

Book Review

Kwon Heonik 권헌익. 2020. Trans. by Jeong Soyeong. 『전쟁과 가족: 가족의 눈으로 본 한국전쟁』 [War and family: The Korean War through the lens of family]. Paju: Changbi Publishers 창비. 324 pp. ISBN 9788936486617 ₩20,000*

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The debate concerning whether ontology or politics holds supremacy is like an endless game in which their relationship and individual natures are illuminated. For instance, is it that “relationships,” including political ones, are prefigured according to the properties innate to the individual entities, the conditions upon which such relationships are built? Or is it that the individual entities preceding the relationships are nothing but a product of illusion, and everything that subsists is rather a mode of existence differentiated within a particular relationship?

The answers to such questions are connected to issues like whether the domain of the apolitical could exist at all, and what its status is like in that case. The idea that ontology, as something that endows a foundation for politics, also determines the truth value of the given politics, assumes supremacy of the ontological dimension over the political one. Today, within the context of what is often referred to as “post-modernity,” political theorists sometimes go on to examine the domain of philosophical ontology and conclude that claiming the supremacy of ontology is actually,

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in itself, a practice of (mostly “bad”) politics. An alternative is often searched for in the pursuit of doing a new kind of ontological reasoning, whereby another (and mostly “good”) political praxis is supposed to be possible.

That said, the anthropological trend that has been extensively discussed in recent years, the “ontological turn,” seems to be an instance of postcolonial projects for its criticism of Western-centrism in anthropology. Certainly, the conceptual opposition laid between the West and “the rest” is questionable for good reasons, and this opposition was replaced by concrete, bottom-up constructions of local “ontologies.” Such attempts, above all, make the idea of politics-free ontology questionable; but the paradox is that macro-social phenomena, mainly studied in political and historical research, tend to vanish into the arguments and debates on the political nature of ontology itself.

The author of the book under review in this essay, Kwon Heonik, points out in his earlier book on the history of the Cold War era—*The Other Cold War* (Kwon 2010)—that postcolonial thinkers, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, left out the persistence of Cold War politics in their discussions. This absence may be attributed to the implicit view that treats the Cold War as mainly a matter of international conflicts and geopolitics. But the reality of the Cold War is not limited to the dynamics between different political communities; it is also constructed by an internal process. Moreover, the two processes are likely to be two sides of the same coin. If so, what theoretical concepts are available to help analyze the processes? Concepts such as “Cold War Culture” or cultural politics may be the first considered, but at the risk of essentializing “community” and “culture.”

Kwon chooses a different path in the book reviewed here, leading off by asking if supposedly “pre-political” relationships (kinship) are as much based on an idea of the political as full-fledged politics is. The neat distinction between ontology and politics may disappear here, and the author proceeds the analysis by examining the ethnographic reality of the Korean War. To reveal the conclusion of this review here, the analysis proposes an alternative to the assumptions of modern political theories, which are boiled down to the use of violence, by restoring the idea of politics based on the “axiom of amity.”

This is an important method of engagement, mainly for its attempt to excavate the object against which the war—an extreme form of violence—had been carried out, rather than retreating into an ontological criticism of individualism. The Korean War’s civilian casualties are estimated to be as

much as six million; this number is higher than the total combatant casualties of any nationality. According to the author, the war wounds suffered by Korean people seem to be different from other postwar traumas in that they are social in nature: “[T]he main thrust of the war’s political violence targeted not only the enemy soldiers’ physical bodies and their collective morale but also the morality and spirituality of intimate human ties” (Kwon 2020: 3). The Korean War was more than a war against the Enemy—it was foremost a “war against the society,” characterized by its attempt to discern the enemies within, to exclude them, and to purify the community, giving rise to the formation of new, corresponding political subjects.

The “society” in this context is not a civil society or a *civitas* built on the norms of state politics and modern citizenship and property ownership. The book shows that what constituted the “society” as the target of the Korean War was mainly kinship and its related mores. The subjects were not individuals comprising a civil society but were moral people born into a specific kin group. In modern political theories, especially a Hegelian one, kinship is a form of pre-political association: in order to act in the political domain, the conflicts between kinship law and state law must be resolved, usually by sacrificing the former. In the eyes of state politics, kinship, a type of human alliance that often operates as a political form in stateless regions, is not granted the status of politics.

What does politics of violence look like? Carl Schmitt, a twentieth-century jurist and political theorist, argued that what characterizes the concept of the political lies in the distinction between the Enemy and the Friend, and that total destruction of the Enemy is the logical conclusion of politics. If the idea actively mobilizes a mechanism of exclusion, a passive mobilization of violence could be said to result in a modern political subject by establishing exclusive property rights and sovereignty over the self in a space where other beings are absent. Therefore, from this perspective, kinship, which is based on alliance and connectedness, is viewed as apolitical at its very core.

According to the author’s argument, however, kinship was actively called upon and exploited by such politics in the Korean War. Guilt by association, the topic of chapter four, instantiates the point. The McCarthyism that swept up South Korea over the Cold War period singled out kinship alliance as the major path of propagation for the Enemy’s ideology. The reality was different though. The real tragedy of the

Korean War may be said to emerge from here. Kinship demanded absolute loyalty to or responsibility of care for kinsmen, rather than being a path for ideological infiltration, and this feature created a situation in which people were torn between the left and right paths (*uwangjawawang*) as the frontlines moved back and forth. Opposite ideologies coexisted within a kin group, and the ideological choice was more a matter of opportunistic functions driven by the ideological stance chosen by particular kin members. What constantly changed was not people's thoughts; rather, people had to opt for the opposite ideology to be able to save the kinsmen with any political stance, if they were at risk of being pointed out as the Enemy by the political faction that happened to hold power in the region at the moment. Chapters one to three illustrate this point by analyzing war literature and real-life experiences of the people at war.

Human alliance and connectedness, negated by state politics and vanished from the public domain, reemerged there as the thaw set. This historical change is examined throughout the fifth and sixth chapters of the book. The author tracks down the places where ideological conflict failed to separate the dead from each other and from the living, according to their political affiliations—like the cemeteries where victims of both World Wars rest side by side equally—and asks what a politics of peace would look like. The answer would be connected to the possibility that the dead and the living may affirm their moral and political connectedness to each other. In conclusion, the author writes:

The political life of kinship after the massacres in Korea has been a long struggle to reclaim the inalienable rights of the memory of the dead to an intimate existence among the living—what Emile Durkheim once called the rights of the soul. The rights of the soul in this context meant, for the dead, the recovery of their rights to exist in the world of kinship, and have been, for the living, equal in meaning to the recovery of their civil rights in political society. (Kwon 2020: 184)

References

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- Kwon, Heonik. 2010. *The Other Cold War*. New York: Columbia University Press.