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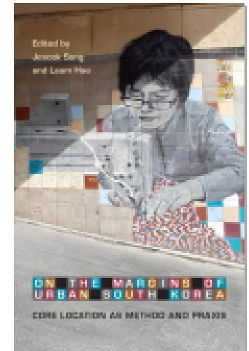

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3 Against the Construction State: Korean Pro-greenbelt Activism as Method

LAAM HAE

On the afternoon of 30 July 1999, a protest and counter-protest spectacle unfolded in Seoul Station Plaza, located in Seoul's central business district. Five hundred protesters from all over the country were railing against legislation that the Kim Dae-Jung government had just announced, an act that mandated the revision of greenbelt laws in the direction of deregulation. They demanded the resignation of the head of the Ministry of Construction and Transportation (MOCT), as well as the annulment of the new act. These protesters were social and environmental activists from about 160 activist organizations that constituted the umbrella group People's Action for Saving Greenbelts (PASG, Geurinbelteu Salligi Gungmin Haengdong). This was an unusual scene, one in which the riot police were guarding protesters, who were chanting anti-government slogans, from the counter-protesters, who were physically and verbally assaulting the activists. Anger, even fury, was intense among the counter-protesters, and Seoul Station Plaza was filled with the smell of the broken eggs that they had thrown at the protesters. The counter-protesters comprised mainly residents and landlords in the greenbelts, most of whom were members of the Korea Greenbelts Association (Jeon-guk Gaebaljehan-guyeok Juminhyeophoe), which had persistently demanded the abolition of greenbelts in Korea.[1]

This protest and counter-protest spectacle (and many similar ones over greenbelt deregulation) was a moment that expressed the contradictions of unfolding post–Cold War geopolitics conjoined with

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1 This description of the protest is based Bae and Lee (1999).

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political democratization and economic neoliberalization in Korea. Such struggles over greenbelts are the focus of this chapter. I examine the politics of greenbelts from the 1970s onwards and, in particular, the protest actions that ensued in the late 1990s as a result of the state's announcement of the deregulation of the country's greenbelt. In examining this issue, I also engage with the question of how we understand a place and a place-based oppositional politics, drawing on the insights of Baik's (2013) idea of "core location."

First, I argue that, while the neoliberal economic turn in Korea in the 1990s triggered greenbelt deregulation, such deregulation should also be analysed as a moment within the longer history of the peculiar capitalist political modernity that has existed in Korea since the 1960s – that is, the construction state (*togeon-gukga*). The "construction state" refers to a historically specific politico-institutional assemblage that has powerfully shaped the urbanization process in Korea, especially that process's pattern of uneven development. The mantra of "Fight the Construction State" that was chanted by pro-greenbelt activists in the 1990s compels us to chart their organizing struggles within the particular spatial history of capitalism in Korea, as engineered by the construction state and reconfigured through neoliberal processes. The construction state machine, and more recently the country's neoliberal power bloc, has long considered the greenbelt as both *terra nullius* and a disposable reservoir for future development.

Following the emphasis in many postcolonial works, including Chen (2010), I want to highlight the importance of an analysis that attends to geographical and historical contexts and contingencies. But I seek to do this without losing sight of the idea advanced by historical materialist scholars (Palat 1999; Hart 2006; Glassman 2016) that locally particular historical trajectories, such as the one instantiated with the history of the construction state in Korea, should be understood as arising and evolving through the processes of interconnection and interdependence. In other words, seemingly local particularities are always produced and evolve in interconnection with other places and are dynamically integrated into a global capitalist matrix that is ever changing (Palat 1999).

Second, and in a related vein, I also situate pro-greenbelt protests against the greenbelt deregulation that emerged in the late 1990s, as impelled and informed by the contradictions of the locally particular politico-spatiality of Korea's capitalism – that is, the contradictions of the construction state that were amplified by the neoliberalization of space in recent years. In examining these protests, I will refer to Baik's (2013) notion of "core location" – a location of multiple marginalities and the politics of resistance – an investigation of which unveils layered power relations and inequalities. I take the greenbelt in Korea to

be just such a core location. And, by examining the contentious history of protests against greenbelt deregulation, I engage with Baik's ideas of "critical self-reflection" (*seongchal*), "praxis" (*silcheon*), and "communicative connection" (*sotong*), and discuss the ways in which pro-greenbelt activism constitutes one node within the broader trans-local "counter-topography" (Katz 2001) of anti-capitalist resistance politics. As many feminist scholars have argued (e.g., hooks 1986; Katz 2001; Mohanty 2003), and as Baik (2013) has also implied, individual sites of resistance are loci of reflexivity of the universal as well as particular conditions of living and life, and, further, a basis of common ground, connections, and the "deep solidarity" (Mohanty 2003, 225) that can be forged among different anti-capitalist movements across borders. In this sense, learning about the pro-greenbelt activism that emerged in 1990s Korea should be registered as one of many efforts "to theorize experience, agency and justice from a more cross-cultural lens" (Mohanty 2003, 244).

