

## **Grassroots Oral History and the Limits of “Great Man” and Organizational Understandings**

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Oral history is a methodology that developed as a result of contemporary social movements beginning with the 1960s and continuing with South Korea’s *minjung* movement as well as more recent periods of generalized uprisings. At the center of all these movements is the belief that people are primary—more important than “Great Men” of history and organizations like political parties. In order to appreciate this change in historical understanding, I will briefly review some key features of historical analysis.

The emphasis on Great Men is part of the “bourgeois” perspective. Most influential in this regard was German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, who measured the development of world history through the emergence of individualized inward subjectivity. Hegel traced historical progress through the unfolding of the individual, a process he located in the lives of Socrates, Jesus, and Martin Luther—“Great Men” who sacrificed their own lives for the good of humanity. For Hegel as well as for Kant, history’s internal progress led to perfection through the state.

From my perspective, Hegel transposed the individual for the species as the agent of history, a position that helped to shape the ideology of the ascendant bourgeoisie as capitalism was consolidated. In contrast to Hegel, it is my view that history is nothing but the development of the human species and is not measured through the flowering of the individual in isolation from others (that is, bourgeois history) but in the unfolding of human collectivities and of an individuality which surpasses bourgeois individualism. Moreover, what for Hegel was dialectic of mind is today understood as dialectic of praxis, of the consciousness-in-action of millions of people.

European philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sought to understand the structure of individual thought and to classify it according to its various dimensions and historical unfolding. Using a similar analytical method, we can comprehend social movements as the logical process which unfolds within the praxis of thousands—and sometimes millions—of people as they rise up to change their lives. The inner logic in seemingly spontaneous actions during general strikes, uprisings, insurrections, and revolutions constitutes the concrete realization of liberty in history. People’s collective actions are the specific character of freedom at any given moment. The precise details of uprisings reveal emergent aspirations, dreams, capacities, and limitations in events that are crucial to the future.

In the twentieth century, during the epoch of corporate capitalism and state socialism, emphasis of the “Organization Man” superseded the nineteenth century’s “Great Man” orientation. Today, we observe the continuing extension of this principle in both academic studies of social movements and activists’ professionalization as party or NGO members.

“Resource mobilization” rapidly became the most widely invoked academic schematic to analyze social movements. Even when the individualism of Western society is transcended, descriptive narratives limited to specific organizations and particular resources predominate, which once again understate the role of nameless ordinary people who spontaneously develop their own forms of organization during uprisings. Communist histories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which for them begins with the Russian Revolution and ends with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, centers on the key role of the Party in leading historical change. More recently, NGOs are understood as the alpha and omega of civil society, a perspective through which specialized organizations become ends in themselves, rather than one dimension of popular movements’ self-organization, one aspect of civil society—and perhaps not even its most important one. By emphasizing professional organizations—whether communist parties or NGOs—the role of grassroots movements in creating and nourishing them is hidden.

For us to become “citizens of paradise” living in perpetual peace, we must first comprehend ordinary people—not governments, political parties, organizations, professional politicians, and “Great Men”—as history’s most important force. Heaven on earth is not possible until militarized nation-states are replaced with assemblies of activated citizenry (precisely the kind at the center of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising).

### **Writing Korean History in English**

In almost every case, English-language histories of Korea center on the lives of “Great Men,” individuals like Kim Il-sung, Dean Rusk, Douglas MacArthur, Kim Dae Jung and Park Chunghee. With respect to Korea, the best English-language historians have often neglected (and sometimes misstated) people’s insurgencies and paid scant attention to their significance, emphasizing instead “Great Men.” In so doing, huge and sometimes purposeful errors have presented self-serving versions of history.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the prestigious Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs concluded that Roh Tae-woo was the key figure in the transition from dictatorship to democracy.<sup>1</sup> Following a long line of thinking that Great Men of history are its motor force, the transition was analyzed in terms of personalities. The Carnegie report believed Gaston Sigur, President Reagan’s special envoy to Korea in 1987, who also contributed an article to their report. He affirmed that, “Roh led Korea toward a full-blown democracy”; Roh “curbed the power of the police”; his policies “included the freeing of labor unions.” They were not alone in portraying Roh Tae-woo as a participant in the democratization movement—rather than his actual position as its enemy. *Los Angeles Times* reporter Frank Gibney wrote that Roh was “quite sincerely a democrat. ‘There is an old Korean saying,’ he once told me, ‘that the wishes of the people are the wishes of God.’”<sup>67</sup> (Roh’s intelligence agents evidently showed him minjung theology leaflets, from which he paraphrased their slogan, “The will of the minjung is the will of God.”) The widespread misconception among U.S. elite policymakers that Korea’s democratic transition was “elite-led” serves to justify

