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BOOK REVIEW

Joo Y. M., (2018), *Megacity Seoul: Urbanization and the Development of Modern South Korea*, Routledge

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Over the last fifty years, Seoul has quickly flourished emerging as an important node of the global network of cities. The increase in population, which boomed from 1.6 million in 1955 to 10.6 million in 1990 due to massive domestic immigration, challenged the ability of the city to fulfill the infrastructural demand. For instance, in 1970 a little more than half of the population lived in formal settlements. Despite the difficulties, the Korean and Seoul government quickly took a central role in the development of infrastructure transforming the capital into the national command and control center. Seoul rapidly envisioned itself as a first-class city in the global economy (Kim and Han, 2012). The speed along with the strategic central political role of the government in tackling the infrastructural problem became characteristics of a "Korean model". Yu-Min Joo's new volume tries to distinguish the "Korean model" from other Asian models of global city development such as the Singapore or Hong Kong one.

Megacity Seoul - Urbanization and the Development of Modern South Korea depicts how different levels of government steered and shaped the national and the metropolitan urban development. The core issue of the volume is the variety of economic and spatial strategies devised by both the local and national level. The author aims to show how "the urbanization and modernization of Seoul was not a by-

product of the nation's stunning economic development, (...) it is a result of Korea's overall strategies which focused on city-building and connecting urban and economic priorities in tandem" (Joo, 2018, p. 2). In other words, Korean policies steered the economic growth controlling the urbanization process.

Overall, two points are developed across the chapters. Firstly, the author argues that the economic growth of South Korea and of its capital cannot be explained only by economic policies. In this regard, she demonstrates how urbanization policies at a national and local level were devised to fuel national growth. Secondly, she analyses how the city of Seoul has been transformed step by step into a global city. By the '90s a combination of industrialization and urbanization facilitated the emersion of Seoul as a metropolis. Moreover, after 2000 the government projects Seoul and the "Korean model" at a global scale. In other words, Joo describes the rise of a metropolis not merely as a quantitative growth. She describes the challenges that arose in the transformation of the city into a metropolis (Barile, Raffini, Altieri, 2019).

Yu-Min Joo's second published book uses an analytical approach that can be situated close to what is advocated by Gottdiener (1994) in his review of the political economy approach. *Megacity Seoul*, indeed, covers all the four socio-spatial dimensions proposed by the American sociologist. Firstly, Joo uses an historical perspective to scrutinize the metropolitan and regional development. Secondly, she analyses the linkages between multiple levels of government. Thirdly, she stresses the role of public sector in development of domains of capital accumulation. Eventually, the author refers to the symbolic meaning of Seoul development in the world city network.

Despite the attempt of following such a broad socio-spatial perspective, references to the work of Roy and Ong (2011) anticipate an unbalanced attention towards the study of capital accumulation. Joo describes how different political regimes redundantly have fostered the creation of new domains of capital accumulation. The developmental state built the infrastructure for the export-oriented industrial economy. The property state forced the increasing role of real estate in Korean economy. Eventually, Joo stresses how after 2000 the export of urban solutionism has been identified as a new domain of capital accumulation. For example, she mentions the attempts of the Korean state to sell abroad the capacity that it had accumulated in the '70s in the production of new towns.

A political sciences and planning approach mirrored in the structure

In order to present Joo's book, the research process that led to the release of the volume is worthy of notice. Indeed, the perspective that the author uses is directly

translated in both her position on the related literature and the style and structure of the chapters. According to the author's acknowledgments, *Megacity Seoul* combined the work of her PhD in Urban and Regional Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) along with her research as an assistant professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore (NUS). The volume, therefore, uses a double lens to analyse the emergence of Seoul. While using concepts from political sciences such as the one of developmental state, Joo tries to test them with a spatial and planning appraisal. The structure of the chapters further reflects how the topic is tackled by the author using simultaneously different perspectives. The author, indeed, alternates the description of Korea's political and economic context with a deep analysis of spatial transformation projects. Overall, the author mobilizes the developmental paradigm and she originally argues that the physical and social development of Seoul is not the outcome of economic policies. Conversely, it is part of urbanization policies led by the developmental state to force economic growth. Despite a general predominant spatial mindset, *Megacity Seoul* balances a focus on spatial transformations and a political science approach in the analysis of public policies as well as in the structure of its chapters.