Understanding the Local

A recent body of work has raised concerns regarding how most political economic literature in urban studies has failed to represent the multiple modalities of urbanization in non-Western countries. This critical work has problematized the practice of understanding non-Western cities through paradigmatic Western urban theories, such as the "global cities" paradigm and others rooted in the context of Western neoliberal urbanization, and has sought to retheorize the urban from a postcolonial angle (Robinson 2006; Shatkin 2007; Roy 2009). Inspired by a range of postcolonialist theories, including that of Chakrabarty (2000), these scholars have contended that the categories and concepts that seem to have a universal appeal are in actuality provincial, related to the particular circumstance of the emergence of European capitalist modernity. In particular, they have sought to demonstrate the ways in which urbanization in the non-Western world has variegated foundations and evolving patterns, co-determined by multiple local and extra-local factors (see, e.g., Buckley and Hanieh 2014). This scholarship shares an interest in uncovering the different combinations of determination in places, and, based on these, strives for theoretical heterogeneity.

The postcolonialist mandate for decolonizing knowledge production has shaped my interest in the construction state and greenbelt deregulation in Korea. In particular, Chen's (2010) rejection of Eurocentric world historiography and his call for multiplying reference points among Asian subalterns has helped me think through the case that I examine in this chapter (for more details on Chen's arguments, see the introduction

to this volume). In contrast to the non-contextualized picture of, say, neoliberal urbanization that is often found in renditions of the global convergence thesis, I am convinced, that urban studies both for Western and non-Western cities should take seriously the path-dependent processes and contextual factors at work in particular places and should carry out more nuanced research. However, it would also be inadequate to analyse urbanization in any particular place in isolation from broader political economic processes that are increasingly becoming the global "rule regime" (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010). In my view, and as many others have also argued, a study of a locality should entail an interrogation of how it becomes a site of *articulations* and *co-determinations* of different forces and processes that have shaped people's experiences of their lifeworlds and their struggles against structural processes, and how local social formations are articulated by, and further integrated into, the broader capitalist world-system through historically and geographically contingent and complex forms (Palat 1999; Hart 2006).

The concept of articulation requires clarification, though. According to Gupta and Ferguson (1992, 8), the concept is often loaded with the assumption that a place is in a "primeval state of autonomy," which is presumed to be transformed and violated by external forces. They argue that, instead of "taking a pre-existing, localized 'community' as a given starting point" (ibid.), as has been implied in the concept of articulation, it is necessary to examine how each place has *always* been formed out of interconnected processes (that are often in tension with each other) originating from, and moving through and between, different places. The differences that each locale possesses are never pristine or uncontaminated, but rather are produced through socio-spatial forms of interconnection and interdependence. Therefore, the fault line between what is purely local and what is extra-local is hard to discern. While Gupta and Ferguson develop the notion of articulation to explain culture and place, a similar point has continuously been made by Marxists, too. Marxists have shown capitalism's innate tendency toward competition for absolute and relative surplus value for accumulation's sake and the consequent expansion of the system to wider geographical and social realms. Harvey (1989) shows that such a tendency results in "time-space compression," where different places in the world are intimately integrated and concatenated through increasingly advanced transportation and communication technologies.[2] Leon Trotsky's theory of "uneven and combined development," while it acknowledges the different, multilinear historical progression of different places,

2 I thank Kyle Gibson for pointing out this issue to me.

also illuminates how these places are interactive with each other and integrated into the capitalist system via trade and capitalist overseas investment (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2017).

Such points about articulation enlighten those of us who study Korea to bear in mind that a historically informed and contextually grounded study of the country should not lead us to a preoccupation with the supposedly incompatible particularity of Korea. Rather, they should compel us to explore the historically sedimented particularity of Korea that has been formed through interconnected geopolitical and capitalist processes, as well as transnational flows of ideas and forms of praxis between different places. In this sense, the tendency of certain post-colonialists to reject the universalization of the capitalist system – the latest incarnation of which is neoliberal capitalism – cannot properly capture the totality of life in any place. In some studies, the particular is misleadingly equated with the local and is analysed as being incompatible with the universal and abstract (Sayer 1991; Hart 2006, 996; Orzeck and Hae forthcoming). This is an analytical fallacy, which is empirically unsustainable, and we need to take seriously the question of the universal in our study of locality. We should also remember, however, that the universal is not an "epistemological given." Instead, as Chen (2010, 245) reminds us, it should be understood as a horizon constructed through locally based grounded knowledge.

Again, it is important to theorize local differences in their mutually constitutive relation to the broader macro structure and the increasingly universalizing capitalist market compulsion (which takes specific historical forms). And, as is mentioned earlier in this chapter, an attention to local differences has been one of the under-explored dimensions of some political economic literature in urban studies. Another subject that these schools of thought have also under-privileged in their theoretical endeavours has been the everyday political struggles of people. According to Ruddick and her colleagues (2017), the planetary urbanization thesis (Brenner and Schmid 2015), for example, does not consider struggles and practices of people as the key component and generative forces constituting the social ontology of the urban, and its optic stays at the level of the abstract.[3] Theories that attend to struggles

3 First conceived by Henri Lefebvre ([1970] 2003), the idea of "planetary urbanization" was recently revitalized through the work of Brenner and Schmid (2015). The latter argued that capitalist urbanization – in particular, neoliberal urbanization – now cuts across different kinds of spaces (including agricultural and wilderness spaces) and takes a planetary form. This, according to them, compels urbanists to revise inherited categories of, and the binary between, the urban and non-urban.

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and take praxis seriously, such as Baik's idea of core location, can, therefore, provide a corrective to such a tendency among some political economist works in urban studies, even though Baik's concept is not free of limits and political ambiguities, as is discussed in the introduction to this volume. For the episteme of Baik's core location starts its analytics from the marginalized places and people and their resistant actions against complex relations of power.

