



Looking 'for a fight rather than a cause': (De)legitimization of resistance to gentrification in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

Negative impacts of gentrification have been continually recognized over the past several decades, prompting varied forms of resistance in cities around the world. However, gentrification has also been more recently framed in public discourse as a beneficial and constructive process, grounded in examples of 'revitalizing' centres. These contrasting positions introduce underexplored tensions in how different interests approach gentrifying environments in an urban area, particularly with respect to the impact of resistance movements. Using Hamilton, Ontario as a case study, I consider how acts of resistance to gentrification and displacement are perceived and (de)legitimized by local residents, business owners, and others, focusing on the recent emergence of direct action tactics across the inner city. Applying concepts of antagonism, hegemony, and transparent space, I explore dominant values in a context of municipal-led revitalization as portrayed through discourse on resistance to gentrification in central Hamilton. This analysis draws primarily on news articles and Twitter responses pertaining to prominent instances of gentrification-related resistance in Hamilton between 2016 and 2018, supplemented by interviews conducted in early 2018 with representatives from local community organizations. The paper finds three discourses through which antagonistic relations emerge and the (de)legitimization of gentrification-related resistance occurs: violence, entrepreneurship, and productivity. The dismissal of certain acts of resistance in residents' and others' responses can be connected to their contestation of dominant ideals of revitalization and the contrived simplicity of gentrified space. Importantly, this delegitimization includes the invalidation or minimizing of underlying concerns and imperatives. These findings have implications for mobilizing collective responses to address inequities of gentrification.

Keywords

resistance, gentrification, neoliberalism, hegemony, antagonism

Introduction

Against the backdrop of an increasingly pervasive neoliberal rationality, the presence and progression of gentrification in cities around the world continues to elicit mixed reactions. In public discourse, gentrification is now commonly positioned as a positive and desirable process that sees landscapes of decline ‘revitalized’ into vibrant urban neighbourhoods (e.g. Lavy et al., 2016). At the same time, many continue to recognize and resist the inequitable implications of gentrification (e.g. Lees & Ferreri, 2016), introducing underlying, and under-explored, tensions in how gentrifying spaces are perceived and addressed by different local interests. These tensions erupted in Hamilton, Ontario on 3 March 2018, when a group of 30 protesters took to Locke Street, a locus of commercial gentrification, and threw rocks through the windows of several high-end businesses. While there was initial confusion over motivations, their actions in fact contested the growing displacement and marginalization of the city’s vulnerable populations. This direct action followed a number of smaller protests in other gentrifying neighbourhoods across Hamilton, which used similar tactics of damaging or otherwise symbolically deterring new businesses and development aimed at incoming higher-income residents. These acts of resistance have been overwhelmingly condemned in the responses of residents, business owners, and others, with limited reflection on the validity of their motivations, effectively dismissing protesters’ concerns alongside their actions.

Indeed, substantial engagement with inequities of gentrification is largely absent from reports and discussions on the ‘senseless vandalism’ that followed the events of 3 March, with a couple exceptions. At the same time, other strategies to resist impacts of gentrification, such as efforts to protect the affordable rental housing stock, have been legitimized by representatives of local organizations and in the media. With the resistance literature relatively limited in scope (e.g. Lees & Ferreri, 2016), building understanding on how resistance to gentrification intersects and potentially conflicts with dominant values in a context of revitalization illuminates challenges and supports new directions for collective action against gentrification. In this paper, I interweave concepts of antagonism, hegemony, and transparent space to unpack this friction, drawing primarily on the work of Mouffe (2005), Lefebvre (1991), and Laclau and Mouffe (1985). In doing so, I argue that certain acts of resistance to gentrification in the neoliberal city are framed as illegitimate (antagonistic) in public discourse in response to the ways in which they rupture the constructed transparency of space and contest hegemonic ideals. In Hamilton, this is illustrated in how themes of entrepreneurship and productivity feature in individuals’ responses to different actions against gentrification, as well as how the concept of violence is framed across these responses.

I begin the paper by considering how perceptions of gentrification, displacement, and associated acts of resistance in urban, neoliberal contexts are discussed in the literature, situating the tensions that are present in the Hamilton context. I then introduce my theoretical framework, demonstrating how antagonisms emerge from the constructed unity and simplicity of societal organization and space, where disruptions that threaten what is made visible and natural by the dominant neoliberal order are branded illegitimate. I use this

discussion to trace the (de)legitimization of resistance to gentrification in the Hamilton context, highlighting discourse on violence, entrepreneurship, and productivity to illustrate my points. Finally, I conclude by considering the implications of the tensions embodied in perceptions of resistance for transformative collective action against gentrification and displacement.

Perceptions of (state-led) gentrification, displacement outcomes, and resistance

The neoliberal and entrepreneurial cities that have emerged against a broader backdrop of state retrenchment (Harvey, 1989) are sites of state-led gentrification, where municipal revitalization plans, redevelopment incentives, and rebranding initiatives drive and enable social, physical, and economic transformations (Doucet et al., 2011; Hochstenbach, 2015; Shaw, 2005). However, as a contentious and ‘ideologically and politically loaded’ concept (Lees et al., 2010, p. 3), the ways in which gentrification processes are framed by academics, policymakers, the media, local residents, and others vary substantially, with implications for how resistance efforts are perceived. Given the inequities that emerge in the creation of elite neighbourhoods and spaces at the expense of marginalized populations, the nature and impacts of gentrification continue to be widely critiqued (Elliot-Cooper et al., 2019). Nevertheless, more positive conceptualizations of the process have also emerged in the literature, as criticized by Slater (2006). In recent work, Collins and Loukaitou-Sideris (2016) challenge the notion of gentrification as a ‘zero-sum game’ in Los Angeles, arguing that the gentrification process in Gallery Row has supported increased advocacy around neighbouring Skid Row.

