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From "Power to the People" to "Civil Empowerment"

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From "Power to the People" to "Civil Empowerment"
-- The Making of Neoliberal Governmentality in Grassroots Movements for the Urban Poor in South Korea

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Abstract :

   This paper examines how grassroots movements for the urban poor in South Korea have been transformed in the context of neoliberalism. It is based on my fieldwork (September 1999 – April 2001) in Nangok, which was one of the most well-known shantytowns in Seoul. What concerns me is how and why grassroots groups came to abandon their dream of "Power to the People" and reconciled themselves with their antagonistic counterparts such as the state and welfare bodies. Through the fluctuating relationship between "welfare" and the movement, I examine what I call "the making of neoliberal governmentality," i.e., the process in which grassroots movements for the urban poor have reconfigured the movements' relationship with the state and the poor while embodying and contesting the technologies of neoliberal government. As neoliberal technologies, I find the extension of market rationality, the emphasis of responsible autonomy and empowerment, and the relocation of the "will to govern" of the state which Foucaultian studies have generally indicated. Rather than essentializing them as characteristics of neoliberal governmentality, however, I focus on to how grassroots activists have woven historically specific tapestry of these characteristics in the process that their memory of long-term movements intersect with the changing praxis of political economy.

   Our service begins with drinking, crying, yelling, cursing, and hugging. In this church, we put sorrow into joy. If you're in a fit of anger, if your sorrow wells up within you, if you have nowhere to stay, come to our church! Come! (A monthly newsletter of the N Church, March 1984)

   Our church has carried out this [social work] for a long time. Yet we haven't developed our know-how because we are lacking in expertise. The church has not devised its own model of social welfare yet. It's good to cooperate with welfare centers and the local government for our activities. (A monthly newsletter of a center in the N Church, June 1996)

This paper examines how the grassroots[1]movements for the urban poor have been

transformed in the context of neoliberalism in South Korea. Through the fluctuating

relationship between "welfare" and "movement," I will examine what I call "the making of neoliberal governmentality," or the process through which grassroots movements for the urban poor have reconfigured their relationship with the state and the poor while both contesting and embodying the technologies of neoliberal government.

In "Governmentality," Foucault (1979) traces the emergence of the "art of government" in modern European societies. By loosing governance from its moorings in the nation-state, Foucault's notion has allowed scholars to find various ways in which programs of government are articulated in micro-settings (O'Malley et al 1997). Beyond the historical account that sees governmentality as a counterpart of "sovereignty," which primarily involves the domination of the state, what I find more exciting in this concept is that it seeks to "interrogate the problematizations through which 'being' has been shaped in a thinkable and manageable form" (Rose 1999: 22). In other words, the concept of governmentality allows us to analyze "a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons" by denaturalizing it (Gordon 1991:42 cf. Dean 1999; Gupta 2001; Ferguson and Gupta 2002).

Seeing neoliberalism as neoliberal governmentality contributes to the resolution of some of the analytical problems entailed in seeing it as ideology. In fact, many leftists in non-Western countries have deprecated neoliberalism as an ideology because of its forcible imposition by the West. In other words, they have defined neoliberalism as an ideology for facilitating the increased integration of developing countries into the global capitalist economy in the name of "free" trade (e.g. DeMartino 2000; Harris and Seid 2000; Demmers et al 2004). However, this critique overlooks the fact that not only does neoliberalism seep into the conduct of individuals beyond the domain of economic policy, but also that, as Foucault (1980) suggested, its power is productive, not limited to its negative aspects.

Most analyses of neoliberalism as governmentality have anchored neoliberalism in its relation to liberalism (Burchell et. al. 1991; Barry et. al. 1996; Dean 1999). Neoliberalism disposes of the liberalists' remaining skepticism about state reason by relocating its "will to govern" in the active involvement of individuals in government as a kind of enterprise (Rose 1996). However, these studies raise another question because of their Eurocentric assumptions: how can we develop historically specific analyses of neoliberal

governmentality that rely neither on liberalism nor on the welfare state in the West? In South Korea, the introduction of a neoliberal economic model, the emergence of discourses about neoliberalism, and the "neoliberal" structural adjustment by international agencies do not correspond to each other. That is, the neoliberal economic model was introduced in the late 1970s,[2] and its publicization as the new "common sense" has been prevalent since the early 1990s, long before the structural adjustment programs implemented by the IMF in 1997.

In the uneven wake of neoliberalism in South Korea, therefore, I suggest that we focus on the *making* of neoliberal governmentality rather than on analytically essentializing its characteristics. During my fieldwork in Nangok, Seoul (September 1999 – April 2001), I found an extension of market rationality, an emphasis on responsible autonomy and empowerment, and the relocation of the state's "will to govern" that Foucaultian studies have indicated are characteristic of neoliberal governmentality. However, grassroots activists there have woven a historically specific tapestry of these characteristics as their memories of long-term movements intersect with the changing praxis of political economy in South Korea.

