

Social Mix, Control and Gentrification

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Public policies often encourage gentrification in the name of social mix, among other arguments. In urban research, however, this type of discourse is the subject of intense criticism.

“Gentrification disguised as ‘social mix’ serves as an excellent example of how the rhetoric and reality of gentrification has been replaced by a different discursive, theoretical and policy language that consistently deflects criticism and resistance.”¹ These are the terms used by the British geographer Tom Slater to describe how the political and media success of the watchword “social mix” has helped to divert social scientists from studying the social effects of gentrification, and especially the mechanism of eviction of the most vulnerable populations. As Slater sees it, few seek to denounce the dissimulation of gentrification policies in measures aimed at creating the conditions for the middle and upper classes to stay in, move to, or frequent working-class neighborhoods that are diagnosed as being “in crisis.” Our aim here is not to fundamentally challenge Slater’s conclusions. Rather, we seek to qualify them by showing, in particular, how the scientific reflection initiated in France around the ambiguities of the political category of social mix has found some echo in the French literature on the gentrification of working-class neighborhoods, sparking lively discussion on the subject.

The stakes involved in these debates are at once social and political; for they raise the question—more or less frontally to be sure—of how the working classes are considered and dealt with in neighborhoods that have become attractive and strategic (again) not only for local political and economic actors, but also for some wealthier urbanites. Thus, paying attention to social mix in gentrifying neighborhoods entails inquiring into the status and place of the working classes in the very center of major cities. It also means interrogating the role of the working-class presence in a conception of the ideal city—one that, by prescribing social mix as a condition for any form of social cohesion, tends towards a pacified, balanced and harmonious vision of downtown neighborhoods. However, “social mix” cannot be reduced to a horizon of expectation. In central neighborhoods undergoing gentrification, it has established itself as a norm that creeps into everyday social relations; it also brings to light very real power relations between social groups and between individuals that are open and acknowledged at times, and subtle and covert

¹ Slater T., “The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification Research,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2006, 30, p. 751.

at others.² These power relations outline the forms of control to which the working classes are subjected in gentrifying neighborhoods, but also, conversely, the practices of subversion or resistance that they are able, in some circumstances, to carry out.

Bringing Central Working-Class Neighborhoods Up to Middle-Class Standards

The way in which social mix has imposed itself on the agenda of public policies implemented in gentrifying neighborhoods is far from unequivocal. The diversity of national legal frameworks for urban policy, the balances of political power, the terms of involvement of local public and economic actors (whether they join together in a coalition or not), but also the dynamics of housing markets and the temporality, intensity and spatial forms taken on locally by gentrification processes, are among the many factors that influence the recourse to “social mix” in public action.

At first glance, it seems difficult to put the two uses of social mix on the same level. On the one hand, it has served to spearhead ambitious policies of urban “regeneration” or “renewal” in Britain or the United States, and hence to provide a vague moral justification for policies that are explicitly aimed at evicting immigrants and the working classes, and that can be described, following radical geographer Neil Smith, as “revanchist.”³ On the other hand, it has been mobilized because it helps to maintain a “fuzzy line” between two legitimizing political principles that oppose each other: 1) improving the situation of the working classes that live in these areas; and 2) upgrading these neighborhoods to attract new residents and activities.⁴

Yet the political use of “social mix” appears in either case—i.e., as concrete intervention or as discourse—to be deeply normative and prescriptive. Whether incentivizing and consensual or violent and cynical, the types of urban policy it legitimizes participate in the short- and long-term logic “of strict *control* over the localization”⁵ and distribution of the working classes in the centers of large cities.

