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## Orchestrating Time : The Evolving Landscapes of Grassroots Activism in Neoliberal South Korea

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## Orchestrating Time: The Evolving Landscapes of Grassroots Activism in Neoliberal South Korea

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### 1. Introduction

The Korean Community Organization Network (KONET)<sup>1)</sup> was founded in November 1996. The organization expressed its rationale in terms of carrying out the urgent tasks of the twenty-first century: “In the last century, human beings have experienced a series of crises in politics, the economy, culture, education, the environment, and so forth. At the center of these crises are the unpredictability of the future and the possibility that the human race may disappear from the earth . . . In the new century, we face a historic mission to change the polarized present into an integrated future in which human beings coexist with nature.” With such a grand manifesto, one might assume that KONET represented one of the newly-emerging NGOs in millennial South Korea. In fact, however, the organization was founded by veteran activists who had been involved in grassroots movements for the urban poor since the 1970s. Many grassroots activists working in the local community hold simultaneous positions as KONET trainers.

The organization was launched when the near-completion of re-development processes and the evolution of electoral democracy led to anxious questions and stormy discussions about the future of activism. Demolition, which was the dominant issue in most shantytowns, began to wane; the poor’s fierce struggles against it were being replaced by tedious negotiations, along with the implementation of direct orders from local government officials and delegates. Under these circumstances, grassroots activists began to redefine themselves as community organizers, extending the scope of the “people” and the “community” which they aimed to serve. In their narratives, “people” were no longer *minjung*, i.e., political subjects who could build solidarity against state violence under military rule, or *binmin*, poor people; now, the favored term was *jumin*, that is, residents of a certain locale. “Community” was also broadened from *hyunjang*, a base for the incubation of “conscious” warriors against state or market violence, to *jiyeok*, a residential area based on administrative divisions, which included *jumin* from various classes. KONET’s establishment sprung from the activists’ desire to pursue social movements with the *jumin* in the *jiyeok*, while also holding on to their long-standing spirit of resistance. They sought to accomplish this challenging task by teaching strategies of “community organization” (*jumin jojikhwa*, hereafter CO).<sup>2)</sup>

In this article, I examine the evolving landscape of grassroots activism in South Korea against the backdrop of the neoliberal restructuring of urban space and welfare functions, with a focus on the metamorphosis of KONET. The 1997 Asian financial crisis, dubbed “the IMF crisis,” dramatically affected conditions of poverty. The IMF loan was conditional on a series of neoliberal market reforms, such as the liberalization of the financial market and the enhancement of labor market flexibility, which engendered a drastic increase in casual, irregular workers as well as massive lay-offs (K. Shin 2011: 17–20; Kim and Seo 2013: 260–273).<sup>3)</sup> Importantly, under the Kim Dae Jung presidency, economic neoliberalization coincided with political democratization (1998–2003), shifting the modes of politics and governance in relation to anti-poverty intervention. Government policies modeled solely on the workfare system were combined with new partnerships between governments and civil society organizations. This emergence of “a neoliberal welfare state” (Song 2009: 18) has threatened activists’ political legitimacy, which they struggled to retain throughout the 1990s. As will be detailed in the next section, grassroots activism has been facing what Ida Susser calls a “regime of disappearance” (Goode and Maskovsky 2001: 3) in a dual sense. First, following the demolition of former shantytowns, the poor have been made invisible within the geographical landscape. Second, most if not all activists have been made invisible within the political landscape as they operate corporate- and government-sponsored welfare-related projects while stuck in local community centers. It is in this context that many activists often describe the period following the IMF crisis as “the doldrums” of the social movements. For instance, activists from the northern areas of Seoul who led a successful anti-eviction struggle in the mid-1990s wrote in their memoirs: “For the past ten years, our CO has been in the doldrums. This downturn happened not when our residents were extremely poor, but when their life improved following the new acquisition of rental apartment complexes” (Seongdong Residents’ Committee 2010: 24).

However, it was surprising to note that none of the activists interviewed in this study announced the “end” of their mission, despite a general consensus about their present predicament. Activism for the urban poor in South Korea has long featured protracted, passionate reflections and discussions about its direction, as well as tenacious relationships between seniors and juniors. There are currently about 30 active KONET members. On the one hand, as “CO trainers,” they are invited to teach the methods of community organization to various groups in various locations. On the other hand, as community organizers, they also conduct daily work in their own communities. Thus, this study simply asks, what are they actually doing? What is it that inspires a sense of confidence in them about their actions? What kinds of affects, actions, and narratives are these activists mobilizing in order to buttress their conviction that they are operating within the realm of “the political”<sup>4)</sup> within seemingly de-politicized conditions?

This article sets out to answer these questions with an ethnographic eye to two aspects. One is the production of CO textbooks for training, which includes changing modes and processes of knowledge production, as well as communication events between interlocutors. The other aspect is the KONET members’ training process in the realm of international development. Most of the applicants requiring CO training sessions from KONET are NGO staff members and social workers, who manage irregular workers, migrant workers, welfare

recipients, volunteers, and so forth. This study focuses on KONET's encounter with participants in the realm of international development because this encounter starkly illustrates the shifting relationship between activism and state power. Activists whose identity once resided in their opposition to the state now preach the gospel of community organization to those who work in close partnership with the government.

