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Book Review

Jennifer Jihye Chun (2009) *Organising at the Margins: The Symbolic Politics of Labor in South Korea and the United States*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. ISBN: 9788-0814-4471-12.

REVIEWED BY *Karl von Holdt, University of the Witwatersrand*

This book comprises a fascinating comparison of the seemingly incomparable – namely, labour movement strategies to organise marginalised service sector workers in the US and South Korea. Chun draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of classification struggle and symbolic power to provide a substantial theoretical understanding of new forms of struggle in a way that I have not seen done elsewhere; in doing this she demonstrates the value of bringing new theoretical perspectives to bear on labour studies, a field sorely in need of this.

The book provides a solid base for Chun's comparative case studies, starting with an account of employer and state offensives against organised labour in both countries. With increasing global competition in the 1970s US industry faced pressures to reduce costs, and employers adopted aggressive strategies, supported by state policy, to reduce union power through concession bargaining, aggressive antiunion campaigns and plant relocations. By 1990 union membership in manufacturing had declined from 46% to 20%, accompanied by real declines in wages and benefits.

In South Korea, militant trade unionism led to growing membership both before and after democratisation in 1987, peaking at 18.6% in 1988. However, liberalisation of the labour market together with employer offensives in the form of mass dismissals and retrenchments, supported by state repression, whittled away at these gains until union density stood at 11% in 2000. In the same year, the US labour movement had declined to a density of 13%. This is the first startling parallel between the two countries.

The second startling parallel is the similarity of labour market restructuring in both countries, with an expansion of service work, and the concomitant expansion of irregular or nonstandard forms of work, entailing the formation of highly vulnerable and mostly non-unionised sectors of the workforce. In recent decades virtually all jobs created in both countries have been in the service sector. Labour market vulnerability overlaps in both societies with broader social vulnerability and discrimination, as these precarious jobs are occupied by blacks, latinos, immigrants and women in the US, and (often older) women in South Korea.

Having established the basic comparability of union trajectories and labour market restructuring in both countries, Chun goes on to compare the histories of social movement

mobilisation and new union strategies. Here, as one would expect, social movement legacies differ markedly between the US and South Korea; nonetheless, Chun successfully demonstrates the significance of left-wing student movements, innovative union organising strategies, and broad mobilization, for the formation of organisational repertoires and a layer of activists in both – which would constitute a crucial resource in developing new labour strategies for vulnerable workers in the 1990s.

In the US, the Civil Rights movement and new left formations such as Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s fed into community unionism, of which the outstanding example was the United Farmworkers. Both community unionism and corporate campaigning appealed beyond the traditional industrial relations terrain to the broader public by invoking claims to morality and justice, and these innovative strategies were driven by activists from outside the traditional labour movement. In the 1980s similar strategies were taken up by a new leadership within some of the trade unions, most notably the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which adopted a conscious strategy of recruiting social movement organisers in order to strengthen its own campaigning capacity.

In South Korea, after the establishment of a democratic regime in 1987, divisions emerged within the militant Korean Federation of Trade Unions (KCTU) between a reformist and social democratic leadership and a more militant and radical layer of activists. A new generation of student leadership in the 1990s supported militant mass-based trade unionism, but also advocated popular struggle across multiple arenas. When male irregular workers, frustrated by the failure of the KCTU to support their struggles, initiated a series of militant struggles in 2000, these militant activists provided a new leadership cadre.

Very different but perhaps even more significant, women activists in the trade union movement, frustrated by the failure of the male dominated leadership to take the plight of vulnerable women workers seriously, were joined by women from the student movement in establishing autonomous forums and structures for women workers, which led eventually to the formation of the Korean Women's Trade Union (KWTU) in 1999. Unlike the militant left-wing activists with their 'fight to the death' tactics, the KWTU developed more nuanced strategies focused on negotiating immediate gains.

