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Contextual Diversity in Gentrification Research

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Abstract
This article argues against the allegedly inter-contextual character of gentrification within the new gentrification research agenda. The main argument is that gentrification is a concept highly dependent on contextual causality and its generalized use will not remove its contextual attachment to the Anglo-American metropolis. The second argument is that looking for gentrification in increasingly varied contexts displaces emphasis from causal mechanisms to similarities in outcomes across contexts, and leads to a loss of analytical rigour. The third argument refers to the ideological and political impact of equating 'gentrification' with, and projecting its neoliberal frame on, the different forms of urban regeneration across various geographical and historical contexts. As gentrification becomes quasi synonymous with urban regeneration, it becomes less useful to the analysis of urban socio-spatial change and, since the use of this term seems no longer avoidable in academic and broader discourse, its implicit contextual assumptions should be constantly exposed.

Keywords
context, contextual diversity, gentrification, urban policy, urban regeneration, urban renewal, urban sociology

Introduction

Gentrification is an ambivalent notion. It denotes processes of urban regeneration and underlines the advantages for capital investment versus the bleak fate of displaced residents from renovated areas. At the same time, it is a term that policy makers and investors in urban regeneration persistently avoid – using instead positive terms like 'urban renaissance' (Lees, 2008; Lees et al., 2008: xix; Shaw and Porter, 2009: 2–3) – since they claim regeneration processes to be the most effective way to renovate the city and reduce localized poverty and deprivation. Gentrification and terms like urban renaissance are, therefore, competing claims about the impact of urban regeneration processes – or 'different positions on a continuum of outcomes' according to Shaw and Porter

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(2009: 2–3). The question in this article is whether gentrification, which has grown as a critical understanding of such processes in the anglophone world, can facilitate or impedes their understanding in different contexts.

This article argues against the allegedly inter-contextual character of gentrification within the new gentrification research agenda. The main argument is that gentrification is a mid-range concept, highly dependent on contextual causality, and the effort to simplify its definition and broaden its applicability does not remove its original contextual attachment to the Anglo-American metropolis. The second argument is that looking for gentrification in increasingly varied contexts displaces emphasis from causal mechanisms and processes to similarities in outcomes across contexts, and leads to a loss of analytical rigour. The third argument is related to the ideological and political impact of labelling 'gentrification' the different forms and processes of urban regeneration across various geographical and historical contexts; it is claimed that this leads to projecting onto these forms and processes the features of gentrification's dominant conceptualization as a process fuelled by neoliberal policies.

'Context' is used here in a more mundane manner than in Wittgenstein's or Frege's philosophical elaborations concerning the (im)possibility of meaning or truth/falsity claims outside the contextual frames of propositions. It is used, primarily, to remind us that concepts and theories are always context-dependent and that the degree of this dependency is related to their specific object. Urban regeneration processes, and gentrification among them, are context-dependent in the sense that their patterns and impact are determined by the combined effect of mechanisms and institutions involving the market, the state, civil society and the specific and durable shape of local socio-spatial realities, i.e. built environments, social relations inscribed in property patterns, urban histories and ideologies.

In the anglophone world current urban regeneration processes are mainly understood as gentrification, following a rather monocausal explanatory model based on market mechanisms and neoliberal policies, while the rest of contextual parameters is taken implicitly on board. It is claimed that, eventually, this conceptualization of urban regeneration – whose context dependence becomes increasingly invisible due to its dominance – may not be adequate to travel around the world as it actually does.

An Expanded Concept for a New Research Agenda?

In his conclusion to the Atkinson and Bridge volume (2005), Clark (2005: 259–60) criticizes the mantra-like references to the pioneering work of Ruth Glass (1964) in the hundreds of articles on gentrification that give the impression of a process suddenly discovered in the early 1960s in a London neighbourhood. He argues for a simple and universal definition of gentrification, while the whole volume is permeated by the idea that gentrification is a process much more extended in geographical space and historical times than it was usually considered. In the same volume Petsimeris (2005: 242) even formulates the rather extreme claim that gentrification goes back to the Renaissance.

In recent years, the epicentre of the long debate on gentrification has moved away from the supply-side/rent gap (Smith, 1996; Smith and Williams, 1986) versus demand-side arguments (Hamnett, 2003; Ley, 1996; Zukin, 1982) concerning its origins and dynamic. Following Lees's research guidelines on post-recession gentrification (2000), the current debate revolves around the breadth of gentrification's content, which increases steadily by bringing a host of varied processes under a common umbrella. This raises new questions on whether it is productive for the investigation of changing urban inequalities to stretch out the content of gentrification (Butler, 2007) or whether it is time to put it to rest (Bondi, 1999: 254, cited in Davidson and Lees, 2005: 1165) and

replace it by more focused concepts and descriptions, such as 'super gentrification', 'residentialization', 'reurbanization', 'studentification', 'embourgeoisement', 'gentrification in rural settings' etc. (Butler, 2007; Buzar et al., 2007; Lambert and Boddy, 2002; Lees, 2000; Phillips, 2004; Preteceille, 2007; Smith, 2005; Smith and Butler, 2007).

