

Loving diversity/controlling diversity: the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion in American upper middle class culture.

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Many books and articles have analyzed how “diversity” structures the identity of middle class and upper middle class residents who move to inner-city neighborhoods. Gentrifiers claim to enjoy mixed areas composed of a white and non-white, a poor and wealthy, a gay and straight population. It is easy—and relevant—to point to exclusionary practices that usually go hand in hand with such seemingly tolerant stands. However, is it fair to say that inclusion is limited to words, and that exclusion entirely pervades relations between social groups, even in mixed areas? Rejecting both the idealized vision of a spatial mixing that abolishes social differences and the analysis of gentrification as a purely exclusionary process, my study aims to take the gentrifiers’ endorsement of diversity seriously. I argue that their love of diversity, which cannot be reduced to sheer hypocrisy, is intrinsically linked to their capacity to control it.

I conducted fieldwork in the South End, Boston, spanning from 2004 to 2010, spending a total of 14 months there, interviewing 77 residents, and also studying documents about the 1960-1980 urban renewal policy at the Boston Redevelopment Authority and the South End Historical Society. I also used ethnographic methodology: as I was invited to parties, social events and fundraisers, I progressively integrated myself in the gentrifiers’ life.

Formerly a disadvantaged, inner-city neighborhood, the South End is now a sought-after address in Boston. In 2000, the total population of 28,160 residents was composed of 14,058 whites, 7,054 African-American, 3,236 Asians and 4,578 Hispanics. Although the neighborhood has left behind its “skid row” reputation, it has been unevenly gentrified and is still considered a mixed area (residents living in subsidized housing amount to 40% of the population).

My book, to be published in October (*Good Neighbors: Studying the liberal upper middle class in Boston*), analyzes the emergence of a social group from the 1960s up to the present. It investigates unions and divisions between various groups living in the South End (Black and Hispanic activists, the African-American middle class, landlords and landladies, young professionals, conservative residents, etc), which finally resulted in the emergence of a local elite. Focusing on the upper middle class residents’ mobilization in neighborhood associations, I bring to light the emergence of this local elite, which progressively gained power in the decision-making process and controlled renovation, commercial and real estate development. My analysis is both political and cultural. This group is also characterized by a specific *habitus*. Through morality but also culture and relations to public space, it creates specific boundaries with “others,” in terms of class, race and sexual orientation. “Diversity” epitomizes a new kind of social distinction, which does not rely on segregation between homogeneous residential areas, but on a strict control of spatial mixing within residential areas.

1) What do my interviewees mean by “diversity”? In most cases, as I asked them why they moved to the South End, I heard very similar answers. A consultant, who moved in 1987 with his wife, a lawyer, explained: “*It’s a small community of very different people. [...] People are different, age-wise, racially, ethnically, they are different educationally, they are different economically, with regard to their sexual orientation.*” Another consultant, a woman married

to a corporate manager, also a member of a neighborhood association whose website praises the diversity of Dover, said: “*We wanted to live in the part of the city which could offer what we consider the best of the city, which was diversity. In all its flavors, diversity in terms of age of people who live there, ethnic mix, the vibrancy of the South End art, the homosexuals, the low-income housings, the empty-nesters.*” As the literature on gentrification already demonstrated, gentrifiers use the oppositions between mixed neighborhoods and the suburbs, heterogeneity and homogeneity, interactions and individualism, public and private, social ties and fears to define themselves. For residents who moved to the South End because they could not afford buying property in Back Bay or Beacon Hill, the argument of diversity is also a way of rationalizing their residential choice. However, diversity also reflects values, which originate in two histories: the history of gentrification and the history of liberalism.

Very much consonant with Jane Jacobs’s rhetoric, diversity as a core value structures the identity of my interviewees. In that sense, diversity means intense social ties. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs criticized urban renewal policies, which destroyed rich urban neighborhoods and instead created artificial and isolated communities. She provides a description of the Village in Manhattan, where various groups constantly interact and meet and opposed it to the suburbs where people use their cars and withdraw to the domestic sphere. The huge success this book met can be seen in my interviewees’ responses and practices. Constantly mentioning how many neighbors they know, how many people they say “hello” to on the street, some of them also joined an organization created in 1990 in the South End, *Walk Boston*, which promotes walking for transportation and recreation.

The endorsement of diversity in the American upper middle class is also a legacy of the history of liberalism since the 1960s. Very active in the fight against Jim Crow, many liberals became afraid of the radicalization of the Black Power movement and the New Left in the late 1960s. Not only did the radical movements criticize institutionalized segregation, but they also pointed to the structural roots of poverty. As the “white backlash” in the 1970s and the neoconservative movement in the 1980s violently attacked the Left, diversity became a way of stressing a commitment to progressive value while maintaining a distance from radicalism. In the 1990s, the promotion of cultural diversity entered universities and big corporations, not so much to challenge social structure, but to increase efficiency. At the same time, the discourse of diversity stopped focusing on race and rather encompassed various groups such as women and gay people. Civil rights movement rhetoric gave way to a more consensual and elitist approach to minorities. Far from revealing inequalities that should be eliminated, differences are seen as something positive in themselves, thus leaving power relations unquestioned. My interviewees developed the same approach to diversity: as the above interview excerpts show, when asked to define diversity, they always provided a list of social groups which make diversity valuable for everyone. Thus, gentrifiers can highlight their openness to “others,” while obscuring any power issues related to the coexistence of racially and socially distinct populations.

