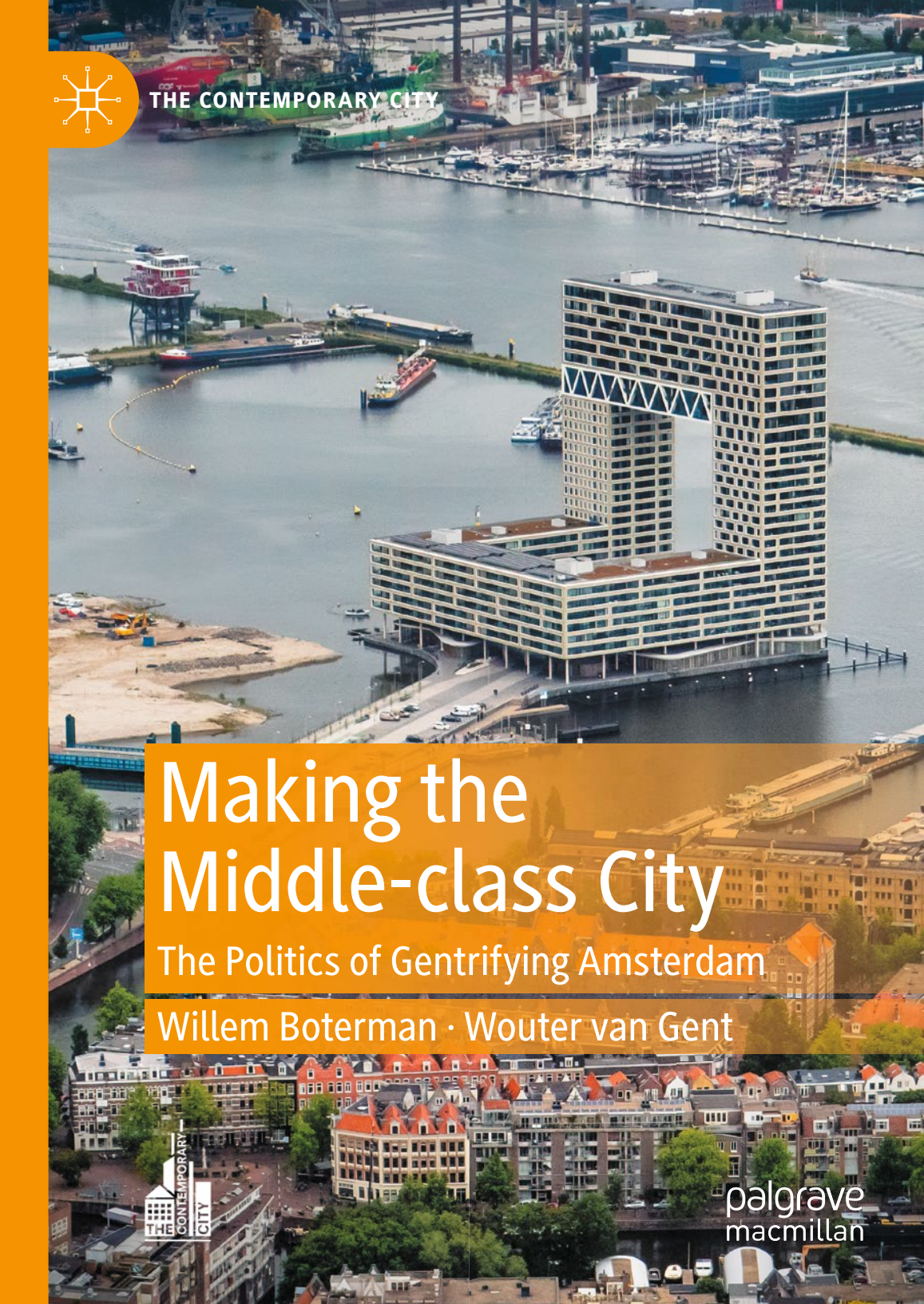
THE CONTEMPORARY CITY
Making the Middle-class City
The Politics of Gentrifying Amsterdam
Willem Boterman · Wouter van Gent
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The Contemporary City

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Willem Boterman • Wouter van Gent

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ISSN 2634-5463 ISSN 2634-5471 (electronic)
The Contemporary City
ISBN 978-1-137-57494-7 ISBN 978-1-137-55493-2 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55493-2

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Like many cities in Western Europe and North America in the past 40 years, the city of Amsterdam has undergone a profound social and political transformation. It changed from a relatively poor city, governed by a (radical) left-wing government to a city dominated by affluence and marked by centrist liberal politics. Also in terms of public space and housing development, the city is hardly recognizable. In a word, the last decades saw the re-emergence of Amsterdam as a middle-class city. This is not to say that the entire population is middle class, but that the city's politics and policies are dominated by middle-class interests, leading to the production of classed urban space. This book seeks to understand how this transformation could have taken place.

