

Gentrification

Gentrification refers to a particular process occurring in working class districts of cities, entailing changes in the housing, and often in the public spaces and the retail trade outlets. The notion is linked to that of social «segregation», and implies a change in the social distribution across the urban space, which also involves material change.

Gentrification is a neologism created in reference to London in 1964 by Ruth Glass, a Marxist sociologist, from the English word gentry ("people of good social position, specifically the class of people next below the nobility in position and birth" (OED)). In London in the 1960s gentrification referred to the renovation and rehabilitation of former popular housing by way of its appropriation by better-off households, in particular in Islington, to the north of the city.

It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that the notion was returned to and theorised by British and North American researchers. Gentrification is seen as a «bifurcation» in social evolution in run-down central areas in the large cities, which goes against the urban ecology model of the Chicago school. At that time the reference was to a "return" to the centre by wealthy social categories, although in fact it was more a non-departure into the suburbs than a return. In the 1970s and 1980s there was considerable debate, mainly concerning the causes of the process: Neil Smith maintained that gentrification was above all a reinvestment in the city centres by public authorities and private agents in the property market producing a new offer of up-market housing in the former working-class districts. In contrast, David Ley explained it mainly by the individual choices of the gentrifying households belonging to a new middle class, typically new choices in terms of residence. To explain this preference of the middle classes for the city centres, several studies evidenced the importance of the role of women with jobs, in some cases bringing up children single-handed, or that of populations with particular lifestyles, such as homosexual couples. It is only more recently, since the mid-1990s, that researchers have taken a particular interest in public policy in the phenomenon of gentrification, and its impact on the poorer populations, generally relegated to peripheral areas. With Neil Smith, a Marxist geographer and a follower of David Harvey, the study of gentrification was given a critical foundation and a strongly radical component.

Gentrification was at first identified as a process of reappropriation of the neglected and abandoned centres of American and British cities by the middle classes. It began with the systematic up-grading of American city centres in the 1950s and 1960s, and the reconstruction effort in Britain in the same period. It extended into the next two decades, often accompanied by resistance movements. The recession of the 1990s led some to predict that the process would slow, or even reverse, but this was rapidly disproved, and gentrification resumed more strongly than ever, generalising after 2000 and no longer generating any resistance. It is today the main objective of urban policies in numerous cities across the world, with public authorities playing a leading role in the reappropriation of the city centres by the wealthy to the detriment of the working classes. Alongside, patterns have evolved, and the process is no longer restricted to the progressive rehabilitation of working-class districts by better-off households. Gentrification also involves numerous modes of conversion of working-class spaces that are not solely residential spaces; including industrial areas, in particular former docks and warehouses; either via rehabilitation, or by new developments (known as "new-build" gentrification) on the initiative of public authorities, private investors or resident households. Nor is this trend restricted to the city centres, it is spreading to the suburbs enjoying good connections with the city centres.

In continental Europe, processes of this type were studied in the 1960s and 1970s, in particular under the impulse of the Nanterre Urban Sociology Centre (Paris), which studied; and severely criticised; the renovations conducted by the State in the eastern parts of the Paris urban area. However in French scientific literature the notion of gentrification has only come into use recently. It was not until 2003 (with Bidou-Zacharisen) that a first work in French was explicitly devoted to the subject, and that the term appeared in scientific glossaries.

Since its invention, the connotations of the word have changed, and they vary according to the cultural setting. In the English-speaking world the word has been taken into common language, and to some degree has lost its critical component, following awareness campaigns prompted by developers and public authorities; gentrification has thus become synonymous with "rebirth" or "urban redevelopment", glossing over the segregation mechanisms that underpin the process. In contrast, in Belgium or Germany, the word is still perceived as critical, as seen in the arrest of Mathias Bern and Andrej Holm in 2007 in Berlin, charged with "belonging to a terrorist association" because of their proximity with activist groups resisting gentrification. In France, the term has thus far been restricted to the scientific sphere and little used in the media, who generally use the words "bobo" (bourgeois-bohème)

or "boboisation" ; "la gentrification" with its aura of English, appears less polemic.

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