

Book Review: Planetary Gentrification by Loretta Lees, Hyun Bang Shin and Ernesto López-Morales

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10/25/2016

*The first book in Polity's 'Urban Futures' series, in **Planetary Gentrification** authors Loretta Lees, Hyun Bang Shin and Ernesto López-Morales bring together recent urban theory, postcolonial critique and a political economy perspective to offer a globalised take on gentrification. This book is a crucial synthesis of established approaches to gentrification and more recent theoretical developments and is also an excellent example of co-authored scholarship, finds Geoffrey DeVerteuil .*

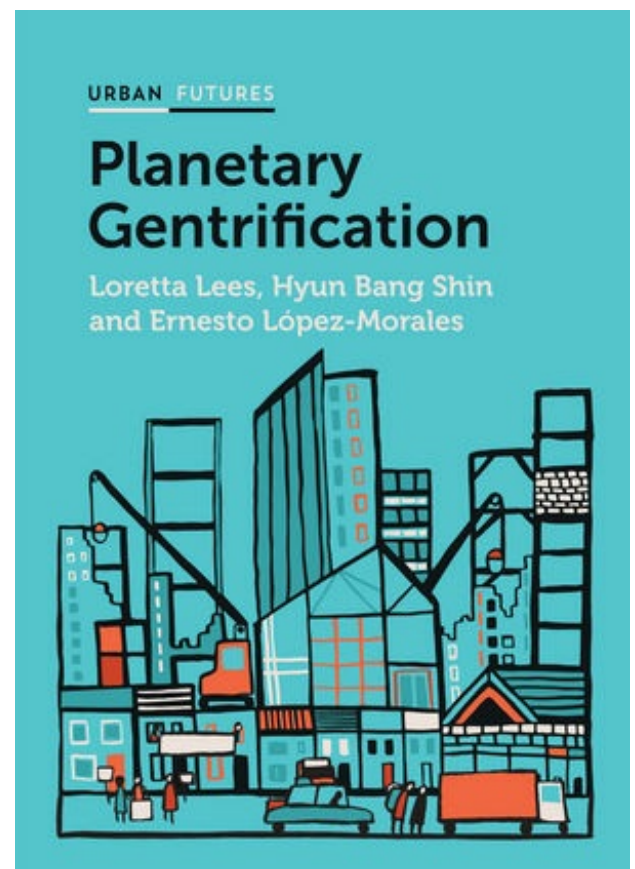
***Planetary Gentrification*. Loretta Lees, Hyun Bang Shin and Ernesto López-Morales. Polity. 2016.**

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With the same three authors, *Planetary Gentrification* may be seen as a companion to the 2015 volume, [Global Gentrifications: Uneven Development and Displacement](#), giving a more unified discussion of how to join gentrification debates to current urban theory, of moving beyond the 'usual suspects' and 'heartlands' of gentrification theory production to embrace a truly cosmopolitan, globalised gentrification, both theoretically and empirically.

Essentially, the book connects to an 'ontological awakening' (5) that directly engages the recent theoretical ferment in urban studies, particularly 'planetary urbanization' and post-colonial critiques, set within an ascendant comparative urbanism while largely maintaining a political economy perspective in the confines of global capitalism. This book is therefore a stocktaking between a now global gentrification and the emerging panoply of new urban theories and approaches, bringing them into conversation to 'advance the view that gentrification is becoming increasingly influential and unfolds at a planetary scale' (4), globally generalised yet locally contingent and variegated. The book therefore hopes to shed considerable light on current urban restructuring, inequality and polarisation.

There is much to commend in *Planetary Gentrification*, particularly its ambitious scope and scale. It maintains a knife-edge tension between building on Global North gentrification theory but ensuring a relational approach, opening gentrification up to new perspectives and theories to better frame the rise of 'spectacular urbanization' and real estate-led mega-development, mega-infrastructure and mega-upgrading. Along the way, this is an excellent example of collegiate production, rather than extensive and globe-spanning travel by one scholar.



