Gentrification as a driver of social and racial tensions: the case of Brixton

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(In)famous for the various riots that have occurred there since the 1980s, the working-class district of Brixton in south London has recently seen an influx of middle-class residents who prize the area for its diversity and tranquillity. However, as Amélie Bertholet shows, this trend does not mean the end of the area's troubles.

Brixton, a neighbourhood in the inner-London borough of Lambeth,[1] has been marked by a strong Jamaican presence since the end of the Second World War.[2] This "[ethnic] community area"[3] (Guillon and Taboada-Leonetti 1986) has long been the textbook example of a "relatively autonomous social space (...) based on the existence of an ethnic-community infrastructure (...) and dense networks of relationships" and was generally regarded as a neighbourhood resistant to all forms of gentrification (Haumont 1998). However, the socio-economic profile of the population has been changing over the last decade, with an influx of young, mainly white, populations in managerial occupations, attracted by good public transport links (notably the Northern Line of the London Underground) and property prices that are still significantly lower than those of central areas or more sought-after neighbouring districts.[4] This (until recently) relatively homogeneous working-class area now seems to be becoming more divided. New populations are introducing new lifestyles and consumption habits to the area (Knox 1991) that are gradually generating both symbolic and spatial fractures. The process of social and symbolic re-evaluation of the neighbourhood seems to benefit the newly established social group to a greater extent, despite the fact that they are in the minority in Brixton numerically, and appears to marginalise the existing residents of Jamaican heritage.

How the area has changed

Although it is difficult to say precisely when this gentrification process started, certain events are indicative of the phenomenon. Long-time residents told us that newcomers bought homes at very low prices (especially after the 1991 riots) and, as a result, helped to mitigate the poor reputation of the district. During the 1990s, new businesses also set up in the area – a process that intensified in the late 2000s. Most notably, an old and almost abandoned covered market, Granville Arcade – renamed Brixton Village (Figure 1) in 2010 – has been rehabilitated by civic-ideas agency Spacemakers (http://spacemakers.org.uk), who sought from the outset to radically transform the

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[1] The London borough of Lambeth extends from the South Bank and Waterloo in the north to Streatham and West Norwood in the south, via Vauxhall, Kennington, Stockwell, Clapham, Brixton – the geographical and administrative centre of the borough – and Tulse Hill.

[2] The analyses presented here are taken from a first-year master's dissertation (Bertholet 2012).

[3] Translator's note: the words used in the original French are "*quartier communautaire*" (literally "community-based neighbourhood"), where "*communautaire*" implies ethnic communities.

[4] The online business magazine *LondonLovesBusiness* reported that property prices in the area, which rose sharply in 2012, are still 5–10% lower than in neighbouring well-heeled Clapham (Hobson 2012). See: http://www.londonlovesbusiness.com/property/where-to-buy-property-in-london/postcode-en-vogue-is-brixton-property-worth-investment/1815.article.

image of the arcade by organising "pop-up" cultural events. With the arrival of restaurants, a vintage clothing store and shops aimed at higher-end customers, Brixton Village has very quickly become a fashionable destination within London.

Figure 1. Brixton Village

Brixton Village is home to numerous restaurants and shops aimed at the area's gentrified population. © Amélie Bertholet, April 2012.

Today, there are a still many examples of socio-spatial segregation in Brixton. For instance, cheap and cheerful shops primarily serving the Jamaican community, which sometimes close because of rising rents for commercial premises and the effects of the financial crisis, now find themselves cheek by jowl with chic boutiques and relatively expensive franchises, although these are still in a minority; the Underground seems to be the preserve of an elite (Figure 2), while the poorest take the bus, as it is cheaper; and a strict compartmentalisation of housing stock reinforces micro-local differences: upmarket streets stand out more and more from the large social-housing estates on the edges of Brixton, which are often in a poor state of repair. Sometimes, differences are apparent at even finer levels, e.g. within the same staircase.