At the heart of Baik's concept of core location is the triad of critical self-reflection, praxis, and communicative connection, which he posits as the sources through which resistant forces challenge and eventually transform formidable material structures that constantly generate disparity, dispossession, and marginalization. He emphasizes the importance of mutually understanding different place-based ideas and praxis, and connecting them across different networks and scales. This approach resonates with many feminist scholars' arguments that critical activist scholarship should seek to contribute to increasingly globalizing organizational struggles and oppositional politics, while at the same time also pursuing non-colonizing and decolonizing scholarship. Non-colonizing and decolonizing scholarship, Baik contends, starts from grounded knowledge of places and the particular conditions in which these places are situated and that shape their peripheral states. This echoes Mohanty's (2003, 223) call to scholars to recognize that "the particular is often universally significant," while at the same time to not try to subsume the particular within the universal.

These ideas by Baik and Mohanty are the framework through which I want to read the story of the pro-greenbelt activism that emerged in the late 1990s in Korea. In the next two sections, I attempt to provide an account of the historical and conjunctural processes that triggered the counter-movement by pro-greenbelt activists against the state's greenbelt deregulation. The processes that are described below are embedded in specific local histories of Korea, but they are also enmeshed in wider relational capitalist, geopolitical processes.

The "Construction State": The Particular Capitalist Political Form in Korea

The particular spatio-political assemblage within which I locate the story of pro-greenbelt activists in Korea is the "construction state." That term expresses a capitalist regime of accumulation and regulative modes developed in Korea in relation to the country's particular position in, and interconnection with, broader geopolitical constellations that were formed during the Cold War period.

The authoritarian and military "developmental states" of the period from the 1960s to the 1980s in Korea facilitated rapid industrialization and economic growth, through which these regimes, which seized power via coups, sought to maintain their political legitimacy (Cho 2013, 269). This economic growth proceeded through a hard-line offensive against the principle of democracy in the political, economic, and social spheres. The blank slate granted to the military regimes also stemmed from Cold War geopolitics in which the Pacific ruling-class alliance, especially the US government, supported the Korean military regime against the East Asian communist bloc that arose around it (Glassman 2016). Since the late 1980s, however, the processes of democratization, neoliberalization, and administrative decentralization gradually destabilized the previous years' authoritarian developmental statist system, and mixing with (and often contradicting) one another, these new processes gave rise to new political configurations, which some have characterized as "post-developmental" (Doucette 2016).

Urbanization has experienced similar transitions. Neoliberal urbanization emerged in the late 1980s and quickened after the economic crisis of the late 1990s (Choi 2012). During the developmental statist period, the state virtually monopolized spatial planning. By contrast, each regime in the post-developmental period implemented an inventory of urban policies that offered more initiatives for private participation, giving in to the development industry's persistent demands for deregulation in matters of land use and development. In the meantime, new forms of popular democracy and civic engagement have exploded since the 1990s along with political democratization in the country. Environmental and other dissident groups have entered the political arena, raising new claims to a set of rights and entitlements that had been denied them during the authoritarian developmental state era (Y. Lee and Shin 2012). At the same time, with administrative decentralization, local governments have surfaced as key political agents.

Despite these shifts in urban governance, some observers have noted that the recent transformations in urbanization processes have taken a "path-dependent" character, with developmental statism still lingering, a view that leads some commentators to label the current regime shift as "neo-developmental" (Choi 2012; Cho 2013) rather than "post-developmental." The central government still exercises significant institutional power in matters related to urban/land development, and it continues to act as one of the primary developers (Y. Lee and Shin 2012; Choi 2012; also see Oh's chapter in this volume). In particular, urbanists have concurred that the "construction state" is one of the core features

of the politico-institutional structure that has survived the transition from the developmental to the post-/neo-developmental period.

The term "construction state" originally referred to a specific Japanese economic structure (McCormack 1995), but Korean scholars and activists maintain that the Korean counterpart operates as more or less the same machine (Hong 2011; Cho 2013). The construction state in Korea (as well as in Japan) refers to the system in which the proportion of the construction sector is substantive in the country's GDP, and the "iron triangle" of the "construction complex" – that is, companies-bureaucrats-politicians – exercises a powerful hegemony in the state's affairs (McCormack 1995).[4] In Korea, it was not until recent years that the term became a scholarly and activist concept (Hong 2011; Cho 2013). Scholars and activists have since used the term to illuminate the current state and contradictions of urbanization in Korea and to mobilize activist groups to resist the construction machine of the country. While the rising importance of real estate and construction within national economies across the world has become universal, as neoliberal regimes have proliferated since the early 1980s, in Korea it by far predates that period: the construction state mechanism has existed as a territorially embedded capitalist, politico-institutional development since the 1960s.

The construction state is a unique modern capitalist urban modality, and "local" and "extra-local" forces have coalesced to constitute it over the past few decades. The origin of the construction state in Korea can be traced to the nation-building drive and recovery efforts following its independence from Japan as well as the Korean War, both of which drove the state to prioritize the (re)construction of the physical infrastructure (Park 2011, 209). At the same time, however, as Glassman and Choi (2014) demonstrate, the US military offshore procurement contracting that Korean (proto-)*chaebols*[5] engaged in during the Vietnam War bestowed upon them, especially Hyundai, a pivotal opportunity for technological learning and the upgrading of engineering and management skills in the fields of construction, which precipitated the advent of the modern construction industry and the construction state in the country. Glassman and Choi develop this argument to debunk the "national–territorial" and state-centric frames of the so-called neo-Weberian accounts of the Korean developmental state. They highlight as an alternative the significant enmeshment of both the developmental

4 Politicians in the construction complex include those operating within national, regional, and local governments and parliamentary institutions.

