

REPORT FROM KOREA

By George Katsiaficas

I recently had an unbelievable trip to South Korea and want to share my experiences with people in the USA. (Feel free to send this to others.) I left Boston on November 20 and returned to the USA on December 1, 1999. Unbeknownst to me, the new translation of my book on 1968 was in its third printing and was something of a best seller. About a week before I left, Lee Jae-won, the book's translator and an activist in his own right, had faxed me some very tough questions about the eros effect and Korean interpretations of my work. Since the English version of the book was published 12 years ago, I had to go back to what I had written, talked with several trusted friends and prepared as best I could given the limited time available.

From the very first day I was in Korea, the reception afforded my work was stunning. The major media had already reviewed the book, and with me in town, they prepared detailed articles on my work and thoughts. Choson Ilbo (circulation 2 million) ran an article with a photo (as did over half a dozen other newspapers). With reporters and photographers showing up at the hotel, and my publisher (E-who) arranging a bevy of interviews, I had an opportunity to speak up and make myself heard in a society where social movements continue to be important vehicles of social change. Some of the headlines from the stories that appeared included (as translated by a Korean student at Wentworth): "A Social Revolution is a Gust of Eros"; "Eros and Imagination are the Starting Points of Revolution"; "Revolution is Global"; "Power to the People! Power to the Imagination!"; "Eros is the Instinct of an Anti-Structure Society"; "TV instigates Indifference to Public Problems" and somewhat erroneously "The 1968 Revolution in France is the Origin of Reformism."

On one level, I was bewildered by the intense media blitz and confused by its sudden appearance. One afternoon, for example, when I thought I was on my way to meet a student of Alain Tourraine who had interviewed me for one of the papers, we arrived, obviously very late by the rush we were in, and found TV waiting. "You have 20 seconds to explain the movements of 1968 to Koreans," the reporter informed me. I composed myself and summarized my take on 1968 (Internationalism and self-management are the twin aspirations of all the social movements of 1968, whether in France or Czechoslovakia, Vietnam or the USA...) When I was finished, I was taken not to meet my acquaintance but to an audience of 50 people waiting patiently for me to discuss European autonomous movements in the 1970s and 1980s (the subject of my book, *The Subversion of Politics*, a Korean translation of which is currently being prepared).

Altogether it was very satisfying to be so honored and to have my ideas be taken so seriously. I am not someone who believes in following leaders, and I hope that dimension of my thinking came through in the interviews. One of the high points of my time in Seoul was a presentation near Seoul National University at a movement bookstore. People stayed for 4 and 1/2 hours passionately discussing the eros effect, revolutionary movements and the future of Korean social movements. At one point, the slide projector jammed. At this moment, people spontaneously began to sing together movement songs until we had fixed the problem. (I have a video tape of this session I have yet to view.) The main question I remember being asked in a variety of forms was this: Is the eros effect simply an analytical construction useful for helping understand revolutionary movements or is it also a movement tactic useful in transforming society. If the latter, "HOW CAN THE EROS EFFECT BE ACTIVATED?"

My first reaction to this question was that it could not. After all, how can an entire people be summoned into the streets to occupy public space and live a qualitatively different reality principle-one in which love and solidarity, not profit and hierarchy, are at the center? After thinking carefully about it, however, I realized my understanding of my own concept was limited by the social reality in the USA where my ideas have not resonated with a popular base and where only a few people are considering problems of social transformation. In Korea, social movements in the 1980s ousted the military dictatorship and in the 1990s, autonomous unions have finally won legal status. Because of these gains, a sense of power at the grassroots exists, and the problem of activating the eros effect is a real question facing those who would like to see the society qualitatively transformed. I am currently working on formulating more detailed answer to this question.

Briefly, there are two levels on which I see this dynamic being crafted in practical situations. When the Zapatistas used the internet to call for demonstrations against neoliberalism last summer--and activists in several cities responded, including in London which experienced its largest riot in a decade or more--clearly they were seeking synchronized popular uprisings. For this method to succeed, the group must be a socially legitimate leadership in the hearts of many people and it must wisely wield its hegemonic power. Besides the Zapatistas, Kwangju might play such a role--and not only in Korea--since like the Battleship Potemkin its actions signal the time for uprising. In 1972, the Vietnamese revolution similarly crafted an internationally synchronized offensive. Secondly, confrontations with the principal instruments of global corporate domination (IMF and World Bank meetings in Berlin 1988, Clinton's recent visit to Athens, WTO in Seattle 1999) create a global dynamic of escalating confrontation that spreads like a wave in a stadium throughout the world. The problem is that for the eros effect to be activated the thousands/millions who comprise civil society need to act--to negate the existing daily routines and break free to lead new lives. This process is not simply enacted by willpower of a small group--although it may be sparked by one. Like falling in love, enacting the eros effect is a complex process. Indeed it appears that leaderless situations often produce the eros effect. Comments?

