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# Intervention – “The ‘Middle Class’ Does Not Exist: A Critique of Gentrification Research”

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**Ståle Holgersen, Department of Social and Economic Geography and  
Institute for Housing and Urban Research, Uppsala University;  
[stale.holgersen@kultgeog.uu.se](mailto:stale.holgersen@kultgeog.uu.se)**

The middle class is a key word in gentrification research, it is used extensively, and it is often part of the very definition of gentrification. But it is also used highly differently. This Intervention argues that the best way to grasp the middle class in the gentrification literature is synonymous with “anyone moving into a so-called gentrified area”, i.e. “newcomers” or “gentrifiers”. This, however, is not a proper definition of a social class. This Intervention also suggests that the capitalist class should rather be understood as the actual gentrifiers, but such an approach is incompatible with the existing gentrification discourse.

Gentrification research has undoubtedly developed and expanded much over the last few decades.[1] But despite all the differences within the discourse, and regardless of whatever new context and situation gentrification research finds itself in, one thing has remained remarkably stable: gentrification research orbits around an active middle class, often leaving a passive working class in the background (for critical reflections, see Paton 2014; Slater 2006; Slater et al. 2004; Watt 2008). The middle class has become the cause and outcome of gentrification: describing at once the driver of gentrification, the main actor, its beneficiary and the end point (i.e. “middle class areas”).

Since Glass coined the term in 1964, the main distinction in gentrification research has been, according to Bridge (1995: 237), between “working class residents and middle class incomers”. Gentrification is conventionally understood as the process by which working class areas are transformed into middle class residential and/or commercial areas. In this short Intervention, I will articulate a critique of the uses of “middle class” in gentrification research and make two bold claims.

First, the middle class we find in gentrification literature *does not exist* as a social class. The common denominator in the use of middle class in gentrification discourse is that it refers to *anyone moving into a so-called gentrified area*; the term then quickly becomes synonymous with “newcomers” or “gentrifiers”. But, however you define it – using e.g. Marx, Weber or Bourdieu – this is not an accurate definition of a social class.

Second, the vast emphasis on the middle class, and the conventional two-class model (i.e. middle and working class), that we find in gentrification research conceal the most powerful actors in gentrification – the real gentrifiers – *the capitalist class*. But the argument that the capitalist class constitute the actual gentrifiers is not only a better vantage point for understanding class in urban development, it is also incompatible with the existing gentrification discourse.

### The Middle Class in Gentrification Research

“The attractiveness of a concept rarely correlates with its precision”, Jürgen Kocka (1995: 783) reminds us, and adds that the “‘middle class’ would seem to be a case in point”. [2] Kocka is correct, and a brief view on the gentrification literature shows how this is especially true in the case of gentrification research.

In gentrification research, the middle class can be *very rich*, as with “middle class groups” in Docklands, London, working in Canary Wharf, the City and the West End, 40% of whom have second homes (Butler 2007a: 771-772; see Davidson 2008). But they can also be *very poor*, as with bohemian artists and others who, due to lack of money (or a love of the aesthetic of rundown neighborhoods), move into “working class” areas, or simply occupy the “cafés, galleries and cycle paths of formerly disinvested neighbourhoods” (Slater 2006: 738). Ley (2003: 2533) even argues that gentrifiers are middle class artists living in “voluntary poverty”.

Sometimes gentrification is driven by “middle class households” that prefer urban environments (Kloosterman and Van Der Leun 1999: 661), and sometimes rural environments (Smith and Phillips 2001). Sometimes the members of the middle class seek to explore the latest trend and style in “dangerous” working class neighborhoods (see Pérez 2002; Smith 1996), and sometimes they desire gated communities and “cleaner”, “safer” neighborhoods (Butler 2007a: 777; Souza 2016: 1240). The middle class comes in various geographies and scales: from individuals to neighborhoods, up to entire towns (see Butler 2007b: 175); we find an “urban” and a “suburban” middle class (Bridge 2001: 212) as well as linkages between “new middle class

settlement” and changes in rural landscapes (Smith and Phillips 2001). The middle class has simultaneously driven *both* gentrification and suburbanization as “the middle class has itself grown enormously and has therefore been able to populate both movements” (Butler 2007a: 762).

