Linguistic fluidity and the spectre of (planetary) gentrification

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In contemporary urban studies, gentrification is perhaps one of the most notable concepts that are subject to such linguistic fluidity within the Global South. Gentrification has increasingly become a rapidly accepted concept to be mobilised by urban social movements, but often entails different versions of translation and understanding. While acknowledging the need of theorising from Asia (hence, Asia as Method) to address the imbalance of knowledge production in the global urban studies, I critically analyse the ways in which such concept as gentrification has been used in contemporary urban politics in diverse contexts of urbanisation, and how such ‘linguistic fluidity’ can also be taken as an indication of the presence of political sub-cultures that have developed over time in the Global South but have affinity with gentrification. The role of the state in building the architecture of gentrification in the Global South is to be particularly emphasised in developing such linguistic fluidity.

In the context Attempts to investigate and conceptualise gentrification in non-Anglo-American cities face some familiar criticisms, e.g., that gentrification is difficult to translate into other languages as the term is too specific to Anglo-American cities. Some may even argue gentrification needs to be confined to the 1960s London when the term was first coined. But, does it really matter whether or not gentrification as a term exists in a particular space and time? What does it mean to speak of gentrification having gone global or even planetary?

This paper takes its cue from Kuan-Hsing Chen’s book “Asia as Method” as a way to think of what it means to discuss gentrification in places where capitalist urbanisation dominates but gentrification as a linguistic expression does not exist. While emphasising the importance of inter-referencing within Asia, Chen (2010, p.226) questions the usefulness of Euro-American theories “in our attempts to understand our own conditions and practices.” He also highlights the linguistic fluidity that produces a diverse range of translated versions of a concept born out of the experience of the Western modernity, arguing that such fluidity is an indication of how political cultures in Asia can be diverse and differentiated from the West.

Keywords: planetary gentrification, capitalist urbanisation, Asia as method, Global South

Here, I advocate the use of a more generic definition of gentrification while urging researchers to acknowledge that universality (the spectre of capital as influencing urbanisation processes at multiple scales) and particularity (the rise of particular forms and institutions of gentrification) are not mutually exclusive and co-exist in both analytical and political realms.

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