

Exuberant Politics on the Internet: Two Forms of Popular Politics in South Korea's 2008 "Beef Protests"

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This study examines South Korea's "beef protests" of 2008, with a focus on how these Internet-born popular protests challenged and overcame a populism anchored in the political elite. In the 2007 presidential election, conservative Lee Myung-bak won a landslide victory with an appeal to national and individual prosperity. However, immediately after his election, a popular uprising took place in South Korea when Lee decided to import American beef despite broad concern about mad cow disease. This article examines the process whereby South Korea's young Internet users swiftly turned from advocates to critics of Lee and mobilized for nationwide protests against him and against the Korea–U.S. free trade agreement. Drawing from Jacques Rancière's concepts of *police* and *demos*, I argue that the course of these events points to two dynamics of populism. First, populism succeeds when a politician or issue captivates public desires by metonymically embodying these desires. Second, in such cases, the public's desire cannot be fully represented or contained by traditional political institutions, and politics created from below lead to exuberant politics that defy institutional politics.

Keywords: Internet activism, beef protest, South Korea, popular politics, youth

In 2007–2008, South Korea experienced two waves of popular politics, electing a conservative president and then seeing a massive protest against him within only six months. In the December 2007 presidential election, conservative candidate Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) won a landslide victory, portraying himself as a chief executive officer for the country and promising dramatic economic growth. During his campaign, Lee successfully presented the arguably contradictory images of being both a representative for poor and hardworking Koreans *and* an aggressive entrepreneur who would lead the way

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to national prosperity. However, only two months after his inauguration, Lee was faced with massive protests that demanded his impeachment. In April 2008, he proposed the resumption of American beef import as leverage in the Korea–U.S. free trade agreement (FTA), overturning the 2003 import ban that resulted from a North American outbreak of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or mad cow disease. When news of the potential policy change leaked, South Korea's Internet space was immediately overcome with fear of the fatal disease and speculation about behind-the-scenes deals made between Lee and then U.S. president George W. Bush.

Internet users—typically young and already active in Internet communities—criticized Lee's import policy, rallying for online efforts to stop the FTA negotiations. A self-identified 11th-grader began a petition demanding the impeachment of Lee in April 2008. Originally posted to *Agora*, an open bulletin board on Daum.net (South Korea's largest online portal), the petition went viral and received 1.3 million signatures by May 13, when the National Assembly held a hearing on the FTA. During the same period, protesters who had organized online poured into the streets nightly. The first gathering in early May drew 15,000 participants to downtown Seoul (U. Kim, 2008). From there, the Internet-born gatherings of young Koreans with candles, playful slogans, music, and dance performances spread nationwide. By the time the protests reached their peak with a million participants nationwide in June, Lee's approval rating had plummeted to a historically low 7.4% (Ryu, 2008).

This dramatic turn of events raises several questions. How did extensive popular support for Lee during the election campaign yield to overwhelming criticism in such a short period? How did teenagers become the primary instigators of such intense opposition? And how did the Internet affect popular politics?

I argue here that the course of the two events reveals the exuberance of a popular politics in which people's desires and grievances give rise to new political agendas and politicians, but also exceed the bounds of institutional politics and subject both the agendas and politicians themselves to close scrutiny. In keeping with the theme of this Special Section on mediatized populisms, the South Korean beef protests illustrate the role of the Internet in the relationship between institutional politics and the people, who are not organized by the logic of the former. This is a distinction that Jacques Rancière calls *police* and *demos*. In *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Rancière (2004) theorizes politics as a tension between *demos*—people doing politics—and *police*—the "system of distribution and legitimation" (p. 28) that aggregates people, organizes power, and distributes places and roles.

Populism often takes the form of the *police* subsuming the *demos*, presenting an issue or politician as the conveyor of popular will and justifying the state. However, the grievances, desires, and affects of the *demos* cannot be contained by the *police*, and in fact can turn into a critical force *against* the *police*. In doing so, the Internet was not merely instrumental in summoning the *demos*; local actors' long-term use reshapes their political practices and expectations. In the Korean case at hand, young citizens' shared concern about the economy helped to elect Lee, making him a metonym (in which a part evokes the whole) for their desired prosperity. However, institutional politics were unable to fully satisfy these desires, and citizens experienced rapid disillusionment with Lee. Furthermore, young and technologically savvy Koreans, who were familiar with expressing concern and desire and finding like-minded people

online, organized the *demos* outside institutional politics, subjecting Lee to scrutiny immediately after the election.

In this article, I first establish exuberant politics as a communicative dynamics of popular politics and detail the role of the Internet in producing it. Then I analyze the online discourses and street performances during the 2008 beef protests, which transformed Lee from a symbol of national prosperity to an elite who was out of touch with the South Korean public, reflecting on the meaning of democracy as embodied by the *demos*.

