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Viewpoint

Gentrifying the Brazilian city? Convergences and divergences in urban studies¹

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There is a growing number of processes in Brazilian cities that have been identified as gentrification. However, the classic definition of gentrification as a process of transformation of existing urban housing stocks by new homeowners with a higher socio-economic profile poses challenges to understand recent empirical data coming from Brazil and the Global South more generally. Instead of dismissing them as deviant cases, this paper challenges the Northern empirical foundations of gentrification theory and calls for a new methodological approach to both classic and new cases that take into consideration its contextualization. This new framework for gentrification research is based on necessary dimensions that identify the production of gentrifiable space as the initial condition to the process of socioeconomic change with displacement in which built-environment upgrades constitute one of its most visible feature. These dimensions are present in each and every case, bounding the concept and operationalizing research, while local mediating forces make gentrification context-specific. Therefore, urban studies on gentrification. Should understand and explore the nature of these differences, in a return to in-depth studies and empirical research, opening spaces for de-centering positions and building theory from multiple positionalities.

Keywords: Gentrification, urban theory, Global South Studies, Brazil.

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¹ This viewpoint is based on research that resulted in the PhD dissertation 'In Search of Gentrification: The Local Meanings of Urban Upward Redevelopment in São Paulo, Brazil' (Siqueira, 2014a) and its subsequent developments.

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Introduction

Brazilian cities have been experiencing intense socioeconomic and physical transformations that challenge urban studies. While cities still carry the marks of past processes of uneven urbanization, local scholars have been framing new cases of spatial production with displacement as gentrification. However, a classic definition of gentrification – related to the transformation of existing urban housing stocks by new homeowners with a higher socio-economic profile (Glass, 1964) – poses challenges to understand recent empirical data coming from Brazil and the Global South more generally. Instead of dismissing them as deviant cases, this viewpoint challenges the Northern empirical foundations of gentrification theory and calls for a new methodological approach to both classic and new cases.

Gentrification has inspired heated debates since Glass (1964) first coined the concept as a process of residential succession and displacement in central London. Divergences emerge especially between this classic and more restrictive definition (supported by authors such as Bondi, [1999]; Glass [1989]; and Lambert & Boddy [2002]) and recent debates on a broader definition that may include rural, touristic, new-built and global gentrification (advanced in studies by Phillips [2010]; Gotham [2005]; and Hackworth & Smith [2001], among others). Considering that cities experienced a range of economic, political, sociocultural and physical transformations since the process first caught the attention of scholars, that classic definition has become less useful to understand contemporary urban processes and their variation. Therefore, this viewpoint argues in favor of the concept considering the strong political connotation associated to gentrification. However, there is indeed the need for a definition that captures its essential aspects without over-stretching the concept in order to allow substantive comparative work, including those on alternatives to resist it. The viewpoint, thus, proposes a methodology for gentrification studies that works closer to and builds theory from the diversity of cases that have been challenging its classic definition.

Since gentrification theory originated in advanced capitalist economies in the Global North, calling for contextual knowledge also means recognizing that the advance of planning in different historical moments represented the expansion of global hegemonic powers (Mirafab, 2009; Roy, 2008; Yiftachel, 2006). Indeed, Atkinson and Bridge (2005) suggest that gentrification is a new form of colonialism, considering that local waves of urban investment and consumer choices are becoming more intertwined with global processes. This paper, thus, also engages with Watson's call for rethinking the ethics of planning in grounding its practice on local knowledge and situated values (2009). By moving among different spaces and temporalities, building contextual knowledge in gentrification theory calls for understanding both necessary and contingent dimensions of spatial production. At stake here is not the fact that gentrification is specific in Brazilian cities or in the Global South. Rather, gentrification is always specific and Brazilian cities, as well as processes within these cities, constitute just other cases alongside traditional cases in the Global North, opening spaces for de-centering positions and building theory from multiple positionalities.

Gentrification in Brazilian urban studies

Gentrification has become popular in Brazilian urban studies. The term is used in its original English form (gentrification), as a neologism (*gentrificação*), or has been translated as 'ennoblement' (*enobrecimento*). Despite the usage, most Brazilian urban studies do not discuss gentrification theoretically.

