



I QUADERNI

#13

Anti-gentrification nelle città (Sud) Europee

Anti-gentrification in (Southern) European cities

Edited by Sandra Annunziata
Commentary by Loretta Lees

maggio agosto 2017
numero tredici
anno cinque

URBANISTICA 
giornale on-line di
urbanistica
ISSN:
2531-7091

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URBANISTICA **ire**

giornale on-line di
urbanistica
journal of urban
design and planning
ISSN: 2531-7091

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Progetto grafico / Nicola Vazzoler

Impaginazione / Giulio Cuccurullo

Data di pubblicazione: Roma, dicembre 2017

In copertina:

illustrazione ad opera dell'artista Antonia Santolaya,

approfondisci il progetto grafico del numero a p. 131

edito da



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per informazioni



#13

maggio agosto 2017
numero tredici
anno cinque

may august 2017
issue thirteen
year five



in questo numero
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nelle città (Sud) Europee**
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Nodi teorici ed epistemologici

Theoretical and
epistemological challenges



Gentrification and the barriers to its global reach. A short commentary

Gentrification e i limiti alla
sua espansione globale.
Un breve commento

Il paper affronta il tema delle 'barriere' ai processi di gentrification in diverse città del globo. Il tema delle barriere alla gentrification posto in relazione alle forme di regolamentazione del capitalismo in contesti in cui politiche neoliberali estreme sono meno predominanti se confrontate con i paesi Anglofoni; con le differenti relazioni tra stato, mercato e società civile. Il tema delle barriere alla gentrification è trattato anche dal punto di vista dell'ambiente costruito, la sua storia e le ideologie che in diversi periodi storici hanno orientate lo sviluppo urbano, così come con le relazioni sociali tradottes in diversi sistemi di proprietà e diritti d'uso. Questi temi sono, più o meno intenzionalmente, delle barriere alle forze globali che promuovono processi di gentrification e possono essere risorse materiali e ispirazione per forme di rinnovamento urbano compatibili con istanze di giustizia sociale.

When you Google 'gentrification' you get huge volumes of information and images. Most of this stuff is mainly about large US cities and, to a lesser extent, about other large cities in the rest of the Anglophone world.

There are two main reasons for that. The one is urban histories and urbanization processes that have been particular in that part of the world. The other is politics that affected the shape of urban policies, especially since the late 1970s.

Gentrification is a process of urban social and spatial change. The term was

coined in the 1960s by Ruth Glass, a British sociologist who observed changes in West London, where run-down properties in pockets of decline were taken up for residences by middle-class households and brought-up to their tastes.

The process of gentrification expanded rapidly in the following decades and the term signifies in fact all sorts of neighborhood change, where you have inflow of more affluent and higher social status residents and, at the same time, displacement of former lower status and poorer residents, combined with substantial investment in fixed capital (Clark, 2005). This inflow brings a new atmosphere, and new aesthetics that are distinctive of the culture of gentrifiers. Former residents are usually displaced either immediately – as their rent increases steeply– or more slowly and indirectly as they are compelled to sell property and exchange their advantageous location with increased housing space or superior amenities in less expensive areas.

Since the 1970s there have been heated debates among academics about gentrification. Neil Smith –the American geographer and specialist on gentrification– saw it mainly as a process related to capital's interest in profit from investing in the city center, after having invested for many decades in cities' suburban sprawl. What made gentrification interesting for capital, according to Smith, was the growing 'rent gap' between the actual rent from a neighborhood's real estate and the potential rent after investing in its renewal and reorientation to demand with higher solvency.

Others, like the Canadian geographer David Ley, insisted more on issues related to the demand side of gentrification, like the change of social and occupational structures, which induced a growing demand for housing in central areas. One-breadwinner families diminished as both women and men usually work, often long and unpredictable hours, and their everyday life patterns have become increasingly incompatible with suburban living.

Those heated debates about the main drivers of gentrification reached eventually a common understanding that both economic motives and sociodemographic changes were vitally important for the development of the process of gentrification.

