Commentary

A rural gentrification theory debate for the Global South?

Ernesto López-Morales
University of Chile, Chile

Abstract
Phillips and Smith's attempt to refresh (rural) gentrification theory is successful as they provide a prolific set of epistemological comparative threads and substantiate this position via analysis of the UK, France and the US cases. Nevertheless, in my opinion, academia should go beyond the Western European/North American comfort zone and embrace theoretical and epistemological complexity, the currently extended and variegated planetary space presents.

Gentrification scholars are familiar with this story: It was the sociologist Ruth Glass who first coined the term 'gentrification' in 1964 to describe how:

> working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes – upper and lower. Shabby, modest mews and cottages – two rooms up and two down – have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have [now] become elegant, expensive residences. (Glass, 1964: xviii–xix)

One decade later, drawing on Glass' work, two young geographers (one Welsh emigrated to Canada, the other Scottish emigrated to the United States) became the leading voices of one of the most conflictive intellectual disputes among urban social scientists at the time, about the causes of gentrification. The former, from a 'liberal' but still critical perspective, argued that gentrification responded to a middle-class household agency on housing and urban redevelopment, a post baby boom suburban generation in search of new centrality and in the quest for a habitus creation corresponding with more conspicuous middle-class consumption demands (Ley, 1980). The latter, inspired by his Marxist background, claimed that gentrification was essentially a 'back to the city' movement of capital, not people; far from being a market imperfection, gentrification was then defined as being part of the functioning of urban capitalism itself, an effect of the constant capitalist need of increasing private revenue by the replacement of fixed capital set in urban space, generating important effects in the displacement of the lower socio-economic strata from inner areas (Smith, 1979). More or less, this is how what we know today as gentrification theory started to be written.

Corresponding author:
Ernesto López-Morales, University of Chile, Centre of Studies of Conflict and Social Cohesion (COES), Portugal #84, Santiago, Chile.
Email: elopez@uchilefau.cl

At the time nobody really questioned how different, barely incomparable, was the city of London, the place where the theory was first incepted, compared to the main North American cities, where the theory was being applied to, from the 1970s onwards. Nor any serious scholar gave too much attention on how 'ontologically flattening' would be the theoretical travelling of the gentrification concept, or how far-reaching this 'sociological translation' from one side of the Atlantic to the other would also be. The 'imposition' of the gentrification term on different cultural realities, especially in places where (previously) other concepts were found more suitable to refer to the radical socio-economic transformation of neighbourhoods in times of divergent post-industrial trajectories (e.g. the Brownstoning movement in the United States; see Lees et al., 2008) apparently did not matter at that time. Gentrification as a concept had not been previously used in the North American reality. But was the terminological nonexistence of gentrification an important factor to deny it was occurring in many cities of the North American region by then? Of course, not.

Young David Ley and Neil Smith were never accused of uncritically responding to colonial mind-sets at the moment of defining their operational categories drawing on a theory incepted in London. In fact, despite the British and North American urban realities seeming to be even more divergent (e.g. at the one hand, Tory and New Labour housing privatization policies that have led to soaring housing prices and unaffordability for lower and middle classes; at the other, extremely racialized socio-spatial cleansing policies; see, for instance, Davidson and Lees (2010) and compare it to Wyly (2015)), both sides often seem to be treated as part of a single analytical unit. This is why I find questionable that more than four decades later, still several gentrification thinkers find problems with accepting the suitability of the gentrification framework outside the so-called 'usual suspects' of the Global North (Lees et al., 2015), more specifically, beyond the Western European/North American regions.

Hence, I applaud this paper by Phillips and Smith (2018) as it reflects on the epistemological challenges that (rural) gentrification presents to researchers who dare to place themselves outside the comfort zone that the type of single-country analysis implies. Their paper is so intelligently written that it succeeds at meeting its double goal: On the one hand, to offer a systematic and careful analysis of the recent contributions on rural gentrification; on the other, drawing on Latour's 'sociologies of translation' to offer an insightful categorization of the different shapes comparative analytical urbanism can take, ranging from individualizing to variation-finding approaches, from encompassing to universalizing approaches. This second goal is, in my views, the most interesting one (I only wished these authors have done a slightly more careful analysis of the recent contributions by Lees et al. (2015, 2016), Shin et al. (2015) and López-Morales et al. (2016), which I think are closer to an 'encompassing' framework rather than to a 'universalizing' perspective). Meanwhile, in my opinion, Phillips and Smith's first goal drives to the weakest part of their paper. The reason is simple: They draw almost exclusively on cases from the United States, Britain and France. As planetary urbanization becomes more palpable, their approach does not completely deliver what they apparently promise in their epistemological analysis: to be a considerable step further for a comparative global analysis.

