Civic Activism in South Korea: The Intertwining of Democracy and Neoliberalism by Seungsook Moon. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. xv, 298 pp.

On December 3, 2024, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol (Yun Seogyeol) declared emergency martial law in a late-night televised address to the nation. As a stunned nation awaited whatever would follow, thousands of South Korean citizens poured into the plaza in front of the National Assembly's main gate to defend their nation's hard-won democracy. They, and the rest of the watching world, celebrated when in the wee hours of the morning the National Assembly passed a resolution demanding the order be lifted.

Democracy in South Korea is an ongoing, complicated project. From the authoritarian regime of Rhee Syngman (Yi Seungman) through the military rule that lasted from 1961 until 1987, generations of South Koreans fought for truly democratic elections. Many lost their lives or freedoms. With the establishment of direct elections and strengthened civil rights, South Korean activists built a network of civic organizations to ensure democracy would reflect the will of the South Korean citizenry. The 1990s were characterized by a powerful and active civil society, bolstered by the global promotion of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In her new book, *Civic Activism in South Korea: The Intertwining of Democracy and Neoliberalism*, professor of sociology at Vassar College Seungsook Moon considers the interdependence of democracy and civic organizations in South Korea. She traces this relationship from the popular struggle for democratization to the exuberant civic engagement in the early years of the new democracy, and the rise of neoliberal governance and the intensifying economic pressures on South Korean citizens in the years following the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s. Moon's aim is to understand how South Korean civic activists dedicated to the moral and practical projects of defending democratic society and protecting public social and economic rights were gradually drawn into arrangements that reinforced neoliberal individualism. More broadly, she aspires to identify and reclaim elements of civic activism that might reformulate citizens' relation to democratic politics beyond the entitlements to voter equality and free-market liberty that are, in the current context, ultimately disempowering.

The book opens with a discussion of the role of civic activism in contemporary neoliberal democracies. Moon argues that because of its pullback from the provision of public goods, neoliberal democratic governance depends for its stability on the private supply of social services by non-governmental organiza-

tions. Although this interdependence with neoliberal democracy tends to distort these organizations' operations and, ultimately, their missions, it also potentially facilitates popular engagement in fundamental democratic activity. Moon observes that studies of neoliberalism's political effects have too often focused on North America and Europe, producing simplified stories of the erosion of democratic norms and structures as neoliberalism took hold there. Reviewing scholarship on neoliberalism in national contexts outside "the West," she suggests that Africa, Latin America, and Asia may allow a view beyond the teleology of ever-expanding neoliberal hegemony. Drawing on a range of theorists, including Pierre Bourdieu, Georg Simmel, Zygmunt Bauman, and Wendy Brown, she presents three points to orient her analysis: 1) Neoliberalism has transformed the state from a sovereign power to a set of diffused governance practices; 2) market efficiency has become the standard of evaluation for both political governance and for individuals; and 3) states themselves, including the Republic of Korea, are vulnerable to the punishments of the global market and therefore shape their governing strategies for global financial survival. These factors erode boundaries between culture, economy, and politics but leave room for citizen participation in shaping social welfare.

Turning to South Korea, Moon outlines the history of democratization in the 1980s and 1990s. Citizen organizations arose in the context of the breakdown of authoritarianism that had characterized the entire history of governance on the Korean peninsula to that point. She writes, "I cannot overemphasize the importance of this shift in the history of state-society relations in the Korean peninsula…. By using political openings generated by neoliberal governance, citizens' organizations tried to establish democratic relations with the government" (37). These organizations also embraced a particular moral code, calling for financial and political independence from the state to monitor and advocate for democracy; the support for diverse issues, structures, and practices; working as a force for social change; and grassroots participation and leadership reflecting a commitment to democratic values. Moon observes that, whatever its shortcomings, the citizens' movement should be recognized for the promise of its ideals. "[C]itizens' organizations … recast ordinary people as actual and potential agents of social change … Citizens can make demands on political and economic elites to solve or address their common problems, democratizing society further in the process. … It is neither natural nor automatic that volunteer associations are founded for routinized and sustained civic activism ideally involving grassroots citizens" (49).

