

National and Transnational Claims on Civil Society: A South Korean Contribution

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1. A brief report

South Korea, I am happy to report, has made substantial progress over the past seven or eight years in securing human rights and consolidating civic freedom.¹ And I am proud to add that writers committed to the establishment of democratic national culture played a significant role in the process, sometimes through direct protest action in the streets, but more broadly through literary works that often brought upon the authors and/or publishers government reprisals in the form of arrests, tortures, imprisonments and confiscations. The main organization for these activist writers, called the Council of Writers for the Practice of Freedom when first launched in 1974, was expanded and reorganized in 1987 as the Association of Writers for National Literature. Its twentieth anniversary celebrations last November, amidst considerable media attention and messages of congratulation from government officials, were an indication of its achieved presence in South Korea's civil society as well as the growth of that civil society to which it had contributed.² Yet many of its members, including myself, feel the need to maintain

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an oppositional stance, which naturally includes the need to redefine that stance in response to changed situations. Also, the above-mentioned transition in the organization's name from 'freedom' to 'national literature' rather than vice versa—which some of you may have noticed with wonder and even misgiving—involves further complexities.

I shall return to these. But let me first give some details of the progress of freedom over the recent past. Eight years ago, that is, in the spring of 1987 General Chun Du-hwan, who had taken power in a bloody coup in May 1980 (with a massacre of hundreds of civilians in Kwangju) and was near the end of his term as President, was vowing—and brutally acting—to suppress any demands to reform the Constitution that had given almost unlimited power to the President and blocked any meaningful popular input into the process of electing him. When his hand-picked successor, a major collaborator in the coup and Military Academy classmate, was formally nominated by the governing party on June 10, protest actions reached a new dimension and culminated in nationwide mass demonstrations that kept growing in size and fervor. Finally, on June 29 the candidate for succession, Roh Tae-woo, made a dramatic announcement acceding to many of the popular demands, including constitutional revision to allow for direct Presidential election, release of political prisoners and restoration of their civil rights, and lifting government control of the press. While not a few of these fine promises were bound to be reneged on, Korea did get a new Constitution, and a direct and reasonably free Presidential election took place in December of the same year.

That election, in which the split between two major opposition leaders handed victory to Roh Tae-woo, was a bitter disappointment to democratic forces. Yet the popular energy released both before and after June 1987 could not be wholly contained by the new authoritarian regime. The great upsurge of labor militancy in the months following Roh's 'June 29 Declaration' was a landmark almost equal to the actions of June, many of the newly created labor unions, as well as older oppositional groups like that of us writers, survived later crackdowns by the Government; while civic associations for limited reform measures came to enjoy influence and respectability as never before.

I do not have time to describe in detail the many ups and downs in the struggle for democracy. Let me only report that another decisive progress was achieved in February 1993 when the first civilian President in more than thirty years took office. But I must quickly add, too, that even this progress was very much a mixed affair,

2 The organization has since attained the legal status of a public corporation in June 1996

for President Kim Young-sam, though an opposition leader for most of his life and often a courageous one, had joined the governing party in 1990 and become *its* candidate. In that sense, his election was a defeat for democratic forces as well as for the opposition candidate Kim Dae-jung. But Kim Young-sam's candidacy itself had been virtually forced upon the reigning party—ultimately because General Roh and his followers knew that the growth of civil society and democratic culture in South Korea had progressed too far to allow the election of another military man, and that dumping Kim Young-sam could only lead to the even more distasteful result of Kim Dae-jung's election.

Developments since the President's inauguration have more or less borne out the mixed nature of his coming to power. There have been dramatic measures of reform, particularly during the initial year, so that the military, at least, is no longer the major partner in the ruling coalition and democratic freedoms have been enlarged in other respects as well. On the other hand, the notorious National Security Law, criticized even by the U.S. State Department, still remains in force along with much of the old security apparatus; the summer months of 1994, following the death of the North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung, saw a sudden wave of anti-Communist hysteria and an actual return to many of the old repressive measures—just when South Korea's position *vis-à-vis* its counterpart would seem to have been strengthened by the event in the North. Yet this particular 'national security phase' differed from similar ones in the past in that mass media representing entrenched vested interests, rather than the Government, took the lead—another evidence of the growth of civil society perhaps, but if so, one that calls for some reflection on the very concept of 'civil society'.