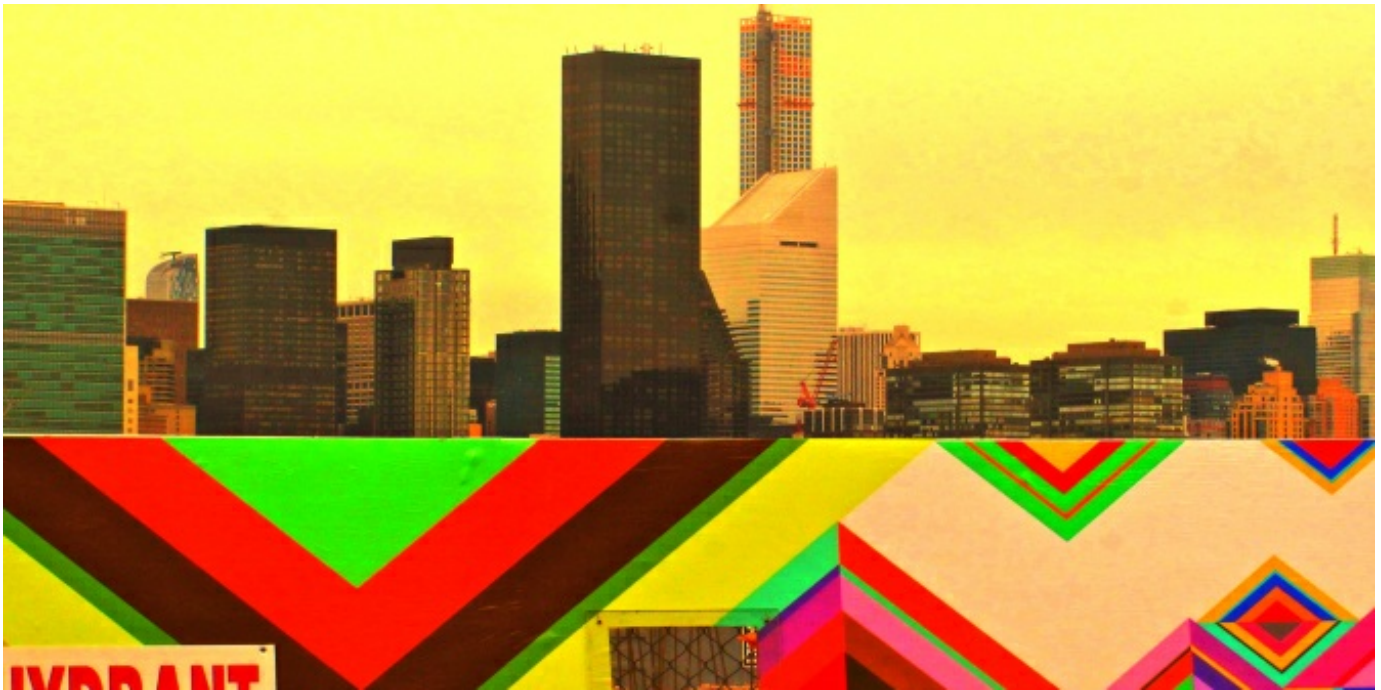


Image Credit: Greenpoint Gentrification (Brenden CC BY SA 2.0)

Three insights in particular stand out. The first is the sense that quaint notions of gentrification as an individual preference have been thoroughly replaced by the state drive towards the privileging of real estate values, producing remarkably mimetic landscapes across the globe. This state-led financialisation of real estate is fuelling new-build gentrification, particularly in the Global South. The state has now become the central agent of gentrification, imposing a global gentrification blueprint through zero-tolerance policing, creative city and mixed communities discourses, heritage preservation policies and slum gentrification in places such as Mumbai and Rio de Janeiro.

The second insight is the rejection of the central city-suburban binary, in which gentrification only occurs in the former, via the revival of older theories of the rent gap and the slum to promote new understandings of a far more spatially disparate gentrification. Finally, the authors argue that the book not only sheds light on the neglected and misrecognised spaces of the urban Global South, a point which many of the key thinkers of comparative urbanism (Sue Parnell, Jenny Robinson, Colin McFarlane) emphasise, but also on the class exploitation inherent in the displacements of gentrification, which is more in line with those who contribute to older debates on gentrification and displacement (Tom Slater, Elvin Wyly).

However, the very wide-ranging conceptual and empirical scope of the book itself leads to inevitable overreach and blind spots. The explicit combination of 'planetary urbanization' and post-colonial critique is an example of unintentional incommensurability. Rather than being complementary, the two theories are actually opposing, emerging from very different ontologies and politics, the former totalising while the latter much more about everyday life and everyday theory. Such a Panglossian approach points to the pitfalls of too eagerly absorbing the range of recent urban theory – some produced so hastily that their 'new' insights are actually recycled from older theories that have fallen into disuse. For example, [the LA School](#) was at the very least insightful about the need to take seriously the polycentric nature of late-twentieth-century urbanism – and yet in the drive for the new, this intellectual debt is forgotten.

I also struggled with the conflation of East Asia – places such as Taipei, Hong Kong, Beijing and Seoul – with the Global South. Surely there is a better way to incorporate areas that have been neglected by Global North theory, but which do not sit comfortably with the other low- and middle-income nations of the world. Along these lines of better unpacking the Global South, there is little investigation into the diversity of experience within the Global North itself,

which is presented as a monolithic template – what about places that are more polycentric like Los Angeles? While I absolutely agree with the emergence of multiple centralities currently structuring the gentrification process, gentrification still retains an enduring attraction to the dominant centre, of being in close proximity and access to it. The importance of a residual centrality therefore means we must be careful about proposing the notion of *tabula rasa* urbanism and gentrification, just as we need to be wary of *tabula rasa* theory production.

Finally, the state is presented as *the* agent of gentrification, but can it not also be an agent of anti-gentrification, of propping up barriers to it? This relates to the section in Chapter Five that offers a uniformly revanchist, zero-tolerance state-promoting gentrification – yet, this is not always true, as one can have gentrification without revanchism and revanchism without gentrification. [My own work](#) on incipient gentrification in Downtown Los Angeles shows that the local state both encouraged gentrification but also continued to support non-commodified land uses – specifically the Skid Row service hub – that throw up barriers to all-consuming gentrification. There can never be complete and total gentrification as long as residuals from the pre-gentrification era – the so-called commons – remain spatially resilient, presenting an intriguing alternative to outright ‘resistance’ that the authors address in the final section of the book.

In conclusion, and despite these critiques, *Planetary Gentrification* advances a crucial synthesis between the more established contours of gentrification and the recent developments in urban theory, particularly planetary urbanisation and post-colonial critique, set within a comparative and relational framework. This synthesis is the main contribution of the book, and sets it apart from the sometimes overly-empirical nature of the field, useful in building up a ‘geography of gentrification’ yet lacking a more crosscutting, theoretically robust framework.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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