Stories from Brixton: Gentrification and Different Differences

by George Mavrommatis
Hellenic Ministry of Interior, Department of Social Integration

Time and place

1.1 Brixton is a South London inner-city area that belongs to the London Borough of Lambeth. Historically, the area has functioned as a point of settlement for successive waves of post-war migration from the Caribbean basin. During the last decades, significant numbers of African migrant groups have settled in the area too. The ethnic mix of Brixton has been further diversified by more recent waves of migration from Central and Eastern Europe, but also, refugees from many conflict areas around the globe. In short, Brixton today is one of the most ethnically diverse areas of London and 'home' to a number of different ethnic communities and individuals.

1.2 By the end of the nineteenth century, Brixton had developed into a prosperous London suburb with a thriving local shopping centre and the first electrically lit street in the capital, Electric Avenue. However, this local prosperity did not last forever. Through a continuous phase of downward filtering the area gradually transformed into a lodging district. For the first half of the twentieth century, Brixton remained a cheap and tolerant boarding-house area, mainly for actors and music-hall performers, while slowly acquired the reputation of a vice-district.

1.3 After the end of the Second World War, Irish, Poles, Cypriots and Maltese migrants moved into Brixton. With the pass of the 1948 British Nationality Act, significant numbers of West Indians settled into the area too. London at the time, not accustomed to racial differences, had very few places willing to accommodate such 'dark strangers' (Peterson 1963). These Caribbean newcomers had to paid higher rents than their 'white' counterparts to landlords as tolerance came at a price[1]. The most entrepreneurial of them bought properties and rent them out to fellow countrymen. Sam Selvon (1956) in 'The lonely Londoners' provides a local description of the place during this time:

> he buy out a whole street of houses in Brixton, and let out the rooms to the boys, hitting them anything like three or four guineas for a double….whenever a boat-train come in, he hustling down to Waterloo to pick them fellars who new to London and ain't have place to stay, telling them how Brixton is a nice area, that it has plenty of Jamaicans there already, and they could feel at home in the district, because the Mayor is on the boy's side and it ain't have plenty of prejudice there (Selvon 1956:27-8).

1.4 To continue, Brixton by the late 1950s, had transformed into one of the most recognisable 'twilight areas' of London; areas of significant migrant settlement characterised by the presence of ethnic and cultural differences. For the untrained native urban vision, which was accustomed to the cultural sameness of the traditional urban landscape, these areas signified the opening of a new-world; a world, although culturally so far away, located within the hearts of British cities.

1.5 The advent of the 1970s brought along a different chapter in Brixton's history. As a result of worsening economic conditions and de-industrialization, local unemployment rates sky-rocketed affecting mainly migrant and ethnic populations. At the same time, a new metropolitan moral panic spread through the capital: mugging. Through intense media representations, London inner-city areas with high levels of 'black' concentration became identified as the centre-stages of this new epidemic. Stuart Hall (1978) has argued that the 1970s economic crisis became inextricably linked to race as: *'race has come to provide the objective correlative of crisis'* (Hall 1978:333). This metonymic correlation between race and crisis became constructed through an equation of mugging with 'black' crime. Specific areas of 'black' settlement in South London became the very signifier of the crisis, as 'policing the blacks' became synonymous with 'policing the crisis' (Hall 1978:332).

1.6 Following these lines, policing in Brixton and other areas of 'black' settlement became qualitatively different from the rest of the capital (see for example Gutzmore 1980, Bridges 1983). Through a series of 'Special patrol' unit deployments, 'Swamp operations' and the enforcement of the 'SUS law', tensions

between police and 'black' youths built up in the area culminating in the 'race riots' of April 1981 (see Scarman 1982, Benyon & Solomos 1986). The media representations of the 'riots' made the area notorious in national imagination. Brixton came to be seen as the 'front line' where police was fighting 'black' crime, but also, as the 'front line' of resistance of the 'black' community to the apparatuses of a racist state (Keith 1991, 1993). During the last two decades, a series of mini-scale 'riots' also erupted. Brixton became famous or infamous, loved or despised to different audiences for different reasons. The area has functioned, and in a way still does, as one of the most significant 'signifiers' (Hall 1996) of multicultural, or more recently renamed, diverse Britain.

