



I QUADERNI

#13 Anti-gentrification nelle città (Sud) Europee

Anti-gentrification in (Southern) European cities

Edited by Sandra Annunziata
Commentary by Loretta Lees

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Anti-gentrification, an anti-displacement urban (political) agenda

Anti-gentrification, ovvero una agenda (politica) urbana anti-esclusione

A cura di / Edited by Sandra Annunziata,

Honorary Research Fellow, Department of geography, University of Leicester, UK

This edition of the *Quaderni* focuses on *anti-gentrification* practices and challenges which have been on the rise in public debates in many cities of the European South in recent years. It presents a variety of practices carried out in several European cities and presented by activists and/or by academics who met and engaged in a collective dialogue on the topic¹. In the first part of the *Quaderni*, activists highlight their experience of involvement in practices against evictions, austerity, commodification of urban space for touristic uses and speculation in various cities. In particular, they were asked to share², their experience, repertoire of practices and proposals for action. In the second part of the issue, scholars stress the theoretical epistemological challenges, spotlight the ambiguities, contradictions and conflicts that this subject presents. In some cases, the researchers locate themselves halfway between academia and activism, critically engaging in conversation with activists, or directly involved in housing protest and/or alternative housing policy design. The result is a polysemy of voices, a collective effort, that enrich our understanding of what it means to resist gentrification.

The noun *anti-gentrification* is here employed with different aims, as a general framework for describing the complex regime of expulsions taking place in European cities. This enables the authors to consider as anti-gentrification a broad range of different practices of resistances all sharing a common claim: the permanent access to urban space (and housing) for vulnerable and precarious social groups and communities, which would otherwise be expelled by (hard and soft) processes of urban transformation. This framework also substantiates the exercise of prefiguration, imagination and enactment of practical actions aimed at countervailing displacement and placing social solidarity at the centre of the urban agenda.

I must mention three distinctive traits pertaining to the line of research from which this issue of the *Quaderni* stem from³. The first aspect is that this work is aligned with a radical critical approach to gentrification, which assumes from the beginning the perspective of those being excluded and marginalized. I follow Marcuse in his claim: *"If the pain of displacement is not a central component of what we are dealing with in studying gentrification - indeed, is not what brings us to the subject in the first place - we are not just missing one factor in a multi-factorial equation; we are missing the central point that needs to be addressed."* (2010: 187). The second aspect is that I deliberately assume a position that lies in-between a particularistic approach to the study of the phenomena, that focuses on the specificities of each context

1 The authors of the essays took part in the workshop "Stay Put, a transnational dialogue for the creation of an anti-gentrification manual for South European cities" at the University of Roma Tre, Architecture Department, October 26-27 2016. I asked an additional paper to Andrej Holm due to his long lasting experience in anti-gentrification practices and housing policies in Berlin.

2 All the papers of this journal have been subject to a blind peer review, however the activists paper are here presented without any claim of meeting academic paper standards.

3 I am referring to the comparative research project Anti-gentrification policies and practices in Southern European Cities, supported by a European Marie Curie IEF FP7-People-2013, grant id. 625691, and developed by the author in collaboration with Professor Loretta Lees at the University of Leicester.

(Maloutas 2017) and a universalistic approach based on a critical understanding of the political economy of housing, with a tendency to extract and spotlight the regularities and the proportions that the phenomenon has assumed on a global scale (Lees et al 2015, 2016). The third aspect worth mentioning is that I choose to explore the anti-gentrification discourse and practices within a specific geographical context, the European cities, and in a specific time, the years that followed the economic crisis. European cities, particularly in the European south, display a complex regime of expulsion, that is legitimized and justified by a permanent austerity climate, as well as the rise of anti-displacement practices and discourses with explicit or implicit reference to gentrification processes (Annunziata and Lees, 2016). I thus deliberately choose to add the reformist echoes of housing policies in Berlin (described by Holm) and anti-gentrification practices in London (in Ferreri) as a way to strengthen by contrast the singularity of the anti-gentrification discourse in Southern Europe.