The discussion about gentrification remained for sometime focused on the experience of the Anglophone world. This is not only due to the fact that urban studies were more developed in that part of the world than anywhere else, and that several concepts –like segregation– have been discussed for long in the US before they migrated to other contexts. The large cities of the Anglophone world have been ideal for gentrification for two main reasons.

The first is related to their urban histories and, particularly, to the choice of their elites to abandon early-on the city center to growing industrial activities and the working-class, and head for the suburbs (Fishman, 1987). About a century later, these cities started rapidly to deindustrialize, and large areas near their centers became favorable settings for a 'back to the city' movement by capital and to some extent metaphorically by the middle classes. The second reason is that the centers of major cities of the Anglophone world became favorable settings for gentrification not only because they offered abundant gentrifiable space, but also because this was combined with neoliberal regulation, which resulted in direct pro-gentrification policies of

urban renewal and in the increased commodification of housing. The eras of Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK have been decisive in this sense.

This favorable setting for gentrification was not present, however, in most other metropolises of the world. In Vienna, for example, the specific weight of public housing still remains overwhelming –since the municipality owns 60% of dwellings in the city following a tradition from the 20s and 30s– and this reduces the margins and the impact of gentrification and the displacement of the more vulnerable groups.

In Paris, the elite never quit the city center (Préteceille, 2007), but managed on the contrary to push industrial activities and the working classes to peripheral locations, especially after the city's spatial remodeling by the Baron Haussmann. That remodeling accommodated the bourgeoisie in the new grand boulevards and made it easier to chase the dangerous working classes after their major insurgency in 1871 (the Paris Commune). Haussmann's remodeling permitted the construction of several thousands of apartment buildings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that still make of Paris one of the most attractive cities in the world. These apartment buildings were usually vertically segregated in terms of class, with the bourgeoisie living in spacious apartments on lower floors, while servants and other lower profile groups lived in low ceiling rooms under the roofs. Things started to change when elevators were introduced and the major inconvenience of upper floors disappeared. This incited internal alterations in old buildings, which gradually changed the social profile of residents on upper floors. Some scholars see this process as gentrification. However, there are important differences with the process and impact of gentrification as we know it, since the affected neighborhoods in Paris were not working-class spaces invaded by the middle-classes, but bourgeois or petit-bourgeois spaces that eventually became more homogenous (*embourgeoisement*). Moreover, the process of change has been rather slow and displacement, obstructed by different forms of rent control, has rather taken the form of replacement.

This inverse-Burgess model characterizing the social geography of Paris is not exceptional or particular. It is the norm in most parts of the urban world outside Anglo-America (Timms, 1971).

Gentrification in cities of the Global South is also a debated issue. I recently spent some time in Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Santiago in Chile. In Mexico City I visited the neighborhood of Santa Maria la Ribera –in decline for several decades– where you could see some clear traces of gentrification-like processes in the refurbished profile of several buildings. On the contrary, the place where I stayed –a very attractive art deco building of the 30s and its surrounding area just a few blocks from the most central squares of Bellas Artes and Zocalo– did not show any signs of gentrification. I also visited the big transport hub of Cuatro Caminos where you clearly witness a war between official retail under the form of a developing big mall –part of the remodeled metro station– and the numerous informal vendors selling all sorts of petty commodities on the sidewalks around the old part of the station. This redevelopment induced some changes in immediately neighboring spaces which resemble gentrification (for example a small old red light district was transformed to a condominium for middle-class residents and a land lot that used to house cabarets and a cock fight arena was being sold for a very high price since its potential new use was already taken for granted).

