#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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Nodi teorici ed epistemologici

Theoretical and epistemological challenges

>

Beyond 'Staying put': reflections on discursive strategies in recent anti-gentrification movements

@ Mara Ferreri |

Oltre lo slogan 'Staying put': riflessioni sulle strategie discorsive di recenti movimenti anti-gentrification

Per ricercatori come per attivisti, l'uso del concetto gentrification è stato e rimane controverso. Questo articolo, basato sull'esperienza della stesura del manuale "Staying put: an anti-gentrification handbook for council estates in London" (2014), vuole offrire una riflessione sulle ragioni e politiche dell'uso del concetto di gentrification all'interno delle mobilitazioni per la giustizia sociale in cittá. Al di là di un caso paradigmatico del "nord globale", Londra, l'articolo prende in esame una serie di progetti e mobilizzazioni emerse in varie città del mondo contro la gentrification, l'espulsione e gli sfratti. Partendo da una discussione di politiche di rigenerazione urbana attraverso la demolizione di case popolari, il paper discute la centralità dei processi di espulsione nella comunicazione degli effetti della gentrification e la sua relazione con il recente aumento della militanza contro gli sfratti. Viene infine esaminato il significato dello slogan 'staying put' (rimanere nel luogo) in relazione a campagne a favore di alternative alla gentrification e a proposte basate sul principio del diritto all'abitare. L'articolo conclude sostenendo che la comprensione e la messa in atto di diverse strategie discorsive hanno importanti implicazioni politiche, sia al fine di criticare la mercificazione dell'abitare che per poter riflettere su proposte per la sua de-mercificazione.

Introduction

In research and activist circles, the term 'gentrification' has been and remains controversial. While some academics have been adapting the term to encompass global forms of urban speculation (Slater, 2017) others have questioned the expansion of its remit, geographically and historically, in terms of its explanatory powers in concrete contexts (Ghertner, 2015). Beyond scholarly debates, researchers and activists seeking to educate and self-educate about dynamics of speculation and its effects often find that the use of term gentrification is too academic, imprecise (Tracy, 2014) or foreign-sounding (Left Hand Rotation, 2017) for effective analysis and organising. Compelling

communication about social justice issues is often based on careful narrative choices between naming issues or their causes, and between singularity and generalisability of experiences. In movements for housing and urban justice, across both 'northern' and 'southern' experiences, the use of the term gentrification continues to be debated as it ebbs and wanes between appeals to particularism and claims to universalism (Bernt, 2016).

With this article, I want to offer a reflection on the rationale and politics of using 'gentrification' in urban social justice mobilisation. The discussion is grounded in the experience of producing 'Staying put: an anti-gentrification handbook for council estates in London' (London Tenants Federation et al., 2014; see also Lees and Ferreri, 2016). Moving beyond the particularism of the paradigmatic 'global north' example of London, I widen my reflection by engaging with anti-gentrification, anti-displacement and anti-eviction projects and mobilisations that have emerged since the publication of the booklet. Understanding how different discursive strategies are deployed has significant political implications because the naming of causes and symptoms gives visibility to some processes while obscuring others.

Urban 'centrifugation'

Participation in public debates on gentrification in non-English speaking countries has brought me to observe how the word *gentrification* is frequently misheard or met with incomprehension. Attempts at popularisation have at times resorted to humour, as with the participatory workshops 'Gentrificación no es un nombre de señora' (Spanish for ´Gentrification is not a lady's name´) ran by the collective's Left Hand Rotation (Left Hand Rotation, 2017). Other times, the term is interestingly transliterated into the more current word 'centrifugation'. Outside the Anglophone world, few can easily grasp Ruth Glass's tongue-in-cheek reference to the 'gentry'. In contrast, observers of the effects of urban speculation can easily recognise that the phenomenon involves a force separating some residents from others, who are pushed away from central neighbourhoods. As commented once by a Gothenborg resident, thinking of the displacement of low income populations from city centre as 'centrifugation' made absolutely perfect sense.[1] And as recently as June 2017, in global Barcelona, the newspaper *El periódico* commented that a demonstration for the right to housing allegedly highlighted "el fenómeno de la centrifugación vecinal" (the phenomenon of neighbourhood centrifugation) (Sánchez, 2017).

Beyond questions of translation, such transliterations may be revealing something more cultural and politically significant: an attempt to make 'gentrification' more tangible by showing the centrality of the experience of physical displacement. As reminded by Slater, "definitions have both analytical and political usage" (Slater, 2009, p. 295), and defining gentrification through displacement is indeed key not only to critical urban scholarship (Marcuse, 1985) but also to organised attempts at understanding and resisting those "forces outside the household [that] make living there impossible, hazardous, or unaffordable" (Hartman et al., 1982, p.3, in Slater, 2009). In the work of Left Hand Rotation (also in this issue), the case study counterpart of their workshops is the transnational digital platform '*Museo de los desplazados*', the Museum of the Displaced[2], once again defining gentrification through its most visible effect: displacement.

1_ *Presentation 'Staying Put in London: the making of an anti-gentrification handbook', Gentrification: what is it?, Göteborg Stadsmuseum and University of Gothenburg (Sweden), 4 September 2014.*

2_ *See http://www.museodelosdesplazados.com/*

Fighting gentrification, displacement or evictions?
Displacement was key, too, to our definition of gentrification in the production of 'Staying Put', from the active spatiality of the title to the inclusion of the data visualisation of the displacement of the Heygate Estate's residents in the opening section 'What's going on?'.[3] Different versions of the displacement maps have since been reposted and republished across a range of digital and printed media (Ableу, 2015; Minton, 2017). As the booklet circulated online and in hard copy around council estates in London, the maps were apparently a highly effective means for residents, and particularly leaseholders, for understanding the displacement effects of 'urban regeneration' schemes that did not guarantee the right to stay or to return under the same conditions. The centrality of displacement and its power of communication were such that we even considered and debated, as research-activist partners, whether it was more appropriate to talk about 'anti-displacement', rather than anti-gentrification, in the title of the handbook.

