

*Remembering the Kwangju Uprising**

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Archimedes once declared, "Give me a fixed point and I can move the earth." Historically speaking, the Kwangju people's uprising of 1980 is such a fixed point. It was the pivot around which dictatorship was transformed into democracy in South Korea. Twenty years afterwards, its energy resonates strongly across the world. Among other things, its history provides both a glimpse of the free society of the future and a sober and realistic assessment of the role of the U.S. government and its allies in Asia.

The most important dimensions of the Kwangju uprising are its affirmation of human dignity and prefiguration of a free society. Kwangju has a meaning in Korean history that can only be compared to that of the Paris Commune in French history, and of the battleship Potemkin in Russian history. Like the Paris Commune, the people of Kwangju spontaneously rose up and governed themselves until they were brutally suppressed by indigenous military forces abetted by an outside power. And like the battleship Potemkin, the people of Kwangju have repeatedly signaled the advent of revolution in Korea—in recent times from the 1894 Tonghak rebellion and the 1929 student revolt to the 1980 uprising.

Forged in the sacrifices of thousands, the mythical power of the Kwangju people's uprising was tempered in the first five years after 1980, when the dictatorship tried to cover up its massacre of as many as 2000 people. Even after the Kwangju Commune had

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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.¹ In 1985, thousands of copies of the first book about the Kwangju uprising, Lee Jae-eui's classic history (translated into English as *Kwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age*²), were confiscated and its publisher and suspected author arrested. Korean civil society is so strong that when the truth about the military's brutal killing of so many of its own citizens and subsequent suppression of the facts finally became known, the government quickly fell. As Lee Jae-eui put it: "The reason why the Korean people could overcome that terrible violence so quickly in 1987 was because of Kwangju's resistance."³ President Chun Doo Hwan and his military government may have won the battle of May 1980, but the democracy movement won the war—seven long years later when the Minjung movement ousted the military dictatorship.

Like the Paris Commune and the battleship Potemkin, Kwangju's historical significance is international, not simply Korean (or French or Russian). Its meaning and lessons apply equally well to East and West, North and South. The 1980 people's uprising, like these earlier symbols of revolution, has already had worldwide repercussions. As a symbol of struggle, Kwangju has inspired others to act. As an example of ordinary people taking power into their own hands, it was (and is) a precursor of events to follow. In 1996, activist Sanjeewa Liyanage of Hong Kong expressed this dimension of the uprising when he wrote:

The "power of people" is so strong that it just cannot be destroyed by violent suppressive means. Such power, from the people, spreads a spirit that will last for generations. Kwangju is a city full of that "people power." What happened in 1980, in Kwangju, was not just an isolated incident. It has brought new light and hope to many people who are still suffering from brutally oppressive regimes and military-led governments...the strength and will of people of Kwangju to carry on their agitative actions was very impressive...Today many look up to them, paying tribute to what they have achieved...I was inspired by their courage and spirit. Kwangju remains a unique sign that symbolizes a people's power that cannot be suppressed. That sign is a flame of hope for many others...⁴

In this paper, I seek to understand the power of the people's uprising of 1980 in three dimensions:

- the capacity for self-government
- the organic solidarity of the participants
- the international significance of the uprising

The Capacity for Self-Government

As monumental as the courage and bravery of the people in Kwangju were, their capacity for self-government is the defining hallmark of their revolt. In my view, it is the single most remarkable aspect of the uprising. The capacity for self-organization that emerged spontaneously, 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 Korea includes military training for every man) have forged a capacity in millions of people to govern themselves far more wisely than the tiny elites all too often ensconced in powerful positions. We can observe this spontaneous capacity for self-government in the events of the Kwangju uprising.