The most central concept used by the author to analyse the emergence of Seoul during the last sixty years is the one of the developmental state. Coined in the '80s to describe the role of the state in Japan's post-war miracle (Johnson, 1982), the idea of developmental state was used mainly by social scientists to analyse how Asian states engineered their national industrialization process. Studies on the Korean post-war miracle scrutinized the political relationship between the Korean state and the *Chaebols*, which are business groups comparable to the Japanese *Zaibatsu*. *Chaebols*, that can be translated with "conglomerates", are large enterprises that are composed of many corporations. In 1989 the five largest chaebols produced 75.2 percent of the Korean total sales in GDP in manufacturing (Joo, 2018). In addition, they have a form of management characterized by strong territorial, family and government relations (Sup Chang, 1988). It is this last political relation that is emphasized by the developmental literature. More precisely, the literature focuses on the state-chaebol coalition and its capacity to enforce policies whose outcome would not have been reached under liberal market (Amsden, 1989; Evans, 1989; Kim, 1997).

From the author's point of view, the literature about the developmental state underestimates the urban dimension as an engine of economic growth. She claims that "scholars have ignored the spatial and territorial dimensions of Korea's economic development success" (Joo, 2018, p. 17). In order to fill the gap of the literature, Joo focuses her analyses to demonstrate how urbanization was used to steer economic

growth. In other words, while the traditional developmental concept considers urbanization as an outcome of economic growth, the author argues that urban investments and policies accompanied and facilitated Korean industrialization.

A demonstration of the interdisciplinary approach, that the author declared as a means of filling the gap in the literature, can be found looking at the mobilized sources. Information and argumentation are drawn by a reconstruction of the literature concerning both economic and spatial development of South Korea and Seoul. In support of her arguments, Joo uses a combination of secondary data that varies from quantitative data to maps and photos from academic literature or public institutional reports. Despite the presence of several data, there is no space in the volume for a precise description of the method of data collection. Moreover, even though the author mentions the importance of her interviewees for the realization of the volume, no direct references to interviews support Joo's arguments along the chapters.

In terms of structure, the volume can be described as a chronological analysis of the economic and political changes undergone by South Korea since 1960. While the first and the last chapters position the analysed topics in a theoretical perspective, the central chapters represent the analytical core of the volume. Despite the chronological order, the analysis is dynamic in its focuses and scales. On the one hand, within each chapter the author alternates analyses of specific physical transformation projects with more broad descriptions of political and economic transformations. On the other hand, from chapter to chapter the author explores different geographical scales of analysis. Starting from a regional point of view to understand the national industrialization policies, Joo narrows her critical point of view several times so as to capture the regional and the local development. The consideration of one project or policy per chapter and the mobilization of a different spatial scales every time has its pros and cons. Despite the attempts of the author to contextualize the urbanization policies in a broader political context, the one-project per chapter structure makes it difficult to grasp long-term political changes and path dependency of strategic decisions. Conversely, the continuous zoom in and out seems to be an effective strategy in order to display the evolving relationship between multiple levels of governance and the parallel development of the local and regional growth.

