

## ECOLOGICAL GENTRIFICATION. A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

### Introduction

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This special issue aims at a better understanding of the process of ecological gentrification, defined as new or intensified socio-spatial inequalities produced by urban greening agendas and environmental policies fostered at a local level. Investigations developed on environmental gentrification are not an integral part of the general literature on gentrification in contemporary cities. The attention paid towards the relation between ecological innovation and the socio-spatial structure of inequalities in cities has been mainly developed by scholars in Urban Political Ecology. Geographers, planners, sociologists have demonstrated that many green interventions create enclaves of environmental privilege, while low-income and minority residents are excluded from the neighborhoods where new environmental goods are created.

This phenomenon, extensively studied in the United States, is more recently becoming an important object of analysis in Europe as well. However, the research carried out in our continent, with few exceptions, is still patchy and there are many conceptual and methodological aspects that need to be clarified, especially in the light of the differences between North America and Europe.

This special issue aims to fill this gap in the theoretical debate as well as in the empirical investigation, by combining case studies and literature review analysis, focusing on some contextual aspects that are helpful to understand how ecological gentrification has been developing in Europe. Two key issues are persistent in these analyses: the relevance of the effects of public policies and the territorial dimension of changes and challenges.

The first aspect is the relevance of public policies in Europe, both in eventually promoting and containing processes of ecological gentrification. On the one hand, several integrated and sectoral policies in Europe, driven

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and managed by different levels of government (European, national, subnational and local) have been fostering public interventions oriented to improve urban greening and ecological preservation. European cities are often extremely innovative when it comes to initiatives enhancing the quality of life and the ecological standards of living, and this may represent an important mechanism promoting gentrification, as already highlighted in the international literature as well as in several articles published in this special issue (the case of Leipzig described by Haase, the case of Ljubljana described by Ploštajner, Simoneti, Cerar, Medved, and the case of Ghent analysed by Goossens). However, in Europe, more than in other contexts worldwide, gentrification seems to be linked to additional aspects of environmental policy. Indeed, European policies have fostered specific strategies targeting climate change and soil consumption, developing intervention in favour of urban density and energy saving technology, in order to reach the ideal limit of “zero consumption”. Fast-growing cities are therefore becoming more densely built up, as previously urbanised areas have been used for residential and commercial purposes. With the exception of re-growing cities such as Leipzig (see Haase in this special issue), it seems difficult to imagine the development of more green spaces in city centres, while the hypothesis of the expansion of green belts or peri-urban parks seems more credible. Consequently, gentrification in European cities may be defined as more ‘ecological’ than ‘green’, especially as far as it concerns growing urban contexts. An interesting example of this tendency towards ‘ecological gentrification’ is related to energy retrofitting. Grossman in her article explains the steps which have been taken towards greater energy efficiency in the building sector in Europe. However, as argued by the author, energy efficiency may become a luxury if its introduction is not supported by economic subsidies and incentives for less wealthy groups, ending up in being a socially unjust policy.

On the other hand, public policies in Europe can also be considered as a mechanisms limiting ecological gentrification. Throughout history, the strong influence of public institutions on urban development through urban planning, welfare policies and housing policies has led to local contexts characterised by lower levels of social inequality and spatial segregation compared with its counterparts in the rest of the world. In her article about Vienna, Cucca illustrates how housing policies and urban renewal strategies in Vienna have limited the potential negative outcomes of urban greening in the city. Although Vienna is an exceptional case when it comes to housing policies, it

in several contexts ecological gentrification may be mitigated and governed by different policy tools.

A second key aspect is related to the territorial dimension and the most recent regional dynamics in Europe.

An important point to take into consideration when thinking about the differences between North America and Europe regards the average city size. In fact, huge global cities in Europe are limited to very few examples (London, Paris, Berlin), while a specific characteristic of the Old Continent is being a network of medium-sized urban contexts. It sounds strategic therefore to conduct research not only on big metropolitan areas, as has mainly been done so far, but also on smaller cities and towns. In this special issue, we have tried to partially respond to this research gap by including studies on towns with approximately 250,000 inhabitants such as Brescia (see Beretta), Ljubljana (see Ploštajner, Simoneti, Cerar, Medved), and Ghent (see Goossens) and on a medium-sized city such as Leipzig with just over 550,000 inhabitants (see Haase). Moreover, the effort to analyse the possible dynamics of ecological gentrification in a rural environment seems to be completely new (see Carrosio, Magnani and Osti in this special issue).

Gentrification in small and medium-sized cities implies that one needs to take into consideration a whole series of context variables, first of all the fact that smaller towns or cities do not tend to attract important financial capital targeting smart, green interventions or specific groups of inhabitants keen in driving ecological innovation. Big international investment indeed is more likely to concentrate on big cities, characterised by dynamism, innovative capacity, creative spirit and economic vivacity, where the return on their financial operations may be bigger. As emerges from the literature, real estate and residential developments (often luxury ones) built by large investment groups include benefits like swimming pools and gyms, along with the parks or green areas (often redeveloped) they overlook. The latter, therefore, although not private, end up de facto being almost exclusively for those who live in these privileged places. The whole of the surrounding area undergoes an upgrade and sees its economic value increase, consequently making it inaccessible to the middle and lower classes.

In small and medium-sized cities, on the other hand, large-scale urban transformations such as the ones mentioned above are unusual and it is unlikely that the redevelopment of a park or green area alone will lead to an increase in the average economic profile of the residents there, as the case studies of Brescia and Lubjiana analysed in this special issue testify. In other words, in European cities, and especially in small and medium-sized cit-

ies, urban green spaces, if isolated from broader redevelopment interventions, do not represent sufficient leverages to cause the displacement of the less affluent social classes.

To sum up, European cities seem to present a variety of characteristics and dynamics that, on the one hand, require precaution when it comes to identifying possible processes of green or environmental gentrification, but on the other hand indicate new challenges and tensions as far as the relation between ecological innovation (both technological and bottom-up driven) and socio-spatial inequalities are concerned.