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<sup>1</sup> See *Democracy in Korea: The Roh Tae Woo Years* (New York: Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, 1992).

the Chun dictatorship as benign, superior to Chinese Communist autocrats in the view of Chonnam National University Cho Jung-kwan.<sup>2</sup>

These English-language misunderstandings of Korean history are mirrored in the military dictatorship's own mistaken blaming of Kim Dae Jung for the Gwangju Uprising, an analysis that led them to sentence him to death. Kim was deep inside a dungeon in the basement of the KCIA building in Seoul for days before the uprising occurred, and he did not even know what had happened until weeks after the bloodshed.

### **“Great Men,” Organizations and Movements**

While the decisions of “Great Men” are the usual means to comprehend world events, ordinary people's ability to articulate their own needs reveals a collective intelligence far superior to that of any individual. In my study of Asian uprisings, I demonstrate concretely how popular insurgencies have visions that are far more intelligent and compassionate than “representatives” of the people—whether kings, presidents or dictators. Even the fondest dreams of an individual genius such as Martin Luther King, a “Great Man” of history, fell far short of the imagination of the New Left when it became a world-historical movement. As eloquent and intelligent as Martin Luther King was, his individual dream concerned racially integrating the existing system. Although near the end of his life he began to discuss the connections between the struggle for civil rights and the war in Vietnam, he did so long after advocates of Black Power had already been persecuted for their anti-war stands. Like millions of other people, Martin Luther King was transformed by the global impetus of the 1960s, and in the months before his assassination, he began to discuss the idea of qualitatively restructuring the whole of American society.

The most progressive political party in 20<sup>th</sup> century US history, the Black Panthers, proved inferior to the intelligence of the popular movement it led—at least when one compares its 1966 program with the aspirations collectively authored in 1970 at the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention (RPCC), a multicultural public gathering of between 10,000 and 15,000 people who answered the call by the Black Panther Party (BPP) and assembled in Philadelphia on the weekend of September 5, 1970.<sup>3</sup> More than any other US organization in the latter half of the twentieth century, the BPP pushed ahead the revolutionary process, and this dialectical synchronicity of popular movement and revolutionary party, the interplay between the two, their dependence on each other and mutual amplification, accelerated and reached its climax at the RPCC. When held up against the RPCC documents, the 1966 program is timid, its vision limited. The program and

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<sup>2</sup> See Jung-kwan Cho, “The Kwangju Uprising as a Vehicle of Democratization,” in *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea's Past and Present*, ed. Gi-Wook Shin and Kyung Moon Hwang (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003) 76–77.

<sup>3</sup> See my article, “Organization and Movement: The Case of the Black Panther Party and the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention of 1970” in Kathleen Cleave and G. Katsiaficas (editors) *Liberation, Imagination and the Black Panther Party* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

platform contain no mention of international solidarity. Nor are gay people's rights, the liberation of women, and proportional representation of minorities and women anywhere to be found in the 1966 documents. Compared with the exemption of black men from military service, the RPCC calls for an end to a standing army. Rather than black prisoners receiving new trials, ALL prisoners were to be judged afresh by decentralized community-based tribunals. The modest national reparations of 40 acres and two mules for African-Americans, originally promised by Abraham Lincoln and restated as part of the 1966 program, were superseded by international reparations and the redistribution of the planet's wealth in the RPCC documents.