The role of the government in the emersion of Megacity Seoul

After an introductory chapter in which the author presents her approach in relation to the existing literature, the second chapter *The developmental state's export-oriented industrialization and selective urbanization* opens the analytical section of the

volume introducing the role of the developmental state in the post-Korean war period. Joo describes the state-led industrialization and urbanization transition during the authoritarian regime of the general Park Chung-Hee. More precisely, she discusses the role of selective urbanization policies in the “economic miracle” of the ‘60s and ‘70s. After having prompted labor-intensive industrialization, the state had to cope with the unbalanced growth of Seoul in comparison with other regions. Therefore, it firstly devised mitigation measures at the local level. Secondly, it designed a national industrialization strategy based on the transition towards capital intensive export-oriented industry specialized in heavy-chemical productions. The use of a regional scale of analysis along with the study of the state’s massive effort in the infrastructurization of new industrial towns allow the author to depicts the process that led to a “bipolar urbanization and hierarchical spatial division of labor” (Joo, 2018, p. 18). After two decades of industrialization, Chaebols decided to separate their production and their direction to localize their headquarters close to the political power in Seoul. Thus, while Seoul emerged as a post-industrial city where direction offices and research centers were concentrated, the south-east regions of Korea became the location for the heavy-chemical industrial production.

After having mobilized the concept of developmental state as a lens to interpret the industrialization process, the author explains how the property state (Haila, 2000) intervened heavily in the property market. In the third chapter *Developmental and speculative urbanization led by the state in Seoul* the development of Gangnam district is described to understand how the state tackled the problem of housing shortage in Seoul. In front of a booming population and an increase in the number of slums, the state was active in the build-up of both the demand and the supply of the market. With its regulatory power and the design of a variety of incentives, the state lured private developers into the construction of raising apartments and persuaded Seoul's growing middle class to purchase them as wealth accumulation tools. The author uses the concept of property state since she interpreted the state’s interest in real estate development as a way of opening an alternative domain of capital accumulation. While building huge infrastructure on a national scale, the state used rigid regulation on the property market to generate and to gain revenues.

Besides mega-projects such as the new Gangnam or the Olympic district that cleared the slums and built a new global image of central Seoul, the state implemented urbanization policies that for the first time enlarged the borders of the city at a metropolitan level (Storper, 2013). In the fourth chapter *The democratized state’s new town developments and Seoul’s growth into a metropolitan area*, Yu-Min Joo zooms out to the regional scale to analyse how the state devised a five years program to build

two million housing units. Facing a fast process of democratization and economic pressures due to the liberalization of the national market, the newly elected president Roh Tae-Woo promoted the construction of new cities in order to tackle the housing demand and gain political support from the middle class. Looking at the new towns policy with property state lenses, the author suggests that the state's intention was to gain revenues from agricultural land development and to feed the construction industry. Similar to what is described as liberal expansionism in the U.S. literature (Imbroscio, 2006), in the case of Korea the state promotes a regional expansion within a modern liberal vein. However, in the regional expansion of Seoul the goal is not redistributive. The state targeted middle-class, *Chaebols* and the state itself as recipients of the revenues by the real estate development.

In addition to political and economic pressures, namely the democratizing process and the new competition with the Chinese export market, the Asian crisis of 1997 marked the decline of the developmental state. Conversely, Seoul benefited from a window of opportunity to challenge state's responsibilities and to envision itself in the global arena. The following chapter *Globalization and the making of global cities* describes the attempt of reaching competitiveness and attractiveness throughout growth-oriented mega-projects and strategic use of communication. The author analyses two different mega-projects. Firstly, she uses the case of the Cheonggyecheon restoration project and other design-centered projects to describe the emergence of urban development in contraposition with the developmental state. Joo tries to demonstrate how the economic pressures of the first decade of 2000 rescaled the developmental and the property state into characteristics of the new local government's role. With Harvey's words, the liberalization of the market transformed the city's role from managerial to entrepreneurial (Harvey, 1989). Secondly, the case of Songdo Smart City is used to analyse how the Korean state strove for a more active and leading role in the international arena. Coherently to its previous strategies, the state used its regulatory power to facilitate the private development of a new city. Thus, once again it relies on a combination of economic and urban strategies to increase the role of the property market. However, the author also stresses how the Songdo mega-project can be read as the last step of the export-oriented industrialization process led by the state. After having described the transition from the first and the second circuit of accumulation, namely industries and the built environment (Lefebvre H., 2003), the Korean state sought a new domain of capital accumulation. Despite being mainly a property-based project, the author argues that Songdo was conceived as a showcase project in order to export Korean urban solutions such as the adoption of information technology for the development of a smart, green urban growth.