Around the end of the post-war boom, the influential argument articulated was that the growth of white-collar workers constituted a “new” middle class. But the “new” middle class – or the “emerging new middle class” (Bridge 2001: 212) – did not come with a more precise definition. The new middle class –with its “widely varying boundaries” (Ley 1994) – is supposedly made up of “young, high-income professionals” with “urban rather than suburban sensibilities” (for critical discussion, see Porter and Barber 2006: 222); yet it is also driving rural gentrification (Smith and Phillips 2001: 458).

Sometimes the middle class is a particular strata of the population. Authors will first construct categories and then label those in the middle, “middle class”: Hedin et al. (2012: 448, 452) for example, define “middle class areas” as “areas among the middle 50 percent in initial income level”.

Sometimes the middle class is equivalent to “white”, and sometimes even vice versa: white people are middle class (see Smith and Phillips 2001: 464; see also Butler 2003: 2469). Sometimes the middle class is non-conformist, progressive and freedom seeking (Smith and Phillips 2001) rejecting the “oppressive conformity of suburbia, modernist planning and market principles” (Caulfield quoted in Slater 2006: 741). And sometimes the middle class is highly conservative. When Ley (1994: 56) observed a *conservative* disposition among the “new middle class”, whom, I assume, were supposed to be liberals, he came up with a new class for those endorsing left liberal politics: this was a “cadre” among the “new middle class” which he called “*the cultural new class*”.

Further, as the middle class is often a huge category, several authors have brought in distinctions and categorizations *within* this “class”. According to Butler and Hamnett (1994: 480), the “starting point is that the middle class is a divided class”. In gentrification literature, the members of the middle class – or classes – now span, according to Butler (2007a: 763) “a huge social range, from routine non-manual workers to the highest professionals with six figure bonuses to spend”. Butler and Hamnett (1994: 480) locate three “groupings” in the middle class formed around three “assets”: property (the petite bourgeoisie); bureaucracy or organization (managers); and cultural capital (the professionals). They also distinguish between “higher and lower administrative and professional classes” (Butler and Hamnett 1994: 489), and make a distinction between “service class”, the “new class” and the “middle class” (Butler and Hamnett 1994: 480). Glass (1964), in her “original” description, distinguished between upper and lower middle classes; Ley (2003: 2541) uses a mix of educational background and occupation to name the following “middle class sub-groups”: artists; social sciences; education; medicine; natural sciences; and managerial, administrative. The middle class is both people with (only) cultural capital, as well as people buying luxury residential waterfront spaces (Bridge 2001: 206). We also find a distinction between the middle class in the public and private sector, where the latter arguably has displaced (gentrified away) the former (ibid.).

Butler (2007b: 167) distinguishes between *nonmanual* professional middle classes and a *manual* working class. With Bridge (2001: 211), the new middle class is distinguished both from the traditional bourgeoisie and the working class, by being a “highly reflexive” class: “the aesthetic practices of the new middle class are public, discursive and self-conscious” (in contrast then, one might ask, to a non-reflexive working class?).

One distinct theoretical tradition within gentrification literature draws on Pierre Bourdieu. But despite this common starting point, we still find widely differing middle classes (for critical

reflections, see Slater et al. 2004; Robson and Butler 2001). Both Bridge (2001) and Ley (2003) argue that although “gentrifiers” might be poor and in precarious employment, they are nonetheless powerful due to their large amount of cultural capital (Ley) and middle class habitus (Bridge).

### Five Different Approaches

From the short glimpse outlined above into the enormous world of middle class and gentrification research, I suggest we can distinguish five different, but often interrelated, approaches.

First, authors using the concept without any clear definition or even any explanations at all (see e.g. Kloosterman and Van Der Leun 1999; Pérez 2002; Souza 2016). Often it is simply taken for granted that we all have a shared understanding of what middle class means.