Considering these two aspects, I pay particular attention to what I call the orchestration of time, that is, the series of processes by which activists eliminate, restore, freeze, and defer the time of/for activism in order to valorize their prospects and practices under neoliberal capitalism. In his analysis of modernity within late capitalism, Zygmunt Bauman argued that the idea of progress, which is based on the belief that "time is on our side," has not so much disappeared as it has been "individualized, deregulated, and privatized" (2000: 135). In the new mode of progress, he asserts, episodic time replaces immortal time: "Stretches of time labeled 'future' get shorter, and the time-span of life as a whole is sliced into episodes dealt with 'one at a time'" (2000: 137). In my ethnography, however, the indeterminate nature of time is not a symptom of individualization or privatization; rather, it indicates an effort to secure immortality. By orchestrating time, activists in KONET desperately seek "the spaces of the otherwise" (Povinelli and DiFruscia 2012: 89): they utilize the resilience and uncertainty of time in order to resist, and not serve, a neoliberal ethos of competition, isolation, and distrust.

Before turning to the two aspects mentioned above, this paper first details the tensions and predicaments experienced by grassroots activism. The evolution of a grassroots organization in Nangok, a one-time shantytown in the southern part of Seoul, is provided as an example. Although it is not necessarily representative of all the activist movements of that period, this example can help us to analyze what is eluded, reconstructed, and revitalized in the specific practices and actions of KONET.

## **2. The Precarization of Grassroots Activism: The Case of Nangok<sup>5)</sup>**

Nangok used to be representative of Seoul's shantytowns until its hillside, a very visibly poor area, was demolished in May 2003. Amidst the massive wave of modernization and urbanization that swept over 1960–70s South Korea, the residents who were evicted or relocated from their dwellings in downtown Seoul found refuge in the southern peripheral area of the city. Although the history of grassroots activism in Nangok involves complex reorganization processes by a variety of groups, this study will focus on one organization, which was established by university students in the form of a night school in 1978 and was reorganized as the N Church in 1983.

The early history of the N Church, which was narrated and written by old members in the 1980s to the early 1990s, revealed a lack of concern for welfare issues. In these old members' memories, most movements for the urban poor focused on anti-evacuation struggles against forceful re-development programs. Those struggles were closely connected with anti-dictatorship protests. In Nangok, where the government did not consider any re-development plans until the 1990s, many activists had left the town to support anti-evacuation protests in other shantytowns or to join other labor movements. The theme of welfare or

community seemed to be far from the “revolutionary” ideal of university students and graduates, who had come to Nangok with the slogan “Power to the People.” They wanted to position poor residents as *minjung*, i.e., political subjects who could overthrow the capitalist economy as well as the military regime. Although students and local youths had created the church themselves in order to escape police surveillance, mission work had not been their objective from the outset. A female community organizer who had been a student at the N night school described 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 out with the anti-evacuation struggles of other shantytowns. But we had no idea of what to do in Nangok. Although we created our church, engaging in mission work seemed weird to us. Some enjoyed discussing political issues about community movements, while other youths just loafed around at the 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 around that our church was a haunt for reds. (Interview, July 13, 2000)

It was not until the implementation of the “democratic” reforms resulting from the large demonstrations of 1987 that activists returned to Nangok to build CO at the local level. Reflecting on the fact that evacuation-centered struggles had taken place at the expense of the everyday lives of local residents, these activists began to establish CO in Nangok. CO initiatives involved a variety of activities, such as developing local media, giving public hearings, building a school for mothers, and so forth. However, activists’ attempts to create politically autonomous organizations free from the governmental authorities did not go smoothly. Local residents were so diverse in their individual and social experiences of grassroots movements that they could not be united into a coherent body of political subjects. Furthermore, in the mid-1990s, most activists began to lose their sites of activity as evacuations were reaching completion in most areas of re-development. Unlike in the 1980s, when the economic “sacrifice” of activists had been taken for granted, the question of “how to support activists financially” (Lee 1995: 8–9) emerged as an urgent issue for grassroots groups. Activists had to find new ways of staying in poor areas while receiving legitimate financial support.

Amidst these complex upheavals of the grassroots movements, activists began to pay significant attention to the issue of “welfare.” In the mid-1990s, it became popular for them to (re)enter college to study welfare policies or to obtain social work diplomas. This change was given legitimacy through a series of seminars and workshops about welfare, which had not previously been common in the activist environment. However, if activists embraced the topic of welfare, this did not mean that they accepted its apolitical and patronizing imagery and nuances. Their long-term struggles against the state had led activists to be reluctant to cooperate with their antagonistic counterparts. Insisting that poor people themselves, and not the government, should play a leading role in decision-making, they sought ways to reconcile the “movement” and “welfare” without losing their political spirit.

However, it was the IMF crisis that stifled the activists' efforts to keep the "movement" alive in the changing political and economic landscape. Although sudden restructuring and cutbacks in government spending led to job losses for millions of workers, the poor residents of Nangok and other well-known shantytowns faced a sudden increase in external support. Due to the public sense of national security that had been widely promoted by the media, the government was pushed to create various ways of coping with unemployment and impoverishment.<sup>6)</sup> Under these circumstances, Nangok became a concentrated center for various kinds of aid projects, receiving the support of the state, businesses, and large-scale NGOs.

