

Comparing the Paris Commune and the Gwangju Uprising

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Abstract This paper examines similarities and differences between the Paris Commune and the Gwangju Uprising. Although separated by more than a century, these two events contained many dynamics in common: the spontaneous emergence of popular organs of democratic decision-making; emergence of armed resistance from below; attenuation of criminal behavior in the cities; existence of genuine solidarity and cooperation among the citizenry; suspension of hierarchies of class, power and status; and appearance of internal divisions among the participants. While in Paris a previously formed group (the National Guard) seized power on March 18, in Gwangju people spontaneously formed the Citizens' Army. The Paris Commune played a role in the Gwangju Uprising through the conscious memory of many participants.

Introduction

In the past two centuries, two events in world history stand out as unique beacons of the spontaneous ability of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people to govern themselves: the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Gwangju People's Uprising of 1980. In both cities, an unarmed citizenry, in opposition to their own governments, effectively gained control of urban space despite the presence of well-armed military forces seeking to re-establish "law and order"; hundreds of thousands of people created popular organs of political power that effectively and efficiently replaced traditional forms of government; crime rates plummeted during the period of liberation; and people felt previously unexperienced forms of kinship with each other.

The Paris Commune arose in 1871 as the victorious Prussians moved to seize the capital of France at the end of the Franco-Prussian War. The French government's capitulation and mollification of the Prussians angered Parisians, and on March 18, the National Guard of Paris seized control of the city in a relatively bloodless coup d'état. Despite the government's attacking them, the Communards held out for 70 days against French troops armed and aided by their Prussian conquerors. They established a functioning government that coordinated defense and met the daily needs of Parisians. Twice elections were held, and the delegates chosen sought to govern the liberated city in a robustly democratic manner. Finally, on May 27 overwhelming military force crushed the uprising and thousands were killed in a "Bloody Week" of urban warfare.

Over a century later, the Gwangju People's Uprising occurred at a time when the firepower of militaries was multiplied by several orders of magnitude. There was no conquering foreign army advancing on the city, but the citizenry rebelled

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nonetheless against their own government's military dictatorship (which was aided and abetted by the USA). After horrendous barbarity was inflicted on the people of Gwangju by elite paratrooper units, thousands of people bravely fought the military and drove them out of the city. They held their liberated space for six days, a far shorter period than the Paris Commune. Inside liberated Gwangju, daily citizens' assemblies gave voice to years-old frustrations and pent-up aspirations of ordinary people. Local citizens' groups maintained order and created a new type of government—one of, by and for the people. Coincidentally, on May 27—the same day that the Paris Commune was crushed 109 years earlier—the Gwangju Commune was also overwhelmed by military force.

There are remarkable ways in which the two events converge. Within these liberated territories, a number of similar dynamics arose:

- 1. spontaneous emergence of popular organs of democratic decision-making
- 2. emergence of armed resistance from below
- 3. attenuation of criminal behavior in the cities
- 4. existence of genuine solidarity and cooperation among the citizenry
- 5. suspension of hierarchies of class, power and status
- 6. appearance of internal divisions among the participants.

The most important historical legacy of these uprisings is their affirmation of human dignity and prefiguration of a free society. Like the Paris Commune, the people of Gwangju spontaneously rose up against insuperable forces. Both uprisings were produced by the accumulation of grievances against injustice and precipitated by extreme events. In order to contain the uprisings and prevent them from spreading, the established governments isolated both cities. Cut off from the provinces, the Paris Commune nevertheless found many supporters, and similar communal experiments erupted in many cites, from Marseilles to Tours. In Paris, Communards flew balloons filled with letters to the provinces to try to spread the revolt, and circulars for farmers were dropped successfully. In Gwangju, the revolt spread to at least 16 neighboring sections of South Cholla province. Many people were killed attempting to break out of the military cordon around Gwangju to spread the revolt, and dozens more died trying to get into Gwangju to help in its defense.