The rise of new global Seoul and city exports in an urbanizing globe further explains the re-scaling of the developmental state at the city level after the shift of political paradigm of 2011. After the Asian financial crisis, despite the citizen-oriented narration attempt, designed-centered projects failed in gathering political consensus. Instead of fostering well-being, these projects fueled inequalities and led the city into debt. As a result, in 2011 Park Won-Soon was elected after a political campaign focused around the “human-centered city” paradigm. In this case, the author does not use physical transformation projects to describe the shift of paradigm. Instead, she uses three policies: the “Sharing City”, the “One Less Nuclear Power Plant” and “Global Digital Seoul 2020”. While she analyses how the human-centered paradigm is transformed into actual co-producing policies, the author points out how the city used this approach both to seek an alternative narrative to enter the global arena and to challenge the national developmental state. Seoul’s changing of policy values was not only about seeking middle-class political consensus and social demand. It was also about making the city globally appealing in order to facilitate the export of the city itself.

In the last chapter *Conclusion: Megacity Seoul and the property state* the author discusses the role of the property state in Korea in contrast with its role in Hong Kong and Singapore, where the concept was coined by Anna Haila (2000). As mentioned before, Joo’s analyses the developmental state’s effort to fuel the real estate market as an alternative engine for the national economic growth in addition to the export-oriented and heavy-chemical industry. Thus, the property state is considered by the author as an instrument of the developmental state. In other words, coherently with her original approach to the developmental theory, she argues that real estate is not a result but a pillar of Korea’s economic development.

The problematic use of the property state concept

Even though the author tries to detach Haila’s property state concept from the exceptional Korean one, it seems problematic to apply this concept to the Korean case for at least two reasons: the different mechanism of capturing the increasing value of the land and the legitimacy of this operation, and the different level and purpose of intervention by the government.

First, Haila studied Hong Kong and Singapore, whose land is scarce and mainly publicly owned (due to the legacy of British colonies). Public land ownership gives to the two city-states the power to manage land use and capture the increasing value. In both cases, they allocate land through land auctions with a time frame which ranges from 15 to 999 years. Conversely, the Korean state and the city of Seoul does not rent

the land. Revenues from the land were provided by a public mechanism of land development. After having exported agricultural land, a public developer (the Korea Land Corporation, KOLAND) built basic infrastructure and sold the newly urbanized land at an increased value. While in Hong Kong and Singapore speculation was prevented by the time-frame of the land lease, in South Korea the model of rising apartments was fueled by speculation. The Korean state devised new forms of governance and decision-making to gain the highest revenues from land dispossession and development. In these terms, it seems more appropriate to speak about “speculative urbanism” (Goldman, 2011) rather than property state.

The second characteristic of property state that does not seem to suitably apply to the Korean case is related to the level and the purpose of state interventions. While Singapore and Hong Kong’s economies are based on land lease as a result of land scarcity, the importance of real estate in Korea is an outcome of the interventionist state. As noted by Haila (2000), the two city-states differ in the level of intervention in the property market. Singapore's state is more interventionist than Hong Kong's. However, in both cases, property state is translated into state interventions to benefit the whole society. For instance, in Singapore homeownership is part of a public housing program. Conversely, in Korea the state actively fueled real estate in order to make it represent a large share of its GDP. Property market is an outcome of state intervention. Moreover, in opposition to a universal benefit, the Korean state targeted the emerging middle-class as recipient of its urbanization policies. Creating a unique type of residences and promoting them as investment assets for Korean middle-class the state forced the construction of a property mind. As perfectly described in “Ecology in Concrete” (Jeong, 2017), high rise towers have reshaped the landscape of Seoul along with the lifestyle of society. Apartments became a constant set of people’s life stages. The ownership of an apartment affected people's life from birth to death being both the symbol of modern life and a financial security. The state mobilized its regulatory power to control economic access to apartments in order to frame them as a positive financial and social incentive (Vitale, 2010) for the rising middle class.