Figure 2. Brixton underground station (Northern Line) on a weekday at 8 a.m.
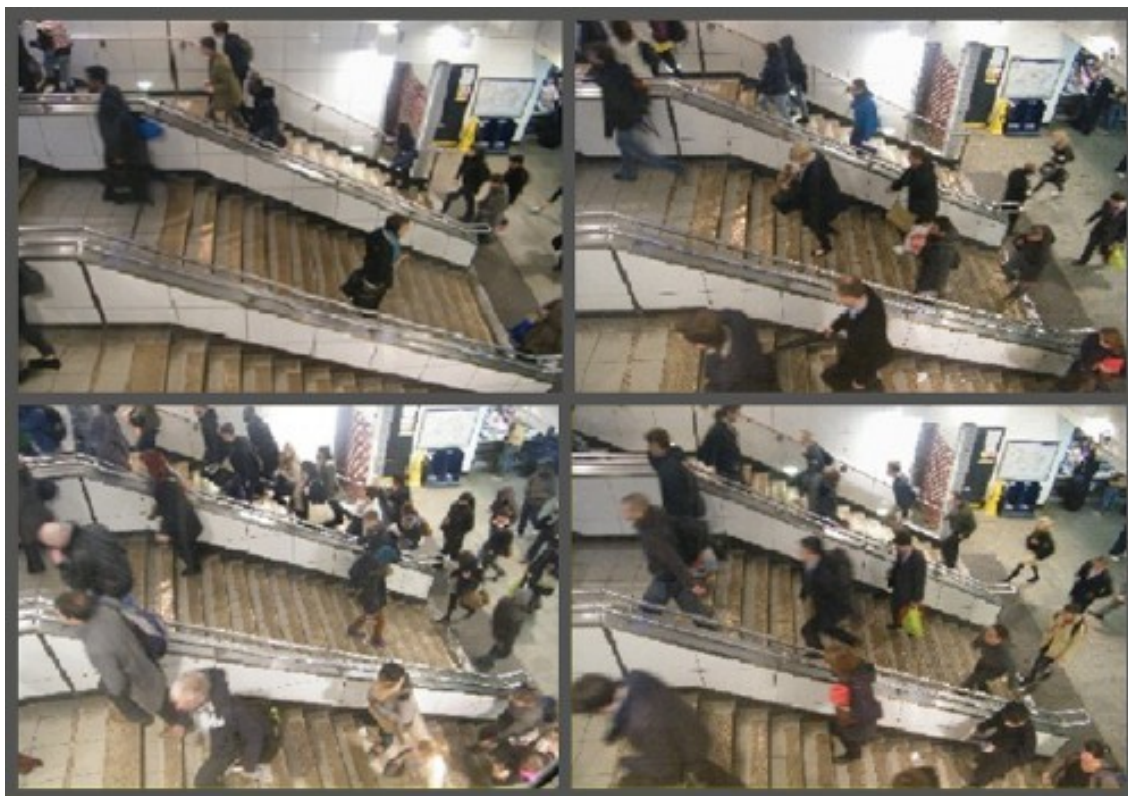
The Tube is used almost exclusively by residents from higher social classes on their way to work.
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The urban regeneration policies and development projects for run-down spaces in the area conducted by the Greater London Authority and Lambeth borough council have had a profound impact in terms of fostering gentrification. In its literature, Lambeth council[5] – citing public interest – insist on the need to make the neighbourhood safer and on the inevitable improvement of the area: euphemistic language that often masks an institutional and economic appropriation of the gentrification process (Smith 2003).

The work recently carried out in Windrush Square[6] is a case in point in this respect. This project brought together two existing green spaces in the centre of Brixton that were hang-outs for "perpetrators of antisocial behaviour" according to the borough council website. Both parts of the renovated gardens are now more open and more closely monitored by CCTV surveillance, and are spaces that attract families from the gentrified population. Cultural events such as artistic performances organised by the local council have no doubt contributed to the appropriation of the public space by the district's newcomers.

However, the case of Brixton is unusual at a London-wide level: it does not conform to the definition of gentrification as introduced by Ruth Glass (1963). This is probably because there is no single model of gentrification in inner-city London: each gentrified district has its own specific populations, values and territorial practices (Butler and Robson 2003). Thus, unlike the Barnsbury area of north London, for example, young gentrifiers in Brixton are not "yuppies" who work in the banks and offices of the City; they are people who actively seek and pursue an alternative lifestyle, in opposition to the consumerist habits that they attribute to their parents, and seem motivated by a desire to participate in the dynamism of this working-class neighbourhood. The new inhabitants also appreciate Brixton for the relative tranquillity of its residential streets: their "quiet" and

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[5] http://www.lambeth.gov.uk/Services/AboutLambeth/LambethByLocalArea/Brixton/BrixtonPlaces.htm.
[6] http://www.lambeth.gov.uk/Services/Environment/Regeneration/FutureLambeth/BrixtonCentralSquareProject.htm.

"residential" character seems to enable them to reconcile a dense neighbourhood life with the ability to get away from the hustle and bustle of the main roads. In this way, Brixton would seem to facilitate a certain personal fulfilment that is not inconsistent with the lively and multicultural nature of the neighbourhood (Butler and Robson 2003).

