GENTRIFICATION IN POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES: AN INTRODUCTION

In its 50-year long history as theme of academic enquiry, the status of gentrification has evolved from that of being an anomalous phenomenon localized in the inner city of London (Glass 1964) to that of a "global urban strategy" (Smith 2002). The transformation of inner-city neighborhoods, accompanied by rising housing costs, a new urban chic, and unmistakable social transformations, has become an experience shared by a growing number of cities across the planet.

Arguably, the role of the key actors involved in the process – the gentrifiers themselves as well as investors eager on exploiting "rent gaps" in urban land markets – has gradually diminished: with gentrification increasingly being conceived as a readily available regeneration strategy, supply side actors now appear to be leading the development (Davidson 2007), with state support through complicity, partnership or outright subsidization (Hackworth, Smith 2001). This has set the scene for what has been termed as the "new urban colonialism" (Atkinson, Bridge 2005), a phenomenon that is, perhaps somewhat lightly, assumed to have a global reach that is consistent with the spatial logic of capitalism (Smith 2002, Lees 2012).This globalization of gentrification has been paralleled by the widening and reconfiguration of its conceptual boundaries. While disputed (Hamnett 1991; Slater 2006; Boddy 2007; Ball 2014; Slater 2014; Schlichtman, Patch 2014), the term "gentrification" has become a central concept in human geography, associating social, economic and cultural processes with the socio-spatial upgrading or class remaking of localities (Smith 2002). Moreover, gentrification is no longer confined to the middle class or to inner-city areas of major metropolitan areas: nowadays, it involves a variety of social groups ranging from students (Smith 2005) to the super-rich (Butler, Lees 2006), and the process is said to be an increasingly ubiquitous feature of contemporary urbanism, prompting Davidson's (2007, p. 493) suggestion that gentrification is a "capital-led colonization of urban space". Yet, despite its ubiquity, gentrification, and especially the gentrifiers themselves, are very diverse in their impact on the local community (Butler, Robson 2001; Bridge 2006). To a significant extent, the scale and extent of gentrification is an empirical question, but the interpretation of any empirical results is strongly determined by the way the concept is defined and delimited. This definition, in turn, is of paramount importance for the subsequent (non-) formulation of policy responses (Bernt, Holm 2009; see also Wacquant 2008).

Nonetheless, the conceptualization and explanations of gentrification, as well as the popular global strategy narrative, still parade an unmistakable "Western/Anglophone" bias, despite recent calls (e.g., Lees 2012) and even more recent responses (e.g., Choi 2014; Lemanski 2014; Lees, Shin, López-Morales 2015) supporting a more globally inclusive research agenda.

For some reason, the experience of the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is still somewhat ambiguous, and engagement with this

region has been rather sketchy at best, giving rise to an increasingly glaring blindspot on the global map of (global?) gentrification theory. Therefore, the articles collected in this theme issue represent a valuable improvement on this situation.

CEE cities share important similarities with their "Western" counterparts, but they also exhibit notable differences. Whereas Glass's (1964) description of working class neighborhoods in London in the 1960s as "shabby" and "modest" would seem to describe many inner-city quarters under socialism too, a middle class "invasion" of these areas, and the transformation of their housing stock into "elegant" and "expensive" residences, hardly describes the experience of most CEE cities during the last decades. Consequently, there is no consensus among CEE scholars regarding the extent to which "Western" processes of inner city change and "gentrification" are identifiable in the post-communist city. Similarly, the value of the complex of gentrification theories originating from Anglo-American academia is subject to dispute (Sýkora 2005), even though the search for alternative or complementary approaches has yet to bear fruit. To some extent, this Anglo-American theory hegemony has petrified the boundaries of theoretical imagination on CEE cities.