In both cities, traitors to the uprisings and people who supported the government (including spies and saboteurs sent inside the communes to disrupt and destroy them) were quite numerous. In Gwangju, government agents took the detonators from the basement of Province Hall, thereby rendering useless the dynamite brought there by Hwasun coal miners. During the Paris Commune, the decision by a small group of Communards to leave their post guarding one of the forts overlooking the city led to the loss of a most strategic position—one the reactionary forces soon used to bombard the city with artillery. Paris was "full" of internal enemies, and there were riots at Vendome Place and the Bourse, instigated by "loyal" citizens in constant contact with Versailles. In Gwangju, the "poison needle incident" is but the most famous incident in a series of internal problems.

In both 1871 and 1980, after the halcyon days of liberation were bloodily

brought to an end, brutal repression was the order of the day. Estimates of the number of people executed in the aftermath of Commune reach to 30,000, a number that does not include thousands more who were summarily deported to distant Pacific holdings of the French Empire.³ In Korea, hundreds of people simply disappeared. Although the official count of the dead hovers around 200, most people believe that as many as 2000 died in the uprising. Afterwards, there were seven long years of attempts to suppress the truth and to repress any democratic impulses. The Gwangju uprising continued in new forms, and ultimately led to the overthrow of the military dictatorship.⁴

The liberated realities of the Communes in Paris and Gwangju contradict the widely propagated myth that human beings are essentially evil and therefore require strong governments to maintain order and justice. Rather, the behavior of the citizens during these moments of liberation reveals an innate capacity for self-government and cooperation. It was the forces of the government, not the ungoverned people that acted with great brutality and injustice. Reading this description of the brutality of government, it is difficult to tell whether it occurred in Paris or Gwangju:

You shall perish, whatever you do! If you are taken with arms in your hands, death! If you beg for mercy, death! Whichever way you turn, right, left, back forward up down, death! You are not merely outside the law, you are outside humanity. Neither age nor sex shall save you and yours. You shall die, but first you shall taste the agony of your wife, your sister, your mother, your sons and daughters, even those in the cradle! Before your eyes the wounded man shall be taken out of the ambulance and hacked with bayonets or knocked down with the butt end of a rifle. He shall be dragged living by his broken leg or bleeding arm and flung like a suffering, groaning bundle of refuse into the gutter. Death! Death!

After the uprisings, years of repression fueled renewed struggles. In France as in Gwangju, police harassed funerals for years, refusing to allow the somber burial of anyone publicly associated with the movement. In France this practice continued as late as 1887,6 and in South Korea until at least 1987. Even after the Gwangju Commune had been ruthlessly crushed, the news of the uprising was so subversive that the military burned an unknown number of corpses, dumped others into unmarked graves, and destroyed its own records. To prevent word of the uprising from being spoken publicly, thousands of people were arrested, and hundreds tortured as the military tried to suppress even a whisper of its murders.

Both uprisings took place after many years of economic growth. Although repressive, the Yushin system of Bak Jeong-hee galvanized great gains in the Korean economy in the 1970s, albeit at the price of superexploitation of the

¹ Michel, p. 65.

² Schulkind, p. 152.

³ Williams estimates between 17,000 and 20,000 were killed, "many of whom had been given no quarter but simply butchered" p. 151. In addition, of the 46,835 cases heard in trials from 1871–1875, 24,000 were acquitted. Of the nearly 13,000 convictions, 110 were sentenced to death—of which 26 were actually executed. p. 152. Louise Michel (pp. 67 and 168) put the number at 35,000 killed. Edwards tells us the number was 25,000. p. 42. Patrick Hutton (p. 96) estimates 25,000 were executed at the wall after the suppression of the Commune.

⁴ See Na Kahn-chae's article in *New Political Science* 23:4. ⁵ Quoted in Peter Kropotkin, "The Commune of Paris."

