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Debates
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Matthias Bernt

With some delay 'comparative urbanism' has now arrived in the long-established field of gentrification research. If there is one thing the debate between Asher Ghertner and Ernesto López-Morales in *City* 19 (4) clearly demonstrates, it is the fact that the call to 'expand geographical imagination' to understand gentrification more comprehensively is now widely accepted. That there is a need 'to adopt … critiques around developmentalism, categorization and universalism' (Lees 2012, 1) in the field is also broadly acknowledged. What an adoption of postcolonial approaches does to our established theories and what it actually leaves of the concept of gentrification is, however, an increasingly open question.

Ghertner and López-Morales are at the forefront of this question and I welcome both interventions for their clarity as well as for their straightforwardness. This paper picks up on these two interventions and is—at the same time—meant as a sympathetic critique of both.

Before looking in detail at Ghertner's and López-Morales' accounts, it seems necessary to sketch the context in which the two positions have emerged. While conceptual quarrels over the question whether gentrification as a concept is overstretched are not brand new (see, e.g. Hamnett 1991; Sýkora 2005; Maloutas 2012; Betancurt 2014), the intensity with which gentrification is challenged as a

useful concept has changed considerably in the last couple of years. Echoing the call of postcolonial thinkers to 'provincialize' Western theories, today more and more scholars tend to see gentrification as an urban phenomenon rooted in rather specific experiences made in a handful of Western metropolises in the last century. They question whether theories originating from these contexts still have much value for explaining what is going on today and in other parts of the world. More and more often, the concept of gentrification is seen as thin theory, increasingly overstretched and not capable of integrating different trajectories of urban change into its theoretical framework anymore. When Ghertner (2015) demands that the concept of gentrification should be 'laid to bed … among those 20th century concepts we once used' (552), he echoes a mood which is shared by many.

At the same time, the response of the defenders of the concept comes in a more and more abrasive way. Here is an example:

> 'Today's postcolonial theory has achieved what Global North growth-machine operatives have been trying to do ever since the Real Estate Board of New York took out expensive ads […] asking "Is gentrification a dirty word?" […] At precisely the moment when gentrification is becoming truly transnational and powerfully planetary, we are asked to liquidate the intellectual and political investments of generations of critical inquiry in favour of evolving theories of

'"globalized contingency" that have now even attacked postcolonial theory as "hegemonic".' (Wyly 2015, 2531)

At first glance, this might seem like a quarrel amongst a handful of scholars whose careers are tied to studying gentrification. Yet I think that this debate is about more than academic hair-splitting. While the critics attack the 'diffusionist' practice of exporting this 'Western' concept and argue that it distracts attention from issues playing a much more important role in different corners of the world, the defenders of gentrification theory fear losing what they see as an indispensable armory for struggles against urban injustices experienced on a global scale. Evaluating the usefulness of gentrification as a concept is becoming more and more a matter of different political strategic orientations and, consequently, the more controversial. Has the concept of gentrification become a bulldozer flattening dissimilar experiences and enforcing ill-led interpretations and political strategies based on these? Or are the concept's critics disarming themselves when struggling for a more just city, by sweeping under the carpet the fact that much of the most dramatic urban changes is grounded on capitalism? Put differently, is gentrification a very particular experience without much face value and action guidance for 'much of the world' (Ghertner 2015), or have rent gaps gone 'planetary' (see Slater 2015) and has the struggle against gentrification become global?

In addition to these political controversies, the intellectual relevance of this debate also goes far beyond the subject of gentrification in a narrow sense. Indeed, it seems that this is a turning moment not only for gentrification research, but also for the way we develop established concepts into a more global body of knowledge. Thus, both the interventions of Ghertner and López-Morales can only be welcomed, as examining the usefulness of the concept of gentrification can indeed be regarded as a sort of litmus test for the innovations suggested by the current postcolonial

wave in urban studies. In this regard, I see the Ghertner vs. López-Morales debate as 'theorizing back' at its best.

That said, seriously engaging with both texts is not an easy undertaking at all. Ghertner and López-Morales engage quite a number of arguments for supporting their position. Uncomfortably though, these arguments address fairly different issues and do not always work together in easy ways. Ghertner, in this regard, presents at least four points to support his claim that gentrification theory would fail in much of the world. First, he argues that the term has been applied to cases where it doesn't fit. Put differently, he attacks what he sees as cases of misclassification. Second, Ghertner points out that a model based on the working of markets is not functioning in places where 'public land ownership, common property, mixed tenure, or informality' endure. Closely related, Ghertner emphasizes the role of extra-economic forces in urban change in the 'Global South' which according to him is not seriously acknowledged within the narrow economic focus of gentrification theories. Third, Ghertner criticizes etymological limitations that go hand in hand with applying a 'Western' term to non-Western contexts and fourth he blames gentrification theorists for closing their eyes to forms of displacement which are not driven by market dynamics and private ownership.