Methodologically, I analyze online postings and draw on "vernacular discourse" as an interpretive method. Vernacular discourse attends to conversations and debates emerging from local communities, with a focus on shared language practices that are not necessarily accessible or legible to the larger public (Finnegan, 2005; Hauser, 1999; Ono & Sloop, 1995). These communicative practices are critical avenues through which members express their experiences and construct the community. I identify recurring themes, images, and narratives that became prominent online and analyze the users' emerging understandings and shared judgments regarding beef importation, the government, and democracy.

I have collected and analyzed messages from two online communities. The first is *Agora*, South Korea's largest online forum dedicated to current affairs. The second is a smaller online community on Daum.net called *Ch'otpul Sonyŏŭi K'oria* ("Candle Girls' Korea"). These platforms complement each other and make this analysis possible. *Agora* is an open forum, where users address current affairs, debate them, and organize conservative or progressive users to dominate the space. The subdiscussion board dedicated to beef importation was the most popular on *Agora* during the first half of 2008, and at the peak of the controversy more than 10,000 images and messages were updated to the board daily, causing the website to crash and lose data. Candle Girls' Korea is one of many smaller communities dedicated to beef importation; the community was created in May 2008, and most of the participants are teenagers. A community of 2,900 members actively shared their opinions while reposting prominent images and messages from the broader online discussion, and content hyperlinked in this forum often included viral messages broadly circulated in cyberspace. As such, this smaller community originally served as a "sifting mechanism" for users and now can do the same for researchers, making it possible for them understand the prominence of particular themes and messages (J. Kang, 2012, p. 566).

The Exuberant Politics of Internet Activism: The *Demos* Uncontained by the *Police*

The term *populism* has been closely tied to powerful elites and the established political order capturing people's desire and presenting themselves as conveyors of popular will. However, this type of populism also faces an exuberant force of people that overflows and challenges the established order. Furthermore, the Internet increasingly serves as a place where popular politics are *produced* from below and without resorting to symbols provided by the elite. Rancière's distinction between *demos* and *police* is useful for understanding populism and envisioning its multiple forms.

A well-known form of populism is the *police* capturing the desires of and producing an identity for *demos*. For instance, McCarthyism during the Cold War created a subjectivity of good citizens who feared

communist infiltration and desired national stability, thus successfully mobilizing consensus among a broad array of Americans. By creating such subjectivity and affect for the *demos*, populism bypassed the consensus-building process and justified the work of the state (Black, 1970; Charland, 1987; Laclau, 2007). In *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau (2007) posits, "The constitution of the 'people' is the political act par excellence—as opposed to pure administration within a stable institutional framework" (p. 154). Furthermore, as Chakravartty and Roy's introduction to this Special Section illuminates, mediated politics increasingly exhibit "the main characteristics of *populist* political expression." The recent rise of nationalist and populist politics in Australia, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States constitutes the citizens in a similar way, simultaneously capturing and evoking the desire for national security and fear of Otherness—a phenomenon so prevalent that *xenophobia* was chosen as Dictionary.com's "word of the year" in 2016.

Despite a rise of populism that disproportionately supports nationalist agendas, the *demos* is not fully contained by the *police*. In recent work, I have presented captivation as a communicative dynamics of the Internet (J. Kang, 2016), but here I expand on this and further suggest that captivation offers an analytical tool for considering various configurations of both the *demos* and the *police*. The public captivation with a popular political object is a product of shared but often underarticulated desires and grievances at a given juncture. However, because the object is only a metonym for intense and often-heterogeneous desires, the public desire reflected on the object cannot be contained by it.

Understood as a metonymic process, the public's captivation with an issue or politician suggests two possibilities. On one hand, captivation works to "personalize" a complicated issue and support an object of fierce celebration or condemnation (D'Alleva, 2001, p. 88). The readers of this journal will be familiar with the rise of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Sanders, who had been considered too radical for middle-class Americans, emerged on the national political scene as a metonym for the will of the "99%" and broad suspicion of "corporate America" in the aftermath of the Occupy movement (Kazin, 2016). Similarly, the unique popularity of Trump metonymically indicates the shared but underarticulated grievances of the lower middle class in Appalachian and rural regions, who felt left behind in economic development and invisible to established politics (Thompson, 2017). A number of articles in this Special Section demonstrate populism in which charismatic leaders or governments, in the name of "the people," justify their agendas and speak on behalf of the masses against the liberal elite (e.g., see articles in this Special Section by Bulut & Yörük; Mulla; Pal et al.).

However, because a metonym is a partial and incomplete stand-in for the whole, the captivation with an elite cannot fully convey the desire of the *demos*, and furthermore serves to articulate the shared investments of the *demos*—revealing the inability of the *police* to contain it. This perhaps explains why a popular, rising leader often experiences intense disillusionment and criticism from supporters after winning an election. In the Korean case at hand, Lee's supporters quickly realized after his inauguration that Lee could not represent the will of his lower-middle-class supporters.

