The Middle Classes and the City

The impact of the middle classes on the city has been a focus of considerable academic and political attention, most recently concerning the spread of gentrification through cities across the world. Yet the middle classes are increasingly occupying a diverse range of neighbourhoods across the urban system. Through a comparison of such neighbourhoods in Paris and London, this book seeks to explore the dynamics of these forms of territorialisation and the consequences for understanding the sociology, politics and geography of the contemporary city.

Why write a book on urban research that focuses on the middle classes?

In France and Britain, the question of the “middle classes”, their definition and their social role is currently a significant topic in both the social scientific and the political domain. A number of publications, news articles, essays and research articles (Burrows and Gane, 2006; Butler and Lees, 2006; Chauvel, 2006; Donzelot, 2004; Lojkine, 2005; Savage et al., 2005) have recently analysed their decline and downward social mobility, their secessionist logic (into exclusive neighbourhoods, opting out of public services) or their problems in grappling with the financial crisis. Debates around the nature and composition of the middle class have continued since the Industrial Revolution but most concentrated discussions have concerned the expansion of the middle classes since World War II. These discussions increasingly accorded a powerful role to the middle classes in terms of the reproduction of capitalist relations of production (Baudelot et al., 1974; Lipietz, 1996) – in the UK and the US, the group was discussed as the professional-managerial class (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, 1979), the new class (Gouldner, 1979) and the service class (Goldthorpe, 1980, 1982). More recent commentary has involved a discussion about the fragmentation of the middle class into the middle
classes (Butler and Savage, 1995), a term “used to define social groups whose income can vary by a factor of four” (Bidou, 2004; Chauvel, 2006; Dagnaud, 1981). They are increasingly detached from upper-class lifestyles and aspirations and, in certain fractions, there is increasing emphasis on the relations with working-class trajectories which themselves are no longer part of a solidaristic bloc (Ehenreich, 1989). It is now increasingly evident that these different trajectories and experiences of the middle classes and their relationship to other classes are being registered in the different settlement patterns of the middle classes in the city (Butler, 1997; Préteceille, 2007; Webber, 2007). For instance, the current urban research literature tends to depict the middle classes as striving to safeguard the urban and educational enclaves they have managed to carve out for themselves (Bridge, 2006; Butler and Robson, 2003; Reay and Ball, 1998).

At the same time, social mix has become a major driver of urban policy whereby the middle classes are seen as the guarantors of social cohesion. An extensive international literature has examined the rhetoric of so-called social-diversity policies and their contradictory effects (Bridge et al., 2012). This issue is not new and has been discussed by the urban literature since the 1950s (Chamboredon and Lemaire, 1970; Gans, 1961) and has been evident in urban policies and housing policies since the turn of the last century. Over the last 20 years, research on neighbourhood effects and the international debate that followed indirectly addressed this question, but from the perspective of poor neighbourhoods. Work on gentrification on the other hand considers the logic of urban middle classes and the consequences of social division or mix. Such representations and policies shed light on the relationship of the middle classes to urban space as well as their basis of political and social engagement.

However, few studies have attempted a more comprehensive approach to the middle classes and their social relations across urban space. That is the goal of this book.

What do the middle classes do to the city? How do they contribute to transforming their socio-spatial logic? And conversely, how does urban space contribute to transforming the middle classes (through classifying and constructing their identities)?

We concur with previous arguments that territorial relations of the middle classes are nowadays relevant to their social identity (Bridge, 2003; Butler and Robson, 2003; Savage et al., 2005). Territorial identity can be seen as a catalyst of their wider relations with the world and their