

CHAPTER 2

A Short History of Gentrification

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DOI: 10.4324/9781315881096-3

[...] Although the emergence of gentrification proper can be traced to the postwar cities of the advanced capitalist world, there are significant precursors. In his well-known poem, “The Eyes of the Poor,” Charles Baudelaire wraps a proto-gentrification narrative into a poem of love and estrangement. Set in the late 1850s and early 1860s, amid Baron Haussmann’s destruction of working-class Paris and its monumental rebuilding (see [Pinkney 1972](#)), the poem’s narrator tries to explain to his lover why he feels so estranged from her. He recalls a recent incident when they sat outside a “dazzling” cafe, brightly lit outside by gaslight, making its debut. The interior was less alluring, decorated with the ostentatious kitsch of the day; hounds and falcons, “nymphs and goddesses bearing piles of fruits, pâtés and game on their heads,” an extravagance of “all history and all mythology pandering to gluttony.” The cafe stood at the corner of a new boulevard which was still strewn with rubble, and as the lovers swoon in each other’s eyes, a bedraggled poor family—father, son and baby—stops in front of them and stares large-eyed at the spectacle of consumption. “How beautiful it is!” the son seems to be saying, although no words were uttered: “But it is a house where only people who are not like us can go.” The narrator feels “a little ashamed of our glasses and decanters, too big for our thirst,” and for a moment connects in empathy with “the eyes of the poor.” Then he turns back to his lover’s eyes, “dear love, to read *my* thoughts there.” But instead he sees only disgust in her eyes. She bursts out: “Those people with their great saucer eyes are unbearable! Can’t you go tell the manager to get them away from here?” ([Baudelaire 1947](#) edn. no. 26).

[Marshall Berman \(1982: 148–150\)](#) uses this poem to introduce his discussion of “modernism in the streets,” equating this early *embourgeoisement* of Paris ([Gaillard 1977](#); see also [Harvey 1985a](#)) with the rise of bourgeois modernity. Much the same connection was made at the time, albeit across the English Channel. Eighty years before Robert Park and E. Burgess ([Park et al. 1925](#)) developed their influential “concentric ring” model for the urban structure of Chicago, Friedrich Engels made a similar generalization concerning Manchester:

Manchester contains, at its heart, a rather extended commercial district, perhaps half a mile long and about as broad, and consisting almost completely of offices and warehouses. Nearly the whole district is abandoned by dwellers. ... This district is cut through by certain main thoroughfares upon which the vast traffic concentrates, and in which the ground level is lined with brilliant shops.

... With the exception of this commercial district, all Manchester proper [comprises] unmixed working-people's quarters, stretching like a girdle, averaging a mile and a half in breadth, around the commercial district. Outside, beyond this girdle, lives the upper and middle bourgeoisie.

(Engels 1975 edn.: 84–85)

Engels had a keen sense of the social effects of this urban geography, especially the efficient concealment of “grime and misery” from “the eyes of the wealthy men and women” residing in the outer ring. But he also witnessed the so-called “Improvements” of mid-nineteenth-century Britain, a process for which he chose the term “Haussmann.” “By the term ‘Haussmann,’” he explained, “I do not mean merely the specifically Bonapartist manner of the Parisian Haussmann”—the Prefect of Paris, who was building boulevards through the “closely built workers’ quarters and lining them on both sides with big luxurious buildings,” for the strategic purpose of “making barricade fighting more difficult,” and for turning “the city into a luxury city pure and simple” (Engels 1975 edn.: 71). Rather, he suggested, this was a more general process:

By “Haussmann” I mean the practice, which has now become general, of making breaches in the working-class quarters of our big cities, particularly in those which are centrally situated, irrespective of whether this practice is occasioned by considerations of public health and beautification or by demand for big, centrally located business premises or by traffic requirements. ... No matter how different the reasons may be, the result is everywhere the same: the most scandalous alleys and lanes disappear to the accompaniment of lavish self-glorification by the bourgeoisie on account of this tremendous success.

(Engels 1975 edn.: 71)

Earlier examples of gentrification have been cited. Roman Cybriwsky, for example, provides a nineteenth-century print depicting a family's displacement from a tenement in Nantes in 1685. He reports that the Edict of Nantes, signed by Henry IV in 1598, guaranteed poor Huguenots certain rights including access to housing, but when the edict was revoked nearly a century later by Louis XIV, wholesale displacement took place at the hands of landlords, merchants and wealthier citizens (Cybriwsky 1980). Be that as it may, something more akin to contemporary gentrification made an appearance in the middle of the nineteenth century, whether known by the name “*embourgeoisement*,” “Haussmann” or the “Improvements.” It was hardly “general,” to use Engels’ word, but sporadic, and it was surely restricted to Europe since few cities in North America, Australia or elsewhere had the extent of urban history to provide whole neighborhoods of disinvested stock. Chicago was barely ten years old when Engels made his first observations of Manchester; and as late as 1870, there was little urban development in Australia. The closest parallel in North America might be the process whereby one generation of wooden buildings was quickly torn down to be replaced by brick structures and these in turn—at least in the older east-coast cities—were demolished to make room for larger tenements or single-family houses. It would be misleading to consider this gentrification, however, insofar as such redevelopment was an integral part of the outward geographical expansion of the city and not, as with gentrification, a spatial reconcentration.