From a neo-Weberian perspective the arguments for stretching out the limits of gentrification in terms of both time and space can be summarized to a double assumption about a simultaneous social *diversification* and *homogenization* that are framing this process. Diversification is the result of socio-economic transformations that have led to the crisis of class bound systems. Formerly, identities were mainly determined by relations of production (class positions) and diversification ensued from the shrinking of the relatively homogeneous working class and the expansion of the internally diversified middle classes. Following Butler (2007) and others, consumption assumes much more importance in the new social landscape, and place – mainly of residence – plays a highly compensatory role in the formation of diversified identities, especially for the constantly growing and distinction seeking middle class groups.[1]

At the same time, the demise of antithetical class positions, identities and behaviours and the growing importance of consumption have also fuelled an opposite trend of homogenization. Middle class attitudes, life projects and objectives have become increasingly dominant across various social and geographical contexts through the adaptation of global trend-setting consumption models to local conditions. Gentrification-like urban regeneration is part of this homogenization dynamic. It produces forms increasingly disassociated with specific contextual conditions; forms that become adapted to place-centred middle class strategies of distinction, i.e. to the spatialization of Bourdieu's habitus through the process of 'elective belonging' (Savage et al., 2005). In fact, gentrification-like urban regeneration enhances this homogenization dynamic by creating spaces characterised by a *gentrification aesthetic*.[2] Thus, increasing diversification within the middle classes is boosting the demand for the more distinctive and individualistic gentrification aesthetic, while globalized tastes and consumption models are undermining its distinctiveness by massively homogenizing its supply and demand across contexts.

The recent gentrification literature is quite varied as it draws inspiration from Weber, Bourdieu and radical work on economic restructuring and globalization. Its neo-Weberian component elaborates mainly on the importance of middle class diversity (Smith and Butler, 2007). This focus on middle class diversity poses a number of questions: are class relations nowadays effectively less important in determining social positions and identities or is it the preferential focus on the consumption practices of the middle classes that pre-empts the importance of class relations? What kind of empirical evidence corroborates the claim that place related positions and identities are becoming more important, and does this necessarily contradict and counterbalance the importance of class relations? Slater (2006) has characterized this focus as the eviction of critical perspectives from the gentrification literature, leading to the diminishing attention on displaced groups.[3] In the more radical literature the attention is turned to public policy (Lees and Ley, 2008) –a novelty, to some extent, in the anglophone literature – while the displacement of former residents always remains its central concern (Porter and Shaw, 2009; Slater, 2006). This new focus on policy is aimed against the 'dispersal of poverty' strategies of gentrification promoters – which ironically coincide with objectives and outcomes of American Civil Rights victories in the 1960s (Lees, 2008) – holding, at the same time, a different position from the traditional gentrification literature in terms of the possibility of politics. Finally, there is an effort to consolidate gentrification as a special study area by providing the first gentrification textbook (Lees et al., 2008) during a period when former feuds between demand and supply-side interpretations seem less unbridgeable (Lees et al., 2008: xxii).

Regardless of differences of approach within the recent gentrification literature there seems to be a consensus that gentrification 'has gone global' and that it is increasingly diversified in terms of form and actors involved (Lees et al., 2008: xx–xxi). In order to bring these diverse forms under the same concept, several sub-concepts are invented (super gentrification, studentification etc.) as well as a chronology distinguishing between first to fourth wave gentrification. Clark argues for a simple definition of gentrification according to which the latter involves

> a change in the population of land-users such that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated reinvestment of fixed capital. (Clark, 2005: 258)

Gentrification would be anything fitting this description regardless of specific time or place.[4] Thus, the new research agenda for gentrification broadens its scope in both time (from de-industrialization to post-recession) and space (from the Anglo-American context to continental Europe and increasingly to almost everywhere in the world).

I claim that this spatiotemporal stretching in the definition of gentrification is a regression in conceptual clarity and hence in theoretical rigour, rather than the liberation from an unduly restrictive conceptual and contextual frame.

