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THE ROLE OF GENTRIFICATION IN THE CHANGING ECOLOGY OF INCOME: EVIDENCE FROM CANADIAN CITIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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Frequent assertions are made to the effect that gentrification has dramatically transformed the social structure of inner cities in western countries. This paper argues that these assertions are exaggerations. Gentrification, at least in North America, has affected relatively few cities and even in those favoured cities has not been the most significant process of social change. Empirical evidence in support of these assertions is drawn from on-going research on the changing ecology of income and social status in Canadian cities. Gentrification as a process, and gentrified neighbourhoods as outcomes of that process, are shown to be rather localized and relatively marginal architects of social change. The paper concludes by identifying some of the lessons for further research that might be learned from these results.

The contemporary literature on gentrification is voluminous and growing rapidly (SMITH and WILLIAMS 1986; VAN WEESEP 1994; BEAUREGARD 1994). That literature, although often providing useful case studies of local area change, frequently contains generalizations that go far beyond the limits of the research design and the empirical evidence available. As illustrations, the process of gentrification - defined as involving the movement of middle-class households into older inner city neighbourhoods formerly occupied by households of lower income and social status - is said by some observers to have dramatically transformed the inner city, leading to a reorganization of urban social space and an "embourgeoisement" of the living environments that cities provide. To some authors gentrification is seen as the most significant process reshaping the social structure and quality of life in contemporary western cities.

This paper argues that these kinds of assertions are unwarranted exaggerations. My starting premise is that gentrification, at least in North America, has to date affected relatively few cities and even in those cities it is not the most significant process of social or neighbourhood transition. The contention here is that such assertions are inappropriate in part because the scale and impacts of gentrification have not been systematically evaluated in relation to other forms of urban social change. In this paper evidence in support of these criticisms is provided through an empirical evaluation of the relative contribution of gentrification to the changing ecology of income and neighbourhood change in Canadian cities in general, but with particular emphasis on recent trends in the Toronto metropolitan area.

Setting the Stage: Gentrification in Context

A critique of gentrification would logically begin with a systematic deconstruction of both its cultural origins and underlying conceptualizations. However, since the following argument rests primarily on assessing the relative importance of the process within an empirical framework, a detailed discussion of alternative concepts and theories is not necessary. These issues are carefully reviewed elsewhere (HAMNETT 1991; VAN WEESEP 1994; BEAUREGARD 1994; LEY 1994). Nevertheless, a few poignant comments are appropriate to set the stage and to put gentrification "in its place".

There is little doubt that part of the current debate on the meaning and significance of gentrification is basically a matter of semantics. Most of us would agree that there is no agreed-upon definition of what gentrification is or how it should be measured. For many students of the inner city the restrictive definition given above - that is, gentrification as a process in which members of one social class (the middle-class) invade and subsequently dominate residential areas occupied by those of lower status (usually the working class) - is the point of departure. Unfortunately, there are relatively few situations where this specific form of social transition has actually taken place. As a result, the tendency has been to extend the gentrification envelope to encompass a variety of processes that may also lead to social upgrading in older inner city areas, processes which some of us would argue do not constitute gentrification in any sense of the term. These differences in application would not be especially significant were it not that the terminology is itself loaded with excessive cultural and political baggage. It is this combination of loose definitions and excess theoretical baggage that leads to unwarranted generalizations and unrealistic assessments of the role of gentrification in the inner city.

As an additional source of confusion, gentrification is frequently equated with the process of urban revitalization, in all of its varied forms (BOURNE 1993a; BADCOCK 1992 and 1993; BEAUREGARD 1994). This in turn leads to the inclusion, as part of the gentrification process, of the upgrading of older commercial districts, the reuse and redevelopment of derelict industrial and waterfront areas, in-fill housing and condominium construction, as well as improvements to public facilities and civic institutions. Invariably, this inclusive application conceals the distinctive and restrictive origins of gentrification, and clearly results in an exaggeration of its scale and impacts.

