

A Counter-hegemonic State to Neoliberalism: the Case of Recent Korean Higher Education Reforms

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Introduction

In the wave of globalization, the world has become significantly interwoven politically, economically, and culturally. This interdependent global environment has become the most considerable issue in education. One favored way of policy change to this new environment has been prevalent in higher education since the late twentieth century. It is a neoliberal reform that facilitates marketization and decentralization with the policy options of deregulation, privatization, liberalization, and cost-effectiveness. The global discourse of neoliberal reform has inflicted a big pressure to local policy makers to transform their higher education. In this article, I examined the role of the state with regard to internalizing a global dominant discourse—neoliberal reform—in higher education. By introducing the case of recent Korean higher education reforms, I explored the local politics of neoliberal higher education reform and uncovered the counter-hegemonic response of Korean state to the ideological consensus of macro-politics on higher education reform.

Global Trend of Higher Education Reform

Neoliberalism in education can be understood as a dominant ideology as well as a regulating policy framework. As a political-economy ideology, neoliberalism justifies individual countries' economic and social policies. Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as, "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating

individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" (p. 2). The neoliberal state seeks "to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices" (Harvey 2005, p. 2). Neoliberal education reform, thus, implies that policy makers prioritize the economic rationality, which is supported by particular political interests (Apple 2000).

Indeed, neoliberalism is now the global trend of higher education reform. This global expansion is owing to a transnational political power driven by the Anglo-American macroeconomics (liberal economy + post-Keynesianism). Substantively, Bretton Woods institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Funds, and the World Trade Organization and other international organizations (IOs: like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) created this common trends in educational policies. As these global agencies are established and dominated by the interest of world political regime, they prioritize a particular political ideology and a discourse (Dale and Robertson 2002; Mundy 2007). It is notable that this macro political power of neoliberal reform has been shaped through an ideological consensus, what Gramsci sees as the form of *hegemony*, accompanied by material force in some cases. Therefore, neoliberal higher education reform is a hegemonic project created and managed by a transnational political power.

Localization of Global Discourse

For the case study of global expansion of neoliberal mechanism, I examined policy discourse on recent Korean higher education reforms (1993-2012). Like other Asian

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countries, Korea carried out higher education reform and its feature is *neoliberal* led by market principles (e.g., competition-based, marketization, autonomy and accountability) (Jeong 2012; Kim 2010; Shin 2007; Yim 2012). I collected linguistic data from the documents produced by IOs (World Bank, OECD, UNESCO, and WTO) and the Korean government. Content analysis and critical discourse analysis allowed me to analyze the rich source of reform policy discourses on higher education reform. Raising questions about political dynamics in policy discourse, I paid attention to state's political space in resisting against a global hegemonic ideology—neoliberalism. Political sociology of education and state theories helped me scrutinize state's response to the global discourse on neoliberal reform.

Did Korea adopt all reform policy agendas from global hegemonic discourse as they stood, and were all reform policy discourses identical with global discourse? I found that the ideological consensus between IOs and Korea was created through the political dynamics of their transnational social relations and a neoliberal discourse on higher education reform had been legitimized and reproduced at the local-level of policy making. Agreed themes on neoliberal higher education between two parties (global and local) are: 1) a new policy environment—higher education *in* and *for* the new time, knowledge economy and globalization; 2) the rationale of reform: To foster human capital (HC) or human resources (HR) for global competitiveness (of individuals and a country) in a knowledge economy; 3) government role: supervisory role, to provide a legislative, political, financial framework and a regulatory environment; 4) reform direction: new vision, consensus-based, comprehensive, long-term, coherent, science technology-concerning, market-oriented (incentive-driven, competition-based, best-practice encouraged) and with social and economic objectives of country; and 5) policy advice and core task: autonomy and accountability (deregulation, regulatory framework, and transparency), research development, internationalization, employability in a new labor/job market (manpower, human talent/capital/resources)