To illustrate this, let us dwell on the political approach that consists in turning former working-class neighborhoods undergoing gentrification into “laboratories” or “models” of social mix. We observed this process in Grenoble, where it was implemented from the mid-1990s on by the municipal government of Socialist mayor Michel Destot. The city’s historic working-class and industrial neighborhood was indeed gradually set up as the “Grenoble model of social mix.” This model materialized in several urban interventions (construction of social housing, rehabilitation of old housing stock, development of public spaces), but also in the diffusion of a number of socio-spatial representations in a variety of media (exhibitions, public discourses, local publications). Though the promotion of these novel representations clearly broke with the policy that had been pursued under the municipal government of right-wing mayor Alain Carignon—a policy unashamedly aimed at developing the site in the name of modernity and at the expense of low-income populations—its purpose was nonetheless to shed the neighborhood’s lingering image as a working-class and immigrant district.

² The binary opposition between gentrifiers and gentrified will be used for the sake of clarity, though in some cases it can be considered improper. Indeed, we are aware that the biography and sociology of these two groups are very diverse, and that a single individual can transition from one to the other.

³ Smith N., *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, Routledge, 1996.

⁴ Fijalkow Y. and Préceteille E., “Gentrification: discours et politiques urbaines (France, Royaume-Uni, Canada),” *Sociétés contemporaines*, 2006, 63, pp. 5-13.

⁵ Simon P. and Lévy J-P., “Questions sociologiques et politiques sur la mixité sociale,” *Contretemps*, 2005, 13, p. 88.

The communication strategy was then aimed at controlling inherited (proletarian) or contemporary (immigrant) references to the working-class presence in the neighborhood by integrating them into the model of social mix. For instance, the official discourse strongly insisted on the historical continuity of the neighborhood's "mixed" quality, imposing on it an already-mapped-out urban trajectory, but also a form of mission. In such a prophecy, the more or less recent industrial and proletarian past is strongly abstracted—a process similar to what Yankel Fijalkow and Marie-Hélène Bacqué⁶ observed in the case of the Goutte-d'Or neighborhood in Paris. This implies not only a selective aestheticization of the traces of the past left behind, but, most importantly, an extreme simplification of the multiple forms of social relations that have shaped the neighborhood since its creation. The different forms that make up neighborhood life—oppositions, conflicts, struggles, controversies, lackluster investments, movements of proximity and distance—appear watered down in this political reinterpretation of local collective memory.

The logic thus described largely echoes the critique formulated by Patrick Simon and Jean-Pierre Lévy whereby "the insistence on promoting social mix conveys an idealized and totalitarian reading of the city in which 'balance' is said to organize the product of urban history and social struggles."⁷ Yet with an image such as this, it is also the neighborhood's current situation that is being abstracted—a situation marked not only by gentrification, but also by dynamics of precarization, impoverishment and exclusion, as well as by governments' difficulty in handling these. By manipulating and reducing the complexity of reality, the promotion of social mix openly participates in what Lydia Launay calls "working-class neighborhoods' return to the 'norm',"⁸ which is a process at once social, economic, fiscal and political. This "return to the norm" is, of course, closely associated with gentrification. As Yankel Fijalkow and Edmond Préteceille remind us, "gentrification seems largely determined by the manner in which working-class neighborhoods are described."⁹ The image of the neighborhood as "a model of social mix"—also often relayed by property developers or certain businessmen who turn it into a sales pitch or an economic strategy—is directly aimed at newly settled or potential gentrifiers, even though these do not all respond to it in the same way.

The ambiguities of the Discourse on Social Mix

The watchword of "social mix"—often associated with those of heritage protection, authenticity, village-district, and access to culture—is presented in studies of gentrification as a common ground that is shared socially and culturally by gentrifiers. In her work on Paris, Anne Clerval argues that the embrace of social mix can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, it can be seen as "a reflex consistent with a political position" that is rather left-oriented. On the other, it can be viewed as a way for gentrifiers "to constitute themselves as a full social group," in a strategy of social distinction from the working classes with which they coexist, but also from the middle classes that have settled in suburban homes and from the bourgeoisie of the wealthy

⁶ Bacqué M-H. and Fijalkow Y., "En attendant la gentrification: discours et politiques à la Goutte-d'Or (1982-2000)," *Sociétés contemporaines*, 2006, 63, pp. 63-83.

