ORGANIZING AT THE MARGINS

The Symbolic Politics of Labor in South Korea and the United States

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THE SYMBOLIC LEVERAGE OF LABOR

SEIU gets their moral center from the janitors. . . . We are the campaign that people in the public look at and gives SEIU its glamour and identity. People say all the time that janitors are the "urban farmworkers." They have that kind of moral cause that people are really able to unite around. . . . We put janitors forward as examples of what's wrong—economic injustice. But they are not victims of it, because people are standing up and fighting militant actions in the street. The personal stories that we put out there [about the hardships of health care workers, immigrants, and mothers] . . . in my opinion, that's really where public support comes from.

—Service Employees International Union (SEIU) organizer

When I see middle-aged or elderly women [*ajumma*] find a way through labor unions to show off the abilities and skills they have had all these years, it is moving and inspirational. I see how all their energies and capacities were repressed, all because they were women, working at the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, earning minimum wages, as lowly janitors and irregular [*pijŏng'gyujik*] workers. These people meet women's movements and women's labor unions and they just blossom and come to life. There are some amazing orators and great leaders, and that's because their stories are rooted in life experiences. Sixty-something union members saying they can now live with pride. . . . It's only when the majority of the public participates that we'll see meaningful change.

—Korean Women's Trade Union (KWTU) organizer

The struggles of janitors as well as other low-paid service workers—many of whom are immigrants, people of color, and women—demonstrate that building power from the margins is not only possible but *pivotal* to the future of workers and their collective organizations in the twenty-first century. The unexpected

makeover of one of the most unglamorous segments of the U.S. workforce speaks to the transformative potential of marginality. By rendering the injustice of poverty wages and social inequality both intimate and public, SEIU has refashioned the identity of janitors from one of the most undervalued and demeaned segments of society into the "moral center" of the most rapidly growing union in the United States. The use of tactics and vocabularies from civil rights–inspired unions such as the United Farm Workers (UFW) in the 1960s and 1970s has also garnered rare public support for unpopular trade unions. As the etymological origin of the word janitors to the two-headed Roman god Janus suggests, the role of janitors as doorkeepers or, more specifically, guards to the gates of heaven, makes the figure of the janitor a powerful catalyst of transitions and new beginnings.[1] Since the SEIU launched its morally charged "Justice for Janitors" (JforJ) campaign in 1985, one hundred thousand new janitors as well as many other low-paid service workers such as home care workers, nursing care workers, and security guards have joined the union's ranks. While its dynamic growth and aggressive organizing campaigns have created schisms and conflicts, the SEIU has led one of the most decisive shifts in the contemporary U.S. labor movement.

Likewise, in South Korea the growing ranks of *pijŏng'gyujik* (hereafter translated as "irregular" or "nonstandard") workers—many of whom are women employed in low-paid and insecure jobs—are redefining the landscape of unionism. By "irregular" workers, I refer to those workers employed outside the boundaries of full-time work under a single employer, including part-time, temporary, subcontracted, independently contracted, and daily workers among others, and thus, often denied basic rights entitled to fully employed workers such as paid sick and vacation leave, employer-paid health care, unemployment compensation, and seniority. No longer willing to accept the stigma and chronic poverty associated with work on the "lowest rungs of the social hierarchy," a new generation is rising up against the rampant cost-cutting and discrimination associated with the post-IMF deregulated labor relations climate. While "elderly women" and "lowly janitors" do not represent the "typical" image of a militant and male trade unionist, they too are joining unions and taking to the streets. Women's movement organizations and newly formed independent women's unions provide an important vehicle to empower "sixty-something union members" to live with pride and dignity, according to the KWTU organizer quoted above. For those who never imagined wearing a union vest or participating in a "demo" (*taemo*), a colloquial term for mass protests, the experience of speaking out against the unjust terms of irregular employment is both uplifting and transformative not only for individual workers but also for the broader labor movement. In addition to striking workers in the

auto and steel factories, shipbuilding and transportation, telecommunications and other white-collar sectors, images of union struggles now include the primarily female workforce of golf game assistants and home study tutors misclassified as independent contractors; hotel room cleaners, school cafeteria workers, and train attendants employed under outsourced and often negligent third parties; and telephone operators and retail cashiers employed under highly insecure and unregulated short-term contracts.

The upsurge of labor unrest by atypical and vulnerable segments of the workforce in South Korea and the United States as well as around the world is reviving interest in the transformation of trade unions and labor movements, more broadly (Clawson 2003; Cornfield and McCammon 2003; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Milkman 2006; Moody 1997; Munck and Waterman 1999; Voss and Sherman 2000; Turner and Hurd 2001). Despite widespread consensus from both sides of the political spectrum that trade unions have become obsolete in a globalizing world, many are beginning to deliver optimistic forecasts for the future. The development of new organizational strategies and forms that can outsmart anti-union employers (e.g., comprehensive organizing campaigns), outmaneuver transnational corporations (e.g., consumer-student boycotts, transnational labor coalitions, cross-border organizing), and overcome overlapping forms of social, economic, and political disadvantage (e.g., community unionism, labor-community coalitions) represent hopeful signs of change amidst a backdrop of dwindling union density, deepening income polarization, and deteriorating labor standards.[2] While labor scholars and practitioners debate the pros and cons of different strategies and organizing models, most agree that the narrow, self-interested unionism of the post-1945 era has reached its limits. What we find, in particular, is renewed interest in the role of labor as a dynamic social movement, replete with contentious politics and collective mobilization (Clawson 2003; Fantasia and Voss 2004; Lopez 2004; Moody 1997; Turner and Hurd 2001).

The proliferation of vibrant forms of collective action that go beyond organized labor's traditional weapon—the strike—and mobilize the broader public alongside unions calls attention to the significance of the *symbolic* as a key site of contestation in contemporary labor struggles. The fight against economic injustice invariably includes another conception of justice that is rooted in the cultural or symbolic. The overlapping nature of such struggles is particularly salient for workers situated at the bottom of the socioeconomic and symbolic order. Challenging economic marginalization often entails overcoming "institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible," thus intertwining what Nancy

Fraser calls "struggles for recognition" with "struggles for redistribution" (1995, 70–71; 1997).