López-Morales, in his response, also engages a multiplicity of arguments. While it is difficult to summarize his rather complex argumentation, three points are crucial. First, López-Morales rejects the idea that gentrification was a 'Western ideology of urbanism imposed on the South' and finds that gentrification has indeed gone 'planetary' as there are more and more instances of gentrification in all corners of the world. Second, he acknowledges the need to take into account social, cultural and political 'particularities'—but he sees them as 'context', rather than essence. Third, on an epistemological level he emphasizes the use

of generic theoretical concepts for communication among scientists and demands to 'avoid the over-extended, too particularist post-colonial assumption that the so-called "global North" urban theory should be automatically regarded as useless in the global South. If such were the case, we wouldn't have theorization in the social sciences at all' (López-Morales 2015, 573).

In this paper, there is hardly space for discussing all these points in depth. Some of Ghertner's points must be accepted as self-evident (but nevertheless important). Misclassification is a problem. Language doesn't travel easily and there are many more important issues than gentrification in many places of the world (including Western icons of gentrification like London). López-Morales is certainly right to emphasize the use of common categories for stimulating intellectual exchange. All these arguments are beyond debate, at least from my perspective.

What is a bit more difficult is the question whether gentrification has indeed become— or not—'planetary'. Even if we forget for a minute the fact that the definition of gentrification itself has remained contested, and act as if there was a commonly shared and easy-to-operationalize definition, it would still remain impossible to empirically test whether gentrification has indeed become a 'planetary' phenomenon. There is no, and there can hardly ever be one, comprehensive overview of the worldwide trajectories of urban change and so everything we can meaningfully say is that we have more reports on gentrification than ever before. Whether this is due to actually happening changes on the ground, or instead to changes in publication patterns, is an open question.

This leaves the true crux of the debate: the confrontation between both authors' second points listed above: Ghertner's about the non-applicability of a markets model in places where public landownership, common property, mixed tenure or informality dominate and López-Morales' acknowledgement of social, cultural and political 'particularities' as 'context'. Can enduring

forms of not fully privatized landownership, mixed tenure regimes and other factors (Ghertner) be integrated into established concepts of gentrification in the form of 'contextual factors' (López-Morales), or are the dynamics of these factors so entirely different that gentrification loses its potential as an explanatory device? This question goes right to the heart of gentrification theories.

In answering this question, however, both authors necessarily maneuver in the shallow waters of comparative methodologies. Indeed, both Ghertner's and López-Morales' interventions can easily be deciphered as two of the four fundamental types of comparison which Tilly (1984) established three decades ago. While Ghertner argues from a clearly individualizing perspective (though with some intentions towards an encompassing comparison, see below), López-Morales' take is clear-cut universalist. Without explicitly noting it, both texts thus make an age-old choice in comparative social research (see Tilly 1984; Sartori 1991)—and as a consequence take all the strengths and weaknesses connected to this choice on board. What is wrong about this choice?

Against individualizing comparisons!

Let's start with Ghertner's take. Based on the Indian experience, but also with loads of references to other places, Ghertner's main argument is that gentrification literature is 'property centric'. It is based on a singular Western experience 'where individualized and property-based tenure is more or less universal' (Ghertner 2015, 553). As the reality 'in much of the world', on the contrary, was characterized by public and customary tenure systems, gentrification theory would be useless in these contexts.

Ghertner (2014, 2015) works his way around this argument and convincingly demonstrates how dynamics other than the ones gentrification research describes are at work in India, how they have been researched, what concepts have emerged

from them, and how this dissimilar situation results in different political fault lines and strategies. This is highly informative and illuminating, but there are two major problems with the way Ghertner proceeds.

The first is the arbitrariness with which Ghertner engages manifold places to demonstrate that what he claims is not only valid for India, but for 'much of the world'. Starting with empirical evidence collected in India, Ghertner (2015) moves on very quickly to declare similar dynamics at work for 'China, post-socialist Europe, and many Southeast Asian and sub-Saharan African countries' (552). In my view, this is a fairly unspecified and hardly discussed aggregation for a very broad variety of cases. Here Ghertner aggregates numerous singularities (that share being non-Western as their main commonality) into a new encompassing category called 'much of the world'. But is this really valid? What in fact are the commonalities between, say, the fairly peculiar Chinese Hukou System, Favela urbanism in large parts of Latin America and 'super home ownership societies' in Central and Eastern Europe? Here, 'the global South' has become a muddy metaphor (to use Marcuse's 1989 notion), which is rather vague, shapeless, imprecise and suggests a clear ordering scheme along a binary divide. I agree that all the constellations described represent socio-spatial formations which are not like Islington, or the East Village in the 1970s. But is this all there is? And, does this simple commonality make gentrification theory not applicable in all these cases? This is a somewhat premature conclusion and there is a lot of research coming from exactly these regions which claims the contrary (see also Lees, Shin, and López-Morales 2015; Bernt, Gentile, and Marcinczak 2015).