There are analytical and political reasons why (anti-)gentrification remained. Firstly, we wanted to expose the industry of council-estate 'regeneration' and its repercussions on the lives on low-income individuals and families. Most regeneration-by-demolition schemes have, at their core, a strategy of 'poverty deconcentration' (Lees, 2014) and in the UK, public sector 'regeneration' schemes that fail to guarantee the return of low-income residents have been described as examples of 'state-led gentrification' (Watt, 2009). The regeneration-by-demolition consensus comes at the end of a long 'eclipse' of municipal housing for rent (Cole and Furbey, 1994), can be seen as a new frontier of gentrification (Lees and Ferreri, 2016). In London, it is a significant aspect of a wider housing crisis (Edwards, 2016), particularly in the inner boroughs, where in 2014 council housing still made up 33% of all housing (ONS, 2014).

Secondly, insisting on gentrification enabled to distinguish between displacement and evictions as symptoms, and its underlying causes. If direct displacement is the most visible symptom of processes of gentrification, physical eviction from a place of dwelling is its most tangible manifestation and point of mobilisation. Evictions have become key to make visible both housing injustices and resistances locally, such as through the *Anti-Eviction Mapping* platform in San Francisco (Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, 2016) and transnationally, as collected in the publication *Evictions Across Europe* (European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City, 2016). It is entirely legitimate to deploy the language of eviction as a mobilising strategy: after all, displacees are being forced to leave their homes even if a legally defined eviction has not taken place. On a pragmatic level, however, it can be confusing to talk about evictions in a general sense in contexts where classical anti-eviction strategies, such as physical resistance (Álvarez de Andrés et al., 2015), would not constitute a useful strategy. In the case of the Heygate Estate, for instance, only the last resident was forcefully evicted from his home, out of an estimated 3,000 individuals displaced.

Thirdly, focusing on the highly visible and spectacular instances of physical displacement and eviction risks neglecting that the injustices generated by gentrification can take multiple forms, some of which might be indirect and virtually invisible in the short-term. Returning to Peter Marcuse's 1985 classical definition, displacement does not always equate to immediate enforced moving out; instead, it needs "to be considered to encompass a wider set

3_ *See https://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/heygate-estate/heygate-dispacement-maps/*

of processes than those leading to direct physical relocation of inhabitants" (Baeten et al., 2017, p. 2). Rather than a right to 'staying put', therefore, proposals have been made for a right to 'dwell', understood as "the right to exert a reasonable level of power over one's basic living conditions, with all the physical and mental benefits that entails – regardless of whether displacement fears materialize in actual relocation or not" (Baeten et al., 2017, p. 2).

Staying put towards de-commodifying housing
"We should refuse the idea that claiming the right to 'stay put' is about 'traditional' stasis. As the right to the city movements show, claiming a place is not merely about gaining access to what already exists but rather about transforming place."
(Butler and Athanasiou, 2013, p. 24)

The most complex text to write in producing the 'Staying put' booklet was its third section, 'Alternatives to fight for'. In a poignant reminder to all critical urban scholars, Peter Marcuse noted that using the word gentrification as if it described an active 'it' risks naturalising its processual character and concealing the power relations and motives that cause it (Marcuse, 2015). Naming gentrification as the main or sole cause of the commodification of housing in contemporary cities can render opaque and invisible the equally significant cultural and political dimensions of the issue, and their implications for anti-gentrification alternatives worth fighting for. If we set out to understand simultaneously housing commodification and its decommodification, gentrification theories can be extremely useful "to understand one half of the story, but terribly limited in understanding the other half" (Bernt, 2016, p. 643) as universalist systemic critiques can reify and naturalise those same processes that we aim to transform. As access to de-commodified decent homes has become once again central to critical urban politics (Marcuse and Madden, 2016), "other and more contextually sensitive devices are needed for understanding its decommodification" (Bernt, 2016, p. 643) beyond 'gaining access to what already exists'.

'Staying put' without struggling for de-commodified alternatives is not sufficient because "the 'right to make place can 'be denigrated or destroyed even if one stays in a particular space'" (Davidson in Baeten et al., 2016, p. 2). This observation is particularly appropriate for contexts marked by long-term residualisation and stigmatisation of low income housing, which are important material and cultural barriers to organising for de-commodified housing. Since the publication of *Staying Put* 'a new urban movement' has emerged in London (Watt and Minton, 2016) through place-specific housing campaigns and the wider cross-tenure solidarity organising building 'urban power' (Wills, 2016). Campaigns such as 'We (heart) council housing' and slogans such as 'Social housing, not social cleansing' have not only raised the profile of the effects of regeneration-by-demolition, but also generated space to rethink the very imaginary of desirable housing and alternative proposals. Concrete examples such as the 'People's Plan: A Viable Alternative to Demolition'[4] produced for the Cressingham Garden estate in Lambeth, however, remain few and far between, and the public debate lags behind. Looking ahead, more work is needed, both in academic and activist circles, to join the dots between understanding multiple forms of displacement and developing strategies for a transformative understanding of 'staying put' in the ideation and implementation of permanent anti-gentrification alternatives.

4_ *See http://cressinghampeoplesplan.org.uk/*

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