Methodology and logistics of research

2.1 Narrative studies, which reflect on people's experiences and life stances, advocate that life and experience become meaningful through narration and story-telling (Rosenthal 1993, Widdershoven 1993, Chase 1995, Josselson 1995,Hollway & Jefferson 1997). Following such an analytical direction, this paper is a narrative analysis of the social world of Brixton. It investigates local gentrification's attitudes towards different differences and the urban vernacular milieu. More particularly, this narrative investigation takes place through the close examination of local life-stories and life-worlds as told by people themselves.

2.2 In terms of fieldwork research, twenty-two in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who moved into the area through the years. Thirteen individuals had done so during the last five years and are subsequently named as the newcomers. On the other hand, those who moved into the area throughout the 1990s are coined as the longer established movers in. In terms of gender, thirteen informants were male, whilst the remaining nine were female. Nineteen of them were British, while the rest could be defined as international (two Americans and one German). Within the British category, sixteen of them could be identified as 'white'-British, two as British-Asian and one as British-other (British-Colombian). This series of interviews, which was conducted through a snow-balling technique, did not manage to include any 'black'-British movers in.

2.3 Early gentrification studies commonly depicted the gentrifiers as an undifferentiated category who supposedly shared a common socio-economic position (see for instance Smith 1979, Ley 1980, 1981, Mullins 1982, MOORE 1982). This particular analytical legacy originates from the massive labour restructuring of the 1970s, 80s and the emergence of the phenomenon of young urban professionals. More particularly, the bulk of early gentrification studies habitually narrated gentrification as being carried out by a uniform category of highly-paid professionals (for instance: Ley 1996, Deutsche 1996), concealing the sometimes 'chaotic' nature of the process (Rose 1984, Beauregard 1986). In sharp contrast to this, our fieldwork research brought into the light the possibility that gentrification in Brixton might involve a socio-economic diversity of movers in, stretching from cases of economic marginality to those of economic affluence. To start with, my informants were a highly differentiated bunch of people in terms of employment: six of them were highly-skilled employees in media and IT industries, two of them were PhD holders working as full time researchers in nearby academic institutions, whilst another two were highly-paid professionals in the City of London. On the other hand, five of them were employed in low-paid service jobs with the last two being students. This economic diversity became mostly manifested through the different ways that these people moved into the area. Whilst some of them moved in by buying an attractive Victoriana, others did so by just renting a room in a student flat-share or squatting. To sum up, the people that I managed to interview were a diverse group of individuals rather than a single socio-economic category of people that could be identified as middle, 'new middle' or creative 'new middle-class'.

2.4 Almost twenty years ago, Sharon Zukin (1992) argued that when a first, not so affluent, wave of gentrification settles in an area, a second more affluent one follows; the first ones are the 'trend setters', while the second ones, are people who simply buy into the upper-coming character of the area. One could go as far as to argue that Brixton's division of gentrifiers between newcomers and longer established movers in can be seen through this light, as the former tend to concentrate in well-paid professions whilst the latter ones in less well-paid jobs.

2.5 Last but not least, it has to be made clear how the concept of 'race' and ethnicity is used in this paper. First and foremost, it is approached in a deconstructed way. As Stuart Hall (1992) has claimed, two separate moments exist within the history of 'black' cultural politics in Britain. Within the first moment, 'blackness' is treated as a singular and unifying experience strictly for political reasons. The second moment signifies 'the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject' (ibid 1992:254). This is the moment where 'blackness' becomes redefined as diverse in relation to ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, subjectivity etc. A uniformed category of 'blackness' gives away to many different kinds of 'blackness'. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of an intellectual project to deconstruct 'whiteness' too. Under these lights, 'whiteness' should be analysed in all its complexity and different manifestations. Accordingly, 'whiteness' cannot go 'unexamined' (Chambers 1997), but the whole array of its diversity, should be brought to the fore. Following these lines, some writers ask us to get 'out of' our 'whiteness' (Ware & Black 2002) or even to abolish it (Roediger 1994, Ignatiev & Carvey 1996, Hale 1998).

