

The different explanations of the social drivers of this phenomenon essay sample



The term 'Gentrification' is first attributed to Marxist sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964 when she uses it in her early analysis of urban change in inner London. As a Marxist, Glass was using the term ironically to poke fun at the snobbish pretensions of affluent middle-class (Hamnet, 2003). She described the distinct and radical patterns of urban change that were occurring during the late 1950s and 1960s. Working class quarters in boroughs like North Kensington were being bought by the middle classes and converted into elegant and expensive properties.

This description which has been repeated worldwide is now more commonly known as 'classical gentrification' (Lees et al, 2008). Neil Smith gave an early definition of gentrification in 1982 as 'the process by which working class residential neighbourhoods are rehabilitated by middle class home buyers, landlords and professional developers' (Smith 1982, p139; Lees et al, p9, 2008).

However writing in 2000 Smith demonstrated how the process of gentrification was a developing and changing concept when his definition had evolved to The reinvestment of capital at the urban centre, which is designed to produce space for a more affluent class of people than currently occupies that space. The term coined by Ruth Glass in 1964, has mostly been used to describe the residential aspects of this process but this is changing, as gentrification evolves its self'. (Smith 2000, p294; Lees et al, p9, 2008). Here Smith is demonstrating that Glass's original definition had become too narrow and needed to adapt to be relevant and to reflect the highly dynamic concept of 'gentrification'.

New concepts of new build gentrification, rural gentrification and contemporary gentrification need to be encompassed. Politicians worldwide have resisted using the term 'gentrification' due to the negative and emotional connotations that the term can evoke, preferring to talk about inner city regeneration in the UK or Homesteading in the USA. Other terms have also been used to describe gentrification, each term tending to reveal their own ethos and agenda towards the process (Smith, 1982). Although Glass first used the phrase gentrification there are arguably examples of gentrification taking place many years before 1964.

In the 1850s Paris slum housing was cleared by Baron Haussmann for the now famous boulevards which became the most exclusive part of the city (Smith 1996). Fredrick Engel's in 1872 described the difficulties of workers when the land on which their rented homes were built increased in value 'the result is that workers are forced out of the centre of towns towards the outskirts' (Engels; Merrifield p43, 2002).

Other examples include the 1930's New Orleans and the Georgetown area of Washington, D. C. The process also spread down the urban hierarchy spreading to provincial cities, towns and rural areas. Most commentators however argue that the process properly began in post war capitalist cities in the 1950s and 1960s such as New York and London (Lees et al 2008) and it is from these two cities that I will highlight the two examples of Barnsbury and Alphabet City, Lower East Side, New York to try and explain the social drivers of this phenomenon. The Great Depression was a worldwide economic downturn which started in 1929 and continued during the 1930s.

This depression and the onset of the Second World War led to vast changes and restructured forms of capitalism very different to the unregulated laissez-faire model of the pre depression area (Kindleberger 1973). The driving forces behind post war capitalist development were based on changing economic, societal and political norms (Amin 1994, 3). This led to state sponsored sub-urbanization in the United States and Western Europe. Capital left the run down city centres many of which were bombed ravaged in Western Europe. Capital looked for more profitable locations typically in the suburbs.

This process continued for the next 30 to 40 years as the inner cities became crippled by devalorisation (Lees et al, 2008). Pre War Barnsbury had previously been regarded as a middle class suburb but it rapidly went into decline after the Second World War with working class Irish, British Caribbean and other minority's that influxed into the area. The middle classes fled Barnsbury to the new suburbs of London whose infrastructures were receiving government investment as part of the Greater London Plan for the post-war reconstruction of London this blue print was then followed by 1952 New Town Development Act.

The properties they left behind became multi-occupancy as demand for housing particularly rented types amongst the working class was greater than the supply. A pilot survey in Matilda Street, Barnsbury found that out of 160 houses that 127 did not have access to a bath (Lees et al, 2008, 13). By the late fifties the first or 'pioneer' gentrifiers had started moving into Barnsbury. However private finance was initially difficult to obtain. The 1959

Housing Purchase and Housing Act made over 100 million pounds available
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to building societies and the release of credit into the housing market greatly increased owner occupation.

This can be directly attributed to the beginnings of the gentrification process in Barnsbury. According to the UK census people with middle class occupations in Barnsbury increased from 23 to 43 per cent during the period 1961-1975 (Lees et al, 2008). The process expanded to other Islington neighbourhoods during the seventies and eighties. Houses were beginning to increase sharply in value and it was becoming economic sense to sell rather than achieve relatively low rental yields. The Landlords problem was that a home with tenants in is worth considerably less than a vacated one.

This led to unscrupulous practices known as winking as landlords used a 'what ever' means necessary approach to evict tenants. It was not uncommon for people to come home from work to find their possessions on the street and the locks changed (Lees et al, 2008). Tenants that were more legally aware were threatened. Bruce Bailey a political organiser for capped rent properties in New York was found dismembered in a mafia murder organised by a property developer with mob ties. These increases in the valorisation of land has been coined the 'rent gap' by Neil Smith.

Alphabet City was one of the last New York Boroughs to gentrify. This is what Smith termed the 'locational seesaw'. Investment in one area leads to disinvestment in other areas which then themselves later become development opportunities (Smith 1982 p151). Lower East Side referred to New York's old working class residential and industrial area that grew northwards in the nineteenth century as a tenement district. To the city's

elite it was a dark and dangerous place that housed ' the great unwashed of the foreign masses' (Mele, preface x, 2000).