From Local to Global

Gentrification was first conceptualized in a particular period of metropolitan development and was attributed to specific causal mechanisms on the supply and/or demand side. Processes of gentrification were related to the deceleration of the rapid growth that industrial metropolises have experienced in the post-industrial era, and to the increasing importance of internal changes following the restructuring of their economic base and social structures. These processes led to the subsequent social redistribution of residential areas and building stock in and around city centres, i.e. to the (re)appropriation by upper-middle and middle class gentrifiers of areas occupied traditionally by working class strata and industrial activities.

Gentrification was fuelled by the profitability potential of building and real estate capital invested in inner-city areas and, following Neil Smith (1987), was set in motion by what he identified as the rent gap (i.e. the difference between its actual and potential profitability). The process was also fuelled by the fast growing housing demand for revitalized central locations from a rather distinct socio-demographic group (young single person, single parent and couples with no children households with high and 'creative' occupational profiles) following career patterns that made it less attracted to the traditional nuclear families' way of life in suburban settings.

The etymology of the term reveals its contextual origins since it designates the movement of higher status groups from the periphery (gentry) to the urban core. Gentrification processes were particularly manifest in Anglo-American cities, where the movement of the elites to the periphery during the industrial development era (Fishman, 1987) created the precondition of a massive return and re-appropriation of central locations, when industry declined and inner cities started to be renovated and reappraised.

The emergence of gentrification is inscribed, therefore, within a specific conjuncture of metropolitan development and its generating mechanisms were related to specific conditions of capital investment in the built environment and to particular forms of socio-demographic change. These were the features of the Anglo-American context which boosted gentrification due both to the dominant type of neoliberal regulation – combining direct pro-gentrification policies with the increased commodification of housing – and to the local urban social morphology inherited through a specific path of urban development history.

The current stretching out of the spatiotemporal limits of gentrification is, therefore, a form of *de-contextualization*. The features retained in its new definition are only its broad social impact (social 'upgrading'), the investment in the continuous urban reshuffling and the distinction drive of middle class groups that keeps the system in motion.

In this way, the gentrification debate and literature increasingly encompass urban regeneration processes that were previously examined using different terminologies. The most characteristic example is probably the French *rénovation urbaine*, discussed for Paris by Henri Coing (1966) as early as the first works by Ruth Glass for London. Almost four decades elapsed before French researchers started using the term 'gentrification' to discuss urban change in their own city centres – see for example Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot (2004); Fualkow and Preteceille (2006); Preteceille (2007); Rhein and Preteceille (forthcoming). Does this mean that urban socio-spatial restructuring has become more commensurable on the two sides of the Channel? Following Preteceille (2007) there are important differences between the approaches to urban regeneration in France and the UK; in the former, the emphasis has been on public policies rather than the market, while a major contextual difference is that the centre of Paris has never been abandoned by the local elites, thus reducing the room for gentrification. Furthermore, Preteceille (2007) estimates that only a minor part of the current socio-spatial restructuring in the French capital could be adequately described as 'gentrification'[5], the rest representing either the expansion of neighbouring bourgeois residential areas (embourgeoisement)[6] or that of upward social mobility within working class areas.

If Paris can be linked somehow to the gentrification literature, there are authors from far less commensurable contexts that are increasingly compelled to label changes within urban centres around the world as gentrification. In Istanbul gentrification-like processes are not particularly related to de-industrialization, but to the downgrading of some parts of the city following the evacuation of ethnic minorities in the 1950s and the recent reappraisal of these areas due to their advantageous position (Islam, 2005; Uzun, 2001). Furthermore, the gentrification impact has sometimes been ambiguous and, in cases like the Ortakoy area, gentrifiers were driven away by the uncontrollably expanding nuisance of night-life activities (Islam, 2005: 127). In Kyoto gentrification is not a 'back to the city' movement, since gentrifiers come from inside the city and they do not seem to share the gentrification aesthetic, at least in terms of their own housing which they prefer to be modern. The remodelling process of the city centre seems piecemeal with the production of modern buildings depending on the aggregation of small parcels within a context of strongly protected property rights. In this case, gentrification appears damaging to the gentrification aesthetic and potentially threatens the city's tourist appeal (Fujitsuka, 2005). Brazilian cities have a long history of speculation and eviction (Rubino, 2005: 227) and gentrification – related to the preservation of central areas – seems a much softer process of class revanchism. Its actual impact brings up the question:

> can we find gentrification where there is no displacement of the poor by the 'gentry', but where a curious blend of slums, tenement houses and working-class houses next to upscale stores, coffee houses and restaurants now exist which are geared up to both global and local tourism? (Rubino, 2005: 227).

