



Requiem for Neil Smith: A retrospective of the author's thought on gentrification from the lens of critical geography¹

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Abstract

This article aims to make a retrospective of the several theses that for decades characterized the work of Neil Smith on gentrification and the agents and processes inherent in this process. It is based on the discussion and reflection on the several perspectives of the Marxist paradigm of geography and its impact on the concepts and methodology used by Smith, from the late 1970s until the recent end of his academic career, to understand and analyze the process of gentrification as urban restructuring, within the theoretical and methodological framework of Critical Geography.

Keywords

Gentrification; Neil Smith; critical geography; urban restructuring

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Introduction

This article discusses some of the general issues inherent in the Marxist paradigm of Geography and its repercussion on the conceptualisation and methodology that Neil Smith used from the late 1970s until the end of his academic career for the study of gentrification. The purpose is to analyse how gentrification is a process of urban restructuring, the social product of a specific means of production marked by the economic restructuring characteristic of late advanced capitalism. This view of the phenomenon is clearly dominated by Marxist structuralism, and by discussing its basic features, I seek to also contribute to clarify the misunderstanding involving Smith's economic determinism which has been alleged by some of its main critics and academic opponents.

His has been a contribution of decades and made a considerable impact on the contemporary study of gentrification and urban geography. I shall look at his work based on several theses Smith used over more than three decades to explain gentrification as a restructuring of urban space: i) the role of urban restructuring in the social production of urban space; (ii) gentrification in the contemporary city as a result of real estate capital accumulation; and (iii) gentrification as a neoliberal global strategy, and the revanchist urbanism.

Gentrification and the social production of urban space

Urban space is not fixed. Similar to the economic and social system, the urban system undergoes transformations so that its material and organisational structure changes its features. The production system is the outcome of intermeshing production, consumption, circulation, and management factors. All these factors are interconnected and model space not only because they work through localised structures, but also through the relationships set up and articulated in the geographical space. Changes in the production system and the appropriation of urban space are linked to the global economic dynamics; space therefore, is not neutral or empty of social meaning. Space demarcates precise social practices, each society produces its spaces, determines its rhythms of life and means of appropriation. This is a basic premise associated with the production of space and the principle of space as a real social category: the result-space. Built and in the process of being built, this real space demarcates precise social practices, a reality reflecting the historical vitality on which a concrete society leaves its imprint.

This basic standpoint runs throughout Neil Smith's work when he argues that the gentrification of central urban space intervenes in the production and organisation of productive labour and therefore has an important role to play in society's general reproduction process. It is also present when he affirms that class relations are as well mediated through residential strategies with gentrification at the forefront. These relations in the urban space vary in the way the capitalist means of production and the ensuing social order are reproduced and sustained.

From this general perspective, the proposal put forward by Smith (1986a) and Harvey (1987) ultimately seeks to reveal the concrete ways in which these historical processes qualify and determine society-space relations on the basis of gentrification as an on-going process of socialising the urban space.

Neil Smith indubitably follows the school of Marxist thought when he seeks to shed light and denounce the social injustice and inequality derived from the economic organisation of the capitalist mode of production, thus emphasizing the idea that social-spatial relations forged by gentrification are regulated by capitalist structures, acting within a framework aimed at strengthening and reproducing the wealth and power of the dominant class by exploiting the labour of the dominated class. As a specific residential strategy, gentrification plays a key role arranging set patterns of social differentiation in the urban space, which eventually reinforces socio-spatial segregation.

Gentrification is by definition, a process of “social filtering” (Smith, 1996a). It has meant a process triggering the drastic transformation and recomposing of the old quarters; it also points to a long-term process in the housing market taking over rundown houses in traditionally working-class areas, and socially recomposing (and replacing) these spaces – which were once the bastion of the poorer / working classes – and transforming them in middle-class and upper-middle class quarters – which, it should be mentioned, is known as a process of “social substitution”, aggravating socio-spatial segregation and thereby deepening the social gap in the urban space (Smith, 1986a; Smith and LeFaivre, 1984).