The entanglement of the material and symbolic also foregrounds the importance of the *public,* or perhaps more fittingly, "counterpublics" as driving forces of change (see Fraser 1996; Warner 2002). While the physical gathering of a broad array of individuals during a public protest is crucial for demonstrating strength in numbers, the morally charged language that is circulated on protest signs and in protest chants as well as in the media evokes a longer history of discursively mediated struggles on behalf of the poor, the excluded, and the marginalized. Using the signs, slogans, and vocabularies of past social movement legacies to revalue the identities and contributions of devalued members of society is crucial to reconfiguring the hierarchies that underpin and reproduce relations of economic domination and subordination. In other words, influencing how people think and act in relation to each other is about more than just the art of communication. The symbolic battleground of contemporary workers' struggles are reflective of, in Pierre Bourdieu's words, broader "political struggles...for the power to impose the legitimate vision of the social world...and the direction in which it is going and should go" (Bourdieu 2000, 185).

To better understand the potential leverage that derives from the symbolic and public dimensions of workers' struggles, we need to eschew the tendency to treat struggles over meaning and values as separate and unrelated to struggles over the distribution of power and resources.[3] Too often, the colorful and dramatic aspects of public protests are dismissed as attention-grabbing tactics with little staying power over the long term. We see this in the thinking of union organizers and researchers that deem public sentiment as an important but ultimately fleeting and intangible source of support. While it is certainly true that appealing to the public can have limited and even detrimental effects, neglecting to examine the interplay between the cultural and structural basis of worker power leaves some crucial questions unanswered: Why have the struggles of some of the most vulnerable, as opposed to most powerful, workers become such a revitalizing force for crisis-ridden labor movements in today's global economy? What is the significance of the symbolic and public dimensions of struggles for marginalized groups of workers? How do these struggles help change the unequal balance of power between workers and those entities that use and benefit from their labor? In other words, what exactly are the mechanics of converting social and economic marginality into a concrete form of leverage?

Building Power from the Margins: A Comparative Study

To answer the questions above, I compare the struggles of workers employed at the bottom of labor market hierarchies in two distinct national contexts: South Korea and the United States. In both countries, this stratum of the workforce disproportionately represents historically disadvantaged groups that have faced and continue to face barriers to obtaining higher-paid and higher-skilled employment. Racialized groups of immigrants and women in the United States and socially disadvantaged women in South Korea are a predominant part of the marginalized workforce in each country, though other kinds of workers (e.g., youth, the elderly, the disabled, ex-offenders, former welfare recipients, and those with low education levels) also can be found in the low-paid, service workforce. The growth of flexible employment relationships such as part-time, temporary, independently contracted, subcontracted, and daily work (Cranford and Vosko 2006; Gonos 1998; Gottfried 1992; Houseman and Polivka 2000; Kelleberg, Reskin, and Hudson 2000) has rendered marginalized workers particularly susceptible to precarious and unfavorable wage bargains. Although there are certainly exceptions, in comparison to workers in full-time, permanent jobs, workers in flexible employment relationships usually receive fewer benefits and statutory entitlements, are subject to a greater risk of employer abuse, and are less likely to be unionized.

To understand how and under what conditions marginalized workers are attempting to overcome downgraded forms of flexible employment, I analyze the dynamics of workers' struggles on multiple scales—from the local and national to the global. While studies of labor movement revitalization in the United States provide the most concrete understanding of how unions are organizing new sectors of the workforce, there have been limited attempts to interrogate their "connections with dynamics at play in other places, and in wider regional, national and transnational arenas" (Hart 2002, 14). We know little about how labor movements in other national contexts are responding to similar conditions of crises associated with global economic restructuring and labor market deregulation. We also know little about the relationship of their struggles with respect to each another. To bring a much needed cross-national lens to the study of labor revitalization, I focus on the dynamics of change in South Korea and the United States.

On the surface, these two countries seem an unlikely pair for comparison; they represent two places with asymmetrical trajectories of economic development

and divergent histories of trade unionism. South Korea is studied primarily as a developing nation or a newly industrializing country; whereas, the United States is studied as an industrialized or advanced capitalist nation. Korean unions are recognized as one of the world's most militant and mobilized labor movements, taking radical political stands against authoritarian regimes, free trade agendas, and neoliberal economic policies. By contrast, U.S. unions are characterized as highly bureaucratized and conservative organizations that are oriented primarily toward servicing its members' narrow economic interests. South Korea is also one of the few countries in the world in which enterprise unionism is dominant. Unlike the occupation- and industry-based unionism in the United States, Korean workers have historically affiliated with unions at the enterprise level. While this structure is conducive for strengthening solidarity among workers and management at the company level, in South Korea successive military dictatorships have historically used it to suppress independent labor militancy and prevent the broader consolidation of worker power at the industry and regional levels (Suh 2003). Given these differences, the U.S. labor movement is typically compared to other industrialized countries in the Global North (Fairbrother and Yates 2003; Griffin, McCammon, and Botsko 1990; Western 1997), while the Korean labor movement is conventionally compared to other newly industrialized countries (NICs) in the Global South, formerly referred to as the Third World, and the East Asian region (Deyo 1989).

The compressed nature of Korea's industrialization over the past three decades, however, requires that we traverse the conventional divides that have defined comparative research. Rather than mismatched opponents, the United States and South Korea face each other as economic competitors at century's end. The United States remains the largest world economy with a gross domestic product (GDP) of $10.4 trillion and a per capita GDP of $37,600 (2002), but its growth rates have stagnated in the context of heightened global competition and market liberalization. After two decades of stunning economic growth, South Korea ranks as the twelfth largest economy in the world with a GDP of $477 billion and a per capita GDP of $19,600 (2001) and has joined the ranks of wealthier nations in the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development). However, since the 1980s, Korea has faced intense pressure to liberalize its markets and open its borders to foreign investment and goods. Manufacturing workers in Korea, who led an upsurge in labor unrest in the late 1980s and secured significant wage and benefit gains, are now confronted with similar forces of capital mobility and industrial restructuring that U.S. workers faced a decade prior. Widespread insecurity in the form of nonstandard employment arrangements, weakened labor protections, and reduced social wages also

beleaguers the rapidly growing workforce of low-paid service workers in Korea and the United States. In both countries deepening institutional crises related to global economic restructuring and labor market deregulation have created pressures for national labor movements to redefine their priorities, including a parallel emphasis on organizing the rapidly growing ranks of nonunion workers. While different histories inform the significance of each labor movement's changing priorities, they reflect striking similarities in the way crisis-ridden unions are attempting to adapt to the changing world of work and politics.

