

Decentralization and the Restructuring of Regionalism in Korea: Conditions and Possibilities

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Abstract

Recent developments in regionalism of Korea defy simple application of conventional wisdom on regionalism. Regionalism as a stepchild of centralized authoritarian development has taken an additional aspect of territorial management by the state. Major social, economic, and political changes since the 1990s (democratization, advent of Internet society, globalization, and rise of civil society) as well as widening gap between capital and noncapital regions all contributed to the restructuring of regionalism. Under this situation, introduction of decentralization policy can be of great incentive in ameliorating regional conflict. Theoretically and empirically, regionalism and decentralization share a certain elective affinity in terms of territorial management. With proper application of decentralization policy, regionalism of conflict can transform into a regionalism of competition and cooperation. For this transformation, political reform at the central level, reinforced institutionalization of democracy via citizen participation at the local level, and the dual role of the central government as an umpire and as a mediator between the regions are recommended.

Keywords: decentralization, restructuring of regionalism, politics of territorial management, local government reform, regional development

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Why Decentralization and Regionalism?

In Korea, during the last thirty or more years, one of the most debated (yet, with the least fruitful policy outcome) topics in political as well as in social arena was (and still is) issues related to regionalism, or more precisely, regional conflict and discrimination. Ranging from historical origins to psychological effects, almost every kind of topic related to regionalism has been discussed. Evidently, overriding other equally important issues, such as class conflict and unification, the problem of regionalism has brought about one of the most serious cleavages to Korean society. Despite numerous policy recommendations and planned implementations, many have taken a dim position on the prospects of solving regionalism in Korea.

However, with the demise of the authoritarian military regime in the early 1990s, meaningful contributions from various sectors of society and government began to emerge in an effort to break down the seemingly invincible regional discrimination. Material structures, power relations, institutional settings and discourse formation processes that once contributed to the intensification of regionalism are now being challenged. Despite the warning not to overevaluate these challenges, new forces are coming into view. First of all, discourse formation process on regionalism, once monopolized by the coalition of conservative political groups and a few newspapers, is now being seriously challenged by the growing number of alternative information resources. The convenient and instantaneous characteristics of the Internet have become an important source of information and forum in which alternative voices can pose a challenge to the already set discourse on regionalism. At the same time, the influence of civic and voluntary organizations, change in institutionalized electoral process, the consolidation of democratic practice (at least in legal terms), and the impact of globalization affecting local issues form a sizeable alliance against regionalism.

Currently, research directions and policy-making processes are pressured to reflect these new tendencies in order to bring about serious changes. One of the most widely acknowledged (at least in theo-

retical terms) interpretations of Korean regionalism posits that major characteristics of authoritarian military regimes of the 1970s and 1980s and their lingering effects on Korean politics are inseparable from the development of regionalism. For those researchers, regionalism in Korea is a stepchild of a developmental state ruled by the authoritarian military regimes. Consequently, these researchers focused not on the study of regionalism itself, but rather on the study of democratization of Korean politics. Their major interests were class contradiction, regional contradiction, formation of ruling ideology, authoritarian regime, and the (semi-) peripheral state.

Without refuting the major contribution of these researches, it is also possible to question whether the previous interpretations of Korean regionalism can properly provide a new theoretical and practical instrument, to understand the current changes surrounding Korean regionalism. Broadly speaking, there are two interpretations that dominate the discussion of regionalism in Korea after the 1990s. The first interpretation still starts from the premise of the ruling class' ideological manipulation in sustaining regionalism discourse. The other interpretation places more emphasis on the territorial management aspects of regionalism. While the former interpretation emphasizes the origins and causes of regionalism under the military authoritarian regimes, the latter is more concerned with outcomes and policy solutions of regionalism. This new understanding of regionalism in Korea is, in particular, reinforced by the very presence of indisputably unequal regional development among the various regions in South Korea. As is well known, territorial aspects of rapid Korean economic growth during the last four decades can be characterized by uneven regional development, to the point where any provocative policy adoption cannot be easily solved. Under the military regimes, uneven regional development between the developed Yeongnam region and the underdeveloped Honam region became the source of regional conflict.¹ With further economic growth, however, confrontational

1. It is also evident that recruitment and self-formation of power elites largely coincided with this regional cleavage structure during the period (Kim Yong-hak 1990).

aspects of regionalism expressed in terms of regional development came to take on a different cleavage structure after the power transfer from the military to the civilian government in the 1990s. That is, the capital region has come to dominate the human and economic resources over other regions. Consequently, this immense concentration in the capital region has resulted in shifting the focus of regionalism from “Yeongnam versus Honam” (or put it more correctly, between Honam and anti-Honam) to the capital region versus non-capital region.