⁶ Hutton, p. 127.

working class through long workweeks, low wages and systematic suppression of people's basic rights. In France, output had expanded during the Second Empire of Louis Napoleon. Between 1853 and 1869, agriculture grew from an output of 64 to 114, industry from 51 to 78; building from 51 to 105; and exports from 25 to 66.7 Between 1860 and 1870, national income rose from 15,200 million Francs to 18,800, and real wages increased from 60 to 72 from 1852 to 1869.8 Cholla Do in 1980 and Paris in 1871 were undergoing similar transitions from agriculture to industry, a trend resulting in great migration from the countryside to the cities. The 1872 census put the number of industrial workers in France at 44% of the workforce, but there were probably no more than 15 factories that employed more than 100 workers each, and an additional hundred factories employed between 20 and 50 workers. Similarly, Gwangju in 1980 was the site of many small factories, a feature typical of the transition to higher forms of industrialization.

Differences Between the Two Uprisings

Differences between these two historic events are quite apparent. As previously mentioned, the Paris Commune lasted from the insurrection of March 18 to the final suppression on May 27—some 70 days. The Gwangju People's Uprising held liberated Gwangju for only 6 days—May 21-27. For political events, however, time is not a key variable—at least not as we ordinarily measure it. If one doubts the veracity of this observation, think only of the impact and significance of one day-September 11, 2001-in the overnight political transformation of world consciousness and political reality.

A more significant difference is that in Gwangju, no pre-existing armed force like the Parisian National Guard led the assault on power. Rather asspontaneous process of resistance to the brutality of the paratroopers threw forward men and women who rose to the occasion. Many had little or no previous political experience. Some had little or no formal education. All emerged in the concrete context of unfolding historical events. Liberated Gwangju was organized without the contrivance of governments or planning by political parties.

The capacity for self-organization that emerged spontaneously in Gwangju, first in the heat of the battle and later in the governing of the city and the final resistance when the military counterattacked, is mind expanding. In the latter part of the 20th century, high rates of literacy, the mass media, and universal education (which in South Korea includes military training for every man) have forged a capacity in millions of people to govern themselves far more wisely than military dictatorships or tiny elites all too often ensconced in powerful positions. We can observe this spontaneous capacity for self-government (as well as the deadly absurdity of elite rule) in the events of the Gwangju uprising. Not only was there no preexisting organization to stage a coup d'état, but known leaders of the movement were either arrested or in hiding when the uprising began. On the night of May 17, military intelligence personnel and police raided homes of activists across the city, arresting the leadership of the movement.

⁹ Stewart Edwards, p. 15.

Almost all of those not picked up went into hiding. Already at least 26 of the movement's national leaders (including Kim Dae Jung) had been rounded up. According to one observer: "The head of the movement was paralyzed." 10 Another wrote that the "leading body of the students' movement was in a state of paralysis."11

Nonetheless the very next morning, students spontaneously organized themselves—first by the hundreds and then by the thousands—to march in protest of the occupation of their city by police and freshly arrived units of the army. As the city mobilized the next day, people from all walks of life dwarfed the number of students among the protesters.12 The spontaneous generation of a people's movement transcended traditional divisions between town and gown, one of the first indications of the generalization of the revolt. On May 20, this capacity for self-government was present in the streets. Tens of thousands of people gathered on Kumnam Avenue and sang, "Our wish is national reunification." Paratroopers' clubs dispersed them. At 5:50 p.m., as the brutality and resistance continued, a crowd of 5000 surged over a police barricade. When the paratroopers drove them back, they reassembled and sat-in on a road. They then selected representatives to try and split the police from the army. 13

After driving the military out of the city, citizens voluntarily cleaned the streets, cooked rice, served free meals in the marketplace, and kept constant guard against the expected counterattack. Everyone contributed to and found their place in liberated Gwangju. Spontaneously a new division of labor emerged. The fighters of the Citizens' Army, many of whom had stayed up all night, nonetheless were models of responsibility. People dubbed the new militia the "Citizens' Army" or "our allies" (as opposed to the army, "our enemy.") Without any indoctrination and none of the military madness that elicits monstrous behavior in armies around the world, the men and women of the Citizens' Army behaved in an exemplary fashion. They protected the people and the people, in turn, took care of them. Unafraid to impose a new type of order based on the needs of the populace, they disarmed middle-school and highschool students, 14 and ordered government workers to return to their jobs. When the final assault was imminent, Yoon Sang-won personally insisted that the women and high schoolers among the militants return home so they could survive and continue the struggle. After many protests and with tears in their eyes, they departed.