The urban joys of diversity

3.1 Gentrification has been unfolding in London for more than four decades. Ruth Glass (1964) first coined the term to describe the influx of middle-class and the subsequent eviction of working-class populations in Islington, N. London. Since then, a whole literature on gentrification has been produced that it is not the place to try to re-summarize in this paper[2]. However, one point it should be brought to the fore, is that London's gentrification embraces a variety of processes, each of them with its own characteristics and specificities (Butler & Robson 2001, Butler 2003). For instance, Islington's gentrification is different from cases of gentrification in Brixton, Brick Lane[3] or other inner-city multicultural areas of London.

3.2 Gentrification in Brixton has been going on since the late 1970s early 1980s. Stephen Frears' film,

'Sammy and Rose get laid' (1987), follows a couple of Brixton's newcomers dealing with their marital dramas. As early as the early 1990s, the local newspaper 'Voice' was proclaiming that '*The Brixton man, unlike the Docklands yuppie, is prepared to rub shoulders with the natives but still needs his own wine bars and cafes. He always gets ripped off when he buys ganja but feels safe in his plush apartment*' (Voice 8/1/1991 p.7).

3.3 One of the unique characteristics of local gentrification has been its ability to selectively accommodate differences whilst simultaneously displacing local populations. Through this simultaneous process of accommodation and displacement, eviction and preservation, a new more affluent Brixton was created to co-exist, side by side, with the old Brixton of reggae, high unemployment, poverty and British-Caribbean street-culture. If one takes a stroll around central Brixton, she can still witness the existence of the traditional food market, the Portuguese delicatessens, the 'black' barber shops, the descendents of the old reggae record shops, now selling all the spectrum from R&B to dub, inhabiting the same spaces with more mainstream symbols of our urban civilization like Argos, Sainsburys and WHSmith stores etc.

3.4 Tim Butler, in his various gentrification studies, deploys the concept of 'habitus'[4] to strengthen his analysis. His idea of 'habitus' crudely refers to *attitudes, beliefs, feelings and identities*' that emerge out, but also, characterize specific areas of gentrification (Butler 2002:2). According to this line of thinking, a gentrified area slowly acquires its own habitus, which gradually becomes inscribed into the landscape. This concept of habitus is also useful to our analysis in order to attempt to describe the local culture of gentrification or at least some aspects of it.

3.5 A number of critics have drawn attention at ongoing processes of aestheticization and commodification of culture and everyday life (Zukin 1982, Harvey 1989, Jameson 1994, Wynne & O' Connor 1998) while many contemporary cultural-economic analyses of postmodern urbanism drew heavily on issues of spectatorship and visual consumption (Harvey 1989, Zukin 1992, Boyer 1996). In what follows, a dominant story comes to the fore that depicts Brixton as an urban theatre of differences where the visual joys of diversity reign. Alexander, a 'white'-British newcomer, goes on to describe Brixton in terms of theatricality. He comments:

> Question: How would you describe the urban life of Brixton?
> Alexander: I would look at it more in terms of performance, I mean definitely I have enjoyed it, I don't know if that is the right word for it, but, especially the preachers outside the Brixton tube, I mean I've always looked out for them because I find them fascinating, you've got usually 'black' born Christians, it used to be one guy he had the same speech that would occur over and over again and he had this one phrase 'For the redemption of your sins' and always handshaking in the air and he'd always be there, and right next to that you've got all these vending tables outside Iceland where you have all this sort of Muslim vendors…all this kind of sheer diversity within the context of the street that I find interesting.
> [Later on in the interview]
> Alexander: There are certain individuals especially in the tube station, they become sort of figures in your daily life, like the guy who used to sell the 'Big Issue' who was always there, he went 'bigy, bigy, bigy', 'get your bigy, bigy, bigy', 'don't worry be happy' and sort of this kind of things, and in a sense, that was interaction.