After the meeting was over, about a dozen of us stayed to have dinner and continue the discussions. While we got acquainted, laughed about some of our personal dilemmas and touched on topics like shaman in Korea and which journals and organizations had been represented earlier. When it was almost time to leave, we sat in a circle and each person took the time to reflect upon the evening, provide a sense of how they felt about it, and speculate about what they might have said or done differently. As I recall, I said I was honored to be somewhat a part of the movement in Korea, whose activists had long inspired me. As we bid adieu, someone explained to me that this wrap-up was an old Korean custom. I noted how much group life is imbedded in the everyday reality here--an important resource in the construction of a new society.

Of all the interviews, the newspaper that most interested me was Hankyoreh, a workers daily begun in 1988 (one year after the military dictatorship was overthrown). In order to raise the money to start the paper, 60,000 people each gave at least 5,000 won (about \$5). The minimum donation was one share, while the most anyone could give was 2000 shares. Altogether, about 5 billion won was raised. Today the paper owns its own building, publishes a daily paper complete with in-depth news, analysis of events, book and movie reviews, sports and weather. Publishing six days a week, most of the workers are from the labor, student and feminist movements and also include a number of journalists who were banned from reporting by the dictatorship. When compared to anything in the US (where family trust funds are behind almost all national publications), Hankyoreh is light-years ahead, but even compared to Liberation (France) and Tageszeitung (Germany), it appears to me that its 500,000 circulation gives it a popular base and sense of mission unmatched elsewhere.

After a week in Seoul, I travelled on a train to Kwangju. Originally, my publisher's itinerary had called for me to return to the US without leaving Seoul, but I had changed the ticket to stay a few extra days. I wanted to visit Kwangju personally in order to get a sense of the meaning and legacy of the 1980 uprising. Although I had insisted that E-who not go to any trouble in arranging my trip, they had notified people in Kwangju, one of whom, a most interesting man named Soh Yu-jin, happened to be in Seoul and rode the train with me. When we arrived in Kwangju, a delegation was waiting at the train station. Before I could orient myself in the city, they had shown me an itinerary that kept me there a night longer than I had planned. As we enjoyed lunch, we were joined by Chun Yon Ho, a veteran of the uprising--indeed one of the half-dozen or so individuals who published the daily "Militants' Bulletin" that led the struggle during the time when the city was held as a liberated zone.

The story of the Kwangju uprising has yet to be told. For years, the military dictatorship covered it up. Korean civil society is so strong that the story of the military's brutality and the killing of as many as 2000 people in May 1980 are facts that spelled the end of the regime when they finally were publicly known. US responsibility for the massacre is evident, and the man most complicit is today our UN ambassador--Richard Holbrooke. (I am preparing an article on the 20th anniversary of the Kwangju Commune. As you can tell from the preceding phrase, I consider it to be of the same quality as the Paris Commune--truly a momentous political event.) Essentially what happened is that elements in the military seized the government early in 1980. Protests that initially broke out were quieted except in the heartland of progressive politics--South Cholla province. When students in Kwangju broke through police lines and entered the city, the populace joined them in demanding democracy. The government--with the US approval--released its most seasoned troops from the front lines at the DMZ, and once these troops reached Kwangju, they terrorized the population in unimaginable ways. Bodies of defenseless people were broken by specially designed clubs. One soldier used his bayonet to cut off a women's breast, after which he screamed at the crowd, "I cut off 30 women's breasts in Vietnam!" One young child who witnessed the brutality asked their parents when their army was coming. Another child, having been taught political values at a tender age, screamed that there were communists in the army. Finally, over 100,000 people gathered to protest the brutality. Led by nine buses and over 200 taxis, their march was fired on by the military, and over 150 people were killed and 500 wounded. The militants organized. With 2 and 1/2 hours, people had broken down into teams, raided police and national guard armories and assembled at a central point. Using their World War 2 weapons, they drove the military out of the city. The final assault took place at the train station, where the soldiers used flame-throwers against the crowd, burning to death many in the front ranks. Nonetheless, the people prevailed, and for three days they held the city. When a tank column finally entered the city, hundreds more were killed in the final battle, but the democracy movement won the war--seven long years later.