This new spate of "projects" radically changed the relationship between the government and nongovernmental organizations, as well as between welfare bodies and grassroots groups. Most activists, who had previously managed to survive from hand to mouth with little support, found themselves in a relatively comfortable situation as they participated in projects relating to welfare and job training. However, these projects transformed the existing framework under which activists and local residents had developed a mutual relationship, requiring a professional, "welfare" style of interaction, instead of the former political "movement" mode. The terminology employed in the projects tended to describe the lives of the poor somewhat pathologically, replacing "the language of solidarity" with "the language of expertise" (cf. Paley 2001: 200). Furthermore, although activists came to have more access to local residents through diverse projects, these residents showed up not to



**Figure 1** Nangok in June 2000



**Figure 2** Nangok in April 2011

join political activities, but to seek new “jobs.” The activists’ relationship with the urban poor thus became one of “supervisors” and “employees,” as the activists had to act as mediators between the poor and their “employers”—the government, business groups, large-scale NGOs, and so on. Under these circumstances, activists’ concerns began to shift from politically organizing the poor to supporting their “self-reliance” and “empowerment.” Unlike the “power” in “Power to the People,” the “power” in empowerment did not suggest distinct embattled groups against whom the poor should fight. Instead of making the enemy a visible entity, the ethic of “self-reliance” led local residents to pay more attention to their individual capacities.

Since the Nangok re-development project was authorized by the government in October 2000, most hillside tenants began to scatter, moving to nearby rental apartments or poorly-managed residences. The N Church and other Nangok COs were also relocated to neighboring areas in order to respond to the needs of the dispersed poor. Their project-oriented business, which had started as a kind of “emergency relief” during the IMF crisis, became part of their daily routine. Grassroots activists frequently implemented community-related projects in partnership with social workers or local government officials. They were even dispatched to other institutions to work on government-sponsored welfare projects. The distinction between the “movement” and “welfare,” which these activists had been struggling to mark ten years previously, seemed to be disappearing.

More significantly, the project-oriented, sponsorship-based activism of the 2000s

exposed its structural precariousness as “poor Nangok,” the “salable” image of which had appealed to numerous sponsors and donors during the IMF crisis, became far less visible amidst the re-development processes. Sponsorship from enterprises fell away dramatically, while welfare-related projects from government agencies or large-scale NGOs, to which activists could apply, remained unstable. Furthermore, many activists in the N church and other centers felt that they were losing ground. The more welfare-related their work became, the more it overlapped with that of government agencies, welfare centers, or CSR (corporate social responsibility) business sectors. For instance, the soup kitchen, which the activists of Nangok had opened during the IMF crisis, was eventually shut. One activist in the N church testified with a sigh, “More and more government and business sectors provide free meal delivery services. With unstable budget, our service can’t compete with theirs.”

Finally, the N church, a living witness of grassroots activism in Nangok, is now finding itself at a critical juncture, having to decide whether or not to close down. Some of its members, who worked for an unemployment-related project in the aftermath of the IMF crisis, have become official workers of the government-sponsored, self-sufficiency promotion agency, which is independent from the church. The N Study Room (*gongbubang*), which used to serve as the N church-affiliated school for children from low-income families, has lost almost all ground in its competition with similar, better-off institutions. The church’s remaining members are becoming more and more skeptical about its future, as the church’s political purpose has faded and new prospects remain uncertain.

### 3. The Withdrawal and Restoration of Historicity

By tracing the trajectory of an organization in Nangok, we can identify the ways the political and economic conditions of grassroots activism have radically shifted in South Korea. It is not difficult to perceive a hiatus between the past, when activists fought against state and market violence, and the present, in which activists are reconciling themselves with their one-time antagonistic counterparts and are seeking their financial and institutional support. Jaemin, who has participated in grassroots movements in Nangok for almost twenty years, was self-deprecating about the fact that he might no longer be an activist but a “business operator.”

During the IMF crisis, we [activists] established some principles for facing the crisis. First, we needed to save the dying through emergency relief. Second, we needed to educate them. Third, we needed to help them become subjects who could react to such a crisis on their own and resist those who had caused it. We completed the first mission. But what’s happened to the second and the third? We’ve failed, because we have become business operators, in partnership with those we used to oppose. Or we have become “users,” according to the format of proposals which we write to apply for funding from the government. How can we discuss “people’s power” while acting as “business contractors” or “users”? (Interview, December 31, 2013)

Not all organizations have followed the same trajectory as the N church of Nangok.



Variations seem to be related to the period in which the re-development processes were implemented, as well as the main activists' make-up (i.e., whether they came from a religious background or from student activism), their relationship to local governments, and so forth. Nevertheless, most of the activists I met in Nangok and elsewhere shared and often circulated affective regimes of doubt, anxiety, and frustration. For example, in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the South Korean CO (*jumin undong*) in October 2011, KONET members presented the results of a survey carried out amongst communities with a strong tradition of grassroots activism, including Nangok. To the question of "why activists are shrinking in number and feel exhausted despite the huge increase in resources mobilized for their work," the members answered in a similar way to Jaemin. Their answers were that (a) as proposal-based projects had begun to represent an increasing share of their work, activists focused more on business per se than on their relationship with local residents, (b) the distinction between the "movement" and "welfare" had disappeared, as the former had been incorporated into the network of the latter, (c) activists' cooperation with the government had increased after the implementation of municipal elections and councils, and (d) a uniting issue could not easily be found, as the targets for CO had been extended from the poor (*binmin*) to general residents (*jumin*) with various backgrounds (M. Shin 2011: 19–23).

