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#### A Discours on Problematique of Decentralization and Critical Civil Societies in South Korea

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Civil Society should be doubly critical, even on the problematique of decentralization, in so far as it should take a critical role democratically monitoring the political, administrative actions of central and local governments on the one hand and the various quasi-civil organizations on the other hand which support implicitly various unjust actions constructed out of the common interest of capital and political power, even though their explicit gestures and expressions seem to be

not so different from the authentic, critical civil societies. The monitoring powers of the local critical civil societies are too weak and non-influential, comparing with that of the critical civil societies located in Seoul which are not so strong and influential as the power of central government. Solidarity among the critical civil societies, with which their power can grow, is very significant and crucial to have practical influences upon states and societies.

Key Words: civil society, decentralization, centralization, habermas, offe

#### I.

"Decentralization" has been discussed intensively in South Korea since the so-called "June-protest" of the year 1987 against the authoritarian regime, which is characterized by "centralization". "Decentralization" could and can obtain a strong positive responsiveness and active support from critical citizens because of the following reasons; 1) the strong desire for democracy, 2) the collapse of Soviet-style socialism, that is, centralized state socialism 3)the (uncritical) reception of the neoconservative strategies as European "Zeitgeist" since the late seventies, 4) the challenge of globalism which is closely connected with the concept of informationalism. 5) the

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radical actuality of the ecological problematique.

To 1): An important line of new thinking on decentralization in South-Korea has grown out of a wider critique of the non-democratic regime, while it in the advanced western societies has developed in the contexts of the critique on the crisis of the welfare state. It is the bureaucratic authoritarianism which has dominated the Korean society and state. Why the authoritarianism must be criticised is not difficult theoretically to discuss: it depends ultimately on undemocratic violence. Why the slogan "beyond bureaucraticism" or post-bureaucratic paradigm1) can be expanded, however, must be explained with understanding the problematique rationality, especially of administration. In so far as there is no meta-rationality, the rationality of political and/or administrative action cannot be made only by the bureaucratic. "Beyond the bureaucracy", for which has been spoken, means that there are " divergent rationalities of administrative action"2). in which the rationality of bureaucratic action does not guarantee, but rather perhaps conflicts with, the functional rationality of the political system.<sup>3)</sup> In the post-authoritarian age, which can be at the same time defined as "post-metaphysical age"(J.Habermas) the bureaucratic rationality cannot function adequately without a consensus of citizens. Decentralization can be popular among people on this practical context; in other words, it means "democratization", in so far as "centralization" means nothing other than a negation of democracy or persistence of the authoritarianism.

To 2): One of the main political ideas of the critical oppositions against the military authoritarianism in South Korea during the late seventies and eighties was Marxism-Leninism.<sup>4)</sup> The collapse of "really existing socialism"

<sup>1)</sup> Cf. Michael Barzelay, Breaking through Bureaucracy; a new vision for managing in government (Berkeley: University of California), 1992, p. 118.

<sup>2)</sup> Claus Offe, Disorganized Capitalism. Contemporary Transformations of Work and Politics, The MIT pr., 1985, pp. 300ff..

<sup>3)</sup> C. Offe(1985), p. 302. Ulrich K. Preuss, Legalität und Pluralismus, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973, pp.72ff.

<sup>4)</sup> The characteristics of the 'traditional centralized Soviet model may be identified around the following: 1. The concentration of practically all economic decisions at the central level except for individual choice in the fields of consumption and employment); 2. the hierarchial nature of plans and the top - down' structure of plan implementation; 3.

allows to accept (any) concept of decentralization of "state", with which free-market individualism may grow gradually.

To 3): It is important to remember what the political, social idea(a) against the authoritarianism is. I should like to note that Korean governments since Kim Young Sam have adopted some main political languages of the american neoconservatives which were articulated out of one of the various alternatives to the model of welfare state in the western advanced societies, for example, "small government". It did not create her own political ideas and languages. This signifies that it did not specify fully reflections on the practical logic of the transition to democracy, that is, post-authoritarian state and society. Korean government even today argues for "market" and at the same time denies formally "(big) state of "Centralization" in general under the influences of the american neoconservatives.

