

Book Review: Matthias Bernt (2022) *The Commodification Gap: Gentrification and Public Policy in London, Berlin and St Petersburg* (Wiley/IJURR-SUSC series).

***Generating new concepts in global urban studies: Thinking through (and beyond?)
gentrification***

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Abstract: Matthias Bernt's book, *The Commodification Gap*, is a landmark in the now very long history of gentrification studies and has something new and distinctive to say in this crowded field. It is also much more than just another book on gentrification as it provides a thoughtful and rigorously developed example of how urban studies might approach building insights and stretching concepts through attending to the variety of experiences across the globe. For those who are eager for an inventive and generative phase of conceptualisation in global urban studies, the one disappointment is that we start and end within the frame of a very well-worn concept, even if, following Bernt, this can be seen as a "multiplicity" of many types of gentrification. To move beyond this concept, to give up on the privileged theoretical object, "gentrification", would need a different methodological and theoretical approach than Bernt adopts. Bernt moves us definitively in that direction by acknowledging that gentrification is a concept or abstraction, not a circulating phenomenon or an obvious or pre-given object as such. In this sense we might be drawn to reassign the empirical observations to alternative concepts, abandoning this term and thinking of others. Nonetheless, as urban studies moves forward with methodological experimentation in support of more global analyses, this book provides much food for thought, and is a most important analytical and methodological contribution to the wider project of globalising urban studies.

Introduction

Matthias Bernt's book, *The Commodification Gap*, is a landmark in the now very long history of gentrification studies and has something new and distinctive to say in this crowded field. It is also much more than just another book on gentrification as it provides a thoughtful and rigorously developed example of how urban studies might approach building insights and stretching concepts through attending to the variety of experiences across the globe. For those who are eager for an inventive and generative phase of conceptualisation in global urban studies, the one disappointment is that we start and end within the frame of a very well-worn concept, even if, following Bernt, this can be seen as a "multiplicity" of many types of gentrification. To move beyond this concept, to give up on the privileged theoretical object, "gentrification", would need a different methodological and theoretical approach than Bernt adopts. However, and importantly, Bernt moves us definitively in that direction by acknowledging that gentrification is a concept or abstraction, not a circulating phenomenon or an obvious or pre-given object as such: "what is usually referred to as gentrification is a bundle of empirically observable phenomena, rather than a singular object" (p. 12). In this sense, as I will suggest here, we might be drawn to reassign the empirical observations to alternative concepts. Might we move towards abandoning this term and thinking of others? Nonetheless, as urban studies moves forward with methodological experimentation in support of more global analyses, this book provides much food for thought, and is a most important analytical and methodological contribution to the wider project of globalising urban studies.

Grounds for comparison (rent gap); and a new concept (commodification gap)

A bespoke comparative analysis, stretching across the varied contexts of London, Berlin and St Petersburg, brings into view a new concept which Bernt calls the "commodification gap". Classically, gentrification begins with a "rent gap" which indicates opportunities for economic actors to capture the enhanced value which could be realised through redevelopment, often resulting in displacement of existing residents. Bernt takes Eric Clarke's much cited (1995) definition of gentrification as a starting point, in which the key issues for him are investment of capital and displacement of low-income residents. He does not set out to verify or falsify this approach, but to see how gentrification works and the limits of its application, and to propose new theories.

His systematic focus on the role of institutions in this process is refreshing and most welcome, leading him to interrogate the many processes which are needed to realise a rent gap – notably, for him, is the need to first overcome any “commodification gap”. This is crucial to the wider relevance of the term, gentrification, as many urban contexts include decommodified (state-owned, communal, family, traditional) land and housing (Ghertner, 2015). As he notes: “The major theoretical proposition is that land rent capture and capital accumulation and, thus, gentrification can *always* and *everywhere* only be understood as embedded in specific institutional contexts.” (p. 8). Critical realism and a Marxist analytical vocabulary inform his efforts here: the general concept of the “rent gap” and the widely applicable term, gentrification, remain important for him despite the multiplicity of historical and embedded causal processes associated with many different forms of commodification gap: “The universal conditions for gentrification are, therefore, simultaneously preserved and transcended in the individual gaps.” (p. 215).