In 1984, or even in 1994, hardly anyone in Amsterdam could have predicted the high levels of gentrification, marked by soaring housing prices and affordability issues in the 2010s. This transformation was never a foregone conclusion or a natural inevitability. It was a contingent process that cannot be reduced to national and global processes alone, as it has been very much a local affair too. While we take stock of higher-scale processes (economic restructuring, national politics, (welfare) state change), we are particularly interested in what has happened in the city: in its neighbourhoods, in the representative local government and in the local State. As geographers, we take a particular interest in urban context, spatial processes and issues of scale, but this book is as much as an

outcome of personal fascination as academic curiosity. Wouter, like many other young people, came to the city for studies when he was 18 -picking a study to go along with his move to Amsterdam. Having settled in the city, he became fascinated by how other newcomers would subtly claim the city, implicitly -and sometimes explicitly- at the expense of long-term residents, who would often have a migration background. To his surprise, he would hear similar claiming when interviewing policy makers during his PhD research. Willem was born and brought up in Amsterdam, and has seen the city change in the past forty years. As the son of parents who belong to the baby boomer generation who became Amsterdam's first gentrifiers, he grew up in one of the most profoundly transformed neighbourhoods of the city. Bringing up three children in the city himself, he became fascinated by the generational aspects of the social reproduction of the middle classes in urban space.

Our paths crossed for the first time during our studies at the University of Amsterdam and they ran parallel ever since. Throughout our working careers we have been good friends and colleagues collaborating on various projects, mainly focusing on our shared academic interest: the social and spatial transformation of Amsterdam. As academics, we have been engaged in public debates about the city and we have been giving (un) solicited advice to politicians and policy makers. In our work and in our lives we have been contributing to the legitimation and to the critique of how Amsterdam has been developing. So, in a way, our research questions are a reflection of who we are. We are both subject and object of this research: being professional middle class, Amsterdammers, and gentrifiers ourselves

This book is the product of many years of research, discussion and reflection, and we could not have completed it without the help of others. During the research phase, we were assisted by Bas Boomstra, Patrick van Son and Katie Brown, talented individuals, who helped with collecting electoral and interview data. We would also like to acknowledge the interviewees for talking to us, and sharing their views and thoughts. We appreciate that Amsterdam municipal policymakers and planners are socially-engaged individuals, who are willing to engage with academics and academic work. Steve Russell performed an extensive language check. Some of chapters are based on published work that received comments

by anonymous referees. These also acknowledge the help of Katrin Anacker, Thea Dukes, Mai Thi Nguyen, David Varady, and Elvin Wyly. We also thank Brian Doucet who kindly agreed to read our manuscript and provided thoughtful suggestions for improvement.

Our research also was also hugely helped by (former) colleagues in geography and planning at the University of Amsterdam. As our book series editor and colleague, Richard Ronald, provided us with good advice and encouragement. Myrte Hoekstra worked with us on the case study of Van der Pekbuurt in Chap. 6 and helped us think through the politics and their impacts there. Manuel Aalbers, Marco Bontje, Cody Hochstenbach, Rivke Jaffe, Lia Karsten, Robert Kloosterman, Fenne Pinkster, Pieter Terhorst, Justus Uitermark, and Aslan Zorlu have also been very influential through their work and through our daily interactions at the office. Justus, Cody and Rivke also provided valuable feedback on parts of the manuscript. Going by citations, Sako Musterd, our former teacher and promotor, has perhaps been the most influential person in shaping this study. This book builds on his work on welfare state restructuring and urban inequality, and it benefits from the intellectual environment that he has been part of and helped to create.

We owe all these fine and talented individuals a huge debt of gratitude. More so, we would like to thank our friends and family for keeping us sane and for enriching our daily lives in Amsterdam.