Alphabet City was so called as its area is approximately bordered by A, B, C & D avenues. It had similarities to Barnsbury in that immigration had devalued the land partially due to the perceived fears of crime by more affluent classes. By comparison the immigration however, was much more diverse coming from Italy, Germany, Ukraine, Puerto Rica and China amongst others. Being home to the original German immigrants it was once known as little Germany, however under a period of transition during the fifties and sixties as thousands of Puerto Rican immigrants moved in and the Nuyorican art community began to develop.

In the 1980's New York emerged as a world power house in the financial sector. Manufacturing industries continued to vanish from the city landscape mainly due to economic pressures from cheaper imported goods. Service industry employment in areas like law, communications and insurance trebled, leading to significant changes in the composition of employment. This globalisation process has seen the migration of the manufacturing industries to relocate in places of cheap labour with the added advantage of also being emerging markets.

Sassen arguing from a production perspective believes that there has been a march towards neo liberalism. The national and urban economies in advanced capitalist countries have been restructured away from manufacturing towards services, recreation and consumption. (Sassen 1991; Smith 1992). David Ley prefers a consumption theory explanation for

gentrification. He was strongly influenced by Bell's post industrialised thesis which predicted the growth in the service industry. Ley saw a new rationale developing over land use in post industrial cities.

The expanding middle class have 'life' needs as well as economic ones. Their consumption tastes and aesthetic outlook towards city life saw an 'imagineering of an alternative urbanism to suburbanization' which couldn't be captured by structural or production explanations (Ley 1996, p15; Panelli 2007, p53). New York underwent a surge in capital investment as office towers, apartment blocks, and existing units were upgraded. Land values near the city core soared and people who could no longer afford to live in Manhattan moved to less desirable parts of New York like Alphabet City.

Alphabet City became a vibrant mix of Puerto Rican and African Americans living alongside wannabe actors, struggling artists and emerging musicians. The expanding bohemian population attracted by the low rents was synonymous with drug dealing and related crimes like prostitution and muggings. However the almost inevitable ripple effect from previous property hotspots in New York occurred and soon developers began looking at Alphabet City as the next big thing (Mele 2000). The rules of the real estate business were changing rapidly.

Family property owners began to drop out and brokerage firms, property corporations, Hedge Funds and Banks became the major players. Developers began to see the land was effectively vastly undervalued and developers began snapping up property in order to redevelop and re-enact the gentrification that had been so profitable in other New York Boroughs (Mele

2000). Whilst many aspects of gentrification may be considered desirable such as reduced crime rates, improved infrastructure and increased economic activity it is argued that the advantages are enjoyed disproportionately by the new arrivals.

This has inevitably led to conflict as the old and new cultures clashed. David Harvey wrote from a Marxist perspective commenting upon the very tight relationships in the pre-gentrified areas that can lead to conflict. He argued that relationships can lead to resistance when they perceive a threat from outside. This potential weapon of resistance is even stronger when the working class community has a clear spatial definition as a neighbourhood (Harvey 1977; Palen 1984). Some of these anti gentrification clashes have become quite violent like the Tompkins Square Park riot in Alphabet City, New York in 1988.

The building which became a symbol of anti-gentrification during the riots was the sixteen storeys Christodora Building on avenue B adjacent the park. Bought for \$1.3 million in 1947 by the city it was at first used for civil functions then later became a community centre used by groups like the black panthers. The building became run down and was eventually sold for only \$62,000 dollars in 1976 to a local developer named Jaffee. He failed to get government development aid for a low cost housing scheme but still managed to sell the building eight years later for \$1. million to another developer who himself resold or 'flipped' the building in less than a year for \$3 million.

In less than a decade a building had increased in value by 50 times its purchase price without a dime being spent on it. The developers then turned it into eighty six apartments that could cost over \$300, 000 dollars for a two bedroom unit. This gave the finished building a market value of over \$25 million in 1988 (Smith 1996, p22). Landlords throughout Alphabet City began to indiscriminately raise rents and soon many people and businesses were displaced.

The park open twenty four hours a day became a meeting ground and home for many of the homeless people. It soon began to attract increased criminality and other types of public disorder. The new residents and businesses demanded a curfew on the opening hours and the city obliged with a one am limit. When the police tried to close the park on August 6th 1988 the riot began. The Christodora building became the target for much of the anger with graffiti and severe criminal damage (Smith 1996, p5).

Smith's analysis of gentrification is set in the broader context of city development within the capitalist economy. He regards it as a social process rather than a physical one which reflects the wider society and thus clear conflicts of class will occur. ' Gentrification represents a strategy of capital accumulation' (Smith 1979, p540. cited Valentine 2001, p218). Smith argues that working class families have two main roles in the capitalist society. Firstly they produce workers for the capitalist economy with women bearing much of the responsibility of socialisation.

The state intervenes by providing institutions like schools and hospitals to enable the continuous flow of workers. The second main role is that family

homes are centres of consumption therefore providing both profit and future workers for the elite (Smith 1982). Chris Hamnett has been highly critical of Smith's structural theories claiming that it is too deterministic. He states that ' Smith's opposition to any form of agency reveals him as a structuralist for whom individual agency is reduced to the flickering shadows cast by the light of capital's fire'. (Hamnett 1992, p117; Lees et al 2008, p75).