Of course, it is still too premature to predict the dissolution of the Honam versus anti-Honam regionalism and the shift to the new configuration of regionalism. At the risk of oversimplification, however, it is no more an exaggeration that center-periphery aspects of regional conflict between capital region and other remaining regions begin to assume almost the same level of importance as that of Honam versus anti-Honam conflict. In short, regional conflict begins to take the bifurcated route. While, as numerous election statistics clearly show, the old route still remains a powerful force in determining the general political outcome, the emerging new route is gaining force in determining the policy outcome associated with territorial management of the postdevelopmental state. One of the most clear and self-evident examples of the latter route of regionalism can be found in the discussion and evolution of decentralization policy since the 1990s. Coincidentally, the Roh Moo-hyun administration might play a part in reinforcing the relevance of the latter at the cost of the former interpretation of regionalism in Korea. As Roh stated during his election campaign, he is committed to a more balanced regional development and is interested in moving the seat of the government to the Chungcheong region. Both are indicative of the current administration's wish to solve the central problems of regionalism by way of new territorial management derived from decentralization policy.

This paper aims to find a plausible relationship between regionalism and decentralization by answering the following questions: Are there any possibilities of ameliorating regional conflict through the introduction of decentralization policy? If so, on what conditions? For

this purpose, this paper will proceed as follows. In the second section, some theoretical aspects of regionalism will be discussed by referring to the relationship of regionalism to modernization with a short historical comparison between Korean and European cases. In the third section, mainstream academic discussions on regionalism in Korea will be introduced and critiqued and an alternative interpretation will be offered. In doing this, relevance of new interpretation on regionalism to the discussions on decentralization will be revealed. In the fourth section, based on the previous discussions, possibilities and conditions of utilizing decentralization in solving regionalism in Korea will be discussed.

Some Theoretical Considerations on Regionalism

As is well known among social scientists, to attach a precise definition on important concepts is a difficult and laborious task. Regionalism is no exception. To give a precise definition of regionalism is beyond the scope of this paper.² Roughly stated, however, regionalism is a set of belief system based on a certain territorially specific characteristics (historical background, language, culture, etc.), and it tends to be mobilized for some social and political purposes. In short, regionalism is the study of the processes of territorially based discourse formation for sociopolitical mobilization. But this rough definition is redundant and begs another important question because this definition does not offer a precise meaning to the phrase, “territorially based,” which actually means “region.”

A region is fundamentally a territorial demarcation somewhere between the state and local, but within this there is room for a variety of interpretations. A region can be an institutionalized government or a national political actor who performs a variety of functions within culture, politics, economy and so on. For the purpose of this

² For more detailed discussions on the problems of defining regionalism, refer to Keating and Loughlin (1997).

paper, what is more important is to reveal the relationship between the state and its region, especially in political terms. Considering the importance of mobilization in discussing the practical impact of regionalism in the real world, relationship between the state and the region cannot but have a political meaning. Most of the mainstream scholars, especially those who advocate the modernization perspectives of the 1950s and 1960s, regard regionalism as a political phenomenon that should disappear or a phenomenon that could be assimilated into the national system (Shils 1975; Smelser 1966; Lipset 1985). According to their argument, in the face of market integration, social assimilation and nation building process, regionalism is nothing but a delayed modernization or suspicious separatism. In short, according to modernization theorists, with the completion of nation building, politics were supposed to be deterritorialized within national boundaries.

Relying on the arguments put forward by scholars of the political geography tradition (Keating 1988, 1997; Agnew 1987), this paper refutes the modernization interpretation of regionalism on the ground that "the territorial principle in politics is ever-present but often elusive" (Keating 1997, 383). Annihilation of the political nature of space (politics of deterritorialization) by market forces and intrusive state organizations in the midst of modernization turned out to be a false one. As is vividly demonstrated in Europe, territorial politics still plays a very important part in national politics of territorial management. Even under the inescapable pressure of globalization, region as a political actor is not doomed to become extinct. Instead of politics being deterritorialized, under the EU system, region is reterritorializing itself as a newly emerging, powerful actor in lieu of and/or in accordance with the nation-state in European politics (Sharpe 1993).

Implications of this argument on the Korean case are that regionalism should not be regarded as something doomed to become extinct for national political unification, but as something to be restructured with different rules in accordance with the changing internal and international political milieu. Under the highly centralized authoritar-

ian military rule, regionalism was utilized and manipulated by the power holders as a political strategy of exclusion, while the region under discrimination responded with "defensive" regionalistic plan of their own. Introduction and reinforcement of decentralization policy, if properly implemented, can provide each region with ample opportunities for restructuring its politics of territorial management. In short, decentralization policy can initiate a territorial politics of new regionalism³ based on competition and compromise between regions instead of exclusion and discrimination. If political nature of territorial space is intrinsically inseparable from the discussion of regionalism, what we have to do is not to eradicate it but to help restructure conventional regionalism into new regionalism based on competition and cooperation among the regions.