In line with the prevalent municipal agenda of attracting investment and shaping more ‘desirable’ (affluent) city spaces (e.g. Doucet et al., 2011), a narrative of positive gentrification is echoed by policymakers. This is evidenced in the intentional redevelopment of lower-income neighbourhoods into socially mixed communities (Chaskin & Joseph, 2013), as well as in the celebratory use of gentrification’s more flattering synonyms, such as revitalization and renewal (Elliot-Cooper et al., 2019). This positive language also appears in municipal policy documents in cities such as Amsterdam, where gentrification is conceptualized as a controlled process bringing beneficial amenities to neighbourhoods, despite a less equitable reality on the ground (Hochstenbach, 2015). Such narratives imply a balance that can be achieved, where low-income residents experience increased opportunity and quality of life through access to revitalized surroundings and more diverse social interactions with minimal displacement (Chaskin & Joseph, 2013; Hochstenbach, 2015). However, this balance is rarely reflected in the lived experiences of lower-income residents, who often face displacement and the disintegration of their networks (e.g. August, 2014).

Nevertheless, perceptions of gentrification ‘on the ground’, as portrayed by local media and residents, are also varied. In Austin, Texas, newspaper articles on the gentrification of a prominent corridor have presented a mixed outlook on the process, highlighting conflicting local perspectives on new development (Lavy et al., 2016). While business owners see the

changes as largely positive, residents emphasize negative impacts such as incompatible uses and loss of character. Discussions of displacement concerns and inequitable outcomes, however, have been non-existent (Lavy et al., 2016). In some instances, established residents view their changing neighbourhood landscape through an optimistic lens, valuing new amenities and residents, even if they themselves may be vulnerable to displacement as gentrification progresses (Doucet & Koenders, 2018). However, the creation of more affluent spaces may also be perceived by long-term residents as incompatible with their needs and means, contributing to experiences of displacement through a decreased sense of community and belonging (Pearsall, 2012; Shaw & Hagemans, 2015). Thus, while conceptions of gentrification in the neoliberal city reflect a tension between perceived positive qualities and realities of displacement, the literature suggests that celebratory images of revitalization and renewal remain pervasive in public discourse. This dynamic is a function of the interests and agendas of those who, given their position (e.g. as a municipal actor or business owner), are among the strongest voices across different urban areas.

While perceptions of gentrification are fraught, associated displacement impacts are largely understood as inequitable (Elliot-Cooper et al., 2019), despite past assertions of the potential for gentrification without displacement (e.g. Freeman, 2005) that have since been widely critiqued (e.g. Slater, 2009). Attempts by state actors and others to frame displacement through a lens of opportunity mirror efforts to reframe gentrification in more palatable terms but remain marginal in comparison to documentation of its harm and existence as a violent process (Elliot-Cooper et al., 2019). Indeed, several scholars explicitly tie gentrification-induced displacement to concepts of violence in their work. For Kern (2016), the gradual and progressive exclusion of established residents and their informal activities from public spaces in the Junction, Toronto illustrates the ‘slow violence of gentrification’ (p. 446). Baeten et al. (2017) highlight the ‘violent displacement’ (p. 632) of lower-income residents in Sweden through extensive housing renovation projects and subsequent rent increases. In doing so, they emphasize the ‘systemic violence’ of widely accepted renovation practices that reproduce housing precarity amongst marginalized populations, as well as the ‘symbolic violence’ of landlord-tenant communication in a context of displacement (Baeten et al., 2017, p. 141).

Similarly, Elliot-Cooper et al. (2019) position gentrification-induced displacement alternatively as ‘a form of severance...with affected neighbourhoods and populations displaying the marks of wounding or trauma’ (p. 7) and ‘a form of violence that removes the sense of belonging to a particular community’, with ‘capacity to inflict mental and physical harms’ (p. 12). These various understandings of gentrification-induced displacement speak to the distress of being disconnected from place, as well as to techniques of violence employed in processes of displacement, such as intimidation, deprivation of services, prolonged uncertainty, and forced removal (e.g. Baeten et al., 2017; Lees, 2014; Zhang, 2018). However, these perspectives are ostensibly marginalized in public discourse, pointing to the insidious ways in which the violence of displacement unfolds (Baeten et al., 2017; Kern, 2016).

In the context of these different understandings of gentrification and its impacts, the literature provides little insight into how residents, business owners, and others in areas undergoing ‘revitalization’ view resistance to gentrification and displacement. Existing research on gentrification-related resistance typically captures the nature of these acts of contestation, including protests, efforts to shape planning activities, and community initiatives to prevent physical displacement (e.g. Lees & Ferreri, 2016; Novy & Colomb, 2013; Rodríguez & Di Virgilio, 2016), rather than external perspectives of resistance activities. However, as discussed by Hackworth (2002), the increasingly prominent role of the state in driving gentrification has made municipal actors less amenable to visible resistance and engagement with associated demands. This outcome is particularly true for more radical anti-gentrification protests, whereas those focused on augmenting affordable housing options or undertaking other, ‘less militant’ resistance activities have received less government pushback or become sites of state cooptation (Hackworth, 2002, p. 823).