Second, authors making their own subcategories and characterizations, e.g. being white (Smith and Phillips 2001), being students (Souza 2016), or in the form of Ley’s (2003) “middle class sub-groups” discussed above.

Third, a purely empirical stratification approach (cf. Stolzman and Gamberg 1973; Wright 2009:102) where the focus for categorization is on individual attributes and life conditions such as wages, rents, living areas and education (see e.g. Hedin et al. 2012).

Fourth, approaches inspired by Max Weber. Here, “class situations” are defined as sharing “specific causal component[s] of ... life changes”, with a focus on “opportunity hoarding”, and exclusion and inclusion in markets (cf. Weber 1987: 35; Saunders 1979: 67). (See e.g. Hamnett [2003] and Butler and Hamnett [1994] on the use of education level for classifying certain jobs as middle class.)

Fifth, approaches inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1984). In gentrification literature, the focus is often on taste, culture and aesthetics, but also at times on social and economic capital (see e.g. Bridge 2001; Butler and Robson 2003; Ley 2003).[3]

My main intention with this Intervention is not to dismiss all the analyses mentioned above. Analysis based on Weber and even Bourdieu can give valuable insights, and pure stratification approaches can provide valuable overviews. Separately, several of these papers have much to bring to urban studies.

If the five approaches I outlined above constituted five (or more) very different discourses, there would still be plenty of interesting things to discuss, but the definitions could be somewhat clearer and the ambiguities fewer. However, gentrification research is conventionally understood as one discourse, and people often quote and refer to each others’ middle classes without regard for how these are defined. This is *especially* problematic in gentrification research because the term “middle class” is often included in the very definition of “gentrification” (see e.g. Bridge 2001: 206; Glass 1964: xviii; Slater 2009: 294; Watt 2009: 230).

### The Middle What? *Class*?

*What do we talk about when we talk about the middle class? The critical half of the term is not “class” but “middle”. (Weiss 2019: 21)*

The short overview above illustrates the socio-spatial complexity in urban developments. Economy, racism, culture, profession, aesthetics, and much more all play a part. But how can the middle class be a key concept in the literature when it is used so differently? And can we understand the middle class as a social class in all the complexity outlined above?

Despite all ambiguity, I think we can locate a common denominator in the discourse: the middle class is *everyone moving into an area being gentrified* – whoever they actually are. These people, in turn, are called *gentrifiers* (which means, as I read it, those causing gentrification). Bridge (1995: 238), for example, claims explicitly that the “new middle class” in gentrification research is “the assumed class location of the gentrifiers”. I think he has a point. According to Chaskin and Josep (2013: 487), “the middle class are the sole newcomers” in “typical gentrifying neighborhood transitions”. As one equals the other, we can also twist the argument: the newcomers are middle class. The conventional gentrification researcher, I think it is fair to say, normally starts with a geographical area that is arguably being gentrified, and then labels those moving in as middle class. And thus, as long as they are “newcomers”, they are gentrifiers *and* middle class too.

Yet what happens when the “gentrifiers” are gentrified away (see Pérez 2002)? The initial middle class gentrifiers are replaced by new groups of gentrifiers who are *also* middle class (see Bridge 2001; Davidson and Lees 2005: 1169; Ley 2003: 2540). And this is still called gentrification. Why? Because, according to Davidson and Lees (2005: 1169), in addition to displacement, the “expensive apartments and houses in new-build developments in central cities are marketed to the high-earning middle classes who have the economic [cultural and social] capital”. As long as it is middle class people moving in, it is gentrification proper. A similar argument can be made with “new-build gentrification” – what matters is that the middle class is moving in (see e.g. Davidson and Lees 2005).

This role of the middle class in the analysis – I think it is fair to say – is not a proper class analysis. Neither Marx, Bourdieu nor Weber would have approved such a class analysis, and neither should we. The interchangeable use of middle class, gentrifiers and newcomers comes with a high cost.

