The ‘Discovery’ of Gentrification

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Abstract

This paper examines the rise of gentrification in 1970s Amsterdam, based on coverage of the *Jordaan* neighborhood in *Het Parool* and a limited number of other Dutch newspapers. Although the term was not yet common at the time, newspaper articles from the 1970s already show a critical attitude toward social change in a working-class neighborhood. Far before policymakers were talking about it, journalists identified the negative effects of gentrification, such as rising rents and a loss of neighborhood identity. The resistance and criticisms of *Het Parool* and original residents bear striking similarities to contemporary criticisms on gentrification, as visible in the mocking and stereotyping of gentrifiers. Interestingly, developments in American cities were used as a frame of reference for Dutch newspapers in this regard. This exploration of the initial phase of gentrification in Amsterdam shows that both residents and journalists have always viewed the process of gentrification with suspicion.

Today, if you open up any newspaper to read about gentrification chances are that the reporting contains criticism. Policymakers have emphasized the *'benefits'* of gentrification for a long time and in doing that the negative effects of the process were ignored (Verlaan and Albers 2022, 497; Lees 2008; Slater et al. 2008, 234). While those negative effects have been under-reported, journalists have long known of their existence. Back in 2015, the Dutch newspaper *Het Parool* wrote *"The success of Amsterdam threatens to drive the unsuccessful out of the city. They regard the yupbakfietsmoeder and the hipster as the symbol of evil"* (Het Parool 2015).[1]

Has the reception always been negative? How did *Amsterdammers* regard gentrification when the process first emerged in the Dutch capital in the 1970s? Back then, the term gentrification was neither a loaded term in newspaper columns nor part of an official policy. When talking about a neighborhood that was doing 'better' due to the arrival of new residents, journalists were more prone to use positive or neutral terms such as neighborhood improvement, rehabilitations or sanitation (Het Parool 1979, 19712, 19701, 2).

In most cases, however, these articles were already written during the beginning phase of the gentrification process, at least if we use such calibrated definitions as formulated by Loretta Lees and her colleagues. According to them, gentrification is the transformation of a working-class neighborhood or vacant area in the city center to residential and/or commercial use by the middle class (Lees et al 2008, XV).

In order to examine how the Amsterdam press viewed gentrification in its early stages, this essay studies how Het Parool covered developments in the *Jordaan* neighborhood in the 1970s. This was probably the first neighborhood in the Netherlands where the process of gentrification manifested itself, which is why Dutch social scientists also speak of the *'Jordaan effect'*. To put the 'discovery' of gentrification in perspective, we will analyze the first mentions of the term gentrification in the Dutch press. Thanks to the digitization of *Het Parool* – the main newspaper of postwar Amsterdam – and national newspapers, it is possible to trace exactly when and how the term was first used. What is striking here is that Dutch journalists compared Amsterdam to the American context, especially to the context of the city of New York, where gentrification processes occurred earlier and had progressed further (NRC 1979; Het Parool 1979). Moreover, the Dutch press used American cities as a frame of reference to better understand and contextualize the gentrification processes at home, especially when it came to the Jordaan.

The term gentrification first appeared in the late 1970s in the liberal newspaper *NRC Handelsblad,* which described the situation in New York in a predominantly positive light: *"[G]entrification [is] an important turning point in the disastrous development to which New York City has been subjected since World War II"* (NRC 1979). The NRC reporter speaks of the *"renaissance of American cities"* and states that this process is characterized by the arrival of a *"new elite"*, which were mainly 'white', college-educated thirty-somethings who bought up the 'old, neglected neighborhoods'. While the tone of this reporting seems positive, it must be noted that the drawbacks – such as the expulsion of poorer and older residents and the disappearance of small convenience stores due to competition – were acknowledged as well.

