

## Gentrification in Paris: the elite versus the people?

Colin Giraud

**Reviewed:** Anne Clerval, *Paris sans le peuple. La gentrification de la capitale*, Paris: La Découverte, 2013, 256 pages.

*Anne Clerval's latest work on the gentrification of Paris, published in September 2013, caused something of a sensation in the French media. Using a Marxist interpretation of urban change, it decries widespread gentrification that appears to have gradually excluded the working classes from the French capital over the last 40 years. Here, Colin Giraud underlines the undeniable contributions made by this work, as well as its limitations and imperfections.*

With municipal elections in France now less than two months away, the publication of *Paris sans le peuple* (literally “Paris Without the People”) offers a wide-ranging summary of decades of socio-economic, cultural and political change in Paris. Anne Clerval’s book, based on her PhD thesis in geography, calls into question “the gentrification of the [French] capital” by taking as her starting point an extensive statistical analysis of the whole of Paris *intra-muros*,<sup>1</sup> combined with more qualitative investigations in three neighbourhoods of the (historically, broadly working-class) north and east of Paris. As its title suggests, this book examines the factors and processes involved in the “eviction” of the working classes from Paris by reminding the reader, somewhat forcefully at times, exactly what gentrification is: an urban change that is socially situated and which is driven by certain affluent social categories, to the detriment of less well-off categories. Anne Clerval’s work considers gentrification from several different angles: not just historical and geographical, but also social and political.

### Time and space: gentrification as a socio-spatial conquest

The first part of this work situates gentrification within the context of a more general process of *embourgeoisement* (or “enrichment”) in Paris that has been taking place over the last two centuries. The first two chapters emphasise the legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the industrialisation, urbanisation and political struggles that play out in the French capital formed the backdrop for a “general increase in wealth” of the Parisian population. Although “the *embourgeoisement* of Paris has [...] its roots in Haussmann’s transformation of the city” (p. 30), it has, since the 1960s, taken the specific form of gentrification, extending to traditionally working-class parts of the city. The deindustrialisation and metropolisation of Paris are to a large extent responsible for this, leading to a decline in the number of manual jobs and an increase in the numbers of executives and service-sector professionals within the city’s populace. Chapter 3, however, shows that the public policies implemented in France up to the 1990s have had more diverse effects in Paris than those observed

<sup>1</sup> The city of Paris proper (i.e. the area within the city council boundaries) is referred to in French as “*Paris intra-muros*” as it corresponds more or less to the area contained within the old fortification walls (now replaced by the Périphérique ring road). Paris *intra-muros* covers just a small area – 105 km<sup>2</sup> for a population of 2.25 million – at the heart of the wider metropolitan area, which spans some 17,175 km<sup>2</sup> for a population of 12.2 million.

in the US, where the “return to the city” of the most affluent appears to have more clearly benefited from support in the form of urban policy.

The second part of the book studies the spatial distribution of gentrification over the last 40 years so. Based on census data and the analysis of this data at the level of IRIS neighbourhoods,<sup>2</sup> Anne Clerval’s statistical work highlights the uneven distribution and magnitude of gentrification in time and space. It also shows that these processes contribute to the reconfiguration of working-class spaces within the Paris region as a whole, and in particular to the “growing heterogeneity of social profiles at infra-municipal level” (p. 89) in areas such as Seine-Saint-Denis.<sup>3</sup> Chapter 5 aims to explain “how a neighbourhood becomes gentrified”: by asserting that “each time, the scenario is the same” (p. 107), Anne Clerval clearly subscribes to Neil Smith’s canonical model of gentrification. Here, the successive steps of the process are described, including the different players involved: artists, households looking to buy property, shopkeepers and real-estate professionals. However, the author points out that this classic model appears to be more complex in the case of Parisian gentrification: the pioneering role of artists is debatable, and changes in residential and retail occupation prove to be less interconnected than in North American cities; city- and neighbourhood-specific contexts have an impact on this standard model. Chapter 6 heralds a shift in scale and looks to model what is presented as a “conquest” of the north and east of Paris, including its historic phases, “pioneer frontiers” and relative obstacles. Anne Clerval emphasises the role of changing leisure centralities in the advancement of gentrification. Conversely, the process would appear to be slowed down, or even occasionally brought to a halt, by spaces of immigrant centrality (Chabrol 2012).

### **Social transformations and public policy**

The third part of the book examines the social transformations linked to the gentrification process, especially in the north and east of Paris, based on localised observations and a series of interviews. The social groups contributing to gentrification appear to be more heterogeneous than the label “intellectual petit bourgeois” would suggest in the first chapters. In entering the buildings and dwellings they inhabit, and by studying in detail their lifestyles and their “new urban habitus” (p. 155), Anne Clerval seeks to demonstrate what sets these particular city-dwellers apart, and their relationships to housing, to their neighbourhood and to the Parisian space as a whole. The book suggests – although this is not sufficiently clearly asserted – that their situation is ambiguous within the social space and the Parisian space alike: they are difficult to categorise and label – not really bourgeois, but not really proletarian either – and they make use of different and often contradictory socio-cultural registers in order to construct a social position, or even a collective identity, for themselves. Gentrification cannot therefore be reduced to the mere relocation of capital to the central areas of cities; gentrification also enables those involved to “simultaneously form a group and differentiate themselves from others” (p. 170).