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Willem Boterman
Wouter van Gent

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1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In many ways, Sint Antoniesbreestraat is a typical street in Amsterdam. It goes from Nieuwmarkt, near the infamous Red-Light District, towards the Rembrandt House and the former Jewish quarter. At the top of the street, a fish monger sits next to a Chinese supermarket and craft kinky leatherwear shop. Further down, you will find tourists visiting the tattoo parlour and coffee shops and locals going into the book shop or optician across the street. Cyclists speed past continuously, circumventing the little car traffic there is, and startling unsuspecting pedestrians with their loud bells and warning shouts of 'hallo!' The street is a bit narrower than elsewhere in town, as it has been there since the sixteenth century. You would not see this if you looked at the buildings though. The De Pinto house, an urban palazzo from an affluent Sephardic Jewish family, later converted into a public library and cultural centre, is one of the few historic buildings left. Instead, the street is mainly made up of buildings from the 1980s. When it was built, the residences above the shops were all social housing units, designed by famed architects, such as Aldo van Eyk. Because the buildings are above a metro line, the construction costs made it one of the most expensive social housing developments in the world.

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W. Boterman, W. van Gent, *Making the Middle-class City*, The Contemporary City,
https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55493-2_1

Today, quite a few are still owned by housing associations and rented below market price. Yet, with the sale of the dwellings, new residents have also moved into the neighbourhood. Like many neighbourhoods in Amsterdam, the area has seen an increase in more affluent and more highly educated people and households, as they can afford the higher prices of the privatised apartments.

Sint Antoniesbreestraat is not only typical in its appearance but also in its transformation between the 1980s—when prestigious social housing was being developed above shops and metro lines—and the 2010s—when housing prices started to soar and the city developed more private housing than social rental units. In this period, Amsterdam changed from a relatively poor city under a radical left-wing government to a city dominated by middle classes, socially, culturally, and politically. The majority of the city's adult population is now highly educated and the growth of the number of more affluent residents and their impact on politics and public life has meant that Amsterdam has essentially became a middle-class city.

Our central concern is to explain and understand this urban transformation, what we call the (re)-making of Amsterdam as a middle-class city. In a period of 35 years, the city's neighbourhoods, public spaces, housing and amenities have become increasingly (re)developed according to the interests of middle classes. We call this a re-making, as the city had been dominated by upper-middle classes for most of its prewar history. Notably, Amsterdam's glory days in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were marked by bourgeois merchant rulers (regents), and this remained the case until socialists came to dominate the city's politics when universal voting was introduced in 1919. The recent transformations therefore constitute a reconstruction of middle-class power, albeit in a very different form and context than centuries ago.

This book asks the question how the re-assertion of middle-class politics around the turn of the millennium has been possible? How can a city ruled by the social democratic Labour Party for a century, and internationally famed for its social policies, become a place where gentrification sets the tone and (neo)liberal urbanism takes hold again? This book offers an answer by focusing on the interlocking socio-economic and political dynamics that have reshaped Amsterdam's social geography over a 35-year period.

1.2 Explanations for Urban Transformation

To explain the fundamental social transformations of cities in North America and Western Europe, such as Amsterdam, urban scholars have pointed to structural changes in the global economy (Castells, 1990). The loss of manufacturing work in cities and the rise of new economic activities related to, for instance, ICT, finance and business and hospitality services, have had a profound impact on the structure of the local labour market, and thereby on the social stratification of urban regions. These structural economic transformations are often presented as the result of shifting flows in capital investment and reconfigurations in global capitalism (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 2001). These shifts have not only led to investments in economic activities in cities but also in the city's real estate and (re)development (Smith, 1996). In addition, economic geographers portray urban growth and development as the logical and automatic outcome of economic agglomeration, meaning the cumulative spin-off effects from spatial concentration of economic activities (Florida, 2002; Scott, 1988, 1998). Some urban scholars even see urbanisation and the ever-greater concentration of people and capital as an inevitable process (Bettencourt & West, 2010; Glaeser, 2011). These scholars, urban scientists, economic geographers and economists have a rather top-down perspective on what explains the remarkable urban transformations of the past decades. Although the role of these macro-processes of economic restructuring for urban development are undeniable, these perspectives do not really account for the vast diversity of cities and the specific local manifestations of urban transformations. Simply put, not every city and not every neighbourhood is affected in the same way.

Comparative urban scholars and urban geographers have sought to explain local and temporal variations in how economic changes impact the social structure of cities (e.g. Hamnett, 1994a, 2021; Kazepov et al., 2021; Musterd et al., 2017). Macro-level forces, it is argued, become 'filtered' through layer upon layer of local, historically grown institutions, which in addition to political configurations consist of economic structures, social compositions, various (sub)cultures and built

environments (Andreotti et al., 2018). These enmeshed layers are not just filters but also create a path-dependency. This means that the historical legacies have led to considerable national, regional and local *variations* or *variegations* in trajectories of economic and social development in cities in the post-Fordist era. Particularly, the State at different operating levels (national, regional, local) is put forward as a key factor in buffering, mediating or mitigating the effects of higher-level forces. The urban literature has therefore argued that geographical differences in welfare state configurations have made the effects of capitalist transitions on cities anything but natural or inevitable (Le Galès, 2018; Musterd & Ostendorf, 1998).

