



Review of *Planetary Gentrification*

Loretta Lees, Hyun Bang Shin, and Ernesto López-Morales. *Planetary Gentrification*. 2016. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 248 pages, ISBN 978-0-7456-7165-9. Paper (\$22.95).

This book engages with the question whether gentrification has indeed become a “global urban strategy,” as Neil Smith (2002) has claimed. As the title of the book suggests, the authors answer this question affirmatively. This approval is, however, based on a broader than usual definition of gentrification (borrowed from Clark [2005: 258]) as a “process involving a change in the population of land users such that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment of fixed capital.”

It is this breadth of the definition of gentrification that allows the authors to address both the universality of the phenomenon, arguing that gentrification is unfolding “at a planetary scale” (4), *and* the particularities of this process resulting from the different regional conditions and circumstance in which it unfolds. While a focus on time- and place-specific materializations of more structural dynamics of capitalist urbanization is certainly important in order to do justice to the complexity of cities, the authors also pursue a theoretical claim: It is their goal to reconcile two conceptual approaches that are sometimes considered contradictory, namely a political economy perspective and the postcolonial comparative urbanism approach.

To counter the preference of many gentrification scholars for U.S. or European cities, the authors turn to displacement processes in Latin American, Asian and African cities, presenting examples, among others, from Shanghai, Santiago de Chile, Seoul, Beijing, Rio de Janeiro,



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Istanbul, Cape Town and Mexico City. While this geographical extension of gentrification studies is one of the merits of the book, it does create its own problems, as I discuss below.

Another main achievement of the book are two conceptual contributions. Firstly, the authors turn away from a focus on inner-city areas, which is dominant in gentrification studies. By redirecting attention from the city center as the preferred site of looking for dislocation processes to suburban areas – for example in Bangalore or Rio de Janeiro, where investments of IT-related firms produce “mega-displacement of villagers” (41) – the authors also recede from the common concern for certain physical settings (e.g., old, basically valuable, but run-down architecture) as preconditions for gentrification. And they reject the often-implicit notion of gentrification as being a local process. The authors contend that particularly in the global South, urban re-development programs and slum gentrification repeatedly exceed neighborhood scales. In such a view, gentrification has not only become planetary, but also “massive in scale” (173).

The second conceptual contribution the book makes is that it directs attention to gentrifiers other than the ‘usual suspects.’ According to the authors, individual gentrifiers and even the global South’s rising middle classes, with their purchasing power and interests in real estate investments, are nowadays “insignificant” (109) as compared to the combined “assault from the state and capital” (11) on cities. In line with this reasoning, the book points to the part played by super-rich elites from the global North *and* South who are investing across borders. The authors also emphasize the outstanding role of the state (both in its neoliberal and authoritarian form) as a, if not *the*, key actor in gentrification processes in the global South: “(I)t is the state that is the key constituent in gentrification in the global South and East” (109). The book brings many examples of how local and national states act in alliance with capitalist developers and international agencies in projects of urban restructuring that cause the displacement of people, often taking advantage of major international events such as the Olympic Games or programs for historic preservation.

In its narrative form, the book uses examples from many cities to explicate several thematic aspects of gentrification processes. While I like this privileging of a conceptual structuring of the ‘plot’ over a simple listing or juxtaposition of case studies, this method carries the danger of oversimplification because the individual cases are not really discussed, as the authors claim, but used in a more illustrative way to exemplify arguments. I cannot properly assess all the regional examples given, but where I can, I see the problem of black-and-white thinking that does not do justice to the complexity of the world.

In Mexico City, for example, programs for historic preservation are without doubt embedded in a strategy of entrepreneurial urban governance, which uses displacement as a method to redefine and revalorize urban spaces. It is nevertheless too simple to condense the inner-city changes into a “revanchist retaking of central city spaces” (208). Entrepreneurial urban governance

has been – and still is – incoherent (Crossa 2009), and it has therefore produced mixed outcomes. City governments do deliver parts of the city to real estate investors (Parnreiter 2015), but the money thereby made is to some extent used to finance social improvements. More importantly, taking the center back cannot, as the book suggests (126), be equated 100 % with gentrification in terms of the displacement of poorer people. On the one hand, Mexico City's center is poorly inhabited; many of the buildings have long been used only as *bodegas* (warehouses) for street vendors. Displacement refers, thus, less, if at all, to neighbors and more to certain commercial uses.