Nevertheless, any attempt to assess the relative importance of gentrification requires that we specify not only a concrete definition but an explicit set of measurement criteria. For present purposes, I have chosen to apply the restrictive (and stereo-typical definition), which refers to a change in the social composition of urban neighbourhoods, whereby households of one status level or class, typically professionals, replace those of a lower status, typically described as working class. For some the concept of class is central to the identification and explanation of the process, but it too is an exceptionally porous concept. In practice, class is seldom

explicitly defined; it is simply assumed or imposed on an unsuspecting population. Varying the criteria of measurement, of course, alters the results and the images those results invoke.

My third point is that gentrification, however defined, can only be assessed in context. By this I initially mean understanding the geographical setting - the locality - in which the process occurs; an argument that LEES (1994) has recently re-iterated with respect to London and New York. But I also mean setting the relative contributions of gentrification within any urban area against those of other processes leading to social and residential change in the city. The processes of interest here include the effects of dramatic post-war demographic transitions (e.g. baby and marriage booms and busts, fertility declines); the social origins of fluctuations in household formation rates and revised choices in living arrangements; the condominium (and tenure) transformation; continued employment and occupational restructuring; revisions in the linkages between the local economy and households and individuals, as suppliers of labour; changing attitudes to family, community and collective social responsibility; the localized and uneven impacts of crime, poverty, racism and social alienation; the impacts of increasingly diverse flows of immigrants and refugees; the revealed preferences and heightened aspirations of ethno-cultural groups for social space, political recognition and a larger piece of the economic pie; reorganizations of the social welfare net and systems of social service provision; and the constraints and incentives provided by planning authorities and other public agencies; to name but a few. The gentrification concept, it is argued here, captures relatively few of these processes.

The traditional concept of gentrification can also be criticized here precisely because it gives undue prominence to one form of neighbourhood change, resulting from a specific combination of events, over all others. We could ask, for instance, why the movement of a neighbourhood across an arbitrary class or status boundary qualifies that particular neighbourhood for privileged attention? Neighbourhoods, as we know, are always changing; none are completely stable. Some are invariably moving up the ladder of social status, others are moving down. Indeed, some may shift markedly on the same scale but without crossing a class or status boundary, as is often the case of elite districts. Are these any less significant? The same neighbourhoods, as analyses of long-term trajectories have demonstrated, may shift upward or downward at different points in time (BEAUREGARD 1990). Most empirical research on gentrification has also been rather selective, if not myopic. Studies have tended to focus on those few neighbourhoods where social status and housing investment have shifted dramatically upward. However, such neighbourhoods, although highly visible and vocal, are relatively rare.

The literature in this field can also be criticized with respect to assertions that the process is relatively recent. In some settings it may indeed be recent, in others it is clearly not. The earliest reference that I have found in post-war Canada to the phenomenon of middle-income households moving back into older neighbourhoods in the central city is in the report of a Royal Commission published in 1957, and

drawing on data from the 1951 Census. Archival research in Toronto has also shown that renovation activity was well underway much earlier in the inner city, during the late 1920s and 1930s (LEMON 1985). Much of this investment appears to have made use of public funds, or at least public leverage, but the result was the same - a substantial change in the social attributes of the neighbourhood.

A considerable body of scholarly opinion has now accumulated to the effect that gentrification has been much less prominent as a path of neighbourhood change in the US than it first appeared to be. William FREY (1990), for example, ended his assessment of recent demographic changes and urban population movements within US cities by noting that while pockets of gentrification do exist within some large central cities, and these are more likely to be found in cosmopolitan cities such as San Francisco and Washington DC, it appears that:

"...the baby boom generation has followed the patterns of earlier generations by moving to the suburbs as they begin to raise their families" (p.37).

With respect to the long-term impacts of gentrification, he concludes:

"The hope that affluent baby boomers would re-invigorate the nation's largest central cities has evaporated" (p. 38).