Having set the scene historically and structurally, Chun turns to the meat of the book, which is the comparative case studies on strategies used in the US and South Korea to organise vulnerable service sector workers. In all of these cases, the activists and organisations shaped by earlier struggles played a crucial role in organising and leading the struggles of vulnerable workers. In chapter 5, entitled 'What is an "employer"'? she explores the struggles of outsourced University cleaning staff (janitors) at two universities in the US, and two universities in South Korea. In chapter 6, entitled 'What is a "worker"'?, she explores the struggles of home care workers in California and of golf caddies in South Korea.

In essence, her argument is that all of these groups of workers occupy a position of ambiguous legal 'liminality', neither fully protected by labour and employment legislation, nor completely denied these rights. What they are denied, however, is the workplace bargaining power of traditional industrial and public sector workers, which provides the basis for traditional trade unionism. As a consequence, they have to engage in 'classification

struggles' in order to force employers to accept their obligation as employers, and both employers and the state to recognize them as workers with rights to union representation. At the same time, given their limited workplace and structural power, they and their organisations have to construct an alternative source of power, namely *symbolic* power with which to engage such classification struggles. Both concepts are drawn from Bourdieu's investigation of habitus, fields and symbolic domination.

In her case studies, workers' initial attempts to counter employer-state classifications, which are responsible for their ambiguous legal status, with their own re-classifications are ignored, leading to deadlock; the next step, in each of her case studies, is an escalation of confrontation through 'public dramas' aimed at 'generating widespread moral crisis in a given community's conception of "justice" and "fairness"' (107). Tactics include protests and demonstrations with banners and posters, occupations of symbolic buildings, occupying public spaces with 'tent-towns', and the like. Public dramas make previously invisible workers visible; indeed, their very marginalisation and oppression may become a source of symbolic power.

This recourse to symbolic power is only effective if it is endorsed by a wider range of labour and community organisations and constituencies, such as, at universities, students and professors. By constructing sufficient symbolic power, workers and their organisations and allies are able to force the dispute into the public arena and frustrate the attempts by employers to keep the dispute on the legal terrain, where workers' ambiguous and vulnerable status ensures defeat. The similarity of classificatory demands, tactics of public escalation, and construction of broader alliances, in these studies of struggles in the two very different countries is quite remarkable, and forcefully makes Chun's point about the construction of symbolic power.

Although in all six of her case studies vulnerable workers and their organisations were successful, making significant breakthroughs in stabilising employer-employee relationships and winning collective-bargaining demands for improved wages and job security, Chun eschews triumphalism, pointing out the fragility of these gains and the context of expanding marginalisation. In her thoughtful final chapter she poses the question, 'symbolic leverage for what?', arguing that the struggle to stabilise the position of irregular workers requires that symbolic leverage be converted into institutional or structural reform on a broader scale. How this might be done remains an unanswered question.

However, in discussing the problem she shows how struggles from the margins expose the power relations within the labour movement, where the traditional leadership in both the US and South Korea prefer to reproduce traditional strategies and relations rather than empower rank and file marginal workers. The institutional terrain within unions, she implies, needs reform almost as much as the structures of society and capital.

Although several scholars have drawn attention previously to the new forms of power being adopted by irregular workers, Chun establishes this argument on a solid theoretical foundation by drawing on the work of Bourdieu. However, she underplays the significance of her achievement, since she gives the impression that she is simply applying a Bourdieusian analysis to her subject matter. In fact, she is extending Bourdieu significantly, since he

allows little if any scope for subalterns to challenge the prevailing structure of things, that is, the prevailing classification systems. To the extent that struggles are waged in Bourdieu, they take place within elites, and on the terrain of existing fields and their classifications. Thus work such as Chun's forces Bourdieu into new arenas, and in doing so challenges his theoretical perspectives.

This is both empirically and theoretically a refreshing and thought-provoking comparative study, which will stimulate further research and analysis.

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