

Review

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Akira Suzuki (ed.)

Cross-National Comparisons of Social Movement Unionism: Diversities of Labour Movement Revitalization in Japan, Korea and the United States.

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The decline of organized labour in both the global North and South has led trade unions to search for a new type of unionism to be able to deal with the challenges in the last three decades of the global era more effectively. ‘Social Movement Unionism’ (SMU), which was developed through the experiences of the labour movements in the South, has increasingly been concerned as a promising way of labour movement revitalization in the North. SMU was originally developed as a concept by progressive scholars, who studied the militant, powerful labour movements in newly industrializing countries like Brazil, Philippines, South Africa and South Korea, where these movements worked alongside a wide range of social movements for social justice in the 1980s. While the scholarly interpretations of this type of unionism and the use of the SMU concept were originally descriptive, it evolved into a prescriptive model of active union organizing to be applied by trade unions nationally as well as internationally in the struggle against capitalist globalization. Hence, the need of and the interest in studying the experiences of SMU internationally has remarkably grown in the last years.

Akira Suzuki’s edited book should be considered as a timely contribution to the studies of SMU with an international perspective. His volume expands the geographical scope of studies on union revitalization and SMU, and examines cases in Japan, South Korea and the United States. Suzuki clearly frames his volume as a comparative one with a cross-national perspective, which considers the different historical trajectories and policy orientations of the labour movements in those countries, yet points out similar trends in changing industrial structures: “a declining proportion of employment in the manufacturing sector, where union presence was once relatively strong and an increase in the service sector where union presence has been relatively weak. In addition, the labour movement of these three countries with decentralized bargaining structures suffered from a decline in their organizational power under the impact of neoliberal globalization, although the timing and intensity of the impact varied with the countries ” (p.3).

In the Introduction, Suzuki discusses definitional, conceptual and theoretical issues of SMU and presents a broad framework encompassing SMU in both late-industrializing and industrialized countries. Here it must be underlined that South Korea has a specific character as the author emphasizes the characteristics of SMU in South Korea closer to those in industrialized countries than those in late-industrializing countries (p.32). The chapters of the book are organized by three theoretical issues raised in the first section: the impact that SMU has on the existing labour movement, discussions of SMU from a cross-national perspective, including cases of ‘non-Western’ countries, and elaborations of how neoliberal globalization (the macro context of SMU) are mediated by meso-level factors [for example, legal and institutional contexts of industrial relations, the extent of union incorporation into the dominant structures at firm and state levels, strategic choices of union leaders, the relationship between labour movements and political parties, the state of civil society]. The

third section outlines the historical backgrounds and contexts of SMU in Japan, South Korea and the United States.

In the second Chapter of Part One, focusing on the labour movements in South Korea and the United States, Jennifer Jihye Chun theoretically discusses the limits and possibilities of innovative forms of labour contention, particularly those based on symbolic leverage and public drama. Her contribution successfully calls attention to new labour scholarship exploring transformations occurring at the *periphery* of mainstream labour movements rather than traditional scholarship on industrial relations. She argues that “it is at the outer edges of existing union tactics and strategies that we observe examples of innovation and dynamism”¹ (p.40). Supporting her argument, Suzuki shows in Chapter 3 that individually-affiliated unions (community unions) that organize workers not covered by the mainstream enterprise unions in Japan have characteristics of SMU. Joohee Lee’s contribution in Chapter 4 focuses on the unions building solidarity between regular and non-regular workers in South Korea.

In Part Two of this volume, Nobuyuki Yamada makes an attempt to create an index of the diversity of SMU in the United States and Japan based on six variables of revitalization: subject, organization, tactics, industry, directionality and policy. By doing so, she basically makes the similarities and differences of revitalization process in these two countries clearer. Another interesting contribution comes from Minjin Lee in Chapter 6, who uses the conceptual framework of community unionism and compares three individually-affiliated (community) unions in Japan and three regional general unions in Korea (pp.147-179). Community unionism and SMU have many characteristics in common, for example, seeking broad goals and coalition-building with social movements, but the former emphasizes community-related issues more than the latter. Lee argues that regional general unions in Korea that are more active in the abovementioned issues, are closer to the cases of community unionism in other industrialized countries (e.g., the United States, Canada, and Australia) than community unions in Japan. In Part Three, meso-level mediating factors explaining the diversities of SMU in the United States, Japan and South Korea (including Australia) are addressed in the chapters 7-11 written by Stephan Luce, Charles Weathers, Koshi Endo, Heiwon Kwon and Hirohiko Takasu.

This edited volume brings together the two types of SMU that have been discussed separately in previous studies, i.e. SMU in late-industrializing and industrialized countries, into a single conceptual framework, and associates those two types of SMU with pre-institutionalized and de-institutionalized stages of industrial relations, respectively. The comparison of SMU in three countries demonstrates in the first place that while SMU in Japan and South Korea developed outside the mainstream unions, it developed within some established unions in the United States (p.30). In terms of policy orientations of mainstream unions, militancy of the enterprise unionism becomes a particular aspect in South Korea. When it comes to the organizational forms of SMU, community unions and general unions in Japan and South Korea differ from some locals of mainstream unions led by leaders with social movement background in the United States. Coalitions between trade unions and community-based and/or social movements are not widespread in Japan. While there is an increasing support of social movement organizations for SMU efforts to improve conditions of non-regular workers in South Korea, these coalitions can be seen widespread in the United States.

Suzuki argues in this volume that “. . . previous studies have not extended their analytical scope to cases in ‘non-Western’ countries, nor have they developed cross-national, comparative frameworks comprehensive enough to cover these countries” (p.12). Although his edited volume fulfils its premise as a comparative study with a cross-national perspective and includes ‘non-Western’ cases, the predecessor Southern experience of SMU remains unstressed. This is especially important in the case of SMU as it represents cases of ‘learning from the periphery or the South’ that refers to the recognition of the Southern experiences and their relevance for the labour movement revitalization in the global North. Furthermore, a focus on the circulation of knowledge between the labour movements in these countries could have enriched the scope of this remarkable book. Here again, the circulation of SMU concept has a particular characteristic as it demonstrates an appropriate example of non-hegemonic circulation of concepts in social sciences, particularly labour studies, on a world scale. It would be interesting to interrelate and rethink SMU in the cases of this volume, namely Japan, South Korea (with its in-between character) and the United States, as the cases of a non-hegemonic circulation of SMU concept, that is characterized by ‘learning from the South’, representing local engagements, and acknowledging and developing through these multiple cases.