5 *Chaebol* refers to a family-owned, large business conglomerate that has been formed and developed via governmental supports since the 1960s in Korea.

and the construction state within Cold War geopolitics and, in particular, the US military-industrial complex. This argument shows how the Korean capitalist political economy that is often referred to as developmental statism was not a feature generated solely by local agents and mechanisms – that is, the strong state and rational-planning bureaucracy, as neo-Weberians have argued – but the outcome of transpacific interconnections, echoing a point discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to Gupta and Ferguson's work (1992) (see also Glassman 2016).

During the authoritarian Park Chung-Hee regime (1963–79) – the key developmental statist period – civil engineering and public works became a central feature of the Korean political economy, as the export-oriented, manufacturing-based economy required massive investment in productive and reproductive infrastructure. Large land and housing development projects were virtually monopolized by the public sector. In this period, the machinery of a construction bureaucracy (*togeon-gwallyo*) – composed of public corporations established for property and land development and the ministry in charge of national construction affairs – became gigantic and powerful.[6] These key elements have been the linchpin of the construction complex and have been one of the sources of crony capitalism, exercising (often illegitimate) favouritism toward a privileged few capitalists, as well as landed and propertied classes. They frequently implemented policies that would enhance the popularity of the specific regime they served (Hong 2011). Massive public investments in land and housing developments by the public sector during this period were central in consolidating the country into a construction state.

The power of the construction state continued into the 1980s. In this period, the two military regimes continued with their crackdowns on anti-government dissidents. At the same time, they proceeded with several construction projects – most representatively, the "2 million housing" construction project" in the form of massive apartment complexes and the development of suburban towns surrounding Seoul. These massive constructions, planned and implemented mostly by public corporations, were meant to appease discontented urban inhabitants in Seoul. The developmentalist capitalist regime also began experiencing an over-accumulation crisis during this period, and the regimes sought

6 The name of the ministry has changed over time: from 1962 to 1994, it was the Ministry of Construction; from 1994 to 2008, the Ministry of Construction and Transportation (MOCT); and from 2008 until 2013, the Ministry of Land, Transport and Maritime Affairs (MOLTMA). Since 2013, it has been the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MOLIT).

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to tackle this by channelling surplus capital into the real estate sector (Shin 2009; Harvey 1982). In the midst of implementing this array of construction projects in the 1980s, the construction complex was further consolidated.

From the 1990s onwards, while democratization could have potentially tamed the construction state drive, the neoliberal policy platform pursued by political regimes in this period – both left and right – actually strengthened the power of the construction state. Deregulation became a political mantra, especially after the financial crisis in the late 1990s. That crisis resulted in an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout of the country and a deregulatory wave that arose from the structural adjustment programs imposed by the IMF during the Kim Dae-Jung regime (1998–2003). Construction projects proceeded apace during this period, as more capital moved to the deregulated and market-oriented real estate sector. Despite this deregulatory wave, the state's presence in urban development was also reinforced, albeit in a modified form, as the state sought to enhance its national competitiveness through a range of spatial developments (Cho 2013, 271). In the early 1990s, administrative decentralization commenced, which decentred even further the former developmental state. Yet this did not lessen the power of the construction state. Each region became embroiled in inter-regional competition over central government funding as well as private mobile capital (both foreign and domestic), and launched into a stream of construction projects under the leadership of local politicians to enhance local competitiveness (Park 2011, 215; on this trend, see also the chapters by Eom, Jeong, Oh, and Park in this volume).

Although the rhetoric that the construction complex used to justify an unceasing construction wave in the so-called neo-developmental period from the 1990s onward became more reformist in tone, many contend that the construction state's paradigmatic logics have remained intact (Cho 2013; Hong 2011). That is, private interests are still favoured by the state; the processes of planning and development have been largely undemocratic; and the pernicious impacts of these constructions, such as growing land and housing speculation, have disproportionately affected the economically disenfranchised working-class population. Populations with disposable income continue to seek to profit from their investments in real estate, with speculative subjectivities having become one normalized component of capitalist modernity in the country (Sohn 2008). It is also worth noting that the non-stop implementation of construction projects had been established as the sine qua non for the reproduction and consolidation of the interests of the construction complex. By the early 2000s, the housing provision

ratio reached 100 per cent in Korea. But whenever housing shortages became a thorny political issue, the argument advanced by the construction complex has been to "build more," even though the problem has been more the unequal distribution of ownership among the populace. Many have conceived this phenomenon as arising from the calculation of the construction complex to reproduce itself and maintain its hegemony (Hong 2011; Cho 2011, 2013). This also explains the proliferation over the past couple of decades of construction projects with little fiscal feasibility.

This observation does not imply that the ongoing persistence and vigour that social and environmental groups have shown in opposing the construction complex can be discredited. On the contrary, these groups' activism against the construction state has been strikingly vehement, unyielding, and persistent. One instance of such resistance politics was waged by pro-greenbelt activists. In the following section, I examine the process of greenbelt deregulation, which will be followed by an account of the pro-greenbelt struggle of environmentalists and social activists against the construction state machine that executed greenbelt deregulation.