2. The 'national question' in South Korea's democratic movement

In one sense, the zigzag path of South Korea's democratization merely illustrates the familiar truth that actual history is always a more complicated, a messier affair than people's aspirations or ideal projections would have it. But in the Korean case, as I have argued elsewhere (see my "South Korea: Unification and the Democratic Challenge," *New Left Review* 197, Jan./Feb. 1993), there is the peculiar complication provided by the fact of national division, by the presence in the Korean peninsula of a 'division system', of which South Korean society should be viewed as a sub-system rather than an integral 'society' on its own.³ Thus, in spite of extremely limited communication or exchange between the two divided parts, what happens in the one affects the course of events in the other to a degree

unmatched even between two close or very hostile neighboring (undivided) countries, and progress in this particular national question crucially affects the fortunes of democratization, though not necessarily with any one-to-one correspondence. The shift of focus mentioned at the outset from 'freedom' to 'national literature' in the literary movement, precisely when the democratic gains of June 1987 had enlarged the space for the 'practice of freedom', derives from this peculiar situation. For a truly democratic culture would be possible in Korea only as a national culture shared by Koreans of the entire peninsula, and even advances in freedom within South Korea would remain limited and precarious unless accompanied by moves toward national reconciliation and, ultimately, some kind of reunification with significant popular input and empowerment.

The meaning of nationalism for such a national-literary movement is bound to be ambiguous. On the one hand, Korean writers must espouse the aspirations of the preponderant majority of their compatriots for a unified nation and for reunification on the basis of self-determination rather than foreign dominance. At the same time, the ultimate goal is the more universal one of a healthy democratic culture to which nationalism and 'self-determination', whether in the case of a strong unified state like Nazi Germany or the Balkanization with a vengeance of former Yugoslavia, may prove quite inimical. Only a nuanced response to the particular nature of the given national situation will do.

In the Korean case, the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910-45) was a time when the nationalist struggle for independence clearly constituted a major, though not a sufficient, condition for the development of a viable civil society. Clearly so, not according to an abstract principle of 'national self-determination', but because, given the historical relation of the two nations, the Japanese could not have ruled Koreans without resorting to massive violence. With the Liberation of August 1945 the situation became a little less clear-cut. Sometimes a post-independence nationalist government may turn as repressive as foreign rule. But in Korea the relevance of nationalism still held good to a large extent for the following reasons. First, the end of Japanese colonialism did not mean immediate independence but a period of new foreign occupation (by the U.S. and Soviet troops, in the Southern and Northern halves respectively), secondly, this temporary partition turned into the establishment of separate regimes in 1948, thus frustrating aspirations for an independent and unified nation-state, and finally, both during and in the wake of

3 See also a more recent contribution of mine, "Habermas on National Unification in Germany and Korea", *New Left Review* 219, September/October 1996

this process intervention by foreign powers, especially the United States, worked its will often in opposition to the demands of the population for a democratic national life.

The division of the country survived the Korean War (1950-53) and, consequently, so did the largely positive nature of Korean nationalism. But further complexity enters with the consolidation of national partition into what I have called a division system with considerable self-reproductive powers. On one hand, insofar as the division engenders a pair of mutually reinforcing national security states, the nationalist sentiment for unity becomes more valuable than ever as a source of democratizing energy. Yet, the division system—unlike a short-term partition or a division enforced wholly from without—may also foster two varieties of nationalism within the contending quasi-nation-states, and the various combinations of each variety with pan-national sentiment may have widely differing effects on the structure of the division system. Already one may observe signs of Korean nationalism being mobilized to sustain and strengthen either of the divided states, as well as evidence of both South Korean and North Korean nationalisms taking on (each in its different fashion) ominous resemblances to the notorious Japanese nationalism of the past.

The proper response to this complex situation on the part of South Korea's writers and democratic movements can only be the designing of the appropriate—and creative—combination of South Korean nationalism, pan-Korean nationalism *and* radical critiques of nationalism along more universalist lines. This also involves the search for an innovative state structure (of a federal or confederal type) for the reunified Korean nation, rather than the old nation-state which we failed to build half a century ago: a structure that will provide ampler freedom for all citizens, including room for such differences among Koreans as were created during the period of division, yet retain enough power to enable it to play its legitimate role, including that of protecting its citizens from the worst ravages of capitalist globalization, in a world where states of one kind or another still remain crucial factors.