Conventional Wisdom on Regionalism

Reflecting the immense importance of regionalism in Korean politics, the large number of research and publication defies easy classification, and it is beyond the scope of this paper. But at the risk of oversimplification, we can categorize the current state of research on regionalism into two kinds: descriptive research and theoretical research. While the former methodology is more popular, it lacks a systematic analysis of regionalism, thereby being anecdotally descriptive at best and negatively utilized by the conservative political coalition in discourse formation on regionalism. By contrast, despite its theoretical rigor and boldness, the latter methodology has been kept

3 Nowadays the term *new regionalism* is employed by some authors to depict the changing characteristics of conventional regional confrontation. That is, it is no longer just between Honam vs. Yeongnam but includes Yeongnam, Honam and Chungcheong regions which represent the regions from which the three charismatic Kims hailed from (Kim Young-sam for Yeongnam, Kim Dae-jung for Honam, Kim Jong-pil for Chungcheong, respectively) (Jo 2002). But use of this new terminology turns out to be misleading, especially in current politics that can be said to be the post-three Kim era.

at bay by the conservative newspapers⁴ and political parties that taunt it as being inimical to political stability.

Descriptive researches on the causes of regionalism can be grouped into three categories (Kang 1993). In explaining regionalism in Korea, first group of scholars stress the importance of regional historical experiences and distinctive cultural differences derived from it. Those who favor this interpretation (Song 1990) frequently refer to the legacy of the Three Kingdoms (Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla) and its enduring impact upon the formation of regionalism, including competing intellectual historical traditions between regions.⁵ For them, what is more important is not history itself but the socialization processes consciously or unconsciously inherited from cultural and historical legacies of each region. Due to this methodological leaning, not only historians and sociologists but also social psychologists were engaged in conducting empirical tests and surveys to produce explanations of regionalism (Korean Psychological Association 1988).

The major contribution of this intellectual tradition is its sizable primary sources in survey form or archival data. Furthermore, this research orientation provides us with keen insights into the nature of discourse formation on regionalism in the regional civil society, which lacks structural analysis of regionalism. Even after the demise of authoritarian military regimes, during elections, the regional civil society mobilized itself in favor of regional cleavage structure, without any provocative political campaign instigating regional confronta-

4 Political and judicial disputes between professor Choe Jang-jip and *Chosun Ilbo* over the interpretation of the initiation of the Korean War are typical strategy employed by conservative (or more precisely expressed, reactionary) political coalitions. Discourse formation on the topic of regionalism is also no exception to this general tendency of utilizing politics of exclusion.

5 Typical cases can be found in interpreting ideas of Confucianism according to their regional intellectual history. While Yi Hwang represents Yeongnam region, Yi I represents Gyeonggi region. What is more important is the very fact that this camp's views on regionalism frequently coincide roughly with competing power blocks in the central government.

tion. Self-imposed and self-regenerating regional conflict embedded in regional civil society cannot be properly explained without referring to descriptive empirical researches. Despite its important contribution, however, this research tradition has a fatal flaw in being unable to properly explain how and why different cultural socialization process resulted in regional conflict specifically after the 1970s instead of 1950s and 1960s.

The second descriptive interpretation on regionalism focuses on the uneven economic development among regions. As is well known, the "economic miracle" Korea has enjoyed during the 1970s and 1980s was achieved at the cost of neglecting the agricultural Honam region in favor of industrializing regions of Gyeonggi and Yeongnam. Economic and industrial policies during this period consciously exploited the agricultural regions in order to supply industrializing urban centers with cheap food and cheap labor (both of which helped keep labor wages as low as possible) from the agricultural region of Honam. Under this situation, even with the rapid economic growth, on average, people from the economically retarded regions were supposed to be relatively deprived of sociopolitical opportunities compared to those from the well-off regions. What has been known as the theory of relative deprivation was used to connect mobilizing aspects of regionalism with a concrete economic situation.

This interpretation clearly shows the material base of regionalism in territorial terms. Territorial management of Park Jung-hee's military regime was nothing but an instrument for rapid economic growth. And as a natural consequence, for the purpose of efficient utilization of scarce resources, a highly centralized developmental state had no other choice but to exploit one region in favor of another region. And unlike the prediction forwarded by modernization theory, even after the "trickling down" effect, economic growth did not materialize. This deprivation interpretation, however, failed to answer why and on what ground relatively deprived people came to be "politically" mobilized. In the case of Europe, it was not the deprived but the rather well-off middle income areas that were more apt to be politically mobilized (Keating 1988). As it was also in

Korea, other equally or more deprived regions of Chungcheong and Gangwon did not mobilize themselves unlike Honam. Kim Won Bae in this journal likewise demonstrates that contrary to the generally held belief, people in the so-called advantageous regions of Yeongnam remained poor and the region was rather slowly growing between 1985 and 2001.

The third influential descriptive interpretation on regionalism focuses its analysis on elite recruitment for major central government positions (Kim Yong-hak 1990). According to this interpretation, in real world politics, institutionalization of political system and government actually had rather a limited impact than elite recruitment. In a highly centralized state like Korea, once a political group from a certain region takes hold of power, major government positions are supposed to be filled with people from the power holding region in return for electoral and political support shown during the election campaign (Kim Man-heum 1991). According to several research data, arguments put forward by this interpretation proved to have tangible explanatory power. Patron-clientele relationship forged between power holders and political supporters from the region has sustained territorial bases for long-term mutual political benefit and exchanges. Despite its plausible explanation and popular interpretation, this argument does not succeed in answering the question of why and how people from the region who do not have any direct patron-clientele relationship with the local power elite succumb to regional political mobilization with ease. As one recent study revealed (Kim Yeong-jeong 2002), approximately 90 percent of people both from Yeongnam and Honam regions responded that they did not experience personal disadvantage due to regional conflict. Extrapolating from this research outcome, we can assume that most of the people in Yeongnam and Honam will not have any material incentives to rely on patron-clientele relations.