Many scholars (often, but not always based in the "West") describe urban developments in the CEE region as part of a catching-up discourse, which implies that the introduction of market principles will inevitably lead to the approximate replication of western models of urban development, including widespread gentrification (see for example Lees 2003; Smith 1996, 2002; Sýkora, Bouzarovski 2012). However, this view has been challenged by those who prefer to emphasize the region's more distinctive features, whereby the legacies of state socialism may either coalesce with the imperatives of the capitalist order, giving rise to novel hybrid spatialities (Golubchikov, Badyina, Makhrova 2014), or exert a durable inertia effect that insulates against the beneficial or detrimental spatial effects of marketization (Gentile 2015). In either case, the slow pace of change in many CEE inner-city areas underscores the powerful role played by the idiosyncrasies of local context, including the specifics of privatization, property restitution, housing cultures, regulatory frameworks, the politics of symbolic capital, and other factors (e.g., Kovács 1998; Sýkora 2005; Chelcea 2006, Steinführer, Haase 2007; Temelová 2007). These contributions question the convergence hypothesis, highlighting historical legacies, temporal sequentialities and path dependencies in order to make a case for a more nuanced understanding of post-socialist urban transformation. As a consequence, whether or not gentrification exists and matters in CEE cities remains disputed – and under-theorized.

However, this picture has somewhat changed over the past few years, and there are a number of reasons for this: First, while still at an embryonic stage in the early 1990s (Sýkora 1993), processes of inner-city change have in fact gained momentum in many CEE cities during the second decade of transition, and gentrification has come to play an important role in places like Prenzlauer Berg in (former East) Berlin, Praga in Warsaw, Vinohrady in Prague, or Užupis in Vilnius, where the process has almost assumed iconic proportions. Moreover, it is no longer limited to small areas in CEE capitals and boomtowns, as gentrification is increasingly present in more peripheral, but also smaller, locations.

Second, the differences between CEE countries and cities have become accentuated. Thus, whereas gentrification prevails in former East-Berlin and in many major cities of "fast-track" reforming countries[1], it has remained a much more piecemeal process in Russian metropolitan centres, and is nearly unheard of in Albania or Bulgaria. Specifically, whereas inner-city upgrading in some cases seems to be driven by the "spontaneous" movements of a new generation of urbanites who are not necessarily wealthier than their "veteran" inner city neighbours (Grabkowska 2012; Haase, Grossmann, Steinführer 2012; Standl, Krupickaitė, 2004), elsewhere it is dominated by newbuild developers (Badyina, Golubchikov 2005; Cook 2010; Kovács, Wiessner, Zischner 2013). In some cities gentrification is evident on a broad spatial scale (Bernt, Holm 2005; Holm 2010), whereas in others the phenomenon is fragmented and circumscribed (Kaczmarek, Marcińczak 2013; Sýkora 2005). Moreover, what we may broadly refer to as gentrification-like processes tend to be accompanied by, or include, commercialization, brownfield regeneration, touristification, studentification, and other processes. To sum up: processes that very much look like gentrification have not only gained in importance in the region – they have also become increasingly uneven.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the recent years have witnessed an upsurge in urban research coming from within the region. Today, one may find more and more such "indigenous" empirical research confronting the issue of gentrification based on fresh data and new conceptualizations. Most of this knowledge still comes from a limited number of urban centres (mainly Berlin, Budapest and Prague) – but the geographical origin and scope of this research has been expanding rapidly, and new questions have been coming to the fore. Thus, for example, recent contributions (Marcińczak, Sagan 2011; Chelchea 2006), suggest that a nuanced understanding of the spatial patterns of gentrification requires an adequate assessment of the relations between transformation policies, property structures and socio-demographic change. Others have studied different demographic compositions, housing cultures and resulting consumption patterns of the urban middle-classes (Grabkowska 2012; Haase, Grossmann, Steinführer 2012). All these works have contributed to a better understanding of the transformations taking place within the CEE city, advancing our knowledge beyond the convergence vs. "cases-onto-themselves" (Sjöberg 2014) dichotomy. Yet, more new research is needed to portray the many faces of gentrification in this region. After all, the stakes are high: if gentrification theory suffers from its excessively uni-directional input from the academic "Global North-West" (if we may), the experience of the CEE cities may provide fruitful ground for theory "export" (Sjöberg 2014).