3.6 In the same spirit, Natalie a 'white' American performing artist, who has been living in the area for the past ten years and works part-time as a waitress, expresses her own ideas about Brixton's theatricality. Her narrative describes an urban theatre of Brixton as coming out of the plays of Ionesco; intensity goes hand in hand with irrationality. Natalie comments:

> Natalie: Its like either African ladies pushing you out of the way in the market, or kind of, like you know, young single mothers pushing their kids in prams, like running you over, you know, its intense, it's an intense experience…I mean hung out just of the tube station, you know on a Saturday afternoon, it's weird, it's really weird, you get this sort of like group of Korean people that set up an electric organ every week and sing Christian songs, they are like some weird Christian sect, just in front of Pizza Hut, you get the Socialist Worker party, and they like trying to sell you their newspapers, and this group of 'black' guys, they are called like the 'Lost Tribe of Israel' or something like that and they dress up in those 'cool and the gang' outfits, I don't know what they are doing I mean they are preaching something, and then there is this 'white' guy with the megaphone shouting things like you know, 'The end is near'.
> [Later on in the interview]
> Natalie: There is a community of people, of sort of people like an extra strong lager, that hung around the tube station, the small addicts, the prostitutes, the crazy old 'black' lady that plays the harmonica and sells her paintings outside the tube station, you know, it is like a circus sometimes but you know you can't stop, that's the thing, you gonna be pushed into the wall, its very much theatrical, like the twin brothers that run the flowers outside the tube station, the guy that sells the big issue, they're all characters, real characters, and I mean I never spoken to them or anything, but you know they are there, and it is kind of reassuring in a way.

3.7 For Alexander, the Brixton Tube station is a stage for varied local performances to be enacted. Although words are not exchanged, a certain level of communication seems at work. In such acts, theatre and urban life blend together to create a sort of interaction that constitutes, at least for him, the main local attraction. For Natalie too, the Tube station transforms into a stage where many local characters, 'like extra strong lager' perform their everyday selves. By all accounts, this local diversity includes a broad spectrum; it embraces race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, class, income etc. Natalie seems pleasantly re-assured to have it around as it provides her with joy to compensate for the boredom of everyday life.

3.8 Generally speaking, gentrification has been related to processes of cultural consumption (Zukin 1996), whilst different forms of it have been linked to different consumption practices. Early on, gentrification as historic preservation has been related to the consumption of bygone architectural styles (Jackson 1983, 1985, Zukin 1987); loft-living has been related to a 'poetic appreciation' of industrial design (Zukin 1982:174). More recently, there is a tendency to link gentrification of multicultural areas with the consumption of ethnic/cultural differences. Tim Butler (2002, 2003) in his own gentrification study of Brixton concludes that '*it is the multiculturalism that it is the attraction*', '*Brixton is…emotionally blended into an urban multiculture*' (Butler 2002: 7-8).

3.9 According to our analysis, Brixton's attraction is not simply its multiculturalism or its different ethnic communities co-habiting the same spaces. Instead, it is the sheer diversity of the place that embraces race, ethnicity, religion, income, class, gender, age, etc., which supposedly contributes to the joys of urban living. Following these lines, race and ethnicity is part and parcel, but not the sole ingredient of local diversity. As a result, the all powerful category of race and ethnicity is fading away and a more inclusive concept of diversity breaks into the narrative fore.