In contrast to previously mentioned descriptive researches, analytical researches are based on more broad and systematic theoretical foundations. Analytical theories comprise of the theory of peripheral state and the theory of pluralism. The first analytical research orien-

tation starts from the premise that proper understanding of regionalism in Korea is impossible without taking into consideration two most important features of the Korean state during the period. What we can term as a politico-economic understanding of regionalism points out that during the period of rapid economic growth and social change, two major principles characterized the Korean state—politically military dictatorship and economically semi-peripheral monopoly capitalism. Naturally, for researchers in this tradition, regionalism in Korea is a “reflection of cumulative contradictions in political, economic, and social arena enforced by military dictatorship” (Choe Jang-jip 1988, 207). According to Choe Jang-jip (1988), regionalism was a new kind of ruling ideology developed and mobilized by the military regime when the existing ruling ideology⁶ no longer galvanized the people. According to this kind of interpretation of regionalism, a region suffering from regional discrimination was supposed to have electoral affinity for the more progressive and change-oriented political mobilization.⁷ For these political economy theorists, regional contradiction was no more than a superficial appearance of disguised class contradiction superimposed by application of new ruling ideology by the military regime under the principle of “divide and rule.”⁸ In the same vein, absence of a political party based on political ideology was also cited as one of the major sources of regional contradiction over class contradiction (Sin 1990).

Major contributions made by this interpretation cannot be underestimated. During the 1980s, especially in the midst and aftermath of the Gwangju civil uprising, regardless of pros and cons of this approach, political economy interpretation of regionalism was regard-

6 In this case, existing ruling ideology was composed of two factors. The first one was anticommunism, while the other one was incessant economic growth.

7 For these political economy theorists, the Gwangju People's Uprising of 1980 is an example of political mobilization led by regional discrimination.

8 Other theorists in this tradition, however, argue that a different relationship between regional contradiction and class contradiction exists. While for Choe Jang-jip, regional contradiction should succumb to major class contradiction in the long run, others argue for the equal theoretical importance between them (Sin 1989).

ed as a very important starting point in the discussion of regionalism in Korea. The inclusion of previously omitted important structural variables and the successful escape from the dangers of structural determinism easily found among political economists are, without any doubt, major contributions of this research orientation. But what needs more careful attention with regards to this approach is the theoretical relationship between regional contradiction and class contradiction in interpreting regionalism in Korea. It is unclear in this interpretation why regional consciousness in underprivileged regions is prone to be of more progressive nature. The unconfirmed assertion that elective affinity between regional alienation and ideological progressiveness did not support election outcomes failed to explain the undemocratic nature of social relation "within" underprivileged region.⁹

In contrast to the political economy understanding of regionalism, the second analytical approach finds its theoretical roots in liberalism along with political pluralism. According to the liberal understanding of regionalism, regional contradiction prevalent in Korea is not a reflection of structural contradictions but a reflection of an immature civil society. As a logical consequence, the liberal interpretation of regionalism clearly refutes the possibility of identifying regionalism with progressive political movement and something akin to class contradiction. Instead, liberal theorists argue that progressive nature of regionalism in underprivileged region is a reaction on the part of the slowly maturing regional civil society against the highly centralized state apparatus for the purpose of attaining political democratization. Unlike some Western cases, Kim Seong-guk (1987) argues that historical experiences from the overcentralized Joseon dynasty, Japanese colonialism, and the Korean War followed by military dictatorship all forged as immense stumbling blocks, thereby,

9. In many national elections, voters from Honam have cast their ballots largely in favor of regionally-based opposition party at the detriment to the more progressive Labor Party. This selective progressiveness in the underprivileged region is also clearly present in the widespread patron-clientele relationship.

postponing the opening of civil society in Korea. Under these historical situations, regional conflict can be understood as an alternative way of mobilizing the civil society in order to democratize the highly centralized developmental state occupied by the military.

In theoretical terms, compared to the political economy interpretation, liberal interpretation lacks analytical rigor and needs to justify its theoretical application to the Korean case with more empirical studies. Also it needs to incorporate structural variables (which were emphasized in the political economy approach with consistency) into its analysis in line with its emphasis on the rise of civil society.¹⁰ Despite some of these hard-to-overlook drawbacks, it is undeniable that liberal understanding of regionalism provides us with very meaningful insights into the role of civil society in the transformation of regionalism. Its emphasis on the importance of civil society in understanding regionalism and on the potential power of civil society that can transform the conflict-ridden nature of regionalism is an important contribution to the development of a new perspective regarding productive relationship between regionalism and decentralization.¹¹

Critique and Alternative Interpretation

With the benefit of hindsight, we can say that while the conventional wisdom on regionalism provided us with fertile grounds for the development of new theories, it also generated a sizable amount of self-fulfilling and unproven arguments. Sometimes persuaded by election outcomes that tenaciously repeat regional bias, and other times

10. This problem arises from the theoretical position which presumes state versus civil society formation in the analysis of Korean political problems. Following the principle of liberal political thought, this approach correctly puts emphasis on the unsymmetrical relationship between the powerful, centralized Korean state and the emerging civil society, but fails to incorporate the relationship between the state and distorted market system into its analysis.