However, even today, as there are decades ago, the myth that gentrification is a natural phenomenon continues to persist, for example, in how some urban ecology and neoclassical approaches understand "social replacement" in the neighbourhoods (Berry, 1985). In the current context of neoliberal urbanism, the centrality given by the theory of urban gentrification to the causes of the phenomenon focusing on demand rather than supply, and the proliferation of studies targeting issues such as social and residential mix, divert the attention from other important questions and tend to naturalize social inequality and polarization and socio-spatial injustice, displacement and residential segregation (Wyly and Hammel, 1999; Slater, 2014).

Smith (1996a, 2001, 2002, 2005a) makes it very clear that urban regeneration projects based on the ideological promotion of gentrification, give rise to several dubious aspects in terms, for example, of the supposed intention to rehabilitate housing and integrate/settle the population coming from the less privileged socio-economic bracket, which had hitherto lived in the city centre quarters that now have been made the target for renovation. Besides, in this sense, the “filtering up” motion which gentrification automatically implies – through the social replacement process ousting classes of lower social and economic status and replacing them with those of a higher status – predicts how the features of socio-

spatial segregation in areas where the phenomenon happens, will become all the more entrenched.²

Gentrification and the theory of capitalist accumulation

Urban critical theory explains the development of the city or urbanised space based on the process of capitalist accumulation. Theories defending this interpretation stress the structural aspects of the process and tie them to urban development. Among the academics working along these lines, David Harvey, Michael Dear and Allen J. Scott stand out precisely because they have tried to disentangle the inter-related nature of capitalist development and the urban spatial form. The city has become a space for (re)investing (financial) capital. The former remark invites to go back to the relationship between the production of built space and the crises in the process of capitalist accumulation studied by Harvey (1975, 1978, 1982, 1985, 1989). He identifies three distinct circuits of capitalist accumulation. The first, refers to the organisation of the production process itself. The second, to investments in the built environment. Finally, the third has to do with investment in science and technology as well as in a wide range of socially-related expenses, mainly labour-force reproduction processes. As competition among capitalists ends up in super accumulation, a temporary solution to the problem lies in changing the direction of capital flows among the circuits, and therefore redirecting the surplus to the production of built environment. Consequently, according to Harvey, the periodical sum of investment and the ensuing valorisation of the built environment clearly comes to light in cyclical rhythms of capitalist crises and hence, of capital investment in the city (Harvey, 2001, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014).

The dynamic of capitalist investment and disinvestment cycles explains how the stages of constructing the built environment and spatial form work. Towards the end of the 1970s, Neil Smith (1979a, 1979b) applied this innovating critical principle to the study of gentrification, hence triggering a qualitative theoretical leap forward. Until then, most of the literature had merely focused on the effects of gentrification: the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the gentrifiers, the uprooting caused by the takeover of homes, the benefits of urban redevelopment. At first, isolated descriptive analyses predominated without any attempt to contextualize them and fit them into a theoretical framework. Fundamentally empirical, research relied on case studies that simply focused on the physical and social changes that take place in particular quarters of the city, interpreting them as the outcome of individuals' activities, and thus failing to

² Bridge, Butler and Lees (2012) have also analysed how the strategies of gentrification within a neoliberal and revanchist urbanism are camouflaged with the regenerating speech of policies for social mix.

account the structural dynamics conditioning them (Smith and Williams, 1986; Lees, Slater and Wyly, 2008).