Given the stark disparities that once characterized the South Korean and the U.S. labor movements, what explains their converging trajectories? How are increasingly crisis-ridden unions concretely challenging their eroding base of power in a context of intensified global competition, capital mobility, industry transformations, and labor market deregulation? What do these dilemmas illuminate about how workers and their collective organizations can build power in today's global economy?

The Shifting Basis of Worker Power under Globalization

This book's central contention is that profound shifts in the balance of power among labor, capital, and the state have redefined how workers and their collective organizations can generate leverage during the course of a labor dispute, placing increased significance in the symbolic dimensions of labor's leverage. While colorful, dramatic, and public actions are common characteristics of protest politics, symbolic leverage is about more than tactics and strategies; it recognizes that the social exchange of labor for a wage is grounded as much in moral and cultural understandings as in economic calculations about profit and efficiency. It also recognizes when conventional forms of worker power such as the right to form unions and the capacity to strike have been severely eroded, workers can still exercise potentially potent forms of leverage by drawing upon the contested arena of culture and public debates about values. For workers located at the margins of the economy and society, this often entails drawing on recognized and legitimate forms of social injustice that have not only gained meaning and social influence during previous historical struggles but also continue to resonate in new historical settings.

Two factors have fueled the shift toward symbolic leverage. First, transnational flows of capital, labor, ideas, and goods across national borders have introduced new dilemmas for national labor movements, not just for manufacturing workers

but also for service workers. While the age of industrialization strengthened the muscle of the mass strike and the powerful trade unions that carried them out, the transition to service-based economies in a rapidly globalizing economy is shifting the basis of worker power to historically unorganized and disadvantaged workers employed in low-paid, insecure service jobs. For national labor movements that historically built their base of power on more powerful segments of the workforce in manufacturing, construction, and transportation, this means figuring out how to rebuild the basis of worker power from a position of relative weakness as opposed to relative strength. Ironically, the very processes that have rendered historically disadvantaged workers such as immigrants, women, and people of color the targets of cost-cutting employer practices have also laid the groundwork for the resurgence of social movement–inspired forms of unionism that seek to overcome the social and cultural as well as economic conditions of worker exploitation. The state is an active force of intervention in reconfiguring national labor markets along existing and new lines of inequality, emphasizing the state's continued importance in mediating and directing the global forces of change.

Second, the reconfiguration of employment relationships along flexible and fragmented lines requires different approaches to unionism. Subcontracting, independent contracting, temporary agency employment, and other forms of triangulated employment exacerbate structural ambiguities over what constitutes a "worker" and an "employer" (Cobble and Vosko 2000; Gottfried 1992). As such, the legality of workers' representational organizations and their right to negotiate bargaining agreements is often discredited by employers or the state (or both) from the onset of a collective dispute. To overcome such legal barriers, marginalized workers are attempting to redefine the nature of employer-employee relationships in the eyes of the public, as opposed to the narrow confines of legal and contractual interpretation. While demands for social justice must navigate institutionally and historically sedimented relations of power and difference that have included some while excluding others, the organizational and cultural repertoires of past movement struggles provide marginalized workers with a distinct array of strategies and vocabularies that can undermine official sources of authority such as the law and justify alternative applications of justice. Social movement legacies also provide ongoing moral repertoires that can revalue the identities and contributions of devalued groups in the context of chronic poverty and intensifying inequality.

The following sections seek to reconceptualize national specificities in relation to global processes of change, as well as rethink labor politics and organization in new ways. First, I emphasize the importance of evaluating

the shifting basis of worker power in the context of local, national, and global dynamics of change. Beverly Silver's analysis (2003) of workers' movements on a world-scale is crucial to my discussion, though I argue that she neglects to examine the central dynamics of struggle when it comes to some of the most vulnerable, as opposed to most powerful, groups of workers. Second, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic struggles (1989, 1991, 2000), and classification struggles (1984) more specifically, to develop an analytic of symbolic leverage. Although his work in this area is commonly applied to explain the struggles of the elite, it provides crucial insight into how workers and their collective organizations can convert seemingly negative forms of marginality into concrete sources of leverage. However, putting Bourdieu's ideas to work for those on the margins requires radically rethinking the dynamics of symbolic struggles when waged from below.

Labor's Leverage: Rebuilding Workers' Associational Power

Whether it is coined the age of "empire" (Hardt and Negri 2000), "millennial capitalism" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), or a new mode of capitalist domination under "flexible accumulation" (Harvey 1989), scholars across disciplinary boundaries agree that the contemporary period of global capitalism and its associated practices of labor deregulation, privatization, and flexibility are synonymous with the deterioration of working-class organizations on a global scale. The erosion of the nation-state and its capacity to control global flows is implicated in downward pressures on workers and their collective organizations (Tilly 1995). Gone is the old system of bargaining in which workers and employers negotiate over wages and working conditions. Gone is the system of stable employment under Fordist mass production, which provided industrial welfare for privileged sectors of the working class. Instead, future generations of labor increasingly represent traditionally disadvantaged workers—women, immigrants, and other socially marginalized groups—that are employed under lower-paid and more insecure forms of flexible employment, particularly in expanding sectors of the service-producing economy (Sassen 1998, 137–151). While many call for the creation of new social imaginaries that capture the changing demographics of the global working class, few provide concrete insight into how those incorporated into new capitalist work arrangements can transform the inequality and polarization that are endemic to them. Rather, scholars such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) coin provocative but

superficial categories such as the "multitude" to illustrate how the isolated and localized struggles of the disenfranchised, landless, and urban poor can somehow join together and catalyze systemic transformation at the global level.

