Marxism and the Left-Right Division in South Korea

Hyun Ok Park
York University, hopark@yorku.ca
Marxism and the Left-Right Division in South Korea

Abstract
This paper delves into the dynamics of Korean Marxism and its political implications across three pivotal historical periods: the university student movement from the 1980s to the early 1990s, the era from the 1990s to the 2000s, and finally, the contemporary landscape characterized by the emergence of mass protests, the ascent of the far-right, and the spread of populism. It aims to provide insights into revitalizing Marxism in South Korea.

This paper is based on the authors talk presented in the panel, “Peril and Possibilities: Academic Marxism, Class Struggle, and the Growth of the Right Worldwide,” at the Socialist Studies Conference on May 27, 2023, at York University. I thank the panel organizer Robert Latham, fellow presenters, and the audience.

Keywords
Marxism, South Korea, Academia

Cover Page Footnote
Hyun Ok Park is Professor of Sociology at York University. Her research interests include: global capitalism, democracy, socialism, and post-socialist transition. More information about her work is available at: https://profiles.laps.yorku.ca/profiles/hopark/

This theory and class struggle is available in Class, Race and Corporate Power: https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol12/iss1/7
Marxism in South Korea has sought to comprehend the development of capitalism under colonial and Cold War conditions and transform it, entwining academic Marxism and leftist politics together. Marx’s works began to be translated during the Japanese colonial period, especially in the 1920s. However, the zenith of Marxist influence in Korea occurred in the 1980s, marked by university students leading anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements against the military dictatorship. Many former student activists have become prominent Marxist scholars in academia and leading politicians in governments and political parties across different political spectrums. Now, Marxism seems in disarray in South Korea, casting uncertainty over its future trajectory. An example is the Marx Communale, a biennial Marxist conference established in 2003, which serves as the most significant academic gathering of Marxist scholars in Korea. This year's event is speculated to be its final occurrence. (It was later decided that it would continue with the emphasis on the participation of the young.)

In this paper, I delve into the dynamics of Korean Marxism and its political implications across three pivotal historical periods: the university student movement from the 1980s to the early 1990s, the era from the 1990s to the 2000s, and finally, the contemporary landscape characterized by the emergence of mass protests, the ascent of the far-right, and the spread of populism. I aim to provide insights into revitalizing Marxism in South Korea.

During the initial phase spanning from 1984 to the early 1990s, the social formation debate in South Korea was dominated by two contrasting theses: the National Liberation (NL) thesis and the People's Democracy (PD) thesis. The NL thesis depicted South Korean capitalism as colonial and semi-feudal, arguing that imperialist exploitative mechanisms perpetuated and exacerbated feudalistic relations such as the landlord-tenant dynamic, thus hindering the development of productive forces. Its proposed political remedy was the making of a bourgeois-democratic revolution aimed at abolishing feudal remnants. In stark contrast, the PD thesis advocated for a direct socialist transition spearheaded by the working class. It posited that the socialist revolution could only commence as a people's democratic revolution led by the masses. According to this perspective, South Korean capitalism was characterized as neocolonial and state monopoly capitalism. In this framework, South Korean capital developed into monopoly capital under the influence of American imperialism despite its relatively low level of productive forces. However, rather than interpreting this as a pinnacle of Western capitalism as Lenin theorized, the PD thesis viewed it as a distinct late development against a colonial backdrop, echoing Mao Zedong's characterization of it as comprador-feudal-state-monopoly capitalism (Baek 2022; Park 2015; Seo 2023).

The second period, spanning from the 1990s to the 2000s, unfolded in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and other socialist states. During this era, many adherents of the People's Democracy (PD) and the National Liberation (NL) theses underwent a political conversion, aligning themselves with the emerging new right and far-right movements. Throughout this period and continuing into the present, Marxism's focus has shifted from predominantly economic concerns to a greater emphasis on the political realm and from the concept of exploitation to that of political representation. In his contribution to *Lenin Reloaded*, Frederic Jameson (2007) considers this shift a misguided trajectory taken by Western Marxism since the 1980s, encompassing thinkers ranging from Foucault to Ranciere, Deleuze, and Badiou.
In the realm of PD scholarship, there was a notable engagement with the works of Althusser and Balibar, alongside a growing expertise in thinkers such as Foucault, Deleuze, and poststructuralist theory.