In the case of German cities, where gentrification seems an appropriate label for the undergoing processes, caution is nevertheless suggested. Regarding Berlin, Bernt and Holm (2005) conclude – following their study of the Prenzlauer Berg area – that attributing reinvestment into the run-down housing stock to expectations for rising rents is simplistic and that the 'understanding of the regulating context is crucial' (2005: 120). In Spain, Barcelona may be reported as an international flagship of gentrification following the impact of the Olympic Games and the policy orientation of the local authorities, but gentrification in Madrid is rather sporadic and in Bilbao its future seems

contingent upon policies rather than an inevitable destiny (Vicario and Martinez Monje, 2005). On the other hand, Larsen and Hansen (2008) claim that in Copenhagen's Vesterbro, state-led gentrification leads to traumatic forms of displacement even though it is not intended to. This claim runs parallel to Andersen's (2004) conclusion that in Copenhagen segregation is increasing in spite of substantial policies against social polarization.

In most of the above cases there was, until recently, scarce use of the gentrification terminology which rapidly conquers even further untapped ground and the gentrification *problématique* becomes present even in places where the process is literally absent. Sýkora (2005: 90), for example, refers to inquiries about gentrification in Bratislava, Ljubljana and Warsaw, while the term has started appearing in articles about Athens, where there is also no evidence of significant gentrification-like social change in its central neighbourhoods. Socio-spatial change in Athens is still dominated (since the mid-1970s) by the gradual and segregating relocation of upper and upper-middle strata to the suburbs (Maloutas et al., 2006) and, at the same time, by the desegregating effect of vertical social differentiation around the city centre (Leontidou, 1990; Maloutas and Karadimitriou, 2001) rather than by gentrification. The latter was limited – at least until 2001 – to the development of recreation and leisure spaces in downgraded areas of the city centre with negligible impact on residential social profiles (Maloutas and Alexandri, forthcoming). The only process in Athens that technically conforms to Clark's new broad definition of gentrification (2005: 258) is the social upgrading of certain traditional working class areas through the spatial entrapment of local social mobility (Maloutas, 2004). Leal (2004) has identified the same process in certain working class suburbs of Madrid. This endogenous upgrading of working class suburbs in both Athens and Madrid is related to the poorly developed south European welfare state, inducing the upwardly mobile offspring of the working class to settle in the recent and more comfortable part of the local housing stock in order to remain part of their families' local self-help networks. This type of housing demand has been diverted, therefore, from relocating to higher status areas including those with gentrification potential. Moreover, this process produces urban space with no gentrification aesthetic and its social impact is mitigated by family network structures that partly internalize the pressures of socio-demographic displacement.

I do not claim that all these varied processes are irrelevant to gentrification. However, as they become part of the gentrification literature, some of their features are eclectically put at centre stage, even though they may not be the more important ones. And this is particularly detrimental to local analysis that could lead, among other things, to sound political advice. According to Atkinson,

> we have tended to label too many kinds of neighbourhood change as gentrification and this elasticity has reduced the bite of critical studies of its localized appearance and has diminished policy-maker interest as a result. (Atkinson, 2008: 2634)

From Concept to Keyword through Half-Way De-Contextualization

Why do we need to extend the scope of gentrification research? Is it because we need to make sense of apparently similar phenomena across different contexts in a global reality presumed to be increasingly interrelated? I argue that, although this may be what is intended, the contextual stretching of gentrification may only lead to uninterestingly broad and theoretically less controllable constructs.

An important consequence of the contextual stretching of gentrification is that the emphasis is sliding from causal mechanisms and processes of socio-spatial change (as these become inevitably

more diverse) to similarities in outcomes. Similarity in outcomes overshadows diversity in mechanisms and processes and contributes, through the eclectic use of case studies, to increasingly inductive rather than deductive reasoning. This leads to looking for 'what works' through 'best – or worst – practices' (Porter, 2009: 241–2; Shaw and Porter, 2009: 6) on a presumably inter-contextual basis which evacuates local contextual causality and contributes to expanding the range of the dominant explanatory frames that, incidentally, are related to specific contextual settings.

Contextual stretching leads also to a loss of conceptual rigour. In the case of gentrification, this loss complicates further a notion that is already fuzzy and politically ambivalent: gentrification is a claim about processes of urban regeneration entailing a specific type of social impact. At the same time, it is frequently considered by many politicians, local bureaucrats, the media and some academics as the most effective way to urban regeneration and a means to reduce the concentration of poverty and deprivation in particular areas; and it is associated with a certain aesthetic and life styles adapted to middle class tastes that should be promoted according to authors like Richard Florida, whose recipes to boost local growth (Florida, 2002) offer a blueprint for creating a gentrification atmosphere if members of the creative class are to be attracted by communities seeking to overcome economic downturn.

