

New discourses on class, culture and citizenship: gentrification of a Dutch social housing estate and the production of socio-spatial inequalities

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Abstract

This paper shows how class is restructured along particular moral and cultural lines through urban policies that aim at gentrification. It zooms in on the policy targeting a social housing estate in Overvecht, an underprivileged multi-ethnic neighbourhood in Utrecht, the third biggest city of the Netherlands. This policy aims at breaking up areas of concentrated poverty through creating a mix of social housing, houses for rent at market rates and owned houses. According to the municipality and the housing associations, redesigning Overvecht into a mixed tenure neighbourhood should give rise to a demographic which includes residents from different income brackets.

This policy rests upon the idea that mixing more and less privileged residents will prevent the latter from falling into or remaining in a "culture of poverty" – an notion that does not seem to have changed much since Oscar Lewis coined it in 1965. According to this policy, underprivileged residents will benefit from the presence of positive role models, expand their "social capital" and, through this, gain better opportunities at the labour market.

The urban policies in Utrecht express a strong moral preference for the "active citizen". Through participatory procedures, tenants of social housing are summoned to become "active citizens", i.e. "good-willing" citizens who participate in meetings, take responsibility for their neighbourhood, and present civilised behaviour (e.g. keep communal spaces clean and avoid noise pollution). Remarkably, the active citizen becomes conflated with the (potential) home-owner. It is presented as a common belief that home-owners invest more in their neighbourhood. With reference to the

neoliberal dictum that people take good care of their property to increase its value, it is argued that home owners will engage in improving their neighbourhood as this will lead to an increased value of their real estate.

Residents who neither participate in participatory procedures nor present any upward social mobility embody the antithesis of the “active citizen”. Hence, through the policies, a new category of inappropriate urban subjects is created: the “passive citizens”. In Overvecht, a “cultural” reasoning appears to be part of the conceptualization of “passive citizenship”, related to the large group of Moroccan Dutch tenants in the neighbourhood. This “cultural” reasoning blames Moroccan Dutch tenants for “drinking tea instead of looking for employment”, being on welfare rather than working or being unable to buy a house due to religious obstacles towards mortgage loans.

The paper concludes that current urban policy discourse puts class differences back on centre stage and reframes these along moral and cultural lines. The “haves” (property owners) and “may-haves” (tenants who act as active citizens and are socially upwards mobile) are deemed better citizens than the “have-nots” (tenants who will rent forever, allegedly due to cultural impediments to upwards mobility).

This paper combines policy document analysis with ethnographic accounts of encounters and meetings between the different actors involved.