In Sao Paulo urban space is visibly divided between high-rise residences for middle-class households and low-rise for working-class and other poorer groups. This visibly clear spatial division, however, is quite crude if you try to find behind it an equally clear division in social terms. I visited the favela of Nova Jaguaré and what I witnessed was mainly the spectacular improvement in comparison to what I had seen eight years ago when I was there for the first time. Houses were plastered and painted on the outside, and sometimes tiled instead of just bricks and cement you only saw a few years ago. In another area, Sapopemba –also in the city’s central municipality– there was coexistence of different forms of housing in close spatial proximity: four stories cooperative housing, social housing of similar height and low-rise self-constructed favela. I stayed in a completely different area, in one of those high apartment buildings located as centrally as possible –literally one block away from Avenida Paulista. Even though the building was guarded 24/7, it had nothing to do with exclusive and gated living on New York’s Park Avenue. My hosts in the apartment room I rented were doing quite ordinary lower middle-class jobs and so were most of the other residents in the building. The main conclusion in my mind was that both low-rise neighborhoods (including favelas) and high-rise residence buildings are very diversified internally in spite of the opposite assumptions induced by their different shape. Moreover, these socio-spatial divisions correspond to a substantially different social structure from what gentrification is usually associated with, especially in terms of the meagre presence of middle-middle and upper-middle class groups. The second conclusion was that both types are not spaces that easily invite gentrification.

In Rio I visited the favela of Dona Marta. This favela is very near the center –literally over the neighborhood of Botafogo. It has a splendid view of the city, its hills and coasts and its vivid colors make it really attractive. This is one of the model favelas that the municipality tried to invest in when preparing for the Olympic games by putting a funicular rail to serve its upper parts and by trying to reduce criminality putting in place a unit of neighborhood pacification police (UPP). This favela is also famous because Michael Jackson produced there the video-clip ‘They don’t care about us’ in 2008. Following all this, Dona Marta became part of the tourist circuit and you can even pay with your credit card for souvenirs in its few tourist shops. However, ‘gentrificação’ –written on one of its dilapidated wooden huts– can only be considered as a joke. The smell of the open sewers mixing with open rain water canals and the high rate of criminality, which lately increased with the implantation of more organized gangs from Sao Paulo, as well as the access problems for old and handicapped people, make it incompatible with middle-class expectations and standards. Most other favelas in Rio –with the exception of a couple of ones overlooking Ipanema beach– are in much worse condition and further away from a gentrification prospect.

Gentrification in these mega cities of the South exists, but is a rather marginal process of urban sociospatial change. The size of the middle-classes and, therefore, of potential gentrifiers in these cities is (still) quite small to induce a sizeable impact in terms of displacement. Other issues, like the extent of urban poverty and racial discrimination are much more important as immediate problems that have to be addressed (Zukin, 2016).

In other cities, local gentrifiers may sometimes not be enough to put the process in motion, but gentrification can come from outside. In Lisbon, for

example, there is a growing problem for people with ordinary jobs, like nurses or policemen, to find housing near the centre because too many landlords have been seeking tenants in the tourist market through the Airbnb and other similar systems. Lisbon is one of the cities where gentrification goes also under the name of touristification (Barata-Salgueiro et al., 2017; Malheiros, 2016). Athens starts experiencing similar problems. Cities like Lisbon and Athens, in poorly regulated housing systems, compared to Northern or Western Europe, are quite vulnerable to the negative impact of such changes and, particularly, the displacement of groups precariously tied to their houses and residential areas.

I have qualified Athens as ungentrifiable (Alexandri and Maloutas, forthcoming). Like Paris in older times, Athens is vertically segregated, but in the opposite sense. The more affluent live on top floors and the less affluent and the migrants at the bottom (Maloutas and Karadimitriou, 2001; Maloutas and Spyrellis, 2017). Athens is a very old and at the same time a very recent city. Remains of a very distant past, like the Parthenon, are found within a sea of recent apartment buildings mainly constructed between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1980s. These apartment buildings have some interesting features. They are individual buildings –i.e. not part of large construction projects– since small-scale builders and small size landowners have always dominated the local house-building sector. The apartment buildings of that period, which still house more than 70% of the city's population in the central municipality, have usually 6-7 floors with apartments on all floors including the slightly elevated ground floor and the one below it, called semi-basement. Housing conditions and unit size are related to floor. The lower you are, the more chances you have your apartment to be small, noisy, dark, with less access to fresh air since these apartment buildings are in compact rows and on narrow and congested streets. As you move up the floors, apartments are bigger and from the 4th floor and higher you usually have a veranda, which for Greek conditions is an important asset since you can use it almost all year round.