Gentrification and social separation: Post-ethnic and more synthetic narratives

4.1 As it has been widely acknowledged (Anderson 1983, Back 1996), communities become firstly imagined and then later on outlined and lived across the human environment. The imaginary ways that people perceive themselves, their links with one another, their relations of inclusion or exclusion, association or disassociation are, more than anything else, mental constructions. Any concept of community is based upon a relationship of similarity and difference; members of a community allegedly share something in-between them, which separates them from other communities. By all means, this relationship of similarity and difference is founded upon the construction of a 'symbolic boundary' (Barth 1969) that brings together members of a community while dividing them from the rest.

4.2 In what follows, we investigate narrative constructions of local community as they emerge out of the life-words and life-stories of our informants. As it will become evident, a post-ethnic narrative of social separation emerges, which argues that the main local communities lead separate lives as a result of class, income, education, lifestyle preferences etc. From this perspective, race and ethnicity give way to income, education, lifestyle, class etc. as the defining factors of social division. According to this view, the social world of Brixton is divided because of socio-economic rather than racial, ethnic or cultural reasons.

4.3 The first narrative of social division presents Brixton as inhabited by a young 'white' middle-class and local 'black' populations. Carla, a 'white' German female who works as an IT programmer, comments:

> Question: What do you think about the mixing that goes on in the area?
> Carla: I think, better, I would say that they are the indigenous population, and then you get a mixture of 'white' people, I mean the 'white' population is very middle-class that probably I belong to myself, which is not that I say that's what I need to feel comfortable, but I quite like the mix.

4.4 According to the above quotation, the movers in do not share any close communitarian ties, but instead, they come together in comparison to their alleged difference to local populations. More importantly, this construction of a communitarian boundary produces two different groups: a 'white' middle-class and local populations. Allegedly, what brings the former together whilst separates them from the rest, is income and class. The 'white' movers in are depicted as middle-class, where local populations become uniformly narrated as less affluent; class and income supposedly divide the multicultural world of Brixton. Of course, such simplistic narratives of social division leave outside any intra-group differentiations.

4.5 Later on in the interview, Carla argued the following:

> Question: What do you think about the multicultural interactions in Brixton?
> Carla: I don't think, it's not quite integrated as they would like it to be, it is really strange living in the area, because the circles I move in, because the places I go to, it's sometimes really living side by side, as we were inhabiting, you know, different bubbles, and as we were not able to hear each other, sense each other, we kind of sort of move along side by side.

4.6 Carla's multicultural narrative of social division deploys the primordial metaphor of cultures as isolated spheres or islands that touch but they do not 'interpenetrate each other' (Park 1925:41). However, her explanation is not culturalistic to any extent. Instead, socio-economic divisions are allegedly responsible for these separated local life-worlds. According to this view, the contemporary world of Brixton becomes presented as constituted by different socio-economic bubbles[5], totally disconnected and disassociated between them. Such narratives of social division that allegedly characterize the life of gentrified multicultural areas have been cited as 'tectonic' forms of urban living (Butler 2002) or ways of 'intimate segregation' (Mumm 2008).

4.7 Marian, a 'white' female from Manchester, who although her working-class background now works as a financial consultant in the City of London, deploys the same metaphor of spatially co-existing 'bubbles'. Once more, her narrative does not draw on any ethnic or cultural resonance. Instead, she acknowledges class, income and social standing along with lifestyle and education as mostly responsible for contemporary forms of social division. Marian comments:

> Question: What do you think about the local multicultural interaction?
> Marian: They are these pockets of different sorts of lifestyles that go on in Brixton that don't really touch each other, you know, and when these people do come in Brixton [movers in],

they think they live in Brixton but they don't, they are just living in their bubble in Brixton.
[Later on in the interview]
I think, I would also say its not just about multiculturalism, I mean you know, multiculturalism, I wouldn't even say that, its about the people that have always been in Brixton and they haven't got anything in Brixton, and its not just about whether you are 'black' or 'white' or whatever, its about have and have nots… it's not just about what colour you are, its about education, it's about social background, its about interests, its about what people talk about, what papers people read, it's not as simple as that.