2) Does it mean that they are merely hypocrites, who praise openness while carefully protecting themselves from the “others”? In fact, the South End gentrifiers’ endorsement of diversity results in concrete relations to other residents. First, their commitment to the community reveals itself in their constant efforts to socialize newcomers to diversity and create a “good neighbor” ethos, which contributes to promoting a tolerant atmosphere and decreasing conflicts between different groups. This is one explicit goal of the 15 neighborhood associations existing in the South End. In this sense, just as Howard Becker spoke about “moral entrepreneurs,” their members can be described to “diversity entrepreneurs”. In fact, many social agencies are located in the South End and are used by

homeless people, low-income women, former drug addicts and prisoners. This fuels embarrassment and hostility among some residents, especially newcomers whose level of income has increased dramatically between the 1990s and first part of this century. Many of them come from the suburbs where they had big houses, used cars and rarely ventured into public spaces. “Empty nesters,” who have just retired and whose children are now adults, are eager to enjoy urban life. However, by moving to a neighborhood like the South End, they suddenly face a level of diversity that they are not familiar with. Neighborhood associations are precisely engaged in dealing with these fears, acknowledging them but at the same time turning them into something positive: not the exclusion of others, but the praise of diversity.

One active member of a neighborhood association organizes walks in the South End in order to introduce the residents to the history of the South End. I participated in those walks, thus being able to analyze in detail the particular view of the neighborhood that they provide. The walks shed light on the history of the South End as a “skid row,” and issues such as crime, prostitution and alcohol abuse in order to stress the positive aspect of renovation. At the same time, in keeping with the definition of diversity I have explained, the guides of the walks praise diversity as the coexistence of various groups being profitable for everyone. From this perspective, diversity is no longer dangerous; it is enjoyable.

Second, some of these gentrifiers (the most progressive ones as the group is not homogeneous) are able to mobilize for the right of low-income residents to live in the neighborhood. Far from just encouraging displacement, they are in favor of mixed housing programs, composed of a percentage of affordable units. Giving charities money and serving on their boards, they support some of their programs, like one aiming at providing housing for former homeless people. A conflict which took place between 2007 and 2008 in the South End illustrates this commitment. A homeless shelter decided to buy 3 buildings in order to accommodate former homeless people, thus raising protests from abutting upper middle class residents. A small group of residents wrote and circulated a petition demanding that 2 out of the 3 buildings be sold at market rates: they explicitly explained that they didn’t want too many low income residents on their street and that they valued owners rather than renters. Immediately, residents who had been active in the community for a long time (for several decades in some cases) started another group, the Welcoming Committee. This Committee called for numerous meetings, massively attended, and launched another petition signed by 500 residents. In the name of “diversity” and the right of low-income residents to live in the South End, they defended the shelter, which ultimately could buy the buildings.

3) However, while calling for tolerance and promoting “diversity,” these residents have been active in controlling the proportion of “others” that compose the “good” diversity as well as low-income residents’ visibility, in particular in public spaces. The campaign led by the Welcoming committee in defense of the homeless shelter illustrates this ambivalence. While explicitly defending diversity, they organized public meetings and started negotiations between the non-profit organization and the angry residents. During public meetings, both the progressive residents and the representatives of the non-profit put emphasis on the selection and supervision of the renters. The residents encouraged the non-profit to provide a document which said: “We will begin this new housing program with 24-hour staffing, 7 days per week. The staffing will include two case managers, one evening counselor and one overnight house manager”. They committed themselves to implementing strict rules in terms of guests, smoking and sitting on the stoops “All guests and visitors must sign in and out with the date and time in the guest book. Overnight guests and visitors are allowed, provided that adequate advance notice is given to the House manager”.

More importantly, negotiations resulted in a significant decrease in the number of renters and a plan to have a minimum percentage of middle-income residents. Thus, a stricter

definition was given to “diversity,” as endorsed by the Welcoming Committee. The number of units went down from 37 to 30, or less. In addition, 40% of the units were reserved for people in the 60% median income category (which works out roughly to allowed earnings of 30-35 thousand). If they distanced themselves from the question of “density” raised by the angry residents (a word characteristic of neighborhood association movement in the suburbs), the South End gentrifiers proved to the same concern for social balance. Aware that many members of the groups would disagree, the leader of the Welcoming Committee explained her endorsement of the deal by saying: “The introduction of a middle income population to the mix is also a healthy feature. It brings another level of economic integration into the neighborhood. It also gives balance to the house by adding a group that may be more outgoing, more apt to participate in neighborhood projects, and able to serve as a bridge between the poorer residents who from PSI’s experience tend to stay to themselves and the neighborhood at large.” The promotion of diversity also reflects a concern for social balance.

More precisely, the concern for social balance goes hand in hand with the question of visibility. Interestingly enough, as this conflict shows, many gentrifiers oppose the stigmatization of homeless people, low income residents and people of color. They express a commitment to live next to them and are sometimes willing to fight against their displacement. At the same time, this progressive attitude seems to rely on strict conditions: gentrifiers praise low income residents’ and minorities’ attitudes when they show goodwill, and even obedience. The usual sentence I heard during interviews was “they blend in,” suggesting that too much visibility from these residents is not appreciated. Former drug addicts following a detoxification program in a non-profit also located in the South End are welcome to participate in a neighborhood association’ picnic every year in a small public park. But every year, they cook hamburgers while other residents are busy participating in the auctions and social talks.

Some scholars are prone to analyze the relations between wealthy residents and other social groups as participating in the repressive tendencies characteristic of the neo-liberal city and the punitive State. Without making a moral judgment, nor being naïve, I argue the upper middle class emphasis on diversity in mixed neighborhoods deserves a more nuanced analysis. It reveals not so much the desire to establish strong spatial boundaries protecting homogeneous communities but to have a limited and controlled proportion of “others” in their residential area.