The fact that Brixton is now an area prized for its peace and quiet by the well-off middle classes is somewhat surprising, as the very idea would have been inconceivable a few years ago. For a long time, the neighbourhood has suffered from a poor reputation, owing to the violent riots of 1981 and 1995 or drug-related gang violence. Today, the area's shady image seems to be fading. Brixton, now an attractive prospect for new populations, has become "respectable". But what is the real situation regarding the violence that governs relationships between certain individuals? What are the power relations in this space where ethnic and social diversity is fragile? To answer these questions, we must consider representations regarding safety among different residents of the area.

Conflicting perceptions of safety

At first glance, levels of violence seem to have fallen with the arrival of new populations and the introduction of a certain socio-demographic and ethnic diversity into the area. This Jamaican enclave, considered a no-go area to be avoided at all costs 10 or 15 years ago, is now a trendy destination where bars and clubs attract revellers from all over London. However, beyond the image, is this perceived pacification real?

Legitimate doubts can be raised on this score. Indeed, the borough crime figures for Lambeth show that violence is still very much present in the area.[7] The large numbers of burglaries, car thefts, armed robberies and assaults is reflected by the near-constant noise of police sirens in the area. Drug dealing is visible on the street, as can be observed at the Tube station exit. Official figures from the Metropolitan Police are also enlightening: although the borough of Lambeth as a whole has a crime rate comparable to the London average, Brixton is still classified as an area with high to very high crime rates. Nearly a quarter of crimes in Lambeth occur in Brixton, although it is home to only 12% of the total population of the borough (Figure 3).

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[7] *Crime Mapping text view: total notifiable offences*, available on the Metropolitan Police Service website (http://maps.met.police.uk/access.php?area=00AYGA&sort=rate).

Figure 3. Brixton: an area that still suffers from high crime rates
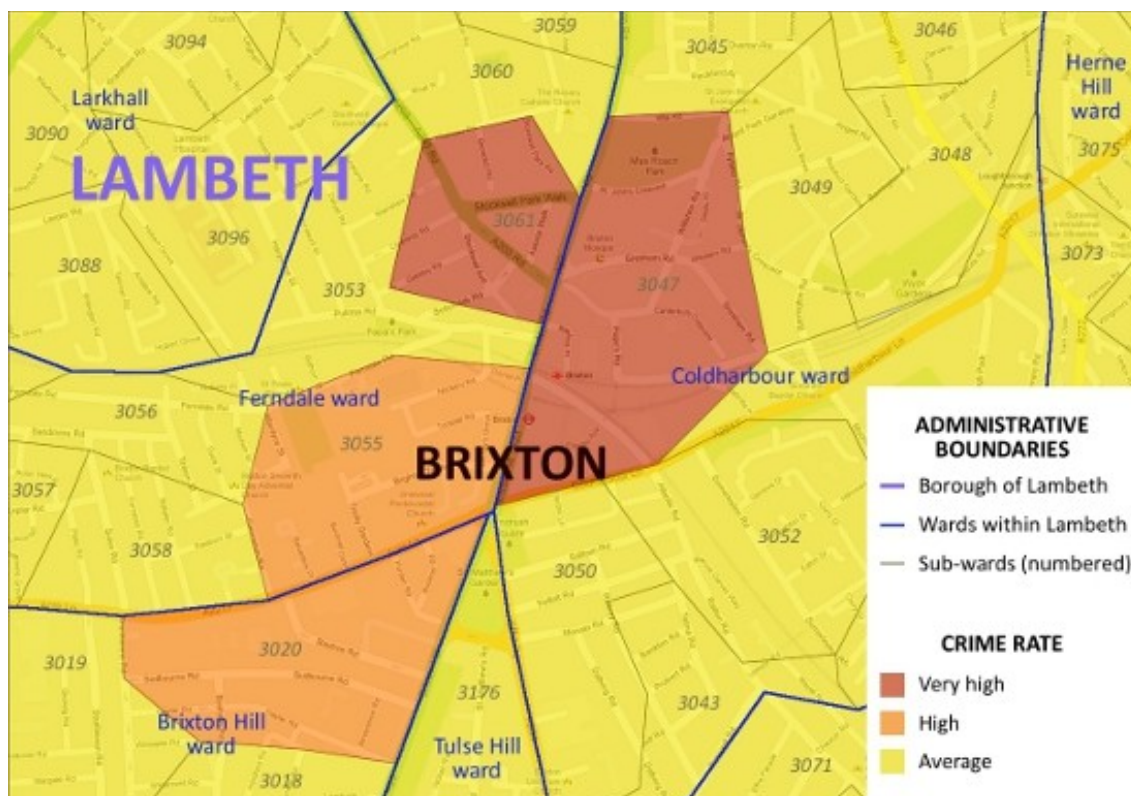
© Amélie Bertholet, 2012, based on cartography from the *Metropolitan Police Crime Mapping* website (http://maps.met.police.uk).