Indeed, as I will explore in the Hamilton context, resistance to gentrification and displacement can itself be widely contested, as well as accepted or encouraged. Lees and Ferreri (2016) and Novy and Colomb (2013) provide examples of resistance to upscale redevelopment projects in London and Berlin/Hamburg, respectively, where the concerns and aims of those involved have received support from other local actors, the media, and broader publics. In both cases, resistance has brought together diverse participants, including those with higher levels of (cultural) capital, and has been centred around occupying and bringing others into the contested spaces for events and activities, a form of direct action. At the same time, emergent resistance movements structured to achieve broader buy-in have been criticized by more radical actors for lacking a robust commitment to tackling injustices of gentrification (Novy & Colomb, 2013). Given these dynamics, local responses to acts of gentrification-related resistance and the ways in which this resistance is (in)validated require further exploration in order to identify challenges and opportunities for collective action toward more equitable cities.

Antagonism, hegemony, and transparent space in the neoliberal city

This paper draws on concepts of antagonism, hegemony, and transparent space to make sense of perceptions of gentrification-related resistance in Hamilton, Ontario. When brought together, these concepts provide insight into how illusions of consensus and clarity that support neoliberal aims are implicated in the condemnation of alternative positions, including those underlying acts of resistance. More specifically, the construction of certain ideals of societal organization as given norms, supported by the contrived transparency of space, can explain the deepening of antagonistic divides in the contemporary, neoliberal city. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) emphasize the impossibility of a whole society that brings together its different parts; the existence of hegemonic practices and orderings are in fact predicated on ‘the presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the frontiers which separate them’ (p. 136). Nevertheless, this instability and difference is often denied through attempts to construct an illusion of consensus around the functioning of society, which a Gramscian understanding of hegemony encapsulates. From this perspective, hegemony represents the

dominance of certain ideals at a broad scale, realized through ongoing, power-imbued attempts to bring diverse interests into a common project (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

The dynamics of the neoliberal city capture these attempts to unify society around a particular mode of organization, with recognition of the hegemonic strength of neoliberalism as a force driving the continued discursive flattening of socio-political divisions (e.g. Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Indeed, the spread of a neoliberal logic can be seen in the normalization of competitiveness between municipalities, whose entrepreneurial efforts to attract both people and investments (Purcell, 2008) through strategies of revitalization speak to the emergence of state-led gentrification. In this way, revitalization is positioned as a dominant ideal of the contemporary city, understood as the process through which economic and cultural prosperity is realized. Entrepreneurialism is also held up and reproduced as a desirable trait not just for municipalities, but also for the individuals inhabiting cities. The pervasive and ‘unquestionable’ logic of the market is also a product of neoliberalism’s hegemonic position (Purcell, 2008), which sustains the continued dominance and natural appearance of private development and private property under capitalism. In this way, housing is generally prioritized by society as an investment rather than a right, which plays into gentrification and its inequitable outcomes.

While neoliberalism is in practice not complete or all-encompassing (Purcell, 2008), the discursive construction of a cohesive societal order around neoliberal sensibilities has implications in terms of the delegitimization of alternate possibilities and imperatives. Mouffe’s (2005) work to conceptualize the conditions for antagonistic relations supports this assertion. Importantly, Mouffe recognizes that striving for (illusory) ‘consensus on one single model’ produces antagonisms (understood by Mouffe as ‘friend/enemy’ relations¹) in forgoing ‘possibilities of legitimate dissent’ (p. 82), with any sense of unity predicated on the exclusion of certain concerns and realities. Following Mouffe’s argument, the narrow ‘consensus’ of a dominant (neoliberal) order creates situations where antagonistic us/them lines are quickly drawn when ‘the “they” is perceived as putting into question the identity of the “we”’ (pp. 15-16). As perspectives that deeply challenge or contradict normative ideals emerge, they are unable to be perceived as valid despite their irreconcilability (Mouffe, 2005). In the contemporary city dominated by a capitalist, neoliberal logic, perspectives that contest ideals of revitalization, entrepreneurship, and private property can be imagined as flashpoints through which antagonistic relations are realized, as they complicate or poke holes in what is continually reinforced as desirable.

While the link between hegemony and antagonism in the contemporary, neoliberal city has been established, a more robust understanding of the emergence of antagonistic relations within its (gentrifying) spaces requires reflection on a third concept: transparent space. More specifically, recognizing antagonisms as a function of the normalization of certain values also

¹ I recognize the friend/enemy distinction employed by Mouffe in her discussion of antagonistic relations has problematic roots as a concept formed by Nazi supporter Carl Schmitt to advance a fascist politics, emphasizing ‘an external other as the enemy’ (Žižek, 1999, p. 29). Žižek (1999) asserts the necessity for the left to instead focus on ‘inner social antagonisms’, or ‘the *internal* [class] struggle which traverses the social body’ (p. 29, emphasis in original). It is from this perspective that I approach my analysis of antagonistic us/them relations in the Hamilton context.

demands consideration of what is made obvious or imperceptible in space in support of hegemonic aims. As Massey (2005) argues, ‘...the conceptualisation of space itself is, crucially but usually implicitly, a stake in emerging confrontations’ (p. 99). Indeed, antagonisms emerge not just through the construction of cohesion around specific ideals of societal organization, but also through the construction of space as a clear and uncomplicated reflection of this hegemonic logic.