Second, what Ghertner does on a conceptual level is a form of individualizing comparison. This way of arguing takes its strength from a detailed description of one case and establishes singularities which are not in line with the chosen theory. Yet, essentially it leaves the theory under question untouched. This way of arguing establishes the notion that a theory doesn't comfortably fit with a particular case—not more. As a consequence, we are left wondering if and how the existence of not yet commodified or decommodified land and housing is connected to observable instances of gentrification (the existence of which is not denied by Ghertner). Do these stocks stop, impede or alter gentrification? Do processes observed here and gentrification work independently from each other? Are gentrified areas just enclaves of 'Westernization', or do they change things in the rest of the city too? Is gentrification itself changed by the predominance of non-market forms of land distribution and in which way? What would this say about theories? All these questions are hardly touched upon.

In isolating his argument from any intention to revise the concept of gentrification Ghertner builds an easily defensible position—but leaves the concept itself untouched. Instead of revising gentrification theory to make it more responsive to cases which have not been researched by its forefathers and -mothers, he relegates gentrification to a handful of Western metropolises and builds a fake antidote of widely encompassing otherness. Attempting to show how different contexts shape outcomes in ways not covered by the concept of gentrification, he ends up with singularities instead of new theories. Instead of opening up the debate towards a less Eurocentric and more global perspective, I'm afraid that Ghertner helps to divert intellectual energy into a form of 'postcolonial orientalism', that is, a theory which essentially replicates the notion of a universal (Europe) at one end and a multiplicity of particularities (non-Europe) at the other (Kaiwar 2015).

Against universalizing comparisons!

Yet, I have problems with López-Morales' positions too. Most of these refer to the Marxist foundation of his argument which operates within a scheme of first- and

second-order contradictions. For López-Morales, and for many other Marxist thinkers, the economic base is determinant, while the superstructure (i.e. social, cultural and historical specificities) is dependent. Thus, while it is acknowledged that different cases of gentrification work under different social, cultural and political constellations, the main focus is on capital accumulation.

In comparative social research this way of arguing is usually termed 'universalizing comparison'. Here, scientists build a theory from one instance, and then move on to include more and more instances to show that the proposed theory fits with every new instance (or could be refined in a way that makes it fit again). Gentrification studies are full of examples for this, and despite best intentions, the norm against which most gentrification studies still work is an assumed 'normal' defined by places like London or New York. The outcome is an often saddening array of studies from outside these places which can't get over the problem that gentrification in Vilnius, Shanghai or Istanbul is in a way similar to that norm—but also diverges of it. The effect of this kind of comparison is not to discover the particularities of each case and revise established theories from there, but to demonstrate the common properties that connect London to, say, São Paulo. In a nutshell, a bigger or smaller number of cases are compared to a given model, and this is used for stating correspondence. In this approach, differences are usually relegated to the role of 'contextual factors' or 'intervening variables'—but not used to refine the starting point.

Unfortunately, a good deal of López-Morales' (2015) argument follows this scheme. His main point reads like this:

> 'We need to see the shared capitalist structure of gentrification vis-à-vis the sociological, cultural and institutional particularities the phenomenon acquires in each place … It is clear that the exertion of class power in the remaking of cities in the South takes different shapes and forms, but this does not mean this process is not gentrification.' (566 and 568)

While there are good reasons to give economic factors a major role in explaining urban change under capitalism, there is also a downside to this theoretical orientation, as it makes it difficult to include culture, history and politics into the core argument. Yet if, say, the displacement of slum dwellers in India can simultaneously be attributed to their weak position in the caste system, to the dispossession of customary law, as well as to the creation and exploitation of rent gaps—why is it then that the commonalities with the West (the shared capitalist structure and the resulting existence of rent gaps) play a central role, while the differences are treated as 'specificities'? How do we know which of these many factors are more important than others? My answer is: we simply don't. By confining 'cultural and institutional particularities' to the role of contextual factors, López-Morales relegates extra-economic factors to a side role, not worthy of theorization and thus, instead of opening up the comparison, effectively closes it.

This essentially universalist drive of López-Morales' argumentation and his failure to make more of 'contextual factors' is, however, not so much due to an unwillingness to recognize differences. Rather, it is owed to the use of the rent-gap argument as the exclusive source of theorization. The problem here again is the essentially universalizing undercurrent which is at the core of the rent-gap theory. While this 'much too simple and definitely obvious' (Smith on the opinion of his PhD adviser, see Smith quoted in Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2010, 97) general argument about capital accumulation in the built environment has indeed superior explanatory power with regard to the economics of gentrification, it necessarily leaves aside institutional, social, cultural and political factors. Downplaying non-economic instances is deeply embedded within the reductionist conceptual architecture of the rent-gap

theory and integrating different institutional, social, cultural and political constellations has remained an enduring problem.