In this process of captivation and disenchantment, online communication allows the *demos* to organize without resorting to an established agenda or politician as an anchor for the metonym. The hypertextual architecture of the Internet allows for the formation of public opinion even before that

opinion is articulated in the language of established politics. Users circulate and recirculate the messages and images that captivate their attention, perhaps without even interpreting them. These texts then attract other users to experience the same captivation and to develop ad hoc alliances with one another (J. Kang, 2016). For instance, many critics described Occupy Wall Street as a frivolous youthful rebellion, citing the absence of a coherent agenda and the participation of heterogeneous groups. However, what captivated young Americans was a plausible plan to go to Wall Street and express the underarticulated but shared grievances that job prospects were dire, the gap between rich and poor was growing, and politicians were more responsive to corporate interests than to constituents. In 2008, Korean teenagers were captivated by the fact that American beef, should it be imported, would likely be served at school cafeterias, where they would have no choice but to consume it, and the government refused to listen to their concern. New media scholar Zizi Papacharissi (2014) argues that affective connections allow social media to “enable expression and information sharing that liberate the individual and collective imaginations” and “activate latent ties” (pp. 8–9). Through a shared sense of vulnerability to contaminated beef and to Lee’s neoliberal policies, Korean youth formed an affective network of the *demos* without being anchored in elite politicians or agendas. These dynamics create a picture of exuberant popular politics in which grassroots communication can generate politics that undermine the *police*.

Korean Youth in the New Millennium

Since the beginning of the 2008 beef protest, the participation of teenagers in junior high and high school was prominent. Teenagers were rather unusual political actors in the robust social movement tradition of the former authoritarian era (1948–1987) that had been driven by university students, labor unions, and radical activists. However, as the first generation born in the postauthoritarian era and a local variant of the global “digital natives,” these teenagers were prepared to make sense of beef importation and Lee’s neoliberal policies as a common concern and to voice their dissatisfaction on the Internet.

Born from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, the teenagers of 2008 were South Korea’s first generation exempt from ideological contestation between the authoritarian regimes and the radical social movement that achieved democratization in 1987. Despite only a few years of age difference, these teens had significantly more progressive attitudes than university students. In the early 2000s, universities buckled under the pressures of recent neoliberal reform resulting from the Asian financial crisis (1997–1998), significantly departing from their role during the authoritarian period as a bastion of radical social movement. Even though South Korea as a whole recovered from the crisis, youth unemployment remained more than twice the overall unemployment rate (9.3%, compared with overall unemployment of 3.3% in 2008) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). The opening of financial markets and an influx of foreign corporations added a particular anxiety for university students and employees alike to equip themselves for global competitiveness (Abelmann, Park, & Kim, 2009). In the face of this heightened educational and professional competition, university students could not afford to set aside career goals to pursue activism—as their 1980s predecessors had—for fear of falling behind. The conservative turn of university students appeared to be an irrevocable trend. In the 2007 presidential election, 46% of voters in their 20s cast their ballot for the conservative Lee, while only 21% voted for his liberal opponent. The shift among young voters was palpable compared with the same demographic

group's overwhelming support for the liberal candidate (59% to 35%) in the 2002 presidential election (Chung, 2012).

Meanwhile, in the first decade of the millennium, teenagers increasingly gained access to progressive knowledge and voiced their opinions. Starting in 2003, multiple editions of history textbooks became available, ranging from those that continued to parrot the regime's narrative to others that critically appraised the authoritarian governments and U.S. patronage. The Korean Teachers Union, formed in 1989 by democratization activists, further brought critical-thinking skills into the classroom ("Chönkyojo, sahoe," 2005). Like millennials in other countries, the students in these classrooms were comfortable with obtaining news online, openly expressing their thoughts, and finding like-minded people on social media (Prensky, 2001). Furthermore, since 2002, the format of Internet-born candlelight protests had established a movement repertoire for young Koreans (J. Kang, 2016). The teenagers of 2008 had already seen candlelight protests to commemorate two girls killed by a U.S. military vehicle in an accident in 2002, to resist proposed university admissions reform in 2005, and even to demand the abolishment of hairstyle regulation in high schools in 2005.

When beef importation was announced in April 2008, teenagers rallied themselves through heterogeneous personal networks and existing online communities, including the fan clubs of K-pop bands and forums dedicated to celebrities, humor, and digital cameras. Because the protests did not rely on an existing organization or leadership structure, it is difficult to pinpoint who was participating and why they decided to join. However, multiple sources report that during the early stage of the protests in May, over 80% of participants were teenagers (Agora P'yeindül, 2008).