11. This will be discussed in more detail in the later section of this essay.

unconsciously manipulated by unyielding forces of ruling ideology “made in” major news networks in collaboration with power holders, and still other times consciously captured by one’s own theoretical orientation, very important changing aspects of regionalism were apt to be put aside as irrelevant in the understanding of regionalism.

Consciously or unconsciously, these tendencies have forced us to unmitigatedly understand regionalism as negative. Intrinsic nature of regionalism as a source of regional identity with its own network of social relation has succumbed to more broad pictures of political manipulation and discrimination. Such a myopic view on regionalism naturally has induced people into regarding regionalism as something to be eradicated or overcome for the purpose of making a better nation instead of accepting it as a way of inviting diversity into an already highly homogenized and uniformly centralized Korean society. The very fact that, if proper policies are introduced under certain conditions, then democracy, development, and regionalism can go hand in hand was put aside too early as irrelevant. In this sense, numerous discussions on regionalism were past-looking. They put more emphasis on the courses and origins of regionalism rather than on the solution. Sweeping, blind pursuits for more and more economic growth and demands for unity against the possible intrusion from the North have made people think otherwise impossible.¹²

The various interpretations of regionalism additionally ignore the importance of “territory” as a spatial form of political entity. Unlike the arguments put forward by modernization theorists, political nature of territory is inseparable from its spatial formation. While numerous interpretations on regionalism compete with each other to be adopted as a foundation for regional policy, it is ironic that no interpretation seriously takes into account the importance of territory itself as an independent variable in explaining the causes of regionalism. In other words, most theorists on regionalism regard territory

12. As was previously argued, broadly speaking, this phenomenon presumes unity over diversity in the process of nation building and deterritorializing modernization theory.

“as a given” which implies that most theories on regionalism are extremely “de-territorialized.” Although they are discussing regionalism, it is hard to find region as a category in their analysis, for almost every aspect of regionalism was interpreted not from a regional but from a central point of view. If we give region theoretical autonomy (albeit in relative terms), according to the issues at hand, region can be a source of self-reterritorialization and self-deterritorialization. Region as a politically fixed territorial entity is a total fiction. For example, conflict between Busan and Daegu over the construction of Wicheon Industrial Park is a case at hand.¹³ While both Gyeongsangnam-do and Gyeongsangbuk-do provinces acted in unity during the election times against both Jeollanam-do and Jeollabuk-do provinces they have changed the rule of game by reterritorializing their territorial entity as an economic actor on issues of regional economic development and the environment.

In addition to theoretical shortcomings, numerous sociopolitical and economic changes in domestic as well as in international context force us to reinterpret conventional wisdom according to what the new era dictates us. First of all, irreversible move toward democratization nullifies some of the basic tenets of conventional wisdom. For political economists, military dictatorship as a factor in explaining regionalism is no longer available. Regionalism as a ruling ideology through the adoption of divide and rule strategy is losing its strength. As an electoral strategy, regionalism is still significant. Regional confrontation and discrimination, once a dominant social cleavage, are now being replaced by solidifying common interests among the regions which in turn find its new opposition in the capital region.

13. Construction of Wicheon Industrial Park was deemed to be essential for the economic recuperation of Daegu, while it was regarded as an environmental menace for Busan. Because the industrial park was to be located at the upper stream of Nakdonggang river (in the city of Daegu), which is at the same time the major source of piped water for Busan citizens, the construction of the park called forth regional mobilization from both regions.

A rapid entry into the information society after the mid-1990s by means of the Internet also provided a fertile ground for fragmenting the myth of regionalism. The wireless communication “forces” are seriously challenging information production and discourse formation on regionalism, which were once almost monopolized by the major traditional communication companies (especially the big three newspaper companies).¹⁴ Spearheaded by the younger generation who are less influenced by sweeping forces of regionalism, wireless communication media produces a counter logic, on a real time basis different from the major “paper media.” Regionalism as a mobilization of bias by some political forces is no longer an easy job as it was a decade or two ago.