Which governmental role in preventing conflicts?

Having reviewed the content of the volume and discussed the main applied concepts, namely developmental and property state, we can turn to discuss what the author brings in the understanding of Korean economic growth and the emergence of Seoul. As previously mentioned, the author’s analytical approach offers an original spatial framework for both economic and public policy analysis. However, in spite of

the original interpretation, two aspects can be considered weak in the analysis of public policies by the author. The first is an undifferentiated use of a top-down approach analysis to policies embedded in complete different socio-economic contexts. The second is the consideration of the state as a homogeneous monolithic actor. In both cases, the result is an underestimation of the complexity of actors and external forces in the policy process. Furthermore, these weaknesses lead to a blurred analysis of political regulations.

Using terms from Sabatier (1986), the author on the one hand uses a top-down approach of analysis, on the other hand she considers the state (at the national or local level) as the only actor in the policy subsystem. An example can be found in the description of political shift that occurred in Seoul's government in 2011. In the introduction of the sixth chapter the author contextualizes Seoul's political shift in relation to the socio-economic changes and to the Asian crisis. After the crisis, the city was in debt due to the realization of growth oriented. Moreover, the politicians failed in prompting a human-centered narrative raising discontent across the middle-class. Even mentioning the rising of political debate and contestations, the author studies the consequent political shift towards more citizen-centered policies with a top-down approach. She focuses on policy decisions by governmental officials and eventually she analyses the consistency of the action with policy decisions (Sabatier, 1986). In addition to the conflictual situation of Seoul, at the end of the first decade of 2000, the political context was highly ambiguous. As Joo notices in the fifth chapter, before the shift Seoul was governed through megaprojects and marketing strategies. While mobilizing narratives that emphasized how public policies were addressing inequalities, a strong use of branding and design strategies were used to enhance the role of property state and to transform Seoul's image as a global city. According to Matland's model (1995), in symbolic implementation processes in which ambiguity and conflict are high, local coalitions are determinant for the outcome. In these cases, the mobilization of different interested groups is crucial since they have control of a variety of resources. Therefore, the study of the network of actors and their learning process would have been crucial to examine the implementation of projects such as the Cheonggyecheon restoration or policies such as the "Sharing City, Seoul".

The second point is strictly correlated to the previous one. In her focus on policy decisions, the author refers to the public sector using words such as "the state" or "the local government". She rarely mentions the different institutions, agencies or offices with specific competences. Despite the historical dimension of the volume and the analysis of different regimes (from the '60s to now Korea has experienced a rapid democratization period after several military regimes), the consideration of the state

as a monolithic object does not depict institutional development across time. For example, in chapter five the author introduces for the first time the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) as the institutionalized authority of the metropolitan area. Whereas, in the previous chapter she identifies the Seoul authority with a general term “local government”.

The understatement of the complexity and relationships between public and private actors leads to a limited understanding of how different interests were coordinated and how possible arising conflicts were prevented. For instance, reading the chapters on the development of new towns, the mechanism of expropriation and compensation is well described. However, it is not considered how the government faced the political cost of land dispossession and the rising inequalities that boomed parallelly to the expansion of middle-class apartments.

The underlined weaknesses in the analysis of public policies may serve the volume’s main arguments. In order to broaden the classic economic explanation of the Korean miracle, Joo’s book focuses on the city building strategies and their implications on the state’s economy rather than on the study of the implementation of public policies. In other words, the chosen spatial approach seems coherent with the scope of the volume. Overall, using a political economy perspective, *Megacity Seoul* brings an original understanding of Seoul development. While the literature tends to explain the emersion of the city in mere economic terms, Joo uses a spatial analysis to argue that the government steered national growth and the emersion of Seoul as a metropolis using urbanization policies. As a result of the specific point of view, urban planners or political scientists who are not Korean specialists may require additional readings to better grasp the political, social and historical context. Thus, they would be able to place the contents of the book in a broader context with different points of analysis which move beyond the narrowed spatial development one.

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