These activists' concerns may seem out-of-date in "post-revolutionary," neoliberal South Korea. In her research on the nation's young single women who had engaged in political activism in the 1990s, Jesook Song called attention to the combination of two kinds of affective baggage, making a distinction between "the social mourning or weighty sense of social duty of the 1980s" and "the imperative for an enjoyable life of the 1990s" (Song 2014: 79). Yet, the former kind of baggage was still heavier in my informants, who were mostly in their forties and fifties. A pervasive ethos of political activism and social responsibility had long informed their subjective formation, weighing them down with solemn dilemmas. Nevertheless, one of the tasks of KONET activists entails a resolute mission to suture people's fragmentary feelings and to present wholesome prospects. Although sharing crisis narratives about social movements amongst themselves, as trainers these activists are expected to teach CO methods and their significance without reservation.

Regarding their knowledge production, it is intriguing to note the resilience of historicity, which is directed at valorizing what activists call "people's possibilities" (*juminui ganeungseong*), as the supreme goal of CO. In the past five years, KONET has published three books about training: *Community Organization: How to Recognize People's Possibilities* (*Juminui ganeungseongeul boneun nun*) in 2009, *Community Organization Methodology* (*Jumin undongui him: jojikhwa*) in 2010, and *Possibilities that People Open Up by Themselves* (*Seuseuro yeoneun ganeungseong*) in 2014. Although these books share a purpose, that is, to spur on community movements led by the people themselves rather than for them, the dialogue between the past and the present is different in the three books: the first two books withdraw historicity, while the last book restores it in certain particular ways. This point is developed below.

To begin with, in the first two books, the rift between the very historicity of KONET and the seeming ahistoricity of its knowledge production is remarkable. Despite their brief introduction to grassroots activism in the 1970–1980s, the two books reveal a conspicuous

absence of time while serving as both ethical guides and manuals for CO. The first book, *Community Organization*, defines CO as a movement designed to help people change their community with their own two hands, particularly emphasizing the empowerment of CO trainers, who are expected to trust, find, and promote the possibilities open to people. To help enhance their capacities, the book provides a series of sections such as “life and philosophy,” “identity and role,” and “upright character and inner reinforcement,” which are also found in many popular books promoting successful personal development. The technique of self-cultivation is not considered to contradict collective action, but is encouraged as a companion practice to it: “CO trainers should take a few minutes to face their own inner selves and to enter into dialogue with them seriously. If necessary, they are expected to use meditation or relevant books” (KONET 2009: 42).

The second book, *Community Organization Methodology*, provides a clear thesis and schematized directions for the implementation of CO. For instance, it introduces ten steps for bringing about CO, which consist of “entering the community,” “meeting people,” “making a rough organizational sketch,” “building leadership,” “drafting a plan for action,” “making people assemble,” “making people act,” “evaluating,” “reflecting,” and “building a community organization,” along with detailed methods for each step. “Community” and “democracy,” which are often referred to as the key values within CO, appear as universal ethical principles lacking specific referents.

If we consider the metamorphosis of grassroots activism in Nangok, the issues missing from the two textbooks seem obvious. Who are these community organizers that the KONET members are trying to cultivate? Where do these organizers fit on the continuum between activists and business operators? Is KONET’s preoccupation with ethics nothing more than a strategy to conceal the increasingly murky boundary between the movement and business? However, it is important to remind ourselves that KONET participants are also the very interlocutors who understand the transformation of grassroots activism and its current predicaments better than anyone else. I asked Sunyoung, a KONET member whom I had first met in Nangok in 2000, about the perceptible lack of historicity in the two books. Pondering my question, she asked in return, “Doesn’t the moderate political character appeal to a wider range of audiences interested in CO?” For Sunyoung, KONET’s first and foremost task was not to heed the historical continuity of activism, but to stick to what she called “the CO spirit,” that is, to empower (poor) people to change their community and society by themselves.

Adding fuel to this debate, the most recent book, *Possibilities that People Open Up by Themselves*, takes a seemingly opposite approach: it restores the presence of time. Unlike the first two textbooks, which functioned as manuals designed to embrace a variety of trainees from a variety of organizations, this book was intended for KONET trainers to deepen and reflect on their own understanding of CO. It was based on over thirty seminars for KONET trainers held between 2012 and 2014. In those seminars, fifteen trainers discussed a single book *Let People Speak by Themselves* (*Seuseuro malhage hara*). Originally published in 1987 and reissued in 2009, the book was written by the late minister Heo Byeong-Seop (1941–2012), a respected activist who left a significant legacy through his involvement in the grassroots movements of the 1970–80s. Inspired by Paulo Freire’s philosophy that the

oppressed must be their own example in their struggle for redemption, Mr. Heo seriously examined the concept of *minjung* (people) as part of the pedagogy for popular education. His critique was particularly directed at the relationship between the *minjung* and the intellectuals. In his book, the intellectuals were not only described as “the very group that tries to perpetuate the structures of oppression, exploitation, and dominance,” but they were also criticized for imposing their class-specific language, style, and thoughts on the *minjung* (Heo 2009: 139).