Yet, it would be a mistake to just see the State as part of a filter, a passive go-between, only managing the forces of the economy (Bourdieu, 2012; Poulantzas, 1978). The State also acts in ways that influence how those structural processes unfold at different levels and may affect even their direction and pace. For instance, at the national level governments have reregulated capital and labour relations in ways that not just responded to processes of globalisation and economic restructuring, but also initiated and catalysed them (Aalbers, 2020; Brenner, 2014; Harvey, 2001). Studies of urban politics and government have also revealed how at the local level the State can actively shift away from distributive policies towards courting the private investments in development and lowering taxes (Cox, 2020; Hall & Hubbard, 1996; Le Galès, 2002; MacLeod & Jones, 2011). The major urban transformations of the past decades are thus explained by a changing urban politics in which capital interests are penetrating the local State, resulting in a focus on urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989; MacLeod & Jones, 2011) and urban revanchism (Smith, 1996).

The growing literature on state-led gentrification has also revealed that neighbourhood transformations through capital-led redevelopment are actively facilitated and sometimes even directly assisted by the State (e.g. Bernt, 2022; Davidson & Lees, 2005; He, 2007; Lees et al., 2016; Uitermark et al., 2007; Visser & Kotze, 2008). The state-led gentrification framework has linked urban transformation with both social class and State. The literature however tends to treat the State rather simplistically; it is portrayed either as a misguided democratic institution or, more

critically, as a handmaiden of capitalist elites. Also, the literature uses State and policy to explain class-based spatial change. What is particularly missing is how processes of gentrification can also *affect* the local State and its policies.

1.3 The Socio-Political Cycle of Urban Transformation

These approaches are all useful to explain and understand the making of Amsterdam as a middle-class city. However, what these approaches have in common is that they all focus on the outcome: the social transformation of the city. This yields an incomplete understanding for two main reasons: (1) it does not offer sufficient explanation for *why* and *how* urban transformations in specific places happen; and (2) it does not account for the effects of local dynamics on the development of the city. Consequently, there is little sense of how the class-based social transformation feeds back into the city's politics and policies.

What is missing from these explanations is a deeper appreciation of how macro-level forces, politics and policies, and socio-spatial transformations are mutually constitutive. There is a reciprocity at work here; cities transform socially, but in doing so they transform their politics. So instead of a cascading model in which structural forces in the global economy produce urban space, filtered through different layers of institutions and state policy, we propose a cyclical model that accounts for various feedback loops between social-spatial change and urban politics over a longer period of time (1980–2015).

We argue that the urban transformation of Amsterdam can best be understood by emphasizing the mutually informing and constitutive ways in which economic restructuring, social transformations and political transformations are intertwined in continuous feedback cycles. Amsterdam's social transformation over the past decades is both informed by and has created the conditions for a transformation of its urban politics. This is a reciprocal relationship in which Amsterdam's social and demographic changes feed into new electoral dynamics and consequently also new urban politics. New political relationships lead to changing

policies that lay out the conditions under which the city undergoes new rounds of social transformation. We thus aim to explain how a new urban politics emerged out of the resurgence of the city. Moreover, we also want to explain the pathways and direction of the city's social transformations by an analysis of institutional and symbolic politics that has initiated, facilitated and mediated its transformation. Figure 1.1 presents the socio-political cycle that is the core of our argument and that will structure this monograph.