In this paper, I focus on the metamorphosis of grassroots movements that seemed to be an irreconcilable counterpart of the state and welfare bodies, that is, the process in which the boundary between "movement" and "welfare" has, in fact, become blurred. In South Korea, grassroots movements, along with welfare policy, philanthropy, media, etc., have played a key role in producing a "poverty politics"[3] through which the meaning of poverty has been represented and contested since the late 1960s. The movements began with the formation of urban shantytowns, places where unlicensed shacks were densely located. The urban-centered development after the end of the Korean War led to the massive migration to cities of rural people, who formed large-scale slums around rivers and hills. As the slums became obstacles to city planning, the Seoul government attempted to resettle more than 40,000 households at about twenty sites by allocating small parcels of land to each household (Whang 1988:155). My area of focus, Nangok, a well-known shantytown in the southern part of Seoul, was one of these sites.

Here, I focus on one grassroots organization, which was established in 1978 by university students in the form of a night school and reorganized as N Church in 1983.

Intriguing is the lack of concern with welfare issues that the activists of the N Church showed. Before welfare became hegemonic as a "scientific discourse," it was separated from grassroots movements in South Korea. Most movements for the urban poor focused not on welfare issues but on anti-evacuation struggles against the fluctuating re-development programs of the government, which was closely connected with anti-dictatorship struggle.[4] In Nangok, where the re-development policy was not at issue until the 1990s, most activists had left the town by that time to support the anti-evacuation protests in other shantytowns or join other labor movements. This lack of concern with welfare, in fact, reflects the coupling of the centralization of state power and a persistent "McCarthyism" in the modern history of South Korea. The partition of the Korean peninsula led the authoritarian South Korean regime to extend its surveillance of the entire nation and to emphasize national security as the principle governing social order (Kim 2000:28). During the military rule, activities not included in governmental channels by the state were stigmatized as advocating communism, while people involved in those activities were characterized as "reds" who threatened national security. In addition, when students and intellectuals, who had more latitude to protest than the working class during military rule, came to Nangok with the slogan of "Power to the People," welfare seemed to be far from their "revolutionary" ideal. According to them, *Minjung* [the people] had to be political subjects who could overthrow capitalism as well as the military regime. Although students and local youths formed the church themselves to escape the surveillance of the police, they did not organize specific activities there: from the outset, mission work was not their concern and any political action within a town seemed too dangerous. One woman, who was once a student of the N night school and is now a community leader, describes the church of the early 1980s as follows:

> In the church, we did not have gospel hymns. We learned revolutionary songs which were secretly circulated among college students. Sometimes we joined demonstrations of students and laborers, or helped anti-evacuation struggles of other shantytowns. But we had no idea of what to do in Nangok. Although we made our church, engaging in mission work seemed weird for us. Some enjoyed discussing political issues about community movements, while other youths just loafed at church, drinking and sleeping. So there were few local people in our church although we had parties or sports events for them. Sometimes, it became a refuge for intellectuals wanted by the police. That's why rumors were flying that our church was a haunt for reds.

It was not until the "democratic" reform resulting from the largest demonstrations in 1987 that activists returned to Nangok for the purpose of organizing local movements, that is, building the "Democratic Nangok" that corresponded with their slogans. Certainly, the so-called "democratizing" period starting in 1987 allowed grassroots groups to revitalize their activities. In Nangok, asserting that evacuation-related struggles had been at the expense of the everyday lives of local residents, activists began to create Community Organizations (COs), thereby diversifying their concerns into such issues as women's rights, education, environment, etc.

However, activists' attempts to make autonomous organizations free from government authorities did not go smoothly. First, although the COs started a variety of activities such as producing local media, hiking, public hearings, schools for mothers, etc., it was not easy for these groups to reconcile political mobilization against authoritarian rule with the urgent needs of poverty-stricken residents. Whenever activists planned any programs for local residents, they faced an incredible diversity of meanings couched in such phrases as "Democratic Nangok" and "the poor." Local residents in the movements were so diverse in their individual and social experiences of grassroots movements, as well as in age and gender, that they could not be united into a coherent body of political subjects. Second, and more importantly, the government began to implement more favorable policies such as urban medical insurance, public pre-kindergarten, and a national pension scheme starting in the late 1980s. Above all, as the Seoul government began to guarantee permanent public housing after 1989, the movement's slogan "No Evacuation without Alternatives" was no longer convincing (The Urban Poor Research Institute 1989; Lee 1995). Interestingly, it was after the end of the military regime and the advent of so-called "democratization" that leftist intellectuals and activists began a heated discussion about neoliberalism. Especially for activists in shantytowns, the neoliberal welfare and re-development policies implemented by the civilian government provided a reasonable explanation for why leftists became suddenly exhausted. That is, neoliberalism came to be interpreted as the mechanism through which fundamental issues of inequality became invisible, and public resistance came to be crippled by the state's sophisticated policies.