The Greenbelt as Core Location

Korea's greenbelt policy was first drafted and imposed in the Seoul area and thirteen other cities by the Park Chung-Hee regime in 1971.[7] Development restrictions in the form of a greenbelt policy may seem paradoxical, considering the developmentalist mandate of that era. Yet "national security" concerns related to the Cold War geopolitics of the time factored in more heavily in the designation of the greenbelt than did concerns for development control. Indeed, the major purpose of the greenbelt was to secure sites for strategic military action in preparation for potential war with North Korea (Chang 2004, 70; Jung 2005, 126). Nonetheless, the regime's designation of greenbelts was also meant to curb urban sprawl, increasing real estate speculation in major cities experiencing rapid population growth, and the contamination of air and sources of drinking water.

The greenbelt designations were driven by administrative convenience and a dictatorial, centralized planning mechanism. They were undertaken by technocrats who did not conduct thorough land-use

7 The area of greenbelts in total was 5,397 km^2 and covered 5.4 per cent of the total national land (MOLTMA 2011, 22).

surveys or seek public input, and who drew the boundaries of greenbelts based only on air and topographical maps. This was a typical example of the sort of undemocratic decision-making processes conducted behind closed doors by the authoritarian developmentalist regime of that time. The designation of greenbelt lands in this way not only caused serious inconveniences to residents in these areas – most of whom were engaged in agricultural activities – but also seriously restricted landowners' rights. This was a period in which the national interest, especially the security interest, was prioritized over individual interests (often including property ownership) by a McCarthyesque dictatorial state machine, so land and property owners did not dare to challenge the state's decisions regarding the greenbelt for fear of harsh retribution.

Since their establishment, the physical boundaries of the greenbelt have barely changed. Yet, given the circumstance that more than 80 per cent of greenbelt lands were privately owned, controversies over the strict greenbelt regulations continued, and in the 1980s the new military regimes permitted minor relaxations of the regulations to modestly improve the convenience and livelihoods of greenbelt residents. The critical change in this period, however, was that the state started to approve the locating of public buildings and amenities, such as administrative buildings, recreational public parks, educational tourist farms, and sports facilities, in greenbelt lands (Chang 2004, 75; MOLTMA 2011, 148–9, 189). The construction of public buildings and amenities was far from being uncontested, with the media in particular engaging in serious criticism of the government, especially when controversial facilities, such as waste treatment facilities and golf courses, were also permitted to be built (MOLTMA 2011, 152). The approval of these developments then gave rise to increasing discontent among greenbelt landowners and residents, as they perceived – quite correctly – that the greenbelt rules had been strictly enforced on them alone (Kim and Kim 2008, 46).

This particular evolution of greenbelt development signified to many that the state was not actually interested in protecting the greenbelt. If anything, many contended that the greenbelt became a reservoir for contemporary public development (Chang 2004, 75). Furthermore, the increased access to greenbelt lands by public institutions together with a wave of (limited) relaxations of greenbelt regulations raised the general expectation that the greenbelt would soon be deregulated and opened to private forms of development. It became commonplace by this time for the affluent class to buy up greenbelt lands, especially in the Seoul Metropolitan Region (SMR), from the original owners and to

start to build luxury houses and restaurants on these lands (MOLTMA 2011, 170, 171). They frequently bribed public servants in charge of approving use changes to greenbelt lands (176–7). According to one media report published on 27 June 1990, a public officer commented that "the preservation of greenbelts is dependent upon the state's will to curtail the power of this affluent class" (176). The price of some parts of the greenbelt surrounding the Gangnam area of Seoul – which is the most expensive district in the city – experienced an upswing, and speculation over these lands ensued.

In the meantime, from the late 1980s to early 1990s, suburbs in the SMR were developed as a massive residential area via new town developments – such as the 2 million housing construction project, mentioned above, which was a landmark feat of the construction complex. Lands there were subject to frantic speculation, and landowners enjoyed hefty profits as a result. This further augmented the discontent among greenbelt landowners in the SMR whose lands were not part of speculative frenzy, owing to development restrictions. Speculation had by then been established as one of the major means of upward mobility in the country and one key component of the construction state's operating mechanism. Greenbelt landowners started to mobilize themselves, and by the mid-1990s they became active political participants. The continued political democratization of the country further aided this process, emboldening these landowners to speak out. They claimed that it was unfair to impose the social costs of preserving greenbelts on greenbelt landowners. While this advocacy was an understandable move by owners whose property rights had been severely infringed upon, not all who embarked on the political action were victims of the previous system. The class composition of greenbelt landowners had changed during the intervening years. According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Construction and Transportation in 1993, the percentage of greenbelt landowners who had lived in greenbelt from the time of its designation was down to 45 per cent, while that of the greenbelt landowners who lived outside greenbelts – that is, rich landowners and/or speculators – was 46.3 per cent (MOLTMA 2011, 192). Many suspected that the latter group, rather than the former, was spearheading the campaign to completely repeal greenbelt regulations.