Even as late as the 1930s and 1940s, gentrification remained a sporadic occurrence, but by this time precursor experiences of gentrification were also turning up in the United States. The flavor remained resolutely European and aristocratic, however, laced through with liberal guilt. The spirit of the

enterprise is well captured in a recent retrospective by Maureen Dowd, recalling the Georgetown scene in Washington, DC's most gentrified neighborhood through the eyes of patrician hostess turned historian Susan Mary Alsop:

They gentrified Georgetown, an unfashionable working-class neighborhood with a large black contingent. As Mrs. Alsop told *Town and Country* magazine: "The blacks kept their houses so well. All of us had terrible guilt in the 30's and 40's for buying places so cheaply and moving them out. The gentry and the hostesses faded through the 1970s.

(Dowd 1993: 46)

Similar scenes were being lived out in Boston's Beacon Hill (Firey 1945), albeit with a different local flavor, or for that matter in London, although of course genteel society had in no way relinquished its claim to many London neighborhoods in quite the same fashion.

So what makes all of these experiences "precursors" to a gentrification process that began in earnest in the postwar period? The answer lies in both the extent and the systemic nature of central and inner-city rebuilding and rehabilitation beginning in the 1950s. The nineteenth-century experiences in London and Paris were unique, resulting from the confluence of a class politics aimed at the threatening working classes and designed to consolidate bourgeois control of the city, and a cyclical economic opportunity to profit from rebuilding. The "Improvements" were certainly replicated in different ways and at a lesser scale in some other cities—Edinburgh, Berlin, Madrid, for example—but, as in London and Paris, they were historically discrete events. There are no systematic "improvements" in London in the first decades of the twentieth century, or a continued *embourgeoisement* of Paris in the same period systematically altering the urban landscape. As regards the incidences of gentrification in the mid-twentieth century, these were so sporadic that the process was unknown in the majority of large cities. It was very much an exception to larger urban geographic processes. Its agents, as in the case of Georgetown or Beacon Hill, were generally from such a limited social stratum and in many cases so wealthy that they could afford to thumb their patrician noses at the mere dictates of the urban land market—or at least mold the local market to their wons.

This all begins to change in the postwar period, and it is no accident that the word "gentrification" is coined in the early 1960s. In Greenwich Village in New York, where gentrification was associated with a nascent counterculture; in Glebe in Sydney, where sustained disinvestment, rental deregulation, an influx of southern European immigrants, and the emergence of a middle-class resident action group all conspired toward gentrification (B. Engels 1989); in Islington in London where the process was relatively decentralized; and in dozens of other large cities in North America, Europe and Australia, gentrification began to occur. And nor was this process long confined simply to the largest cities. By 1976, one study concluded that nearly half of the 260 US cities with a population of more than 50,000 were experiencing gentrification (Urban Land Institute 1976). Barely twelve years after Ruth Glass had coined the term, it was no longer just New York, London and Paris that were being gentrified, but Brisbane and Dundee, Bremen and Lancaster, PA.

Gentrification today is ubiquitous in the central and inner cities of the advanced capitalist world. As unlikely a city as Glasgow, simultaneously a symbol and stronghold of working-class grit and politics, was sufficiently gentrified by 1990, in a process fueled by an aggressive local state, to be adopted as

“European City of Culture” (Jack 1984; Boyle 1992). Pittsburgh and Hoboken are perhaps US equivalents. In Tokyo, the central ward of Shinjuku, once a meeting place for artists and intellectuals, has become a “classic battleground” of gentrification amid a rampaging real estate market (Ranard 1991). Likewise Montparnasse in Paris, Prague’s response to an unleashed real estate market since 1989 has been torrid gentrification, almost on the scale of Budapest’s (Sýkora 1993), while in Madrid it was the end of Franco’s fascism and a comparative democratization of urban government that cleared the way for reinvestment (Vázquez 1992). In the Christianhavn area around the experimental “free city” of Christiania on Copenhagen’s waterfront (Nitten 1992), and in the back streets of Granada adjacent to the Alhambra, gentrification proceeds in tense affinity with tourism. Even outside the most developed continents—North America, Europe and Australasia—the process has begun to take place. In Johannesburg, the gentrification of the 1980s (Steinberg *et al.* 1992) has been significantly attenuated by a new kind of “white flight” since the election of the ANC in April 1994 (Murray 1994: 44–48), but the process has also affected smaller cities such as Stellenbosch (Swart 1987). In São Paulo a very different pattern of disinvestment in land has taken place (Castillo 1993), but a modest renovation and reinvestment in the Tatuapé district accommodates small business owners and professionals who work in the central business district but who can no longer afford the rapidly inflating prices of the most prestigious central enclaves such as Jardim. Much of this redevelopment involves “verticalization” (Aparecida 1994) as land served by basic services is scarce. More generally, the “middle zones” around São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are experiencing development and redevelopment for the middle class (Queiroz and Correa 1995: 377–379).