Part of the lack of depth regarding alternative class politics can be attributed to the failure to investigate the interplay between workers' struggles at the local and national level and broader global economic shifts. It can also be attributed to the inability to specify exactly how the shifting balance of power among labor, capital, and the state under processes of globalization is producing new conditions of struggle for workers and their collective organizations. By *globalization,* I refer to a set of contradictory processes on multiple scales that seek to reorganize relations of power and difference according to the profit-driven pursuits of capital over the values of sustainable human and ecological life (see McMichael 2005). Beverly Silver's (2003) influential study of the long-term, world-scale patterning of labor unrest is an important intervention into this debate. Through her rigorous empirical investigation of the "relational processes among 'cases' (workers and workers' movements located in different states/regions) on a world scale across both time and space," Silver provides key analytical tools for identifying the development of new forms of worker power under world historical capitalist transformation.

The theoretical foundation of Silver's analysis is the recognition that workers cultivate different and interrelated forms of power to secure economic and political concessions from employers and the state. Building on Erik Olin Wright's conceptual categories (2000, 962), Silver (2003, 13) distinguishes *structural power,* which stems from workers' location in the economic system, from *associational power,* which derives from workers' self-organization into trade unions, political parties, and other collective organizations. Structural power, which is most commonly associated with the economic leverage a strike yields, is most effective during the early phases of industrial development, when capital and the state are most vulnerable to the withdrawal of labor at the point of production and thus most willing to make concessions to workers and their collective organizations. However, as capitalists relocate production to lower-waged regions to weaken organized labor's hold on wages and working conditions, workers face heightened competition as well as more repressive state controls against labor militancy, which hamper the effectiveness of previously successful methods such as the mass strike. In the latter cases, workers can compensate for weaker levels of structural power by strengthening the basis of their *associational power.* Although Silver (2003, 14) narrowly defines associational power in terms of state legal frameworks regarding how unions can be established and what they can bargain about collectively with employers,

her empirical discussion of Indian and Chinese textile workers in the early part of the twentieth century and of South African, Brazilian, and Korean automobile workers in the latter part of the century shows that workers relied on extralegal sources such as multiclass political alliances with national democracy movements to strengthen the basis of their associational power (Silver 2003, 90–91, 94–97; also see Koo 2001; Seidman 1994).

Silver's relational analysis not only highlights the significance of a diverse array of strategies and organizational forms—beyond the strike and trade union frameworks—that can underpin the basis of workers' associational power, but it also highlights the increased significance of associational power itself. This is particularly important for previously manufacturing-based labor movements that are grappling with the challenges of how to rebuild their collective organizations in the context of heightened competition, transnational capital mobility, and global economic restructuring. As capital shifts the site of its domestic investment into a new array of service-producing sectors, nontraditional working-class actors (women, people of color, and immigrants) are increasingly recruited to fill the growing ranks of low-paid service work, groups with whom existing unions have little to no linkages (Arrighi 1990). State deregulation of employment relationships and labor markets, which tilt the balance of power in favor of employers, also leave workers with little recourse against intensified wage cutting and employer abuse. Despite these obstacles, Silver (2003, 110) points to successful cases in the United States such as the "Justice for Janitors" campaign and local living wage movements to show that marginalized workers can effectively pressure employers whose image and profit is tied to a fixed location "by engaging in a strategic rethinking of how to leverage 'associational power.'"

To take Silver's claims about associational power seriously, however, we need to engage in a more nuanced discussion of how and under what conditions marginalized workers can leverage alternative sources of associational power. Silver's discussion of associational power is largely subordinated to her discussion of structural power, and what happens to workers' leverage as a result of global capital mobility in manufacturing industries. While she recognizes the significance of other factors such as national democracy movements and community-based organizing in strengthening the basis of workers' associational power, she fails to incorporate such insights into her theoretical discussion. In doing so, we have limited insight regarding how workers, particularly those employed on the bottom rungs of the labor market, can renew the basis of their associational power in the face of eroding labor rights and downgraded employment relationships. We also cannot account for how institutional structures of

labor and employment regulation affect the ability of workers to exercise effective forms of associational power.

The establishment of national labor laws and trade union frameworks was pivotal in the expansion of industrialized labor movements. However, the codification of workers' rights under various national labor law frameworks had differential impacts on the character of workers' associational power. In the United States, workers fought vigorously for the freedom of association and the right to strike; however, fierce employer resistance to the passage of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) resulted in the transformation of militant industrial unions into highly bureaucratic and service-oriented unions that were narrowly focused on improving the living standards of their own members (Brody 1993; Lichtenstein 2002).

The uneasy relationship between worker protests and the labor laws can also be seen in post-1978 reform China (C. K. Lee 2007). By channeling labor protests into legally circumscribed grievance procedures, the Chinese state has been able to quell mounting worker discontent in China's rapidly expanding sunbelt. However, by imbuing the "rule of law" with contractual authority, the state has provided discontented workers with an unintended source of moral legitimacy. While the long-term implications of struggles over the law are difficult to assess, Ching Kwan Lee (2007, 238) emphasizes that what is important is not the codification of labor rights per se but the recognition that contested struggles over the "rule of law" directly shape the expression and efficacy of workers' associational power.

Struggles over the rule of the law and its moral and cultural underpinnings represent a crucial feature of the twenty-first century labor relations climate. This is due not only to heightened employer resistance to the existence of unions and their control over the price of labor under the banner of neoliberal globalization, but also to the proliferation of irregular forms of employment that complicate the ability of workers to exercise basic associational rights.