Lee Myung-Bak's Populism: Capturing the Desire for Survival in the Neoliberal Era

The overwhelming popularity of Lee Myung-bak in the 2007 presidential election was a product of widespread public anxiety about neoliberal reforms and the desire for economic security and upward mobility. Even before the election, Lee had been considered a shoo-in with no viable competitor. The historically low voter turnout of only 63% (compared with 81% in 1997 and 71% in 2002, and later 76% in 2012) and the extraordinarily large gap between Lee and the liberal runner-up from the Democratic Party (46 % to 26%) illustrates the political atmosphere at the time (C. Kim, 2007).

During the campaign, images of Lee as a determined "bulldozer" politician with dramatic accomplishments became a metonym for Koreans' yearning for personal and national prosperity in the shadow of neoliberal restructuring (Shin-Yoon, 2005). When Lee was the mayor of Seoul (2002–2006), he drastically changed the cityscape by restoring the Ch'önggyech'ön stream from a hidden waterway to a tourist attraction, and he implemented a radical new public transportation system. "Lee speaks to conjure up vivid images," as political critic Kang Chun-man (2008, p. 67) noted. When reporters asked Lee about the most difficult aspect of the recovery of Ch'önggyech'ön, he presented the image of a dedicated, tireless mayor in his answer: "The conflict with the 220,000 merchants and 1,500 street vendors was the most challenging part. . . . I met with them more than 4,200 times to talk with and persuade them" (C. Kang, 2008, p. 67). Similarly, when Lee was running for president, he described his proposals as "7-4-7,"

evoking the state-of-the-art jet aircraft. With this, he promised to achieve a 7% annual growth rate, raise gross domestic product per capita to \$40,000, and advance Korea to the seventh largest economy in the world. These were unattainable goals, but they nevertheless presented a "spectacularization" of dramatic growth, harnessing Koreans' national pride (Chakravartty & Roy, this Special Section).

The image of Lee as a self-made man and determined entrepreneur enabled him to appeal to the lower class while nonetheless implementing policies against the interests of poor Koreans. Lee's slogan called for an "era of people's success," identifying with the hardworking poor. A television campaign states, "Lee Myung-bak is still hungry. Lee can't even waste time to eat in order to open up an era when every hardworking person can succeed." Another television campaign proclaims, "We have survived all odds, pulling wheelbarrows and running street stalls. . . . Let's enter into an era of people's success" (as cited in Shin & Lee, 2009, p. 283). These messages embody the desires of those who are hungry and perform manual labor but are determined to achieve upward mobility (Shin & Lee, 2009, p. 283). The narrative also combines Lee's personal trajectory as a self-made man with the shared national trajectory moving from suffering in a war-torn country to comfort and success.

As the *demos* was subsumed by an elite politician, popular demand and desire reinforced a form of *police* that contradicted the public interest. The image of Lee as a capable CEO of the country was a factor in his election victory, even despite numerous scandals involving embezzlement and stock price manipulation. Furthermore, as economists Shin Jin-wook and Lee Young-min (2009) note, Lee's image justified the privatization of public services and education in the name of "business efficiency" and "anti-bureaucracy" (p. 287). Shin and Lee call Lee's populism a "market populism" that primarily served the corporate interest, justifying deregulation, marketization, and monopolies; it was therefore a "populism without people" (p. 287).

"Mad Cow, Mad Education": The *Demos* Responding to Lee's Populism

In the midst of Lee's unwavering lead during the campaign, online enclaves were formed centering on criticism of his prosperity rhetoric and on bitterness toward the public that uncritically accepted it. With names such as "Anti Lee Myung-bak," these online communities drew a broad array of citizens who denounced Lee's policies—such as the pan-Korean Grand Canal, privatization of public corporations, and deregulation of medical insurance—for resorting to industrialization-era construction projects and a neoliberal outsourcing of public services ("Ch'ōtpul Chiphoe," 2010). In particular, Lee's education policies, such as the deregulation of private high schools and liberalization of university admissions, drew teenagers to these communities. In such spaces, Internet users developed vernacular criticisms of Lee, preparing for the national shift from support during the election to more critical perspectives.

In these communities, American beef importation emerged as a key object through which the *demos* developed a vernacular criticism of the class-based nature of Lee's neoliberal projects. The free trade agreement was expected to meaningfully hurt the typically small and independent South Korean cattle farmers, with the primary beneficiaries being South Korean conglomerates that would gain preferential access to the American automobile, telecommunication, and heavy industry markets.

Furthermore, South Korea's upper class would still be able to afford expensive but safe domestic beef; however, the lower classes would have limited choice, and students and military servicemembers no choice at all (No, 2009).