However, who can then decentralize the Korean state? It must be the big government of the centralized state, more clearly speaking, the president and "the blue-house". But decentralization through centralization is of a paradoxical nature and has immanently danger.

To 4): Since D. Bell, one of the leading postindustrial and informational sociologists, has said that nation state is too small in oder to solve big problems and tasks, and too big in order to solve small problems and tasks.

– it is significant to note that this thesis is related to his neoconservative thinking – and his writings have taken journalistic popularity in South Korea, criticisms on the centralized state have become more strong and explicit, although it is not so clear, whether a development of informationalism makes decentralization more possible: it can make a centralized state more central

imperative rather than indictive planning; 4. economic calculation and planning stipulated in direct and physical (rather than monetary) terms; 5. money having a largely passive role within the state sector; 6. planning embodied within an authoritarian political system. Cf. Christopher Pierson 1995, Socialism after Communism. The New Market Socialism, The Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 27. And its most prominent generic weaknesses may be identified as the following: 1. poor responsiveness to the final consumer, 2. irrational incentives structure, 3. problems of scale, complexity, 4. the irrationalities and inefficiencies of the second and third economies. For a detail explanation, Pierson 1995, op. cit., pp. 28–29.

; decentralization depends lastly upon the complex interaction between historically rooted political institutions and increasingly globalized agents.<sup>5)</sup>

To 5): Greens evidently want a less hierarchial and centralized system of polity, economy, and society. "Thinking globally, acting locally" is one of the their famous phrases. Decentralization signifies hereby the double dimensions, namely of organization and of space (place). Almost "green" organizations themselves take on the form of self-management, or participatory democracy. And every ecological social movement in South-Korea as well as in the advanced capitalistic societies is oriented to the concrete issue which has a concrete place.

#### II.

Why must "centralism" be critically negated? Because its epistemological ground is metaphysically "closed"(K. Popper). This closed-ness of reductionism has been wholly criticised not only by the French poststructionalisms(M. Foucault, J. Derrida) but also the German critical theories(J. Habermas, C. Offe). The "State" cannot monopolise the political-administrative truth, because any kind of reductionism cannot now be epistemologically legitimated.

But, must state be withered away? I argue not for the withering away of state, but for its transformation. With respect to the issue of decentralization, it means not a withering away of centralization, but only its transformation. We can speak only of a dialectic of centralization and decentralization: We may here rely on C. Offe's argumentation. "In a capitalist social formation, the state, on the one hand, leads a distinct and limited existence in relation to its possibilities for manoeuvring and acting (and this identity is watched over by jurists, held together at the centre and, according to given criteria of fiscal revenues, is financially nourished): this aspect of the state is

<sup>5)</sup> M. Castells, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Vol. I The rise of the network society, Oxford, 1996. Cheon-Kwuan Kim, City Development and Policy, Seoul: Dae-Young, 2004, pp.118ff.

normatively described by the principle of the 'rule of law'. On the other hand, the state itself must increasingly organize and regulate the socio-economic functional coherence of the whole order(which requires experts, appropriate means of investment, and decentralization adjusted to particular contexts); this aspect presupposes flexibility and an instrumental relation to rules. In respect of this structural problem, it seems that the search for new, adequate problem-solving strategies inside the administration can succeed only in oscillating between the two sides of this dilemma, but not in resolving the dilemma itself".6)

#### III.

It is not surprising at all that various theories of space and place could begin to take theoretical and practical actualities in the same period when the active critique of statism as a centralism was produced. Various, different voices of local spaces place the practical focus on overcoming the so-called "Seoul-Republic", although they have not yet enough power for overcoming the centralizing power of Seoul. Why are spaces and places Because, theoretically speaking, conceptualized? the paradigms "production"(J. Habermas) and "work(Arbeit)"(C. Offe) with which the concept of interest is closely interconnected are no more persuasive: the concept of interest which many modern social and political theories since Th. Hobbes have developed is no more conceived as the universal category of theory and practice. There are thereby two reasons. The first one is as the epistemological related to non-existence of metaphysic by which the category of interest is also no exception at all. The second is as the empirical and normative related to unsolving the ecological risk-problems with it. Therefore, it is now not enough to argue for the decentralization of interest. We should conceptualize the decentralization of spaces, because they themselves must be defined as different, but not identical.

