



Book Review Essay

“Social mixing as state-led gentrification?”

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Gary Bridge, Tim Butler, and Loretta Lees (Eds.): *Mixed Communities. Gentrification by stealth?*, The Policy Press, Bristol, 384 pp., ISBN-13: 978 1 84742 493 8 hardcover, €94.00, 2012.

The goal of creating “socially mixed” urban neighbourhoods is currently very popular amongst urban policy makers and practitioners. Also, within academia – at least in the German context – the concept is not often criticized (apart from a few exceptions, e.g. Holm, 2009; see also Häußermann and Siebel, 2004:146). And certainly, as the editors of this book also ask, who would be against socially mixed neighbourhoods (Lees et al., 2012:1)? To get to the bottom of the discourse of social mixing, questioning its underlying assumptions and effects is thus an important undertaking, both politically and academically. It is the inestimable contribution of the editors to finally bring together critical theoretical as well as empirical perspectives on social mixing within urban policy into one volume.

The book originates from a series of seminars on “Gentrification and social mix” held in the UK in 2008/09. The 18 chapters of the book, written by urban sociologists, geographers, policy analysts, etc., include case studies from different cities in Europe, North America and Australia. The various contributions analyse the origin and content of the “promise of social mixing”, investigate its empirical validation, examine its political functions and draw conclusions therefrom. With its broad geographical range of contributions, the book is also able to show historic and geographical specificity and contextualization. In what follows, I will summarize the main arguments of the book, thereby integrating insights from the different chapters as well as from further literature.

The editors identify socially mixed neighbourhoods as a major planning and policy goal of state-led interventions in many countries in Western Europe and North America, to be

achieved mainly by bringing in middle-income people into low-income neighbourhoods (Lees et al., 2012). The main assertion of the book is that the idea of social mixing has evolved from a progressive policy in the 1960s and 70s towards a policy leading to “gentrification” (this is particularly well demonstrated in the chapter on Vancouver, Canada, by Ley, 2012). The editors contend that gentrification, understood as the “movement of middle-income people into low-income neighbourhoods causing the displacement of ... the pre-existing low-income residents” (Lees et al., 2012:1) is nowadays “rhetorically and discursively disguised” (Lees et al., 2012:1) as social mixing. Social mix policies are also closely related to important current urban trends, like city branding strategies (cf. e.g. Van Criekingen, 2012, analyzing the case of Brussels) and also the “re-urbanization” of the middle-classes – trends that often result in forcing poorer households from the centre of cities to the periphery (see Glynn, 2012 for the case of Dundee, Scotland). The rhetoric of social mixing furthermore deflects “attention from structural roots of poverty and racism and disinvestment in low-income communities” (Lipman, 2012:111). The image of social mixing as a progressive planning goal is thus contrasted with the “Revanchist City” thesis by Neil Smith (1996).

Social mixing is moreover criticised as an “one-sided strategy”, as it is rarely advocated in more affluent neighbourhoods. By replacing or upgrading former social housing estates, these policies frequently aim at recapturing prime real-estate (cf. for the case of Melbourne – Shaw, 2012; for Toronto – August and Walks, 2012). Concurrent urban policy interventions even take the opposite direction, further revealing the goal of “social-mix” as rhetoric. As Tunstall (2012) shows, important urban policies in the UK such as the “Right to Buy” and cuts on housing benefits or, in general, the shrinking of the social housing sector, would be better termed “anti-mix policies”. As a result, social mixing policies do not tackle the origins of poverty and exclusion, but legitimize and

support gentrification, which ultimately causes the displacement of low-income urban residents rather than the betterment of their lives (although social-mix policies do not necessarily lead to gentrification, as Tunstall, 2012 also shows). In consequence of their analysis, the authors nevertheless do not argue for the withdrawal from public policy interventions in marginalized neighbourhoods but call for socially just policies.