However, according to the new arrivals to the area, Brixton has become a pleasant place to live. People settle there out of choice, not obligation. Newcomers evoke a real sense of urban well-being, which generates sometimes paradoxical statements: Sarah, a young woman working in the medical sector, says she feels "safer in Brixton than elsewhere", but then mentions that a child was injured by a stray bullet in her street. This feeling of security is shared by many new residents; their main concern relating to the safety of the neighbourhood is in fact that they might *accidentally* be involved in a conflict that has nothing to do with them.

Residents' opinions on the subject of the riots of summer 2011 are illuminating. Two opposing discourses emerge, depending on the social situation of the interviewee, revealing different perceptions of local violence. For example, there is a relative consensus among individuals from the gentrified population: the riots are described as not representative of a district that has become "safe". This goes hand in hand with a systematic minimisation of the violent nature of the events: some point out that there was less rioting in Brixton than elsewhere or say they saw nothing and were not directly exposed to the events in question. They are also described as being devoid of any political motivation. Olivier, a French businessman who has lived in the neighbourhood for 22 years, shares this view: "These riots, in contrast to those of 1995 or 1980, were not political. There was something of a 'bank holiday' feel about it – everyone gets to have a laugh, break things, and pick up a new iPhone in the process".

These representations contrast with those of poorer people and people more closely concerned by the events in question. In the Jamaican community in particular, there was a desire to explain why these riots occurred, against the backdrop of the day-to-day difficulties encountered by the majority of local residents. The riots disproportionately affected the poor, and so were perceived as more traumatic by these populations. For instance, Patricia, a Jamaican single mother aged 40 who has lived in Brixton since childhood, offered the following explanation: "It wasn't just to nick stuff; there was something else behind it, perhaps a kind of appeal against the frustrations of people's

everyday lives (...). I was there during the riots in the 1980s. I was much more scared during the riots this year! It seemed very aggressive this time round. And it was during the summer holidays – my son goes out more at this time of year, and I was afraid he might become involved in some way...".

Jamaican culture: a symbolic resource for new arrivals

While the gentrifiers seem to deny the social realities of the poor to a certain extent, they nonetheless value the coexistence of different cultures in the area. This is probably because this diversity does not call into question forms of social separation. The omnipresence of Jamaican culture in Brixton is indeed in no way synonymous with inter-class and interethnic relations, but it does bring a certain added value to the public space and the representation that gentrifiers have of their own environment.

The work of Sylvie Tissot (2011) on the South End neighbourhood of Boston revealed the paradoxes of these socially progressive elites that find a very real prestige in their proximity to the working classes. Diversity, far from being synonymous with a loss of social capital, reflects the renewal of the urban elites' distinction strategies. But this transformation of socio-spatial segregation is allowed only because this new proximity remains organised by the gentrifiers. This is the case in Brixton, where we might note in particular the strong involvement of the elites in neighbourhood life and in local clubs and associations, such as those based at the new sports centre. It is also interesting to note that the local branches of the main political parties are constantly looking for – and struggling to find – candidates who are black or from the Jamaican community.

As in the case of the South End of Boston, the interference of the upper social strata in the management and control of public spaces involves in particular a policy of "good neighbourliness" and avoidance of conflict. The appreciation of black and Jamaican culture in Brixton seems to be a way of organising social and ethnic proximity: promoting a flattering image of "the Other" becomes a way of taming this figure of otherness with whom they rub shoulders but whom they do not really know. The opening of the Black Cultural Archives in the area is contemporary with the phenomenon of gentrification, as if the presence of gentrifiers had led to an "ennoblement" of Jamaican culture, now transformed into institutionalised heritage.

In this way, gentrifiers appear to be "good neighbours": they appreciate and praise social and ethnic cohabitation. While violence is a reality for the poorest in the area, as in the case of the riots, this does not affect newcomers' sense of security. Denying this violence, though very much present in the neighbourhood, seems akin to an indirect strategy of distancing difficult social realities from these changing spaces. One might then wonder whether glossing over this violence by encouraging the creation of a myth of harmonious social diversity does not in fact play a key role in increasing social fractures: by masking the violence of others, are the gentrifiers not simply ignoring the reality of the situation? And, by extension, is ignoring other populations not simply a means of asserting their own social superiority?

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