The last census (2011) made it possible to illustrate this vertical segregation in the center of Athens, which is important both in class and ethnoracial terms. In the upper floors you have 5 times more people who belong to the higher occupational categories than you have at the bottom. You also have 8 times less migrants and 2,5 times more homeowners. The profile of most of these buildings started as middle-class. The decline of the city center –mainly due to excessive densification with the proliferation of this type of buildings– produced the gradual and still on-going exodus of middle-class groups to the suburbs since the 1970s, and the replacement, especially on lower floor apartments by lower means households including migrants. This has produced an increased social mix in central areas, although it was neither the aspiration of residents nor the intention of policy makers.

Since the mid 1990s the city center has attracted attention and public investment related to the Olympic games of 2004. New metro lines and tramways, extensive restoration of old buildings, connection of important archaeological sites to an uninterrupted walk, and city beautification have all induced several private investors to start thinking in terms of gentrification. However, their hopes were curtailed after the games finished and the state abruptly stopped investing in the city center. Later, these hopes were literally finished off by the crisis. In any way, even if conditions were more

positive for gentrifiers, the bulk of the building stock at the center is ungentrifiable. Unlike Paris, where you could invest in the former servants' rooms at the roof tops and make extremely attractive apartments by unifying 3-4 of them, in Athens you cannot reverse the quality problems of apartments on lower floors, even if you invest a lot of money. Sometimes the shape of the building stock determines the limits of the gentrification process and of displacement in particular.

What can we learn from this excursion to different cities in respect of gentrification? The main thing is that context matters (Maloutas, 2012 and 2017). And context means the way the state, the market and civil society are imbricated in each setting, as well as the built environment which carries within it urban histories and ideologies as well as social relations embodied by the property structures and the ways rights of use are allocated.

If context matters, then also policies and politics matter since they are part of it, and therefore gentrification is not inevitable. There are always alternatives, unlike what Thatcher used to claim. Urban renewal may be inevitable since everything changes with time and cities have to change to. But they don't have to change necessarily on the gentrification mode. Solutions of urban change closer to social justice can be promoted if communities are active and try at least to mitigate the plans of those who invest in urban renewal only to maximize private profit.

The US context has been one of the most suitable for gentrification. Large amounts of space abandoned by declining industrial activities in the urban cores; interesting industrial structures adequate for cheap transformation to accommodate loft living; sizeable and growing middle class groups including large numbers of people inclined for living in gentrified areas; abundance of former industrial workers and related urban poor stuck in gentrifiable areas and potentially victimized by displacement; and, most importantly, neoliberal policies –more easily adopted in the American politico-economic landscape of economic liberalism than anywhere else– which promoted both pro gentrification policies and the further commodification of housing.

The varied landscapes of barriers to gentrification, as well as the various battles against urban injustices not necessarily framed as gentrification, in cities around the world can be a source of inspiration for those who are fighting for urban renewal compatible with social justice. This comprises obviously those fighting at the heart of the Anglophone world as well. It is the opposite view –i.e. to assume that such inspiration for urban resistance should come mainly from what happens in the Anglophone world in terms of purposeful resistance to gentrification– which does not make much sense. First, because this view implicitly confuses the motives and knowledge of resisting actors with the critical theoretical analysis of gentrification (see the thorough analysis by Annunziata and Rivas (forthcoming) on the multiple facets of resistance to gentrification). Second, because it sometimes draws undue attention to a process which may be much less central than in academic debates and overshadows other issues contextually more important in terms of social impact (Zukin 2016). The Anglo-American world may have been a pioneering laboratory in the application of gentrification policies, but other parts of the world have shown more effective resistance, sometimes as an unintended consequence of specific contextual factors and, more often, as the consequence of other struggles which prevented the formation

of favorable conditions for the development of gentrification. These less direct and less visible forms of resistance to gentrification and other urban injustices should not be underestimated as assets for future struggles and sociopolitical arrangements and compromises, making a difference in people's lives until the day when social justice is no longer an issue.

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urbanistica
ISSN:
2531-7091

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