



Down Among the Gentrifiers

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There was no wedge of lime jammed into its neck but the label's vaguely Toltec sun, emitting old-fashioned rays from behind a cloud, left no doubt that this was a bottle of Sol, the fashionable Mexican beer. I came across this unexpected import from the land of the plumed serpent one recent Saturday morning: half-empty but still upright on the disillusioning pavement of Hackney's Dalston Lane. It was putting up a good stand against the drifting litter and the greasy strutting pigeons, but it still looked as implausible as Canary Wharf, that other tall beacon of the Renewal that suddenly went into reverse.

The British distributors insist it was only in 1990 that Sol 'went mega' as the 'badge-branded' beer preferred by those in the know, yet time had already been called for the bottle on Dalston Lane. The same should be said for the idea of 'the gentrifier' as it has been applied to homeowners in areas like East London.

That bottle would certainly have looked more promising a few years ago, at the height of what sobered estate agents now suggest may, for complicated European reasons, have been the last of the great British property booms. A spirit of adventure was in the air then, and people bought into the area with an eye for character rather than blight, social deprivation or the dishevelment of the public services.

Householders of a few years' standing could not help but marvel, often disapprovingly, at the ludicrous sums their properties were apparently worth. People visiting the north would return with incredible tales about the well-appointed manor house, or the considerable stretch of town that could be had for the cost of a single terraced house even in Hackney or Bow.

The sun soon went down on those overheated dreams, and the skips of refurbishment sank away with it. All over east London, disenchanted 'gentrifiers' opened their eyes and watched in horror as every bulge and crack in their yellow brick walls came forward to declare itself another impossible financial liability.

It was in this grey dawn that a resident of Hackney's grandest square revealed, with only the most parsimonious hint of irony in her voice, that she herself was now caught in 'the new poverty trap'. There was the poll tax, the vast mortgage and punishing interest rates. Meanwhile, house values had tumbled, falling furthest in those marginal areas that estate agents used to advertise as 'gritty' but have since redefined as standing at 'the edge of the market' - ie decidedly dodgy, if not entirely off the sensible person's map. Only a certifiable optimist would now indulge the thought of effortlessly climbing up through Stoke Newington to Highgate and then on to some leafy Old Rectory in the shires.



The dry rot has eaten into the property ladder, leaving it rickety and insecure from top to bottom. As for the lowest rungs, they seem to have fallen off altogether. Estate agents concede that some properties are virtually unsaleable at the moment: the tiny flats where there's 'hardly room to swing a cat' or the places over shops, which people were persuaded to buy as 'footholds' in the desperate stampede of the boom. Times can be especially hard for people who clubbed together to buy shared properties at the very top of the market in order to qualify for multiple tax relief on their mortgages before this (MIRAS) was abolished on 1st August 1988. They can give precise estimates of the deficit that has opened between the artificially inflated price they paid to get their foot on the ladder four or five years ago, and the cost of now getting out of a precipitously assembled household in which relationships may well have turned sour. They will not be reassured to hear that trend spotters in New York have already started identifying 'degentrification' as a sign of these depressed times.

The problems of middle class home owners barely register on any true scale of inner city affliction, but they may still prompt us to wonder where the idea of gentrification came from in the first place. There is nothing new about the 'embourgeoisement' of the city. This was Baron Haussmann's strategy for red Paris in the 19th century: shift the working classes to the periphery, carve up the city with new boulevards and bring the rich into the centre to reduce the possibility of revolution and civil war.

But the term 'gentrification' only came into use in the early nineteen sixties. It is said to have been coined by the marxist urban geographer, Ruth Glass, in an article published in 1964. She was trying to grasp events in London, at a time before confidence in municipal development had collapsed entirely. Glass had high hopes for 'the people of the public sector', and she looked forward to a future in which widescale public sector redevelopment would continue to reduce the contrast between rich and poor districts. As she pointed out, 'the new homes of working-class and lower-middle-class people, who are municipal tenants, are frequently superior in design and appearance to the older "luxury flats" and expensive houses of private tenants or owner-occupiers.'