Before turning to the empirical analysis, I should clarify what it is that I am not saying. I am not arguing that gentrification is irrelevant to the state of the nation's cities, as some might argue. Nor am I saying that it has not had significant impacts in certain districts in selected cities. Nor does my position imply that gentrification is not a prominent force elsewhere, perhaps in western and central Europe (VAN WEESEP and MUSTERD 1991; BRUN and FAGNANI 1994), although there too the danger of over-generalization is clearly present.

Assessing the Contribution of Gentrification: A Canadian Case Study

How does one assess the relative contribution of gentrification to neighbourhood change and social upgrading in the inner city? The particular empirical evidence on which much of my argument rests is drawn from an on-going study on the redistribution of income, wealth, capital investment and collective consumption within Canadian metropolitan areas. Although still incomplete, this study explores the dimensions, causes and implications of the changing geography of capital, income and wealth, and social inequality both between and within inner cities and suburbs. The objective, ultimately, is to contribute to extending a conceptual framework and an empirical base for understanding how and why capital and income move over space, among households and social groups, and into and out of the built environment, and with what effects (HARVEY 1985; BADCOCK 1992; SMITH 1994).

The metric used to evaluate the contribution of gentrification is personal (household and family) income. We have chosen to use this variable in this paper, rather than a more complex multi-dimensional criterion, for three reasons; because of its simplicity in interpretation, because it is the most consistent over the long time period under

analysis, and because it captures the interaction effects of changes in other dimensions of contemporary social life (e.g. in demography, living arrangement, occupation and labour market participation) better than any other index. It is not, however, without serious limitations.

The income variable (discounted for inflation) encompasses wages and salaries, interest and investment income, as well as all transfers to individuals through government programs (e.g. social assistance) and collective consumption. At a later stage, the income derived in kind from the consumption of public goods and services will be imputed from local tax and assessment rates and from local variations in levels of service provision. The brief discussion to follow, however, focuses only on changes in the redistribution of income, by subarea and source.

These data are then used to examine the simple question posed at the outset: how important has the gentrification process been in contributing to the changing ecology of income within Canadian metropolitan areas? The present analysis builds on the results reported in several earlier papers (BOURNE 1993a, 1993b, 1994), by extending the data to include the results of the 1991 Census and by varying the spatial units of analysis to include a wider range of neighbourhood types. The examples below will cover only one metropolitan area, the Toronto census metropolitan area (CMA), for the period 1951-1991, but with particular emphasis on the most recent 1986-1991 census period¹.

To set an appropriate context for the empirical test to follow we should provide a brief overview of recent trends in the distribution of income for the entire Toronto metropolitan area and specifically for the central city and inner city area. Table 1 provides a summary of trends in the spatial distribution of household income, measured as an index and by municipality within the CMA from 1950 to 1990. The data reveal the classical ecological pattern: the central city and inner area municipalities are on average poorer than the suburbs, and have become poorer over time. Thus, in a metropolitan area that has frequently been cited as having witnessed widespread gentrification over the last few decades (SABOURIN 1994; LEY 1994), the inner area-suburban contrast in incomes has intensified.

Nevertheless, the effects of urban revitalization and social upgrading are still evident. The income (and thus social status) index for the central city as a whole, that had declined steadily from at least the 1950s, has increased moderately since 1980, from 89.0 to 91.3. At the same time, the relative social status of the older inner suburbs and even the mature (post-war) suburbs, has declined very sharply. The suburb of Scarborough, for example, had above average household income (103.2) as a new suburb in the 1950s, but by 1990 had income levels well below the metropolitan average (89.8) and below that of the central city. Poverty, and low incomes, are becoming common attributes of the older suburbs, in part because of the suburbanization of social housing construction and the in-flows of new immigrants.