The arrival of these gentrifiers in areas formerly the preserve of Parisian working-class categories has resulted in calls for public action. From this standpoint, Chapter 8 gives a very mixed opinion of measures taken by the city council with regard to housing since 2001: the objectives in terms of “social diversity”, as vague as they were ambitious, are far from having been achieved; the creation of new social housing has not been sufficient either to meet needs or to compensate for the number of dwellings demolished. Above all, efforts have been concentrated on intermediate housing, which has tended to benefit the lower middle classes more than the working classes. Similarly, the policy of “promoting the city in all its forms” (p. 183) appears to have encouraged gentrification by

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<sup>2</sup> IRIS neighbourhoods (IRIS stands for *îlots regroupés pour l’information statistique*, literally “grouped blocks for statistical information”) are the smallest geographical divisions of towns and cities used by INSEE – the French national statistics office – for published data. An IRIS neighbourhood contains around 2,000 inhabitants on average.

<sup>3</sup> Seine-Saint-Denis, one of the three *départements* (county-level administrative areas) that surround the city of Paris, covers the city’s north-eastern inner suburbs, including some of the poorest towns in the Paris region.

supporting the creation of cultural venues that are appreciated and used above all by the middle and upper classes.

The final chapter examines the effects of gentrification on working-class populations, who appear to have been pushed out of north-eastern Paris. The heterogeneity of these working-class residents would seem to explain their highly variable reactions. Certain respondents do not see gentrification as a bad thing and, on the contrary, view it as having enhanced their neighbourhood, and even their own identity. This heterogeneity would also seem to explain the lack of mobilisation and collective action in resistance to gentrification in Paris compared to other world cities. It does not, however, preclude other forms of resistance: indeed, it is from this angle that Anne Clerval analyses the occupation of the street, of certain bars and cafés, and of public spaces at different times of day.

*Paris sans le peuple*, with its powerful empirical armoury, is an important work in terms of the light it sheds on gentrification in Paris, offering a new opportunity to deconstruct the shibboleth that is social diversity and underline the spatial dimensions of social inequalities. But this work also raises a number of questions with regard to its analysis of gentrification.

### Is gentrification everywhere?

The first domain in which the book proves to be somewhat ambiguous relates to the model used for the spatial distribution of gentrification (Chapters 4 and 6). On the one hand, it asserts that “different phases of gentrification cannot [...] be seen as a strict model with well-defined steps, because, as the process advances through the urban space, its mechanisms change” (p. 119); on the other, it emphasises “the great coherence of the gentrification process in Paris, which advances in a largely continuous fashion through the urban space” (p. 130). Above all, it uses the term “gentrification” very extensively. In Chapter 6, the cartographic work tends, in particular, to support the idea of a “widespread invasion” originating from a “polarising centre” – comprising “the affluent districts of the west of Paris” – and spreading to the north-east of the city (p. 113). The term “gentrification” thus includes, within one single, long-term movement, “demolition and new-build construction in the 15<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*”,<sup>4</sup> the “renovation of old working-class housing in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> *arrondissements*”,<sup>5</sup> and the “renovation of Le Marais”,<sup>6</sup> as well as more recent and diverse processes such as the brand-new buildings of the Paris Rive Gauche development (in the 13<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*)<sup>7</sup> or more isolated renovation projects in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> *arrondissements*<sup>8</sup> (pp. 116–117). The drawback of this wide-ranging use of a single term is that it covers urban configurations and sociological contexts that are so different that one cannot help but wonder whether it prevents the identification and understanding of other mechanisms of urban change.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* (city district), in the south-west of Paris, covers the generally affluent areas of Vaugirard, Grenelle, Beaugrenelle, Javel and Dupleix (just south of the Eiffel Tower), as well as part of Montparnasse.

<sup>5</sup> The 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> *arrondissements* – now two of the richest areas of Paris – form the most central part of the Left Bank, including the Latin Quarter (5<sup>th</sup>) and Odéon, Saint-Germain-des-Prés and the northern part of Montparnasse (6<sup>th</sup>).

<sup>6</sup> Le Marais (in the central 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> *arrondissements*) was an aristocratic district until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, when it fell out of favour – and into decline. Since the 1970s, it has once again become a fashionable and sought-after area.

<sup>7</sup> Paris Rive Gauche is a new district bordering the Seine and centred on the Bibliothèque François Mitterrand (the main site of the French national library since 1996). The 13<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, in the south-east of Paris, also includes neighbourhoods such as La Butte aux Cailles, Les Gobelins, Austerlitz and the city’s largest Chinatown.