Irregular employment, also referred to as atypical, casual, contingent, nonstandard, and precarious employment, is essentially defined by what it is *not:* a stable, permanent job under a single employer that is regulated under protective labor law frameworks. Through a process of reclassification, irregular employment places workers in the "cracks" and "fissures" of formal employment—in what may be called a state of "legal liminality," that is, a state of institutional exception in which workers are neither fully protected by nor fully denied the rights of formal employment (see Rothenbuhler 1988). As such, labor struggles increasingly take the form of classification struggles aimed at redefining the terms and conditions of the employment contract (which I discuss in greater

detail in the next section). Interestingly, these struggles are less about their official contractual expression under the rule of law than about what Emile Durkheim (1984, 316–320) calls the noncontractual elements of contracts: the principles of reciprocity and cooperation originating in the wills of consenting parties that underpin the foundational authority of all contracts, either verbal or written.

Given the difficulties of rebuilding the associational power of irregularly employed workers through existing institutional avenues such as labor law reform and formal grievance procedures, cases in South Korea and the United States reveal that marginalized workers are challenging the legitimacy of their employment contracts by highlighting the chronic poverty and material deprivation associated with structurally ambiguous employment. In other words workers are seeking to rebuild the basis of their associational power by rearticulating the moral norms and cultural values that underpin the social exchange of labor for a wage. This is particularly the case for marginalized workers such as immigrants and women in low-paid service work that have limited capacity to strengthen the legitimacy of their collective demands against employers and the state in the face of legal opposition and weak levels of structural power. To uncover the dynamics of this process, I turn to the insights of Pierre Bourdieu and his discussion of symbolic struggles.

The Symbolic Struggles of Labor

Symbolic power is one of the most fundamental mechanisms of change in the social world (Bourdieu (1984, 1989, 1991, 2000). Put simply, symbolic power is the power of naming. It is "in a sense a politics of perception aimed at making or subverting the order of things by transforming or conserving the categories through which it is perceived" (Bourdieu 2000, 185–186). Its power to influence stems from cognitive and cultural struggles waged by social actors competing for the "authority to impose legitimate knowledge of the sense of the social world, its present meaning, and the direction in which it is going and should go" (Bourdieu 2000, 185). Cognitive struggles are more than just battles over ideas, however, and cultural struggles are more than just battles over values. Winning the power to define the terms upon which the social world is perceived, evaluated, and acted on allows individuals and social groups to reorder material relations of domination and subordination. A key component of this process is the ability to convert various forms of capital, including symbolic capital, into economic capital—a conversion rate that Bourdieu (1984, 246; 1986) explains is "fought over at all times."

While most scholars, including Bourdieu, have deployed the concept of symbolic power to explain the dynamics of struggles among various fractions of the dominant classes, Bourdieu (1984, 483–484) recognizes that the "labour of categorization" is a "forgotten dimension of the class struggle." His emphasis on the importance of the symbolic in the dynamics of class struggles echoes contributions by prominent labor historians such as E. P. Thompson (1966) who critique structuralist interpretations of class and class formation. Like Thompson and the new social historians he inspired, Bourdieu points out that before a social group such as the "working class" can be said to exist, it must be concretely made. Forming unions, which have required a recognized social identity for advancing the collective interests of workers, represents a likely strategy for the working class. Yet what is important, according to Bourdieu, is not just the formation of a unified class identity or established institutions, but the ability to win recognition in the public arena as a legitimate political actor with the capacity to influence the distribution of power and resources in the broader society.

Various strategies can help subordinated groups such as the working class win a recognized place in the social order. Public spokespersons create visibility and coherence to the existence of a hitherto unrecognized social group by enabling separate individuals to act and speak as a group through a single leader (Bourdieu 1990, 248). Public mobilization validates the legitimacy of a group's leaders because the efficacy of their ideas is measured by the "number of different voices that assemble in a single place that can physically and historically verify the existence of a collective will" (Bourdieu 1990, 190–191). Alliances between social actors endowed with different forms of capital are particularly important for subordinated social groups. Although it can be a tenuous alliance, Bourdieu asserts that intellectuals play a strategic role in legitimating the symbolic struggles of the working class by offering the latter "explicit theory" and "institutionalized instruments of representation [such as] trade-unions, political parties, [and] social technologies of mobilization and demonstration." Thus, the power of the working-class's symbolic capital operates by "a sort of embezzlement of accumulated cultural capital [which provides the working class] the means of constituting objectively their vision of the world and the representation of their interests" (Bourdieu 1990, 245).

Despite his elaboration of the dynamics of labor's symbolic struggles, Bourdieu's emphasis on the role of leaders and intellectuals overshadows important dimensions of symbolic struggles when they are waged from below. His claims are historically, geographically, and autobiographically specific to late-twentieth-century France and Europe. However, in twenty-first-century Korea

and the United States, as well as around the world, intellectuals and labor leaders have declining relevance and therefore less ability to enhance the symbolic capital of the working class.[4] However, rather than assume that the only forms of symbolic capital to which workers have access are "borrowed," identifying the forms of capital that workers already possess or can generate in relation to other social groups during the course of a collective dispute should be the subject of empirical inquiry. In other words, evaluating the dynamics of symbolic struggles from below entails foregrounding the concrete historical conditions under which subordinated groups such as workers are able to transform a state of negative capital (i.e., overlapping conditions of economic, social, and political marginality) into unexpected forms of leverage. An examination of symbolic capital is particularly germane.

Unlike other species of capital (economic, cultural, and social), symbolic capital has received relatively little empirical attention, especially in the analysis of political struggles.[5] This is a notable gap, given that "his [Bourdieu's] whole work may be read as a hunt for [symbolic capital's] varied forms and effects" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 28). While it is certainly true that subordinated groups are unequally equipped to verify their symbolic claims, workers do have access to potentially potent forms of symbolic capital. Given that workers possess multiple social identities and social locations, historical accounts reveal that racial and gender hierarchies have offered certain workers additional symbolic capital, although it has often come at the expense of more vulnerable groups. For example, nineteenth-century male workers in England used their privileged position in gender hierarchies to strengthen their opposition to capitalist exploitation (Scott 1988). Patriarchy as well as racism served as potent sources of moral legitimacy in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America. By repudiating morally depraved Asian workers and dependent groups of slaves, native Americans, and women who were deemed "unfit" to rule themselves, white native male workers justified their demands for expanded citizenship rights (Glenn 2002).