It is the case of St Petersburg which most starkly demonstrates, and perhaps inspired, his approach (Bernt, 2016). As Bernt notes, “Due to the specificities of the Russian housing system, large rent gaps exist, but they can only be closed in a rather fragmented and spatially dispersed way.” (p. 183). In fact, the “rent gap” is purely notional in many settings here – as residual and run down socialist-era *kommunalski* (apartments with shared kitchens and one room per family), as well as a patchwork of various other buildings remaining under earlier tenure and occupation arrangements. Together with strict heritage regulations, these resist transformation, making gentrification somewhat “splintered”. Bernt invents the term, a “commodification gap”, which needs to be closed before gentrification, or realising the potential value indicated by a rent gap, can be considered.

Bernt looks to demarcate his analysis from a recent study by Gavin Shatkin (2017), who also took the rent gap as a starting point for comparison. He criticises Shatkin for reducing the rent gap as a comparator to its minimalist definition of the potential for value capture. Bernt rather “thickens” the interpretation of the rent gap as necessarily bound up with, and only ever existing because of, a “commodification gap”: “I aim to integrate political and economic factors into a single concept. I turn Shatkin’s approach upside down and start with the institutions allowing for decommodification to explain the chance for the rent gap to be

put to work.” (p. 54). So, Bernt works backwards from the rent gap to see what makes “gentrification” possible; whereas Shatkin works forward from the rent gap to see how development emerges on that basis. Both use the shared feature of the rent gap as the grounds to assemble comparative insights into the diversity of the political dynamics of urban development. But their different manoeuvres have very different implications for theorisation.

Gavin Shatkin’s (2017) study across China, India and Indonesia brings into view the wide diversity of political formations associated with urban change across Asia - authoritarian, informal, peremptory and democratic. It is this diversity which needs to inform analyses of urban development politics if they are to be globally relevant, open to theorising with the variety and heterogeneity of urban politics and stretching that as far as the urban world requires (Robinson et al., 2022). In Shatkin’s case a new theoretical object emerges: the fundamental role of (national) state actors in driving large-scale property development across Asia, seldom attended to in more northern-centric urban studies. The diversity of forms of state and land management he identifies stretches the theoretical and empirical repertoire of analyses of urban development politics.

Bernt’s case studies also offer scope for expanding accounts of urban politics. For example, the unpredictable and often informal associations amongst state and developer interests which shape developments in the Russian context – “planning mistakes” which overlook illegal developments resonate with the “planning violations” and related networked associations amongst different actors which determine urban development in many parts of the world (Sundaresan, 2019). But the implications of these for a wider theorisation of the varied nature of urban politics don’t attract Bernt’s attention in their own right, as he is focussed on explaining gentrification. For Matthias, “Heterogeneity is, thus, sought as a means to identify diverse combinations of factors” (p. 18) which are at work (to activate rent gaps and bring about decommodification) in shaping gentrification.

What follows in *The Commodification Gap* is rather a systematic analysis of the variety of ways in which institutions and political dynamics shape the possibility for a rent gap to be activated, and for a particular form of gentrification to be manifested (or not):

“Gentrification, in other words, demands the relative weakness, inexistence, bypassing or lifting of components of housing provisions that are decommodified. When this is not achieved, gentrification doesn’t take place. The crucial point made here is that the way in which commodification and decommodification work is historically and geographically specific.” (p. 53). The concept “commodification gap” encompasses, then, the wide range of institutional processes associated with “gentrification”. Bernt offers us a typology of 12 kinds of gaps, which are processes he has identified in each of the three contexts considered in the book (such as a privatisation gap, a new tenancy gap, or a tenure conversion gap). These various commodification gaps open up (or potentially do so) the (rent) gap in value between existing use, ownership or housing forms and potential alternative uses (pgs 122-3). Helpfully, the limits to gentrification are also evident through his study. For Bernt the potential for conversion of a potential rent gap into a development to realise that value is not inevitable. For example, institutional protections for tenants in Berlin limit scope to increase rental for existing tenants who have strong rights and protects against rampant redevelopment; and in St Petersburg, socialist era protections mean that just one recalcitrant resident can prevent redevelopment of a whole block.