The "promise of social mix" is based on the assumption that the spatial concentration of poor people deteriorates their opportunities and exacerbates social exclusion. Thus, "deconcentrating the poor" – mainly by bringing in middle-class residents – is advocated as a solution. The underlying hypothesis of positive "neighbourhood effects" establishes that residential propinquity of people from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds will lead to social interaction and social ties, increase mutual tolerance and reduce social distance between the different social groups. The spatial proximity to middle-class neighbours should provide low-income urban residents with access to social and cultural capital, as well as political and economic resources brought in by their new neighbours, thereby improving their individual life chances. Particularly the chapters by Fraser et al. (2012) provide a thorough investigation of the backgrounds of these claims (before giving an equally good and nuanced analysis of the US-based HOPE VI program) as well as by Davidson (2012, who furthermore criticises the UK urban policy programmes introduced by New Labour) and Manley et al. (2012).

Reality does not hold up to these hypothesised promises and assumptions, though. What actually happens in "mixed neighbourhoods" can often be characterised rather as strategies of avoidance and of social distinction than of social interaction (Le Galés, 2012:27), expressed, for example, through school choice (see also Butler and Robson, 2003). This observation is theoretically further explored by Davidson (2012). He argues with the help of Bourdieu's concept of habitus that social mixing through "progressive gentrification" is just impossible. Middle-class identity is central to the gentrification process, and this identity is precisely based on distinction and the maintenance and cultivation of social distance. Davidson concludes that the inability of achieving social mixing by gentrifying neighbourhoods is not simply a policy failure but unavoidable because "a socially inclusive society will not be achieved through any attempt to include people into a society that, by definition, relies on excluding social differences." (Davidson, 2012:248). Also, Lees et al. (2012) argue the impossibility of social mixing through gentrification, since "social mix is but a transitory phenomenon on the way to complete gentrification" (Lees et al., 2012:7) and again – now up-scaled – social homogeneity.

As Cheshire further points out, even if contacts would increase, "(l)iving together with richer neighbours may not make poor people any better off". He adds that there is a "certain patronising aspect to the view that a Sun reader must benefit from having a Guardian-reading neighbour."

(Cheshire, 2012:18). This patronising view naturalizes values and behaviours of the middle-class and denies low-income people "the capacity to know and act in their own interests." (Lipman, 2012:108). Empirical studies show instead the "benefits of living with peers" (Cheshire, 2012) or of "good segregation" (Ley, 2012). Cheshire's perspective points out that social homogeneity of a neighbourhood might indeed prevent conflicts and increase political power of marginalized communities (for the weakened tenant power through redevelopment argument, see the Toronto case in August and Walks, 2012). In any case, it is not the neighbourhood that makes people poor, but poor people can only afford to live in certain disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Cheshire, 2012; see also other studies from urban sociologist and segregation studies). Thus, as Manley et al. (2012) argue, even if there were neighbourhood effects, they would be rather a result of selection than of causation.

The misleading analysis of the spatial-proximity definition of poverty and exclusion results in inappropriate solutions, i.e. the call for spatial interventions. However, and this is the main critique, "(a)tttempting to cure or reduce deprivation by engineering neighbourhood social mix" (Cheshire, 2012:24) is treating the symptoms of inequality, not the causes. As various authors argue, *social* inequality cannot be eliminated through *spatial* mixing of socially diverse households in a neighbourhood (see also Rose et al., 2012 for a similar argument). Since exclusion and poverty are mostly related to unemployment, job creation and training as well as saving and improving social and affordable housing are thus more adequate to tackle those problems than social engineering efforts (Ley, 2012).

Overall, the book offers crucial new perspectives and updates on the gentrification literature and proves to be useful for discussions on segregation, re-urbanization and suburbanization, as well. Two minor points of critique may be mentioned: first, the argument would be more compelling if the different cases and perspectives were brought into a closer conversation with each other. The excellent critique offered in the various contributions seems at times redundant. This allows for each chapter to be read individually but is tiring for the reader of the whole book. Second, the general structure of the book is not entirely comprehensible. Some more theoretical chapters take turns with more empirical contributions without a discernable order, and examples from the same countries are somewhat scattered throughout the whole volume. These remarks concerning the structure of the book notwithstanding, it is highly recommendable for urban scholars – both for research and for teaching. It will hopefully also be read by policy makers and practitioners and might have an effect on the actually existing policies of social mixing, which are so far all too often accepted and deployed uncritically.

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