On May 15, 1980, one million people participated in a student demonstration in Seoul, a huge outpouring of sentiment against the dictatorship. While many people believed the time to overthrow the dictatorship had come, student leaders, flush with their success and under pressure from liberal politicians, decided to suspend actions scheduled for the 17th and 18th in the hopes that the government might end martial law. Instead the military clamped down, sending thousands of combat troops to all the large cities, especially to Kwangju. On May 14, students there at Chonnam National University had broken through the riot police cordon enveloping their campus. When they reached the city, many citizens supported their demonstration for democracy. On May 16, when the rest of South Korea was quiet, students from nine universities in Kwangju rallied at Province Hall Square, renamed it "Democracy Square," and then marched through the city in a torchlight procession. The next night, military intelligence personnel and police raided homes of activists across the city, arresting the leadership of the movement. Those leaders 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."⁵ Another wrote that the "leading body of the students' movement was in a state of paralysis."⁶ 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.

With US approval, the government had released from the front lines of the DMZ some of its most seasoned paratroopers, the same army units that had crushed movements in Pusan and Masan a year earlier. Once these troops reached Kwangju, they terrorized the population in unimaginable ways. In the first confrontations on the morning of May 18, heads of defenseless students were broken by specially designed clubs. As demonstrators scrambled for safety and regrouped to counterattack, 45 riot police were suddenly surrounded and captured by demonstrators at Sansu-tong Junction. For a time, people debated what to do with their captives. They soon decided to release them, and immediately after they were set free, the paratroopers viciously attacked: "A cluster of troops attacked each student individually. They would crack his head, stomp on his back, and kick him in the face. When the soldiers were done, he looked like a pile of clothes in meat sauce."⁷ Bodies were piled into trucks, where soldiers continued to beat and kick them. By night the paratroopers had set up camp at several universities. As students continued to fight back, soldiers used bayonets on them and arrested dozens more people, many of whom were stripped naked and further brutalized. One young child who witnessed these events asked her parents when *their* army was coming. Another child, having been taught political values at a tender age, screamed that Communists had taken over the army. One soldier brandished his bayonet at captured students and screamed at them, "This is the bayonet I used to cut 40 VC women's breasts [in Vietnam]!" The entire population was in shock from the paratroopers' overreaction. The paratroopers were so out of control that they even stabbed to death the director of information of the police station who tried to get them to stop brutalizing people.⁸ Despite severe beatings and hundreds of arrests, students continually regrouped and tenaciously fought back.

As the city mobilized the next day, the number of students among the protesters was dwarfed by people from all walks of life.⁹ This 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. When working people began to participate, the paratroopers once again resorted to callous brutality—killing and maiming people whom they happened to encounter in the streets. Even cab drivers and bus drivers seeking to aid wounded and bleeding people were stabbed, beaten and sometimes killed. Some policemen secretly tried to release captives, and they, too, were bayoneted.¹⁰ People fought back with stones, bats, knives, pipes, iron bars and hammers against 18,000 riot police and over 3000 paratroopers. Although many people were killed, the city refused to be quieted.

On May 20, a newspaper called the *Militants' Bulletin* was published for the first time, providing accurate news—unlike the official media. Tens of thousands of people gathered on Kumnam Avenue and sang, "Our wish is national reunification." They were dispersed by paratroopers' clubs. At 5:50pm, 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.¹¹ In the evening, the march swelled to over 200,000 people (some say 300,000) in a city with a population of 700,000. The massive crowd unified workers, farmers, students and people from all walks of life. The procession on Kumnam Avenue, the downtown shopping area, was led by nine buses and over 200 taxis. Once again, the paratroopers viciously attacked, and this time, the whole city fought back. During the night, cars, jeeps, taxis, and other vehicles were set on fire and pushed into the military's forces. Although the Army attacked repeatedly, the evening ended in a stalemate at Democracy Square. At the train station, many demonstrators were killed, and at Province Hall, the paratroopers opened fire on the crowd with M-16s, killing many more.