However, Korea had a unique development of supranational consensus at a certain level. In spite of

above agreed-upon themes on macro-perspective reform schemes, the Korean government adapted different ideas from IOs' suggestions for some parts of higher education reform. This localization was shown in two ways: 1) different meanings in same word (reconceptualization and recontextualization) regarding to *a quality improvement, job market-concerning education, diversification, academic-industry link, internationalization, and social issue concerns*; and 2) different ideas due to differing primary political interests such as reform directions *upon local needs and national development* (IOs) versus *national competitiveness* (Korea). For example, both IOs and the Korean government considered *quality improvement* in higher education reform, but their focal points were different: IOs dealt with the phrase, *quality improvement* specifically for the improvement of educational contents, emphasizing systematic support such as assurance and accreditation system while Korea approaches the same word for institutional competitiveness through research and teaching excellence. Upon local needs, the themes for reform direction such as *national economic crisis, regional development, transparency, participation, and world-leading* were prioritized in Korean policy document. In short, although substantial parts of the reform ideas were shared between IOs and Korea within a macro-level political relationship, IOs and Korea have some different ideas about higher education reform. (*Transparency* is understood as one way to consolidate autonomy for institutional management in IOs documents. But transparency in Korean reform policies specifically refers to the exposing corruption of Korean higher education institutions.) I identify this linguistic divergence as the *localization* of global discourse.

Why did this localization—semantic divergence and new ideas—occur in local policy discourse? In a practical sense, it is because that the global discourse formulated through macro-political dynamics does not fully satisfy the local needs. Accordingly, macro-level agendas will necessarily go through a localization process, as there are always unique and critical concerns arising from local context. This practical gap allows *political space* for local governments (equivalently understood

as state here) to localize a global discourse that contains a particular political hegemonic ideology.

Through the comparative observation of four Korean regimes, I found out that the political orientation of each regime is decisive for the policy outcomes. Conservative politics (The administrations led by the first civilian president, Kim Young-sam [1993-1998] and the previous president, Lee Myung-bak [2008-2013]) in Korea produced neoliberal-friendly reform policies while consolidating their political ideology (which centered on economic achievement) through global (neoliberal) discourse. Yet, the conservative-oriented regimes did not deal with social concerns as distinctively as the other. On the contrary, the liberal regimes (The two political regimes administered by the president, Kim Dae-jung [1998-2003] and Roh Moo-hyun [2003-2008]) were more apt than the conservative regimes to view social concerns as significant. The DJ administration introduced equality concerns and the Roh administration placed these concerns ahead of economic perspective with regard to higher education reform. Consequently, the duality of local politics in the liberal regimes allowed the DJ and Roh administrations to meet the demands of local politics while offering compromise with the external pressure of world politics (e.g., a positive response to educational liberalization and the accommodation of neoliberal principles for higher education reform). This finding indicates that the neoliberal ideology was definitely rooted in recent Korean higher education reform policy discourses, but an ideological confrontation between neoliberalism and Korean local politics was importantly present. In other words, local politics (political situations and the political orientations/ideologies of policy makers) determined the directions of reform policy and decisively controlled the level of neoliberal reform in Korean higher education.

State in Capitalist Society

In discussing about the duality of politics, it is important to clarify the actor—the state—in this political interplay. In general sense, *State* is a bureaucratic administrative authority as a political entity in a given geographical territory (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). When it recognizes the demands of policy change, the state

decides a policy priority among various imperatives (whether external or internal) as a supreme political authority. The role of state remains vital in local policy making because global capitalism, IOs, and multinational companies never subordinate to the state's regulatory controls (Carnoy 2001; Holton 2011).

The action of the state represents the abstract of the dominant ideology, which is obtained from a class struggle in civil society. In this sense, state's policy choices are what a dominant social group wishes to dominate over others. Thus, it is always important to consider "what type of state and political regime supports what kind of education for whom and for what purposes" (La Belle 1986, cited by Arnove et al. 1996, p. 140). This state action is not static as it changes depending on the organizational features of the state politics, such as the political regime and bureaucracy. As the state is "a strategically selective terrain which can never be neutral among all social forces and political projects" in an accepted territory, "the outcome of state power also depends on the changing balance of forces engaged in political action both within and beyond the state" (Jessop 1990, p. 353). The understanding of historical dynamics/contextualization is essential, too, for unfolding the privileged strategies of the particular capitalist state's decision (Hay 2006; Jessop 2002). Consequently, a comparison of four recent Korean regimes proposes to show the historically changing strategies of local politics that takes different goals towards each regime's own political needs.