Considering this ambiguity of a key concept, one question that follows is why gentrification discourse has not already sunk into a mire of meaninglessness? However, I think a more fruitful question to ask is whether the gentrification research we have seen over the last few decades could have emerged *without* this ambiguity? I think not. Indeed, if someone were to introduce a clear and succinct definition of middle class that everyone agreed upon, one would need to rethink the whole discourse of gentrification.

The middle class is ironically the ambiguity that creates order in the discourse. Further analyses are needed in order to examine precisely how this is possible, but I think a fruitful approach in this respect is to grasp contemporary uses of middle class as ideology (cf. Weiss 2019).

### Meet the Capitalist Class – or Reach the End of Gentrification Research?

*Abandoning critical class theory for a descriptive sociology of consumption ends up blurring the lines of force, in favour of a mosaic of infinitely divisible groups.* (Bensaïd 2002: 183)

Several authors have argued that focusing so closely on the middle class in gentrification research downplays or ignores the working class (cf. Bridge 2001; Paton 2014; Slater et al. 2006; Smith and Williams 1986; Watt 2008). I agree. But it is also important to remember that

simply “adding” more of the working class into the analysis does not in itself make the uses of “middle class” any less ambiguous.

Further, the emphasis on the middle class also conceals another class, i.e. those Glynn (2008: 165) calls the “bigger elite class interests” who are the “real beneficiaries”. It is, for example, only possible to argue that the middle class is *the dominant class* (cf. Ley 2003: 2533) if one ignores the fact that there might be another class dominating both those normally described as working and middle class. Or in other words, if one ignores the major power structures in political economy, i.e. ownership and control of land, spaces, buildings, infrastructure and construction companies.

Yet in gentrification research, those owning and controlling the built environment are seldom understood as a class. When the spotlight is on these groups, they are often presented in abstract terms like “investments”, “capital”, “urban development projects”, “real estate”, “land rent”, “construction”, or perhaps “capital accumulation” or “finance”. However, we must remember that behind these concepts are flesh and blood people – often men in suits who are very engaged in urban development. The way the capitalist class is presented as impersonal concepts and abstractions is in sharp contrast to all the “real humans” we meet in the so-called working and middle classes.

If we view the capitalist class as a class, and if we accept the premise that owning and controlling capital is absolutely crucial for understanding urban development under capitalism, it no longer works to make “middle class” synonymous with “gentrifiers”. It is in fact developers, land-owners, financiers and construction companies who have the primary impact on gentrification processes. From this perspective, the starting point should rather be that *the capitalists are the gentrifiers*.<sup>[4]</sup>

Defining the capitalist class as the “gentrifiers” is not merely another approach that can be added to the five already existing approaches outlined above. The five mentioned approaches can co-exist within a broad and messy discourse precisely as they all approve that “middle class” equals “newcomers” and therefore “gentrifiers”. Arguing that someone else is actually causing many of the processes that are normally described in the gentrification literature is not compatible with the gentrification discourse as we know it today.

As researches, our main task is to (try to) understand the world. Gentrification is one lens through which we can (try to) understand class in urban environments – it is not the other way round. If we can better explain class in the city *without* the middle class (as the beginning and end of urban developments) and *without* gentrification as such, then we should definitely do so.

## Endnotes

[1] From describing “spot rehabilitations” in a “relatively small number of major cities” (Hamnett 2003: 2402), to an international and “planetary gentrification” (cf. Lees et al. 2018; Smith 2002; Smith and Williams 1986), and describing housing in the city to include rural/wilderness gentrification, as well as suburban-, infill-, island-, tourism-, slum-, new build-, public housing-, retail-, commercial-, and environmental- and green-gentrification (Clark et al. 2007; Kloosterman and Van Der Leun 1999; Lees 2018; Slater et al. 2004; Smith and Phillips 2001). Discussions on the state (see Hamnett 1973; Teernstra 2015), and on degrees of gentrification (“hyper”, “super”, “ordinary” and “classic”) (Clark et al. 2007, Hedin et al. 2012; Lees 2018), bring more complexity to the field. In addition come disagreements on the content of gentrification: between supply-side and demand-side explanations, on the role of displacement (see Freeman 2005; Marcuse 1985), on “displacement” and “replacement” (see Hamnett 2003; Slater 2009), on its “radical

edge” (see Brenner and Theodore 2002), as well as all kinds of discussions concerning relations between gentrification and the rest of the political economy (Hamnett 2003: 2401), as well as other social relations like gender (see e.g. Warde 1991) and race (see e.g. Smith and Phillips 2001; see also Davidson 2008; Slater 2006; Slater et al. 2004; Smith 1996). And more.