<sup>6)</sup> Offe(1985), p. 307.

#### IV.

What are problems in the contexts of centralization and decentralization in South Korea? Firstly, the state power is not decentralized, but pseudo-decentralized. There is no fundamental change in the relationships of central-periphery which dominated the bureaucratic authoritarian regime. Their basic mode of power continues without fundamental transformations. We can see in South-Korea today only the transition of the centralized authoritarian to the centralized democratic regime, but not the structural transformations of the vertical relationships of central-periphery. I should like to add to it that democratic decentralization cannot be successful without structural transformations of the korean political parties which are characterized by unsuitable overcoming the weakness of inner democracy, that is, of democracy of the inside of party organizations. And it is necessary to reform the laws concerned with making new political parties which provide hard difficulties for establishing them.

Secondly, there is a real discrepancy between the theoretical affluence for decentralization and the practical, real poverty for decentralizing the centralized power of the political administration. And this discrepancy implies nothing other than a failure of the theoretical considerations, which comes partly from the passive receptions without critical reflections on Western political and social ideas and theories.

Thirdly, almost every local government is not (yet) decentralized, even though the ranges and grads of decentralization are very poor. In the Korean cities a kind of "growth machine"(H. Molotch) is developing, which destroys the democracy through a substantive decentralization of cities.

Fourthly, it is very important to consider the unchanged duration of the korean political, social culture in which the "un-rational" personal intimacies are crucial for social interactions: Without structural transformations of the political, social culture, the institutional decentralization does not guarantee the possibilities of democratic legitimation and efficiency. A form of the inner

<sup>7)</sup> Shin, Kwang-Young, "Tasks and realities of local society, local politics and local civil society", Narajungchijunguhoe(ed.), Blueprint for Local Self-government, Seoul, 1995, pp. 64-66.

<sup>8)</sup> Cf. Ki-Woo Lee, Theory of Local Self-government, Seoul, 1996, pp. 465-472.

colonization of "system" by "life-world(Lebenswelt)" is dominant as content of crisis not only in the level of central state but also of the local societies, whereas the inner colonization of "life-world" by system produces structural problems of the advanced western societies.<sup>9)</sup> Therefore, decentralization can operate only on the surface of administrative and political actions.

Fifthly, almost all scholars of universities in South Korea who study the theme of centralization and decentralization belong to the department of administration, and we may see in it that the Korean studies on this theme are basically characterized by a speculative, theoretical separation of administration from politics – by which the "classical" metaphysical social sciences was characterized – , thus by researches of the efficiency of organizations rather than the political legitimation and by a relative neglect of the studies on the philosophical thoughts – Pierre–Joseph Proudhon, Robert Owen, George Jacob Holyoake, John Neville Figgis, Harold J. Laski, G. D. H. Cole, etc. – for decentralization and/or centralization.