Today the analyses of gentrification concentrate on the spheres of production and consumption, yet explanations seek to favour the predominance of one sphere over the other. On the one hand, Neil Smith focuses on the urban land market. He argues that with the de-industrialization of the urban core came the devalorisation of the inner urban land and the widening of the gap between the potential value of this land (given its central location) and its actual value. This “rent gap” is narrowed by, amongst other things, the creation of a market for gentrifiable housing (Smith, 1979a). On the other hand, David Ley (1994, 1996) has signalled the importance of the cultural and lifestyle values of a new middle class with liberal political orientations who value the historical preservation of the urban core and the consumption of non-standardised commodities. For Ley, key indicators of gentrification include employment in the tertiary sector or in “post-industrial occupations”, and having a university degree. Similarly to Ley, Chris Hamnett (1984, 1991, 1992, 2000) is skeptical of the rent gap explanation but emphasises the significance of post-industrial service jobs located in the central city as a strong material force behind gentrification. The growth of this type of employment requiring accessibility to the central city is bound to have an effect on the social composition and consumption outlets in the central areas of the city. Elsewhere the increasing feminization of the professional workforce and the rise of both single and dual high-income households requiring accessibility to the central city, are seen as significant.³

For Smith, from the standpoint of the circulation of capital, real-estate booms allied to gentrification coincide with transferring capital from the first accumulation circuit (the production sphere) to the second (producing the built environment) during times of over accumulation. In the light of this principle, he seeks to explain the restructuring of urban space as a process that is closely connected to the restructuring of the capitalist economy itself, more exactly, to the macroeconomic cycles evolving irregularly and affecting the development of advanced capitalist societies (Smith, 1986a, 1996a, 1996b). The built environment has become the scenario of the cyclical peaks and falls in the real-estate market, along with run-down housing and over-building. The two phenomena are the outcome of subordinating the process of constructing the city to capitalist relationships, underpinned by the belief that unequal urban growth is intrinsic to the capitalist nature of development. A new cycle is hence inaugurated: the cycle

³ Both authors are very critical of the excessive economic determinism in Smith's analysis, because it relies on the axiom of economic rationality and downplay the significance of individuals that defy the norm as gentrifiers and as agency.

that valorises /devalues urban space on the regional real-estate markets, sparking off the start of the suburbanisation process and the emergence of the rent gap.

Both processes were studied by Neil Smith (1979a, 1979b, 1982a, 1987a, 1996c; Smith e Schaffer, 1986; Smith *et al.* 2001) and have been pinpointed as being mainly responsible for the workings of the urban restructuring today. The transferring of capital to the periphery gives rise to a change that is inversely proportional to the ground rent in the suburbs and the central residential quarters themselves. While the value of land in the suburbs has increased significantly with the growth of new buildings and infrastructures, as well as with the introduction of a multiplicity of activities in these spaces, the original value of the central quarters has done the opposite and suffered a gradual decline due to the fact that increasingly less capital is invested in the maintenance, repair and recovery of the housing located in the inner-city areas.

This phenomenon is what Neil Smith referred as the rent gap in the city centre quarters – that is the difference between the actual ground rent capitalized from the present (depressed) land use, and the potential rent that may be capitalized from the highest and best use (or at least a higher and better use) given the central location. It is this transfer of capital to the suburbs and the resulting rent gap in the central urban space that, according to the author, provides more economic opportunities to rebuild the central quarters and make more public and private investments to rehabilitate and recover the housing stock. The phenomenon occurs on an almost worldwide scale in all the cities in advanced capitalist societies and is associated to real estate speculation.

The logical outcome of applying the rent gap principle is that spatial unequal development and the cyclical devaluing of built space (in this case, the historical areas in the city centres) are “functional” and intentionally produced so as to deliberately warrant future capital investment and its respective reproduction. For each “growth zone” which represents an area that attracts serious investment, there is a “transition area” in the historical centre, where fixed capital is devalued before the speculators move in and take advantage of redevelopment. Unequal development is stepped up due to the functional needs of the capitalist accumulation process whereby past investments are devaluated so as to better reproduce themselves by means of “creative destruction” (Smith, 1982a, 1982b, 1984, 1986c; Smith *et al.* 1989; Harvey, 1978).