Thus, through its simplified definition – that only involves gentrifiers and reinvestment – gentrification increasingly becomes a mere keyword for its fuzzy and ambivalent content, i.e. a signifier related to an aggregate of gentrification aesthetic and local 'social upgrading' rather than an articulated account of the underlying socioeconomic and political mechanisms and processes that produce it. At the same time, it is not an innocent keyword, and this is another important shortcoming resulting from the broadened scope of gentrification.

It is in this sense that I believe, contrary to Rodríguez-Pose (2006), that the Anglo-American domination in human geography may be 'bad'. The debate on this domination – incidentally one of the few international debates not dominated by Anglo-American colleagues – has already pinpointed at the extent of the geographical bias in favour of articles published in international journals originating from authors working in UK or US academic institutions (Paasi, 2005; Rodríguez-Pose, 2006); it has also drawn attention to the effect of using English as the unique medium for publication (Garcia-Ramon, 2003) and to the gate-keeping role of most international journals that in fact preserve this domination through their practice (Aalbers, 2004); finally, it has highlighted the pressure from academic institutions around the world to publish internationally (which increasingly means exclusively in English) as well as to develop a 'citation consciousness' (Paasi, 2005: 783–4) as *sine qua non* conditions for career advancement. As a result, this domination has affected the ways we understand the 'local' and the 'international' (Hadjimichalis and Vaiou, 2004; Vaiou, 2003) leading to an implicit academic hierarchy of contexts and has combined the relative disempowerment of researchers working in the peripheries with the contextual blindness of those working at the core (Minca, 2003).

I want to introduce here another element in this debate, which links it further to issues of context and hence to my discussion on gentrification.

In the debate on Anglo-American domination in human geography, it has been documented that in this discipline the domination is comparatively more prominent (Paasi, 2005: 782–3). I will argue that apart from the aforementioned reasons, this domination may also be explained on epistemological grounds. Theories and concepts are the product of abstraction, and abstraction is –among other things – a process of *de-contextualization*. Geography, on the other hand, is a discipline highly dependent on spatiality and most of the time the latter cannot be relevantly reduced to a geometrical or some other form of abstract spatial dimension. Andrew Sayer (1984: 132–6) commented extensively on the difficulty in producing meaningful theoretical constructs for geography

at high levels of abstraction. In this sense, what I claim here is that theoretical propositions and concepts in human geography are usually bound to remain context dependent since not only their inception but also their relevance are context related. Gentrification is not a highly abstract construct of social science, like capital, surplus value – or even the second circuit of capital and its spatial 'fixes' – and the effort to simplify its definition and broaden its applicability will not transform it into such a construct due to its indelible contextual attachments.

It is, nevertheless, clear that throughout the history of the discipline several concepts and theoretical constructs have burst out of their initial contextual limits and been tried in, or imposed on, different contextual realities through a process of *half-way de-contextualization.* By this term I refer to processes of abstraction and theory building that lead to concepts and theoretical constructs that are only seemingly disentangled from their attachment to specific geographic and/or socioeconomic contexts. Half-way de-contextualization ultimately leads from contextually embedded and context dependent mid-range concepts to notions claiming broad-range applicability that turn to fuzzy, all embracing and self-explanatory devices when the importance of lingering contextual attachments is forgotten or overlooked. Thus, the acquired conceptual status of gentrification, through the undue generalization of its use, masks those attachments under the presumption of its general validity and reduces visibility and control over their ineffaceable existence.

The sliding from concepts to ambivalent keywords through such half-way de-contextualization is facilitated by the modes of academic production and the ways they reproduce established hierarchies and power relations. Using rather ambivalent and far reaching notions/keywords instead of rigorously defined, and therefore rather restricted, concepts may be a better way to boost 'excellence' – a content-less but quantifiable academic property (see the thorough critique by Readings, 1996) – since the number of free-riders on the larger theoretical waves is multiplied as well as the number of those who are compelled to bring their contradictory empirical evidence from diverse contexts.

Gentrification is certainly not unique in this regard. Segregation, for example, is a concept conceived and elaborated within the intense ethno-racial division and the strong immigration in industrial US cities during the first half of the 20th century. Early Chicago School conceptualizations and subsequent approaches (*social area analysis, factorial ecology*) and measures (segregation indices and especially the *index of dissimilarity*) were tightly related to a binomial reality of clearly separated black and white populations. The chronologically following studies on the more complex social segregation issues in Europe and elsewhere have been inclined to use these approaches and measurement tools as the general theoretical canvas against which they weaved their own explanatory attempts – even if this was often done in a critical way. The progressive blurring of the contextual origins of segregation in the process of half-way de-contextualization meant that those origins have become implicit and were carried forward affecting the ways of seeing and the interpretations within the different contexts this concept was applied in.