This theme issue presents excerpts from this new generation of research and gives insights into the variety of perspectives through which inner-city change is currently studied in CEE-countries. It is based on discussions held within the Cities After Transition (CAT) network, especially on the occasion of a CAT workshop held in Łódź in September 2012. This workshop was characterized by

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[1] We use the term "fast-track reforming countries" to refer to the post-socialist European states that underwent a smooth systemic transition and joined the European Union in 2004 (cf. Marcińczak et al. 2015).

comparative approaches to the study of gentrification, and it invited both empirical contributions and theoretical reflections. The result, which this theme issue puts together, includes work based on the experiences of cities as diverse as Tallinn, Tbilisi, Bucharest and Gdańsk, offering a multitude of new insights on a variety of aspects related to gentrification, including both broad takes on the phenomenon and more specific contributions dealing with reurbanization, newbuild gentrification, citizen participation in urban regeneration, and studentification.

Chelcea, Popescu and Cristea (2015, this issue) take a rather broad approach in their account of the rise of gentrification in Bucharest, and conclude that "gentrification research still needs to trace local forms, political configurations, and (post)socialist causes" (p. 129), which their article does diligently. In particular, they outline a typology of commodification strategies – often illegal or semi-legal – that have evolved during the transition era, facilitating gentrification. These strategies are inherently linked to the economics and psychology of privatization or property restitution, and their end result is the voluntary or involuntary displacement or relocation of inner-city residents, who are followed by wealthier residents and the occasional "commercialization tsunami" (p. 124). Over time, there develops a teleological stand-off of sorts between the objectives of a fair and equitable housing policy, the interests of rent-seeking actors and the rights and interests of the inner city residents. These interests do not necessarily collide, and they certainly do not coincide, but the initial conditions of privatization favour those who were privileged under socialism, whereas the tenants of restituted units are the truly disadvantaged (cf. Bodnár, Böröcz 1998).

Like Chelcea et al.'s work, Gentile, Salukvadze and Gogishvili's (2015, this issue) largely theoretical contribution takes issue with the hegemony of gentrification theory stemming from – and informed by the experience of – a limited set of major cities in the Global North. Based in Tbilisi, Georgia, their work uses the example of what a superficial observation might identify as newbuild gentrification (NBG) in order to elaborate on the complexities of inner city change in what they call the *Post-Communist South*. Gentile et al. suggest that the inner city construction boom in Tbilisi, which culminated just before the onset of the global economic crisis of 2008–2009, may largely be attributed to urbanization effects and diaspora capital. The latter is responsible for *tele-urbanization*, a concept the authors use to describe foreign-resident Georgians' investment in newbuild developments, often with no intention to actually occupy the dwellings. This is at best an NBG of sorts, as the phenomenon does not involve actual gentrifiers and is seldom associated with actual displacement.

By contrast, the phenomenon investigated by Holm, Marcińczak and Ogro-dowczyk (2015, this issue) is more reminiscent of the NBG known from the literature (Davidson, Lees 2005; Davidson 2007), but again, the authors' case studies from Łódź (Poland) and Leipzig (Germany) indicate that the process is sensitive to the pace and depth of post-socialist economic and institutional reform, and that it has different economic roots and social consequences than in, e.g., the United Kingdom. They conclude that "NBG in post-socialist Europe is decoupled from gentrification history and stands for a distinctive pathway to produce an extra profit in the housing market" (p. 182) and that, as a matter of

fact, it offered the first real exploitable rent gap within a context of lingering rental regulations, unclear property rights, housing shortages and widespread income poverty.

As its conceptual boundaries have expanded, gentrification has come to embrace processes that do not necessarily imply a socio-economic (income) remaking of the population, but also a social and cultural transformation that may have a deep-going effect on the living environments and sense of place of the affected areas. Studentification, which is a vivid example of the latter, and which the "Global North-West" literature often interprets as a form of proto-gentrification by apprentice gentrifiers (Smith, Holt 2007) is the topic investigated by Murzyn-Kupisz and Szmytkowska (2015, this issue). This theme is particularly salient in Poland, where the number of students enrolled in higher education has expanded rapidly over the past 20 years, giving rise to a substantial pool of potential student-gentrifiers. However, the authors' work in Cracow and Gdańsk (Poland) indicates that the connection between studentification and gentrification is weak: Polish students, like many other people, seem to prefer safety, quietude, relative neighbourhood prestige and connectivity before trendiness; rather than giving rise to localized studentification, therefore, Cracow and (less so) Gdańsk students appear to be colonizing large swathes of their respective cities by virtue of their vast and growing numbers.