Forging "cultures of solidarity," as Rick Fantasia (1988) puts it, which rely on the process of building and strengthening associational ties among workers, has also constituted a potent source of symbolic capital for workers throughout history. As "residents of society's bottoms, margins and cracks," workers have engaged in collective actions "intend[ed] to do violence to the official culture and its central structures" (Rothenbuhler 1988, 67; also see Piven and Cloward 1977, Tarrow 1998). Extralegal tactics such as mass protests, civil disobedience, and media appeals have served as important vehicles for oppositional social movements in publicly dramatizing their struggles. Participating in collective

protest activity not only helps forge shared meaning and purpose among disparate participants but also mobilizes an external base of support from churches, community organizations, and other civic groups that can provide additional resources and moral legitimacy to movements seeking to undermine existing structures of power and authority (Jasper 1997; Morris 1983; Snow and Benford 1992; Zald and McCarthy 1980). An important component of "challenger" movements, as social movement scholars often put it, is the ability to draw upon signs, slogans, tactics, and moral vocabularies from previous struggles and adapt them for use in future battles, emphasizing the ability of less authorized forms of symbolic capital to reproduce themselves over time. The dynamic nature of workers' symbolic capital is particularly vivid when looking at the legacy of the Knights of Labor, the Wobblies (International Workers of the World), 1930s Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unionism, and the 1960s civil rights movement in challenging discriminatory wages, working conditions, and union practices as well as broader structures of racism, sexism, and xenophobia (Cobble 2004; Dubofsky 2000; Gerteis 2007; MacLean 2006).

While struggles over meanings and values can help change uneven class relations, it is essential to recognize their contested dynamics (see Prezeworski 1985; Tarrow 1998). Like other forms of capital, the symbolic capital of workers is a mediated one; however, it is not accumulated and transmitted through individuals and cultural objects. Its power to persuade and mobilize must be continually renewed and reaffirmed in the face of contestation.

The literature on culture, politics, and social movements has generated important insights about the meaning-making practices of subordinated social groups and their use of symbolic struggles to transform relationships of power and inequality (Japser 1997; Johnston and Klandermas 1995; Morris and Mueller 1992; Rose 1999; Snow and Benford 1992; Snow et al. 1986; Swidler 1995; Tarrow 1998; Williams 1995, 2004). Of particular interest is the contested nature of symbolic or cultural struggles because "part of every public political struggle is the battle over whose 'framing' of an issue is authoritative" (Williams 1995, 127). Since exactly *what* constitutes the "public good" and *whose* public good is being promoted is a "matter of political contention" (Williams 1995, 125), subordinated social actors and groups have often resorted to contentious politics—in the form of mass protests, symbolic actions, and morally laden vocabularies—to change the balance of power against more powerful opponents. Given their lack of economic and political resources, contentious collective action, according to Sidney Tarrow (1998, 3), "is the main and often the only recourse that ordinary people possess against better-equipped opponents or powerful states."

Organizations also play a crucial role in shifting the balance of power during the course of a symbolic struggle. In addition to providing tangible resources and public support (see McCarthy and Zald 1977), organizations also serve as sources of values and meanings—or in the words of Elisabeth Clemens (1993, 758; 1997, 57), "cultural rules about what sorts of people should or could master what sorts of organizational competence." For example, the use of familiar organizational models by unfamiliar actors helped win disadvantaged groups such as disenfranchised women in nineteenth-century America "recognition as public actors and transform the logics of appropriateness governing political participation" (Clemens 1997, 55). Thus, strengthening the symbolic claims of less powerful social actors and groups includes a broad array of cultural and organizational repertoires that can shift the balance of power between mismatched opponents during the course of a heated struggle.

Figure 1 outlines the mechanics involved in converting workers' symbolic struggles into potent forms of leverage. Symbolic leverage attempts to rebuild the basis of associational power for workers with weak levels of structural power and blocked access to exercising basic associational rights by winning public recognition and legitimacy for their struggles. To overcome the legal

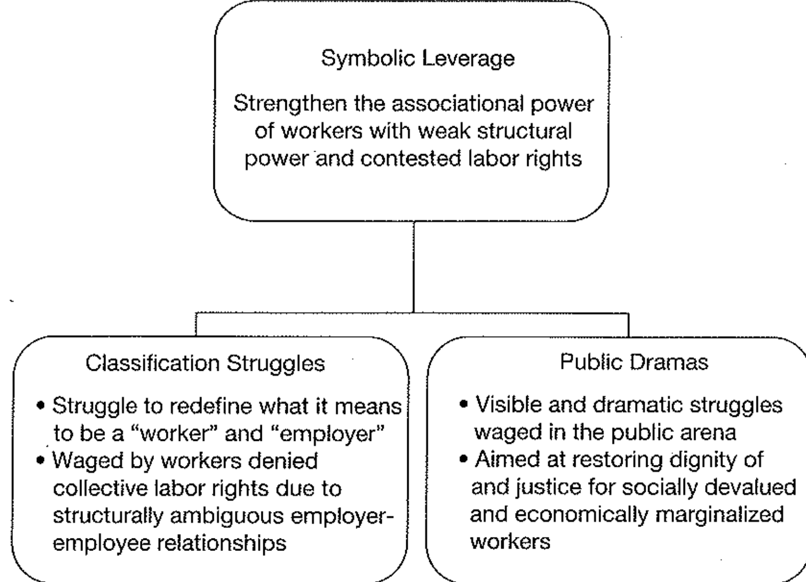

FIGURE 1. Two dimensions of symbolic leverage.

misrecognition associated with hybrid or inconsistent employment relationships, workers can wage *classification struggles* aimed at redefining what it means to be a "worker" and an "employer" in the eyes of the public, rather than the law (Goldberg 2005). This is partially attributed to the fact that many marginalized workers are employed under ambiguous employer-employee arrangements that deny them access to labor rights and protections under existing labor law frameworks. Since workers' classification struggles depend on the ability to win recognition in the face of opposition, using recognized symbols, strategies, and slogans from existing political actors and past social movements forges meaning and consensus about the legitimacy of their struggles, even if employers and legal authorities do not recognize them as such. The state's own discourses and practices around the rule of law can also supply workers with salient forms of moral authority (C. K. Lee 2007, 238). The contradiction between *de jure* and *de facto* labor rights also generates powerful forms of moral authority for discontent workers, as was the case under authoritarian state regimes in South Korea (see chapter 2).