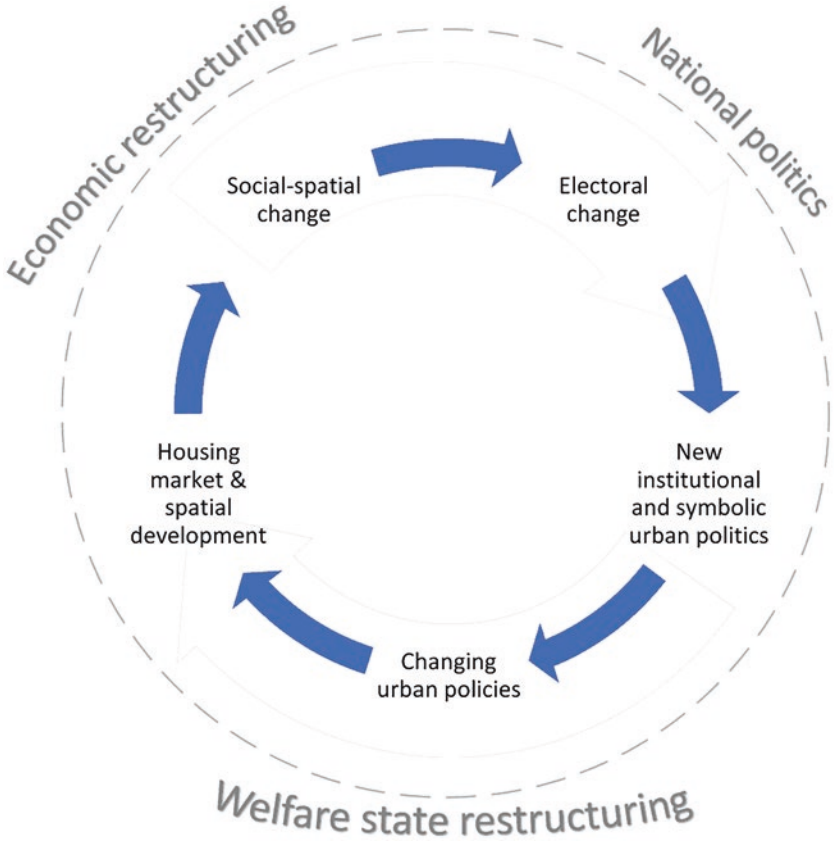

Fig. 1.1 The socio-political cycle of urban transformation

Class, Politics and the Production of Urban Space

Our cyclical model proposes a revised perspective of how urban transformations unfold. While we acknowledge that economic transformation is a potent force of change, we argue that investigating the reciprocal processes between social and political change over a longer period of time allow for a more comprehensive understanding of urban transformation. A keystone of our cyclical model is the relationship between social class and State. As scholars of gentrification have argued, the transformations of cities in North America and Europe in the past decades are primarily a class-based process (Lees et al., 2008, 2016), although this social-spatial transformation also intersects with race and ethnicity (Pattillo, 2010; Van Gent & Jaffe, 2017), gender (Curran, 2017; Karsten, 2003) and specific life courses (Hochstenbach & Boterman, 2018; Rérat, 2012). It has been established that over the past five decades many major cities have become dominated by the (upper) middle classes at the expense of working classes.

Despite the growing literature that shows how the local State promotes gentrification, only a few studies have discussed the relationship reciprocally (Ghertner, 2011; Ley, 1996). In this book we also analyse how the increasing presence of the middle classes has tilted the political balance in their favour. The dominance of middle-class interests is not only brought about through new class-based electoral dynamics and ensuing representational politics (although this is a central point). The gentrification of the city has also transformed the State itself, by reorientating its priorities, altering its discourse, and changing its policies. In fact, we argue that the State itself has become gentrified. At the same time, the changing geography of and ethnic shift within the working classes have reshuffled and gradually weakened the electoral base of left-wing parties, ultimately eroding hegemonic left of centre social democratic ideology within state institutions.

The rise of the new middle classes in the city has established a new urban politics that centres around their interests. These middle-class politics are about how relations in social space are represented in the local State, and vice versa: how relations in the State, the local field of power, feed back into socio-spatial transformations. The hegemonic shift from 100 years of socialist or social democratic dominance to liberal

middle-class politics[1] is therefore not just about more political representatives implementing policies that favour, attract and facilitate the city's middle classes. The shift in politics is also about the struggle over the legitimacy of specific and general urban policy aims, the power to define what a city is, and to envisage its future. In other words, middle-class politics are also about the symbolic dimensions of power. This means that politics exists both as explicit, and sometimes even publicly-stated goals, but also through more subtle forms of reproduction in which embodied norms, values, tastes and ideologies are translated into practice, often beyond reflection. Middle-class politics is thus about being able to articulate and impose narratives and representations of how the city should evolve, how social space may be inscribed upon physical space.