Democratization along with the rapid emergence of information society and the rise of civil society in the form of numerous NGOs after the June Uprising of 1987 have imprinted an enduring mark on the discussion of regionalism in Korea. Nowadays it is almost an undeniable fact that NGOs exercise significant influences on the making of and the implementation of policies. But at the present, we still need to be cautious about the role of civil society, at least with regards to the discussion of regionalism. Although it is true and possible that activities of NGOs contribute to the mitigation of negative aspects of regionalism through social movement, including democratization of the political system, it is hard to tell how much influence NGOs can exert on solving the problem of regionalism. It is mainly because there are two sources of “regionalism on the making.” One is, as was discussed by major political actors, for the purpose of political manipulation. The other source is civil society itself. Discourse formation on regionalism by the regional civil society itself is self-generating. In this sense, NGOs can make some contribution. But what about the latter case? In order to arrest self-generating discourse formation on regionalism, civil society must be self-reflexive. That is why some theorists adamantly endorse the introduction of delibera-

14. One of the best-known one is *OhmyNews* (<http://www.ohmynews.co.kr>).

tive democracy for the consolidation of democracy (Im 2000). I will discuss the possible relationship between decentralization and the restructuring of regionalism later in the essay.

By summarizing the central themes and critiques of mainstream arguments on regionalism, we can proceed to suggest an alternative way of formulating our ideas on regionalism. Previous interpretations of regionalism, which embraced negative images manipulated by political inclusion and exclusion, should move toward a more socio-spatial understanding of regionalism. What I mean by sociospatial understanding of regionalism can be summarized as follows. First, at the risk of oversimplification, with ensuing political democratization (at least in legal terms) the possibility of political manipulation of regionalism at the national level will slowly lose its appeal as an electoral strategy. Instead, what will become more problematic would be the self-generating forces of regionalism at the regional level. Political territorialization of regionalism at the regional level which substitutes political deterritorialization of regionalism at the national level is like a double-edged sword. Because region is going to have more political autonomy at the territorial level, at least with regards to regionalism, the region has the possibility of either being led into regional competition and cooperation among and between regions, or being led into strengthening of previously negative aspects of exclusionary regionalism. In this process, mobilization of regional civil society would, out of necessity, be imbued with a social (rather than political) meaning of regionalism. Regional and social issues rather than national and political issues are supposed to be of greater (or at least equal) importance in mobilizing regional civil society.¹⁵ Territorialization and socialization of politics of regionalism at the regional level would necessarily turn the focus of research on regionalism from national political actors (such as political party, mass media, NGOs etc.) to

15. For example, the chaotic subway arson disaster in Daegu in February 2003 is a case at hand. In the process of managing the disaster, public opinion poll showed that the city's citizens alliance shifted from the Grand National Party, whose political base has been strongly anchored to this region.

the importance of what is actually going on at the regional level. In this sense, local (regional) politics as well as national politics are supposed to have simultaneous impacts on the development of regionalism in the future.

Second, spatial aspects of regionalism (instead of political aspect) will be of great interest pertaining to social issues. Strictly speaking, in the past the discussion of regionalism (in terms of spatial conflict) was focused on spatial conflict between economically well-off, industrially developed regions and poor underdeveloped agricultural regions. This outdated spatial theoretical orientation of regionalism clearly distorts the spatial picture of what is actually happening. Overgrowth and overaccumulation of the capital region at the cost of the other regions have already reached a point where the disparity between the noncapital regions becomes less meaningful. In other words, in spatial terms, the previously dominant regional confrontational structure of Honam versus anti-Honam (or Honam versus Yeongnam region) is being challenged by a center versus periphery structure. Of course, this argument does not automatically lead to the assertion that previous structure of regional conflict has disappeared. Rather, the point is that in the near future, regionalism will possess a dual structure.

In summary, without ignoring the current state of regionalism, we can cautiously predict the coexistence of new and old versions of regionalism in the years to come. If the old version represents the days of centralization and the a-spatial (deterritorialized) politics of exclusion, the new version will put more emphasis on the meaning of "the local" (or center-periphery) and of "the social," thereby resulting in the growing importance of territorial management policy by the state.

Decentralization as a Solution?

This is not a proper place to discuss the problem of decentralization at length. What we need to do is to briefly describe and explain the

major characteristics of decentralization policy in Korea after the 1990s so that we can answer the following questions. Is it possible for decentralization to be used as "a" solution to the problem of regionalism? Is there any elective affinity between changing characteristics of regionalism and the ongoing process of decentralization policy? If so, what are the conditions for bridging the desired goals of solving regionalism and the current status of decentralization in Korea? In order to answer these questions, a brief look at the analytical perspective on decentralization is in order.

As is the case with regionalism, it is not an easy job to define decentralization.¹⁶ Despite controversies over the precise meaning of decentralization, however, there are a few common grounds scholars agree on. First of all, decentralization means territorial distribution of state power (Smith 1985). In this sense, deconcentration, which means territorial dispersion of centralized administrative function, is different from decentralization. In reality the state places itself somewhere between complete decentralization (which logically means self-negation of the state) and complete centralization (which is practically impossible). As a logical consequence, we can assume only "more or less" decentralized or centralized state instead of "decentralized or centralized" state. In short, decentralization is a very relative concept. In reality, degree of decentralization depends on how the central government shares its power with local governments, and this is of very political nature. If we follow Laswell's succinct definition of politics (Who gets what, when and how?), decentralization certainly assumes the nature of territorial management by the central government as decentralization determines which level of government has what kind of power and how much power. It is difficult to establish a general rule of decentralization that can be applied to various countries. Depending on its historical experience and current sociopolitical and economic situation, degree of decentralization varies. But what is clear nowadays about decentralization is the very

16. As one skeptic puts it, there are as many kinds of decentralization as the number of countries that adopt it.

fact that from the 1980s, decentralization can be regarded as a prevailing and dominant trend in most of the nations throughout the world (Norton 1994). The diminishing role of the state in the wake of globalization inevitably forced the nation state to share its power horizontally with the market and vertically with local governments. Decentralization and marketization become catchwords for restructuring the state in the age of globalization. In this sense, decentralization policy of the 1980s and 1990s in Western countries has taken on a new meaning of territorial management under the pressure of globalization.