The process she named 'gentrification' could be seen around the edges of that ongoing municipal reform. In places like Paddington, Kensington, Westminster, private developers were following the initiative of local councils and renovating streets near their redevelopments. Many working-class quarters of London had been 'invaded by the middle classes'. Shabby mews and cottages had been taken over as their leases expired and turned into 'elegant expensive residences'. Large Victorian houses, which had been in use as lodging houses or were otherwise in multiple occupation, were being upgraded if not always restored to family use.

Gentrification involved the revaluation of neglected inner city property, but it was also defined by its displacement of the original working class occupiers. There was very little left of the poorer enclaves of Hampstead and Chelsea, and Glass could see the process reaching into Islington, Paddington, North Kensington, even the 'shady' parts of Notting Hill. The East End was 'exempt' at that time, but it was already imaginable that 'some of its districts too are likely to be affected'.

Since then, the idea of gentrification has entered common parlance. It was much favoured by the new Sunday colour supplements of the sixties and seventies, which liked to write soothsaying articles about which run-down area was about to go through the roof next. The inner city came



to be relished as a place where deprivation and opportunity were exotically confused. The black and white imagery of the slum interior was lifted from the Shelter posters by estate agents who served it up scarcely changed for the benefit of 'urban pioneers', who were adept at living by candlelight or reopening chimneys and lighting the first coal fires that ever burned in post-industrial smokeless zones.

Urban geographers surveyed this riot of 'journalistic impressionism' with considerable suspicion. For Neil Smith, a Scottish geographer domiciled in the United States, this fetching drama of middle class resilience and self-improvement was beside the main point. In 1979, he introduced the idea of 'the rent gap' in order to establish that gentrification was really motivated by a much larger cycle of capital investment and certainly not just the foibles of individual preference, or a romantic middle class revolt against the suburbs. The rent gap developed when capital investment was concentrated in the creation of suburbs, thus allowing the value of property in central areas to fall significantly below what could be obtained once reinvestment was underway. The fact that 'risk oblivious' artists, conservationists and other Bohemians were often the first to move into gentrifying areas did not distract Smith from this deeper theme.

East London has certainly become familiar with gentrification since Ruth Glass cast an eye over it in 1964. In the late sixties and early seventies, when urban policy was shifting from comprehensive redevelopment to a less destructive model based on area improvement, there were bitter disputes between owner occupying conservationists, and their working class tenant neighbours who insisted that their rotting late Georgian or early Victorian terraces should be demolished rather than refurbished for 'gentrified' middle class use. There were also campaigns in which middle class incomers joined residents' associations to defend mixed communities threatened with demolition and displacement by the local authority: helping to form tenants associations, housing co-operatives and associations, and organising resistance to property speculators who were busy 'winkling' legally protected tenants out of houses that could not be sold until they had moved.

The characteristic developments of the eighties were altogether less concerned to balance gentrification with wider social improvement or worthiness. The Spitalfields Trust, which started buying threatened Huguenot houses along the eastern edge of the City of London in the late seventies, claims never to have displaced anyone. But the 'New Georgian' mythologies that emerged from, or perhaps usurped, its activities as the market took off were hardly so fastidious: they celebrated the discrepancy between the re-Englished Georgian interior and the grainy Bangladeshi world outside, treating the extremes of social inequality not as a spur to reform but as vivid local colour.

Similar things can be said about the characteristically 'inward-looking developments' that were built at that time. Earlier waves of gentrification may have involved some general improvement to whole areas and their facilities, but down at 'The Haven', 'Independent Place' or 'Watermint Quay', the idea seemed to be that you could live in the most forsaken and unimproved parts of the city as long as you didn't have to come into too much contact with the world beyond your security system. Often built on redundant industrial land, they came with architectural features that pressed back at the void outside. Even the more modest versions were marketed as yuppie citadels: hermetically sealed lifestyle centres with psychological heli-pads attached.



In the end, however, there is something unsatisfactory about the way in which the idea of 'the gentrifier' has come to be used in these parts. Far from illuminating the transformations that were underway in areas of East London, it went into circulation as an insult. Indeed, if the eighties brought new kinds of private development East London, they also brought a succession of contemptuous epithets that came to stand in for the categories of reasoned social observation. 'Gentrifiers' gave way to 'drabbies' or 'mockneys' during the Ken Livingstone years, and when the market took off again the talk was suddenly all about 'yuppies'.