Against this backdrop, it is debatable whether dislocation processes in Mexico City's center can or should be labeled *generally* as 'bad gentrification'. For me, using (or misusing) inner city spaces to store cheap merchandise (much of it coming from China) is not a public good worth defending. On the other hand, the removal of street vendors, while certainly establishing a new form of socio-spatial exclusion, has also contributed to the recovery of *public* spaces in the center. Sidewalks, for example, that for long have been privatized by streets vendors for business interests (even if they are small-scale), are now public again: Friday and Saturday evenings people walk around, some taking advantage of the new consumption facilities, many others not. This mode of appropriating the city cannot be reduced to an upper- or even middle-class experience; rather, it contributed to the city's vitality and diversity and hence to something that urban scholars consider to be *the raison d'être* of cities.

On the conceptual level, my criticism centers on the book's project to identify "planetary indigeneity (organic gentrifications that are not copies of those in the West)" (4). To be very clear: The book demonstrates that considering "the extent to which Western theorizing on gentrification can be useful in non-Western cities" (p. 3) is a necessary and useful endeavor. It also evidences that a flexibilization of the approach (e.g. as regards the involvement of the state or the sites of gentrification) is required to understand displacements in Southern or Eastern cities. Yet, the search for *indigeneity* in these processes is a pointless undertaking based on false assumptions.

Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) has not only argued that the search for the appropriate unit of analysis is the key to any successful examination of the real world (successful in the sense of being able to understand its processes), but also that the correct unit of analysis has to be the world-system as a whole, and not entities such as individual societies or states. Falling into "the trap of not analyzing totalities" creates, according to Wallerstein (2000: 76), "pseudo-problems" that distract from the real dynamics of the capitalist world-system. And that is exactly what happens to the authors of *Planetary Gentrification*. Bifurcating the urban world into "Western" cities on one hand, and "Southern" and "Eastern" cities on the other, and searching for the indigeneity of gentrification in the latter, attempts to separate endogenous from exogenous processes of urban

restructuring. Yet, that is precisely what world-system analysis considers to be misleading because in the world-system, accumulation dynamics (and urban development and re-development certainly belong to them) are embedded in a *single* division of labor.

This fact does not mean, however, that everything is the same in all places. Rather, Wallerstein argues that the position a certain place occupies in the single global division of labor is what is decisive for the concrete shape that capitalist processes and relations take there. Thus, gentrification, as a process of restructuring, appropriating and revalorizing urban spaces, springs from the dynamics of a *unified* world economy, even if its particular forms, actor constellations, and social costs are different in different places. Hence, while it is a merit of the book to point out the specificity that the state assumes a central role in Southern and Eastern gentrification, “Korea” or “Mexico” are not separate, let alone indigenous entities. The planetary-ness of gentrification is systemic not in the sense that that it happens in many places, but rather in the sense that it stems from its interwovenness with a single global process of capital accumulation. Accordingly, the separation of processes as indigenous and nonindigenous is artificial and does not enhance our understanding of the issue in question.

Against this backdrop, it is no wonder that the book does not succeed in singling out indigenous Southern or Eastern gentrification processes. The evidence presented highlights the importance of ‘nonindigenous’ actors (e.g. financial capital, international institutions, the super-rich), and sometimes it seems that the authors themselves are not sure about the distinctions they wish to draw between endogenous and exogenous actors and processes. On page 110, for example, they list key actors in planetary gentrification, including “(trans)national developers.” Putting the ‘trans’ in parentheses is, however, unfortunate insofar as it throws together conceptual opposites—the very essence of a transnational actor is that he/she is no longer anchored nationally.

Despite these critiques, *Planetary Gentrification* contributes to our understanding of displacement processes related to urban restructuring around the world. The book provides new lenses for analyzing gentrification, and by doing so it could (and hopefully does) encourage more theory-guided and empirically thick work in and on Southern or Eastern cities.

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