These aggregations, however, obscure considerable variability within each municipality and district, especially the central city. Table 2 illustrates the contrasts in income within and between the central downtown core, the inner city and the central

Table 1 Trends in the Spatial Distribution of Average Household Income, by Municipality, Toronto CMA, 1950-90 CMA=100

	1950(a)	1970	1980	1985	1990
INNER AREA					
City of Toronto	93.1	90.8	89.0	90.9	91.3
East York	107.4	89.2	85.3	80.9	80.8
York	102.5	84.6	78.4	75.3	75.8
MATURE SUBURBS					
Scarborough	103.2	99.7	97.7	95.3	89.8
North York	116.6	110.7	103.4	100.1	98.4
Etobicoke	116.8	109.0	105.5	102.4	96.8
NEWER SUBURBS					
Mississauga	n.a.	110.8	110.2	108.8	106.0
Brampton	n.a.	103.8	106.3	105.4	105.5
Richmond Hill	n.a.	98.2	107.7	116.2	120.0
Oakville	n.a.	112.2	121.4	123.7	130.0
Vaughan	n.a.	116.7	132.4	128.1	132.9
Markham	n.a.	123.6	136.4	139.7	137.1

n.a. = not available

CMA = Census Metropolitan Area = 100

(a) = Municipalities aggregated to conform to present boundaries

Sources: Census of Canada, various years, 1951 through 1991

city, relative to the CMA. Note first that all of these zones have seen upgrading relative to the CMA, and that the downtown core now has higher average incomes than the CMA as a whole. This clearly is the combined result of revitalization and new condominium construction on commercial and industrial lands, and gentrification. Second, the skewness index (the standardized difference between average and median incomes), has increased for all areas, but notably for the downtown core and the inner city. In this sense income and status polarization has deepened over the study period, in part we might assume as a result of both revitalization and gentrification.

What specific contribution did gentrification and gentrified neighbourhoods in particular make to this process of social upgrading? As a first step in responding to

Table 2 Changing Income Distributions and Levels of Polarization, Downtown Core, Inner City and Central City, Toronto, 1970-90

Median Household Income by Area	1970 (a)	1990 (b)	Change 1970-90
As Ratio of CMA (1)			(b) - (a)
Central Core (2)	81.3	103.2	+21.9
Inner City	68.7	74.5	+5.8
Central City	90.8	91.3	+0.5
CMA	100.0	100.0	-
Skewness Index (3)			(b) - (a) / (a)
Central Core	31.3	41.1	+37.7
Inner City	24.8	40.2	+62.1
Central City	22.8	33.8	+48.2
CMA (rest)	11.9	16.8	+41.1
Coefficient of Variation (%)			(b) - (a)
Central Core	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Inner City	37	69	+32
Central City	47	61	+14
CMA (rest)	36	43	+7

(1) CMA = Census Metropolitan Area

(2) Core = CBD, the central business district and its immediate surroundings of mixed commercial and industrial uses

(3) Skewness Index (S). $S = \text{average-median income} \times 100 / \text{median}$

n.a. = not available

Sources: Census of Canada, various years

this question thirty-five neighbourhoods were identified within the central city as having undergone some form of social upgrading. Otherwise stable neighbourhoods (those whose relative income and status ranking changed by less than 5%), and those of declining income, were not included, although they remain a primary focus of the larger project.

These thirty-five neighbourhoods were in turn classified into five distinct types based on both the social and physical forms of upgrading underway. These areas

included:

1) newer redevelopment districts (6); 2) long-established elite areas (6); 3) middle-income districts (9); 4) immigrant-ethnic communities (8); and 5) gentrified neighbourhoods (6). The latter neighbourhoods were identified from previous research on gentrification in the city (e.g. LEY 1992; BOURNE 1993b; SABOURIN 1994); the four earlier types were defined by the usual socio-economic and ethnic origin variables. The respective contributions of each neighbourhood type to overall income growth were then calculated as simple summations (weighted) of income growth in that area as percentages of city-wide growth. The results, for the household income variable alone, and in terms of the relative ranking of neighbourhood types, are summarized here as Table 3.