In the heat of the moment, a structure evolved that was more democratic than previous administrations of the city. In the course of many interviews, we were able to reconstruct an outline of the structure created on May 25. (See the chart in Na Kahn-chae's article in this volume of New Political Science.)

As in Paris, military and police sometimes sided with the insurgents. General Chung Oong bravely refused to order the killing of innocents. The police chief in Gwangju, cognizant of the death sentences meted out to police officers who ordered the deadly shootings on April 19, 1960, also refused to participate in the

⁷ Plessis p. 69. (This index was calculated in constant Francs with 1890 = 100.)

⁸ Plessis, p. 115. (1900 = 100)

¹⁰ Lee Jae-eui, p. 41.

¹¹ The May 18th ... p. 121. ¹² The May 18th, p. 127.

¹³ Lee, p. 64.

¹⁴ May 23 Fighters' Bulletin.

slaughter. Many individual policemen helped wounded citizens and cooperated with the new civil authority once Gwangju had been liberated.

While Korean military and police units acted individually, during the Paris Commune, whole units went over to the side of the Commune (or remained faithful to the government). During the war against Prussia, the French government on August 11, 1870 had organized 200 new National Guard battalions from the poorer classes to fight alongside the 60 battalions already drawn from the propertied classes. When the newly elected National Assembly of February 8, 1871 voted for France to surrender to Prussia, the people hated it, and the National Guard became the sole source of national pride. With the support of at least 215 of the existing 260 National Guard battalions, their leaders carried out a relatively bloodless coup d'état on March 18. The Central Committee of the National Guard, composed of three representatives from each of the 20 arrondissements (neighborhoods) of Paris, effectively became the new govern-

Military units, which sided with the Commune, were at times undisciplined. According to one observer: "The artillery battalions were in effect more completely a law unto themselves, having their own arrondissement committees, which refused to merge with the main National Guard Central Committee."15 Confusion and polycentric authority patterns marked the Paris Commune. On March 1, "the guiding personalities of the Paris International still had no definite political program."16 On March 26, 287,000 men voted in fresh elections (after the National Guard's coup), and 90 members of the Commune were selected—but they included 15 government supporters and 9 citizens against the government but also against the March 18 "insurrection." The next day, 200,000 people attended the announcement of the results and installation of the new government at the Hotel de Ville (City Hall). Unlike the free flowing gatherings at Democracy Square in Gwangju when everyone had a voice, the crowd in Paris watched as their representatives were sworn in, and then they left. The new government created nine commissions to manage Paris, the most socialist being for Labor and Exchange. The government was not the only power to be reckoned with however. In the analysis of one observer, "The Republican Central Committee acted as a shadow government."18 In addition, the National Guard also gave orders to its units. Sometimes, military commanders received three sets of conflicting orders! Elected leaders' orders were often reversed by one of the other groups claiming authority—the Central Committee of the National Guard or the Republican arrondissement associations. Even though the Paris Commune had elections, the elected government was practically powerless, rivaled in military affairs by the Central Committee of the National Guard and diminished in political power by the arrondissement associations. Tragically, the elected government was also mired in personal antagonisms among its members and depleted by elected representatives who refused to serve or

resigned. Most significantly, it was weakened internally by those loyal to the old government, the bitter enemy of the Commune.

Despite the presence of as many as 3000 Blanquists in 1871,19 and even though the Commune had its disposal something like 60,000 men, 200,000 muskets, 1200 cannon, five forts and enough munitions for years, 20 decisive action was difficult. No attempt was even made to seize the Bank of France.²¹ In the first week of April, more than 200 priests had been arrested,²² but mainly through popular initiative. Louise Michel tells us that 15,000 people stood up to clash with the army during the Bloody Week,²³ but when the Versailles army first broke into the city on May 21, there were large crowds listening to a concert in the Tuileries Gardens.²⁴ Even more indicative of the lack of discipline and unity in Paris was a poster of the Central Committee of the National Guard: "Death for Looting, Death for Stealing"25 In liberated Gwangju, by contrast, incidents of looting or stealing were practically nonexistent.

