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COMPARATIVE APPROACHES TO GENTRIFICATION: A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

Comparative research on gentrification is on the rise, especially since gentrification is no longer confined to historical, central neighbourhoods in First World countries, but also appeared in rural, new-built areas and Second World countries. In this paper we present our comparative approach to investigate gentrification processes in four European cities (Arnhem, Istanbul, Vienna, Zurich), which differs from previous studies in its use of assemblage theory as research framework. The multi-layered framework discerns three levels: ‘metrics’, ‘interpretations’, and ‘practices’. We argue that many comparative studies mainly focus on metrics, while researching interpretations and practices instead – and how these three levels influence each other through processes of actualisation and counteractualisation – would enhance our knowledge on gentrification. In doing so, we aim to provide a precise account of the nested relations of different layers of empirical reality and thus respond to various calls in the debate to intensively examine ‘geographies of gentrification’.

Key words: Gentrification, assemblage theory, European comparative research

INTRODUCTION

The collection of papers in the previous special issue of this journal showed the complexities of gentrification in a number of ways. Doucet (2014) outlined new forms of gentrification that have emerged in the past decades. As a result, gentrification is no longer confined to historical, central neighbourhoods in First World countries, but has appeared in other places including the rural, new-built areas and Second World countries (e.g. Atkinson &

Bridge 2004; Davidson & Lees 2005; Lees & Ley 2008). Consequently, comparative research in gentrification research emerged (e.g. Franzén 2005; Harris 2008; Lees 2012), which made gentrification even more complex. The special issue – with a focus on gentrification in the Netherlands – adequately shows that there are significant institutional, political and policy distinctions between countries, whereas the debates on gentrification are still dominated by the Anglo-American context (Bridge 2014). Uitermark & Bosker (2014), for example,

illustrate the ambiguous gentrification policy of the Amsterdam government that has become more neoliberal over the years, but that still can be regarded as relatively mild compared to other countries. Dutch gentrification has historically been far more state-led than in other countries (Ernst & Doucet 2014). In his afterword, Bridge (2014, p. 234) therefore stated that “these institutional factors are key to understanding gentrification in the Netherlands and such claims suggest the importance of robust cross-national comparison”.

With our paper, we would like to contribute to this call for comparative research, and for the combination of different research perspectives and methods. It introduces our research framework that forms the basis for a research project to be carried out in four different cities across Europe: Vienna (Austria), Arnhem (the Netherlands), Istanbul (Turkey) and Zurich (Switzerland). Building on assemblage theory, the project uses interdisciplinary methods to understand how different social, economic and spatial processes coalesce in shaping neighbourhoods in these four cities. The multi-layered framework discerns three levels: ‘metrics’, ‘interpretations’ and ‘practices’. Our framework sheds further light on the way gentrification can be seen as both a “process of change and a changing process” (Doucet 2014, p. 125). To do so, we approach gentrification as an ‘open concept’, without testing certain pre-defined propositions but instead regarding it as an assemblage of processes. Below, we will first elaborate our views on gentrification indicating why an assemblage approach and the notion of ‘open concept’ presents a valuable contribution to gentrification research. Subsequently, we will further detail our multi-layered assemblage perspective.

GENTRIFICATION AS AN ‘OPEN CONCEPT’

Gentrification might well be one of the most intensively researched urban phenomena of the last decades. Its definitions, causes and consequences have shifted over the course of time. Gentrification has reached out from its initial orientation on residential, historic areas in or near the centre of First World metropolises, to non-urban areas (‘rural gentri-

fication’), non-residences (‘commercial gentrification’), non-historic areas (‘new-built gentrification’), non-metropolises including smaller service-oriented cities like Bristol (‘provincial gentrification’), and areas where the ‘gentrified’ are being replaced by the ‘super rich’ (‘super gentrification’) (Bridge 2003; Lees *et al.* 2008; Doucet 2014). For some, this ‘definitional overload’ has led to a ‘loss of momentum’ around gentrification (Bondi 1999: 255) and gentrification becoming a ‘chaotic concept’ (Beauregard 1986). More recently, Maloutas (2012, p. 33) claimed that gentrification becomes less useful to the analysis of urban socio-spatial change as it becomes “quasi synonymous with urban regeneration”. Its definition has thus widened and become more diffuse.