The second aspect of decentralization we have to pay attention to is that a priori value judgment on decentralization should be avoided. For many, decentralization is analogous to local autonomy and democratization, which is good. But for others, decentralization means local separatist movement or local corruption, which is bad. In reality, depending on one's theoretical orientation or school of thought, decentralization has provided us with different possibilities. For classical liberals like J. S. Mill or Alexis de Tocqueville and his followers, decentralization occasions local autonomy and grass-roots democracy by the local civil society. Local autonomy as a training ground for democracy has long been a democratic foundation for many Western countries, especially Britain and the United States. Currently, renewed concern for the revival of Western democracy in the postindustrial and information age has rekindled research interests on the possible relationship between decentralization and institutionalization of deliberative democracy (Burns, Hambleton, and Hogget 1994). By contrast, for neoliberals like Ostrom or Tiebout (Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren 1961), decentralization has meant marketization. For them, competition between decentralized local governments would lead to a maximum utilization of scarce resources through the optimum distribution of materials. If decentralization has meant a school of democracy for classical liberals, for neoliberals decentralization has meant a surrogate market.

The above applies mostly to Western countries. For many of the developing countries, introduction of decentralization policy has a

very different meaning. In the case of many Latin American countries, introduction of decentralization policy has meant a pseudo-democratization of the political system¹⁷ or Trojan horse for neoliberal economic reform¹⁸ (Curbelo 1993; Boisier 1987). For some of the African countries, decentralization simply has meant invention of new institutions for more efficient handling of foreign aid programs without corruption and inefficiency of central government. In China's case, adoption of decentralization policy during the Deng era has meant a new form of developmental model under market socialism, which has proved to be a great impetus for rapid economic growth.

Although studies on decentralization have approached the topic from various directions, two broad tendencies are discernable. First, in terms of political ideology, decentralization is still being regarded as an important instrument for accomplishing democracy. In developing countries, during the transitional period from authoritarian to civilian government, decentralization policy was adopted as a token of democratization. In the Western world, experiments in the revival of democracy in postindustrial and information age are being conducted in conjunction with decentralization. Second, in terms of developmental strategy, adoption of decentralization policy has meant a rapid adaptation to the world transformed by globalization. For example, the previous centralized (welfare) model has to be reconstructed so that a more flexible decentralized model of territorial management can be established. In the developing countries, globalization has forced decentralization to be used either as a conduit for neoliberal economic reform or as a strategy for rapid economic growth via competition among regions by circumventing the central government.

When we compare the major characteristics of regionalism in Korea with general trend of decentralization worldwide, we find

17. This is the case of Mexico. During the 1980s, under the Madrid and Salinas administration, a strong decentralization policy was adopted as a way of reforming the Mexican state, which unfortunately resulted in further reaffirming the vested interest of governing party (PRI: Partido Revolucionario Institucional).

18. This is the case of Argentina under Menem.

broad parallels. Growing emphasis on territorial management and the renewed concern for regional civil society as a source of consolidation of democracy in Korea are reminiscent of major directions of development for decentralization in other parts of the world. Returning to our question, "Can decentralization be a solution to the problem of regionalism?" theoretically the answer is not a definite "yes," but close to "yes" or "possibly yes." Having examined the theoretical possibilities of a general relationship between decentralization and recent developments in regionalism in Korea, now it is time to look into what is actually materializing in Korea so that we can compare and contrast theory and practice. By doing this, we can find clues to "conditions" for decentralization as "a" solution to the problem of regionalism.

Current State, Possibilities, and Conditions

As is well acknowledged among researchers, Korea is one of the most highly centralized states. As Gregory Henderson succinctly puts it (Henderson 1968), the politics of the vortex at the center has engulfed the whole nation. Historical experiences of powerful centralization, colonialism, and the state-led rapid economic growth, all have contributed to the enduring impact on the formation of a highly centralized state. After a brief introduction of decentralization policy during the first republic, Park Chung-hee's 1961 military coup d'état totally abolished that policy, until it was reintroduced in 1995 by the Kim Young-sam government, the first civilian government. Resumption of decentralization was initiated by the June Uprising of 1987. Accepting the demand from the civil society that democratic elections be held, the military government agreed to hold a direct presidential election and to resume decentralization. Although local councils were formed by direct elections in 1991, complete resumption of decentralization was delayed until 1995 when provincial governors and mayors were elected by the voters.