Lefebvre’s (1991) work on the production of space provides insight into the spatial dimension underlying antagonistic relations in the contemporary city. The production of (in)visibility in space is captured in Lefebvre’s discussions of abstract space and the ‘illusion of transparency’, which he suggests:

‘goes hand in hand with a view of space as innocent, as free of traps or secret places. Anything hidden or dissimulated – and hence dangerous – is antagonistic to transparency, under whose reign everything can be taken in by a single glance...’ (p. 28).

Lefebvre situates this contrived ‘clarity of space’ (p. 320), which presents a simplified picture of the complexity of the social, in relation to power and hegemony at multiple points. In particular, he notes that ‘abstract space, the space of the bourgeoisie and of capitalism...depends on consensus more than any space before it’, alluding to resultant tensions in stating ‘within this space violence does not always remain latent or hidden’ (p. 57). In this way, efforts to restrict the appearance of conflict in space and to control what space reveals help to reinforce hegemonic ideals and maintain a sense of cohesion around the ways in which these ideals order society.

The connection between the dynamics of hegemony and ‘a reality that...seems transparently clear’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 188) is apparent in the context of a dominant neoliberal logic. In the neoliberal city, discourse on and conceptualizations of space contrive its apparent clarity and unity, hiding aspects and conditions of urban life that may disrupt the hegemonic order. Inhabitants may be shaped by this ‘impression of transparency’, experiencing space as an intentionally incomplete reflection of reality – ‘a mirror and mirage’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 189). As per Donald (1999), as cited by Massey (2005), ‘we experience our social world as simply the way things are, as objective presence, because that contingency is systematically forgotten’ (p. 168). Importantly, this manipulation of space includes maintaining the invisibility of urban inequities produced under the dominance of neoliberal/capitalist ideals and practices.

Discourse on ‘revitalized’ urban space propagated by municipalities and private developers, among others, provides one example of this constructed (in)visibility. This discourse illuminates and emphasizes specific elements of transformed environments, including new amenities, improved pedestrian conditions, and increased vibrancy, which fail to capture the complexity of these spaces. The marketing and branding of both existing neighbourhoods and new developments acts in a similar fashion, associating certain identities and experiences with these spaces through slogans, banners, and renderings. In these instances, the presence and experiences of marginalized populations, including experiences

of exclusion, are commonly minimized in both the transformed physical environments and the associated rhetoric.

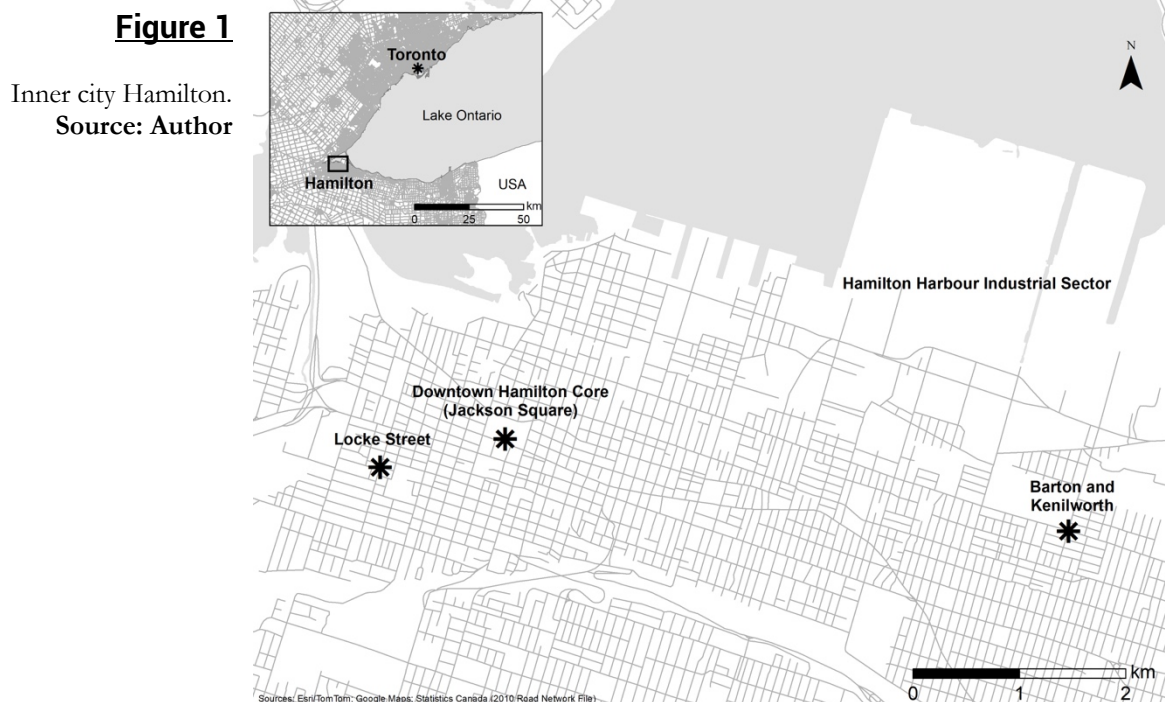
As with Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) emphasis on the impossibility of a fully 'sutured space' of society (p. 96), these constructions of cohesive space obscure the 'element of "chaos"' that space truly possesses', where 'different temporalities and different voices must work out means of accommodation' (Massey, 2005, p. 111). In one sense, the manufactured clarity of space supports the illusory 'suturing' of society by neoliberal values, which works to delegitimize alternative imaginaries that contradict the 'right' way forward. At the same time, antagonisms can be understood to emerge when 'the element of surprise, the unexpected' (Massey, 2005, p. 11) underlying transparent space ruptures the illusion of unity and simplicity that it embodies in ways that challenge accepted identities and ways of being.

