

# Epilogue

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We are mad, of course. From the point of view of those who defend their armchairs and discuss the arrangement of the furniture in the run-up to the next election, we are undoubtedly mad, we who run about seeing cracks that are invisible to the eyes of those who sit in armchairs (or which appear to them, if at all, as changes in the wallpaper, to which they give the name of ‘new social movements’). The worst of it is that they may be right: perhaps we are mad, perhaps there is no way out, perhaps the cracks we see exist only in our fantasy. The old revolutionary certainty can no longer stand. There is absolutely no guarantee of a happy ending.<sup>1</sup>

The small and diverse experiments in informal life politics that we have explored in this volume might seem, from a more conventional political perspective, to be mad, or at least marginal, irrelevant and doomed to failure. They are idealistic efforts to change very small corners of the world, driven often by sheer pressures of circumstance, but also sometimes by a belief that minor autonomous actions can ultimately flow into wider processes of social and political change.

The stories we have encountered here are very varied, but placing them side-by-side has also helped to make certain common threads more visible. In all of these stories, it proves remarkably difficult to define the participants in terms of conventional identity categories: class, status, gender or even ideology. Though the groups are small and often community based, they almost invariably consist of networks bringing together both ‘locals’ and ‘outsiders’, as well as people with differing social backgrounds and life experiences. It might be tempting to see these groups as practising middle-class ‘lifestyle politics’, and certainly some participants might be called ‘middle class’, and some might be labelled

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1 John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 8–9.

‘intellectuals’. But the clearest motif is diversity. Farmers and fishers were active protagonists in the informal life politics described by Sho Konishi’s account of early 20th-century Japan (Chapter One), in the life of the Bishan commune (Chapter Two), the Nagano Prefecture endogenous development projects (Chapter Three) and grassroots responses to the disasters of Minamata and Fukushima (Chapters Five and Six). Factory workers engaged in the cooperatives of 1920s Japan and in the reactions to the 2011 nuclear disaster (Chapters One and Six). Shopkeepers and traditional craftsmen cooperated with professional artists and others in the Hong Kong art activism described by Olivier Krischer (Chapter Eight). People from all walks of life shared in the search for a response to the *Sewol* disaster (Chapter Seven), and have taken part in groups like India’s Honey Bee Network and Thailand’s Bann Mankong Program (Chapter Ten).

The potential to bring together the talents and experience of diverse people is clearly important to the practices of informal life politics. At the same time, though, this diversity suggests a need to explore new ways to observe and understand these actions. Like the forms of politics discussed by John Holloway, these are ways of ‘doing’ rather than ways of ‘being’. People engaged in informal life politics develop their sense of self in the process of ‘doing’, rather than being impelled to take political action by a pre-existing sense of identity. The creation of skills for observing and understanding improvisatory ‘doing’ remains an important frontier for future research.

A further common thread that emerges from the chapters in this book is a desire to ‘push back’ against the seemingly endless expansion of a commercial system that reduces all life to a matter of economic value and profit. These forms of informal life politics can be seen as one side of the ‘double movement’ described by Karl Polanyi in his classic *The Great Transformation*. According to Polanyi the apparently relentless expansion of the market provokes a countermovement to protect parts of human life from the invasive forces of commercialisation and commodification: ‘the market expanded continuously, but this movement was met by a countermovement checking the expansion in definite directions’. This countermovement is not just ‘the usual defensive behaviour of a society

faced with change', but is rather 'a reaction against a dislocation which attacked the fabric of society, and which would have destroyed the very organisation of production that the market had called into being'.<sup>2</sup>

As early as the 1920s, as we have seen, the Japanese villagers of Arishima Farm and of the New Village Movement were experimenting with practices of shared ownership and communal living, and Chinese rural reformers were rediscovering the agrarianist visions of their forebears as a response to the inroads of commercial modernity into rural life. This push back continues in responses to disasters generated by unbridled commercialism, examined in Chapters Four to Seven, and in the search for autonomous forms of community building explored in Chapters Eight and Ten. For, as Polanyi also observed, the expansion of the market is always underpinned and made possible by the action of the state: 'the road to the free market was opened and kept open by an enormous increase in continuous, centrally organised and controlled interventionism'.<sup>3</sup> So too today, those who confront the damage to daily life done by corporate development schemes, industrial pollution, nuclear radiation and human-generated 'accidents' confront the power of the state as well as the power of the market.

The case of North Korea, discussed in Chapter Nine, seems to be an intriguing counter-example. Here, instead of people pushing back against the intrusive power of the market economy in their lives, ordinary people use the power of the market to push back against the intrusions of a repressive state. But this counter-example helps to highlight an important point. The central issue is not the practice of market exchange itself. Markets can take many forms and serve many purposes. Rather, as this case reminds us, we need to re-politicise our understanding of the market, and to re-examine its diversity of forms. The expansionary and invasive nature of an ever-expanding system of commodification, intertwined as it always is with the 'continuous, centrally organised' workings of state power may threaten the foundations of life. Yet small-scale exchange systems controlled by groups of local traders may be socially empowering for participants while also contributing to longer-term processes of nationwide change.

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2 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001) (original published in 1944).

3 *ibid.*, 145–6.

How can we judge the success or failure of the stories we have encountered here. None, of course, has transformed national or international society. Some (like the Bishan commune) have faced state repression. Others (like the actions of the *Sewol* families) have faced fierce counterattacks from ideologically opposed sections of society. In an age of the emptying of democracy, the forces stacked against small actions to restore human autonomy and agency seem almost insurmountable. Yet, as we saw in Chapter Three, even groups that seem to wither in the face of repression may prove to have sowed the seeds for future informal political action. By placing these stories together, we hope that we have been able to bring them into dialogue with one another, and with some of the many other minor actions of people around the world who seek to shape their lives according to their own hopes and visions. Informal life politics, as we have seen, has a long history. In a world without promises of happy endings, its future is also uncertain. The only certainty is that this future lies in the hands and actions of the people who enact—who live—this quiet and often invisible form of politics: and those people include ourselves.

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