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Mad cow militancy: Neoliberal hegemony and social resistance in South Korea

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A B S T R A C T

Massive protests shook South Korea through the summer of 2008. This political eruption which exhibited many novel and unexpected elements cannot be explained by pointing to basic political conditions in South Korea (strong labor unions, democratization, and so forth). Neither does the putative reason for them – to protest the new President's decision to reopen South Korea's beef market to the U.S. – adequately explain the social dynamics at play. In this paper, we examine the political geography of the 'candlelight protests' (as they came to be known), focusing in particular on their novel aspects: the subjectivities of the protesters, fierce ideological struggles, and differentiated geography. We argue that the deepening of neoliberal restructuring by the new conservative regime formed the underlying causes of these intense conflicts. In other words, the new protests should be seen as a response to the reinforced contradictions engendered by neoliberalization and a new alignment of social groups against the prevailing hegemonic conditions in South Korea. In this view, the huge demonstrations revealed vulnerabilities in conservative hegemony but failed to produce a different hegemony. To advance these claims, we examine three aspects of the protests: first, the neoliberal policies of the new conservative regime; second, the intense ideological conflicts around the media; and finally, the spatial materialization of the protests.

Introduction

Between May and August 2008, South Korea was rocked by a series of unprecedented protests. Hundreds of thousands of people marched through the streets of Seoul and other major cities carrying the symbol of resistance—a modest candle (see Fig. 1). These so-called 'candlelight protests' were launched without any formal statement or defined leadership, yet they briefly transformed South Korea (hereafter Korea).

What caused these protests? The standard explanation – with which we agree, in part – points to the President's decision to reopen Korea's market to U.S. beef imports. After the discovery of mad cow disease in Washington State on 23 December 2003, Korea announced an import ban on American beef. Then on 18 April 2008, new President Lee Myung-bak reversed this decision and re-opened the Korean beef market to the U.S. to facilitate the approval of the Korea–US Free Trade Agreement (or KORUS FTA) and restore relations between Korea and the U.S.[1] (Whereas the previous liberal government had opened the market to U.S. beef, it did so with numerous restrictions about cattle age and parts; President Lee removed these restrictions.) But after a television station ran a program on the threat of mad cow disease in U.S. beef on April 29, criticisms of the reopening of the beef market surged onto the national stage. On May 2, an on-line club held a candlelight protest in Cheonggye Square in the center of Seoul; most of the protesters were teenage students. Further demonstrations followed, with almost daily protests for more than three months. Hong (2009) explains that the candlelight demonstration is a distinct form of gathering caused by the draconian stipulation of the Law on Assembly and Demonstration that prohibits open-air gatherings after sunset, but does allow 'cultural activities'. Thus, the candlelight demonstration in Korea is also called 'candlelight cultural festival'.

The rapid intensification of these protests surprised many, as did the emergence of new aspects and practices of mass struggle. Even if these candlelight demonstrations were not the first, they differed substantially from previous ones in Korea. We aim to explain how and why this new type of social resistance evolved. We reject at the outset the notion that a single political decision – the opening of Korea's beef market to U.S. imports – can account, in a simple or direct way, for these massive and novel forms of resistance. We must go beyond the immediate emphasis on beef and food safety to examine the underlying sources of conflict.[2] We argue that the stage was set for the anti-beef import demonstrations by a new round of policy changes brought in by the new conservative government. These policy changes reflect a deepening of Korea's neoliberal turn which started in the 1980s, and have promulgated a limited and partial hegemony—the limits of which were clarified in 2008.

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Fig. 1. Candlelight protests in the summer of 2008. *Source*: Nam, S. Y. (http://www.ohmynews.com).

Nevertheless, we do not claim that the protesters viewed their protests as 'mobilizations against neoliberalism'.[3] Most did not. Nor do we claim that the participants perceived these protests as struggles against neoliberal transformation per se. Rather, we argue that although the protesters did not cast their protests in 'anti-neoliberal' terms, the substance of their arguments can be read as opposition to neoliberalism or, more fundamentally, to the disruption of their lives by the deepening of capitalist social relations. Because the protests addressed food safety, some Korean intellectuals found in them the emergence of a new "life politics" (Hong, 2008; H.K. Kim, 2008; Yang, 2008). This approach attributes the extensive participation of women in the protest to 'life politics'. Though we do not reject this argument, we suggest that the emphasis on beef must be interpreted in light of the socio-economic changes brought by the conservative regime.

In proposing to interpret the beef protests in this way, we aim to draw out the key connections between the well-documented changes in Korean political economy on one hand, and the political–geographical qualities of these unexpected protests on the other. On this basis, we argue that the protests of May–August 2008 reveal both a deepening of neoliberalization by the conservative regime as well as a deepening of resistance to neoliberalism among many Koreans. More narrowly, we contend that the 2008 protests should be interpreted as a response to the contradictions engendered by neoliberalism and a new alignment of social groups against present hegemonic conditions in Korea. This approach allows us to explain the novelty of certain socio-spatial practices and to investigate the limits of this new social resistance. Specifically, we examine three aspects of the protests in this paper: (1) their framing of neoliberal policies of the new conservative regime; (2) fierce ideological struggles around the media; and (3) the spatial manifestations of these conflicts. While the first point is linked to the cause of this protest, the latter two examine the nature of the demonstrations as such. To begin, we turn to the literature on Korea's experience with neoliberalism to contextualize the policies at the heart of the protests.

The neoliberal Korean state

There has been a vast amount of research on neoliberalism in political geography in recent years (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007). Here, we focus on the discussions in political geography of the neoliberal state. Neoliberalism is often understood as the reduction of state function and power (Friedman, 2002), but this is an oversimplification. As Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell explain, "rolling back the frontiers of the state" does not mean rolling back the state *in general* but rather rolling back (and restructuring) a *particular kind* of state (Peck & Tickell, 2007: 28–29). They argue:

> Only rhetorically does neoliberalism mean 'less state'; in reality, it entails a thoroughgoing reorganization of governmental systems and state-economy relations. Tendentially, and more and more evidently as neoliberalism has been extended and deepened, this program involves the roll-out of new state forms, new modes of regulation, new regime of governance, with the aim of consolidating and managing both marketization and its consequences (2007: 33).

Neoliberal restructuring is invariably a destructively creative process, the dismantling of Keynesian state and social institutions accompanied by the roll-out of new institutional and discursive practices.

In his analysis of the contradictions between neoliberal theory and practice, Harvey outlines four features of the neoliberal state in practice (2005: 79–81): (1) the neoliberal state is "activist in creating a good business climate and to behave as a competitive