Another shift in the debate concerned the causes of gentrification, which altered through time from the movement of people (focusing on cultural or ‘consumptive’ factors) to the movement of capital (focusing on economic or ‘productive’ factors). Meanwhile, research has moved away from this polarised impasse, either explicitly (e.g. Lees *et al.* 2008) or implicitly (e.g. Zukin 1995). In a similar vein, the association of gentrification has diversified from an unwanted process of displacement to a depiction as “engine of urban renaissance” (Cameron & Coaffee 2005, p. 39). Consequently, the role of the government in stimulating and regulating gentrification has also changed from “roll-back” to “roll-out” (Peck & Tickell 2002, p. 380; see also Hackworth & Smith 2001).

In addition, as Doucet (2014) also outlined, the spatial scope of gentrification studies has widened from the Anglo-American world to cities in both the Global North and the Global South, including Sydney, Berlin, Istanbul, Kyoto and Bilbao (all case studies in Atkinson & Bridge 2004). Overall, the debate has tended to shift from a focus on general causal factors to one on their geographically variable effects (Lees *et al.* 2008). On multiple occasions, Lees (2000, 2012) has therefore argued for a detailed examination of the ‘geography of gentrification’. Rather than focusing on opposing arguments such as supply versus demand and culture versus economy, she sought to widen the spatial lens of gentrification studies

through international, intra-national and city-wide comparisons. Phillips (2004), in addition, goes as far as stressing ‘other geographies of gentrification’, which, in line with work by Lefebvre (1991) and Soja (1996) should include other spatial epistemologies. According to Phillips (2004), Soja’s identification of ‘second-space’ and ‘third-space’ dimensions calls for a detailed understanding of perceptions, interpretations, and practices in shaping ‘geographies of gentrification’.

In view of this debate, we would argue that gentrification has turned into an ‘open concept’ (Kooij *et al.* 2012). From a denominator of (supposedly) well-defined urban processes, gentrification has evolved into the anchor point for core debates on the manifestations, roots, threats, potentials, effects and normative issues of process of neighbourhood ‘upgrading’ led by property. In this view, we see scope for a comprehensive and comparative approach that is not framed in dichotomies of production versus consumption, causes versus consequences, unwanted displacement versus urban renaissance. Rather, we seek to understand the variations and complexities associated with gentrification, stemming from concrete practices and interpretations evolving in particular spatial contexts.

Our research is by no means the first to apply a comparative perspective within gentrification research. Analytical frameworks have ranged from transatlantic, transcontinental and inter-urban to intra-urban comparisons (Harris 2008). Yet, our research differs from these comparisons by opposing the inclination to start from certain universal prepositions on the role of real estate, certain social groups (‘middle class’, ‘creative class’), and certain given mechanisms, for instance with regards to displacement. In our view, the tendency in the literature to hold on to universal claims has resulted in a rather chaotic conceptualisation of gentrification (cf. Beauregard 1986). Despite attempts to be more synthetic and context-sensitive, gentrification has threatened to become an empty concept bundling a wide range of events only bearing semantic resemblance. In response, Lees *et al.* (2008, p. 135) argued that gentrification needs elasticity and detachment to open up to new insights, while centring on one aspect, common to all cases,

namely (re)colonisation of neighbourhoods by the middle class.

We recognise that universal claims play an important role in thinking on, and engaging with neighbourhood development. However, instead of seeking to test the validity of such – often critical – claims, we should draw the attention to how prevailing claims inspire certain forms of measuring and analysing, and hence the production of particular metrics. These metrics, in turn, originate from a very specific set of discursive actors and practices. It is this interaction between different levels, metrics, interpretations and practices that is central to our proposed framework. Inspired by assemblage theory (Deleuze & Guattari 1987; DeLanda 2002, 2006), we propose a layered framework to elaborate and understand the complex and singular reality behind the ‘open concept’ of gentrification. The next section will further detail our approach.