It was the protesting punk anarchists of Class War who demonstrated the inadequacy of this latter term. One only had to read the letters page of the *Hackney Gazette* to suspect that their 'Mug a Yuppie' campaign was actually about redirecting indigenous racism around a somewhat loftier goal than Paki-bashing. But the 'yuppies' of this area turned out to be a disappointing crew too. When Class War set out to leaflet the homes of 'Rich Scum' they managed, as Julie Burchill pointed out in a withering riposte, to find the door of a young actress from 'East Enders', who had just managed to buy a two-bedroomed flat in the borough where she had been born.

The same point emerges from East London's so-called yuppie citadels: these may well house a few young bankers, accountants and entrepreneurs who seem to conform to the stereotype, but the briefest visit will reveal a racially mixed group of people who certainly do not: teachers, single women who appreciate the idea of security, social workers, people with clerical jobs . . . The residents' association at the Bow Quarter is chaired by a working class Australian, who moved into that exotic development after twelve years in a hard to let flat on the Isle of Dogs. He's doing better than he was, but not nearly so well as the journalists who came down to taunt the 'yuppies' who stood to 'lose their shirts' when the initial developer of this former match factory went bust in 1989. On this point we can agree with Islington estate agent Diana Matthews, who remarks that the social basis of home ownership has been greatly widened 'under Thatcher'. The 'gentry' are no longer who they were.

The urban geographers also have their doubts. It has been suggested that gentrification is a 'chaotic' concept, which reduces a complicated cultural process to a single economic dynamic. Since Neil Smith posited the 'rent gap', others have wanted to stress the new, often non-familial forms of household that have emerged in inner city areas, the increased number of women in higher paid jobs, the movement of ethnic minorities into homeownership, and the legitimacy of conservationist activity.

David Harvey, Professor of Geography at Oxford University, suggests that the term 'gentrification' should probably only be applied to the brutal kind of scenario that can be found around Tompkin Square Park on Manhattan's Lower East Side, where the displacement of poor residents has been deliberate and often violent, with developers using arson, vandalism, and other coercive means to get residents out of their rent-controlled homes. It can't really be applied to refurbishment of derelict industrial space, and he would hardly be inclined to apply it to MIRAS victims in Hackney either.

Neil Smith concedes that he may well have been too reductive in his first accounts of gentrification, but he remains suspicious of a recent psychoanalytic tendency to rehabilitate the gentrifying pioneer as 'a postmodern folk hero struggling to express his fragmented self in a cruel world.'



He agrees that it is indeed 'chaotic' to apply the word 'gentrifier' to middle-class homeowners, thereby 'personalising' a process that can only be adequately understood with reference to the institutional interests of banks and estate agents. He is also dismissive of the recent talk about 'degentrification' in New York, remarking that he has seen nothing to convince him that this reversal is anything more than an impressionistic fantasy. The gentrification of both Harlem and the Lower East Side in New York has certainly come to a halt recently, but the economic conditions remain for the process to resume as soon as the current depression lifts. Indeed, he suggests that to talk about the end of gentrification now would probably be as foolhardy as 'talking about the end of suburbanisation in 1933'.

Meanwhile, there have been some changes at Dalston Junction in the eighteen months since I took the area as a prism through which to appraise the Thatcher years. The time-warped Town Guide Cabinet is still there with its map of Hackney as it was in the sixties, but the spectres of Sir Alfred Sherman and Lord Keith Joseph no longer hover around it, haranguing passersby about the abysmalness of their own condition.

Together with its private sector partners, Hackney council has just submitted a thoroughly impressive bid for City Challenge funding. The proposal envisages extensive refurbishment and redevelopment throughout the 'Dalston City Corridor', hoping to attract as much as £200 million investment into the area. If the proposed new manager of Dalston Town Centre can be restrained from bringing it up to date, the Town Guide Cabinet will form the perfect starting point for the heritage trails that are also planned for the area. As for gentrification, perhaps Neil Smith is right and the serious boom is really still to come. Bottles of Sol all round.

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