The Paris Commune's Role in the Gwangiu Uprising

In a series of interviews, Lee Jae-eui, author of the definitive narrative history of the Gwangju Uprising,²⁶ offered penetrating analysis of the differences and similarities between the Paris Commune and Gwangju People's Uprising.²⁷ "During the Paris Commune, they had enough time to organize elections and set up an administrative structure. But in Gwangju, there was not the time for the leadership to get authority from the people." Lee continued: "In response to the situation. I suppose it's very similar. Even though there were so many differences-ideological, historical, social, cultural-human beings respond to protect their dignity and existence."

In my interview with Yoon Hang-bong, we discussed the Paris Commune at some length.²⁸ Yoon felt the Paris Commune and the Gwangju Uprising were not similar because the Paris Commune was more "systematic and ideological." In his view, Gwangju was more "voluntary." "People's level of democracy was very low here," he said. "They believed US ships were coming to help them, showing they had no understanding of international political dynamics." Yoon felt that the workers of the Paris Commune had a high consciousness but that in Gwangju the workers were not educated. The Gwangju Uprising was "moral"-stores and banks were not robbed. "If they had some conception of class consciousness, they would have redistributed these goods and funds to the poor." When I interjected that the Bank of France had also been left alone during

¹⁵ Edwards, p. 32.

¹⁶ Schulkind, p. 294.

¹⁷ Alain Plessis, The Rise and Fall of the Second Empire 1852–1871 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Pres, 1987) p. 171 estimates the number of voters at 230,000 out of 470,000 who were registered.

¹⁸ Roger L. Williams, The French Revolution of 1870–1871 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969) pp. 90, 122, 130.

¹⁹ Hutton, p. 30.

²⁰ Lissagaray, History of the Commune of 1871 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967) p. 183.

21 Williams, p. 138.

²² Hutton, p. 81–2. ²³ Michel. P. 67.

²⁴ Edwards p. 40.

²⁵ Eugene Schulkind, ed., The Paris Commune of 1871: The View from the Left (New York: Grove Press, 1974) p. 136.

²⁶ Translated into English as Lee Jae-eui, Gwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age (UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 1999).

Lee Jae-eui, interview, March 17, 2001.

²⁸ 29 October, 2001.

the Paris Commune—indeed guarded by the Communards—we decided to continue the discussion at greater length another time.

According to another interviewee, the Paris Commune and Gwangju Uprising were similar in their community spirit, in the ways people "lived and struggled together" under difficult circumstances. Like the Paris Commune, there were many calls for an uprising before the actual event transpired. Kim recalled how he, Kim Nam-ju and Park Sung-moo called for an uprising in 1972. They secretly threw leaflets from the administration and law school buildings at CNU on December 8, after which they repeated their action at Gwangju Ilbo and the girls' High School.²⁹ He also mentioned other calls for an uprising long before 1980.

Not only were the Paris Commune and Gwangju People's Uprising similar events, but the conscious memory of the Paris Commune played a role in the events of 1980 Gwangju. Of the 29 interviews I conducted in 2001 with participants in the Uprising, many persons indicated that they had been part of study groups that for a time focused on the Paris Commune before the Gwangju Uprising. Moreover, one person remembered that Yoon Sang-won had attended a 1976 speech given by poet Kim Nam-ju at Nokdu bookstore in which Kim Nam-ju discussed the Paris Commune. 30 During the uprising, Yoon Sang-won spoke publicly at least once about the Paris Commune in his discussions with other leading members of the Uprising. 31