4.8 To sum up, within this first narrative of social division, Brixton is constructed as a place where two different local communities ('black' and 'white', affluent-non-affluent, indigenous/ working-class and gentrifying/ middle-class) reside. Although they live in the same area, they seem unable to proceed into any meaningful acts of communication. However, culture and ethnicity are not presented as defining factors, but instead, income, class, education, lifestyle etc. are depicted as the main reasons for living apart.

4.9 Nevertheless, there is another more complicated narrative that argues that class, income, education and lifestyle preferences become complemented by race, ethnicity, culture, gender, age etc. to produce the story of local social division. Accordingly, local communities and people live separately, or in some cases not, as a result of a number of factors and intersecting[6] categories instead of one (racial/ ethnic or economic/ social); the either or logic of social separation gives away to a synthetic narrative of social division. Kalbir, a British-Pakistani young woman, who recently moved into the area and works for the BBC, comments:

> Question: What are your thoughts on local interaction?
> Kalbir: What I think about Brixton, is that I think you very much could see different communities live, side by side harmoniously, but again there isn't much interaction. I don't mean that there is tension between them, but there isn't much going on between them, its just like obviously I go to the market, I go to the shops, and I see the Jamaican whoever, but because I am part of the sort of young media type that live in Brixton, I am more likely to meet people through that, than I am to go to talk to the Jamaican family next door.
> Question: Which are the main reasons for this minimum interaction?
> Kalbir: I mean if you look around, I see many 'black' girls of my age, who live here and maybe born and brought up in the West, if you like in Britain, and yeah, they've all got like two to three children and they are like pushing them whatever, and they are on my age or even younger than me, and is such that kind of difference in perception of what is expected in their lives and what is expected in my life. I definitely feel that there is a big gulf there, I sort of look at them, and I think they look at me, and there are a bit like, you know, they think probably I am sort of like this person that flicks around and goes to poncey cinemas, like Ritzy, and they are like all there in their kind of matching jeans and sort of like babies in designers gear, is such a difference in lifestyles, and yet we all live in the same place, it's very strange, I don't know what point I try to make, but I guess it's a kind of, class isn't always the right word, you know, because sometimes class divisions are just still there, but also, is just very deep cultural themes probably that infect us all as a racial group, what is expected from you, as an eighteen year old 'black' girl from certain households in Brixton, and if you were 'black' living in Primrose Hill it would be very different, you know.

4.10 Kalbir makes sense of local social division as the combined outcome of ethnicity, race, culture, class, lifestyle choices, income differentiation etc. As she says, through reflecting on her own inter-subjective encounters with 'black' girls of her own age carrying babies around Brixton, she is amazed of what is expected from them and her respectively. She states that a 'black' girl from Primrose Hill is probably different from her everyday encounters. By arguing that, she claims that race, ethnicity or culture are intersecting with other categories like class, income, education etc. to produce a variety of different 'black' female positions. According to her thinking, to be 'black' and female is not a uniform category, but alternatively, it intersects with class, income, education, family background and expectations etc. to produce a variety of 'black' female subjective experiences. Last but not least, she feels that she would probably have more in common with a 'black' girl from Primrose Hill. As Stuart Hall (1992) has argued and Kalbir comments clearly reaffirm, 'black' experience and more particularly 'black' female experience becomes redefined as diverse.

