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The Far-Reaching Roots of Harlem’s “Second Renaissance”

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Abstract:

Brian Goldstein’s *The Roots of Urban Renaissance: Gentrification and the Struggle over Harlem* presents a much-needed addition to existing research on the history of urban redevelopment in New York City and the United States. Goldstein’s book analyzes the complex and often contradictory history of urban redevelopment in Harlem in the second half of the twentieth century. His analysis focuses on a number of influential local organizations that initially intended to shape the neighborhood with radical ideas of “community control” for its majority low-income residents, but over time realized a very different vision: a neighborhood for wealthier residents and private investors. His book is thus at the same time a history of a particular and special urban place in the US and an account of the struggle of African-American city dwellers to retain their place in an increasingly gentrified city.

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Goldstein, Brian D.: *The Roots of Urban Renaissance. Gentrification and the Struggle over Harlem*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. 400 pages, 39,95 USD. ISBN: 978-0674971509.

Abstract:

Brian Goldstein’s *The Roots of Urban Renaissance: Gentrification and the Struggle over Harlem* presents a much-needed addition to existing research on the history of urban redevelopment in New York City and the United States. Goldstein’s book analyzes the complex and often contradictory history of urban redevelopment in Harlem in the second half of the twentieth century. His analysis focuses on a number of influential local organizations that initially intended to shape the neighborhood with radical ideas of “community control” for its majority low-income residents, but over time realized a very different vision: a neighborhood for wealthier residents and private investors. His book is thus at the same time a history of a particular and special urban place in the US and an account of the struggle of African-American city dwellers to retain their place in an increasingly gentrified city.

The title of Brian Goldstein’s monograph *The Roots of Urban Renaissance: Gentrification and the Struggle over Harlem* serves as a reminder for one of the most prominent chapters in the history of this New York City neighborhood, the so-called “Harlem Renaissance” of the 1920s, when African-American literature, art and culture came into its own and made the majority African-American neighborhood known worldwide. However, the “urban renaissance” of the title also alludes to Harlem’s “second renaissance,” as it was being called at the end of the 1990s, when the neighborhood turned into a “sought-after destination for a returning middle-class” (p. 5) after it had seen substantial transformations to its built environment and its community. The story of how a Postwar Harlem, which was often seen as emblematic of the “urban crisis” plaguing many US-American cities during those years, came to be the thriving, “revitalized” middle-class neighborhood of the twenty-first century, forms the core of Goldstein’s book.

The Roots of Urban Renaissance is divided into six main chapters, chronologically working through and analyzing the major developments concerning the redevelopment of Harlem. Goldstein uses a vast array of sources, drawing from an impressive number of archival materials while also investigating the media discourse of the times. He combines this with a detailed analysis of leaflets, brochures, and planning documents as well as of the buildings and places constructed by the involved community organizations, architects, planners, state and federal agencies, thus paying “close attention to the spaces they produced on paper and in reality” (p. 14).

Goldstein traces the roots of the gentrified Harlem of today, the result of its “second renaissance,” all the way back to the beginning of the 1960s: “The Harlem of the new millennium [does] not represent a sudden break from the social movements of the 1960s [...], but rather grew from those radical roots” (p. 2). Goldstein delineates how the opposition against the top-down “urban renewal” development strategy of the 1950s – meaning the large-scale demolition and subsequent rebuilding of entire communities that was disproportionately directed at the low-income, minority populations of the inner city – birthed ideals of “community control,” “community development,” and democratized urban planning. This led in turn and over time, paradoxically and ironically, to the eventual gentrification of Harlem, resulting in the displacement of many of its mostly low-income African-American residents.

Goldstein’s explanation of this bitterly ironic turn focuses mainly on the actions of the various local “Community Development Corporations” (CDCs) founded in Harlem during the late 1960s. Many of those organizations, very much influenced by the civil rights movement, had their roots in radical ideas for “community control,” of a redeveloped Harlem predicated on the idea that the neighborhood “did not need class transformation [...], but could flourish by housing and serving its current inhabitants, however poor they may be” (p. 83). However, it was those precise organizations that eventually turned away from their radical roots and opted for an approach that relied heavily on private investment aiming to attract a returning middle-class to Harlem, thus paving the way for its eventual gentrification. By demonstrating how ideas about the need for a “mixed income” neighborhood and for Harlem’s “economic integration” – a sea change from the radical ideas of “community control” of the 1960s – made their way into the urban development mainstream, Goldstein lays bare the roots of the neoliberal logic that characterizes urban development in many US-American (and global) cities still today.

Thus, it is one of the major achievements of Goldstein’s book that it succeeds in further complicating the history of gentrification, adding fresh nuances to the common trope of “outsiders” invading a neighborhood and imposing change on an unsuspecting population. Instead, Goldstein argues that Harlem’s gentrification “was not simply the result of decisions made by outsiders to the neighborhood

or the product of external forces, but which grew up from very local roots” (p. 279). Further, in its understanding of gentrification as a multifaceted process that escapes simple explanations, Goldstein follows an argumentative framework in recent urban historical scholarship concerning the root causes for gentrification: Instead of adhering to one side of the usual explanatory frameworks for gentrification, either preferring a supply-side explanation or a demand-side explanation, Goldstein instead argues for the relevance and importance of both explanations. As Goldstein concludes, “the story of gentrification cannot be told only from the point of view of the migrants to neighborhoods like Harlem, nor can it be told through simplistic binaries of good and evil or innocence and guilt” (p. 287). Goldstein elucidates our understanding of the history of urban redevelopment in the US, giving a detailed account of how 1950s urban renewal and the radical opposition to it that followed in the 1960s paved the way for the processes of gentrification that have begun to characterize many US-American cities since the turn of the twenty-first century.

Finally, Goldstein’s meticulously researched and elegantly written book on the history of housing politics and urban policy in Harlem also doubles as a piece of African-American history, as a micro-history of the Civil Rights movement as it happened in Harlem during the 1960s, shedding further light on the racialized practices and discriminatory history behind many of the urban policies still in existence today. It is not least Goldstein’s forceful and convincing fusion of these two histories and narrative strands that make *The Roots of Urban Renaissance* required and urgent reading for anyone interested in the (urban) America of today.

German Abstract:

Die weitverzweigten Wurzeln Harlems „Zweiter Renaissance“

The Roots of Urban Renaissance: Gentrification and the Struggle over Harlem von Brian Goldstein stellt eine wichtige Ergänzung zur Geschichte der Stadtentwicklungspolitik in New York City und den USA dar. Goldsteins Buch zeigt anschaulich die komplexe und oft widersprüchliche Geschichte der Stadterneuerung Harlems während der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts. Er richtet seinen Blick hier vor allem auf eine Reihe einflussreicher lokaler Stadtteilorganisationen, welche das Viertel anfangs mit radikalen Ideen zur "community control" in Sinne der mehrheitlich ärmeren BewohnerInnen zu gestalten dachten, letztlich aber eine gegenläufige Vision für Ihren Stadtteil realisierten: ein Harlem, das sich gehobenen Schichten und den Interessen privater Investoren öffnete. Gleichzeitig fungiert der Band somit auch als Erzählung über den Kampf afro-amerikanischer Stadtbewohner, die ihren Platz in den US-amerikanischen Städten inmitten weiter zunehmender Gentrifizierung zu verteidigen suchten.

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