In this way, with the suburbanisation of capital and with investments channelled to the periphery, certain quarters in the inner city which have undergone disinvestment, are now worth significantly less capital, far below their potential rent value. However, more recently, with the search for places in the metropolitan areas in which to make safe, profitable investments, and given the fact that suburban ground space is already saturated and more expensive in relative terms, public and private capital is now being channelled to the under-valued areas (taking into account their central location). Activity (from rehabilitation to sheer real-estate

speculation) is now under way with an eye on profit-making by means of the difference between real and potential capitalised rent. In short, the gentrification process has ended up by partly developing the urban land market in an irregular flexible way, integrated within the process of capitalist accumulation.⁴

Gentrification, social critique and social intervention

Following through with his role as commentator and social critic, Neil Smith (1995b, 1996a, 2001, 2002, 2005a) warned that in recent decades the “regenerating” discourse revolving around gentrification in urban policy-making, even if it contemplates keeping the population already living there where it is, modernising the economic fabric, increasing job offers and stimulating economic growth, the truth is that gentrification will not stop working in favour of consolidating the powers-that-be and mobilising large-scale public investment. In the end, what will happen, will be to sidetrack help to the most needy and subsidise the wealthiest (banking, the financial houses, large economic and construction groups, big business, the political class, etc.). It could also be said that Smith insisted on the principles that the laws governing a capitalist society, and the State, which although it acts under a liberal (ideological) disguise, are necessarily bourgeois and only exist to serve the interests of capital and not the social majority.

Central (State) power ensures the stability of the system by means of feeding the status quo and social demand through planning processes and urban policies aimed at regenerating the city centre. These public measures to enhance the city set in motion contradictory mechanisms involving expulsion and re-appropriation. The new urban policies mean a more pronounced swing to the market and consumers, in detriment to the most under-privileged classes. Smith recognised that to a great extent, the private-public development partnerships that are frequently drawn up within this framework, really mean subsidising the wealthiest, the most powerful entrepreneurial fabric as well as the strategic functions and relations based on the control, power and domination of the urban space. This is a vital condition for perpetuating the reproduction of capital, an essential premise of capitalist production and consumption, made at the expense of investments in local services catering to collective consumption.

The selective nature of investments favourable to the reproduction of capital means abandonment, neglect and less attention being paid to the “city of the majority” and is particularly serious in the neediest areas where the under-

⁴ The works of Badcock (1989) in Adelaide (Australia), Clark (1988, 1994, 1995) in Malmö (Sweden), and Hammel (1999a, 1999b) in Minneapolis (United States), provide strong evidence that the trajectory of capitalized and potential ground rent do indeed follow the general tendency theorized by Neil Smith for Philadelphia’s neighbourhood of Society Hill (1979b).

privileged population is concentrated. In his late work, Smith explored the emergence of the “revanchist city” produced by the neoliberal offensive (1996a, 2001, 2002, 2005a, 2008b, 2009, 2010b). Stripping the mask of social wellbeing and “institutional wellness” to the newest real-estate products from new urban management, and showing how they foster the same rationale based on social control favouring the reproduction of capital and the ruling classes. It is within this perspective that the author’s foundation of critical political discourse resides.

The Marxist paradigm that permeates his work and contribution is ideologically bound up with well-defined political aims. Smith notes how activities leading to urban rehabilitation and regeneration, which have likewise been determined by the need to improve the city’s image and make it more appealing and more strategically competitive among cities on a global scale, frequently means expelling home-dwellers of a lower socio-economic bracket living in the central areas, and slowly condemn them to the socio-spatial fringes. There is an almost direct correlation with ideological model that foresees that the social reproduction of classes continues to be located in a more powerful socio-economic status (Smith, 1993, 2003, 2010b, 2011; Smith and Low, 2006).

This is where his ideas seem to advocate an economic and social revolution that will push the overthrowing capitalism and replacing it with a mode of production organised around principles of equality and social justice. Furthermore, his latest work suggests that Geography is a means by which this capitalist order may be overcome. This particularly Marxist idea reveals his strong critical thinking and commitment to social intervention. First, in his belief that geography should be used as a political weapon for social transformation (Smith, 1979c, 1992b, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2005c, 2010a). Second, in his belief about the need for the working class residing in the city centres or other urban social movements to take political action against the capitalist hegemony represented by the bourgeoisie, which the author considers to be the embodiment of gentrification (Smith, 2008b). Third, for his thoughts give strength to an important social, critical and ideological component that is drawn together in the geographical analysis of the processes involving the social (re)production of the multiscale urban space ranging from the local to the global (Marston and Smith, 2001; Cowen and Smith, 2009).