⁷ P. Simon and J-P. Lévy, *art. cit.*, p. 85.

⁸ Launay L., "De Paris à Londres: le défi de la mixité sociale par les 'acteurs clés,'" *Espaces et sociétés*, 2010, 140-141, p. 111.

⁹ Y. Fijalkow and E. Préteceille, *art. cit.*, p. 9.

districts—a strategy that “allows them to reunite with their peers who, like them, reside in former working-class neighborhoods.”¹⁰

Against this classist interpretation of social relations, some oppose a renewed approach to class divisions and class boundaries that integrates not only distinctions based on origin, gender and sex, but also the promotion of new moral, political and cultural values and of other ways of thinking and practicing the city. In this perspective, Anaïs Collet urges caution insofar as there are a “variety of gentrifiers.” The watchwords above can indeed be “defined and defended in various ways depending on the fraction of the middle or upper classes that embrace them, and depending on local issues and configurations”¹¹: Gentrifiers’ motivations “to invest in their neighborhood and the representations that guide them vary between generations but also within them—i.e., between more or less intellectual fractions, or between artists and technicians of the middle and upper classes.”¹² In turn, in her work on Boston’s South End which focuses on the bourgeoisie deemed “progressive” precisely because of its adherence to the watchword of social mix, Sylvie Tissot¹³ stresses the complexity of the play of alliances that has contributed to the gentrification of the neighborhood—with black activists, stable fractions of the working classes, or furnished apartment landlords being alternately allied with and opposed to white upper-class property owners.¹⁴

The variety of dispositions towards social mix as value can be observed in daily practices and relationships with members of the working classes, as well as in forms of organization and collective mobilization. While certain analyses openly praise the benefits of the (often mercantile) exchanges which are made possible by social mix—thereby incidentally legitimizing the gentrification process—most studies stress, on the contrary, the forms of distancing, closing off, looking inward, and even separatism that gentrifiers engage in with respect to the working classes.¹⁵

Thus, it is especially the ambiguities, and even the contradictions, in gentrifiers’ ordinary experience of social mix that have fueled the debates. These ambiguities and contradictions, which vary according to the context and the situation, are found at many levels: between the embrace of social mix as value on the one hand and exclusive lifestyles on the other¹⁶; between forms of solidarity espoused during activist engagements and struggles (against renovation, in favor of onsite relocation) and the reality of daily coexistence with members of the working classes¹⁷; between certain forms of neighborhood activities to promote, most likely in good faith, everyday social mix and the advertising effect of those actions on potential gentrifiers.

¹⁰ Clerval A., “Les anciennes cours réhabilitées des faubourgs: une forme de gentrification à Paris,” *Espaces et sociétés*, 2008, 132, p. 104.

¹¹ Collet A., *Rester bourgeois. Les quartiers populaires, nouveaux chantiers de la distinction*, La Découverte, 2015, p. 198.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹³ Tissot Sylvie, *De bons voisins. Enquête dans un quartier de la bourgeoisie progressiste*, Raison d’agir, 2011.

¹⁴ Collet A., “Les nouveaux espaces de la bourgeoisie,” *La Vie des idées*, 2012.

¹⁵ We can highlight, between these two poles, the originality of the work produced by Jean-Yves Authier and Sonia Lehman-Frisch: “La mixité dans les quartiers gentrifiés: un jeu d’enfants ?,” *Métropolitiques*, 2013.

¹⁶ Bidou C., *Les aventuriers du quotidien. Essai sur les nouvelles classes moyennes*, PUF, 1984; Clerval A., *Paris sans le peuple. La gentrification de la capitale*, La Découverte, 2013.

¹⁷ Simon P., “La société partagée. Relations interethniques et interclasses dans un quartier en rénovation, Belleville, Paris 20e,” *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, 1995, 68, pp. 161-190.