The censored media had failed to report killings that occurred right under their noses. Instead, false reports of vandalism and minor police response were the news that they fabricated. The brutality of the army was still unmentioned. After that night's news again failed to report accurately the situation, thousands of people surrounded the MBC media building. Soon the management of the station and the soldiers guarding it retreated, and the crowd surged inside. Unable to get the broadcast facility working, people torched the building. The crowd targeted buildings quite intelligently:

At 1:00 in the morning, citizens went in flocks to the Tax Office, broke its furniture and set fire to it. The reason was that taxes which should be used for people's lives and welfare had been used for the army and the production of the arms to kill and beat people. It was a very unusual case to set fire to the broadcasting stations and tax office while protecting the police station and other public buildings.¹²

Besides the Tax Office and two media buildings, the Labor Supervision Office, Province Hall car depot and 16 police boxes were burned down. The final battle at the train station around 4 a.m. was intense. Soldiers again used M-16s against the crowd, killing many in the front ranks. Others climbed over the bodies to carry the fight to the army. With incredible fortitude, the people prevailed, and the army beat a hasty retreat.

At 9 a.m. the next morning, more than 100,000 people gathered again on Kumnam Avenue. A small group shouted that some people should go to Asia Motors (a military contractor) and seize vehicles. A few dozen people went off, bringing back only seven (the exact number of rebels who knew how to drive). As they shuttled more drivers back and forth, soon 350 vehicles, including three armored personnel carriers, were in the hands of the people. Driving these expropriated vehicles around the city, the demonstrators rallied the populace and also went to neighboring villages to spread the revolt. Some trucks brought bread and drinks from the Coca-Cola factory to the main demonstration. Negotiators were selected and sent to the military. Suddenly gunshots pierced the already thick atmosphere, ending hope for a peaceful settlement. For ten minutes, the army fired indiscriminately, and in the carnage, dozens were killed and over 500 wounded.

The people quickly responded. Less than two hours after the shootings, the first police station was raided for arms.¹³ More people formed action teams and raided police and national guard armories, and assembled at two central points. Apparently the long-held tradition, so valued in Korea, of never rising with arms against a Korean government was suddenly transcended by thousands of people. With assistance from coal miners from Hwasun, demonstrators obtained large quantities of dynamite and detonators.¹⁴ Seven busloads of women textile workers drove to Naju, where they captured hundreds of rifles and ammunition and brought them back to Kwangju. Similar arms seizures occurred in Changsong, Yonggwang and Tamyang counties.¹⁵

The movement quickly spread to Hwasun, Naju, Hampyung, Youngkwang, Kangjin, Mooan, Haenam, Mokpo—in all to at least 16 other parts of southwest Korea.¹⁶ The rapid proliferation of the revolt is another indication of people's capacity for self-government and autonomous initiative. Hoping to bring the uprising to Chunju and Seoul, some demonstrators set out but were repulsed by troops blocking the expressway, roads, and railroads. In Mokpo, birthplace of Kim Dae Jung, 100,000 people marched to protest the arrest of their favorite son, and there were five consecutive days of rallies for a democratic constitution.¹⁷ In Chonju, people took over city hall. In Jeonji and Iri, police were reported to have joined the demonstration.¹⁸ Helicopter gunships wiped out units of armed demonstrators from Hwasun and Yonggwang counties trying to reach Kwangju.¹⁹ If the military had not so tightly controlled the media and restricted travel, the revolt might well have turned into a nationwide uprising, as some people hoped. The Sabuk miners' revolt, the Pu-Ma Incident, and hundreds of other struggles indicated that conditions were ripe for action in many quarters.²⁰

Assembling at Kwangju Park and Yu-tong Junction, combat cells and leadership formed. Machine guns were brought to bear on Province Hall (where the military had its command post). By 5:30, the army retreated; by 8 p.m. the people controlled the city. Cheering echoed everywhere. Although their World War 2 weapons were far inferior to those of the army, people's bravery and sacrifices proved more powerful than the army's technical superiority.