4.11 Last but not least, Kalbir mentions a particular micro-space that defies all these combined social, economic, cultural or racial divisions. This place is the sauna at the Brixton Recreation Centre; this space stands as a multicultural micro-heaven where the new and old people of Brixton can come together, talk to each other and act as connected and caring social beings. Many years ago, Michel Foucault (1986) suggested that within any society there are spaces, which succeed in remaining outside the norms and logic of any existing social order. He coined these spaces as heterotopias; places that are different from all the rest (hetero=different, topos=space). The local sauna appears to function in such a way; a gender comradeship is at work in this female only sauna. For a brief time, gender similarities are more powerful than economic and cultural divisions to delineate their subjects. Similarities become more important than differences. Within this steaming environment different differences lose their authority. Kalbir comments:

> Kalbir: That's a good point really, sometimes I go to Brixton Recreation Centre, which is the leisure centre near the tube station and I go swimming there, exercising there, and I go to the sauna with my friends, who are 'white' ok, in the sauna its predominantly 'black' women, you know, everything is steaming and its full of 'black' women, there are like all kinds of 'black' women, ten year old, twenty year old, everything, and we end up chatting cause obviously its like we are all in there and its really, really bizarre, cause I always say things like 'it was really nice' and their always replying like, you know, 'we're always here on Thursday, maybe

see you on Thursday', and I am like 'yeah, maybe see you on Thursday' and when I come out I think, 'God, I never talk to these people and they never talk to me.'

The complicated relationship between gentrification and different differences

5.1 A decade ago, Loretta Lees (2000) in her reviewing of the Anglo-American gentrification literature argued that there were still omissions in research. Among them, race and ethnicity were cited as significant 'wrinkles' of research. More recently, Tim Butler and Gary Robson (2001) or Butler himself (2002, 2003, 2007) in the UK, along with a number of writers from the other side of the Atlantic (for instance Hackworth & Rekers 2005, Mumm 2008, Sze 2010, Murdie & Teixeira 2009), have tried to fill this gap. Gradually, an ever expanding literature on gentrification has been produced that takes into account race and ethnicity along with class-related considerations.

5.2 As we said earlier, Brixton's gentrification has been going on for more than three decades. From the late 1970s early 1980s, people were moving into the area either looking for a bargain Victoriana or new urban experiences. In these early days, many young people used squatting to move into the area and be part of the 'progressive' multicultural world of Brixton, where 'white' and 'black' communities rubbed shoulders and allegedly 'understood' each other. At the same time, more mainstream gentrification processes were going on through the acquisition of attractive local properties 'full of character and original features' in an unbeatable price. By all accounts, the 'Brixton City Challenge' running from 1993 to 1998, played its part in the future transformation of the area. According to its logic, the local multicultural character was transformed into the very vehicle for urban renewal. Its motto, 'The United Colours of Brixton', brought into mind images of a celebratory form of urban multiculturalism coming out of the pages of advertising campaigns (Mavrommatis 2010). Most importantly, the Brixton Challenge put the area 'on the map' by emphasising and promoting the development of a night economy. Through the following years, a number of bars, restaurants, clubs etc. sprung out in the area. The notorious 'front line', where police was supposedly fighting 'black crime' or the place where the 'black' community was struggling against a 'racist' state was changing into a front-line of entertainment within the night economy of the capital. By the late 1990s, the London economy had taken off with the housing market experiencing robust growth. More and more people were moving to Brixton to experience its 'buzz', 'contemporary edge' and 'way of life'. As a result of all these, a new Brixton emerged, partly gentrified whilst partly the same; partly well off while partly poor; partly a multicultural heaven while sometimes 'feeling' like a monocultural hell.

5.3 According to our narrative analysis, a few interesting findings about the culture, or better, the habitus of local gentrification emerged. Firstly, the gentrifiers were not just attracted to the area's celebrated multiculturalism, but to the whole array of local diversity including race, ethnicity, religion, faith, gender, age, class, income differentiations etc. Secondly, local socio-economic divisions were mainly blamed for the alleged little give and take between the different communities. At the same time, a more synthetic narrative emerged where different differences were deployed to explain the many social divisions and few transgressions. In cases of social division 'bonding capital'[7] was allegedly at work, while in the few cases of coming together, 'bridging capital' was supposedly invested. More interestingly, the bridging of differences took place through a bonding produced out of a similarity. For instance, gender similarities appeared to rule over age, ethnic or class differences. Furthermore, it was assumed that different combinations between ethnic and class differences were able to bring people together or further apart. In short, a complicated image of the social world of Brixton emerged, were different differences were simultaneously at work.