For many critical scholars, urban regeneration and reurbanization are euphemisms that help "sugarcoat" gentrification, and will inevitably cause social conflict and displacement in a broad sense (Smith 2002, Wacquant 2008). However, Grabkowska's (2015, this issue) research in a traditional working class neighbourhood of Gdańsk (Wrzeszcz Dolny) portrays a different picture, where young and urban-minded newcomers are instrumental in the development of bottom-up, grass-root level participatory regeneration. What is more, rather than being alienated or phenomenologically uprooted by gentrification (cf. Davidson, Lees 2010), the established residents appear to be empowered by the community-mindedness of the "gentrifiers", whose arrival, Grabkowska asserts, has fostered "social integration and civic engagement [as well as improved the] quality of life of both new and indigenous residents […] with a minimum risk of social costs such as displacement" (p. 219). Therefore, she concludes that classic gentrification and reurbanization describe different phenomena, and that reurbanization may helpfully contribute to urban regeneration, as long as the established residents are included.

Haase and Rink's (2015, this issue) engagement with the conceptual bumfuzzling of gentrication and reurbanization is even more straightforward than Grabkowska's. In a context of population shrinkage, a high housing vacancy rate and subsequent slow urban renaissance, the authors show that reurbanization – which for them has a far broader reach than gentrification – has given rise to a variety of pathways towards the revival of the crisis-ridden inner city residential function. Within this context, the contribution of gentrification is limited, albeit clearly increasing during very recent years. For shrinking cities, it appears that reurbanization is a *sine qua non* for gentrification to emerge, but gentrification is just a single expression of Leipzig's inner city revitalization and rejuvenation. This is a lesson that may well be evoked when considering

the real or potential "gentrification" of the inner cities of the American or British rustbelts.

Grabkowska's and Haase and Rink's findings resonate with Kovács, Wiessner and Zischner's (2015, this issue) work on neighbourhood upgrading in Budapest. Their study poses yet another challenge to the catch-it-all "global strategy" narrative of gentrification by emphasizing the presence of a qualitatively diverse set of gentrification-like processes in Budapest: classic gentrification (be it state-led or spontaneous), incumbent upgrading and soft revitalization. Interestingly, these processes appear to be taking place simultaneously and in juxtaposed locations, although with different intensities, leading to a reality that would best be described as being characterized by "diversified upgrading". This leads the authors to the conclusion that the original contents of the concept of gentrification are best left untouched, and that the "big" version of gentrification championed by critical scholars, mainly academics from the Global North-West, conceals the complexity, heterogeneity and diversity of inner-city upgrading processes in CEE.

The final contribution in this theme issue, written by Kährik, Novák, Temelová, Kadarik and Tammaru, returns to a simple, yet crucial, question: who are the residents of the post-communist inner city and how do they, as a group, compare to the rest of the population? Comparing the cases of Tallinn and Prague, the authors identify both similarities and differences in the demographic and socio-economic compositions of these cities' respective inner cities. Overall, the younger cohorts are over-represented in the inner city, particularly in Tallinn. In Prague, however, the group is more prominent in the gentrified Vinohrady neighbourhood than in the actual city centre, while the elderly population appears to have stayed put.

Summing up, the contributions included in this theme issue offer a wide range of approaches to the understanding of inner city change in post-communist cities. Importantly, what emerges is a serious challenge to some of the central assumptions of gentrification research stemming from the Anglo-American empire of urban theory. Arguably, the main takeaway from this theme issue is that post-communist cities challenge the core assumptions that frequently underlie the analysis of gentrification under capitalism, and that distinctiveness, rather than global narratives, remains central to any nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

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