Nevertheless, even as the grassroots groups criticized neoliberalism as ideology, neoliberal governmentality began to permeate their discussions and activities. The invisibility and sophistication of state control began to reconfigure both the individual conduct of the activists themselves and the institutional conduct of grassroots groups in a new way. Indeed, most activists began to lose their sites as the evacuation reached completion in most of the redevelopment areas. Unlike the 1980s, when the economic "sacrifice" of activists had been taken for granted, "how to support activists financially" (Lee 1995:8-9) emerged as an inescapable issue among grassroots groups in the mid-1990s. Activists had to find new ways of residing in poor areas while legitimately receiving financial support.

The topic of "welfare" emerged as a natural consequence of this process. In the mid-1990s, it became popular for activists to (re)enter college to study welfare policy and to obtain a social worker's certificate. This change began to acquire legitimacy through seminars and workshops that had never been common among grassroots groups, thereby resituating the institutional conduct of grassroots movements. This change in grassroots movements overlapped with the prevalence of the emerging discourse of "civil society." Between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, large-scale NGOs began to emerge in the process of searching for a new form of resistance. Although Gramsci (1971) stressed that civil society and the state are one and the same in reality, for a decade, civil society in South Korea has been considered a realm of hegemonic struggle against "political society." Paradoxically, the discourse of civil society in South Korea appeared at the very moment when the boundary between the state and society seemed obscure. "Civil society" and "NGOs" became fad words among both intellectuals and activists when grassroots groups relocated their relationship to the government from relentless struggle to collaborative partnership. The "welfare movement" that began in the mid-1990s has shown how civil society, as "an inherently double-edged weapon," invokes both populist power and a normative purview (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:33). When activists embraced the topic of welfare, this did not mean that they accepted the apolitical and patronizing images of welfare. Moreover, long-term struggles against the state led activists to be reluctant to cooperate with their antagonistic counterparts. Against the state discourse that Korea should not follow the unsuccessful precedent of developed countries

– that is, "the welfare state" – activists and leftist intellectuals strongly attacked the governmental scheme of introducing an enterprise model into welfare system. In any case, although the categorization of grassroots movements under the, for them, strange title of welfare was not smooth, activists continued to grapple with how to reconcile the "movement" and "welfare" sides without losing their political spirit.

However, it was the unexpected financial crisis in 1997, popularly dubbed the "IMF crisis," that stifled activists' practices and debates over how to keep the "movement" alive under the new neoliberal situation. Although a sudden restructuring and cutbacks in government spending led to the loss of jobs for millions of workers, residents in Nangok were surprised by the sudden increase of external supports. Because a public sense of national security was widespread through the media, the government had to strive to create various ways of coping with unemployment and impoverishment. In other words, what I witnessed during that time was not cutbacks in public expenditure for social services but the reinforcement of the safety net in the governmental and non-governmental organizations. Although the structural program led to a drastic privatization of state-owned enterprises and the deregulation of employment, the programs's neoliberal picture did not entail the minimization of state intervention in welfare. The growth rate of the GDP decreased from 5.0 in 1997 to -6.7 in 1998, but the budget of the Ministry of Health and Welfare showed an increase of 480 billion *won* (0.4 billion dollars) over two years.[5] In this situation, Nangok became a concentrated center of many kinds of aid, in which everyone could openly debate key social issues such as "unemployment" or "poorly-fed children."

Most of all, "projects" radically changed the relationship between government and non-government, welfare bodies and grassroots groups. By "projects," I mean all programs proposed and implemented by grassroots groups with the support of the state, businesses, and large-scale NGOs. Most activists, who previously managed to survive from hand to mouth with little support, now find themselves in a relatively prosperous situation as they have joined welfare-related projects. However, projects have radically transformed the existing framework in which both activists and local residents have developed a mutual relationship. First, projects have required a professional style of "welfare," not the political one of the "movement" (cf. Apthorpe 1997; Paley 2001;