Grounding symbolic leverage in the temporal and spatial dynamics of *public dramas* redirects narrow workplace disputes into full-scale "moral crises." Unlike their opponents who rely on official state classifications to produce a recognizable source of authority, marginalized workers must cultivate sources of authority that circumvent existing rules and procedures, as well as the relations of power and inequality that underpin them. While the targeted employer(s) will attempt to restrict the boundaries of contention to legally circumscribed contractual relationships, the public dramas of marginalized workers appeal to historically and culturally contested notions of justice that have acquired moral force during previous symbolic struggles (Chun 2005). This includes paying attention to the persuasiveness of rhetoric, symbols, and practices that construct certain types of workers as "marginalized" and thus entitled to the intervention of broader members of the public. At stake in public dramas are struggles to overcome misrecognition in the arena of public life, that is, attempts to rebuild the dignity and social worth of subordinated social actors who have been disenfranchised, devalued, and deemed inferior (Fraser 1995).

Engaging in morally driven struggles over the terms of justice is particularly resonant in cases of verifiable social inequality and material deprivation. Eliciting firsthand testimonies of individuals who have been devalued, mistreated, or deprived of acceptable standards of dignity and human welfare serve as potent sources of verification. Generating recognition for the legitimacy of marginalized workers' claims is also particularly effective against institutions that are susceptible to public opinion such as governments, brand-driven corporations,

and universities (as detailed in chapters 4, 5, and 6). For example, in cases when national governments or corporations are unresponsive to international women's rights, human rights, environmental solidarity, or cross-border solidarity campaigns, activists can mobilize a "politics of shame" to exert extralegal forms of pressure (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Armbruster-Sandoval 2004). Winning media attention also helps broaden the scope of public contention. However, it is important to note that all three cases—firsthand testimonies, publicly vulnerable institutional targets, and the media—are shaped by structures of power, dominance, and subordination that privilege the experiences of some over others.

Although the struggles of marginalized workers confront an uphill battle and a high likelihood of defeat, changes in the regulation of employer-employee relationships, particularly with respect to lower-paid, insecure service-sector work, are producing new conditions of struggle. The reclassification of employment relationships is a central mechanism of labor cost-cutting in today's global economy. While triangulated forms of employment such as subcontracting are one of the oldest forms of capitalist exploitation, they have become pervasive across manufacturing sectors as well as rapidly expanding service-producing sectors. The ability to define the legitimate divisions of the employer-employee relationship not only influences the distribution of rights and resources between workers and those who benefit from their labor under ambiguous and insecure forms of employment, but it can also subvert existing institutional channels for defining the meaning and application of the rule of law, especially when pertaining to subordinated social groups. As such, the classification struggles of labor may reflect an alternative mode of capital accumulation and conversion that foregrounds the centrality of the margins.

Global Ethnography of Labor's Leverage

This study investigates new forms of labor politics and organization among marginalized segments of the workforce. It takes an "old" subject—working-class struggles—and attempts to shine new light on its contemporary relevance. I analyze workers' struggles on multiple levels—from the local and national to the transnational—to dispel the notion that globalization is a totalizing, inexorable force that imposes itself on everyone everywhere in the same manner (Burawoy 2000). By exposing the contradictory and historically contingent dynamics that are part of global transformation, I attempt to uncover "the specificities and power relations obscured by the bland homogenization of global

neoliberalism" (Burawoy 2000, 349). Reconceptualizing *place* as a central site in which struggles over power and resources occur is crucial to identifying the limits and possibilities of change. This "spatial point," in the words of Allan Pred and Michael Watts, "is simply that how things develop depends in part on where they develop, on what has been historically sedimented there, on the social and spatial structures that are already in place there."

To adapt ethnographic practices to studies of the "global," I utilize a two-pronged comparative historical and ethnographic approach. Part I engages in a comparative historical analysis of the interrelated dynamics of convergence and divergence for workers and their collective organizations in South Korea and the United States. Cross-national labor studies have typically sought to identify variation among cases with similar histories of industrialization to determine that which is distinct and unique among labor movements in different national contexts (Katznelson and Zolberg 1986). In my comparative historical account, I seek to move "away from [the study of] distinct cultural territorializations and to an analytic of interconnected spaces" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). I employ Michael Burawoy's (1991) "extended case method" to develop a nuanced understanding of the similarities and differences between different cases of worker organizing in each country with respect to broader global transformations.

By analyzing the shifting balance of power among labor, capital, and the state in South Korea and the United States since 1945, my findings reveal a striking pattern of convergence in each country. Although trajectories of the Korean and U.S. labor movements up until the late 1980s reflected very different paths, chapter 2 demonstrates that processes of change associated with globalization are eroding the structural and associational base of power for privileged sectors of the unionized workforce in both countries, which, in turn, is undermining the effectiveness of previous strategies for exercising worker power. In the United States, core working classes, particularly unionized workers in heavy manufacturing and related strategic sectors, are no longer promised rising standards of living and increased consumer power in exchange for industrial peace. Overcoming stagnating profits and improving productivity mean dismantling the "costly" social compacts that previously included workers in the fruits of economic growth. The breakdown of social compacts among labor, capital, and the state in the United States has also weakened the claims of the burgeoning Korean labor movement. Rather than take advantage of the explosion of unionism in the late 1980s, representatives from the business and government sectors reason that if the world's most powerful workers have already consented to the deregulatory pressures of the global free market, then

workers in developing countries have little grounds to justify their demands for increasing wages and enhanced labor protections. The rollback on union rights and protections have been particularly prominent in the aftermath of the 1997–1998 Asian debt crisis, as militant unions are blamed for jeopardizing national economic reforms.