Why did KONET trainers pay so much attention to this book by their senior, written at the height of the democratization movement? What prompted them to invoke the specter of the *minjung* in “post-revolutionary” South Korea? The text of *Possibilities that People Open Up by Themselves* indicates that the seminars did not merely focus on the restoration of historicity. First, what they invoked was not the ideological dogmatism which had become rampant among intellectuals in the 1980s, but the community-based activism that the intellectuals of those days were neglecting despite their proclaimed love for the *minjung*. Indicating that Heo’s book had received little attention on its first publication, Moon Donghwan, a well-known religious activist, esteemed the book as a work of “self-criticism as well as a warning against intellectuals who left the *minjung* behind” in their search for ideological dogmatism and factionalism (Heo 2009: 7–8).

The text of *Possibilities that People Open Up by Themselves* also evidences KONET trainers’ attempts to revitalize the politically popular terms of the 1980s, reconstructing their meaning and significance according to present circumstances. First and foremost, they invoked the concept of *minjung* from Heo’s work. Instead of deleting specific terms such as “liberation” and “(class) struggle” from their descriptions, KONET trainers highlighted the “*minjung*’s communal and dynamic nature” (Heo 2009: 206) and the significant role they played in their own community.

The *minjung* live as laborers, peasants, petty merchants, migrant workers, homeless persons, LGBT people,<sup>7)</sup> poor women, precarious youths, disabled and elderly people, and so on. At the same time, they live as residents (*jumin*) in certain communities. The *minjung* live at the intersection of both forms of life . . . *Minjung* education is doomed to fail if we see LGBT people only as LGBT people and refuse to realize that they also live as local residents. (KONET 2014: 26)

Furthermore, KONET members deliberately replaced *ju*(住)*min* (local residents) by *ju*(主)*min* (people who are on their own). They expected that the new concept of *ju*(主)*min* could incorporate the *minjung* of the 1980s and the *simin* of the 1990s and 2000s, i.e., the subjects of civil society, who included progressive middle-class citizens as well as the oppressed. They diagnosed the doldrums of political activism in millennial South Korea as having occurred because the *minjung* and *simin* did not merge with one another as *jumin*: “Both the *minjung* and the *simin* live in their home communities and also work in their workplaces. Those who organize themselves and forge solidarity with others constitute the *jumin*” (KONET 2014: 107).

Along this line, the words “building organization” (*jojikhwa*) and “conscientization”

(*uisikhwa*), terms once used in relation to the overthrow of the dictatorship in the 1980s, were incorporated into the CO manifesto as a series of processes through which the *jumin* come to realize that they shape their own world themselves, and then mobilize their own resources and build community organizations to solve issues affecting them, establishing mass organizations in solidarity with other groups (KONET 2014: 20, 156). This emphasis on political intervention through CO makes the communities imagined by KONET members distinguishable from self-sufficient communities, which some former activists returning to farming had built out of the widespread sense of disillusionment with the present politics.

The conscientized *jumin* view the self and the world differently from how they did in the past. They have not only attained new perspectives, but also established their thoughts and acts systematically. This means that the *jumin* begin to take social action when they come to interpret the predicaments occurring within their lives as socially structured. Through this direct action, the *jumin* also experience life as it is for others. (KONET 2014: 184)

All in all, the recent processes of knowledge production illustrate the ways KONET members orchestrate the time of and for activism. By erasing past history from textbooks, they have sought the ethicalization and universalization of grassroots activism; by selectively revitalizing historical time, these activists have been trying to bridge their belief in people's possibilities with political action, although they do not have a clear answer as to who or what they are supposed to take action against. During the democratization movement, they fought against the military rule; in local communities, they fought against state and corporate power, which wielded structural and physical violence through the demolition process. Today, however, in circumstances where past enemies have become present partners, the figures against whom these activists are struggling are becoming increasingly vague. The next section considers another aspect of KONET-led activism, namely the trainers' encounters with participants in the area of international development. The time of/for social activism is altered as these two parties from disparate backgrounds begin to engage in dialogue.

#### 4. Freezing and Deferring Time

Since the mid-1990s, South Korea's budget for ODA (official development assistance) has increased radically, as the government announced the shift in status from a recipient to a donor nation. Along with this new flow of ODA, the number of development NGOs implementing aid projects for the Global South also increased dramatically.<sup>8)</sup> Despite their shared mission to tackle poverty within and outside the country, members of KONET and of development NGOs had no relationship with one another until recently. In contrast with KONET, development NGOs, most of which were founded by religious groups, implemented their work in close partnership with the government from the outset. It was not until the needs of the people in the beneficiary nations had begun to receive significant attention within the ODA environment that the two parties began to interact. In particular, some development NGO workers were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the fact that South Korea's ODA was preoccupied with material aid and rapid tangible results. Identifying CO

as an alternative model of development, a veteran activist in the realm of international development contacted KONET to invite some of its trainers to teach CO perspectives and techniques.