Brazilian studies have been mainly using gentrification theory to analyze so-called 'revitalization' projects of colonial downtowns and the commodification of built heritage. Such

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transformations are related to renovated historical structures that promote cultural or touristic districts in cities such as São Paulo, Recife and Salvador (Vargas & Castillo, 2005). However, while 'revitalization' projects may have been resulting in gentrification in the United States and Europe, in Brazil such results are disputable, especially considering that classic definition of gentrification as a process of residential succession by the transformation of existing housing stocks by new homeowners. In the Brazilian colonial downtowns, even with significant investment by public institutions, the socioeconomic residential profile of these spaces has not changed significantly. The anchor projects of museums, cultural districts and touristic facilities may promote a gentrification of consumption that is limited to specific events, times and places, without having a dramatical effect on the attraction of high-income residents (Frúgoli Jr. & Sklair, 2009; Leite 2007; Ribeiro, 2014).

Brazilian studies also address gentrification within the frame of neoliberal policies (Arantes, 2000; Leite, 2007; Vainer, 2000). Following their Northern peers, Brazilian scholars have examined similar shifts in planning and dismantling of local socioeconomic and political arrangements. Therefore, even if one recognizes that segregation and displacement have historically characterized Brazilian cities, the forms and intensity of recent processes constitute significant changes. The new strategies prioritize private interests, targeting a new image of the city to attract investments and a high-income clientele over facing the more difficult and concrete local realities. In São Paulo, the debate usually follows the Global City assumption, including the emergence of citadels or islands of development connected with international economic flows (Ferreira, 2007). Hosting recent worldwide events, such as the 2014 FIFA's Soccer Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, also had significant impacts in Brazilian cities with the violent displacement of many (Gaffney, 2015; Mesentier & Moreira, 2014). Although this literature provides important insights on the transformation of planning and urban space, it tends to generalize this structure of urban competition and entrepreneurialism without acknowledging the local forces that may intervene in this process, producing contextually specific outcomes. Therefore, these studies mention gentrification as one of the several results of neoliberal policies without exploring either its definition or the actual dimensions of gentrification in Brazilian cities.

If it is possible to make this type of criticism of recent research on gentrification in Brazil, the reality faced by scholars is one of great urban transformations sensed not only by academia, but also by the media, politicians, planners and residents. Additionally, if Brazilian cases bring into question the above-mentioned classic definition of gentrification, new empirical data coming from South Africa, India, China, other countries in Latin America, as well as Europe and North America have been posing similar challenges. It is no surprise, then, that the call for geographies of gentrification is coming also from the Global North, where not even in the same city is gentrification homogeneous (Butler & Robson, 2010; Hackworth & Smith; 2001; Lees, 2000). Therefore, it is important to explore those fundamental issues with the classic definition of gentrification to address the evolution of the process not only in the new scenarios of global gentrification, such as Brazil, but also in those original locations where gentrification was first spotted.

Divergences and convergences of gentrification

In this viewpoint, based on original research and literature review on gentrification, we intend to define gentrification as a process of upward urban redevelopment with displacement. This definition has two important methodological implications. The first refers to its character as a process, and not an end result. Gentrification is, by these terms, a series of actions that produce change, i.e., upward redevelopment with displacement. Thus, it is not possible to

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identify a common type or single gentrified space, since it is the process that defines the outcome, and not the other way around. The second and related methodological implication is that gentrification research should not try to find criteria to identify the final outcome (the gentrified space), but focus on aspects to analyze the process of change itself (Beauregard, 1986; Betancur, 2014; Davidson & Lees, 2005).