Chapter 3 highlights the significance of historically sedimented inequalities in actively creating and reproducing a cheap labor force in expanding sectors of the low-paid, service economy. In the United States, a growing proportion of women and immigrants from Asia and Latin America are concentrated on the bottom rungs of urban service economies. These workers, who were previously barred from legal entry into the United States, now serve as "cheap labor" in the domestic labor market. Urban revitalization strategies, supported by local, state, and federal governments, have contributed to the flow of female and immigrant labor into low-paid, urban service jobs. In Korea, while there is a small and growing number of migrant workers recruited to fill peripheral jobs, native Korean women are the primary targets of cost-cutting labor strategies. The state has played an active role in the reproduction of a highly exploitable, predominantly female workforce. Discriminatory gendered practices by employers and male-dominated unions also exacerbate the marginalization of irregularly employed women workers.

Chapter 4 shows that, contrary to conventional wisdom, peripherally employed immigrants and women *can* challenge the intensification of discrimination and exploitation associated with downgraded employment. Distinct social movement legacies play a crucial role in providing cultural and organizational repertoires with which to organize historically disadvantaged groups of workers. In the United States, 1960s social movements, such as the civil rights and early New Left movements, influenced subsequent efforts to revitalize local unions and shift the priorities of the organized labor movement. In Korea, the 1970s and 1980s women workers' movement and student-led democratization movement also produced a generation of activists and social movement organizations that could support the struggles of exploited segments of society. When an explosion of grassroots labor unrest by irregular workers took place in the aftermath of extensive labor market deregulation in 1998, these activists and organizations played a key role in supporting their struggles, many of which were systematically ignored and even sabotaged by existing unions.

Chapters 5 and 6 attend to concrete cases of worker organizing (see table 1). I selected two groups of workers for my ethnographic comparison: (1) subcontracted university janitors and (2) independently contracted personal service workers. In the case of subcontracted workers, I examined the janitors' struggle at

Table 1. Comparative Ethnographic Case Study Design

	UNITED STATES	SOUTH KOREA
Subcontracted workers	Janitors	Janitors
	USC (SEIU Local 399/1877) Harvard (SEIU Local 254)	Inha (KWTU Incheon branch union) SNU (SNU Janitors' Union, affiliated with KCTU Seoul Regional Center)
Independently contracted workers	Home care workers (SEIU Local 434B)	Golf caddies (KWTU 88CC golf game assistants' branch union)

the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles between 1996 and 1998 and at Harvard University (Harvard) in the Boston metropolitan region between 1999 and 2001. In South Korea, I examined the janitors' union struggle at Inha University (Inha) in Incheon between 1999 and 2001 and Seoul National University (SNU) in Seoul between 1999 and 2000. In the case of independently contracted personal service workers, I focused on the home care workers' union struggle in Los Angeles between 1987 and 2000 in the United States and the golf game assistants' union struggle in the Kyonggi-do region of South Korea between 1999 and 2002.

My ethnographic fieldwork began in South Korea and was conducted in three stages over twenty-two months between June 1998 and December 2002. During my first field visit, I immersed myself in the worlds of union activism with workers, trade unionists, labor leaders, women's movement activists, and students. I attended strikes, marches, public protests, after-protest debriefing meetings, public forums, and internal union meetings. I conducted additional site visits and interviews with unions and activists actively organizing regular workers. For each case, I constructed narratives that reveal the politics and strategies involved in organizing marginalized workers. I treat each of my cases as empirical puzzles, rather than best practices models, to uncover how a sequence of social actions and events relates to broader sociohistorical processes, as opposed to evaluating their abstract generalizability, regardless of time and place (Isaac 1997). For the U.S. cases, I rely heavily on internal union documents, newspapers, and secondary accounts. Since there has been an explosion of quality empirical case studies on local union organizing campaigns, I chose struggles that reflected trends in the national character of organizing that could be compared cross-nationally. The Justice for Janitors campaign is a well-known and documented case, but to streamline my comparison, I focused on struggles at two universities. For these cases, I also conducted site visits at local unions and interviews with union organizers in Los Angeles and Boston between April 2003 and April 2004.

Based on findings from my comparative ethnographic analysis, chapters 5 and 6 assert that new forms of employment exclusion require new forms of worker power. As more and more workers are incorporated into employment arrangements that place them outside the boundaries of basic labor protections, workers and their collective organizations are confronted with a central dilemma: how to legitimate their claims for basic associational rights. Chapter 5, "What Is an "Employer"? Organizing Subcontracted Janitors," explores how low-paid immigrant and women janitors in the United States and South Korea, respectively, are using classification struggles and public dramas to overcome structurally ambiguous subcontracting relations and to pressure building owners and cleaning contractors to uphold their moral responsibilities as "employers," whether or not they are legally bound under subcontracting agreements. Chapter 6, "What Is a "Worker"? Organizing Independently Contracted Home Care Workers and Golf Caddies," explores the struggles of two groups of peripherally employed personal service workers. I find that in both cases, local unions are redefining "independent contractors" as "legitimate workers" with the right to form unions and bargain collectively, whether or not they were technically eligible under existing labor laws. In chapters 5 and 6, alliances with students and other social movement actors are pivotal in strengthening the symbolic leverage of marginalized workers in both countries.

In the conclusion, I discuss the implications of symbolic leverage for labor politics and organization. Rather than focus solely on questions of strategy and scale, I discuss the significance of the margins in exposing the crossroads facing each labor movement. Each labor movement's crossroads highlight the persistence of social inequalities and hierarchies in impeding more genuine forms of change. They also emphasize the centrality of such legacies to organized labor's broader struggle against profit-driven forms of economic restructuring on a global scale. Rather than assuming that working-class struggles in the current global context must "think globally and act globally" or "think globally and act locally," union struggles in Korea and the United States reveal that efforts to transform the cultural logics and institutional practices of globalization take place on concrete historical and institutional terrains, each shaped by the production of different constellations of power among labor, capital, and the state.