Sixthly, there are naturally few cases in South Korea by which not only the central state but also the local governments make "correct" reponses to the politicization of administration which is already evident in reality in South-Korea as well as in advanced societies. Therefore many citizens point out with their angry voices the residue and persistence of the authoritarian administrations. As such reflexive political sociologists as U. Beck, A. Giddens, S. Lash, argument, citizens' active participation in making consensus of politicized administrations is postulated for the pragmatic supplement for the absence of a meta-truth, or a meta-rationality to which different truths or rationalities should be reduced. "Citizens become the final and decisive executive-organ of state policy wherever the existing tasks of politics and administration are such that they cannot be solved with the classical means of the threat of punishment or the distribution of goods, that is, through positive and negative sanctions. Instead, state policies require a task-specific mobilization of the 'base' and its willingness to cooperate. The action variable of the 'base' becomes the decisive criterion for whether, and at what fiscal and administrative costs, administrative policy and can carry out its declared goals."10)

<sup>9)</sup> G.-H. Seo, Political Imagination of Modernity, Seoul, 1993; J. Habermas 1981, Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, Frankfurt am Main.

#### V.

For democratic control of local governments and societies today, it is required what I call critical civil societies. 11)

1. Let me explain about the theoretical debate concerning the concept of civil society in South Korea: What is the critical civil society? The concepts of civil society and its social movements have taken theoretical and practical actualities also in South Korea since ca. 1990.<sup>12)</sup> Divergent Discourses of civil society have developed explosively from at that time until now.<sup>13)</sup> Man can find out two historical and social-scientific backgrounds in which the language "civil society" has more meaningful for "more democratization" of South Korea: the one is concerning with more differentiation of social movements into such different movements as "ecology", "feminine", "locality", "consumption", "culture" etc., whereas the other with the crisis of the Marxism on which the Korean "democratization movements" against the military, bureaucratic-authoritarianistic regimes depended theoretically or in the level of political ideology.<sup>14)</sup>

For a understanding of the Korean society in the nineties, it is necessarily to know its political, social characteristics, which may be produced by comparing with the eighties. Namely, the democratization movement at South Korea in the eighties was characterized by, firstly, a Grand Movement which has a focus on the structural transformation such as a change of constitution, secondly, a "Strong" ideological struggle on which the antagonistic front is clear, and lastly a radical-political power struggle:

<sup>10)</sup> C. Offe(1985), p. 311.

<sup>11)</sup> A civil society is neither simply planned nor merely market orientated but, rather, open to organizations, associations and agencies pursuing their own projects, subject to the constraints of democratic processes and a common structure of action. David Held, "Democracy: from city-states to a cosmopolitan order?", David Held(ed.), Prospects for Democracy, Polity pr. 1993, p.42.

<sup>12)</sup> See, Ghu-Hwan Seo, "Towards Semantics of State: Theory of Critical Civil Society", The Review of Korean Political Science, 1989.

<sup>13)</sup> See, Jung-Hee Lee, "Tasks and Prospect for Korean Studies on Civil Societies", Yoo-Nam Kim(ed.), 50 Years of Korean Political Science, Han-Ul, Seoul: 2001, pp. 268-303.

<sup>14)</sup> Pal-Moo Yoo and Ho-Kee Kim, (ed.), Civil Society and Civil Movement, Han-Ul, Seoul: 1995.

- (1) The democratization movement of the beginning eighties which is used to be expressed by "the Spring of Seoul" was broken by the military coup d'etat, and this made the front of democracy clear(for or against); the grand division of "Democratic and Anti-democratic" powers:
- (2) The division of "Democratic Powers" such as critical intellectuals and students needed a central, strong ideology with which they could develope their solidarity- strategy against the violent, repressive state power; it was Marx-Leninism or its variants;
- (3) The democratization movement in the eighties oriented itself to political power struggle, by which a political, procedural democratization could be acquired.<sup>15)</sup>

But, man can see practical and theoretical circumstances in South Korea since so called "June Struggle" at the year 1987 at which not only critical intellectuals and students but also white-collar, educated, young middle class participated themselves.