Eunsil was one of the invited trainers. Although it was through this opportunity in 2011 that she came into contact with development NGO workers, her interest in global poverty dated back to a visit to the Philippines that she had made to reboot her passion for activism five years previously. Throughout the 1990s, she had been deeply involved in grassroots activism in Bongchen-dong, an area close to Nangok where the demolition of shantytowns had been an issue. As Eunsil recalled,<sup>9)</sup> her self-identification as an activist had begun to falter during the IMF crisis, when “many activists started merely conducting service delivery” as part of government-sponsored welfare programs. This crisis had reached its peak in 2001–2005, when, under the sponsorship of a large-scale NGO, she had organized the relocation of low-income residents to rental apartments following re-development processes. Once they had secured new housing, former slum-dwellers who had fought against demolition together had scattered. Newly-arriving staff members in community centers were devoid of what she called “the self-consciousness of activism” (*undongjeok maindeu*). The seeming de-politicization of urban communities led Eunsil to question neoliberalism not only as a changing mode of capitalism but also as a specific mode of governing people’s affect and conduct. In order to investigate its actual influences on local communities, she headed to the Philippines, with which she had become acquainted through the Asian CO network.<sup>10)</sup> There, she witnessed the actual practices of international development NGOs.

Staying in the Philippines for about eight months, I came to know that so many development NGOs in South Korea and elsewhere dispatched volunteers and staff to the country. Witnessing their activities, I really felt that I had found a blueprint for activism under global neoliberalism. Their acts seemed to model the linkage of the global and the local. However, I was surprised to find that local activists in the Philippines kept complaining about South Korean activists’ feelings of superiority as well as their irresponsibility. The gap between South Koreans’ appreciation of their own work and the local activists’ view of them was remarkable. (Interview, December 20, 2013)

Returning to South Korea in 2007, Eunsil started to work simultaneously for KONET and for a development NGO, trying to build a bridge between the two. In 2011, together with young members of development NGOs who she had given CO training to, she formed the Co-Village, a seminar group for discussing people-centered and community-centered models of international development. Her dream to expand South Korean grassroots activism globally was realized in 2012, when she founded the Korean Action for Overseas Community Organization (KACO), in consultation with other members of KONET. She persuaded them of the necessity of training and cooperating with participants in development NGOs, highlighting the globalization of anti-poverty interventions: “Poverty is not a problem confined to South Korean society. It will not be solved unless we perceive it as the universal responsibility of human beings” (Kang 2011: 137).

For about three years, I frequently attended KACO events, in which veteran activists from KONET advised workers from development NGOs, and trainees from Co-Village as well as KONET trainers (including Eunsil) were interviewed. Throughout this experience, what I found most intriguing was the unique way in which KONET members trained NGO workers in the realm of international development. In order to highlight the significance of people-centered development, KONET trainers often compared the field of CO to that of international development. However, except in a few instances, the targets of their comparison referred to the *past* state of the former but to the *present* state of the latter. For example, in a KACO workshop to which veteran activists had been invited by both parties to discuss the best ways to organize local residents, an employee from a development NGO asked a question. Listening to her concern about building a new community organization in a Myanmar village, Suhyun, the former president of the KONET, answered as follows:

I fully understand the difficulty of CO. Let me tell you the story of my senior (*seonbae*), Jung Il-Woo.<sup>11)</sup> When he began to live in shabby makeshift towns in Yangpyeong, he suggested to Je Jung-Gu [the late South Korean activist and politician], with whom he teamed up, “Let’s do nothing until the residents do something.” Living in several shantytowns, Jung Il-Woo had met many residents who appealed for help, saying to him, “You are a priest from abroad. We’ve heard that you know many influential figures.” In Yangpyeong, he just lived and often drank with residents, patiently waiting for their voluntary action. He showed an example to us, making us realize that waiting is the most important way of revitalizing a community. (KACO Workshop, January 21, 2014)

In trying to prompt development NGOs to reconsider their actions in the Global South, CO activists have primarily focused on indicating the dangers associated with dependence on external aid. KACO’s foundation stemmed from the perception that “the community spirit of the world’s poor is being destroyed by South Korea’s unilateral aid projects, which are obsessed with economic development.”<sup>12)</sup> Eunsil’s personal experiences helped her to understand the key role of self-reliance, as follows:

In the Philippines and elsewhere, I have seen how unsophisticated forms of local activism are dying out because of international NGOs. These NGOs have poured money in and pushed development projects in the direction not of what local residents want, but in of what they themselves need. Moreover, these international workers have incited local NGOs to compete for external funds, eventually forming an environment of “survival of the fittest.” In the past, we [grassroots activists in South Korea] tried to lead movements with the power of the people, not with the power of capital. We really struggled to stick to that principle. (Interview, September 14, 2013)

However, Jung Il-Woo’s decision to do nothing, and Eunsil’s emphasis on self-reliance, do not necessarily represent the landscape of *present* grassroots activism. As shown in the example of Nangok, activists are increasingly confronted with the need to fulfill a new role as business operators as they compete to apply for projects sponsored by governments,

corporations, churches, and large-scale NGOs. As the book *Possibilities that People Open Up by Themselves* reveals, KONET members have been attempting to establish creative dialogues between the past and the present to inform their production of knowledge. However, similar work is rarely conducted in actual training sessions, as trainers find it difficult, albeit not impossible, to bring up pertinent examples from current activities. Although they have introduced some recent measures setting a limit on project-based work, KONET members rely heavily on the past experiences of their seniors: not only do they use memoirs, biographies, and reviews of past activism as textbooks for training, but they also encourage young trainees to meet veteran CO activists and to learn from them. In short, the freezing of history is guiding the actual training processes.