Meanwhile, in the mid- to late 1990s, two critical changes – one geopolitical and the other institutional – steered the state in the direction of relaxing greenbelt regulations. First, the idea of relaxing these regulations was aided by the easing of the Cold War tensions that had initially given rise to greenbelt designation in the 1970s (Chang 2004, 77, 84). Second, with administrative decentralization and the commencement

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of a local autonomy system in the mid-1990s, which was an outcome of broader political democratization, the central government was pressured by local governments to ease greenbelt regulations (MOLTMA 2011, 141). Local governments started to cut back, and even boycotted allocating, budgets for the enforcement of greenbelt regulations, contending that they should not be mandated to earmark funds for a task that was essentially a breach of their constituents' basic property rights (Jung 2005, 128).

Within this context, the 1997 presidential election offered a political opening to greenbelt landowners, and they pledged the support of their 740,000 votes to the candidate who would execute the repeal of the greenbelt policy. The greenbelt landowner organizations supported the centre-left candidate Kim Dae-Jung – one of the most prominent political opponents of the military governments in previous decades – who promised to execute a drastic deregulation of greenbelt policies. Kim saw such regulation as a regrettable legacy of the previous president Park's military regime, which he himself had fought against. Ultimately elected as the first president from an oppositional party in the history of South Korea, Kim commenced the reform of greenbelt regulations by declaring a principle of "releasing areas that need to be released [meaning 'impaired areas'] while tightening areas that need to be tightened" (*pul geoseun pulgo mukkeul geoseun mungneunda*) (Chang 2004, 85).

Greenbelt deregulation was also in step with the broader deregulatory initiatives implemented by the Kim regime following the IMF bailout of the country in the late 1990s. Perceiving the greenbelt as a massive land stock that showed great potential, but was still awaiting full development, the key members of the construction complex – state actors, experts in government-owned public corporations, urban practitioners, and allied development capitalists – believed that reviving the real estate and land market through the deregulation of the greenbelt would help the economic recovery in the wake of the crisis. The mandate to follow this global deregulatory trend was strong among state officials and technocrats. Additionally, as Seoul was struggling with a chronic shortage of housing, urban experts as well as politicians insisted that greenbelts around Seoul should be released so that more housing could be built there. The importance of the greenbelt as a key site of ecological protection was relegated to the margins in the midst of these political and economic calculations, and the construction state assemblage rose as the mode of governing the greenbelt, now informed by the neoliberal ethos that was increasingly gaining currency in the state's urban policies.

Pro-greenbelt Activism: Resisting the Capitalist State and Its Spatial Modalities

The landscape of resistance politics in Korea was dominated by the labour movement until the end of the 1980s; but from the 1990s onward, environmental activism together with other new forms of activism surfaced as a discernible force in the country's political landscape. Such activism was simultaneously an offspring and facilitator of the broad democratization process of the time, which contributed to a post-developmental political constellation in the country. With the state's move to deregulate the greenbelt, a movement led by a pro-greenbelt coalition emerged in the late 1990s. The coalition stressed the urgency of protecting greenbelts from the state's imminent act of deregulation. Its campaign asserted that the greenbelt is ecologically important and that its preservation should be considered a means of enhancing the public good (Jung 2005; Chang 2004, 87). Referring to greenbelts as a "life-belt" (*saengmyeong-belteu*) (Bae and Lee 1999), the activists in this coalition proclaimed that these areas help preserve biodiversity around major cities, prevent flooding, and attenuate climate change (MOLTMA 2011, 338). Furthermore, they argued that, without a greenbelt, major cities would be left with less green space and with more intensified urban sprawl, and that, with greenbelt deregulation, cities, especially ones surrounding Seoul, would experience greater land speculation. They demanded that the state pay overdue compensation to greenbelt landowners for their long-lost rights to their properties, but leave the greenbelt intact.

Activists also contended that illegal impairments to greenbelts had been made by the people who bought greenbelt lands for speculative purposes (as well as by public institutions) in the previous decade, and, thus, that releasing greenbelt lands that had experienced impairments would benefit only the culprits who had degraded the land. What the state was doing, they argued, was tantamount to a denial of the real history of greenbelt degradation. Critics and activists further maintained that greenbelt deregulation was the key operating mechanism of the construction state – the logic of constructing more housing to solve the housing problem – being emphatically put forward by the construction complex, which they called the "construction mafia" (Choi 1998, 23; Hong 2011). Calls to "resist the construction state" became the lingua franca that connected different social activist and environmentalist groups into a pro-greenbelt activist coalition.

As the cries of these pro-greenbelt organizations were increasingly gaining public attention, the MOCT decided to have pro-greenbelt

activists represented in the Committee for the Revision of the Greenbelt Policy (CRGP, Geurinbelteu Jedogaeseon Hyeobuihoe), a counselling body for the process of drafting a new greenbelt law (Jung 2005, 129). Founded in May 1998 and composed of a range of "civil society" actors as well as public officials, it was created to achieve what they called a "social consensus" regarding greenbelt deregulation. However, only two members from the pro-greenbelt coalition were permitted on the twenty-three-member committee, which meant a serious power imbalance in its decision-making process (Chang 2004, 66).