Mitchell 2002). The terms that have been employed in projects tend to describe the poor's lives pathologically and replace "the language of solidarity" with "the language of expertise," borrowing from Paley's terms (2001:200). Without doubt, these trends are contradictory to previous trends, which were characterized by a refusal to view the urban poor as social "aliens" and to categorize shantytowns as hotbeds of crime. Second, although activists have come to have more access to residents through such diverse projects, local residents have begun to gather together not to join political activities, but to seek new "jobs." The relationship between activists and the urban poor have been transformed into one between "supervisors" and "employees" as activists come to mediate between the poor and "employers" such as the government, business groups, and large NGOs. As activists have met local residents gathering for jobs through projects, their focus of activity has begun to be relocated from politically organizing the poor to supporting their "self-reliance" and "empowerment." The "power" in empowerment, unlike the "power" in "Power to the People," does not suggest distinct embattled groups against whom the poor fight. Instead of making the enemy a visible entity, "self-reliance" centers based on empowerment began to pay more attention to residents' internal individual capacities. The self has become the outcome of strategies (Cruikshank 1996, 1999) developed to infuse the "enterprise model" into public assistance, job training, projects, etc. These new terms are neither unambiguously liberating nor repressive. One activist grumbled while listening to a lecture about empowerment: "What does it mean to 'empower' the poor? Why do we 'empower' them? What on earth does he [a lecturer] expect me to do?"

In this paper, I have examined how the grassroots movements for the urban poor have reconfigured their relationship with the government and welfare bodies by focusing on the making of neoliberal governmentality in the years between the 1970s and the early 2000s. The grassroots movements have been reoriented from stimulating political protests by poor tenants to emphasizing the tenants' self-reliance and empowerment. Moreover, grassroots groups are neither antagonistic to the state nor unconcerned with welfare bodies. The openly political and populist slogans of activists have been replaced by "neutral" and "scientific" diagrams by welfare experts along with the growth of "civil society" and partnerships between the government and NGOs.

Although activists have embodied neoliberal conduct, wittingly or unwittingly, this embodiment is not without its ambiguities and ambivalences. Indeed, it is not difficult to identify "significant points of tension and friction" (Gupta 2001) in the art of neoliberal government. While undergoing the IMF crisis, the neoclassical voice which insisted on the extension of market rationality in welfare intersected with a sudden increase in governmental support for safeguarding national security. Even though activists have embodied the discourse of welfare, they have reinterpreted or contested the discourse, ceaselessly invoking their old slogan, "Power to the People." Among them, the embodiment of neoliberal governmentality has run in parallel with increasing criticism of neoliberalism as an ideology. Finally, the re-development program in Nangok, which started in 2002, was not necessarily conducted in terms of market logic, but it was also different from the violent struggles of bygone days.

This uneven process becomes evident only if we trace the *history* of neoliberal governmentality. While neoliberalism as an economic policy was based on the Western rule at the outset, neoliberal technologies as governmentality resonate with different social histories and political cultures, thereby creating multiple narratives in non-Western contexts. Furthermore, the gap between the introduction of neoliberal economies and the emergence of neoliberalism as an influential discourse indicates that the unevenly globalized political economy of neoliberalism has been interrelated with the metamorphosis of local politics. The study of neoliberalism, therefore, should be not one that confirms characteristics that Foucaultian studies have assumed as neoliberal governmentality, but one that reconstructs the making of neoliberal governmentality through the intersection of regional, national, and international arenas.

Notes

1. Activists in shantytowns persist in using the term "grassroots" in order to emphasize that their activities and their own lives are sometimes based on the "authentic local." They exclude welfare workers in "grassroots" groups because the workers do not live in shantytowns. Although the activists began to cooperate with the large-scale non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have emerged since the early 1990s, they are also reluctant to incorporate their groups into NGOs. As Nancy Naples has noted, however, the term "grassroots" becomes problematic when we ask "who gets to participate in this form of activism" and "whose voices are left out of the dialogue" (Naples 2002:8). In this paper, the "grassroots" include both elites and local residents acting in shantytowns, but more voices come from the elites, as I will explain later.

2. In other words, the neoliberal economic model had already permeated the policy of military rule since the late 1970s by implementing an emphasis on stability over growth, an incentive structure based on market principles, the gradual liberalization of foreign trade and investment, the privatization of state enterprises, etc (Moon 1999:6). In particular, for the military regime led by ex-President Doo Hwan Chun, the neoliberal reforms were regarded as an ideal way to build his political legitimacy through economic stability (Moon 1999:7) and to mute the international criticism of the dictatorship.

3. My use of the term "poverty politics" emphasizes that poverty is not just the counterpart of wealth (Procacci 1991) but consists of multiple trajectories about how to define and manipulate poverty. The term "politics" should itself be the object of analysis, no longer utilized as if its meaning were self-evident (Rose 1996:38).

4. This specificity becomes evident in contrast with Latin America, though both South Korean and Latin America have had similar histories of dictatorship. In the shantytowns of the military-ruled South Korea, it was not easy to find the combination of political movements with collective endeavors for survival, the combination which Paley (2001) identified in the *población* of La Bandera, Chile.

5. http://www.nso.go.kr/cgi-bin/sws_777pop.cgi

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