How does such a unique style of training appeal to young workers in development NGOs? These youths, who are mostly in their twenties and thirties, have not experienced the democratization movement at its peak. The five trainees who were interviewed between 2012 and 2014 had come to engage with global poverty and had started to work in development NGOs after taking part in short-term volunteering activities in Southeast Asia or Africa during college. Although they respected the values of justice, equality, and community adhered to by their trainers, they shared neither their trainers' previous experience nor their sense of necessity to make those values manifest in a political language for social movements. Their encounters with sincere activists who had devoted their lives to social movements aroused complex affective responses. On the one hand, the devotional lives of veteran activists were awe-inspiring, and the young NGO workers were moved by their CO principles. These workers were thrilled as they had long been disappointed with development experts who had replaced human interaction with technical language. This profound respect sometimes evolved into feelings of guilt about their way of life as prosaic workers, rather than determined activists. Minyoung, a full-time activist in KACO, had received CO training before being dispatched to South Africa as a local staff of the UNESCO office in 2010. When I asked her about the difference between the realm of CO and that of international development, she answered:

I first felt guilty in relation to my CO seniors, because I perceived some differences between their involvement and mine. Of course, I knew that this comparison was useless. The times in which they had lived were quite different from my own. Nevertheless, I could not but draw comparisons. In those days [in the 1970–80s], they had entered the shabby makeshift towns voluntarily and had worked almost for nothing. Currently, the expenses paid for my activities at KACO amounts to 1.2 million won,<sup>13)</sup> which is much more than what activists in the 1990s received. Moreover, I do not have the courage to live in a local community together with the poor. I was deeply ashamed. (Interview, September 14, 2013)

On the other hand, these youths also realized that under the present circumstances—according to which they were expected to adjust to the short-term cycle of development projects—the CO-centered movement was something remote from them. The more they were involved in CO training, the more they felt that people-centered development was impossible unless they left their current positions. Although trainers emphasized the possibility

that people may fight against unjust powers in their own communities, most of the development NGOs to which they belonged tried to avoid taking an ideological stance. Complex feelings of envy, guilt, doubt, and helplessness overwhelmed these youths, making them share their anxieties and constantly reconsider their direction.

Nevertheless, KONET's inconsistent style of activism has not merely ended up instilling cynicism in both trainers and trainees. In many of the workshops which I attended, what emerged from the often-heated discussions about visions of activism was an emphasis on processes rather than on teleological stages, puzzling comments rather than clear solutions, and acts or words of consolation rather than of refutation. In KONET's communicative events as well as in its knowledge production, the orchestration of time, by which trainers eliminate, restore, and freeze the time for/of activism, inevitably creates logical discrepancies and experiential contradictions. However, it also provides both trainers and trainees with opportunities to oscillate between temporal contingencies in their search for possibilities. The time of/for activism is not only deleted, revitalized, and frozen: it is also deferred, as KONET participants desperately try to imagine and to realize an otherwise which has not yet been fulfilled.

## **5. Conclusion: From People's Power to People's Possibilities**

Not everything is possible, but there is no universal rule to indicate a priori what is possible and what is not. (Callon and Caliskan 2005: 40)

This article has explored the ambiguous and often contradictory ways of revitalizing and pursuing grassroots activism in South Korea. KONET, founded in the mid-1990s by veteran grassroots activists for the purposes of producing knowledge for community organization (CO) and of teaching its methods to a wide array of audiences, has been used as an ethnographic example in this study. I have been particularly intrigued by the metamorphosis of grassroots activism following the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, when massive lay-offs and relentless de-regulation policies brought about an explosive increase in the number of working poor, while emerging forms of anti-poverty intervention based on new partnerships between social movement groups and state apparatuses, and no longer on the antagonism between the two, also aroused doubts and frustrations about the proper place of activism. This paper has attempted to investigate the ways veteran activists, who have not yet lost the pervasive ethos and memories of the social movements from the 1980–90s, have tried to rebuild their place and to seek new prospects within the seemingly de-politicized era of neoliberalism.

With an eye to the production of training textbooks and the provision of training sessions in the realm of international development, the ethnographic findings of this study indicate that KONET trainers keep coordinating the time of and for activism. Wittingly or unwittingly, they have eliminated the historicity of past activism in their search for universal, humanist values, restored it when rediscovering the spirit of communal activism from the past, and frozen historical time to compare the present of development NGOs to the past of grassroots movements; otherwise, they have deferred the time for activism, waiting for



unknown messages from the future.

