Book Reviews


Reviewed by

Zachary Neal
Michigan State University

Much of urban sociology has been devoted to understanding the demographic structure and organization of cities. The concentric ring model, which placed factories and the poor at the center and more affluent residents at the edge, in many ways no longer accurately describes modern cities, and indeed some would argue never did. Often framed as a project of dismantling the Chicago School hegemony, many have proposed alternative models, for example the LA School’s contention that cities follow a more haphazard and patchwork pattern. In The Great Inversion, a book-length version of his 2008 New Republic article entitled “Trading Places,” Alan Ehrenhalt joins this debate, arguing that although a concentric ring pattern persists in American cities, it has been turned inside out. Describing the process as a “demographic inversion,” he contends that the suburbs, once the domain of affluent whites, are now (or quickly becoming) populated predominantly by immigrants, minorities, and the poor. At the same time, the central city has become a highly desirable place to live for those who can afford it. As this process unfolds, twenty-first century American cities are coming to resemble nineteenth century European cities like Paris, where the wealthy enjoyed Haussmann’s boulevards in the center and poor immigrants were relegated to the cramped outer arrondissements.

This argument is built on a series of diverse cases ranging from downtowns (Philadelphia, Houston, and Phoenix) and inner-city neighborhoods (Chicago’s Sheffield, Manhattan’s financial district, and Brooklyn’s Bushwick), to suburbs (Cleveland Heights, OH; Clarendon, VA; and Stapleton, CO) and the metropolitan fringe (Atlanta’s Gwinnett county). These cases offer detailed and engaging illustrations of the idiosyncratic changes—both demographic and land use—occurring in these places. For example, the Gwinnett county case highlights that Atlanta’s urban sprawl is increasingly driven not by white flight, but by immigrants seeking affordable housing. Similarly, the Stapleton case documents the phenomenon of grayfield redevelopment (here, a former airport) under the aegis of New Urbanism. Although these cases do an excellent job of describing American cities’ changing forms, it is less clear how they are connected to each other or to an overarching narrative. Thus, they ultimately raise two important questions, which Ehrenhalt struggles to answer: Is a demographic inversion really taking place, and what is driving the changes?
The difficulty in determining whether a demographic inversion is taking place lies in the ambiguity of what counts as a demographic inversion. In its strongest form, Ehrenhalt defines demographic inversion as “the rearrangement of living patterns across an entire metropolitan area” (p. 3) in which “the roles of cities and suburbs will not only change but will very nearly reverse themselves” (p. 228). Using this definition, the cases offer only mixed evidence. Yes, the inner-city neighborhoods of Sheffield and the financial district are now home to affluent whites, while suburban Gwinnett county is home to a multi-ethnic population of immigrants. However, downtown Phoenix remains residentially empty, except for some SROs, while the upper-middle-class continues to push its suburban boundaries further outward. Likewise, although the loft homes in Stapleton or Tyson’s Corner are designed to look urban, they are still unambiguously suburban locales. Indeed, even Ehrenhalt points out that “we should not attempt to draw from all this that…suburban families will return to the city, reversing the demographic changes of the past half century” (p. 60). A somewhat weaker definition of demographic inversion focuses on “the emergence of a city-seeking young population cohort” (p. 207). However, there is little evidence that this is a distinctively new phenomenon; young singles have always flocked to the city looking for opportunity. Moreover, there is little evidence that preferences to live in the city are backed up by behaviors; as Ehrenhalt notes, “other than the ones who already live in New York, not too many of them will ever get there” (p. 206).

Even if Ehrenhalt’s cases do not illustrate something on the scale of a demographic inversion, they still highlight significant changes in the patterning of urban life that are worth explaining. Throughout the book, he is careful to note that these changes are not the result of gentrification, yet many of his examples belie this claim. For example, although he explains that “gentrification is not a word that accurately describes Sheffield,” he does describe the neighborhood in the 1970s as “in transition from modest working-class enclave to semislum” where “people with the means to [renovate a house] began doing it” (pp. 43–50). Similarly, although he argues that “Bushwick is not in the midst of any standard gentrification process,” he does describe it as being pioneered by “twenty-first-century products of the hippest liberal arts colleges – Wesleyan and Vassar, Bard and Sarah Lawrence” (pp. 75–77).

Ehrenhalt instead focuses on two other mechanisms to explain the demographic changes: immigration and transportation. First, because low-cost housing, unskilled employment, and entrepreneurial opportunities are now located in the suburbs, rather than the central cities, immigrants’ destinations have shifted accordingly. For example, he links the explosion of Gwinnett County’s Hispanic population from 1990 to 2000 with the Olympic Games’ demand for construction workers, and the influx of Vietnamese immigrants in Clarendon with the supply of vacant retail space. Second, rising commuting times and costs have made middle- and upper-middle-class workers increasingly willing to pay more for conveniently located urban residences. For example, he links the growth of affluent white residents in Sheffield, the financial district, and Bushwick with their accessibility to subway stations. It is interesting, and perhaps a bit ironic, that the mechanisms identified as driving a demographic inversion are the same mechanisms that Chicago School researchers identified as drivers of the original concentric circle settlement patterns this book seeks to revise. Thus, while Ehrenhalt’s argument may involve redrawing Burgess’s 1925 image, it does not require rejecting the underlying ecological processes.
As a documentary account of the demographic and other changes occurring in American cities, readers will find much to like in *The Great Inversion*. Its greatest strengths are the central chapters, which each present nuanced and accessible accounts of different types of urban restructuring, ranging from gentrification in Chicago and New York to failed revitalization attempts in Phoenix. Unfortunately, they fail to support a particularly novel theory of urban form, instead illustrating a hybrid combination of gentrification and neo-ecology.


Reviewed by

Andy Clarno

*University of Illinois at Chicago*

Urban restructuring in the global South has generated a rapidly growing body of scholarship that challenges conventional approaches to urban studies. A new volume edited by Tony Roshan Samara, Shenjing He, and Guo Chen, *Locating Right to the City in the Global South*, brings together empirically and theoretically rich case studies that contribute to the development of conceptual tools for understanding contemporary urban inequality. Highlighting the innovative work of young scholars conducting research in cities throughout Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, the volume provides powerful evidence for the editors’ argument that it is “increasingly untenable to refer to as marginal or peripheral those areas of the world where most people live, where most economic activity takes place, where multiple forms of global urban culture are forged and from which the strongest political storms of the future may well emerge” (pp. 16–17).

The volume is divided into three sections and twelve empirical chapters, each of which explores the “distinctive Southern expressions” (p. 2) of neoliberalism and the right to the city. The chapters in Part I, “A City Divided Against Itself,” emphasize context specific forms of neoliberal restructuring, highlighting the ways that market-based projects reinforce existing divisions while creating new forms of exclusion. Mona Fawaz (Ch. 1) and Koenraad Bogaert (Ch. 2) argue that efforts to eliminate informal settlements in Lebanon and Morocco demonstrate that neoliberal restructuring is an active state project, rather than simply a market based process. State-led efforts to “integrate” the poor into housing markets and circuits of credit rely on violence (Fawaz) and the empty language of “participation” (Bogaert). Studying a similar project in Burkina Faso, Wouter Bervoets and Maarten Loopmans (Ch. 3) explain that slum eradication has not generated resistance because it draws legitimacy from earlier socialist efforts to upgrade slums and because it has uneven impacts that divide residents into oppositional interest groups. In a stimulating essay, Jia-Ching Chen (Ch. 4) argues that the promotion of