(De)legitimization of resistance to gentrification and displacement in Hamilton

The gentrifying spaces of Hamilton, Ontario are a setting to explore and apply the interwoven concepts of antagonism, hegemony, and transparent space with respect to the ways in which acts of resistance to gentrification are (de)legitimized in public discourse. Hamilton, a mid-sized city of around 600,000 residents located 70km west of Toronto (Figure 1), is currently in the midst of a so-called 'renaissance' following decades of deindustrialization. This 'renaissance' is the product of a number of factors, including an outmigration of residents and businesses from Toronto in search of less expensive housing and commercial space, and the revitalization efforts of the municipality itself.

Regardless, the ultimate outcome has been the progressive gentrification of many of the centrally located, predominantly lower-income neighbourhoods around the downtown core. This has occurred alongside more explicit efforts to redefine the city's working-class image while strategically capitalizing on its longstanding 'gritty', industrial identity. The average household income of these neighbourhoods remained below the city-wide average in 2015, from six percent lower in the area around Locke Street, where gentrification is more advanced, to around 50 percent lower in areas of incipient gentrification. However, the rate of change between 2005 and 2015 was also much higher in these areas regardless of gentrification stage. As the average household income across Hamilton grew by 25 percent over the decade, it increased between 31 and 52 percent in gentrifying neighbourhoods around the core (Statistics Canada, 2006, 2016). More recently, some investors have started to look to other traditionally working-class neighbourhoods further east of the core in search of additional opportunities. These areas have already experienced a 40 to 50 percent increase in rental prices over the past decade, disproportionate to the 30 percent increase city-wide, reflecting a shift in some cases from below average to above average rent (Statistics Canada, 2006, 2016). This new interest suggests continued changes to the physical and socio-economic landscapes of inner-city Hamilton in the coming years.

This analysis focuses on local responses to instances of direct action against gentrification and its impacts (decreased affordability, displacement) that have occurred in Hamilton over the past few years. I also juxtapose responses to these direct action tactics to the ways in which other forms of resistance to displacement have been perceived and portrayed. While concerns of gentrification and displacement are increasingly present in discourse on Hamilton, the direct action protests have perhaps been the most prominent (and divisive) manifestations of these concerns. These acts of resistance have involved damage to high-end amenities and developments that have popped up in traditionally working-class neighbourhoods, as well as other forms of protest against the framing of lower income neighbourhoods as sites of capital accumulation.



This form of direct action resistance first began in 2016 and was initially focused around Barton and Kenilworth, a lower-income, economically depressed area east of the downtown core that is now being positioned as the next ‘up-and-coming’ neighbourhood (Figure 1). In June 2016, a number of anonymous individuals physically protested an investment tour of the area, which was followed by instances of damage to new, upscale restaurants, a co-working space, and other sites of change in the summer of 2017 (Van Dongen, 2017). However, I consider in particular public reactions to the most recent and most prominent instance of direct action that unfolded on 3 March 2018 along Locke Street, where a group of anonymous protesters threw rocks through the windows of many of its businesses. An upscale commercial corridor, Locke Street (Figure 1) is located just beyond the downtown core in a now middle-income neighbourhood. As a relatively longstanding site of gentrification, both the street and the surrounding neighbourhood are symbols of Hamilton’s revitalization process, experienced by some as a vibrant local destination and by others as a space of exclusion.

Throughout this case study, I draw predominantly on 141 Twitter responses to the Locke Street event, from one week following the direct action, and nine newspaper articles that cover different instances of direct action between 2016 and 2018. The tweets and newspaper articles include perspectives from residents, business owners, local organizations, politicians, and others with an interest in Hamilton who have been asked or have chosen to publicly respond to these acts of resistance. I selected pertinent tweets and articles through keyword searches and used an inductive-deductive approach to analysis (Palys & Atchison, 2014), iteratively identifying common themes and discourses alongside the development of the theoretical framework. I also incorporate relevant insight from interviews conducted with representatives of local neighbourhood-level and city-wide organizations in early 2018 (n=15). This insight includes perspectives on the direct action, which emerged during some of the interviews, and perspectives on other forms of resistance in which some of the organizations are engaged. With a few exceptions, the majority of responses included in this study share largely similar sentiments on the direct action despite the representation of a variety of different groups or interests, although it is possible that certain understandings are missing from the data.