Critical accounts to the process of *gentrification* have already highlighted the fact that to deal with this phenomenon equals examining its effects, namely the urban expulsion of fragile, vulnerable and low-income social groups. The terms of the anti-gentrification discourse and practices can be referred mainly to: a demand for prevention and, where necessary, for countering urban expulsion in all its forms – direct, indirect, exclusive (Marcuse 1985a) and symbolic (Janovshka 2016); the demand for possibly long-term and sustainable rents (Newman and Wily 2006; Hartman 1984); an indiscriminate opportunity for all citizens to benefit from public urban assets. For a long time however, practices of resistance and alternatives have occupied a marginal space in the literature on gentrification. Lees and Ferreri (2016), starting from a set of anti-gentrification struggle in London, have updated the debate deepening our knowledge of the repertoire of practices and skills set in motion to counter the process of displacement.

Housing scholars argued that Southern and Northern European cities in some cases have displayed a set of ‘endogenous factors’ that have represented elements of inertia for gentrification processes, the so called *gentrification barriers* (Ley and Dobson 2008; see also Maloutas on Athens, Holm on Berlin and Sornado on Madrid in this issue). Among these barriers we can recognize: a relatively affordable housing system such as in the case of Berlin; the presence of public housing in central areas as well as rent regulations still in place, for instance in the historical centre of Madrid; the diffusion and the fragmentation of property all seen as factors of inertia to large development project. Moreover, it is also important to mention that in many South European cities the historically determined relation between social groups and urban space has led to a low level of residential segregation or to types of vertical segregation that intensify social diversity in urban areas (Barbati and Pisati 2015 for Italy, Leal 2010 for Spain, Maloutas and Karadimitriou 2001 for Greece).

Because of these factors, gentrification outside the paradigmatic cases in the

European North (such as London) initially presented itself at a slow pace and in a hybrid form, combined with other traits of urban change and described as *gentrification-like* processes (Janoschka et al 2014). However, urban policies in the last decades played an important role in boosting a process where it barely existed. Gentrification practices in South European cities have been described in relation to tourism development policies (Cocola Gant 2014); urban regeneration schemes that implies demolition of entire neighbourhoods (Arbaci, Tapada 2012, Dalgado 2011 and Portelli 2015 for Barcelona); redesign of public space and commercial plans implemented with the aim of enhancing central areas and related consumer practices (Janoschka and Sequera, 2015 for Madrid; Alexandri 2015 for Athens); sale policy of public housing in city centre (Herzfeld 2009).

Moreover, after the burst of the global financial crisis, European cities have been the epicentre of public debt crisis and have been transformed into experimental zones for testing forms of acute economic austerity that in turn have produced a set of necessary justifications for strengthening predatory practices of dispossession. This process is carried out through land-grabbing, privatizations, placement of collective and private assets on the financial market also by scaling up gentrification operators such as real estate funds and global corporations (Alexandri and Janoschka 2017). In this climate, the antibodies to gentrification are themselves at risk of being expelled: social centres, housing occupations and all those contexts that have traditionally nourished alternatives to the commodification of urban space and housing (Cattaneo and Martines 2016) have been evicted or are under eviction themselves. Consequently, the topic is at the centre of public debate, making it possible to question the specific responsibilities of policy decisions⁴.

At the political heart of these considerations lies the fact that during the most acute phases of the gentrification processes, preventive measures have already failed and have proved to be inadequate. Policies designed to reinstate a balance between different groups living in a city would require huge collective effort, high levels of social solidarity and the implementation of highly unpopular measures for mitigating and regulating the market. However, after decades of disappearance from blind neoliberal political agendas, an orientation toward progressive housing policies is (timidly) arising as testified by the case of Berlin in this issue.

The anti-displacement paradigm is in fact not new in the field of progressive planning and housing policies and gentrification study (here the reference is owned to American scholars Marcuse 1985a, b and Hartman 1984). In 1984 Chester Hartman summed up with the slogan 'the right to stay put' a set of practices and policies for guaranteeing long-term enjoyment of housing for vulnerable social classes, one-parent households, single persons and ethnic minorities. For Hartman however the slogan 'stay put', a key word in the anti-gentrification discourse, is something more than 'to stay still in a place and resist expulsion'. A translation (e.g into Italian) of the expression conveys a sense of 'being aware', of observation and of critical interpretation of what is

⁴ See the Guardian on the topic "What is your city doing to resist gentrification?" <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/sep/9/city-resist-gentrification-displacement>.

happening in our surroundings. This slogan reinforces the concept that resistance does not imply stillness, on the contrary, it evokes action intentionally directed and the exercise of prefiguring a change (Saitta, 2015).