In the context of liberalized political culture and familiarity with social media, Korean teenagers were ready to perceive Lee's policies as a potential threat to their health and education, and to express these judgments on the Internet. With concern rising about contaminated beef, Internet users soon made the *mich'inso* ("mad cow") an icon for their protest. Various renderings were produced of a cow with a sponge-like brain painted on its forehead. Madness, as in "mad cow, mad education" or "mad cow, mad politics," quickly became a theme of chants and slogans expressing the immediate threat to young people's lives from both contaminated beef and Lee's policies.

In late April, the trope of madness captivated Korean youth by addressing the shared but underarticulated vulnerability to a fatal disease and to extreme educational competition. The resulting street protests beginning May 2 gathered teenagers under the banner of "You eat the mad cow," directly addressing Lee. With this vernacular trope of the mad cow, the protests rejected Lee's portrayal of health care, education, and survival in the global market as matters of personal choice, with little consideration for the unequal access to these resources. Figure 1 shows the mad cow icon with two protesters who climbed a McDonald's sign wearing masks of Lee Myung-bak and George W. Bush to represent the two men responsible for the importation of potentially dangerous beef. The protesters unfold the banner that reads, "No to mad cow import" below the image of a mad cow with a visibly porous brain and red-white-and-blue ears, indicating its U.S. origin.

The protests depicted the new import policy as threatening the lives of Korean citizens. Further, although visual parodies and the scientific reports circulating online continued to portray American beef as dangerous, the focus of protests both online and off- shifted to targeting Lee Myung-bak himself. Protesters held banners directly addressing Lee: "I am too young to die," "Can we recall the president?" "President eats Korean beef, and we eat imported beef." Protesters also wore cow outfits and installed sculptures of Lee and the mad cow.



Figure 1. A protest at McDonald's with a "mad cow" image. © Oh My News.

In addition to directly addressing the president, popular slogans and chants during the protests defied Lee's broader neoliberal policies. Education was the most prominent theme of the early protests; South Korean education was (and is) known for the most competition, longest study hours, and highest private education expenditure in the world ("Korean Youth," 2009). Protesters opposed Lee's proposals to introduce additional competitive measures among both students and schools—policies that led high schools to add another class period before the regular first class, dubbed "period 0." Student protesters brought out banners that read, "Our true movers are mad cow and mad education" and "Period 0 to students, debt to patients, precarious work to workers, mad cow and GMO for our dinner" (Ch'u, 2008). These parodies addressed the privatization of the universal health care system, the increase in contract workers in lieu of employees with benefits, and the pursuit of the free trade agreement. While Lee presented his policies as inevitable responses to an increasingly globalized and competitive economy, parodies instead represented these measures as bringing unreasonable hardships to the average citizen. These Internet-born parodies did not adopt the language of the *police*; however, vernacular parodies disrupted the government's framing of competitiveness as a personal and national goal and instead rearticulated beef import, privatization, and extreme academic competition as matters of collective concern.

With this increasing attention to the beef importation issue, many Koreans who voted for Lee began reappraising policies that largely overlooked inequality and social security but created an optimal environment for private corporations. Such rapid disillusionment reveals the temporary power of *police*, which cannot fully contain or embody popular desires. The public accepted Lee as a larger-than-life image, but Lee was then held responsible for the ideals and competencies projected onto him. The mad cow as a

vernacular symbol of the *demos* thus metonymically conveyed people's nascent criticisms of the import policy, neoliberal reforms, and a government perceived as not caring about its people's safety.

Demos on the Internet and in the Street: Outmaneuvering Institutional Politics

As the beef protests drew more students and regular citizens, the government and the conservative media aggressively rebuked the gatherings and their participants, labeling the public fear of mad cow disease an urban legend propagated by antigovernment radicals (U. Kim, 2008). On May 14, the South Korean government announced that it would prosecute Internet users who posted unsubstantiated information online as well as organizers of street gatherings. In responding to the spreading beef protests, the government and mainstream media alike viewed the protests through the lens of the *police*—the frame of conservative-progressive opposition. The protesters, however, did not respond with the language of the *police*; instead, they exceeded the bounds of institutional politics with the presence, network, and vernacular style of the *demos*.

Conservative and progressive presses quickly attended to the protests, respectively disapproving of them as mobilization by radicals or celebrating them as a new generation of political action. For instance, On May 7, five days after the first gathering against the "mad cow," leading conservative newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* reported on the existence of an organized coalition against U.S. beef import and concluded that the protesters were "directly and indirectly related to leftist organizations" (Lee, 2008, para. 3). Attributing the protests to organized activists, conservative presses labeled the teenage participants as a crowd summoned by these activists. Conservative *Dong-a Ilbo* published an op-ed titled "Internet Brainwashing," lamenting that "curious and scientifically minded teenagers are mustered by nonscientific propaganda" (Hö, 2008, para. 3).