Table 3 The Contribution of Different Types and Processes of Neighbourhood Transition to Aggregate Income Growth in the Central City, Toronto, 1950-90

Rank in Income 1991	Neighbourhood Type and Inputed Transition Process	No. of Areas	Range of Income* (C000\$)	Rank in Aggregate Contribution
1.	Existing elite areas	6	125-235	2
2.	Redeveloped - new social spaces	4	75-155	1
3.	Upgrading of middle-income neighbourhoods	9	65-125	3
4.	Gentrified neighbourhoods	6	55-105	5
5.	Upgrading of immigrant-ethnic neighbourhoods	8	40-75	4

* Incomes are averages for all households (in 1990 current dollars).

Source: Calculations based on Statistics Canada data, Census of Canada, 1991; adapted and extended from BOURNE (1993a and 1994)

The obvious conclusion from this simple test is that gentrified neighbourhoods, as aggregate social entities, and measured in terms of the total income growth received by resident households in those areas, ranked fifth and last among the neighbourhood types. The largest contributor to aggregate income growth and redistribution in the inner city resulted from the redevelopment of formerly underused or vacant industrial, railway and port lands for residential purposes, typically as condominiums. Almost without exception, these areas contained little or no prior residential population. The second and third ranked contributions to overall social upgrading in the central city were the continued accumulation of wealth in older elite

residential areas, and the more modest but still significant upgrading of existing middle-income areas of the city. The fourth-ranked contributor, rather surprisingly, was the relative growth in income in many of the city's older (primarily second and third generation) and lower-income immigrant and ethnic neighbourhoods.

It seems reasonable to conclude that when set in context, gentrified neighbourhoods in themselves did not represent a large proportion of total aggregate income growth in the central city. When measured by the capital investment included in residential renovation and house purchase, although these data are far less reliable due to enumeration errors and spill-over effects (and thus are not reported here), the proportional contribution of gentrification was even lower.

How would these results differ among individual neighbourhoods? Among the 12 highest income neighbourhoods in the central city in the 1991 Census (those with average household incomes of over C\$100,000), only one was a gentrified neighbourhood as defined above. That neighbourhood, Don Vale, ranked eleventh overall. Most of the other neighbourhoods typically classified as gentrified had household incomes around the metropolitan average, and most witnessed slower rates of income growth over the latter part of the study period than either elite or middle-income areas.

The range and diversity of neighbourhood income levels and rates of social upgrading are illustrated in Table 4 for a sample of each of the neighbourhood types. Note that the income levels (in 1990) varied widely, from C\$59,500 to over C\$231,000, or from 100.2 to 329.6 as ratios of the metropolitan average. Over the period in question some of these neighbourhoods more than doubled their wealth level relative to the entire metropolitan area. Clearly, even among upgrading areas, social polarization is immense and increasing. Only one of the gentrified neighbourhoods, again Don Vale, became wealthier over the study period at a rate (105% increase) common among the elite and middle-income areas. The proposition that gentrification is not a recent phenomenon is confirmed through an analysis of the time series data. The peak of the gentrification process in most of the gentrified neighbourhoods defined, at least in terms of income growth (and associated) house price inflation, was in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Among these neighbourhoods, only Don Vale continued to attract middle-income households at the same rate during the house-price boom of the mid-1980s. Even then it was swamped by social changes taking place elsewhere in the city, and through other kinds of processes. Thus, even in a city where gentrification is widely regarded to have been substantial, and where incomes in the downtown core area now exceed the metropolitan average, and those in the central city have risen relative to the metropolitan area as a whole, gentrification was not the dominant architect of social upgrading nor of the spatial redistribution of income. Assuming that the above neighbourhood typology can be equated with the spatial outcomes of different processes of social change - and that is a critical assumption - there are several other processes and outcomes leading to upgrading and revitalization that warrant higher priority in our research agenda².