Five years later, the tone was significantly different. From New York, the Dutch, predominantly left-winged *Volkskrant* reported on the abuses that occurred because of gentrification processes (De Volkskrant 1984). A correspondent describes how landlords are bullying away poorer and older residents to make room for new tenants who are able to pay much higher rents. *"The elderly, Puerto Ricans, blacks and less wealthy whites are literally threatened if they do not leave voluntarily"*, he notes. He describes gentrification as a euphemism and criticizes artists, who are often seen as the pioneers of the gentrification of a neighborhood: *"Manhattan is clearly becoming a park for the very rich; other people are being driven off the island."*

A 1986 edition of Het Parool subsequently highlights the dark side of the *'urban renaissance'* in America (Het Parool 1986). The article describes the two methods landlords apply to evict tenants, namely buyouts and intimidation. A New York woman tells the reporter of Het Parool about the intimidation: *"See that house over there? That burned down, just like that one over there, and that one over there"*. She points to three apartment buildings in her immediate neighborhood that burned down, whose residents left, and which were then renovated to make way for wealthier residents. The author concludes his article by stating that *"socially-minded people will hope that people with little money can find a place to live in Manhattan"*.

Around the same time the first signs of gentrification in Amsterdam's Jordaan neighborhood emerged, although without the sharp edges of expulsion and exclusion. The Jordaan was a working-class neighborhood close to the center with a strong cultural identity, but it was suffering demographic decline and degradation, especially after the Second World War. In the 1970s, the neighborhood was discovered by artists and students, and later by the affluent middle class. As a result, the Jordaan transformed from a working-class neighborhood into a *"bulwark of the urban middle class"*

(Verlaan and Albers 2022, 500). Given the scope of this study, we will not elaborate on the history of the Jordaan and its gentrification process. For that we refer to the work of Verlaan and Albers, who also studied newspaper articles on gentrification in the Jordaan, albeit from a broader perspective (Verlaan and Albers, 502-509).[2] Instead, our paper complements them by shifting the focus to Het Parool's attitude toward the process.

Image 1: *Repair and new construction on the Tuinstraat, 1973*
(Amsterdam City Archives, Archives of the Municipal Housing Department: 5293FO013146).

The reports in Het Parool indicate that there was criticism and resistance to the developments that took place in Amsterdam's working-class neighborhoods in the 1970s (Het Parool 1975; 1974; 1972, 19702). The positive effects of gentrification (if any), such as the mixing of social classes, the renewal of public space and the renovation of dilapidated buildings, did not outweigh the higher rents and feelings of alienation that resident felt towards their changing living environment (Hochstenbach, Musterd and Teernstra 2015, 754; Lees et al 2008, 196). Many residents complained that they did not benefit from the new constructions and renovations, but rather suffered from it (Het Parool, 1975; 1974;1972, 19701).

On the one hand, the criticism in Het Parool comprises a dissatisfaction with the fact that new constructions and renovations drove up rents, driving the *rasechte Jordaner* [translation: *'born and raised Jordanian'*] – as the original residents are called in the newspaper – out of the neighborhood (Het Parool, 1972; 19711). In some way, the working class, to which most of the original Jordanians belonged, were conquered by the new neighborhood residents, who generally had higher salaries (Het Parool 1972). On the other hand, there was criticism of the changing atmosphere and neighborhood identity. According to the Jordanian *ome* [translation: *'uncle'*] Kees Weyermans, by the mid-1970s the neighborhood had already been transformed into an *"open-air museum"*, *"an attraction for tourists with nice houses, restaurants, pubs and boutiques"* (Het Parool 1975). Consequently, in 1975, Het Parool wrote that the *oer-Jordaan* [translation: *'original Jordaan'*] was not pleased (Het Parool 1975). The romance of the neighborhood was said to have disappeared, as well as the togetherness, which was overshadowed by the individualism of the newcomers (Het Parool 1972).

This dissatisfaction and resistance were not necessarily directed against the new neighborhood residents, but rather against the municipality; especially the Urban Development Department; and the city council. They too, had plans for new construction and demolition that aroused resistance among Jordanians, although gentrification was not directly the goal here. In the early 1970s, it was mostly the new neighborhood residents, together with students and artists, that were part of the resistance against the municipality's demolition and construction plans. They organized themselves into action groups such as *Jordáád* [translation: *'Jor-deed'*] or *Volksfront Jordaan* [translation: *'Popular Front Jordaan'*], only getting backed by a *"handful of [original] residents and housing developers"* (Het Parool 1972, 19711). According to Het Parool, the many action groups, united in the *GAJ: Gezamenlijke Actiegroepen Jordaan* [translation: *'Collective Action groups*

Jordaan'] stood up for the *"preservation of the wondrous street-warren and its accompanying atmosphere*" (Het Parool 1972).