Summing up, rent-gap theories only allow general statements and by using these theories as a major theoretical foundation, López-Morales necessarily limits himself to overemphasizing commonalities and downplaying differences. Bound to treating different social, cultural and historical constellations as mere 'specificities' outgunned by the 'shared capitalist structure' he gets stuck between acknowledging difference in principle, but remaining with commonalities in practice.

This is not only an intellectual, but also a political problem. If what we see is primarily based on 'the shared capitalist structure', any guidance for political change which goes beyond stating that capitalism should be abolished, stands outside the theoretical explanation and can only be developed in an ad hoc way. Despite honorable ambitions, the actual political implications of this way of arguing are thus rather dire.

Bringing in Polanyi

Let me sum up: Ghertner, on the one hand, bases his critique of gentrification research on tenure diversity in 'much of the world', the existence of which he denies for the West. López-Morales, on the other, relegates the effects of different land and property structures to being mere contextual factors. The benefits and detriments of the two arguments are laterally inverted. While Ghertner does an excellent job in attacking the (un)usefulness of gentrification theory for specific cases, but essentially leaves the theory itself untouched, López-Morales acknowledges the importance of contexts and urges us to think generically, but hardly revises the established theory on this basis either. The outcome of the debate is thus a stalemate in which both sides employ more or less convincing evidence to support their claims, but fail to frame a way forward.

In my view, the major reason for this failure lies in an implicitly shared conceptualization of 'individualized and property-based tenure as more or less universal' in the West. The crucial problem with this conception is that near-monopoly control over land and the unchecked working of markets are neoclassical fictions which do not even exist in the most neoliberalized countries of the 'Global North'. In reality, 'economy' and 'society' can hardly be separated. Markets are socially embedded institutions rather than friction-free devices through which capital flows freely and unchecked. Instead of just 'jumping' from one place to another, in a real world flows of capital are lured and daunted, incentivized and channeled, set free and restricted by a plethora of politics, laws, subsidies and regulations. There is no such thing as a 'free market', but markets are politically organized and only made possible through a set of institutional arrangements and social relationships. Polanyi ([1944] 1957) has described this entanglement of markets and societies as a 'double movement' and argued that Western civilization would be subject to a dialectical process of commodification and disembedding as well as decommodification and re-embedding of markets, with markets and societies existing in related tension.

The relevance of this argument to the study of gentrification is apparent. No matter whether we look at the relevance of different generations of rent regulations in defining the patterns of gentrification in Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg (see Bernt and Holm 2005, 2009), at the application of 'compulsory purchase orders' and all sorts of other state powers to push forward the gentrification of social housing estates in London (Watt 2009; Lees 2014), or the political debates around the rezoning of 125th street in Harlem, nowhere do we see unchecked individualized property and automatically working markets. 'Extraeconomic force' (Ghertner) is a regular companion of gentrification, not only in the South, but everywhere.

The commodification of housing and its decommodification are thus closely connected and need to be studied together, and this is true for both 'northern' and 'southern' experiences. While rent-gap theories provide indispensable instruments for understanding the commodification of housing, other and more contextually sensitive devices are needed for understanding its decommodification. Gentrification theories are thus at the same time extremely useful to understand one half of the story, but terribly limited in understanding the other half. Instead of getting stuck in 'either, or' arguments, we need make more use of the chances provided by theoretical triangulation, that is, the simultaneous employment of divergent theories.

What does this mean for future research? Here are some suggestions: first, while gentrification has been studied in manifold places around the world, most reports are based on single case studies. Up until now comparative approaches have mostly been limited to publishing edited volumes (e.g. Atkinson and Bridge 2005; Porter and Shaw 2009; Lees, Shin, and López-Morales 2015). Studies with a genuinely comparative research design which allow examining how established theories work in different environments are as of yet in short supply. Future research should thus first of all aim for more genuinely comparative work. Second, while gentrification studies have (rightfully) focused on the commodification of land and housing, more progress needs to be achieved with understanding the relation of gentrification to non- or decommodified forms of land and housing provision. For this, the state needs to be put into the center of gentrification research. Third, with regards to theories, progress could be achieved by moving away from the established theoretical foundations of gentrification research and actively applying concepts from not yet prominent fields like housing studies, institutional economics or political science.

While this list is far from comprehensive and each of the points sketched needs to be made subject to intensive discussion, I'm sure that there is more than a choice between unreflective universalism and essentializing individualization.

Disclosure statement

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