As we shall see in this book, the norms, values, and ideologies that drive middle-class politics cannot be understood as urban revanchism (Smith, 1996). Many members of Amsterdam's middle classes express a genuine commitment to progressive values and social politics, and also share a broad enthusiasm for living in socially and ethnically diverse urban settings. This liberal cosmopolitanism is not boundless however. While social justice is on their minds and part of their (symbolic) politics, the middle classes are very much centred around their own interests, related to social reproduction through housing, schools and consumption. This double heartedness or tension between loving diversity and the need to control or gatekeep urban marginality and the working classes has been found in other scholarship on the urban middle classes at the neighbourhood level (Andreotti et al., 2013; Brown-Saracino, 2010; Butler, 1997; Tissot, 2014). As we shall see at the urban level, class

[1] Liberalism is notoriously hard to define. We see liberalism as a living political ideology that is actively promoted by social and conservative liberal parties as well as by other actors. The ideology favours individual freedoms and is less inclined towards collective arrangements and social redistribution (regardless of whether that is based on class solidarity or on nationalism). Liberals are inclined towards economic liberalism and individual freedom to varying degrees. Social liberals sometimes profess collective arrangements and are generally more progressive on issues of gender, race and sexuality. Conservative liberals tend to be more market-oriented and less progressive on social and cultural issues. To be clear, when we use neo-liberal or neo-liberalisation, we refer to the institutionalised logic ('rule regime') of pushing market interests (see Brenner et al., 2010). For our North American readers, liberals are not necessarily left-wing in the Dutch and European political context. Rather, their positions on social and economic issues range from left to right wing. The largest liberal party in the Netherlands, VVD, considers itself to be right wing.

interests and diversity politics are not necessarily *consistent* but can be complementary. The hegemonic politics of the Amsterdam middle class is no less hegemonic than in other gentrifying cities, yet the manifestation of that hegemony is about the symbolic moderation of this effect: it's about downplaying class and ethnic difference. The mantle of diversity and social justice obfuscates middle-class politics as *Realpolitik*. As we shall argue, this paradox is inherent to Amsterdam's middle-class politics.

1.4 Outline of this Book

This socio-political cycle of urban transformation is a continuous loop where causality is difficult to pinpoint exactly. The main reason for this is that the feedback mechanisms that constitute the cycle are asynchronous. Policies affect urban transformation but not necessarily immediately; much political change is slow and incremental. Population change informs electoral change and political reconfigurations, but it might be difficult to establish exactly when this becomes apparent. In this book, we break open the cycle and discuss the different stages of urban transformation in different time periods (Table 1.1).

The book has five chapters that each deal with different elements and relationships of the cycle. Chapter 2 introduces the main theoretical concepts used in this book. It starts by outlining the meaning of middle class in the Dutch and Amsterdam context and then discusses how Amsterdam's transformation can be understood in terms of class. It continues by focusing on the relationship between social class and the State, theorizing how urban transformation is also a transformation of the local State, caused by and reinforcing the class-based transformation of urban space.

Chapter 3 is concerned with how the social class composition and social geography of Amsterdam have changed over the past decades (1980–2015) and how this is related to economic restructuring. To study these social transformations we relied on academic papers, sources such as annual and other reports from the Amsterdam municipality, and secondary data from the municipal Research, Information and Statistics Office (*Onderzoek, Informatie en Statistiek* (OIS)) and the National

Table 1.1 An overview of the stages of Amsterdam's urban transformation

Period	Chapter	1977–1989	1990–2001	2002–2009	2010–2016
Social and spatial change	Chap. 3	Working class decline due to deindustrialisation and suburbanisation. Younger and more highly educated population increases.	More highly educated residents remain in the city. Migrant communities gain in electoral importance.	More dual-earners, domestic and international housing demand increases.	High middle-class demand for housing augmented by demand for buy-to-let property (short- and long-term), stimulated by record levels of international migrants.
Electoral politics	Chap. 4	PvdA (Labour Party) together with progressive and radical left-wing parties such as the Dutch Communist Party (CPN)	PvdA together with social liberals (D66) and conservative liberals (VVD), on occasion augmented by GroenLinks (Green-Left Party).	PvdA with conservative liberals (VVD) and Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), later with GroenLinks	PvdA with GroenLinks and conservative liberals (VVD) From 2014: Social liberals (D66) form collation with conservative liberals (VVD) and the Socialist Party. For the first time PvdA is no longer the biggest in the city council.
Dominant policy agenda	Chaps. 5 and 6	Housing development for low income and small households. Left wing social democratic politics.	Integration policies and meeting a growing demand for housing from the middle classes within the city.	Urban boosterism and attracting the middle class.	Financial austerity and logic of capital accumulation in municipal development. Stronger focus on middle income groups and even the super-rich.