It is maybe obvious that these authors chose their three cases due to they can find there an impressively vast, at least sufficient, list of theoretical references. Or maybe these places are where they can find fluidly speaking (in English, of course) international partners, well-established and well-funded academic environments and numbers of papers published and somehow predictable political and institutional structures they can confidently draw their analyses on? Still at the end of their paper, I could not see how much of their excellent epistemological analysis could be useful for an application beyond the geographical frontiers these authors seem to invite to trespass, but hardly do.

So may I recall these relatively unknown words by Ruth Glass (1964: 2) reflecting about the:

> predominance of Western thought, in general, is reflected in the treatment of such subjects, which tends to follow both the conventional lines of demarcation

between matters urban and rural, and also the established boundaries between the various disciplines of the social sciences.

Could we even wonder, at the moment of taking radical discussions at planetary level, about how small are the urban academic attempts to really become involved in the geographies of the so-called encompassing 'sociologies of translation', where languages, cultures, extreme informality, bitter senses of centralized power and tastes of authoritarianism, where advanced marginality (Wacquant, 2007) inside and outside the urban territories, sometimes quite unfortunately, become the norm?

Therefore, is rural gentrification, as presented by these authors, an applicable category to those places where the urban/rural divide is far from being so neat? Or does the extreme informality of land tenure and land use make the differences between the two realms unrecognizable? Or, if we decide to draw on Brenner and Schmid (2012), in a world where everything is essentially urban, does this rural/urban divide really completely makes sense? How can we conceptualize displacement or exclusion from the soon-to-be urban spaces of the expansive metropolitan frontiers in the rapidly and unjustly urbanizing territories of the so-called Global South? What epistemological theorization do we need for assessing whether the vast favelas in many cities of Brazil or slums in India clearly correspond to urban or rural milieus, or the combination of the two? Of course, we cannot blame the rural gentrification analytical category to be just another 'postcolonial imposition', but anyway we need to learn more about those inextricable realities the world offers and be able to get rid of some of the rigid boundaries the comfortably well-established academia presents, if we do not want to miss the opportunity to really make the rural gentrification concept a planetary, useful construct.

I strongly ascribe to the idea that the study of gentrification not only can, but also must, be driven beyond the Anglo-American domain; this implies emphasizing the possibility of gentrification mutating across time and space. Further, any other social phenomena associated with the changing nature of capitalism goes through mutation, as this is normally part of social sciences, and it has happened with even more encompassing, higher range concepts like class, race, social distinction, segregation and habitus (Shin and López-Morales, forthcoming). Hence why not making (rural) gentrification flow and mutate in a similar vein? I find this paper is extremely useful for this aim, even despite my criticism about the lack of sensitiveness regarding the challenging different geographies and analytical categories that a properly comparative reflection should present.

Rural gentrification is at the heart of the tensions generated by planetary urbanization, namely, the expansion – both territorial and epistemological – of urbanization as a normalizing process across the earth, but I think the concept needs to be seriously reconceptualized, deeply questioning into different realities and dealing with the different forces a variegated number of contexts essentially offer. What is then the most valuable meaning of the (apparently well established) rural gentrification concept for Latin American, African, South Asian realities and the Middle East? Can this concept nurture important ongoing debates related to the expansion of cities and urbanization processes led by real estate capital and urban policies into rural areas, the constraint and opportunities that land property and land use informality offer, the extreme power that the transnational tourism industry have on local social and political realities and communities, the still highly conflictive encounter between modern and traditional ways of life (as if Modernization and Marginality Theories have always been there, waiting for this opportunity for a revival), or the ecosystem services the nonurbanized land offer to human and nonhuman life everywhere? My impression is yes, it can.

During the early decades of gentrification studies in Latin America, pioneer authors like Ward (1993) and Jones and Varley (1994) claimed such process in the subcontinent was merely constrained to historical central areas, whereas heritage protection was driven to commercial activities akin to gentrification processes. Those views were short sighted, as issues of socioeconomic exclusion and displacement highly related to racism were then inexplicably overlooked. More than 20 years later,

gentrification in Latin America is one of the most conflictual debates related to neoliberal urban change, as urban redevelopment has been commonly driven by real estate capital across the subcontinent. A similar trends seems to be currently experienced in South Asia, the Middle East and some parts of Africa. Maybe it is time now to give a step forward in all these places and connect with processes of peripheral urbanization, the displacement of rural or indigenous population and the disappearance of fragile ecological economies existing in the fringes of the accelerated urbanization process. It might be the time for scholars to give more efforts and go beyond the comfort zone of the Northern European/North American reality (that strangely pervasive single analytical unit) and search for the injustices and traumas generated by the unstoppable quest for land aimed to the maximum exploitation of housing and upper-class consumption that takes place everywhere and in front of us, in different forms and temporalities.

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