The core of the book consists of Moon's analysis of three civic activist organizations. She traces the ways these organizations responded to govern-

mental incentives and shifting social, economic, and political pressures as democracy in South Korea transformed from the heady early days in the 1990s to the cynicism of the 2010s, with the case studies functioning as exemplars of particular problematics in the relationship between civic action and neoliberal democracy. First, there is the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), a large non-governmental organization engaged in policy and governance advocacy. The staff of PSPD are largely professional researchers and analysts dedicated to pressing the government on policies. Their initial commitment to the moral code of civic activism has been challenged in part by their success. Progressive politicians both in and out of government power have over time sought out PSPD's advice and assistance, and several PSPD staff members have run for government offices, muddying the organization's independence from government. Moreover, the degree of expertise necessary to work as a policy advocate has limited grassroots involvement, leading to self-questioning within the organization.

Second, there is the Democratic Friends Society (DFS), a feminist activist organization that operates through local branch offices, two of which Moon examines in depth. The two branches have faced a different set of challenges. As local organizations, they are funded largely through membership fees and small donations, yet as feminist organizations they are dependent on a financially disadvantaged class, namely, women. The issues they focus on revolve around women's employment, childcare, family health, and food provision. Both established food co-op stores in the early 2000s, which helped to expand their membership and income and provided venues to share information about feminist economic and social philosophy (even if many co-op members were interested in safe food, not feminism). When the food co-ops were spun off from the branches, however, membership shrank. Around the same time, DFS won contracts from local governments to provide social services, which clearly entangled it in neoliberal governance. Moon describes how these service-provision contracts subjected DFS branches to government oversight and, under conservative governments, punitive exclusion from contract eligibility. DFS maintains its commitment to feminist action, but it is struggling to sustain and refresh its membership.

Finally, there is the Friends of Asia (FOA), a single-issue organization that defends the rights of immigrants. Although very small, it has maintained financial independence from the government in large part through a volunteer staff. It made the conscious decision not to seek government funding associated with immigrant services, many of which are focused on promoting "multiculturalism." Its membership includes immigrants and South Korean volunteers who teach

language classes, run writing circles, and visit immigrants detained for violations of immigration codes. Moon shows FOA as responding to certain neoliberal pressures (for example, tailoring activities to young South Koreans looking for "fun" ways of volunteering to augment their resumes), but of the three organizations, it has best been able to defend its core moral commitments to civic activism.

The book benefits greatly from the years-long period over which Moon conducted her research, consisting of three major rounds of fieldwork between 2004 and 2015, interviews with civic activist organization staff and members, and investigation of a range of archival sources, including blog posts, annual reports, newspaper articles, etc. The result is a richly detailed examination of the varied circumstances and responses of the case-study organizations. Such sustained study of organizational activities is a rare academic accomplishment, and it allows Moon to draw out distinctions grounded in the details of the unfolding of political change over time. Students of non-governmental organizations and of neoliberal governance will find the deep-dive accounts rich in both detail and analysis, as Moon engages judiciously with key works of social theory to examine more deeply the relationships among neoliberalism, democracies, and social movements.

One limitation in Moon's approach is her focus on progressive civic organizations to the exclusion of those with religious or right-wing ideological orientations. She adopts a particular definition of civic activism "as a set of ideas and practices that *solve common problems and promote and protect public resources equally open to everyone for use*" (6, italics in original). She asserts that civic activism holds that all human beings are equal and that they all have the right to self-determination, allowing her to highlight the particular inconsistencies of progressive democratic civic activism and its adaptation to neoliberal governmentality. Her analysis of this problematic is a significant contribution to understanding the contestations between agents working to expand the reach of neoliberalism and those that oppose it. It has been made obvious, however, by the present spread of populism and right-wing politics that non-progressive and anti-progressive civic organizations share the social space of activism in South Korea (as elsewhere), and therefore defining them out of the scope of study leaves an important dynamic unexplored. While Moon mentions the rise of the New Right (38), she does not develop this line of inquiry. One might ask, for example, if right-wing civic groups better adapt to neoliberalism than progressive groups and, if so, whether this accounts for some of the recent surge in right-wing popularity.

In her closing chapter Moon draws out the complexities of how tensions

between the market and governance aspects of neoliberalism pull and push civic organizations: "[A] contradictory relationship between the two modes of ruling … simultaneously facilitated or enabled civic activism pursued by these organizations and constrained or undermined it" (202). This is an ambivalent observation, but she highlights the potential upside. She points out that in order to survive, many civic organizations have appropriated market tools and governance partnerships for their own objectives, demonstrating that "democracy is not one-dimensionally undermined by neoliberalism" (203). Yet to move beyond adapting to survive, she argues that civic activists must cultivate widespread solidarities "to change the hearts and minds of ordinary citizens" (216) and achieve the political majorities necessary to challenge the political and economic elites invested in neoliberalism. At the current political moment, Moon offers a narrow but welcome opening for optimism.

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