A second example is the social polarization thesis, whose contextual origins are also often forgotten, even though it explicitly refers to the *global city*. The growth of polarization is argued on the basis of changes, involving the spatial concentration of activities (financial and other high-end producer services) that give global cities the leading edge as world management centres, and impact on their social structure in a polarizing and segregating manner (Friedmann and Wolff, 1982; Sassen, 1991). Regardless of the validity of this thesis,[7] its paramount diffusion is giving the impression that socio-spatial polarization is growing throughout the urban world, even if in most urban areas the socially polarizing mechanism assumed for global cities is not present.

The social polarization thesis, as well as the underclass debate (Massey and Denton, 1993; Mingione, 1996; Wacquant, 1997; Wilson, 1987), has contributed to create powerful metaphors of

divided cities and societies that were subsequently emancipated from the analysis of their generating mechanisms and contexts. This is happening because theory in the discipline is context dependent – in the sense that it is inspired by and remains attached to the context from which it has emerged – but not necessarily context confined, since it can be projected and eclectically linked to different realities through the process of half-way de-contextualization.

Thus, the social polarization thesis has created a dominant way of seeing urban society – a 'regulating fiction' according to Robinson (2002) – extending much further outside the global city context. By providing an implicitly context-indiscriminate and seemingly unproblematic link between social polarization and economic restructuring, this way of seeing reduces the need to explain – or even to confirm – the existence of socio-spatial polarization in specific contexts, taking for granted the inevitably polarizing and segregating effect of economic restructuring everywhere. As a result, a lighter and rather confused version of the polarization thesis, more linked to the metaphor of the divided city[8] than to the global city thesis itself, identifies polarization wherever there is accumulation of problems and entrapment of people in the lower echelons of the social scale followed by increasing income inequality, i.e. almost everywhere. In this way, half-way de-contextualization leads to the demotion of polarization from a rigorously defined concept to a fuzzy and intuitive notion/keyword.[9]

The Imposed Meaning of Neoliberal Gentrification

Returning to gentrification, I argue that the same kind of half-way de-contextualization is happening to this concept as it gains broader appeal and breaks the confines of its initial contextual boundaries. This process is not devoid of further consequences. If we bring together under the same gentrification umbrella all current processes of urban regeneration followed by some kind of local 'social upgrading', gentrification is no longer one possible process or outcome of urban regeneration, but becomes quasi synonymous to urban regeneration. Throughout urban history we can find processes with some similarity to gentrification, but is it theoretically interesting to apply the same concept in the case of the remodelling of Paris by Haussmann and in that of current gentrification processes in New York, for example? Does not this abstraction of context lead to the theoretical banality that within our unequal societies the groups with more resources will be more or less successful in appropriating the most sought after goods and services – if the latter are sufficiently commodified – and this involves of course residential locations, re-valued for one reason or another, and formerly occupied by less affluent groups? And how meaningful can it be to analyse the practices of different middle and upper middle class groups involved in gentrification processes and their place related identity formation strategies if they are not inscribed into particular contextual coordinates? Guilt-free middle class choices that fuel 'elective belonging' within a liberal context may be quite distant, in terms of both predispositions and impact, from 'choices' constrained by a deeply embedded sense of civic obligation within developed Scandinavian welfare societies or by the cross-class sense of national pride in east Asian contexts when partaking in an evenly distributed development effort (Fuzita, 2003; Fuzita and Hill, 2003). And, in a more prosaic manner, 'elective belonging' may be curtailed in its potential gentrification impact by reduced residential mobility in southern Europe or by strong property rights in Japan. My scepticism, therefore, does not concern abstraction and theory in general, but unwarranted – and half-way – abstraction from context in the case of mid-range concepts, like gentrification or segregation.[10]

Associating different processes of urban regeneration across space and time with gentrification leads to projecting neoliberal ideology and practice – even if this is done in a negative/critical way – as a new script on the past and throughout the world. Therefore, when we bring into this

concept different geographical and historical contexts from the one in which gentrification was originally conceived, it is doubtful whether we succeed in enriching its content and in broadening our perception about it; it is more likely that we project onto those different forms of urban regeneration the features of gentrification's dominant conceptualization. As a result, this dominant conceptualization is further reinforced by losing its own contextual references and limits, and becomes a 'regulating fiction' and a self-fulfilling prophesy obstructing the creative (and eventually subversive) imagination of cities' possible futures (Robinson, 2002: 544, 549).