On the criticisms to Neil Smith’s work

Despite of the merit Marxist authors have for their studies on how economic power has influenced the social order through political and economic mechanisms, some argue that the answers put forward by the particular paradigm of the urban analysis of gentrification suffers from two weaknesses. One has to do with the fact that the socio-spatial action of the gentrifiers tends to be seen as subordinated to the economic structure. And the other, which is partly dependent on the first, is due to the fact that Marxist authors have chosen an unidimensional causal approach insisting on purely materialist reasons. Their explanations are

based on an exaggerated notion of the importance of the instrumental, coercive aspects of structures over agency.

In keeping with Hamnett (1991, 1992), the urban theory following Neil Smith line of thought is able to offer convincing explanations about the effect of material structures as well as the causes of socio-spatial inequalities and conflicts produced by pushing back the borders of gentrification in the urban landscape, yet explanations fail to allow the cultural, symbolic and subjective aspects of the production of urban space a more regular position in their studies. In this way, it has been argued that the Marxist view is connected with a certain form of economic determinism that undervalues the explanation of what are taken to be economic factors in the evolution of the social, spatial and political processes (Baudrillard, 1975; Gottdiener, 1985; Harvey, 1996; Peet, 1998; Phillips, 2005).

Most of the authors writing on gentrification who are still influenced by Marxism defend the thesis that the superstructure also influences the infrastructure (Smith, 1987b; Lees, Slater and Wyly, 2008). The social relations forged by production and production forces are at the base of different social formats and the ideological and political components of the superstructure. Although they are relatively autonomous and are able to respond to the demands of the economy and indeed, may control some structures, political and ideological factors are in the end determined by the infrastructure (Smith, 1987b, 1992a, 1999).

Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that not only have Marxist critics but also some neo-Marxists come out with work arguing that determinism should be adjusted so as to take into account today's diversity in terms of structuring levels of socio-spatial production. They both assert that pluri-causal approaches are needed because the base-superstructure binary is now outdated. Contemporary scholars reject the excessive determinism of the base-superstructure model, underlining that the structural paraphernalia does not explain in a satisfactory way the production of urban space and the social life it mediates. This is the case of Manuel Castells, Allen Scott, Doreen Massey, Mark Gottdiener, David Harvey, Michael Dear and Edward Soja, among others.

Interwoven in some of his arguments, Neil Smith (1986a) denotes a criticism, albeit a very surreptitious one, to the reductionism of the thesis of "economic determination" that confronts the superstructure as passive to the advantage of hyperactivity and total domination of the economic structure. The recent evolution of economic structures and the strengthening of civil society have lessened the capacity to determine the direct economic impact on other areas of life. Between the infrastructure and the superstructure a strong power of mediation has been developed making it difficult to establish direct and causal relationships between the two.

The superstructure can also influence, and condition the infrastructure. Smith (1986a) highlights this dialectics when he acknowledges the determination that the infrastructure (process of capital accumulation, economic base) holds on

the superstructure (space and social relations that produce class gentrification). His texts do not restrict the gentrification ideology to the superstructure field, but at the level of social reproduction. In other words, the reproduction of the conditions of economic production, require, in turn, the reproduction of the political and ideological. The reproduction of the relations of production is ensured, first, by the materiality of the production process of urban space and the circulation process of capital. In this case, the superstructure also influences the infrastructure.

Neil Smith also ensures an argument on the same line of thought when, for example, argues that the production of symbolic capital inherent in the process of gentrification (superstructure) works primarily as a result of the regime of flexible accumulation (structure), but also influences the latter, because serving ideological functions. This is because the mechanisms by which processes contribute to the reproduction of the established order and the perpetuation of a deep "hidden" structure of domination which facilitates the concentration of the dominant class in the city center, critical to ensure continued investment.