Given this definition, we propose an analytical framework for gentrification research based on identifying both the necessary dimensions of change and the local mediating forces. This means that there are aspects present in each and every case, bounding the concept and identifying the process. However, local structures, different temporalities, agents and contextual patterns make gentrification on the ground specific and context-dependent. On the one hand, we intend to acknowledge the situatedness of gentrification in time and place (Watson, 2016) and, on the other, we follow a cautious approach neither to overstretch nor to dilute the concept (Forrest, 2016). Thus, the framework we put forward intends to expose the common denominators for building on gentrification theory while paying attention to its diversity as an empirical phenomenon that deserves substantive, rather than formal, comparative work. These fundamental dimensions of gentrification are:

Production of gentrifiable space:

For gentrification to take place there must be a difference in capital accumulated from current uses of space and the potential profits coming from changes in its occupation. Therefore, gentrification is a process of spatial production that unlocks urban land values. In this process of creative destruction, the existing barriers for capital accumulation – the less profitable uses – are displaced (Harvey, 2007). The production of gentrifiable space was systematized first by its conceptualization as a real estate gap or the difference between actual and potential rent (Smith, 1996, 2010). However, since first criticism to urban ecology to more recent Global South studies on urban structure (Villaça, 2001), scholars have demonstrated that land markets are social creation and, thus, rent (and people) is not distributed in the same way on every city. Additionally, studies have also demonstrated difficulties of empirical analysis (Bourassa, 2010; Ley, 2010) and the lack of explanation to why gentrification usually does not happen in the location with the largest gap in a city (Beauregard, 1986; Lees et al., 2008; Ley, 2010). To guide gentrification research, thus, it seems more useful to explore the economic motivations of gentrification in terms of the different approaches to real estate values over time and space, conforming geographies of investment and disinvestment. That is why gentrification is a movement by capital and not by people, and this assumption can be used to understand cases in city cores, peripheries and suburbs in the Global North and Global South alike.

Likewise, there are different forms that capital might assume. In classic gentrification, landlords and property owners might sell or rent their properties for higher values to residents that make reforms and renovations on the existing built stock (Glass, 1964; Lees, 1994). Realizing the existing potential, though, developers also enter the process, producing units that are 'ready' for new residents (Mills, 2010; Zukin, 1987). Nevertheless, in both cases the residents' motivations may not be financial capital itself, but cultural capital and social distinction in recognizing the importance of historical structures (Butler & Robson, 2010; Zukin, 2010).

In Brazil, accumulating real estate, and not immediate financial returns, might also be the motivation for a larger number of small investors. Given the political instabilities and the different economic reforms, which included the confiscation of bank accounts, there is a

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popular saying in Brazil that 'real estate is the best form of savings'.² Therefore, besides corporate investors, many Brazilian families invest in real estate to consolidate their savings and may see redevelopment areas as opportunities. Economic motivations might also materialize as reduced costs for middle or high-income families in South Africa. For instance, Lemanski (2014) found that families in higher income communities bought units in nearby public housing developments to house domestic workers and other employees. If they are not owners and do not have direct discounts on monthly wages, the new residents still have a higher socioeconomic profile than the original occupants, causing direct and indirect displacement.

Upward socio-economic change with displacement:

In the conflict between current and future uses, gentrification entails population change – i.e., a group of incomers with a higher socio-economic profile. It is, thus, a class-based concept (Hamnett, 1991; Lees, 1994; Smith, 1996). Therefore, gentrification represents a transformation of households that can be identified by contextual dimensions, such as changes in income; levels of formal education; types of professions; homeownership; number of residents per unit; and race and ethnicity. Moreover, displacement can happen with increases in rents and taxes, diminishing social protections, landlord harassment, pressures to sell properties by real estate developers, and transformations in the local life that might have multiplying effects, such as feelings of political and community displacement (Forrest, 2016; Marcuse, 1986). In neoliberal contexts, gentrification projects led by large developers and the state can also result in demolitions and new constructions that promote direct displacement as well as have spillover effects on current uses with rent hikes, increases in taxes, and evictions (Davidson & Lees, 2005). Finally, diminishing social and housing programs in a context of neoliberal and competitive urbanism can increase the exclusionary effects of gentrification. It is important to notice here the impact of public policy, with State action having effects in the process on both in Global North and Global South cases (Furtado, 2014; Harris, 2008; Lees & Ley, 2008).