Through the theoretical understanding developed in the previous section, I argue that certain acts of resistance to gentrification in the neoliberal city are positioned as illegitimate (antagonistic) according to the ways in which they rupture the constructed transparency of space and contest dominant values and practices. In a broad sense, these instances of direct action visibly and forcefully disrupt the images and narratives of positive revitalization maintained through the appearance of gentrified spaces and circulated by city officials and others in the media. While the tactics and targets of these acts of resistance have been widely denounced, the complex concerns driving them have also often been downplayed or marginalized in most responses.

More specifically, reactions to the direct action tactics on Locke Street and elsewhere in Hamilton demonstrate the construction of antagonistic divides between those who undertook the ‘senseless’ resistance, portrayed as ‘hooligans, idiots, terrorists, and gangsters’ (Wells, 2018), and the ‘reasonable’ Hamiltonians who understand these actions as unjustifiable (Hayes, 2018). Antagonisms are particularly evident in discourse on the violence of the direct action, the irrationality of its targets (small businesses), and the productivity of different forms of resistance. These discourses represent inflection points where values and ideals assumed to be commonly shared are challenged, antagonistic relations quickly emerge, and the urgent inequities of gentrification and capitalism are effectively dismissed. As I will conclude in the final section, understanding local responses to gentrification-related resistance in this way suggests challenges in advancing transformative collective action against displacement and other related inequities.

Antagonistic divisions: Discourse on violence

Reports on and responses to the Locke Street event continually condemn the violent nature of the direct action tactics. For instance, one commentator described the protest as

‘the most violent incident in an escalation of anti-gentrification acts’ (Hayes, 2018). As I established in the previous section, the illusion of consensus that hegemony and transparent space uphold works to negate ‘possibilities of legitimate dissent’ (Mouffe, 2005, p. 82). In the Hamilton context, concerns of urban inequality underlying these acts of resistance, which challenge (illusory) cohesion around ideals of revitalization, have been repeatedly dismissed through responses that emphasize a ‘senseless’ violence ‘indefensible by any reasonable standard’ (Wells, 2018). Capturing a popular sentiment, and demonstrating the antagonistic divide, one Twitter response celebrated ‘a city rallying together against such ridiculous acts of violence, vandalism, and ignorance’. In delegitimizing the actions and perspectives of the protestors, such responses mobilize a narrow understanding of violence. Here, the violence that is recognized and condemned is visible violence against private property. Damage to private property elicits antagonistic reactions by contradicting hegemonic assumptions of its value and disrupting the presumed transparency of the gentrified street as a vibrant, revitalized space.

Importantly, the instances of direct action in Hamilton highlight and contest a different form of violence, namely the violence of gentrification and displacement that is present but often hidden in revitalized environments (as per Kern, 2016). As a local anarchist group asserted in their response to the Locke Street event, ‘[t]he ongoing effects of gentrification in this city are heartbreaking – waves of displacement, growing violence, and intensifying poverty...a single family being evicted is far worse than everything that happened on Locke St’ (Carter, 2018). In the Hamilton context, the rationalities that support the ‘systemic violence’ of gentrification-induced displacement (Baeten et al., 2017, p. 641), such as the logic of revitalization, are also those upheld through the careful construction of gentrified space.

Unsurprisingly then, contestation of the logic of revitalization through assertions of its violence faces barriers to being broadly legitimized, particularly when the tactics employed also play into the construction of antagonistic relations by challenging dominant ideals, including those of property. Indeed, Twitter responses to the direct action on Locke Street rarely raise issues of displacement, let alone recognize the violence of gentrification, displacement and capitalist logic, as asserted by protesters (e.g. Northshore, 2018). Indeed, responses that acknowledge the need to extend support not just to impacted businesses but also to the ‘voiceless and displaced’, as per a tweet by one resident, are few and far between. Thus, a disconnect emerges as some concerns of violence are justified while other forms—those driving the direct action in Hamilton—are overlooked by most.

Locke Street protesters’ concerns do receive some validation in newspaper articles discussing the event but are ultimately minimized. A small number of commentators, including a local academic and a representative from a local organization, accept ‘there is merit to [protesters] concerns’ (Braganza, 2018) or ‘some legitimacy to the root concerns raised’ (Hayes, 2018). However, these perspectives are paired with others that qualify their validation of these concerns, including statements that downplay the connection between gentrification and displacement and suggest that those who are protesting are not themselves impacted by gentrification. These qualified sentiments mirror those expressed in response to

prior instances of gentrification-related direct action in Hamilton, where reference to the ‘serious underlying issue’ is paired with dismissal of the resistance tactics and an emphasis on the need to sustain the current revitalization trajectory (Van Dongen, 2017). Additionally, the treatment of gentrification and its impacts in these media reports fails to link the process to concepts of violence, aside from one reference to ‘income inequality’ as a ‘very destructive force’ (McQuigge, 2018). The discussions of gentrification that do appear outline the characteristics of the process in Hamilton, including threats or instances of eviction, but do not emphasize the trauma and violent tactics of displacement.

Overall, across the various articles and responses, sentiments of validation are marginalized and undermined by the overarching emphasis on the violence of the direct action and the associated damages incurred. The dearth of responses that substantially validate protesters’ concerns, even as ‘legitimate adversaries’ (Mouffe, 2005, p. 120), is unsurprising when reflecting on the understanding developed in the previous section. Indeed, recognizing the potential for displacement to be violent challenges the innocent appearance of gentrified space and the increasingly normalized conceptions of positive revitalization.

