

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Kirsteen Paton, *Gentrification: A Working-Class Perspective*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014.

ISBN: 9781472418500 (cloth); ISBN: 9781472418517 (ebook)

As the author clearly intended, this book provides a refreshing and welcome perspective on gentrification from the voices of people intrinsic to the process and only too rarely heard. Firmly reinserting the politics of class into her analysis, Kirsteen Paton's thesis is that the lower-income incumbents in gentrifying areas may not identify as working class (a phenomenon which she argues is class-based in itself) and may indeed support the idea of gentrification as a process in which they can participate but, as a consequence of their economic position, are eventually done over by, as they are unable to maintain attachment (or fixity) to the places with which they do identify.

Paton employs Jock Young's (2007) concept of "bulimic society" to express the paradox of working class residents being simultaneously included and excluded: on the one hand, keen and encouraged to participate in "consumer citizenship" and neoliberal urbanisation through gentrification in Glasgow; and on the other, as they do not actually have the financial means to do so, finding themselves socially and culturally, if not physically, displaced. Alongside this analysis is a strand that argues that such residents can however "negotiate gentrification as consumer citizens for their own gains" which "testifies to the power of working-class agency" (p.10). The tension between these two arguments is resolved in the concluding analysis which positions (financial) control as the ultimate class indicator. Many of Paton's interviewees express their general lack of control as "private issues", producing the clincher to her thesis: that "the relationship between personal troubles and public issues in a contemporary working-class post-industrial neighbourhood" (p.11) is profoundly classed, and worthy of further urban sociological research.

This is fabulous stuff: subtle and nuanced, and an important contribution to the gentrification literature. On the strength of this analysis, Paton proposes a "new theory" of

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

gentrification as a regeneration/restructuring of people—not in the Andres Duany sense of “the rising tide that lifts all boats...improv[ing] the quality of life for all of a community’s residents” (2001: 37), but through creating a “wider ethic of consumption and a way of life that supports the relations of accumulation” (p.41)—without adding to the resources that enable those subjects to meaningfully participate in that restructuring and exercise control over where they will eventually live. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony is invoked, not completely successfully, to argue that the coercive element of the threat (and, indeed, reality) of displacement ensures their consent.

I’m not entirely convinced by the Gramscian employment of coercion and consent in facilitating the local hegemony; there are plenty of other factors that could explain the general lack of resistance to gentrification in Partick, Glasgow, in the first decade of the 21st century. There is an uncomfortable sense of false consciousness in the analysis, which I found surprising given the extraordinary levels of honesty and self-awareness displayed by so many of Paton’s interviewees. It must be said that the really great strength of this book is in the accounts of the individuals and their connections to place, which is clearly attributable to Paton’s exceptional interviewing style. She conveys delightful personal relationships with her research participants, who speak with disarming frankness and humour about their personal and housing situations and their aspirations and choices, so the characterisation of some of these choices as barely any choice at all is a bit jarring. A key conclusion—that Paton’s working class interviewees are “coerced through the fear that they will be Othered if they oppose what is presented to them as a positive change. Opposing these processes is deemed a deviant or illegitimate ‘choice’” (p.195)—is only one of many interpretations that can be drawn from her complex and nuanced findings.

The book is based on a PhD thesis and the theoretical packaging for the rich qualitative data is a bit dated and, well, PhD-ish. The quality of writing is variable. In the findings chapters it leaps off the page in laugh-out-loud words from the participants, perfectly

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

situated and contextualised by Paton. All ethnographic research should be this intimate and sympathetic. The theory chapters are a bit of a plod, though, and there is too much emphasis on restructuring—of theory, of class identity. This is proper for a PhD; it needed more work to be converted to a successful book. As is common in so many PhDs, too, there is a tendency for overreach—I don't think we need a new or expanded typology for displacement as proposed by Paton (and Marcuse's types, while acknowledged, are not given sufficient attention) and the “new theory” of gentrification is probably less a new theory than a novel and welcome time and place-specific analysis.

But I blame the publisher for this—the sausage-factory approach to publishing PhDs does many of their authors a great disservice. A bit more care and some editorial assistance would have produced a significantly thinned-down and refined review of the key theories and literatures, a boosting of the interview and findings sections with photos and other images (I love the cover photo), a conclusion more engaged with the opening, and corrections of typos along the way. This would have made what is currently a good book a great book, and a substantial reduction in price and a print-run in paperback would, I have no doubt, more than recouped its costs.

It really is a shame that the book is not more accessible, as this would (perhaps) enable resolution of my lingering doubts about how the participants themselves would respond to Paton's analysis of what they have gained and what they've lost. With too much theory to wade through, not enough pictures, and at 60 quid, we're unlikely to find out.

References

Duany A (2001) Three cheers for “gentrification”. *The American Enterprise* April/May:36-39

Young J (2007) *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*. London: Sage

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Kate Shaw

Geography

University of Melbourne

kates@unimelb.edu.au

June 2015