The most valuable comparative insights emerge when Bernt leverages the empirical diversity of the “commodification gaps” to offer nuanced reflections on politics and policies. “A broader theory of gentrification must take the role of policies, politics and politics seriously.” (p. 218). He remains convinced that the term, gentrification, has potential to mobilise resistance across many contexts; but one of his main conclusions is that the politics of gentrification is itself deeply contextual, and needs to be crafted based on a careful analysis. A range of practical politics and policies flow from identifying the contextual processes of decommodification, yielding nuanced insights into the opportunities for policies and political struggles to achieve change now, as opposed to succumbing to a view of the overwhelming or necessary power of capital. This marks an important nuance to some analyses of gentrification which see scope for a “planetary” wide mobilisation against capital-induced displacement (Slater, 2017). For Bernt there is no “silver bullet” to framing an anti-gentrification politics, and he rather perceives a range of political possibilities in different cases. In this part of the book substantial learning is possible across the three cases through attending to the “actually existing jungle of political struggles”. As he notes, “Real-

world alternatives to gentrification are already there, and they are embedded in the histories of housing in the three societies discussed” – “a better understanding of the political forces ... can make alternatives to gentrification possible.” (p. 210).

However, the narrow focus on gentrification means that many other pertinent struggles and concerns about the power relations of urban transformation are occluded. In London, for example, conflicts over the generation of state revenue from urban development through demarcating zones of exception and appropriating planning gain provide grounds for some alternative analytical directions in which neither gentrification nor decommodification offer fully convincing insights. The struggle is rather over the broader production (through new planning demarcations) and distribution (through secretive informal discussions) of value amongst the varied actors involved in development, with a very strong role for state actors. A theorisation and exposure of state interests is urgently needed. Moreover, the outcome cannot be pre-determined as “gentrification” (Robinson and Attuyer, 2021). The dangers of persisting with a weighty theoretical term include that bringing new and much needed insights into the limelight can be actively hindered. For me an important priority in urban studies is to look for ways to be open to divergent urban experiences, to make more space for previously occluded voices, and to generate new concepts.

Sticking with gentrification? Methods and concepts

It is something of a mystery, therefore, to those of us who are not invested in “gentrification studies” why authors persist with this term despite the mounting evidence that its application requires that the term must be radically revised (characteristically multiply hyphenated) beyond the agreed meaning – and that at times it is of course irrelevant to the processes shaping urban change (Maloutas, 2012; Ghertner, 2015; Mosselson, 2016). Would it not be helpful to seek out alternative concepts and insights from different urban contexts? Bernt rehearses the common argument concerning the continuing value of retaining the term gentrification as a “universal” because of its political purchase and analytical reach (pgs 207-8; Lees, Shin, Lopez-Moralès, 2016). But, distinctively, he provides a generous opening to difference in his use of the term, suggesting that across his three cases, “Gentrification as a process is not only essentially different between the three cities, but also between different neighbourhoods in each city, and even within one

neighbourhood at different times and with regard to different pieces of land in it. Instead of one gentrification with a capital G, one should, thus, speak of a multiplicity of gentrifications.” (p.210).

In my own writing on revising concepts in urban studies, inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Walter Benjamin, I am also drawn to the suggestion that each concept is potentially associated with a “multiplicity” of related or neighbouring terms and concepts, responsive to different arrangements and interpretations of features by different observers in different situations (Robinson, 2022, Chapter 11). But I also make the case that there are sometimes good reasons to get to the end of a concept. To follow Deleuze in his mathematical metaphors, this might be when the next, neighbouring concept (or point on a curve) proves to be an inflection point – a moment of change in direction of the curve, and a new term begins to accumulate meaning. The temptation to hang onto a familiar term might counter this tendency, for various reasons and with different justifications. Peck (2013) is drawn to the Wittgensteinian term, “family resemblance”, to try hold an analytical unity across the unruly diversity of neoliberalisms, for example. However, for both Deleuze and Wittgenstein, the possibility that further cases and observations might lead to the demise of some terms, and the invention of others is an important proposition. This is a possible outcome in relation to “family resemblance” terms, in which the same observations or elements of the phenomena defining a concept might be assembled differently, to reveal an alternative concept. But it is a strong expectation of the Deleuzian mode of “generating concepts” in which concepts (Ideas) are composed of a multiplicity of observations (or singularities) which could be assembled in many different ways. Thus any concept exists alongside a multiplicity of closely related Ideas (see Robinson, Chapter 6; Chapter 11). Insisting on sustaining an original term while being open to its multiplicity – as Bernt proposes – is an important step to accommodating difference in the urban world. But without attention to the possibility of observations adding up to something else altogether, enabling creativity in generating concepts, Chatterjee’s (1994) powerful comment on Benedict Anderson’s account of nationalism, “what is left to imagine”, comes to mind. Insisting on sticking with one term could also be read as political, authorial or analytical hegemonic ambition.

