Theories and Issues of Gentrification: Contextual Analysis through Comparative Studies

Hyunjoo Jung*

Abstract: This paper critically reviews the theories and issues in the study of gentrification. The conventional approaches to gentrification are divided into two traditions: the supply-side structural approach and the demand-side humanistic approach. The former explains gentrification as a capital return to inner city areas where ‘rent gap’ is the greatest due to the devaluation of properties. The latter characterizes gentrification as new urbanism brought by the high end fraction of service workers in post-industrial society. However, each approach explains a partial aspect of gentrification, a complex socio-economic process. Suggesting an integrated understanding of gentrification, the paper examines two cases studies of Society Hill, Philadelphia and Fairview Slopes, Vancouver. Through the comparative analysis, the author emphasizes that socio-economic contexts specifically given to each locality differentiate the process and the consequence of gentrification. Therefore, it is argued that contextual analysis with understandings of different conditions of localities, rather than the generalization through theoretical debates, is further required to improve practicability of the study of gentrification. It also points out that the factors that both approaches attribute as the causes of gentrification only provide necessary conditions for gentrification. In practice, it is the agent that initiates and directs the process of gentrification.

Key Words: gentrification, rent gap, consumption based approach, urban renewal, inner city redevelopment

I. Introduction

Since the World War II, most American cities have experienced dramatic changes in their intrametropolitan structure. Among those changes, one of the most critical issues is inner city decline and, as a result, central and suburban disparity. Suburban
flight by white and upper-middle class households has been a dominant part of intra-urban migration during the last half of 20th century, while most urban poor remained in the central city. Thus, deterioration or abandonment of property and significant decline in economic activities have characterized the typical features of central cities. However, after 1960s-70s, a reverse process occurred. That was gentrification.

The term of gentrification originated from the European tradition whereby landed gentry maintained a house in the city in addition to their country seat. Glass first used this metaphor to describe the middle-class household migration into the working-class neighborhood in London (Weesep, 1994). Due to its deductive nature, the definition of gentrification varies depending on the observed cases and the foci of researchers. The common features of definitions include two interconnected aspects: the characteristics of demand (namely gentrifiers) and supply (the conditions of gentrified housing market). Generally, gentrification refers to the renovation of previously deteriorated working class neighborhoods by middle or higher income groups. It accompanies the transformation of demographic structure of the neighborhood from predominantly the low income population into the mostly high income and professional population. In the process, gentrification brings physical renovation or rehabilitation of housing stock, and, often, the displacement of the original occupants (Hamnett, 1991).

Gentrification has occurred in only large Western cities and its impact to housing market is known as limited (Bourne, 1993). However, scholarly interests in gentrification are somewhat exaggerated compared to its real impact on urban change. This inflated attention of urban geographers results from symbolic and practical implications that gentrification provides to urban studies. First, gentrification shows a possibility to lessen city-suburb disparity. In early studies, gentrification was suggested as a new urbanism and an alternative way to rebuild diverse and convivial urban environments in contrast to the homogeneous suburbs (Ley, 1980; Mills, 1988). Second, gentrification study highlights the role of new urban middle class, ‘gentrifiers,’ which draws increasing attentions of recent urban researchers. Gentrifiers, often called ‘the inner city frontiers,’ are composed of mostly new middle class who appeared with emerging of ‘post-industrial society.’ The gentrification process shows their distinctive socio-demographic features and cultural propensities (Ley, 1980, 1994, 1996). Due to the fact that gentrifiers with unique cultural orientation initiated the inner city renovation, gentrification differs from urban renewal and redevelopment. Third, the most important contribution of gentrification study probably lies in the fact that it prompts important theoretical debates in recent urban studies (Hamnett, 1991). Debates over gentrification revolve around the structural approach and the humanistic approach, which illuminates an old time controversy in human geography as well as general social sciences.

In spite of theoretical debates over gentrification, empirical studies reveal that gentrification is a very diverse phenomenon and reflects local conditions that influence the form and the extent of gentrification processes. This implies that gentrification needs to be examined on a case-by-case basis. Therefore, I suggest that the importance of gentrification is not in macro generalization, but in its context which represents the characteristics of each locality and dynamics of involved actors. Through a comparative case study of two well-known gentrification processes in Society Hill, Philadelphia, and Fairview Slopes, Vancouver, the paper examines how the theories are applied into the real gentrification processes and the major issues emerging in the study of gentrification.