AN ASSEMBLAGE PERSPECTIVE ON GENTRIFICATION

Our approach starts from a position elaborated by Massey (2005). In her relational perspective on place and space, places are considered as full of potential for non-determined, creative change that cannot be understood in terms of underlying, universal mechanisms and processes, let alone in terms of local determinants. Rather, they are places emerging at the conjunctures of multiple lines of development or ‘trajectories’, each with their own space-time dynamics. Places become recognised as such through the identification of the capacities and potentialities for development, governance and branding in view of these trajectories (Healey 2007). In the case of gentrification, the following kinds of trajectories can be expected to be particularly relevant:

- shifts in local economies from industry-based, production-oriented, to services-based consumption-oriented processes of value creation, in which neighbourhoods are increasingly perceived discourses and conceived as spaces of attraction and consumption;
- transitions in real estate and housing markets, with an increasingly pervasive role of institutional investors;

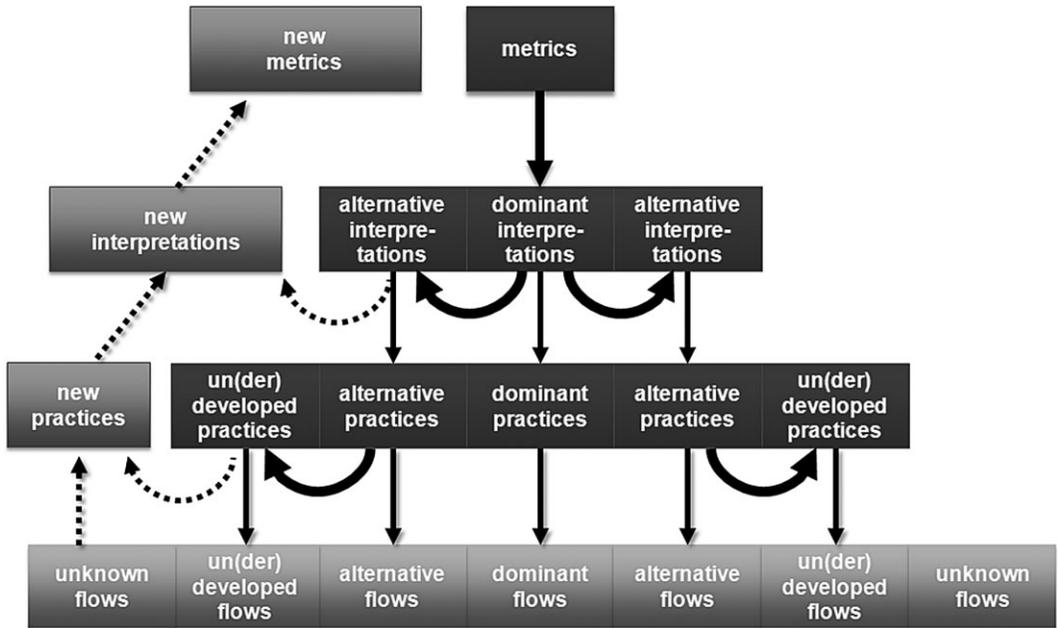


Figure 1. Process of counteractualisation (solid arrows) and (re)actualisation (dashed arrows).

- changes in the preferences for, and engagement with, particular kinds of residential areas by social groups, such as middle class or immigrant groups, due to new working, living and bonding habits;
- more emphasis on neighbourhood development by local and national authorities, driven by concerns on safety and social mixing, and by ambitions regarding creativity, entrepreneurship, social cohesion, etc.;
- the trajectory of ‘gentrification’ as an open concept itself, notably in the way it navigates between normative, analytical, prescriptive and reflexive perspectives on neighbourhood dynamics as described above.

For a place, trajectories present drives, capacities, ideas and practices. These do not come as concrete conditions or resources, but as worlds of flows and potentialities that are actualised through processes of assemblage (McFarlane 2011). Hence, from an assemblage perspective, further trajectories can be distinguished that capture the way places are constituted out of the world of flows, as conjunctures of multiple trajectories. These are the trajectories of ‘actualisation’ moving from potential and ‘open’ spaces to actual and precisely structured

spaces or ‘assemblages’. If we move along this trajectory, we move from the world of flows to three levels: ‘practices’, ‘interpretations’ and ‘metrics’. Through actualisation, each level emerges from the level below (practices emerging from flows, etc), in increasingly structured form (see Figure 1). The reverse also happens, through a process called ‘counteractualisation’ (DeLanda 2002): the opening up of possibilities at lower levels through the destabilisation of entities at the higher levels (such as metrics). Elaborating these levels presents our response to Phillips’s (2004) plea for using a multi-layered approach to gentrification, and related issues discussed before. It seeks to meet the challenge posed by Brenner *et al.* (2011, p. 236), to “explore who (or what, as the case may be) is doing the structuring to whom”, by providing a more precise conceptual and methodological framing of assemblage theory. We will discuss the different levels starting from the most rigidly structured level: metrics.