Another critique to Neil Smith's work has to do with the idea that Marxist theory has ignored the spatial dimension referring to capitalist accumulation, i.e., that the Marxist theory was non geographical and "spaceless". It is a myth that remains rooted in the conceptual frameworks of many social theorists and that does not correspond to the epistemological reality. According to David Harvey (1975), this is partly because Marx's writings on the subject are too fragmented and developed only superficially. However, a close examination of the works of neo-Marxist theorists, as well as of Marx himself, reveals that they recognize that capital accumulation occurs in a geographical context, creating specific types of geographical structures. David Harvey, Neil Smith and Allen Scott excelled in developing new approaches to location theory, showing the general process of economic growth and capital accumulation with the emergence of particular spatial structures. Marxist analysis present in the critical theory of the urban although it begins with the dynamics of accumulation, nevertheless seeks to deduct the specific geographic structures of the city. The urban landscape created by capitalism is seen as a dynamic place of contradiction and tension, and not as an abstract entity, a mere passive expression of the harmonious balance of social forces in question.

Final comments

The Marxist paradigm applied to the study of gentrification continues to give us a sound, pertinent theoretical foundation on which to analyse the processes of urban socio-spatial change. It is undeniable today that the mechanicism that considers individual and social practices as a mere reflection of the determining structures of a society, has nothing to do with the dialectic inherent in the dynamics of spatial processes. If structures are fulfilled and activated by individuals and social groups according to their own interests, such elements do not cease being conditioned, however, by the socio-economic organisation and by a specific means

of production. Therefore, to interpret social and individual practices as atomised and disconnected from the mechanics of structures that govern social-spatial formations is, according to Smith (1986b, 1987c, 1990), a postulate of neoliberal ideology which recognises the individual as an autonomous historical agent. It fails to take into consideration the material forces that not only structure society and space, but also condition the activity of social agents.

However, at this point, it has become clear that there is no satisfactory theory of gentrification unless it includes cross-references, whether to do with theories about supply or consumption, in the direction of a more balanced and integrated understanding of the interactions between human agency and structure. Besides, none of these perspectives manages to be coherent when taken alone, and none is able to provide an answer to the epistemological problem posed by gentrification in urban studies over the last 40 years without referring to the explanations and arguments of others (Smith, 1995a). And this also confirms that the old oppositions between holism and individualism, structure and agency, materialism and idealism, may be seen as problems when dealt with in concrete terms and within the sphere of specific, localised social situations happening in time and space.

In this paper, I tried to make an in depth analysis of the pioneering ideas of Neil Smith on the Marxist political economy of urban space, on his ground-breaking research and socio-spatial analysis, and a reflection on the criticisms of his ideas. I expect re-reading Neil Smith's work through a radical lens, recalling the debates over the importance of structure and superstructure, the cyclical movements of capital and its creative destruction in space versus the critiques over agency, may be useful to re-articulate theoretical conceptualization and re-establish discussion over the importance of discussing gentrification as an outcome of inequality and injustice in today's cities.

But above all, this paper has aimed to demonstrate how Smith's work, with over 30 years, has created in itself a paradigm and school of urban analysis about the phenomenon of gentrification, having strongly influenced the line of thought produced in, from and to the urban critical theory in the upcoming years. Smith's work on gentrification through the social production of urban space lens explains the process as a consequence of the uneven investment of capital in certain land uses, its devaluation through use and systematic disinvestment, and the opportunities for profitable reinvestment created by these capital flows. The most important and influential theory in this tradition is Smith's rent-gap thesis, which in a frighteningly visionary way exposes the relevance of his work now applied to the contemporary reality of gentrification not only in the Western and Anglo-Saxon world but also in the capitalist socio-economic formations of the Global South (Slater, 2015). The work of Neil Smith continues to thrive and constantly helps us to rethink the deep structures on which are based the new patterns of urban (re)development and of sociospatial inequalities, mainly in the light of the present uncertain times of world capitalist crisis.

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