Significant shifts, including economic liberalization, political reform, crackdowns on student activism, and financial crises also characterized the historical context of the 1990s. In response to these changes, both the People's Democracy (PD) and the National Liberation (NL) movements confronted a pivotal question: whether to establish a political party and participate in reformist politics or to persist in grassroots labor movements and anti-government activism, particularly against neoliberal, pro-American, and democratic administrations. The debate surrounding this question was particularly pronounced within the PD movement, causing deeper divisions than the NL. This internal disagreement has persisted over time and continues to influence the trajectory of the PD movement to this day, significantly undermining its cohesive power.

During this critical juncture, the People's Democracy (PD) movement was embroiled in a classic Leninist debate regarding the party's role: whether it should serve as a superior form of mass politics or merely function as a tactical tool of mass organizations. Due to time constraints, I won't be able to provide all the names of the various groups and factions that emerged, merged, and subsequently splintered during this period. Amidst these debates, the PD opted to establish a leftist political party. Still, those who viewed it as a retreat from the grassroots labor movement opposed this decision. Conversely, proponents of the party's formation criticized the opposition for “shopfloor centrism” or “laborism,” which they argued overly focused on factory-level issues to exclude broader political concerns. Baek Seung-wuk (2022), a prominent Marxist scholar, identified this internal disagreement, which emerged in 1991, as a pivotal moment marking the onset of a political decline of leftist politics in South Korea. Furthermore, even labor unions began to shift their focus towards economic unionism, marginalizing activists and organizations that continued to prioritize grassroots organizing efforts.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Union, one of the most powerful organizations since the 1987 political liberalization, embarked on a path seeking institutional power, aligning itself with the legal progressive party. However, critics from the grassroots shopfloor movement have raised concerns about the bureaucratization within these unions, alleging that they primarily safeguard the interests of unionized and higher-wage workers. This criticism comes when the unionization rate has dwindled to approximately 12 percent. Furthermore, this so-called progressive confederation of labor unions has faced accusations of excluding precarious workers, commonly referred to as irregular workers, who now constitute over 40 percent of the total labor force. Even when working alongside regular employees on the same shop floor, irregular workers receive wages of less than 60 percent of their counterparts. The failure of shop floor organizing is attributed to the prevalence of economic unionism and internal conflicts within the labor movement. Similarly, the shortcomings in party politics are blamed on bureaucratization and a perceived detachment from the concerns of workers and the broader populace. As of 2023, South Korea has four leftist parties. In the most recent election, one party secured a solitary seat, while the remaining three each secured one seat in the National Assembly, which comprises 300 members.
The latest verdict on Marxism and leftist politics in South Korea is that they are in crisis. Neither leftist parties nor workers’ politics have the capacity to respond to the current moment, which I characterize as the double crisis: the crisis of liberal democracy and the crisis of neoliberal capitalism, which is giving rise to populism on both the right and the left and the specter of fascism. The crisis of liberal democracy in South Korea cannot solely be attributed to the failure of Marxist and leftist politics; it also implicates the two dominant parties—the conservative party, which occasionally aligns with the far-right, and the liberal democratic party. Despite their apparent ideological differences, both parties tend to prioritize the pursuit of neoliberal capitalism. Their opposition often revolves around identity politics, particularly concerning the history of colonialism and military dictatorship and whether Japanese and American imperialisms facilitated South Korea's economic development. The conservative party and the emerging far-right adopt a stance that attributes economic progress to the influence of external powers, such as Japanese and American imperialisms. Some former People's Democracy (PD) scholars have contributed to the theoretical underpinnings of this position. Conversely, the liberal democratic party defines its identity by championing democratization and seeking reparations for the violence perpetrated by colonial and military regimes throughout the twentieth century until the 1980s. This partisan dynamic within and outside the national assembly has fostered a climate of polarized politics characterized by a "friends-enemies" mentality, wherein each side views the other as inherently malevolent and seeks to eradicate their influence.