Even though progressive newspapers celebrated the new wave of activism, they also attributed the protests to partisan politics. *Kyunghyang Sinmun* and *Hankyoreh*, two major progressive papers, took teenagers' voices from the street as counterevidence against the conservative portrayal. A 16-year-old girl was reported to say, "We are here to express our stress and discontent related to educational policies such as the immersive English courses, liberalization of regulation, and publication of student rankings" ("Kyoyuk," 2008, para. 2). In such reports, students demonstrated an aware and deliberate criticism of Lee's education policy (P. Kang, Pak, & Yu, 2008). With these voices, one *Hankyoreh* article concluded, "the ultimate cause of the so-called urban legends is the government, which pushed for beef import without public consent" (Ch'oe, 2008, para. 2). Despite the opposing interpretations, both the conservative and progressive media nevertheless "reduce *politics* to *police*," attributing the opposition and activism of young protesters to organized political action with formal intention (Laclau, 2007, p. 245).

Nevertheless, while mainstream presses debated the partisan nature of the protests, teenage participants were embodying a different politics entirely, and their spontaneous participation gave rise to a variety of collective responses to the government both online and in the street. When the government announced that it would prosecute protest organizers, Internet users on *Agora* developed an online campaign posting en masse to the bulletin board of the National Police Agency, all writing "Arrest me" (Agora P'yeindül, 2008). This was soon named the "Campaign for Ten Million Arrests," with the goal of

being detained in impractically large numbers to outmaneuver the government's efforts to subdue the beef protest (Agora P'yeindül, 2008).

Parody and subversion had been familiar practices online, appearing in response to controversial political and popular issues under the auspices of anonymity and rapid circulation. However, the beef protesters brought these formats into the streets, directly speaking back to authority with irreverent humor. As the protests grew to draw tens of thousands of participants nightly, the Seoul police denied permits in the name of public safety. Citing the illegality of the gatherings, riot police shot water cannons to disperse the protesters and arrested them. In response to this police violence, protesters developed creative slogans and performances. For example, protesters chanted "Warm water!" as they were doused by water cannons—parodically diminishing violence to simple discomfort from cold water. The recurrent theme of education also appeared in protesters' responses to police violence. Groups of junior high and high school students chanted, "You are responsible for our final exams!" as they confronted police until late in the evening. Some students brought desks and read books in front of the protest line; "Let us study," they told police (Song, 2008). With these responses, young participants deflated the validity of police demands and brought collective concerns about education to the foreground.

The young protesters did not principally intend to mock state authority, or have any formal intention of entering the *police* with their oppositional agendas. Rather, they organized the *demos* to destabilize the work of the *police* with the scale and scope of their connectedness and communicative patterns. The festive and irreverent crowds in 2008 were not merely a product summoned by Internet communities but a new type of collective that opened a space for outmaneuvering the *police* with its scale, rendering state authority an object of satire.

The participants appeared to find private pleasure in this public act. This enjoyment—what Lacan calls *jouissance*—draws from the impossibility of fully gaining the object of desire but nonetheless compels the subject to constantly attempt to transgress prohibitions in order to pursue this gap.² The young protesters refused to be confined to the ideological dialogue framed by mainstream media and politics. Instead, they outmaneuvered these conventions by occupying the city center and performing their radical attachment to the fantasy of liberating themselves from binding structures, ranging from police violence and authority to educational and ideological frameworks.

Inability to Contain the *Demos*: The Success and Decline of the Beef Protests

As the beef protests grew to become nightly gatherings in city centers across South Korea, online users circulated a proposal for a nationwide "One Million Candle March" scheduled for June 10. The date was the anniversary of the famous June 10 democratization protest of 1987 that forced then president Chun Doo-hwan (1981–1988) to accept a popular presidential election. The evocation of the iconic democratization movement drew many who had observed the beef protests with sympathy, particularly those who had participated in the 1980s democratization efforts.

² I am grateful to Meera Lee for pointing out the connection to *jouissance*.

Nonetheless, "democracy" as a trope had a different valence with the older and younger protesters. Some scholars from the 1980s democratization generation viewed the recurrence of the theme of democracy as an indication that the original democratization efforts inspired the 2008 protests (Lee, 2014; Sim, 2012). Politicians and progressive intellectuals were excited about the beef protest as an effective means of influencing institutional politics (the *police*), repealing the free trade agreement, and even impeaching the president. However, democracy as evoked by the young protesters instead marked demands for direct communication with government and grievances regarding Lee's use of procedurally lawful but democratically distasteful measures to contain the protests.

As the beef protests became increasingly framed as a movement for democracy, mainstream politicians, religious groups, and progressive intellectuals came to support the cause. In particular, the oppositional Democratic Party and activists against the FTA joined the crowd, citing a need for leadership at the powerful but unorganized gatherings. On June 2, a group of 100 university professors offered a joint statement rebuking beef importation and the Grand Canal project ("Ch'ötpul Chiphoe," 2010). The Catholic Priests for Justice released a public statement criticizing beef importation and the Grand Canal for "putting the socially and ecologically weak at risk" (Chang, 2008, para. 9). Growing support from these respected organizations pointed to the success of the youth-driven protests. Nevertheless, these older activists' visions of identifying leadership, securing legitimacy, and achieving institutional change coexisted awkwardly with the goals of younger participants.