Ambiguities and contradictions are also found between the different registers of daily practices that unfold in the spaces (i.e., activist, residential, public, or school spaces) where social mix is (re)defined¹⁸—the most blatant of these lying, unquestionably, in the gap between the embrace of social mix in public or residential spaces and the rejection of school coexistence.¹⁹

In short, the key contradiction lies in the gap—observed countless times—between the ideals promoted by gentrifiers and their actions, and in the redefinition of the relations of power and control that result from this gap. As Collet writes concerning Bas-Montreuil in the 1980s and 1990s, “even when gentrifiers’ practices and mobilizations are part of a humanist tradition that values equality and encounters between social groups, they do not escape the development of relations of domination.”²⁰ In the same vein, Tissot clearly demonstrates that while the “progressive” bourgeoisie’s adherence to social mix hinders to some degree the eviction of the working classes from Boston’s South End, it is possible only insofar as social mix remains subject to “strict control.”²¹ This control exerted in the context of associations’ strong mobilization not only involves a selective construction of local memory—at the expense of the neighborhood’s working-class, immigrant and African-American past—but also entails material and symbolic surveillance in daily life, forms of distancing, of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the assignation of poor and undesirable populations to subordinate places. Here as elsewhere, social mix is regulated in ways that induce the redefinition of local norms and legitimacies, the in-depth reorganization of social coexistence, and through this, the strict control over modes of appropriation of the neighborhood.

Acceptance, Subversion or Resistance?

How do the “gentrified” who originate from the working or lower middle classes react to these forms of political or social control? Indeed, there are very few cases where all populations threatened by gentrification are completely evicted from their neighborhood. For authors such as Jean-Yves Authier²² or Jean-Pierre Lévy, gentrification appears “rather as a juxtaposition of differentiated populations and mobilities, as the social product of a complex game in which sedentary and mobile populations live side by side.”²³ Whatever the stage of development of the process, those who manage to stay, or even sometimes to come back, leave their mark on the social landscapes of gentrifying neighborhoods. The mechanisms to remain in place, though strongly marked by relations of domination, are multiple: They concern the owners of a home purchased at a time when the market was affordable, social housing tenants, private market tenants who wish to stay in the center at the cost of poor housing conditions, long-term users, etc.

The few empirical studies²⁴ that directly focus on the gentrified—whether displaced or not—reveal that the way these relate to social mix as a moral value, political principle, or

¹⁸ Charmes E., “Pour une approche critique de la mixité sociale. Redistribuer les populations ou les ressources ?,” *La Vie des idées*, 2009. <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Pour-une-approche-critique-de-la-mixite-sociale.html>.

¹⁹ Van Zanten A., *Choisir son école. Stratégies familiales et médiations locales*, PUF, 2009.

²⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 199.

²¹ *op. cit.*, p. 14.

²² Authier J.-Y., “Formes et processus de ségrégation dans les quartiers centraux réhabilités. L’exemple du quartier Saint-Georges à Lyon,” *Sociétés contemporaines*, 1995, 22-23, pp. 107-126.

²³ Lévy J.-P., “Gentrification,” in Segaud M., Brun J., and Driant J.-C. (eds.), *Dictionnaire de l’habitat et du logement*, Armand Colin, 2002, p. 200.

²⁴ Among recent works, see Van Criekingen M., “Les impacts sociaux de la rénovation urbaine à Bruxelles: analyse des migrations intra-urbaines,” *Belgeo*, 2002, 4, pp. 355-376; Lehman-Frisch S., “Gentrifieurs, gentrifiés: cohabiter

contingency of everyday situations, is far from unequivocal. To be sure, the negative impact on the poorest and most vulnerable households from the social changes and situations of forced co-existence that are produced by gentrification has been demonstrated. The social and symbolic violence created by spatial proximity with the upper classes, but also the feeling of being dispossessed of one's neighborhood, losing one's bearings, and becoming invisible in public space, often cause discomfort, frustration and rejection. Depending on the individual, this translates into withdrawal, avoidance practices, indifference, clashes or confrontations.