Metrics – Our understanding of metrics very much corresponds to what Marxists conceive as ‘real abstractions’ (Sohn-Rethel 1978; Toscano 2008). Metric studies produce objective knowl-

Table 1. *Research framework.*

	Metrics	Interpretations	Practices
Ontology	Metric properties	Projective possibilities	Differential capacities
Assemblage	Institutional properties	Organisational possibilities	Practice capacities
Method	Quantitative/STS	Discourse analysis	Ethnography
Examples	Demographics (migration, age, household size, ethnicity etc.), wealth (income, employment, output), characteristics of real estate market (price, supply)	Stories of social mix and diversity (multiculturalism), clustering and branding, visions of urban revitalisation	Everyday social life, entrepreneurship, planning and project desires

edge by undertaking comparisons in terms of axiomatics and quantified variables (cf. Deleuze & Guattari 1983, 1987). This knowledge is restricted to the discrete and quantitative yet otherwise very broadly defined, including real abstractions like facts, figures, statistics and other measurements about general categories of objects of knowledge (including policy evaluations). Such knowledge is primarily produced and used by a variety of established institutions (state, universities, official think tanks), as well as by social and economic agents such as housing associations, businesses, real estate agents, etc. Metrics play an important role in embedding discursive formations, making stylised representations of (parts of) neighbourhood development and translating these in prevalent ways of thinking.

Academic research on gentrification has often focused on such metrics, customarily using demographics, employment rates, and characteristics of real estate market. For example, Alonso's (1964) bid rent theory illustrates the competition between firms and households for the most central locations with the highest value and best accessibility. Such formal models define the city as an arena of equilibriums and sovereignty of rationally behaving consumers and producers. In a similar vein, Smith's (1987) rent gap theory suggested that an area will undergo gentrification as soon as developers identify the opportunity to capitalise on the difference between its current and potential value after redevelopment. Although their frames of reference differ, they share a certain level of 'objectification': there is a standard model or universal claim explaining gentrification that needs only

to be refined and tested through comparative research. According to Van Gent (2012), this 'generalisation' has led Smith to deny the existence of any substantial differences between gentrification processes in European and US cities or to only regard them as local variations of the same model.

From an assemblage perspective, 'metric' gentrification studies are not simply discarded as untrue to reality. On the contrary, models, institutional data and other quantified knowledge of the studied neighbourhoods – such as ethnicity or income, see Table 1 – are considered as a crucial part of the real world of gentrification. Our focus centres on the ways in which metrics originate from the actualisation of interpretations and practices, and how, and through which channels, the latter become further rooted through the use of certain metrics. Besides, we examine how the search for alternative ways of knowing may open up new possibilities at the level of interpretations and practices (i.e. through counteractualisation). This is not just a matter of debunking, but of a careful assessment of how trajectories of changes can be built involving new actors and ideas (McFarlane 2011).

Interpretations – 'Interpretations' refer to the shaping of representational identities, stories, images and projections of urban areas (like gentrification or creative city), which primarily evolve at the level of organisations (public, private, community, etc.). They are part of a discourse on urban development. In assemblage terms, interpretations manifest projective possibilities. These include (opposing) identities, decisions, stories, images and

theories stemming from and establishing organisations and agents. When applied to gentrification, interpretations refer to stories of, for example, social mix, displacement, branding of the neighbourhood, and visions of urban revitalisation.

For us, there are two forms of interpretation: signifying and indexing. Signification attributes meaning abstract terms and relations, tying for instance, real estate investments, displacement and shifting social mixes in a coherent story. This is generally framed within normative statements on the desirability of certain developments. Indexing refers to the labelling and characterisation of concrete phenomena and developments in view of the prevailing abstractions. For example, labelling Klarendal – our selected case in Arnhem – as a gentrifying area manifesting some undesirable displacement is an example of indexing. Interpretations are central to the process of recognition of places in view of prevailing societal ambitions and forms of knowing.