Table 4 Rates of Income Growth and Social Upgrading Among Elite, Redeveloped, Gentrified and Immigrant Neighbourhoods, Inner Area, Toronto, 1950-90

Selected Inner Area Neighbourhoods (and CT)	Household Income 1990 (a) (in 000s\$)	1950 Index (b) CMA=100	1990 Index (b) CMA=100	Index Change 1950-90 (in %)
Old Elite areas:				
Rosedale (86)	196.1	160.2	329.6	105.7
Rosedale (87)	129.9	127.1	218.7	72.1
Forest Hill(130)	172.1	158.8	289.7	85.9
Forest Hill(131)	123.9	157.1	208.5	32.7
Newly Redeveloped:				
Waterfront (13)	113.1	-	190.4	-
Inner Suburban:				
Bayview (264)	231.1	226.2	389.1	72.0
Don Valley (266)	180.7	186.3	304.2	63.3
Gentrified:				
Don Vale (67)	102.4	89.0	172.4	93.7
Don Vale (68)	61.6	90.0	103.7	15.2
Riverdale (69)	59.9	76.2	103.7	30.2
Immigrant:				
Dundas W. (41-45)	59.5	64.1	100.2	56.3
CENTRAL CITY	54.3	94.5	91.3	-3.5
METRO AREA (CMA)	59.5	100.0	100.0	-

(a) = average household income in thousands of current dollars.

(b) = ratio of neighbourhood income to CMA (Census Metropolitan Area) average.

Sources: Census of Canada, various years, 1951 through 1991

Among these priorities are the impacts of expanding immigrant populations, residential redevelopment and condominium conversion, and the widespread intensification of older elite and middle-income neighbourhoods.

Counter-arguments Addressed

How might the proponents of gentrification respond to these criticisms and analytical results? Some observers will argue that all of the above processes of social change and upgrading represent gentrification, but in different forms and locations. To accept this definitional argument implies that the term has unlimited flexibility, and therefore, in my view, little meaning and even less analytical utility. If gentrification is supposed to have something to do with the replacement (or displacement) of residents of one (low) class by those of higher income and status, in particular places and neighbourhood settings, then it cannot in my view encompass developments in areas that were not previously residential.

Others may argue that this analysis is not a real test of the significance of the gentrification process, because of the restrictive definition and classification used, or because of the selection of variables. Specifically, some will reply that this approach ignores other and sometimes more subtle changes that may be unrelated to income and that are more appropriate to evaluating the social imprint of the process itself. Among the most obvious of such variables are educational level and occupational status (LEY 1992). There is, for example, little doubt that indices based on educational attainment and occupation status (e.g. professionals) show higher levels in most Canadian inner cities than do indices for income alone. For example, in the Toronto case the 1991 Census shows that average incomes in the central city are only 91.3 percent of those in the CMA (median incomes are only 81.4 percent) and the poverty level is much higher (19.2% to 12.4%). Yet the proportion of the population with university degrees is substantially higher in the central city (21.7% compared to 13.3% in the CMA), as is the proportion working in personal and business services, government, health and education (32.4% to 27.7%).

How does one account for this apparent paradox? The most obvious explanation is that they represent different populations. The City's population has become increasingly polarized, between an educated, professional and higher-income population and a poorly educated, manual and lower-income cohort. The higher proportion of university-educated in the central area also reflects the uneven distribution of institutions of advanced learning, hospitals and government offices, most of which are located in the central core. Yet, a much higher proportion of the university-educated population in the city is in the younger age cohorts (under 34), many presumably are students or recent graduates. Finally, the overwhelmingly majority of university graduates live in established middle-income and elite areas, not in gentrified neighbourhoods.

Others will argue that the above analysis primarily measures the physical extent of gentrification, and that this is not the real issue. Instead, it has been suggested, gentrification should be considered as a "metaphor for restructuring" that goes well beyond the spatial imprint of gentrification itself. As MARCUSE (1986) argues, it is possible and indeed likely that gentrification may not lead to an increase in the average income (or rent-paying ability) of the entire central city, but rather involves a

redistribution of wealth and of middle-class households within the city, even within a declining city. I agree; and this is precisely why the neighbourhood-level analysis above was undertaken. The empirical results indicate that while income redistribution has occurred it has taken place to a much greater extent in neighbourhoods and districts other than those classified as gentrified.