The theoretical or/and practical issues debated from the beginning to middle of the nineties were followings: (1) what is the significance of the category of class not only for analysing the Korean state and societies but also for making "ideas" of the social movements?; (2) whether the militant, revolutionary "Min-Jung" movement or the civil reform movement? Which movement should have the hegemony power by which the Korean state and societies can be directed?; (3) Should the "Min-Jung" movement transform itself into "civil movement", or the "civil movement" into "Min-Jung" movement? (4) what is the goal to change the Korean state and societies? "Proletariat, Min-Jung democracy" or "civil, liberal democracy"?16)

Now, we can find out more clearly a structural transformation of the Korean social movements since the nineties; "New" social movements are developing now also in South Korea. (1) They take a explicit negation on the revolutionary Marxism and accept the evolutionary way of social reform; they respect situational social consensus instead of directing people with the strong ideology or the meta-theory; (2) They perform not a militant, political power struggle but "peaceful" strategies to make public opinion which are

<sup>15)</sup> Hyung-Jun Park, Reflexive Civil Society and Civil Movement, Yi-Am, Seoul 2001, p. 305.

<sup>16)</sup> Se-Kyun Kim, "A Critique on the ideological implications of the korean debates about 'civil society'", in : Yi-Lon 2, 1992.

mostly legalistic, that is, they are a kind of network movement; and (3) They develope "realistic" strategies, in other words, they select their issues for struggling against political and economic power as problems which have strong relevance for practical everyday life of normal, general citizens.<sup>17)</sup> What are important and very significant factors of such structural transformation? Man can see the followings: (1) The political opportunities and the mechanism of mobilization for social movements have been changed; (2) The "ideological" differentiation and pluralization of social movements have been developed; (3) The more active participation of new middle classes at social movements.<sup>18)</sup>

#### Beyond Gramsci or/and Habermas?

Many Korean scholars for social-sciences think it is necessary to reconstruct the concept of civil society, and therefore try to reconsider the theoretical resources of Antonio Gramsci and/or Jürgen Habermas. What are then the differences between both thoughts in the context of reconstructing of the concept of civil society. As you know well, the category of "civil society" for Gramsci belongs to not "basis" but "superstructure". Thus his language, "civil society" implies a theory of overcoming the economic determinism, sustaining the critical position since Karl Marx.

Habermas' theory of communicative action<sup>19)</sup> develops the concept of public sphere(Öffentlichkeit) as distinct from "state" and at the same time "economy" at the one side and from private sphere(Privatheit) at the other side. This concept is characterized by the systemic autonomy from the sanctions of "power" and "money" Now, we can understand the theoretical and practical difference between Gramsci and Habermas as the theoretical resources of civil societies. The Gramscians argument the structural dependence of "civil society" on the "state" and "economy", but in the last

<sup>17)</sup> See, Hyung-Jun Park, Reflexive Civil Society and Civil Movement, op. cit.,, p. 308.

<sup>18)</sup> Hyung-Jun Park, op.cit.., pp. 188-192.

<sup>19)</sup> See, Jürgen Habermas, Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, 2Bde, Frankfurt am Main, 1981. For a explanation between this and his early work "Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit" (1961), See, my book, Political Imagination of critical Modernity, Min-Um-Sa, 1993.

instance on the "economy" in the capitalistic society, and the Habermasrian claim its structural autonomy. I think it belongs to empirical question how many autonomy from "state" and/or "economy" the Korean public sphere or organizations of civil societies can have. What is more important than the question concerning the difference between Gramsci and Habermas? It is how the political, economical, or social critical activities of civil societies beside of parliaments can perform their legitimity theoretically. I argue for theoretical returning to the old concept of the civil society not-devided from state.<sup>20)</sup>

2. We may make a periodization of the korean history of critical civil societies as following: (1) The first period(1960s - 1979), which we can call the pre-history of the critical civil societies. The mainstream of the first period was the damage compensation; (2) The second(1980 - 1987), the period of making sense of anti-pollution. In this period, professional ecological movement organizations started to act with ideas and strategies; (3) In the third (1988 - 1991), a experimental period, ideological diversity began to appear. Man finds out three different types of ecological discourses. that is, ecologism which aims to overcome technology-centered industries and anthropocentric value system and life style, left environmentalism which overcome environmental crisis maintains that man cannot transformation of the present social system and environmental managerism which claims that man can overcome environmental crisis without radical transformation of value system and social system; and (4) The fourth (now since 1992), the period of establishing "realistic" strategies. A kind of environmental managerism combined with ecologism have a mainstream, as the left environmentalism has rapidly declined since 1992.<sup>21)</sup>