A history major in his undergraduate years at Chonnam National University. Lee Yang-hyun read about the Paris Commune in the 1970s. From his readings, he recalled that "3 to 4-year-old kids threw rocks at the French Army." Though he thought that was an exaggeration, he observed his own three-year-old son throw rocks at the police during the Gwangju Uprising.³² During high school, Lee and his classmate Chang Sang-Yon (also a prominent participant) were part of a book club that focused for a time on the Paris Commune. Kiln Jong-bae reported that Chang Sang-yong, Yoon Gang-ok, Kim Yong-chol, Yoon Sangwon, and Park Ho-son were all members of a Paris Commune study group prior to the uprising.33 Yoon Gang-ok described the group as "loose-knit"—meaning anyone could join-and recalled the key role of Professor Lee Young-hee. Kim Hyo-sok read about the Paris Commune during one of the meetings of his "good book club" at the YWCA.34 Organized by Yoon Young-kyu and Song Gi-suk, these clubs attracted a wide following. According to Yoon Young-kyu, at least 18 readers' clubs were organized in Gwangju in the late 1970s. Bringing together high schoolers, college students and professors, these groups included "opinion leaders" and leaders of illegal organizations. Many books were available about the Paris Commune, all illegal and many of poor quality printing.³⁵

Chong Sang-yong remembered reading about the Paris Commune before the uprisings in a group called Kwang Rang (Gwangju Young Men), which had

These direct connections between the Paris Commune and the Gwangju Uprising illustrate how the legacy of uprisings, whether in Paris or Gwangju, is to empower other humans to struggle against oppression. Even when an uprising is brutality suppressed—as in both cases here under consideration—their being experienced publicly creates new desires and new needs, new fears and new hopes in the hearts and minds of participants and all those standing in the path of the ripples of history being made.

Conclusion

The sudden emergence of hundreds of thousands of people occupying public space, the spread of the revolt from one city to another and throughout the countryside, the intuitive identification with each other of hundreds of thousands of people and their simultaneous belief in the power of their actions, the suspension of normal values like regionalism, competitive business practices, criminal behavior, and acquisitiveness are dimensions of the "eros effect" in both the Paris Commune and the Gwangju Uprising. ³⁹ After World War 2, the sudden and unexpected contestation of power has become a significant tactic in the arsenal of popular movements. Popular uprisings remain a powerful weapon of social transformation.

As an example of ordinary people taking power into their own hands, the Gwangju Uprising and Paris Commune were (and are) the precursors of a truly free society. To catch a glimpse of such a society we need to look no further than liberated Paris or Gwangju during the People's Uprising. Despite the brutality of the states, people briefly tasted freedom. The example set by citizens of Paris and Gwangju in their spontaneous capacity for self-government and organic solidarity may well be their most important legacy. Alongside these indications of the unrealized potential of human beings today, there were concrete gains in Gwangju—the overthrow of the military dictatorship and the inspiration of other democratic movements—and specific lessons taught through the blood and sacrifices of so many. Today, the uprisings continue to provide all of us with

²⁹ Interview November 7, 2001.

³⁰ Ihid

³¹ Interview with Lee Yang-hyun June 22, 2001.

³² Interview June 22, 2001.

³³ Interview November 27, 2001.

³⁴ Kim Hyo-sok interview November 6, 2001.

³⁵ Interview with Yoon Young-kyu April 10, 2001.

been created after the overthrow of Syngman Rhee on April 19, 1961.³⁶ As he recalled, in 1966 the texts were read in Japanese by older college colleagues who then presented summaries in a group of about 20 people—several from each grade level. These people then, in turn, discussed the subject with their own colleagues, a structure that facilitated learning by a large number of people. Kim Sang-yoon remembered a study group in 1978 that focused on the Paris Commune. "At most 5 people would study together. Each member would then form another group on almost the same topic. Kim Nam-ju got a Japanese book about the Paris Commune." While Lee Chun-hee read intensively about the Paris Commune after the uprising, she recalled that during the uprising, leading people talked about the Paris Commune at the YWCA, along with the significance of the Argentinean-born revolutionary Che Guevara. These direct connections between the Paris Commune and the Gwangiu

³⁶ October 17, 2001.

³⁷ Kim Sang-yoon, April 15, 2001.

³⁸ Interview, December 21, 2001.

³⁹ See The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968 (Seoul: E-who Press, 1999) and The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life (Seoul: E-who, 2000) for discussion of what I call the "eros effect."

a palpable feeling for the dignity of human beings and the necessity of intensifying the struggle for liberation.

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