<sup>8</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, in the north of Paris, covers the generally well-off districts of Montmartre and Clignancourt, and the less well-off districts of La Goutte d’Or and La Chapelle. The 20<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, in the east, covers the southern half of Belleville as well as Ménilmontant, Saint-Fargeau, Gambetta and Charonne. Historically working-class, the 20<sup>th</sup> is becoming increasingly affluent in parts (e.g. upper Belleville/Ménilmontant, Gambetta).

<sup>9</sup> This converges with well-documented criticisms levelled at uses of the concept of gentrification (Bourdin 2008).

## **A simplistic vision of social relationships**

Furthermore, although gentrification “reflects the dynamics of class relationships in the urban space” (p. 10), the analysis of these relationships here raises questions. Following on from the work of Neil Smith, Anne Clerval on numerous occasions uses Marxist vocabulary, in a highly orthodox and binary version that portrays gentrification as a form of exploitation of the working classes by the dominant classes. The author clearly assimilates gentrifiers to a mobilised class that is close to the media, to power, and to an abstract concept of “capital”, reminiscent of the capitalist bourgeoisie of the Second Empire. And yet, at the same time, the book abandons the model of the “revanchist city” (Smith 1996) in the case of Paris and suggests that its gentrifiers<sup>10</sup> are more difficult to situate in the social space than for other cities: their social origins, their backgrounds and their lifestyles exhibit significant sociological variations. Categorically placing all these gentrifiers in the highest socio-professional groups is not self-evident: the fact that they have an income higher than the median for the Paris urban area (p. 143) is not enough to prove their “participation in the exploitation of the working classes” (p. 41).

Similarly, although the diametrical opposition between gentrifiers and the working-class population is assimilated to the opposition that structures the relationships “between bourgeois and proletarians”, it transpires, as we progress through the book, that these “class relationships” are in fact more complex (Chapters 7 and 9). Although they clearly reveal forms of domination, they are of varying intensity and are not restricted to opposition between rich and poor. Other works have shown the often more euphemised, more subtle and less unilateral nature of domination relationships in the urban space, particularly in gentrified contexts. Moreover, class belonging is not the only element that plays a role in these social relationships: age, cultural background and gender are all important determining factors in the construction of social relationships. The “people” of Paris do not, therefore, constitute a single homogeneous category, and neither do gentrifiers. Describing their social relationships in terms of the opposition “between bourgeois and proletarians” (p. 234), while radical, is also overly simplistic.

## **The question of gentrifiers’ intentions**

Finally, the book also emphasises the role in Parisian gentrification of certain types of strategic behaviour implemented by rationalistic individuals and groups with deliberate intentions. This theory is applied not just to property developers, but also to certain shopkeepers, who apparently “often deliberately aim to transform a working-class neighbourhood” (p. 107), certain new residents, and certain elected officials. Here, we once again see the similarity with Neil Smith’s approach, which considers gentrification to be the result of the perfectly rational – and even conscious and coordinated – behaviour of a multitude of parties driven, in a relatively abstract way, by rationales based on the spatial location of capital. This intention-based interpretation of gentrification processes is often suggested but rarely explored in detail. The fact that a resident uses the word “strategy” in an interview is not enough to establish the rationalistic nature of their choices or the amount of information at their disposal, let alone their level of awareness of the cumulative future effects of their individual behaviour when replicated by other residents (p. 103). The analysis of the backgrounds and representations of these new residents demonstrates the effects of socio-cultural parameters based in the past (a desire for mixed neighbourhoods, social diversity, authenticity) much more than the effects of rational calculations based solely on financial gain, to the detriment of others.

Similarly, does the fact that a political measure failed to achieve the intended results necessarily mean that it was precisely the opposite effect that was in reality sought by elected officials favourable to income generation from property ownership? A great deal of research in the social

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<sup>10</sup> Anne Clerval considers that only those households belonging to the “intellectual petite bourgeoisie” who own and renovate their own homes are gentrifiers.

sciences has shown that the collective effects of an accumulation of individual behaviours that are not necessarily coordinated in any way rarely enable the deduction of initial motives or the “intentions” of each behaviour considered in isolation; the same applies to gentrification processes (Launay 2011). On these different points, the analysis undertaken by Anne Clerval tends, almost systematically, to create an opposition between the working-class Parisian “people” and the cultural, political and economic elites who are apparently consciously mobilised in some sort of joint effort to eradicate the working classes. And yet the paradoxical thing about gentrification is that it is often based on various forms of appreciation of, and/or affinity with, the working classes. Admittedly, this has the perverse effect of contributing to their disappearance, but, nevertheless, we cannot establish the intentional and deliberate nature of gentrifiers’ actions.

This book, ambitious in its approach, offers a “global” vision of gentrification that provides readers with an impressive amount of information and enables them to learn a lot about the transformations that have affected Paris over the last four decades. This “global” process is not, however, in any way a mechanism: it has variations and limits; it is the result of a number of factors; and it can rarely be reduced to a binary opposition between an all-conquering elite and a downtrodden populace.

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