This imbalance, of course, eventually had its repercussions. In the seven months following its formation, CRGP announced a first draft of the plan for greenbelt reform. Not long before the announcement, the Korean Constitutional Court declared that the expropriation of a person's land and property rights through greenbelt regulation would be unconstitutional if it were not coupled with proper compensation by the state to the affected people. As a result, the state felt it even more pressing to abolish greenbelt regulations (MOLTMA 2011, 247). Overall, the reform suggested by CRGP was to completely remove greenbelt regulations from thirteen small- to medium-sized cities and, in the case of major metropolitan regions such as SMR, to abolish the greenbelt category only in areas with lower environmental values. This plan was a shock to pro-greenbelt activists, as many small- to medium-sized cities included lands that, according to several environmental impact studies, should be protected because of their ecological sensitivity or the water sources in them (Yang 1999; Bae and Lee 1999, 82, 83). With this announcement of the tentative plan for revising greenbelt laws, local governments of these cities started to announce plans to build casinos, leisure facilities, and/or golf courses on the greenbelt lands that were slated for deregulation (Bae and Lee 1999, 86).

Consequently, pro-greenbelt activists scaled up their acts of resistance. The two pro-greenbelt activist members on CRGP threatened to resign their posts. A number of pro-greenbelt activists attended the public hearings that followed the announcement of the deregulation plan and vehemently raised their objections to it. They also recruited more sympathetic activist organizations and converted themselves into an umbrella coalition called the People's Action for Saving Greenbelts (PASG, Geurinbelteu Salligi Gungmin Haengdong). The PASG launched a repertoire of combative direct actions, rallies, marches, forums, and newspaper advertisements, which helped it lead a good number of media outlets over to the pro-greenbelt side (Jung 2005, 124;

Bengston and Youn 2006, 69).[8] Greenbelt landowners often interrupted PASG-organized forums and rallies, as was illustrated at the beginning of this chapter, and frequently made threatening calls to the PASG's key activists (Jung 2005, 125).

The PASG's investigations revealed that six of the thirty members of the MOCT committee of the National Assembly were current landowners in greenbelts destined for deregulation (Bengston and Youn 2006, 73), revealing that these members had a personal stake in the issue. At the same time, the PASG organized "five working level talks" with MOCT officials and other state bureaucrats (Jung 2005, 129). Importantly, the Ministry of Environment (MOE)[9] was on the side of greenbelt preservation and counterbalanced the construction complex (at the centre of which stood the MOCT and the Blue House) that was driving greenbelt deregulation. Activists expected this splintering within the state apparatus to further empower the pro-greenbelt movement (Chang 2004, 80).

The unceasing campaigning waged by the PASG forced the MOCT to make concessions, agreeing to the pro-greenbelt coalition's demand for a neutral third party to review the tentative plan. At the end of 1998, the MOCT commissioned the Town and County Planning Association (TCPA) from the United Kingdom to assess the tentative plan, review the overall state of greenbelts in Korea, and propose some suggestions for greenbelt governance. Following the report from the TCPA, the MOCT announced a revised and final greenbelt policy in July 1999. Although, as discussed below, it did incorporate one crucial demand from the PASG and the TCPA, the final law largely bypassed a number of key demands made by the PASG and preserved much of the content of the first draft's pro-deregulation position. The final plan was also made public by the MOCT before it acquired consensus from the CRGP (Chang 2004, 86n15).

The PASG resisted the new plan by orchestrating protest spectacles in various parts of the country. Some members shaved their heads in public, carried out overnight sit-ins, and staged hunger strikes. They also held a press conference, collected a petition signed by a million people to impeach the minister of the MOCT, and sued the MOCT in

8 Some scholars and activists also began to discuss the possibility of applying the National Trust movement to greenbelts (Bae and Lee 1999; Oh 2000). The National Trust is a campaign in which interested citizens purchase historic sites or ecologically sensitive areas to establish them as commons and preserve them.

9 The MOE was established in 1994.

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the Supreme Court for its violation of environmental rights (Chang 2004, 86). Individual activists were carrying out campaigning in major squares and plazas of Seoul under the hot summer sun and torrential summer rains. By this time, the number of participating organizations – mostly social activist and environmentalist groups – in the PASG amounted to 247 (Jung 2005, 124). Eventually, the MOCT scaled back some of its deregulation plans and reluctantly agreed to reduce the number of deregulated greenbelt lands from 113 to 94 (Chang 2004, 88n20). Ultimately, though, the activist coalition could not stop the powerful current of greenbelt deregulation pushed forward by the developmentalist construction complex, which was buttressed by greenbelt landowners and liberal economists and urban experts. The MOE – a crucial source of counter-pressure to the construction complex – was eventually relegated to only a passive (consulting) role in the process of revising the greenbelt laws by the MOCT (Chang 2004, 87). The pro-greenbelt movement was unyielding and persistent, to be sure, but the balance of political power was deeply asymmetrical.

In retrospect, PASG activists realized that they should have organized their movements at the local scale in order to "construct grievances at the grassroots level" instead of using the abstract language of "ecological preservation" to appeal to the general public (Jung 2005, 129). Some PASG activists also concluded that the failure of the movement could be ascribed to the misguided belief at its birth that talks with the MOCT and working within the CRGP would be an effective strategy (H. Lee 1999). They claimed that the government's placement of opponents of greenbelt deregulation on CRGP was at best a public relations stunt. The PASG became disorganized shortly after the new greenbelt law was passed, and activists from various groups started to scale down their activism to local chapters (Jung 2005, 130). Activist organizations located outside Seoul, however, often suffer from a lack of expert cohorts and full-time activists as well as from under-funding, and this has impeded these local chapters from actively monitoring urban developments in deregulated greenbelts (ibid.). This consideration makes it difficult to argue in general that administrative decentralization would have led to local democratization, as the mandate of local competitiveness pronounced by local political elites, capitalists, and the landed class – members of the construction complex – prevails in the absence of well-resourced countervailing social activist forces.