I believe the South Korean experience has some global relevance regarding national (and nationalist) claims on civil society. First, for all its ambiguity or precisely because of that ambiguity, nationalism cannot be dismissed as simply a threat to universalist notions of freedom and democratic culture, but must be analyzed in each particular historical context and appraised accordingly. Secondly, the discourse of civil society, while it should not take the formation of the nation-state as a precondition even in cases like Koreans who after 1945 were unjustifiably

deprived of the chance to build one, must not postulate, either, a simple equation of civil society with democratic culture and indiscriminately celebrate the weakening of the state. Unless 'civil society' is defined narrowly (and somewhat arbitrarily) as the sum total of democratic citizens' movements, a state grown weaker vis-à-vis civil society could restrict the freedoms of the majority of its citizens quite as much as a strong nation-state of the older type, for by becoming weaker toward certain market forces within or without its borders it would actually grow stronger against other—more democratic—elements in the country

The challenge to South Korean people, therefore, is not only to continue to work for the weakening of the repressive powers of its state, but to overcoming the division system in such a way as to produce a state structure more resistant to the claims of the world market because structurally more accountable to its own people and more open to transnational democratic movements. I think the dangers quite real that South Korea's democratic advances of recent years may eventually be reversed, unless they lead to such an innovative national reunification with growing popular participation.

3. Transnational claims on civil society

While *global* civil society can only be a distant idea in the current state of the world, nor can we speak yet of a transnational civil society in East or even Northeast Asia, various transnational movements at the level of civil societies are already a significant and growing fact. And all kinds of transnational claims are implicit in the very notion of democratic culture. Not only 'human rights' but the more particular demands for gender equality or ecological survival call for citizens' movements across, as well as within, national borders. Even the demands for 'national autonomy' may represent insufficiently articulated claims for a global classless society—claims that are properly transnational in classical Marxian theory, though not in the practice of building socialism in single countries. But rather than going into theoretical details regarding transnational or global dimensions of civil society, I shall return to the case of South Korea and then conclude with some remarks on the particular Northeast Asian region.

Let me remind you that on the Korean peninsula the very notion of 'national border' is highly ambiguous. Both legally and in predominant popular sentiment the Armistice Line dividing the two Koreas is not considered a national boundary. Yet it is more heavily armed and probably less permeable than any national border in the world, with still minimal communication or contact between the two peoples.

Thus, any peninsula-wide popular movement for common goals, if such should materialize, will have to be a virtually transnational coalition as well as a national movement in the sense of striving to reunify the still unusually homogeneous Korean nation. And if the aim of this movement be not just any reunification whatsoever but one that liberates and empowers ordinary citizens more than big capital or other privileged groups, the movement will have to be transnational in a more obvious sense as well: our work for Korean unity will need to adopt other goals more immediately shared by people outside the peninsula, including human rights and democratic culture.

Transnational movements (in the more obvious sense) are crucial for Koreans in any case, if only because of the involvement of foreign powers in the division system. This calls for substantial input from foreign citizens to influence the governments, corporations and other organizations involved. The immediately concerned powers include: the United States, Japan, China and Russia—that is, nearly all the major powers in the world except the leading members of the European Union. Transnational citizens' movements do not limit their membership by nationality, but even if they did, a solidarity movement encompassing citizens of all the major powers involved will automatically turn into a nearly global, as well as specifically Northeast Asian, configuration.

And here we find reflected the peculiarity of the region as a whole. Today global concerns are important in other regions too, but both the actual crowding together of world-class giants (in one sense or another) and the absence of conditions for regional cohesiveness make Northeast Asia even more sensitive to global developments while making not the less urgent some kind of a framework for regional cooperation. And Korea's reunification is essential, whether simply to remove the prime source of immediate frictions or to help redress the imbalance caused by Japan's economic predominance or China's overwhelming size. But in order to achieve a truly viable regional framework a reunited Korea will have to provide more: an innovative model of both state and civil society that makes larger room for national and transnational movements for democratic culture than do extant models available in the region (or perhaps the world), and the consequent moral leadership that, in the nature of the case, will only come from a less than gigantic but still not negligibly small member of the region.

Harmonizing the often conflicting national and transnational claims on civil society is never easy and all the less so in a complex situation like the divided Korea. But in the perceived possibility of convergence of specifically South Korean, peninsula-wide Korean, Northeast Asian, and global claims, we in South Korea,

including my fellow writers in the 'national literature movement'. I find hopes for a meaningful contribution to the globally shared cause of a more humane and democratic culture.