Within a historical trajectory of actualisation some interpretations give rise to metrics, also helping particular ways of thinking to travel, as scripts or calculative practices, to move to other places and agents (Kooij *et al.* 2012). In daily practice, hence, interpretations tend to follow metrics, in the sense that metric knowledge is translated in analytical and prescriptive stories. The latter, in direct and indirect ways, feed the decision-making process by organisations engaged in neighbourhood development, such as the local governments. Across space, decisions taken will thus conform to prevailing abstractions, resulting in similar approaches to gentrification. This does not mean, however, that interpretation presents a fully smooth space of converging ideas and decisions. Organisations, or more precisely organisational practices, play an important mediating role. If incoming interpretations run counter to the interests and views of core agents such as local or national governments, or investors, other courses of action may be pursued. If such ‘deviations’ become more widespread, they may prompt calibration and adaptation of the generic model.

An important mediating role is played by academic debates, or more precisely by the practice of academic storytelling (Dormans

2009). Through their critical engagement with prevailing ways of knowing and interpreting, and their capacity to propose alternative metrics and chains of signification, academic scholars orchestrate, to a considerable extent, the actualisation processes from urban practices to metrics. What is measured and correlated, for example, displacement, ethnicity, creativity, entrepreneurship, is a reflection of underlying notions of the ‘urban’ and the ways this is linked to grand narratives notably on capitalism, social conflicts, and changing spatial formations. Understanding such chains of signification as a learning by practice, or a transformative ‘transduction’ (cf. Simondon 1992; Latour & Hermant 2006), may make an important contribution to rethink our “most basic assumptions regarding the site, object, and agenda of ‘urban’ research” (Brenner *et al.* 2011, p. 226).

Practices – ‘Practices’ result from the consolidation of flows into habitual, yet inherently transformative ‘ways of thinking and doing’; they involve creative routines and capacities of working, living, shopping, relaxing, etc. Consolidation of practices is only temporary and place-specific, what from a phenomenological point of view would be interpreted as ‘lived spaces’ (Lefebvre 1991). In assemblage terms, practices consist of differential capacities, emerging through technical and affective transformations based on trends and tendencies immanent to those creative urban ‘flows’. In the context of gentrification, new middle class inhabitants may accept displacement tendencies among other classes, or they may actively embrace practices of social mixing (e.g. through choice of schools). Hubs of ‘creative’ businesses may function as entrepreneurial enclaves in deprived areas, or they may seek active methods of integration. What these examples show is that local contexts can affect the extent to which practices evolve as dominant, fitting and feeding prevalent projections and metrics, and which are marginal, yet with the potentiality to set in train new actualisation and shape new trajectories.

In our comparative research, we will study processes of actualisation and counteractualisation by collecting information on metrics,

interpretations and practices in four European cities. Data is collected on discrete objects (e.g. on houses, enterprises, public spaces), on continuous fields (zones, corridors, blocks, streets), annotations (frames with place-specific information, impressions and tales), tags and metadata for the neighbourhood as a whole (including 'stories' contained, for instance, in policy documents and academic reflections). Besides interpretative and other methods (Table 1), visualisation of the data and their intersections presents an important tool for communication and analysis. The aim is to build an interactive, multi-layered and dynamic map for each neighbourhood that retains the complexity of the original data, but also serves to draw out the various trajectories and assemblages and the ways in which these do and do not relate.

CONCLUSION

Gentrification, approached as an 'open concept', can be read as a tendency, a bundle of practices, a projection, and a model. Applying the perspectives of trajectories and actualisation help to present the conceptualisation of gentrification as a nested event. Our rendering of assemblage theory, in particular, provides a more precise account of the nested relations of certain layers of empirical reality and the different methods corresponding to those layers. In doing so, we respond to various calls in the debate, notably to Lees's (2000, 2012) advocacy for a detailed examination for the 'geography of gentrification', and Phillips's (2004) emphasis on adopting a multi-layered approach. We thus engage critically not with certain messages coming out of the gentrification debate, but with the practice of articulating and deploying the concept itself. Our research, in other words, aims at detailing the geography of articulating gentrification. In doing so, we seek to identify the possibilities for other routes of actualisation, capturing other potentialities at the level of flows and practices through different kinds of interpretations and metrics.

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