In the left-right division, the right pejoratively depicts the left as the “sympathizers of North Korea” (called chongbuk), given North Korea's emblematic status as a socialist entity and the nation's other half under the national division. The implementation of the National Security Law in 1948, ostensibly aimed at safeguarding the nation from North Korea, has served as the primary tool for the right to target perceived adversaries, encompassing not only the left and Marxists but also victims of numerous recent tragedies. In 2014, the Supreme Court banned the United Progressive Party on grounds of chongbuk. Similarly, families seeking accountability from conservative governments in power for incidents such as the 2014 Sewŏl ferry disaster and the 2022 Itawon incident were labeled as chongbuk and faced attacks.

In recent years, some indications of populism and fascism have emerged in South Korea, with two significant events serving as prominent examples: the mass candlelight protests of 2016-2017, which ultimately led to the president's impeachment, and the presidential election held in 2022. While many in Korea and globally hailed the candlelight protests as a revolution akin to the Arab Spring, some Marxists tend to interpret them as manifestations of populism. They view these protests as populism that demanded a change while insisting on spontaneity and freedom from leftist activists and their organizing. This populism risks being co-opted by image-driven and charisma-based politics. Furthermore, from the Marxist perspective, the candlelight protests lack any concrete vision of alternative politics. In the most recent presidential election, Yoon Soyŏng, a well-known Marxist, endorsed the conservative party candidate, now the current president. This endorsement was based on the belief that the liberal democratic party and its candidate were veering towards populism, showing a fascist potential. This perception was fueled by promises such as implementing a basic income policy and pursuing economically unrealistic initiatives like income-driven economic development.
If we think there is a future of Marxism and leftist emancipatory politics in and beyond South Korea, I find some clues in the two books I have recently read with friends and colleagues: Sylvain Lazarus’ *The Anthropology of the Name* that theorizes politics as thoughts; and Ruy Mauro Marini’s *The Dialectics of Dependency* that draws on the labor theory of value to theorize “super-exploitation” of the global capitalist system. The works by Lazarus and Marini are different in time and subject. Lazarus’s theorization comes from his working with workers for decades in France from the 1980s. Marini’s book is about the dependency of the Latin American economy in the 19th and 20th centuries before neoliberal capitalism. Still, they share at least one thing: the approach to workers without presupposing their class characteristics and the forms of their politics, whether class struggle or political parties.

Lazarus challenges the classical class struggle paradigm and Bolshevik struggle, positing them as saturated historical modes of politics. Instead, he theorizes politics as “thoughts,” emphasizing politics not as being subordinate to organization, ideology, party, or external factors but as emanating from an “interiority” of individuals who declare their enemies and separate themselves from the prevailing order. By stressing workers’ interpretations and declarations, he perhaps seeks to retain a utopian vision of unifying mental and manual laborers in shop floor politics while diverging from linear historical narratives. For Lazarus, class antagonism is not objective but contingent upon consciousness, requiring declaration—a theory that renders politics rare. Alain Badiou (1985/2019) also theorizes politics as thoughts and a rare event. However, they parted their ways. Whereas Badiou shifts his focus to the ontology of politics that postulates true politics and its philosophical underpinnings, Lazarus anchors politics in the actual experiences and interpretations of workers within their production relations. See from Lazarus's analysis of the historical modes of politics, Korean Marxism has primarily been influenced by two dominant modes: classical classism and the Bolshevik model. In the social formation debate of the 1980s and early 1990s between the National Liberation (NL) and People's Democracy (PD) factions, the paradigms primarily revolved around abstract class categories such as monopoly capital, bourgeoisie, and the working class, alongside discussions of class alliances, antagonisms, and political organizations. During this period, the focus was, as mentioned earlier, often on whether to prioritize party politics or workerism, with the working class typically portrayed as the vanguard. However, despite this emphasis on class analysis, there was a notable absence of direct engagement with actual workers. Instead, the debate centered on abstract class categories and political strategies. Moreover, grassroots groups to organize workers continuously sought to avoid objectifying them. When university students attempted to work alongside and live with workers, they often concealed their identities and organized in small, discreet groups. Following the liberal democratization, organizing strategies shifted from traditional methods like running night schools to more casual activities such as hiking, cooking, and sewing. However, the unresolved struggle to link work and everyday life in organizing activities underscores the predicaments and limits of Korean Marxism in comprehending what workers were “thinking.” The turn to affect in mobilizing the public participation and analyzing workers’ experience is one of the latest attempts to overcome economic determinism and traditional class and party paradigms.