The clash between old and young protesters became especially visible in online responses to a self-identified 11th-grader's online message, "This democratization is what my dad achieved in the basement interrogation room" (91nyönsaeng Alice, 2008). In her 140-line open letter to Lee Myung-bak posted to *Agora* on June 1, the author retold stories of her father fighting for democratization under the dictatorship of Chun. The following is a segment from the letter:

Democratic politics until three months ago was
the democracy that my father achieved
in the interrogation room in the basement
which he was dragged into
while his friend was dying next door
where he suffered all kinds of torture and interrogation.

Because of my father, his friends and colleagues
because of the precious democracy that they achieved
you will not be able to wield your power.

We have already experienced too much freedom
We have experienced freedom that even allows us to write critical
messages on the website of the president's office.

It is impossible to determine whether the letter was written by an 11th-grader, but its broad circulation offers a glimpse of popular perceptions. The message received more than 3,000 responses on *Agora* and

went viral from there (Agora P'yeindŭl, 2008).³ Some expressed agreement, others felt uncomfortable identifying Lee Myung-bak with authoritarian leaders, and yet others were surprised at the level of sophistication found in a high school student's writing. Many self-identified members of the democratization generation expressed gratitude for the author's acknowledgment of their achievement in 1987. Contributors noted, "I can't stand the fact that we are regressing back to 20 years ago"; "Tears came down from my eyes. See how we achieved democracy"; and "History repeats itself. This document shows why we should always be alert" (Ent'ŏ, 2008, para. 6). Converging with the June 10 protest, the beef protests became labeled as a movement for democracy.

Ironically, the growing popular appeal of the beef protest marked the beginning of the end, and the participation of activists and politicians in particular jeopardized the position of young participants. As professional activists, trade unions, and nonprofit organizations began attending protests en masse, they relegated teenagers to secondary roles and focused on institutional goals. One such example was the organization of the "candle reservists." When online communities were preparing for the June 10 march, some users proposed that those who served in the military attend the protests in uniform to show their patriotism. These men assumed the role of protecting the "weaker group," including teenagers. A candle reservist's message on *Agora* reads, "Students should not get hurt. Your parents wouldn't want it. . . . Trust adults once" (Winterer, 2008).

The participation of organized activists and increasing attention to institutional goals embodied the logic of the *police*, leaving little room for the affective investment and radical visions of earlier protests. On Candle Girls' Korea, a teenager expressed frustration over the reservists in a post titled "I don't want to be protected by reservists":

I was carried outside by them. I was excluded. The feeling is beyond description. . . .
I came to voice my opinion. How come they force me to give up and hide behind them? Only because I am a girl? Only because I am a "woman"?
I don't mean to reject any help. I just want to be able to decide, do my part, collaborate, and sympathize. (Nŏege Tokbaek, 2008, para. 4-6)

The author felt that she was unduly relegated to the margins, even though she viewed herself as a political actor. Indeed, sociologist Yi Hae-jin's (2009) survey of participants suggests a changing affective investment at the maturation of the beef protests. Students who had participated during the earlier phase tended to participate repeatedly (72%), while few of those who joined after the June 10 protest returned (only 14%). Similarly, sociologist Kim Chul-kyu's (2010) work confirms that teenagers in the early phase viewed themselves as active participants in the loose network of nontraditional protests, while those who attended after June 10 viewed themselves primarily as spectators.

³ This post was reprinted as one of the most influential during the period of beef protests in a book published under the collective authorship of *Agora* users, entitled *Taehanminkuk Sangsik Sajŏn Agora* ("Agora, the Common Sense Dictionary of the Republic of Korea").

The June 10 protest was an apparent success. Lee's approval rating plummeted to single digits nationwide, and he publicly apologized for the second time, accompanied by the resignation of his chief of staff and seven other cabinet ministers (Ryu, 2008). Lee also promised additional negotiation of the FTA. Oppositional politicians, activists, and civic groups joined together in Lee's moment of weakness to channel the power of the crowd into tangible political changes. However, it was now clear that there was little more to be gained by further protest, and the protests began to dwindle in late June (Hong, 2008).

Nonetheless, in marked contrast with the conventional success of the protests is how teenage participants began withdrawing at the height of the protests' influence on the *police*. This attests that what was conveyed in the young protesters' slogan of "democracy" differed significantly from the meaning of the word for older activists. For teenagers in 2008, the trope of democracy was not a foundation for entering into institutionalized politics but a means to speak back to authority with the affective investment and radical imagination of the *demos*. When the protests shifted to more institutional goals, teenagers lost interest.