What an honor for me to be in Kwangju, let alone to be honored as a guest and comrade! After lunch, we visited the Youth Bookstore, a collectively run institution which functions as a movement center. From there, we went to a reception for Kim Chun Teh, poet of the Commune whose new book was released that day. Imagine my surprise when I was introduced to the auditorium and received an ovation. The poet himself stood and applauded me. The mayor told me that the young people were all reading my book. Most impressive of the activists I met was Kim Hyoung Joong. He graciously and patiently explained many details of life in Kwangju.

At a forum on the eros effect that evening, I discovered that many people spoke German, and much of the session transpired in that language. The questions here were more intellectual, having to do with rooting the eros effect in the works of Marx. At a dinner that evening, I met Lee Jae-eui, whose very moving manuscript about the uprising will soon be published by M.E. Sharpe. The next day we visited the graveyards where the martyrs of the uprising are buried. The new cemetery, lavishly funded by the current government, has state of the art video displays and a series of monumental sculptures commemorating the events of 1980 (as well as previous episodes in Korean revolutionary history). Most impressive of all was the original cemetery, a section of the city's public burial grounds. Here bodies of the dead had been unceremoniously dumped by the military in 1980. (Many other bodies were never found.)

The next day, I visited Chonnam National University, where the uprising began. The May 18 Institute there has a wealth of materials, many of which are being translated into English. Late that afternoon, I was privileged to give a talk on the eros effect. Before the meeting, I met Professor Yoon Soo Jong, with whom I immediately felt a very close affinity. He is the translator of Antonio Negri and a great partisan of autonomous movements. My talk was very well received--that is, the questions were quite critical and insightful. Once again the issue of activating the eros effect was prominent in the discussion. As I commented near the end of the session, I never have experienced such a high level of discourse about my own work. I am still attempting to raise myself to the standard set by Kwangju. I cried when I returned the next morning to Seoul. Part of me will always reside in Kwangju.

Once again, my expectations of a quiet day in Seoul were not to be. I was rushed from the bus station not, as I thought, to the house of Hyun Hee-kyung, an activist and member of the E-who collective, but to the headquarters of a new group of labor leaders called Power of the Working Class. In our discussion, they informed me of the gravity of the situation today. Unable to feed their families despite working a six-day week, some workers in Korea have burned themselves to death. While activists in Seoul are given media attention, these desperate acts of protest are rarely covered. I then was taken to Sungkonghoe University to be interviewed by Professor Kim Dong-Choon, well known as a partisan of workers movements. Perhaps the most in-depth of all the interviews I was privileged to be part of in Korea, this discussion ranged from the current state of the world to a comparison of Korean and Vietnamese movements for national liberation. I look forward to its appearance and to working together with Professor Kim preparing a proposal for a volume on the Korean workers movement. The autonomous trade unions have only recently won legal status, and are poised to make the next period of Korean history the period of the working class. As we drove in a taxi back to E-who, I was informed that another paper was waiting to interview me. This time it was the paper of the NGO's, actually a way of talking about "new social movements" --feminist, ecology, anti-consumerist, etc. Once again, I attempted to ask as many questions as were posed to me, and learned a great deal in the process.

My overwhelming sense is that Korea is simultaneously the most civil society I have ever experienced and the most Americanized Asian country I have ever visited. Layered over a traditional Buddhist/Confucian social structure is a highly developed political economy bearing the birthmarks and character of its American parent. While in Seoul the US military presence is not highly visible, approximately 40,000 US troops remain poised along the DMZ, and the vestigial Cold War division of the world--long since thawed in Israel/Palestine, Ireland/England, South Africa and elsewhere--remains a real threat to life in the Korean peninsula. Do progressive Americans have a role to play in ending this ominous stalemate? Clearly we have not done our part in the past fifty years. I believe that people here need to counteract the US government's control of Korean political and military affairs. I, for one, plan to return to Kwangju for the 20th anniversary of the uprising on May 17, 2000, and I invite others to help form a delegation of progressive Americans.

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