Lazarus's theory represents a shift within Marxism towards the political realm, prioritizing the analysis of political dynamics and subjectivities. However, this emphasis has drawn criticism, notably from scholars like Frederic Jameson, who argue that it overlooks the importance of
material conditions in shaping social and political phenomena. Conversely, the renewed interest in Ruy Mauro Marini's work reflects a reversal to the economics of the global capitalist system. This return to economic analysis comes during a heightened crisis for neoliberal capitalism and leftist politics.

Marini explains global unequal exchange between core and periphery countries through the lens of labor value theory, elucidating how surplus value is transferred from the periphery to the core via this unequal exchange. In the context of imperialist core countries, importation of inexpensive natural resources mitigated the falling rate of profits by reducing the proportion of constant value in the organic composition of capital. However, this unequal exchange in Latin America meant exporting goods and natural resources at values significantly below their actual worth. To compensate for this loss of surplus value, there was a reliance on intensifying exploitation, whether by lengthening the working day or enhancing productivity, while remunerating workers well below the value of their labor power. Marini terms this phenomenon "super-exploitation." Expanding upon this analysis, he delves into the concept of unevenness within peripheries. This includes individuals subjected to super-exploitation, who subsist on inexpensive foods and engage in secondary employment. Additionally, some individuals consume luxuries rather than reinvesting profits into production, further exacerbating economic disparities within the periphery.

Marini’s book’s insights can be extended to shed light on the dynamics of present-day neoliberal capitalism, particularly in South Korea, where deep unevenness has emerged within and across socioeconomic strata. As previously mentioned, one of the most salient manifestations of this unevenness is the stark division between irregular and regular workers in terms of wages and representation within the labor market. This internal stratification among workers, or the segmented labor markets, is often analyzed through the lens of neoliberal ideology, which promotes flexible employment arrangements alongside criticisms of union bureaucratization. However, Marini's economic analysis offers a different perspective, suggesting that this unevenness may have its roots in South Korea's export practices, where goods are often sold at prices below their actual value on the global market. At least, his work encourages us to consider the global capitalist exchange as an important but neglected factor in understanding the rise of precarious workers and their experiences beyond neoliberalism.

In South Korea, this economic law of global capitalist exchange is mediated by political factors such as democratization and economic unionism. This interplay has contributed to the creation of unevenness between unionized workers, who have been able to participate more fully in liberal democratization, and precarious subcontracted non-unionized workers, who are subjected to super-exploitation. Therefore, while critiques of party and union bureaucratization may hold some validity, Marini's analysis suggests that the underlying economic dynamics of global capitalism play a significant role in shaping the unevenness observed in the labor market. Considering the global capitalist exchanges, this perspective invites reevaluating Marxist organizing strategies.

The current trade tensions between the United States and China, particularly impacting South Korea's semiconductor exports to China, have significant ramifications beyond the country's macroeconomic growth. While conventional analyses often focus on the broader economic
implications, such as the impact on South Korea’s GDP and its reputation as a significant player in the global economy—often referred to as the “Samsung Republic” due to its dominance in its economy—Marini's framework provides a deeper understanding of the social and economic dynamics at play. In light of Marini's analysis, the trade war's effects on South Korean workers will likely exacerbate the existing uneven division between regular and irregular workers.

References