It is somewhat ironic that although original Jordaan residents felt that the new neighborhood residents were tarnishing the authentic character of the neighborhood, these new residents did stand up to preserve that same authenticity. Although the protests and resistance were mainly directed against the municipality and the city government, dissatisfied people also turned their attention to their new neighbors. This was done with the same derision and stereotyping with which typical 'gentrifiers' are treated today: people who take their children to school exclusively on cargo bikes and do nothing but drink oat milk cappuccinos all day (Het Parool, 1979, 19711; Het Parool 2015). In 1979, Het Parool describes the background of the fictional characters Simon and Marlise, who are portrayed as embodying the new wealthier Jordaan residents:

De nieuwe elite

OP het naamplaatje staat alleen maar: Marlise en Simon. Geen achternamen, want achternamen zijn maf. En waar wonen ze? In de Jordaan. Klein huisje natuurlijk, nauwe, steile trap, kleine kamertjes, zolder, keuken, — ja, ja, maar de boel is keurig gerenoveerd, doorgebroken, verbouwd, gestut, en dat heeft dan wel een aardige duit gekost, maar je hebt er een huis voor waar menige villabewoner jaloers op kan zijn. En in 't hartje van de oude stad met andere Marlises en Simons als je naaste buren, die je iedere avond ontmoet in het bruine kroegje op de hoek.

Ach ja, de stad veran-

Image 2: *Newspaper clipping from Het Parool depicting Marlise and Simon as the embodiment of the new Jordaan residents* (Het Parool 1979).

Marlise and Simon are described as follows:

> *“They both work, of course. Simon is a political science graduate and has advanced plans for his dissertation. Marlise is in welfare work. Since they have a double income, they are not short of anything and the bank will take care of the mortgage payment. Only Simon has some problems parking his Volvo and so does Marlise with her deux chevaux. Their sailboat is in Monnickendam and they have a cottage in the Dordogne” (Het Parool 1979).*

The same article uses the term gentrification literally, at that time still in English. The newspaper describes gentrification as the *“refinement”* or *“enrichment”* of an old residential neighborhood (Het Parool 1979). What had been taking place for some time in New York was now manifesting itself in the streets of the Jordaan as well: *“The new elite are beginning to repopulate Manhattan, and there are striking similarities”.*

Urban historian Vincent Baptist recently noted that gentrification is often interpreted too negatively. According to him, it is a process you are almost forced to be against because journalists and academics would not appreciate a more nuanced view (NRC 2023). Through an exploration of the historical perception of gentrification in Dutch newspapers – focusing on Het Parool in particular – this short essay has researched for how long this has been the case. Interestingly, the newspapers’ coverage paid considerable attention to developments in American cities, highlighting both positive and negative coverage of the gentrification process. Despite some positive reports about New York's *‘urban renaissance’* or *‘urban rebirth’* in the 1970s and 1980s, the coverage on the gentrification of the Jordaan area by Het Parool in the same period highlighted the fierce resistance and criticism of this phenomenon from the very beginning. Original Jordaan residents faced rising rents – at least of the renovated properties – and a loss of neighborhood identity. The resistance and criticism of neighborhood developments bear similarities to contemporary gentrification criticism, in which new residents are often similarly mocked and stereotyped.

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Endnotes

1 ‘Yup’ stands for ‘young urban professional'. *Bakfietsmoeder* is an informal term used in the Netherlands referring to the stereotype of a mother transporting her children in a *bakfiets*. A bakfiets is a bicycle with a large container in the front that can carry children, groceries or other goods.

2 Dr. Tim Verlaan guest-edited this issue of the AMJournal. For more on his research, see ‘*The Dialogue’* in which Verlaan talks about history and gentrification with Dr. Prof. Suleiman.