Not only has gentrification become a widespread experience since the 1960s, then, but it is also systematically integrated into wider urban and global processes, and this too differentiates it from earlier, more discrete experiences of “spot rehabilitation.” If the process that Ruth Glass observed in London at the beginning of the 1960s, or even the planned remake of Philadelphia’s Society Hill during the same period, represented somewhat isolated developments in the land and housing markets, they did not remain so. By the 1970s gentrification was clearly becoming an integral residential thread in a much larger urban restructuring. As many urban economies in the advanced capitalist world experienced the dramatic loss of manufacturing jobs and a parallel increase in producer services, professional employment and the expansion of so-called “FIRE” employment (Finance, Insurance, Real Estate), their whole urban geography underwent a concomitant restructuring. Condominium and cooperative conversions in the US, tenure conversions in London and international capital investments in central-city luxury accommodations were increasingly the residential component of a larger set of shifts that brought an office boom to London’s Canary Wharf (A. Smith 1989) and New York’s Battery Park City (Fainstein 1994) and the construction of new recreational and retail landscapes from Sydney’s Darling Harbour to Oslo’s Aker Brygge. These economic shifts were often accompanied by political shifts as cities found themselves competing in the global market, shorn of much of the traditional protection of national state institutions and regulations: deregulation, privatization of housing and urban services, the dismantling of welfare services—in short, the remarketing of public functions—quickly followed, even in bastions of social democracy such as Sweden. In this context, gentrification became a hallmark

of the emerging “global city” (Sassen 1991), but was equally a presence in national and regional centers that were themselves experiencing an economic, political and geographical restructuring (M. P. Smith 1984; Castells 1985; Beauregard 1989).

In this regard, what we think of as gentrification has itself undergone a vital transition. If in the early 1960s it made sense to think of gentrification very much in the quaint and specialized language of residential rehabilitation that Ruth Glass employed, this is no longer so today. In my own research I began by making a strict distinction between gentrification (which involved rehabilitation of existing stock) and redevelopment that involved wholly new construction (N. Smith 1979a), and at a time when gentrification was distinguishing itself from large-scale urban renewal this made some sense. But I no longer feel that it is such a useful distinction. Indeed 1979 was already a bit late for this distinction. How, in the larger context of changing social geographies, are we to distinguish adequately between the rehabilitation of nineteenth-century housing, the construction of new condominium towers, the opening of festival markets to attract local and not so local tourists, the proliferation of wine bars—and boutiques for everything—and the construction of modern and postmodern office buildings employing thousands of professionals, all looking for a place to live (see, for example, A. Smith, 1989)? This after all describes the new landscapes of downtown Baltimore or central Edinburgh, waterfront Sydney or riverside Minneapolis. Gentrification is no longer about a narrow and quixotic oddity in the housing market but has become the leading residential edge of a much larger endeavor: the class remake of the central urban landscape. It would be anachronistic now to exclude redevelopment from the rubric of gentrification, to assume that the gentrification of the city was restricted to the recovery of an elegant history in the quaint mews and alleys of old cities, rather than bound up with a larger restructuring (Smith and Williams 1986).

Having stressed the ubiquity of gentrification at the end of the twentieth century, and its direct connection to fundamental processes of urban economic, political and geographical restructuring, I think it is important to temper this vista with a sense of context. It would be foolish to think that the partial geographical reversal in the focus of urban reinvestment implies the converse, the end of the suburbs. Suburbanization and gentrification are certainly interconnected. The dramatic suburbanization of the urban landscape in the last century or more provided an alternative geographical locus for capital accumulation and thereby encouraged a comparative disinvestment at the center—most intensely so in the US. But there is really no sign that the rise of gentrification has diminished contemporary suburbanization. Quite the opposite. The same forces of urban restructuring that have ushered new landscapes of gentrification to the central city have also transformed the suburbs. The recentralization of office, retail, recreation and hotel functions has been accompanied by a parallel decentralization which has led to much more functionally integrated suburbs with their own more or less urban centres—edge cities as they have been called (Garreau 1991). If suburban development has in most places been more volatile since the 1970s in response to the cycles of economic expansion and contraction, suburbanization still represents a more powerful force than gentrification in the geographical fashioning of the metropolis.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, however, as academic and political critiques of suburbanization were mounting, gentrification for many came to express an extraordinary optimism, warranted or otherwise, concerning the future of the city. The urban uprisings and social movements of the 1960s

notwithstanding, gentrification represented a wholly unpredicted novelty in the urban landscape, a new set of urban processes that took on immediate symbolic importance. The contest over gentrification represented a struggle not just for new and old urban spaces but for the symbolic political power to determine the urban future. The contest was as intense in the newspapers as it was in the streets, and for every defense of gentrification such as that by the Real Estate Board of New York there was an assault against gentrification-induced displacement, rent increases and neighborhood change (see, for example, [Barry and Derevlany 1987](#)). But the contest over gentrification was also played out in the usually more bromidic pages of academic journals and books. [...]

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