Antagonistic divisions: Discourse on entrepreneurial targets

Responses to the protest on Locke Street and the smaller instances of direct action highlight the irrationality of targeting (high-end) small businesses, who are understood (and see themselves) as having little to do with issues of displacement. In doing so, these responses continually reiterate the hard-working nature of small business owners and emphasize the benefits their businesses and other new, small-scale investment provide in terms of neighbourhood vitality. Twitter responses to the Locke Street event, for instance, position small businesses as the ‘backbone’ of neighbourhood life, ‘built by passion...and scrappy spirit’. This narrative reflects ideals of entrepreneurship that permeate the contemporary, neoliberal city. However, these ideals are challenged by the different instances of direct action and their assertions of capitalist entrepreneurial complicity in outcomes of marginalization, made both implicitly through their tactics and explicitly in accompanying statements. The assertions attached to these acts of resistance also rupture appearances and experiences of Locke Street and other gentrifying commercial corridors as uncomplicated spaces of revitalization. More specifically, these actions posit a more complex spatial dynamic, where desirable, high-end small businesses overlay and are implicated in inequitable processes of neighbourhood change, despite good intentions. When protests challenge ideals of entrepreneurialism and revitalized commercial activity, an antagonistic divide is defined between the ‘irrational’ protestors and ‘rational’ Hamiltonians who celebrate small businesses.

Several residents and businesses shared images of Locke Street’s return to normalcy on Twitter. This can be seen as an attempt to restore the ‘illusion of transparency’ that conceals inequities underlying Locke Street’s current form and allows it to be perceived and experienced once again as a vibrant and welcoming local destination. Twitter responses to

the direct action by businesses, neighbourhood associations, politicians, and residents are also focused on encouraging those in Hamilton to ‘support our local businesses’ and help ‘make [them] stronger than before’. However, these responses almost entirely avoid simultaneously motivating reflection on, or efforts to address, underlying issues of gentrification. Similarly, events held following these acts of resistance, such as ‘Love Locke Day’, have centred on efforts to ‘bring business to [impacted] storefronts’. While some of these events have included donations of sales proceeds to affordable housing initiatives (Braganza, 2018), such responses are symbolic and ultimately do not reflect deep and continued engagement with inequities of gentrification and displacement. In this way, concerns that disrupt illusions of unity around the positive qualities of entrepreneurship and revitalization receive little validation.

(De)legitimization through discourse on productivity

Discourse on the (un)productivity of certain forms of resistance is also threaded through responses to both the protest on Locke Street and the smaller manifestations of direct action in Hamilton. Broadly, ideas of productive resistance in this context are connected to achieving certain material outcomes, versus disrupting narratives of positive revitalization or raising awareness of latent inequalities. In an article discussing the direct action on Locke Street, one commentator, a local academic, failed to see how it ‘could lead in any useful direction’, while another, a business owner on the street, emphasized ‘it doesn’t solve anybody’s problems. It doesn’t work toward any positive change. It just drives the problems further in, and it drives people apart.’ (Hayes, 2018). Similarly, a representative from a local organization with interests in revitalization viewed the protest of the investment tour in 2016 as ‘quite irrational and actually quite destructive’, identifying their organization’s alignment ‘with those individuals who are willing to engage in a productive manner’ (author’s interview). These responses that highlight the irrationality of the direct action on the basis of its apparent lack of productivity speak directly to the emergence and escalation of antagonistic relations, with ‘unproductivity’ defined in part according to the extent to which the direct action disrupts capitalist, neoliberal ideals.

Indeed, the classification of gentrification-related resistance as productive or unproductive (legitimate or illegitimate) can be connected to how it is seen to align with or contest hegemonic ideals of revitalization, entrepreneurship, and the centrality of the market. In contrast to direct action tactics, efforts to support the inclusion or protection of affordable units within private development are portrayed as appropriate ways to resist impacts of gentrification in Hamilton. A representative from a business improvement association in Hamilton captures this sentiment, stating:

‘...certain people in the community feel stronger, especially anarchists, with regards to the gentrification piece. And I feel sometimes they look for a fight rather than a cause, if you know what I mean...like, if they really wanted to do something about it, go and fight for affordable housing, don’t go and fight the small businesses and say get out of

that illegal residential, because that's not the right way to support it...' (author's interview)

While approaches centered around maintaining an affordable housing stock are valued in taking tangible steps to address issues of displacement, they also often act within the existing system. In this way, they do not deeply disrupt dominant ideals, such as private, market-driven development, or the persistence of revitalization initiatives. Instead, the focus is on making the current trajectory of change more equitable by helping to maintain a place for lower-income residents in gentrifying neighbourhoods and new developments.

The intent here is not to minimize 'legitimized' forms of resistance. Instead, it is important to consider why certain acts of resistance are accepted while others are delegitimized and their concerns marginalized, which presents potential challenges for collective action that seeks to be both transformative and broadly recognized as valid. In contrast to legitimized approaches to contesting displacement, the direct action protests poke substantial (and literal) holes in positive images of revitalized neighbourhoods. By provocatively suggesting the need for a direction that is radically different to what is broadly accepted, their perceived validity is constrained.