Conclusion

The day after the Million Candle March on June 10, 2008, renowned conservative writer Yi Mun-yŏl (2008) declared at an interview, "The protests were an admirable victory of digital populism" (para. 1). He continued, "The protests were admirable and terrible because this pattern can be used for other important national events" (M. Yi, 2008, para.1). The awe and fear expressed in Yi's remark—"admirable and terrible"—offer a glimpse of the responses from established politics and media toward the unprecedented Internet-born mass protests.

Despite the political impact, the collective on the Internet and in the street defied easy categorization or containment by institutional politics. The protesters observed in 2008 were not necessarily informed citizens, but neither were they a homogeneous group mobilized by a leader. However, young Koreans' captivation with their own vulnerability to mad cow disease turned them into critical collective actors who developed a vernacular critique of Lee pursuing the FTA, market competition, and deregulation while forsaking public health and social security. The protesters might not have been able to formally articulate the political meaning of the mass protests, parodies, and subversion, but they nonetheless intuitively understood that they were undertaking a distinct action that was political in nature. This youthful collective and its carnivalesque subversions reflected the formation of *demos* beyond the demands of institutional democratization (the old democratic agenda), outmaneuvering the Lee government's attempt to justify beef importation and broader neoliberal reform as an inevitable global flow and matter of individual choice.

The *demos* organizing themselves against the *police* reappeared recently, bringing even more dramatic political consequences. In October 2016, South Koreans again began pouring into downtown Seoul with candles—this time also with candle images lit on smartphone screens and apps to coordinate the gatherings. The series of 20 mass protests demanding that President Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) step down drew more than 17 million people, and the Internet-born collective eventually put sufficient

pressure on the National Assembly to impeach Park and later on the Constitutional Court to uphold the impeachment.

The rise and fall of Park follows a path similar to Lee's, with even more dramatic turns. In the tight 2012 presidential race, Park won by a margin of only 3.6%, owing largely to voters in their 50s and older who gave 67% of their vote to Park. Park's image as the daughter of President Park Chung-hee (1961–1979) drew voters who could still remember his rule. Older Koreans projected their image of the longtime leader, who spearheaded the country's dramatic industrialization and "anticommunist" efforts, onto his daughter. Furthermore, they remembered her as the tragic figure who witnessed the assassination of both of her parents and as a poised acting first lady after the death of her mother in 1974. For these voters, Park Geun-hye was a metonym of their nostalgia for a strong leader and a more secure nation in the face of the faltering economy and uncertainty on the northern half of the Korean peninsula.

On October 24, 2016, a scandal arose about the influence of Choi Soon-sil, a longtime friend of Park. Several news media reported that Choi had access to classified documents and edited Park's important speeches on foreign policy and the North-South relationship. Initial public captivation focused on Choi and the sensational details surrounding her, such as her alleged connection to a cult and her daughter's dubious admission to prestigious Ewha University. Only four days after the initial scandal, on October 29, 2016, the first candlelight protest was held in downtown Seoul.

The focus of the protests then shifted to Park and her privatization of power and negligence of duty as president. The protests furthermore pressured the oppositional parties to impeach Park. The opposition was reluctant to pursue impeachment because they were far from the two-thirds majority (200) in the National Assembly required to do so. However, the 2 million participants (about 2.5% of the entire country's population) at the December 3 protest nonetheless prompted the three oppositional parties to jointly initiate the impeachment proposal. On December 9, 2016, the National Assembly voted overwhelmingly to impeach Park, with at least 63 members of the governing Saenuri Party also voting in favor. On March 3, 2017, the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment, officially firing Park.

Corruption scandals are not new to Korean politics, especially toward the end of a president's tenure. However, in 2016, the image of Park that helped her during the election turned against her. Her family history, combined with the corruption scandal, created the perception of Park as an anachronistic leader who was fundamentally authoritarian in her approach and attempted to manipulate citizens with outdated appeals to national security or patriotism. Much like Lee's case in 2008, public captivation with a political leader later induced dramatic disillusionment.

The course of the 2008 beef protests informs recent debates regarding the rise of populist leaders and Internet activism. What I have presented here is a dynamic process, in which a political leader and agenda can achieve overwhelming public support but soon become subject to public scrutiny or criticism. A politician or agenda can gain support when it metonymically captures existing grievances and desires (ranging from economic anxiety to desire for a secure nation to a sense of being left behind in national development); however, such shared desires cannot be fully contained by the metonyms, and

inevitably citizens become disenchanting. People doing politics—the *demos*—without resorting to institutional resources have the potential to embody exuberant politics by circulating captivating objects, building affective networks around these objects, and performing irreverent subversion of authority without fear of persecution.

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