However, placed in the grip of unpopularity, anti-gentrification measures are destined to occupy the political space of radical incrementalism, a practice able to correct the targets and the main flaws in a system without however questioning its foundations⁵. On the contrary, the theoretical corpus of Hartman's progressive planning is built on active prevention of displacement, on the de-commodification of urban assets and on the right to use and access urban space. The handbook *Displacement how to fight it?* (Hartman, Keating and LeGates, 1982) outlines a set of actions to be carried out with the aim of blocking expulsion. The proposals for community based development presented in this text are valid assumptions still today: avoid demolition and privatization of public residential housing; build campaigns to raise awareness about speculative developments and capital-intensive projects (see Saitta for a critical account on the difference between gentrification and speculation); limit the change of use of property respecting neighbourhood's social composition; establish eviction-free zones and design alternative projects for urban regeneration. The papers in this issue comment several action in this sense: the referendum for a rent legislative proposal in Berlin (Holm), critically evaluate land use changes as for the case of the Stop Hotel in Madrid Lavapiés (Sorando), measures for mitigating tourism and for preserving low-income housing especially in historical city centres (Cocola Gant and Asamblea de Barris per un Turisme Sostenible), The validity of this approach is also proven by the housing agenda presented by many anti-eviction platforms throughout Europe (Colau and Alemani 2012; Osservatorio DESC 2013; European Action Coalition 2015) and by the repertoire of actions carried out by committees of citizens campaigning against the demolitions of council estate in London (see Ferreri commenting the realization of the Handbook Staying Put: An Anti-gentrification handbook for council estates in London, in this issue), or against demolition of historical buildings in Rome (Libera Repubblica di San Lorenzo in this issue).

A critical revision of the gentrification resistance practices (Annunziata and Rivas 2016) has enabled us to identify some of the recurring traits and skills placed at the core of a specific request for prevention (in the form of legislative reform of rent laws, new generation of public housing and housing allowances) as well as a heterogeneous set of practices and legal *bricolage* aimed at gaining time, or counter narratives that elaborate counterproposal against mainstream regeneration culture (see Left Hand Rotation in this issue). The common denominator of these practices seems to build awareness, an internationally and overtly oriented effort to stay put that strategically mobilizes visibility. However, in the current situation this is not the only form of resistance to processes of expulsion. In fact, a strategy of invisibility is equally plausible; informal practices in search of informal support networks are the most frequent practices of survival and everyday life resistance to the acuteness of processes of dispossession and destitution (Lees,

⁵ This thesis is presented in Gallaher, 2015, who studied the conversion from lease agreements to ownership. According to Gallaher the practice of condo conversion contributes to the increase of opportunities for tenants to stay in their neighbourhoods. The text does not, however, focus on the issue of who can not afford ownership or who chooses not to.

Annunziata and Rivas, 2017). From this perspective, a theory of resistances to gentrification can benefit from new studies considering the anti-displacement issue by examining not only cases of collective action but also the micro scale of everyday life and of practice of resistance that critically engage with diversity in gentrifying neighbourhoods (Manzo in this issue) and the formation of identities in postmodern society. We are all, no one excluded, involved. The question of what we can do about the phenomena concerns us more than we may realize.

Today increase of urban displacement due to the economic crisis, the emergence of a (new) housing crisis represent a turning point in the critical analysis of the phenomenon as well as in practices that mitigate it. It is not a coincidence that in the anti-eviction discourse, the topic of how to contrast displacement is central to practices of civil disobedience such as the anti-austerity and anti-auction movements in Greece (described by Katerini in this issue) the housing squatting movement in Rome (Caciagli and Grazioli in this issue). The prevention of homelessness is at the centre of measures implemented by the EU with the aim to combat poverty (European Commission 2015) and by cities dealing with old and new housing emergencies (Annunziata and Siatitsa on Rome and Athens in this issue).

Gentrifying urban spaces in European cities thus represent dynamic fields where new proposals for action can flourish. They are 'political' spaces where a constant renegotiation of social and spatial rights is at play. However, despite the effort to appear coherent and with a united agenda at the European level, anti-displacement practices are highly differentiated in their conceptualization of the problem as well as in their repertoire of actions. The framework provided by this special issue of *Quaderni* allows us to consider them together and to assess their potential to define the contents of a possible anti-displacement agenda tailored to the situations of emergency in the cities we inhabit.

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