Having said that, some gentrified do try to take advantage of the ongoing social changes and the forms of control produced by the watchword of social mix. This has been observed in the area of schooling, but also sometimes in the way that the gentrified practice public spaces or frequent collective spaces such as business stores. In doing so, some gentrified affirm the desire to confront otherness, to derive benefits from coexistence that are, if not social, at least symbolic. In this way, the principle of social mix appears to be subverted, for the mythology being coveted for the purpose of distinction is no longer proletarian or working-class, but bourgeois. Consequently, these forms of appropriation of social mix often result in celebratory discourses, which, in fact, merely relay the government's vision. This is even more obvious when the gentrified have an economic interest in promoting social mix—such as long-established storekeepers who have managed to adapt their activities to developments in their neighborhood, or certain resident homeowners whose property is appreciated thanks to the presence of gentrifiers. The existence of these particular cases, however, should not be overstated.

Social mix as conceived and implemented by governments and certain gentrifiers constitutes a driver of competition between social groups for access to urban resources in gentrifying neighborhoods. Though the fight is uneven, some gentrified manage to offer a degree of resistance. The latter is sometimes expressed in collective struggles and mobilizations, which can vary greatly in form (occupation, protest, petition), in content (against evictions, renovation, or gentrification, or for the overthrow of capitalism), or even in the degree of internal contradiction (amount of supervision, autonomy vis-à-vis gentrifiers). The critique of social mix often lies behind these various forms of mobilization, though it is rarely put forward in demands.

But the gentrified can also offer everyday resistance to these forms of control, for instance by perpetuating and spreading representations of their neighborhood that are freed from the peaceful and sanitized vision conveyed by social mix, or else by holding on to certain residential positions—even at the cost of worsening housing conditions—or daily practices. This is why some gentrifying neighborhoods are still strongly marked by the presence of immigrant populations, whose daily movements affect not only the social rhythms and markings of the neighborhood, but also its external image. This capacity to maintain forms of working-class continuity, to occupy public space and to make oneself visible is a key leverage in the short- and medium-term competition between different social groups for the appropriation and control of their neighborhood.²⁵

Conclusion

dans le quartier de la Mission (San Francisco),” *Espaces et sociétés*, 2008, 132-133, pp. 143-160; Manzo L., “On People In Changing Neighborhoods. Gentrification and Social Mix: Boundaries and Resistance,” *Cidades, Comunidades e Territórios*, 2012, 24, pp. 1-29.

²⁵ S. Lehman-Frisch, Sonia, *art. cit.*

Far from being consensual, the debates surrounding social mix in gentrifying neighborhoods *de facto* raise the question of the place, role and fate of the working class in attractive urban centers. Yet without falling into the trap of overly binary thinking (governments *versus* residents, gentrifiers *versus* gentrified), it seemed important to us to recall that social mix, as a framework for action or as an activist and humanist principle, often leads to control over the working classes and their modes of appropriation of the neighborhood—a control that these sometimes contest vigorously. It is not easy to extract and to generalize that which, in such forms of political and social control, pertains to unwitting paradox, moral-political bias, relations of domination, or pure cynicism.

Having said that, in gentrifying neighborhoods as in other urban areas, “social mix as an ideological and organizing principle of the city certainly does not lead to a reduction of inequalities linked to class relations.”²⁶ Here as elsewhere, “the constant reference to social mix hinders or distorts redistribution policies”²⁷ and deters from real measures that might be adopted to reduce social inequalities—for instance, strict rent controls, or the obligation to compensate at fair market value those threatened with eviction. So long as gentrification is not conceived as a segregating force that involves extremely fine scales of social division and new forms of unequal access to the city, there is little hope that the role assigned to social mix in urban policies implemented in central neighborhoods will change.

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²⁶ Lenel E., “Un regard phénoménologique sur la mixité urbaine,” *EspacesTemps.net*, 2011.

²⁷ E. Charmes, *art. cit.*