In contemporary society, the essential movement of history is the sudden generalization of struggles. In 14 months, the Arab Spring revealed nascent aspirations for more democracy and pluralistic rule in 14 countries that had remained silent for decades. In 6 years from 1986 to 1992, the Asian Wave resulted in the demise of 9 dictatorships in 8 countries in a region often thought to be content with despotic rulers. The weakness of Great Man and organizational views become apparent when they fail even to be able to conceptualize intelligently such leaps. Generalized periods of struggle are not cleverly orchestrated by "world-historical individuals" or a small group of conspirators organized into political parties, but involve the spontaneous and conscious action of millions of people. In contrast to what has become a commonplace alienation from politics, these moments are ones of the eroticization of politics—the eros effect. The essential change which creates these leaps in human reality is the activation of whole strata of previously passive spectators, the millions of people who decide to participate in the conscious re-creation of their economic and political institutions. Such spontaneous leaps may be, in part, a product of long-term social processes in which organized groups and conscious individuals prepare the groundwork, but when political struggle comes to involve millions of people, it is possible to glimpse a rare historical occurrence: the emergence of the eros effect, the massive awakening of the instinctual human need for justice and for freedom.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I developed the concept of the eros effect to explain the rapid spread of revolutionary aspirations and actions during the strikes of May 1968 in France and May 1970 in the United States as well as the proliferation of the global movement in this same period of time. As I pulled together my empirical studies, I was stunned by the spontaneous spread of revolutionary aspirations in a chain reaction of uprisings and the massive occupation of public space—the sudden entry into history of millions of ordinary people who acted in a unified fashion, intuitively believing that they could change the direction of their society. From these case studies, I came to understand how in moments of the eros effect, universal interests become generalized at the same time as the dominant values of society are negated (such as national chauvinism, hierarchy, and individualism). See *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Boston: South End Press, 1987); "Eros and Revolution," *Radical Philosophy Review*, 16.1 and 16.2. 2014; and "The Eros Effect." These last two essays are available at [www.eroseffect.com](http://www.eroseffect.com)

Of course, the movement of history—what Hegel referred to as the *Zeitgeist*—is not mandated by organizations or organized by conspiracies. Rather, as the dynamic process of historical change unfolds, the actions of millions of people actualized in moments of the *eros* effect confirm the new stage reached in the realization of freedom. The insight that it is the deeds of millions of people which determine the direction of society may be obvious today, but it is a recent insight in historical terms, one that originates with the French and American revolutions and is consolidated in late 20<sup>th</sup> century movements.

In writing my book on Asian uprisings, I relied on the insider accounts of dozens of activists. I arrived in Korea for the first time in 1999 after the Korean translation of my book on 1968 had sold well and resonated with the Korean public. Thinking it would be my only trip to distant Korea, I extended my stay to go to Gwangju. I feel in love with the people and their city. Invited back six months later, I decided to accept an invitation to do research. Shortly after I moved here in 2001, I feel in love with Shin Eun-jung, and I lived in Gwangju and Cambridge, Massachusetts with her until 2012 (when she passed). The most important part of my formative first impressions of Gwangju were a series of interviews with members of the Citizens' Army which Na Il-sung and Na Kahn-chaе helped me accomplish. Because I was known through my writing, these activists accepted me and opened up to tell me their stories—even though many of whom had never met a foreigner. Some told me the only reason they came to talk to me was that their wives had seen me on television and insisted they meet me. I learnt from the people. Over 10 years, from 1999-2009, I interviewed more than 50 fighters and nearly 150 citizen activists. (The 518 Research Institute published 2 volumes of my interviews with members of the Citizens' Army.)

More than anyone else, Eun-jung—a long-time activist and Gwangju person—taught me the inside of the Korean movement. Our relationship was extraordinary on many levels—lovers, best friends, comrades. She made an award-winning film about Harvard (a short walk from where we lived) and I wrote a book about Korea. That is real companionship!

Over the many years I have had the pleasure and privilege of being part of Gwangju, the May 18 Memorial Foundation brought thousands of grassroots Asian activists here to learn about the struggle, to visit the cemetery, and to gain fresh breaths to continue their freedom struggles. I worked together with the foundation and was invited to address many gatherings of Asian activists. Very often, I was invited to visit their countries and did so. In Gwangju as in other Asian countries, I learned about the movements from the inside, interviewing more than 50 citizens activists in 2008 and 2009. Some had become senators, ministers and even one was president of Nepal, but in the main, they were grassroots activists.

Recounting the specific features of uprisings through the first-hand experiences of people involved in them provided a view of history inaccessible to proponents of the Great Man or party-centered views. Today, as planetary integration accelerates, human beings are rapidly becoming self-conscious as a species. With the simultaneous emergence of freedom

struggles in many places, a genuine popular creation of history becomes possible, and a more promising future comes into focus.