For Bernt an *a priori* investment in the term, gentrification, is strongly reinforced by his methodological choices and the way in which “theory” is treated in this book. He eschews both universalising and individualising comparisons (pgs 214-5) in favour of a “critical realism” which draws attention to contextually varying (empirical) causal processes to interrogate and explain pre-existing theoretical objects and propositions (the theory of “gentrification”, then). He observes that “The task of an empirical study is, thereby, not to verify or falsify an established theory, but to work out alternative causations.” (p. 15). Thus, “comparisons can be generative for a new round of theorising – but only when they are built upon a reference to existing theories and a commitment towards abstraction. Working with concepts is of key importance here.” (p. 16). As he summarises his method, “What counts is not the comparison as such, but the theoretical argument” (p. 11). This somewhat disappointingly reinstates the existing term, gentrification, as both the beginning and the end point of the analysis, limiting the potential of a comparative imagination for revising and inventing concepts.

But, along the way, Matthias opens his analysis to a very wide scoping of causal processes: “Heterogeneity is, thus, sought as a means to identify diverse combinations of factors.” (p. 18). The focus on the diverse preconditions and causes of gentrification across three different cases brings forward a fascinating if slightly haphazard array of processes: private rental regulation, state buy-to let and internationalisation in the UK; state-developer complicity and corruption, heritage regulations, the procedural risks of tenant intransigence and “planning mistakes” in Russia. These are assembled into the quite useful table showing a typology of commodification gaps and kinds of gentrifications (pgs. 122-3) – this is great for teaching purposes. But an alternative glance across the data might drive transversal theoretical reflection, perhaps moving the theoretical gaze away from the starting point to rather develop insights into new theoretical objects. For example, the diversity of institutions, power and the nature of the state in relation to urban politics. This was indeed the move that Shatkin made – although beginning with the rent gap, the staple ground of gentrification theory, his study rather generated a theorisation of the diversity of state and land governance formations. As noted above, Bernt’s discussion of the implications of his own comparative analysis for thinking about political opportunities and policy is an excellent example of how comparisons might expand insights across and with diversity (pgs 210; 219).

It would have been good to see more of this, to potentially reach escape velocity from “gentrification”.

Generating new concepts?

This book is a really good example of how comparative analysis can help to interrogate and expand concepts across different contexts – in this case, to look at *causal mechanisms* as historically and geographically constituted (rather than given in theorisation based on only certain locations), and to be alert to their necessary multiplicity. However, I have suggested that comparative initiatives could also seek to radically revise concepts, rather than preserve existing theory (see Ren, 2015; Mosselson, 2016; Shin, 2016). It would of course also be beneficial to choose concepts to interrogate which have emerged in contexts previously marginalised in theorisation (Zhao, 2020). Thus, potential starting points for comparative analysis might be sought in a wider variety of settings – for example, agrarian urbanisation (Balakrishnan, 2019), peripheral urbanisation (Caldeira, 2016; Meth et al., 2021); popular urbanisation (Streule et al., 2020). In addition, I suggest that using the looser term, conceptualisation, rather than theory with its implications of weighty authority, might leave scope for new insights and terms to emerge. There are so many analytical resources across the urban world which can form, and increasingly are forming, starting points for inventive and creative conceptualisation. But, more than this, it is the urban world itself which demands of us to think again about our interpretations. Thus, the basis for thinking might not be abstracted, tightly meshed “theory” or the apparently well-understood institutions and social processes which stretch across many urban contexts; but space itself, the urban world, as the fullness of socio-spatial experiences, which both assembles and generates new processes (Robinson, 2022, Chapter 8; Chapter 11). Starting with urban territories and experiences can therefore also be a way to generate new concepts, in conversation with other places.

In a world of many concepts, and a more level playing field of scholarship, the hegemony of gentrification to date would be less of a bother. Certainly, this is an overstretched term, but as one amongst many, we could conclude that it has for sure been productive, and, as Bernt so ably shows, may still be. However, the intellectual world is not an even playing field, in economic, institutional, linguistic and regional terms. In this sense, the political meaning of

sticking with existing theories, or opening to new conceptualisations, is evident. In this sense, then, Matthias Bernt's contribution of a new term, "commodification gap", with rich possibilities for use in many different contexts which face usurpation of traditional, customary, family, communal or hard-won class-based rights to land and settlement, is most welcome.

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