5.4 The birth of gentrification study came along with its baptism as a strictly class phenomenon (Glass 1964, Laska & Spain 1980, Mullins 1982); a supply-side and demand-side explanation emerged (Smith 1979, Ley 1980, 1981, 1996). At some point, a cultural-economic consensus about the drivers of gentrification prevailed (Zukin 1982, Hamnett 1991). As gentrification analysis matured, class was studied along with gender (Rose 1989, Warde 1991, Bondi 1991, 1998, 1999), sexual preferences (Castells 1983, Lauria & Knopp 1985, Knopp 1995) and age (Pushup 2004). Race and ethnicity became also included, always along with class, within its ever expanding considerations (Anderson 1990, Butler 2002, 2003, 2007). To sum up, gentrification analysis has been constantly evolving for the last fifty years.

5.5 More than two decades ago, Chris Hamnett (1991) in order to promote a culture-economic consensus on gentrification, deployed the metaphor of the 'blind men and the elephant'. For Hamnett, gentrification theorists that either accepted a solely economic or cultural explanation, acted like the blind men of the story who although touching parts of the animal were unable to see the whole elephant of gentrification. Is there a chance that this 'blind men (or women) and the elephant' story of gentrification could still be relevant to us today? The answer is yes, if we agree that we are standing in front of a cross-road in relation to future gentrification research. New research can take the complicated path of intersectional theory, where class along with gender, age, race, ethnicity, sexual preference etc. are all dealt with simultaneously. The adoption of such an analytical agenda might carry the risk of losing sight of the fundamental class-related character of gentrification, causing the very elephant of gentrification to dissolve just before our eyes. Such a direction would probably produce less critical[8] research as the class character of the process would be seriously perplexed by the intricate workings of different differences. On the other hand, we can continue, as the contemporary blind men (and women) of our times, to research only the class related aspects of gentrification or the combination of class with another analytical category (gender and class, race and class etc.) and be content with our restricted analytical touching. However, the transposition of the problematic of the 'blind men and the elephant' story to the present and future of gentrification research, cries for answers to the following questions: Is it time to start see gentrification more synthetically? Has the time come to analyze urban sites of multiple differences from a combined/intersectionalist perspective? Should gentrification be analysed in relation to how differences interact with each other within spaces of diversity? Or is it really getting too complicated and perplexed and we risk losing sight of the very elephant of gentrification? How far can we go with our synthetic analysis before we end up being incomprehensible? More thought is needed towards this analytical dilemma.

Notes

[1] The infamous 'colour tax' of the era.

[2] For a reviewing of the gentrification literature see Hamnett (1991), Lees (1994) and more lately Lees (2000).

[3] For Brick Lane's gentrification see for instance Jacobs (1996), Mavrommatis (2006).

[4] The concept of habitus has been used previously by P. Bourdieu (1977) in his elaborate theories of taste as social distinction.

[5] Tim Butler (2003) has also used the term 'bubble' to describe the socially divided world of North London's gentrification.

[6] Intersectional theory is a form of sociological analysis that argues that a number of different societal categories together contribute to define the social standing of a person. Accordingly, there is not one all powerful category (for instance gender) that defines the life or life-chances of a person, but instead, each person is defined by the point of intersection of all categories involved. Intersectional theory was born out of the black feminist movement that argued, in opposition to a universalizing feminism, that the realities of being a woman in American society are also defined by race and ethnicity (see for instance Crenshaw K.W. (1991), Collins & Andersen (1992)).

[7] Robert Putman (2000) has used the concepts of 'bonding' and 'bridging' capital in order to explain forms of social connection between diverse individuals and groups.

[8] Tom Slater's (2006) influential paper 'The Eviction of Critical Perspectives from Gentrification Research' ignited once more the on-going gentrification debate.

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