It is somewhat ironic that radical thinkers like Saskia Sassen and Neil Smith contribute indirectly to this effect by reinforcing the image of neoliberal omnipotence through their critique of a regulation model that bursts out of its contextual confines due to the Anglo-American domination in the discipline. Sometimes they become themselves victims of the resulting contextual blindness, as witnessed by Neil Smith's expectation to visit the 'battlefields of gentrification' in Malmö (Clark, 2005: 263); and it may be true that Scandinavian welfare regimes or developmental capitalism regimes in East Asia are under the pressure of neoliberal aggressive globalization, but it is also true that they present considerable resistance affecting decisively local socio-spatial processes and their outcomes. Gentrification-like processes may be experienced worldwide, but as Shaw (2005: 168) states, gentrification 'plays out differently in different places and the process is deeply affected by the local context'.

In the most recent gentrification literature the question whether it is appropriate to stretch the meaning of gentrification so that it covers almost any form of urban regeneration is brought to its logical limits. In the Porter and Shaw (2009) volume the question is de facto brought up by the numerous cases where urban regeneration processes may not always lead to gentrification, or where gentrification may not be the intended outcome of urban regeneration. This is certainly the reason why the term does not figure in the book title, the subtitle, or the titles of 21 out of the 24 texts of the compilation. The same issue is treated by Ley and Dobson (2008: 2494), who acknowledge the possibility of politics (i.e. the possibility that processes of urban regeneration have an outcome different from gentrification) even if 'there is no silver bullet against gentrification'. The possibility of politics is clearly advocated by Shaw and Porter in their critique of the rigidities in the radical literature:

> The drawback of this approach is that it does not allow that regeneration can occur in any other way. It neither allows for different and competing objectives among the producers of urban regeneration, nor does it consider that various injustices might be unintended. It precludes the possibility of governments acting beyond the interests of the producers of gentrification. (Shaw and Porter, 2009: 5; see also Porter, 2009: 251)

On the other hand, Lees et al. (2008: xxii) defend the use of 'gentrification' on political grounds, i.e. to preserve the mobilizing capacity of the term due to the struggles fought under that name and in the hope that this will mitigate the gentrifying effect (of gentrification). It is clear, of course, that this argument is highly contextual since almost anywhere outside the anglophone world the political weight of the term is non-existent.

I believe that the current stretching of the contextual limits of gentrification will eventually lead to its return to what it really is: a potential outcome of urban regeneration processes that has gained important impetus due to a combination of investment opportunities and changing socio-demographic profiles within favourable conditions created by the joint effect of neoliberal policies and local urban histories. In this sense, it would be much more productive to compare contextually embedded forms of urban regeneration and inquire about the role of gentrification-like processes within them, rather than labelling them gentrification and assuming its presence at the mere sight

of a waterfront development, a mega-project of some sort or even a smaller urban regeneration scheme. The Porter and Shaw (2009) volume points in this direction.

Conclusion

In a presentation of his project *Les mots de la ville*, Christian Topalov[11] stressed that the multilingual thesaurus he compiles strictly avoids translation between the eight major languages of the project (see Topalov, 2002). This option was adopted in order to avoid loss of meaning related to each word and its historical constitution within a specific context. He referred at length to the example of the *square* – which denotes much more than the open space between the surrounding buildings – and the clear loss of meaning when it is translated using some variant of the Greek *πλατεία*, like *place* or *piazza*. The thesaurus of *Les mots de la ville* is focused on words related to the empirical reality of the city, avoiding more elaborate concepts, probably because the latter contain translations and abstractions that have already cut the links with the historicity of signifiers of urban facts. In the world of theory and conceptualization this loss of meaning is part of the game. Abstraction is by definition a partial loss of meaning and generalization is a form of translation between different contexts.

The problem in the case of gentrification is not the loss of meaning in general through a rigorous process of abstraction and theoretical construction. It is the systematic loss of contextually particular meaning operated by the imposition of concepts and theoretical propositions that assume overbearing validity even though they implicitly remain entangled in their own contextual origins. This particular type of implicit link to the contextual origins of mid-range concepts, like gentrification, does not occur at random, but in systematic ways within the geographically uneven structuration of power relations in academic production.

Theory, especially in a discipline like human geography, remains to a large extent context dependent. Theory is usually generated in highly developed regions, and this is part of what makes of those regions the core in the academic division of labour. This implicit core contextuality of theory in human geography is responsible for not having to justify the international relevance of dealing with socio-spatial issues in London or New York and, on the contrary, to be obliged to do so for Naples, Recife or Nagoya; and even to do it on the basis of their relevance to theoretical discussions and concepts implicitly bound to a different context from their own, incidentally that of the former. Thus, the skewed contextual dependence of theory leads to a skewed theoretical dependence of context. In 2008 half of the world population was living in cities, but only a very small part lived in the core cities that set the ways of seeing and understanding socio-spatial change that often become the deforming lenses through which we examine what happens in the rest.