Nonetheless, it is necessary to emphasize that the higher level of inequality and the greater housing deficit in the Global South might result in more intense effects on local housing markets. In São Paulo, there are approximately 391,756 households in 1,730 informal communities (*favelas*) and 1,506 tenement housing arrangements (*cortiços*)³. In a city with historic and systemic problems with urban infrastructure, there is still a high number of arsons and violent displacements in 'hot' frontiers for capital investment. Additionally, with new competitive policies, some of the best locations in São Paulo are targeted for large urban projects. Concentrating resources and not prioritizing housing solutions, these projects can become tools to promote gentrification, displacing vulnerable households and contributing to further unequal development (Siqueira, 2014b, 2018).

Built-environment upgrades:

Gentrification entails transformations in the built environment, given the distinct socio-economic profile between previous and current users. On the one hand, there is a strong relationship between gentrification and postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, promoting new patterns of consumption (Harvey, 1989). On the other, physical space transformations are also related to the construction of a new spatial fix for capital accumulation by freeing fixed capital from less profitable uses. In classic gentrification definition, these

² The literal translation of the popular expression is 'real estate is the best savings' (imóvel é a melhor poupança).

³ This data was made available by São Paulo Housing Department. Available at <http://www.habitasampa.inf.br/habitacao/>. Retrieved in April 22nd, 2020.

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investments mostly take the form of reform and renovations of the existing structures (Lambert & Boddy, 2002; Lees et al., 2008). However, developers and architects can capture the most visible aspects of gentrification to sell the aesthetics of gentrification (Jager, 2010; Zukin, 2010). In neoliberal gentrification, additionally, public agents and other real estate developers can promote gentrification by investments in physical structure to sell an image of attractive locations (Davidson & Lees, 2005; Hackworth & Smith, 2001).

Built-environment upgrades in a country such as Brazil might be related to the systemic lack of infrastructure and the different patterns of consumption from high-income groups that are usually not interested in historic units, as previously mentioned. Rather, new buildings have been more attractive to local elites (Siqueira, 2014a). This also seems to be the case in Hong Kong where urban renewal and public action have a great importance on local gentrification cases (La Grange; Pretorius, 2014). In terms of urban structure, Harris' study of Mumbai and London found, besides the more intense effects in Mumbai, that gentrification caused the disruption and disorder of both cities' functioning and organization (2008). Gentrification 'fractured' the original urban tissue, resulting in exclusive spaces in Mumbai and London. The finding is similar to the formation of elite's citadels in Brazilian cities and the invasion of impoverished peripheries across Latin America by shopping centers and high-income gated communities (López-Morales et al., 2016).

Final considerations

In this viewpoint, we put forward a definition of gentrification as a process of upward urban redevelopment with displacement. Classic gentrification concerns the transformation of existing housing stock and the displacement of working-class groups. Globally, gentrification concerns the expansion of neoliberal policies, especially urban entrepreneurialism and new patterns of consumption. These aspects cannot be dissociated and evolve jointly. Nevertheless, these definitions have the intrinsic risk of being deterministic, exploring cases independently of the context. This is also the case of most Brazilian studies that do not acknowledge gentrification's path-dependency.

Even considering that gentrification has gone global or became the main policy of urban neoliberalism, the process has to be understood in its articulation with local patterns once they may alter it over space and time. Therefore, instead of describing its end-result, research should focus on unveiling how gentrification is operationalized and located in different contexts. This paper argues that while there are fundamental dimensions that are present in each and every case, there are also local mediating structures that makes gentrification context-specific. Research on gentrification, thus, has to explore contextual knowledge, using methodologies that dialogue with different spaces, temporalities and agents.

If the framework above is valid, studies on gentrification should understand and explore the nature of the differences between these various cases to generate ideas that can inform practice in contextual ways, including those to resist gentrification. In all necessary dimensions here proposed it is possible to identify variables to operationalize research, such as time series analysis on changes in household income and rent values, as well as strategies to fight back, once rent hikes can expose similar situations, promote dialogues and exchange of experiences. These networks of residents, activists, academics and policymakers yield a type of knowledge that illuminates not only realities similar to their own, but also those that usually contrast sharply with them, hence providing greater insight into the dynamics of gentrification and urban processes more broadly.

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