The orchestration of time does not indicate the distortion, deterioration, or temporary suture of grassroots activism. Such an overview may create a nostalgic illusion that the activism of the past is the only path that can be followed. Instead, it is interesting to observe the ambiguity of the current activist discourse and the resilience that it provides. I argue that the temporally volatile, uncertain manifesto of grassroots activism contributes to broadening both its horizons and the possible representations of its direction, despite the dangerous contradictions that it reveals. Although KONET members are increasingly realizing their subjection to state and capitalist powers in their local communities, as trainers, they are spreading their belief in CO to a wide array of groups, trying to build new forms of solidarity.

Embracing these contradictions with the realization that they are not to be solved in the near future, both CO trainers and trainees have come to reinterpret their activism not as a teleological project moving towards the completion of a goal, but as a series of *processes* by which they need to make mutual efforts and to share affective burdens all together. It is in this context that activists now prefer the discourse of “people’s possibilities” to that of “people’s power,” which in the 1980s was regarded as a means to an end: the overthrow of the dictatorship. In contrast with the latter, the former highlights unknowability, spurring persistent, patient efforts over time: “Possibility comes from the realization of impossibility in the present. If something can possibly be done now, it cannot be a possibility” (KONET 2014: 114).

In his keynote speech for the 40th anniversary of CO in South Korea, Shin Myung-ho, a well-known activist-type researcher, highlighted the “endless coming” of democracy: “The seeming peace in front of our eyes is far from representing the completion of democracy, thus requiring new types of resistance” (M. Shin 2011: 27). Who are activists expected to resist? Mr. Shin concluded his speech by suggesting that activists need to “fight against themselves”: “Whether an activist tries to do something meaningful together with poor people or not is eventually up to what kind of life he or she wants to live” (2011: 31). The combination of activists’ beliefs in people’s possibilities, of their will to cultivate themselves as people, and of their endless efforts to perpetuate social movements eventually leads to the ethicalization of activism. It has become a message of salvation which has not yet been realized, thus prompting activists to undertake their mission seriously and hopefully. Drawing on the indeterminate and uncertain dynamics of time, which are often interpreted as a neoliberal mode of time use, they struggle to resist neoliberal forces, making their CO training an ethical guide for bolstering activism.

## Notes

- 1) The names of persons and local institutions mentioned in this article are pseudonyms, except for the names of well-known activists and areas.
- 2) The term “community organization” was not popular until South Korean activists participated in the Leaders and Organizers of Community Organizations in Asia (LOCOA) in the mid-1990s, i.e. the Asian network for organizing grassroots movements for the poor. Some activists and

- researchers began to use the term “CO” when they needed to coin a new term for “*jumin* movements.”
- 3) Between 1996 and 1998, the GDP’s growth rate plummeted from 7 percent to minus 6.9 percent, while the unemployment rate increased from 2 percent to 7 percent in 1998 (Statistics Korea website: <http://kostat.go.kr>).
  - 4) This paper borrows the term “the political” from Jacques Rancière and adopts his definition of it. Rancière conceptualized “the political” as the encounter between two heterogeneous processes: “The first process is that of governing, and it entails creating community consent, which relies on the distribution of shares and the hierarchy of places and functions. I shall call this process policy. The second process is that of equality. It consists of a set of practices guided by the supposition that everyone is equal and by the attempt to verify this supposition. The proper name for this set of practices remains emancipation” (Rancière 1992: 58).
  - 5) Some portions of this section have already appeared in my article “From ‘Power to the People’ to ‘Civil Empowerment’” (Cho 2005). Primary fieldwork in Nangok was undertaken between 1999 and 2001, and follow-up research was conducted in December 2013.
  - 6) The GDP’s growth rate decreased from 5.0 percent in 1997 to minus 6.7 percent 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 ([http://www.nso.go.kr/cgi-bin/sws\\_777pop.cgi](http://www.nso.go.kr/cgi-bin/sws_777pop.cgi)).
  - 7) Widely described as a “sexual minority” in South Korea, the term stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.
  - 8) In South Korea, most development NGOs are affiliated with the Korea NGO Council for Overseas Development Cooperation (KCOC), an association of NGOs implementing development and aid projects to alleviate global poverty. The number of development NGOs belonging to the KCOC has increased from 25 in 2000 to 118 in 2014 (<http://www.ngokcoc.or.kr/>).
  - 9) Two interviews were conducted with Eunsil, in September and December 2013.
  - 10) Long before their encounter with development NGOs, South Korean activists had developed a global anti-poverty intervention network through their participation in the LOCOA, as noted earlier. The institution intended to introduce an extensive network of COs and to facilitate the exchange of CO tactics and experiences between activists in Asian countries.
  - 11) Jung Il-Woo (John V. Daly, 1935–2014) is a long-esteemed Catholic priest and grassroots activist. Born in the US, he eventually settled in South Korea and fostered solidarity among the evicted poor despite continuous threats of exile under military rule. Called “godfather of the poor,” he long lived with evicted residents in Cheonggyecheon, Yangpyeong-dong, Sanggye-dong, and many other shantytowns in South Korea.
  - 12) KACO homepage: <http://KOCO2co.tistory.com/>.
  - 13) About 1,120 dollars. For reference, in December 2013, the average initial salary of college graduates in South Korea was 2,659,000 won (about 2,470 dollars) per month (Korea Employers Federation 2013).

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