What is the feature of Korean state? With the characteristic of a developmental state (i.e., a "dirigist" state character in a proceeding country's macro-economic plan), Korea has pursued economic development for an important national goal. After a substantive political democratization in 1992, Korea has given a top priority to economy for political discourse and national policies. In this perspective, Korea is a post-authoritarian democratic state, and one capitalist state that highly values capital accumulation while maintaining a Confucian value over the society. In a post-authoritarian stage, Korean politics is still composed of a weak civil society and strong state elite in policy making process (Chung 2001). An educational policymaking process has largely

depended on a top-down way based on government's national strategy rather than a direct negotiation between policy makers and educational stakeholders (Shin 2005; Shin 2007; Yang 2012; Yoo 2006). In establishing and implementing neoliberal higher education reform, so, I argue that the Korean state acted as a *strict regulator* and a *capitalist class mediator* (Jeong 2014).

Concluding Remarks: Counter-hegemonic State

To sum up, I argue that the basic framework for neoliberal reform was ideologically shared between IOs and Korea, but local reform policies were uniquely developed upon local political needs. By inspecting the dual facets of local politics, I revealed the critical role of state: *Local politics is an important variable as a counter-hegemonic venue to resist against a transnational capitalist hegemony*. The state, as a political entity of competing social force, determines the level of neoliberal ideology permeation in reform policies—whether to benefit a global hegemonic ideology or to attenuate it. Consequently, the Korean government performed neoliberal higher education reforms over the years as a result of the political dynamics of transnational capitalist social relations, but local politics significantly shaped the features of local higher education reform as a counter-hegemonic value. That is, the particular circumstances of Korean politics provided room to balance the macro-economic market ideology and local political needs.

Comprehending the role of the state in neoliberal policy reform, I grasped a political disturbance in transnational hegemonic power. This finding is important because the state's interplay with both external and internal political pushes enables the diverse features of policy outcomes. The core of this state interplay relies upon the characteristics of the political regime selected by local society—that is, their political orientation. From the case study of Korean higher education reform, I discovered that the political orientation of the state directs the genuine direction of reform policies over the last twenty years. Therefore, my study highlights the significance of local state's political orientation.

Even though a global discourse has a transnational political power, local policy makers should necessarily com-

promise with this power when they establish reform policies because global discourse becomes useless without a local consensus. In this sense, the maximization of local state's autonomy is necessary. To achieve this, *local policy makers and their political supporters* should aware that they have a power to create a political project not for benefiting transnational hegemonic class, but for empowering a local political voice. This political voice must consider educational issues. Yet, a desirable solution is to separate the economic perspective from educational policy making. If it is unavoidable to prioritize an economic perspective as a capitalist developmental state, local state has to balance both education and the national economy in educational policy making. Therefore, the conservative politics in Korea has to consider an educational perspective rather than highlight economic productivity exclusively, by democratizing (i.e. including educational stakeholders in) a decision making process. The liberal politics in Korea should grow a political voice for educational welfare regardless of their political power (whether they hold a reign of government or not) while concerning the local subordinate class.

Neoliberal higher education reform is needless to say a hegemony project. Simultaneously, education reserves a space for counter-hegemonic action. As Gramsci noted, teaching and learning are central to both hegemony and counter-hegemony. Thus, education is not only an efficient venue for the transnational dominant class to transmit their hegemonic ideology, but also a powerful place for subaltern groups to create counter-hegemonic values and actions. For the latter, the Gramscian perspective highlights education for class consciousness and social awareness, so a subaltern class “must understand the contextual political nature of their labor situations and be able to critically analyze them from a more distanced perspective” (Mayo 2010, p. 26).

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