[2] On the long and complex history of the concept of the middle class, see Wallerstein (1991: 135-152) and Williams (1983: 60-69).

[3] There might be different reasons why researchers tend to focus on the middle class. Slater et al. (2004) point to two reasons: first, that “researchers are often gentrifiers themselves”; and second, that “an informed, supportive critic may argue that the only way to gain a complete understanding of the causes of gentrification is to trace the movements and aspirations of the gentry” (Slater et al. 2004: 1141-1142; see also Slater 2006; Watt 2008). Another explanation is that the focus relates to chosen theory. According to Slater (2006), the fixation with the middle class is much related to vast usages of Bourdieu, while Watt (2008) adds the focus on “employment aggregate”, which points more toward Weber. Authors inspired by these two approaches often end in two-class models (i.e. working and middle class). For readers inspired by Bourdieu the main *distinction* is between the working class and the middle class (Bourdieu 1984; for different critiques see Paton 2014; Riley 2017; Watt 2006). While authors with Weberian approaches see major differences between the middle class being “included” in and the working class being “excluded” from housing and consumption markets, as well as “middle class” jobs being unreachable for the broader working class through “creating barriers restricting the supply of people for desirable employment” (Wright 2009: 109-110; see also Crompton 2008). The middle class in the Weberian approach is generally described as powerful – “control over economic resources”, “... mechanisms of exclusion that sustain the privileges of those in middle-class positions” (Wright 2009: 109).

[4] Thus, rather than having the middle class at the center of discussion, a far more productive place for gentrification research to begin is with Lefebvre’s (1991) description of general class conflict being between those who have a use-value relation and those who have an exchange-value relation to the city. That is, between those who own and control capital (the capital class), and those who don’t (the broad working class). If gentrification research is to have a future, I think it would do well to return to the work of Neil Smith; not necessarily to find the right answers, but to at least find the right questions...

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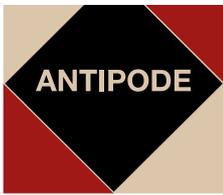
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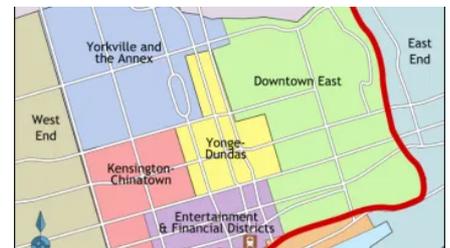
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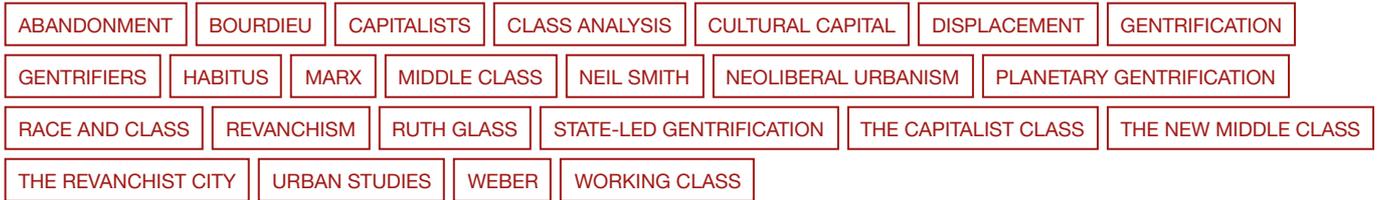


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