3. What are Prospects and Tasks of Critical Civil Societies in South Korea?

(1) Self-Critique of Critical Civil Societies: the critical activities of critical civil societies to protest against "State" and "Capital" have taken their relatively strong legitimity, as far as the political and the economical powers did not jet have a consolidated democracy. But, "inside-democracy" of

<sup>20)</sup> Karl Marx reminded us this forgotten concept in the work, "Deutsche Ideologie". (MEW3, p. 36.) I called this concept as the critical civil society.

<sup>21)</sup> See, Do-Wan Ku, The History and Characteristics of Environmental Movement in Korea, Seoul National University(Diss.), 1994.

critical civil societies should be established.

- (2) Solidarity among Critical Civil Societies: It is meaningful and important to note that fast every organizations of critical civil societies in South Korea are too weak to struggle with problems of "great powers" of "State" and "Capital". Thus, to develope various solidarities among organizations of critical civil societies is central for expanding their own public sphere.
- (3) About the tendencies studying on Critical Civil Societies: It is true that many discourses on Korean Civil Societies until now have been produced by theoretical discussions on the english published texts. Therefore, firstly, it is necessary to make not abstract but concrete studies on civil society which should depend on empirical researches about it, which must of course include case-studies. Secondly, to overcome the centralized tendency studying a few examples "Kynung-Sil-Lyun" and "Cham-Yoi-Yon-Dae"- representing the critical civil society in South Korea. In other words, to include empirical-studying local civil societies
- (4) Beyond the "national" boundary: The korean critical civil societies until now are oriented to political, economical, cultural, or social issues in the national boundary. But in order to solve especially ecological problems which expand themselves into the international or global level, it is necessary to promote international solidarities and global networks, with which international comparing studies are connected.<sup>22)</sup>

#### VI.

Civil Society should be doubly critical, even on the problematique of decentralization, in so far as it should take a critical role democratically monitoring the political, administrative actions of central and local governments on the one hand and the various quasi-civil organizations on the other hand which support implicitly various unjust actions constructed out of the common interest of capital and political power, even though their explicit gestures and expressions seem to be not so different from the

<sup>22)</sup> Cf., Shin-Haeng Lee et. al, Movements of Civil Society, Bub-Moon-Sa, 1999.

authentic, critical civil societies.

The monitoring powers of the local critical civil societies are too weak and non-influential, comparing with that of the critical civil societies located in Seoul which are not so strong and influential as the power of central government. Solidarity among the critical civil societies, with which their power can grow, is very significant and crucial to have practical influences upon states and societies. I hope that such solidarity beginning to establish recently in South Korea can develope further.<sup>23)</sup>

And, I cannot disagree with Rudolf Bahro, when he said in his work, Die Alternative. Zur Kritik des real existierenden Sozialismus(1977), that "die allgemeine Emanzipation des Menschen wird immer dringlicher, aber die Bedingungen dafür müssen neu studiert, ihre Inhalte zeitgemäss definiert werden", if man can exclude its historical and sociological contexts.<sup>24)</sup>

<sup>23)</sup> Let me cite Paul Hirst's arguments here who tries to reconstruct associationalism for the politics of decentralization: "Associationalism failed not because it was inherently impractical and utopian, but because as apolitical movement it could not compete in given political conditions with collectivism and centralism." Paul Hirst 1993, "Associational Democracy", D. Held 1993 (ed.), op. cit., p.114.

<sup>24)</sup> This is a revision of the paper presented for International Conference Roles and Developmental Strategies of Social Sciences in the Age of Globalization, College of Social Sciences, Institute for Social Science Inha University, 20 January 2005.

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