



The battle for the high street: retail gentrification, class and disgust

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BOOK REVIEW

The battle for the high street: retail gentrification, class and disgust, by Phil Hubbard, London, Palgrave Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 2017, 260 pp., \$99.99 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-137-52153-8

I am typing these words while taking my morning coffee at a relatively new café in the town I now live in Greece. From the speakers, jazz standards gently fill the space; on the walls, carefully placed ornaments; the cup, which the waiter just brought my espresso in, looks hand-made. I dare to ask the waiter: indeed it is. Above the screen and through the window, I am gazing at another café, on the street's opposite side. Besides a few old (note: not old *fashioned*) discoloured pictures, the brownish walls are naked; apparently overused, the chairs and tables do not look comfortable; senior men are chatting and smoking on the sidewalk, taxi drivers pass by hurriedly for their break. I bet there is one single type of coffee served there: plain Greek coffee. Well, I could have been typing these words in that place, I think. But, really, *would I?*

Perhaps not, Phil Hubbard would argue. Drawing our attention to understudied retail gentrification, *Battle for the High Street* provides a critical, class-cantered account of the policies that aim at regenerating the allegedly 'dying' high streets of British towns. Analysing discourses and practices encapsulated by the 2011 *Portas Review* of high streets, the author contends that the urge to regenerate the British main shopping streets is driven not by a need to replace vacant retail space or less profitable activities such as betting shops and fast food places, as alleged, but follows, instead, certain class interests, moralities and tastes. Specifically, high street regeneration is driven by a middle-class desire for distinction from the 'abject' working classes through consumption and the settings it takes place in. The result of such transforming 'classed geographies of consumption' (p.39) is retail gentrification, which serves the interests of the middle classes at the expense of the working classes, who experience a radical change in the facilities, prices and aesthetics of the high streets that traditionally catered to them. After all, the battle for the high street is a battle between classes.

Hubbard begins his argument with a genealogy of the 'death' of the high street, in which the recent recession threatens the community performed in, and secured by, the British high streets. A selective notion of nostalgia is deployed to argue that independent and authentic shops will save the endangered community, and which ignores that 'different populations consume differently' (p.25). In such a discourse, the high street and its working-class components are first de-moralized and then re-moralized according to middle-class interests. To strengthen his argument, Hubbard successfully highlights the pivotal role of consumption to classed processes of identity and status, as well as the changing retail spatialities orchestrated by and reinforcing these processes. The recent rediscovery of the high street by the middle classes, and the particular experience of consumption it offers, is interpreted as a reaction to the 'inauthentic' out-of-town shopping mall.

Five empirical instances ground Hubbard's thesis. They all stress how a middle-class preoccupation with taste, moralities of disgust and efforts for distinction shadow the serious material constraints imposed on the less affluent. Working-class alcohol consumption is pushed away by a cosmopolitan drinking habitus considered as 'healthier', 'safer' and of 'better quality'. Traditional sex-shops and lap-dance bars provoke abjection to middle-class consumers and are thus replaced by highly aestheticized, feminized and more expensive erotic boutiques. Betting shops in their reproduction of stereotypes of a negative working-class behaviour 'retain a moral taint' (p.158) that needs to be regulated and thus kept away from the eyes of the

untainted gentrifying consumers. Cheap fast food retailers do not comply with current moralities of ethical, healthy and environmentally sensitive food consumption, rendering the high street 'toxic' (p.174) and are replaced by refined places for a 'responsible' middle-class. And, establishing new place identities, art and culture reorder retail and residential space according to a 'cultural valorization of particular aesthetic and cultural forms over others [that] encourages displacement and dispossession' (p.212).

Hubbard concludes that high street regeneration is a process of socio-spatialization that is informed by the association of cheapness with disgust and reproduces classed social relations in space. Therefore, he calls for a socially sensitive regeneration so that different population groups, and especially those of poorer backgrounds, are catered for. Most importantly though, Hubbard stresses the need to work against what he calls a 'collective amnesia' of gentrification studies: 'that is, to expose the processes which result in the displacement of working-class populations from the places where they live and work' (p.233). Besides its empirical wealth, the book brilliantly achieves its goal by situating retail regeneration and gentrification within a wider social critique of the parallel, unprecedented growth of both consumerism and economic inequalities nowadays. Nevertheless, being 'grounded in a very British set of debates' (p.10), as Hubbard admits, what the book perhaps fails to do is to relate to gentrification studies beyond the Anglophone world. In the few attempts to compare to another national context, the USA seems to be the reference. Although in a globalizing world the UK and the US are leading paradigms and other places might follow suit, it is crucial to not forget that in other places the suit is tailored differently.

Overall, I believe that *The Battle for the High Street* is not just a book; it is also a mirror that we all, as academics and, probably, middle-class consumers, should place in front of us. Lest we forget that the 'where', 'what', and 'how' we consume matter for the 'where', 'what', and 'how' the less privileged consume. Glancing at the café on the other side of the street while I am typing these last words, I suspect that this is how the café I am now sitting at looked like in the past: less eclectic, cheaper, with patrons that all they wanted was to take their coffee and socialize in the little time they had available. My distinction, their displacement.

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