Conclusion

Insight from the work of Mouffe (2005), Lefebvre (1991), Laclau and Mouffe (1985), and others support the recognition of antagonistic relations in the contemporary city as the product of constructed cohesion around a hegemonic (neoliberal) societal order and the illusory transparency of space. Following Mouffe's (2005) assertions around the emergence of antagonisms through the enforcement of consensus, disruptions that make the hidden visible and threaten the ordering of urban life around normalized ideals are seen as illegitimate. This theoretical understanding helps unpack the (de)legitimization of resistance to gentrification in Hamilton, where antagonistic us/them lines are drawn in response to direct action tactics that rupture the clarity of gentrified space and forcefully challenge values around revitalization, entrepreneurship, property, and the market. While the dismissal of these acts of resistance in public discourse may seem unsurprising given their apparent violence, the application of interweaving concepts of antagonism, hegemony, and transparent space complexifies local responses.

As demonstrated, direct action tactics in Hamilton against inequities of gentrification are framed as illegitimate with respect to a certain form of violence: visible violence against private property. Residents, business owners, and others who have criticized these instances of direct action have generally overlooked or minimized protesters' concerns around the violence of displacement underlying gentrified landscapes. Indeed, allowing these concerns to be fully valid would fundamentally challenge hegemonic discourses and images of revitalization, including the idealization of entrepreneurial small businesses. These instances of direct action are contrasted with other forms of resistance to gentrification-induced displacement deemed more productive and acceptable, which notably do not contest the logic of the capitalist, neoliberal city in the same way.

The emergence of these antagonistic divisions in the arena of resistance has implications for organizing collective action against gentrification and displacement that can meaningfully address growing inequities, as well as for acts of resistance that seek more profound transformation. A diversity of conflicting perspectives, experiences, and imperatives regarding gentrification and its impacts exist beneath the illusion of a cohesive societal direction and the constructed clarity of space, which attempt to conceal this complexity. These divergent positions on gentrification reflect different urgencies in terms of addressing displacement and other inequalities, with some failing to recognize these inequalities at all, making it challenging to initiate approaches to resistance that can gather sufficient support without becoming diluted. Additionally, the dominance of neoliberal (and capitalist) ideals and practices in the governance of the contemporary city makes it challenging for resistance strategies to advance transformative action that is legitimized in public discourse, particularly when antagonistic fault lines are already established.

While broad consensus is impossible in any context (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), I argue that there is a need to consider further how resistance to gentrification and displacement might take shape in ways that are more broadly legitimized but still disruptive of neoliberal hegemony. This analysis informs two avenues by which gentrification-related resistance efforts may challenge established norms with greater validity and affect transformative change: first, by engaging in subtle disruption and second, by fostering sustained visibility of concerns through ‘conflictual consensus’ (Mouffe, 2005, p. 52). The predominantly dismissive attitudes toward the direct action in Hamilton suggest opportunities for more subtly subversive approaches to resistance. These approaches can build more generalized support for underlying concerns and alternative imperatives by challenging hegemonic norms and practices in ways that are not immediately recognizable as such. The perceived legitimacy of new community-owned housing projects in Hamilton and elsewhere (e.g. Bunce, 2016), which quietly destabilize private property ideals, is one such example.

At the same time, there may also be opportunities for resistance that challenges hegemonic ideals to gain broader acceptance through actions that extend and sustain the visibility of underlying concerns, including continued efforts to frame displacement as violence in public discourse. Indeed, making previously hidden inequities a ubiquitous presence in local conversations may help shift residents’ and others’ imaginaries of and encounters with gentrified space. Doing so provides an opportunity to weaken both the ‘illusion of transparency’ (Lefebvre, 1991) and the ability for these inequities and associated acts of disruptive resistance to be dismissed or downplayed. Here, Mouffe’s (2005) arguments have relevance in calling for a shift away from narrow consensus and antagonistic relations toward an agonistic space of ‘legitimate adversaries’ and ‘conflictual consensus’ (p. 52), where different, incompatible positions find high-level agreement around certain values.

Following Mouffe’s argument, there is potential for resistance that finds and builds on points of convergence between otherwise divergent positions, providing a space among ‘legitimate adversaries’ (Mouffe, 2005, p. 120) for collective action and the continued negotiation of normative practices toward more equitable ends. Lees and Ferreri (2016) provide insight into one such form of strategically critical resistance in their discussion of the

contestation of estate redevelopment in London. The strategies they describe managed to connect different people and priorities while still shifting dominant narratives, including deliberate use of ‘the language of “regeneration”’ (p. 22) in order to reframe its meaning. In the Hamilton context and beyond, those resisting gentrification may build symbolic and functional connections among residents by activating their sense of compassion and empathy (e.g. Porter, 2010) or leveraging shared experiences of vulnerability in the face of neoliberal capitalism. Overall, transformative resistance efforts that work to achieve some form of ‘common symbolic space’ (Mouffe, 2005, p. 52) among diverse interests may find their imperatives and actions have increased validity as they move forward and engage with conflicting perspectives. In this way, resistance to gentrification has the potential to challenge neoliberal ideals and disrupt hegemonic notions of urban revitalization from a position of legitimate contestation rather than as an antagonistic force.

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