



Civil Society's Predicaments in Neoliberal Korea

Civic Activism in South Korea: The Intertwining of Democracy and Neoliberalism. By Seungsook MOON. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. 320 pages. ISBN: 9780231211482.

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It is widely acknowledged that civil society in South Korea has played a crucial role in that nation's democratization. During the authoritarian era, intellectuals, student activists, progressive religious leaders, and industrial workers formed a pro-democracy alliance and mobilized against military dictatorship, blazing the path towards democratization. However, these contentious actors and the nature of their activism have not remained static but have changed over the past several decades as South Korea became an institutionalized democracy and a global economic power. Seungsook Moon's *Civic Activism in South Korea* sheds light on the transformation of social movement organizations during a complex period when South Korea achieved liberal democracy amidst a swift turn, both domestic and global, toward a neoliberal market order. Moon's monograph is a welcome addition to the critical scholarship on social movements, civil society, democracy, and neoliberalism, which requires us to take a fresh perspective in examining the uneasy tensions among contentious politics, democratic governance, and neoliberal capitalism.

From the outset, Moon emphasizes that neoliberalism is not simply a mode of specific state-market relations, but equally an everyday culture and ideology that penetrates every social sphere as well as our imagination

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concerning the ways of structuring political life. When liberal democracy and neoliberal order come hand in hand, Moon argues, “neoliberalism not only undermines democracy as a value and a set of practices but also... undermines the substantive aspect of democracy by shrinking or destroying public resources, institutions, and spaces that are equally open to everyone and are necessary to the equality of social conditions” (p. 22).

Because of such omni-present neoliberal logics, Korean society experienced a swift and thorough neoliberal turn under an administration controlled by democracy-activist-turned-progressive politicians who had assumed power in the presidency and the majority in the National Assembly. Moon problematizes the emergence of the elusive notion of “co-governance,” which in theory promoted partnership among government, business, and civil society. Her critique is centered on the uncritical adoption of the concept of *governance* and the complicit participation of once progressive social actors in the governance framework. As prefaced earlier, Moon views civic actors’ participation in co-governance as a neoliberal political allure that resulted in an undermining of public resources by relegating the responsibilities of politics to private actors and individual self-sufficiency.

With this critical approach to the question of liberal democracy and neoliberalism, Moon interrogates how Korean civil society navigated and negotiated the parameters of its progressive activism in the post-democratization, neoliberal context. By following the trajectories of three different civic associations, Moon examines how these civil actors changed and to what extent these changes in social justice activism conform to or reject neoliberal hegemony. The social movement organizations under analytical scrutiny here include the People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD; a large, national-level advocacy organization with a professional activist staff), two local branches of the Democratic Friends Society (DFS; a medium-size feminist organization with voluntary activists and part-time staff), and the Friends of Asia (FOA; a small, local organization with volunteer activists and supporters, working on foreign migrant issues).

Chapter 1 lays out the background for the emergence of these civic

actors who increasingly labeled themselves as citizens' organizations in post-democratization Korea. According to Moon, these organizations are driven by four moral codes, which in turn have shaped the divergent contours of their changing activism. Korean civil society is largely characterized by (1) financial and political independence from partisan forces and corporations; (2) diversification in terms of each association's size, focus, and goals; (3) a general inclination for institutional and social change; and (4) the pursuit of grassroots participation.

The following chapter introduces the basic profiles of the three civic organizations, while chapter 3 moves on to discuss the tensions to which these social movement actors have been subjected under the country's changing political and market conditions. Internally, these citizens' associations were in pursuit of equality and solidarity, but the organizational growth and institutionalization of these groups raised issues of hierarchies and divisions. Civic organizations pursue institutionalization and professionalization to advance the efficacy of their reformist activism, but this process inevitably raises questions about bureaucratization and divisions in terms of the different social statuses of activists and grassroots participants. Externally, civic associations must navigate how to continue membership recruitment and publicity in ways that will resonate with the general public, who are increasingly bound by the neoliberal logics of individuality and profitability.

The remainder of the book (chapters 4–6) examines the three organizations in a microscopic manner, respectively, to account for the diversity of *responses* these civil actors chose to adopt. The PSPD, as a large national organization pursuing legal and policy reforms, has experienced a hierarchical division of labor between professional activists and grassroots members. The DFS, consisting of local branches of the organization, chose a path of increased partnership with local governments. With such partnerships, DFS financial resources became dependent on partnership projects, which were mostly in the area of delivering social services on behalf of the public sector, such as childcare and the promotion of women's health and employment. In the local context where there were fewer jobs

and fewer members, this was an inevitable decision for the DFS, but the cost was its political and financial autonomy. The FOA, on the other hand, endured the lack of resources and financial precarity by refusing the option of partnership or participation in *governance*. Instead, the FOA was more interested in building solidarity and equality between native Koreans and foreign migrants in its prefigurative activities.

Civic Activism in South Korea offers a rich empirical discussion of the diverse trajectories of Korean civic organizations in the context of democratization and neoliberalism. Moon's critical analysis explores the thorny question of to what extent these supposedly progressive activist organizations were complicit in the penetration of neoliberal logic into everyday life in South Korea because they participated in a co-governance framework and partnership projects with state institutions, whose ultimate goal was to relegate the public responsibilities of formal political institutions to civil, private actors. Moon concludes somberly that the democratizing and progressive activism pursued by these different civic associations were bounded and limited as long as their activities did not challenge the core values and practices of neoliberalism. The hegemony of the neoliberal order remains intact under liberal democracy.

Civic Activism in South Korea will be a welcome read to scholars interested in the critical examination of liberal democracy, neoliberalism, civil society, and the question of the public in the 21st century. Yet, it also leaves several unanswered areas of inquiry. First, Moon's somber conclusion that the boundaries of civic activism are ultimately constrained by neoliberal hegemony goes back to the fundamental social science question of *structure versus agency*. Do or can civic actors, individual or collective, exercise any meaningful agency under neoliberal structures? If structural conditions prevail, how can we imagine the possibilities of prefigurative politics and progressive activism beyond the neoliberal order? Are the findings from Korean civil society extendable to other polities where liberal democracy operates under neoliberal hegemony?

Another question that lingered after closing the book is how to explain the various ways these three Korean civic organizations navigated a

democratizing and neoliberalizing political economy. It was unclear if their choices and adaptations were dictated by neoliberal logics or by the given organization's size, financial conditions, and the scope of their intended activism, or by decisions of the organization's leaders and members. These queries represent different levels of explanation, i.e., the levels of structure, institution, and actors, respectively, and a more nuanced approach would have made Moon's overall argument more convincing.