Major reasons for its slow progress at the beginning are mainly

due to the politicians of the center who viewed decentralization instrumentally. Significance of decentralization was to be realized only upon the continuum of the politics by the center. Relying on evoking regional sentiments, major political parties heavily exploited the situation by monopolizing the nomination process of their candidates. Presence of charismatic party leaders, regional sentiments, undemocratic party structures and manipulation by the conservative mass media all contributed to the marginalization of decentralization. The local election outcomes after the introduction of decentralization also closely reflected the political contours of the center. It is evident that the introduction of decentralization had negligible effect among the voters, at least with regard to regionalism. In this sense, introduction of decentralization was of no use in solving the problem of regionalism. For better understanding of the current state of decentralization, we also need to pay more attention to the formation of social relations at the local level. That is, parochial nature of local social relations composed of family kinship, school alumni, and other social ties prohibited the rise of sound local civil society, thereby reinforcing the existing sentiment of regionalism. After the introduction of decentralization, this old local social formation had a tendency of turning into a local political machine, forming robust social ties among local politicians and local luminaries.

The result of the above-said political situation was clearly reflected in the actual implementation of decentralization policy at the level of administration. The level of decentralization in terms of distribution of governmental function, financial resources, personnel and law-making capacity is very low. For example, in 2002, local expenditure comprised of almost 56% of national expenditure while local tax consisted only 20% of the total tax collected. The difference of 36% between local tax income and local expenditure was to be supported by central government transfers, of course with control from the center. This is only a tip of the iceberg. Visible and invisible controls from the center are hard to escape. A bird's-eye view of the power struggle, antidecentralization forces from the central bureaucracy, politicians (especially assembly members) and the central

media look more powerful than prodecentralization forces of local politicians and local people.

Summing up the current state of decentralization, future of this policy looks rather gloomy. Despite the gloomy picture, however, voices for more decentralization are gaining momentum. First of all, forming of local government through regular election is coming to be regarded as commonsensical. Institutionalization of decentralization is now an irreversible trend. A few attempts to reverse the trend have proven to be unsuccessful.¹⁹ Second, slow but steady progress in politics of the center toward more democracy also helps to reduce the possibility of mobilizing decentralization (or local politics) for the purpose of the politics in the center. Past tradition of regarding local election outcome as a stepping-stone for victory in a national election also proved to be unreliable. Third, the territorial overcentralization of every resource on the center (capital region) has provoked a vehement protest from the local governments outside the capital region. As the capital region's overcentralization became a milestone that changed the nature of regionalism, this situation also helps raise the voice for more decentralization. Fourth, the rise of civil society at the local level is remarkable. With the advent of information revolution, free flow of information helps mobilize the younger generations bypassing the old ties of local oligarchies. Finally, the Roh Moo-hyun government is expected to be of great help in enhancing decentralization policy. During Roh's election campaign, he stressed the importance of local development and balanced growth of the territory as one of the top priorities of his administration. What is more peculiar about the territorial policy of Roh government is that decentralization came to be regarded not simply as administrative deconcentration but as part of a new developmental model that Korea is supposed to undertake in line with globalization.

In conclusion, we can say that thus far decentralization was negligible in mitigating negative aspects of regionalism. But this does not

19. For example, some assembly members attempted to automatically retain mayoral nomination instead of going through a nomination election.

preclude the possibility of having elective affinity between decentralization and regionalism. Despite somewhat dim outlooks, signs of a healthy relationship between the two arenas of Korean politics are rising to the surface. The rise of civil society and the interest in renewing territorial management politics increase the possibility of having elective affinity between regionalism and decentralization. But for this purpose, as previously discussed, we can conclude that the following conditions should be met.

First of all, politics of decentralization based on territorial management should not be manipulated for the purpose of the politics of the center. This requires two things to be done. Political parties that link the central and the local as well as state and civil society should be institutionalized according to democratic practices. This process includes review on current electoral system, candidate nomination process, membership, eradication of boss politics and so on. Also antidecentralization forces forged among central media, assembly members, and central government bureaucracy need to be kept controlled.

Second, conditions that boost the capacity of local government and local democracy must be met. In order to escape from the trap of forging a local oligarchic political machine (among local bureaucracy, local entrepreneur, luminaries and members of assembly and so on) and corruption, need for a reform-oriented local government is a must. Institutional methods that heighten the possibility of direct democracy by the local civil society should be introduced.

Finally, the role of the central government is critical: first as a propelling force for more decentralization, second as an umpire among competing regions, third as a mediator between the well-off and the underprivileged regions. Dangers of overcentralization and the requisiteness for a more competitive government due to globalization necessitate restructuring of the existing state structure to a more decentralized form of government. Central government should be at the front of this reform. While assuming position for more decentralization and competition, central government also needs to pay more attention to even development between regions. *Laissez-*

faire stance toward decentralization by the central government will definitely result in widening the gap between the well-off and under-privileged regions. Structural conditions for fair competition between and among regions must be provided by the central government.

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