Although the indices of change used above are admittedly blunt, they still capture a significant proportion of social upgrading within the city of Toronto. Even if one were to accept that gentrified neighbourhoods are unique, in terms of the attributes of the residents, the housing stock or the nature of the residential conversion process involved, the fact that they are overwhelmed by other changes in the social fabric, and in property re-investment and income redistribution, undermines the widespread attention they have received in the contemporary literature.

Lessons Learned: Implications for Research

What implications, if any, can be drawn from this analysis regarding research and public policy? Are the conclusions with respect to the impacts of gentrification likely to hold true in the future? In concluding the paper we attempt to draw out some of the lessons learned and to suggest future research needs.

The arguments presented here point first to the dangers inherent in research which focuses on only the most visible - but not the most significant - process of social and neighbourhood change, and that does so in isolation. The second lesson is to stress the need to set gentrification in context, that is to put it "in its place" with regards to locally-specific conditions and determinants of change. Third, there is an obvious requirement to evaluate the role and impacts of gentrification in direct relation to the contributions of other processes of social and residential transition operating in our cities, including all forms and expressions of neighbourhood change and urban revitalization. Fourth, the importance of local context, and the variability of the gentrification process from city-to-city, suggest that the search for an all-encompassing explanation is inappropriate.

Finally, there is now a growing awareness that many of the socio-demographic, economic and political conditions which initially encouraged the gentrification process in the 1960s and 1970s are unlikely to continue in the 1990s. Instead, the central areas of most North American cities, including Toronto, began the decade with an immense over-supply of offices, declining real estate prices, stagnant employment, declining public services, and an aging population. Indeed, it has been argued elsewhere that we may be entering a post-gentrification era (BOURNE 1993a). This era will likely witness - at least in most inner cities of North America - far less employment growth, reduced capital investment in the built-environment, fewer new households, a shrinkage of the middle-income cohort, reduced public sector employment and downsized institutions.

To summarize, the argument here is that the spatial and social imprint of

gentrification, as a process of neighbourhood change, has been systematically exaggerated. It is simply not that important in most cities, and is essentially irrelevant in most others. It has not transformed our cities, nor re-written our agenda for theoretical or applied research. In most Canadian and American cities, poverty remains the most serious and persistent policy problem (GOLDSMITH and BLAKELY 1992; BOURNE 1993b). Further, and by implication, our undue emphasis on gentrification as a priority for research represents a misallocation of scarce human resources, diverting those resources from the study of more significant processes and policy issues (HAMNETT 1991; SPAIN 1992; BADCOCK 1993; BEAUREGARD 1994).

The challenge we face is that of re-conceptualizing the social and residential dynamics of contemporary cities under the very different conditions prevailing in the 1990s. Specifically, we need to allocate more of our collective resources and talents to documenting the immense array of processes underlying urban social change, and to an understanding of the diverse paths and uneven impacts of current social transitions and conflicts in social space and living conditions. This is particularly evident in the increasingly sharp contrasts between elite districts on the one hand and the truly marginalized and impoverished neighbourhoods on the other hand. As gentrification becomes increasingly marginal, the opportunity exists to redirect our interests and energies to solving the real problems of cities.

NOTES

1. Income reported in the Census is for the calendar year preceding the census. Thus, the 1991 Census reported income for 1990.
2. The other dimension of these changes is the increasing polarization of income within the central city between the wealthy and middle class areas and those in the poorer districts, as well as among households within each district. A simple measure of income inequality for the City of Toronto (measured as the standardized differential between average and median household incomes) rose from 26.1 in 1981 to 38.8 in 1991; compared to a metropolitan-wide average of 18.8 in 1991.

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