Despite this defeat, pro-greenbelt activism was not in vain. One of the PASG demands was that the government establish a long-term, principled metropolitan regional planning mechanism (which had not existed in the Korean planning system up to that point) and situate the process of greenbelt deregulation within it. Such a mechanism was intended

to prevent unplanned and haphazard development (*nan-gaebal*) in the greenbelt, as well as to conform greenbelt deregulation and development to the comprehensive large-scale planning (Jung 2005, 132; Chang 2004, 80). This call from the PASG was buttressed by the TCPA's recommendation that the metropolitan regional planning body be established before the greenbelt was deregulated. This demand was eventually incorporated into the final draft of the revised greenbelt law.

The PASG's achievements did not end there; it also had a crucial impact on later environmentalist movements. The PASG, as one of the earlier large-scale environmentalist groups, set the example of why and how to (or how not to) fight the construction state. Additionally, according to one interviewee in Jung's research, the greatest achievement of the PASG was the "transformation of public discourses on greenbelts from the issue of public taking of private assets to environmental preservation" (2005, 129). The activism powerfully recreated the image and importance of greenbelts as an environmental reservoir that was threatened by the construction state machine, rather than as a symbol of dispossession associated with the previous authoritarian state. For example, in a survey conducted by the MOCT in 1999, randomly selected groups of citizens and planning experts expressed that they preferred the preservation of the greenbelt with minimal changes, whereas the majority of the residents of the greenbelt preferred its deregulation (125). If a yearning for an ecologically friendly quality of life in order to combat the rapid pillaging of the urban natural environment can be understood to stem from middle-class cultural proclivities, the survey actually showed that a wider range of different classes sympathized and concurred with the key claims made by pro-greenbelt movements, rather than looking upon greenbelts as barriers to lucrative urbanization (Chang 2004, 76–7, 79). Pro-greenbelt activism appealed to this sensitivity and elevated this yearning to a set of concrete rights claims.

But popular consciousness was also paradoxical. For example, in a survey conducted by the MOCT, 36.8 per cent of respondents were opposed to the tax increases necessary to preserve the greenbelt (Chang 2004, 84). As environmental consciousness among the masses grew only slowly and was frequently interrupted by people's short-term economic self-interest, it was hard for environmentalist groups to receive sustained support from the middle- and working-class constituencies (ibid.).

Conclusion

Since the revision of greenbelt laws in the late 1990s, the state has continued to increase the size and scope of the deregulation of the greenbelt, while also building apartment complexes in deregulated areas. Such

development was often carried out by breaking deals that the state had reached with the pro-greenbelt activist coalition during the greenbelt law revisions at the end of the 1990s. The construction state endured throughout this period, constantly seeking to quiet dissident environmentalist voices. However, developments on greenbelts in the first two decades of this century also generated combative counter-actions from environmental activists in multiple pockets of the greenbelt sites. In some areas, activists established alliances with greenbelt residents who had grown disillusioned with the way the greenbelt was being developed. The state was forced to accommodate some demands from these dissidents, and in some greenbelt areas it had to cancel deregulation and development plans entirely. One lesson to derive from this story is that the central planks of resistance politics should be tireless organizing, persistent political engagement, and the building of solidarity among different actors.

The history of greenbelt deregulation reveals the greenbelt as a core location – that is, a place where the ecological considerations associated with it are relegated to the margins by the players in the construction complex. The fight waged by pro-greenbelt activists was driven by the territorially embedded, specific capitalist mechanism of the construction state, which has also been formed and consolidated through interconnection, articulation, and integration within global capitalist processes. Greenbelt activism in Korea, therefore, resonated with a range of resistant forces, movements, and campaigns that have emerged across the world to oppose capitalist states, as well as real estate and landed capital that have turned natural and built environment into sites of speculation. Studying greenbelts and greenbelt activism in this way offers "one route toward an understanding of world history" (Chen 2010, 253) and provides a method through which to understand the contours of a trans-local topography of resistance. One way that academics studying one specific place can contribute to this trans-local movement is to chart the "loops of codetermination and coevolution" (Buckley and Hanieh 2014, 158) of different forces that shape the actually existing social world in individual sites, identify old and new forms of domination and subordination that are also connected to the broader global capitalist system, and point to the cracks, ruptures, and contradictions of systems that may open up political spaces for on-the-ground dissident politics. That is, the task at hand for researchers is to examine ongoing articulations and co-determinations of the different forces and processes at work in a given place, while simultaneously being reflexive in terms of universal(ized) categories, imaginaries, and

optics coming from Western paradigms, when researchers seek to conceptualize place-based processes.

The achievements and defeats of pro-greenbelt activism, its engagements within and outside the prescribed political space, its resilience and incredible commitments to ongoing struggles, and even the mundane rallying cries its proponents chanted, provide clues that illuminate the state of contemporary resistance politics and the possibilities of transformation that they represent. As Chen (2010) stresses, the study of a place necessarily transcends that place. Understanding struggles over greenbelts in Korea is a step toward the imagining of common ground and an informed and reflexive solidarity between different movements against exploitative, dispossessive capitalism in which the capitalist state is a crucial entity. Studying the struggles over the greenbelt in Korea can, therefore, help us "foreground not just the connections of domination but those of struggle and resistance" (Mohanty 2003, 243).

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