It would be legitimate to pay unequal attention to cities in different regions if we believed that the different parts of the world will eventually follow similar stages of development and, therefore, focusing on the leaders would also be beneficial to the rest for future reference; or if we believed that what happens in core regions is so important that it affects peoples' lives everywhere in so predictable and inescapable ways that we should rather focus on the core and deduce the consequences for the rest.

Thus, one cannot but agree with Butler (2007: 162) that the concept of gentrification 'comes bundled with a set of assumptions about the neoliberal nature of the world that originated in the socioeconomic urban landscapes of North America plus a few other sites in the Anglophone world'; and even more so when he argues with regard to the Atkinson and Bridge (2005) subtitle (*The New Urban Colonialism*) that 'in this sense, the issue of "neocolonialism" is as much with the use and definition of the term as with its consequences' (2007: 163). As a result of such preoccupations, he

affirms that his concern ‘is not that this concept has become "diluted" but rather that there is now an expectation of what we should expect to find which blinds us to the continued diversity of consequences’ (2007: 167). It comes, therefore, as a surprise that the central argument developed in his article is that ‘gentrification – despite these concerns – is fundamentally "fit for purpose" in identifying, describing, and understanding the changing relationships between people and places in a range of settings across the world’ (2007: 164).

My conclusion, on the contrary, is that the way gentrification is evolving as a concept that embraces almost any form of urban regeneration is detrimental to analysis, especially when applied to contexts different from those it was coined in/for. At the same time, however, it is probably true that we can no longer escape this concept since it has acquired a substance of its own, has transgressed the limits of academia and has become a sociopolitical issue and a stake in itself. We should, therefore, constantly challenge it by revealing / recalling its implicit contextual assumptions and by comparing them to the contextual realities of the analysis each time at hand. This is mainly a task that researchers outside the Anglo-American core should carry out, even though researchers within that core would have plenty to gain from an increased awareness of the contextual limits of their own tools.

Notes

1 Research on education and the city has also turned its attention to the increasing variability of the growing social middle (Butler and Savage, 1995: vii) and away from its traditional focus on the antithetically clear positions and identities of social extremes.

2 Krase (2005: 205–8) describes the generation of this aesthetic in ethnic neighbourhoods as the elevation of the ‘shabbily chic’ to internationally recognizable standards or the transformation of the taste of necessity to a taste of luxury.

3 Similar critical viewpoints, triggered by Slater’s article, were formulated in a collection of articles in the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* involving, among other things, the disappearance of the working class from investigations of the urban scene, the adjustment of research to the needs of neoliberal urban policies and the impact of the self-serving behaviour of academics siding with the middle classes with which they share place strategies (Allen, 2008; Shaw, 2008; Slater, 2008; Smith, 2008; Wacquant, 2008a).

4 Butler (2007: 176) argues, more cautiously, for ‘an approach to gentrification that is both more specific *and* more general.’

5 Although the author does not express such a claim, the editors of the special issue in which Preteceille’s (2007) article is included classify him among those who ‘argue for an extension of the conceptual meaning of gentrification to capture emerging processes of urban change’ (Smith and Butler, 2007: 3).

6 Embourgeoisement seems increasingly put aside in favour of gentrification in France, Italy and Spain (Kalantides, 2007: 160–61).

7 Following Hamnett (1994, 1996) and Preteceille (1995, 2006) the relevance of this thesis is limited even within the global city context: it may reflect the conditions of American cities like New York and Los Angeles, but it is not empirically corroborated for Paris, London or the Randstad. Several other researchers have also challenged the relevance of this thesis for Sydney (Baum, 1997), Oslo (Wessel, 2001), Toronto (Walks, 2001), Helsinki (Vaattovaara and Kortteinen, 2003), Madrid (Leal, 2004) and Athens (Maloutas, 2007).

8 The power of these urban division metaphors is such that authors who try, for instance, to dissociate the meaning of ‘ghetto’ from the Parisian *banlieues* (Lagrange and Oberti, 2006; Wacquant, 2008b) seem to be caught in an unequal struggle with the dominant notions, usually loved and reproduced by the media.

9 The major proponents of the polarization thesis contribute sometimes to this demotion by using their own terminology in a loose way, as Wessel (2001: 891–2) notes about Sassen and Castells.

10 I use Merton's (1957) term in the same way as Smith and Butler (2007: 7) but in order to stress the limits of its inter-contextuality rather than the opposite.

11 Presentation in the joint seminar of the *EHESS* and the Historical Archives of the University of Athens at the *Institut Français d'Athènes* in March 2007.

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