For five days, the citizens held the city. Spontaneously formed citizens' councils organized all essential services, including defense of the city, and they simultaneously negotiated with the military for more coffins and for release of the thousands of prisoners (some of whom were already being viciously tortured),²¹ as well as for a peaceful end to the conflict. Rubbish from the fighting was quickly cleared away without anyone being told to do so. At the same time, the armed resistance was organized in earnest. At Kwangju Park, 78 vehicles lined up, were painted with numbers and assigned to patrol specific parts of the city to guard against the coming counterattack. An operations office of the Citizens' Army (CA) was established and issued passports for access to their headquarters, safe-conduct passes for vehicles, and coupons for gasoline. An investigations bureau was formed to ferret out military agents, but it appears that it was itself heavily infiltrated.

The emergence of organization appears to have happened quite naturally. The process was obvious* to everyone. Even the government at one point publicly referred to the uprising as "community self-rule." At about 10:30 a.m. on May 22 a group of eight evangelical pastors met to appraise the situation. One of them was Arnold Peterson, a Baptist missionary who happened to be in Kwangju. He later remembered the pastors' appraisal:

The consensus of their feeling is summed up in the phrase "This cannot be." It was unheard of that the citizens of a city should rise up and throw off their government with no conscious planning and leadership.²²

There may have been no leadership in place when the uprising began, but the crucible of the fighting produced many resolute enemies of the military. Others only feared the army all the more because of their brutality. Soon two groups, sometimes referred to as councils,²³ formed in liberated Kwangju: a Citizens' Settlement Committee (CSC) and a Student Action Committee (SAC). The CSC, or May 18th General Citizens Settlement Committee, as it was formally known, consisted of about 20 people: priests, clergymen, lawyers, professors and politicians. Led by Ch'oe Han-yong, a respected anti-Japanese activist, they formed hours before the SAC (also on the 22nd) and almost immediately began negotiating with the martial law authorities. They attempted to find as peaceful as possible a solution to the uprising.

Unlike the CSC, the tempestuous origins of the SAC involved many people who had not previously been introduced to each other. Testifying years later about his personal experiences in the uprising, Professor Song Ki-sook recounted these events. He and Professor Myeong Lo-geun were approached at a rally at the fountain on May 22, the same day Peterson was attending his pastoral meeting. Myeong was asked to gather activists and create a headquarters to "lead an effort to cope with the situation."²⁴ People were concerned that the past histories of members of the CSC indicated that they were not going to lead the struggle but to sell it out. Song Ki-sook was against taking any action, but he went along with Myeong. Holding a bullhorn given to him by a student, Myeong began to speak: "Please choose five representatives among Chonnam National University and Chosson University students respectively." He continued:

Though paratroopers are now driven out, the citizens' army is bewildered and confused, and has no headquarters. A citizens' settlement committee has already formed and went to

Sangmudae with the settlement conditions, but it cannot control the citizens' army. This whole thing was started by students and they should take a lead in straightening things out. Let's go into the provincial government building and organize a student settlement committee.

With that, Professor Myeong led the crowd to the front gate of Province Hall, where the citizens' army, wearing backwards the protective helmets taken from the riot police, kept guard in a tense atmosphere. The 10 student representatives were allowed to enter the building, and were escorted into the administrative office, where "complete chaos" transpired.²⁵

Many of the militants inside refused at first to even discuss a student settlement committee—preferring to "fight until death" for democracy and dignity. Patiently Professor Song prevailed and a political arm of the students, the SAC, was formed, and it soon took care of funerals, alternative media, vehicle control, and weapons collection and distribution, while the CSC negotiated with the military. Sometimes the two councils issued joint statements, but they also worked at cross purposes. On May 24, for example, when more than 100,000 people assembled for that day's rally, the CSC scuttled the loudspeakers. Amplification equipment was finally brought in from elsewhere, but members of the CSC kept unplugging it. Despite pouring rain, people stayed, and an electrician hooked the sound system up to a car battery. Afterwards, the SAC convened an emotional meeting. There was much debate, and a small majority favored turning in all their weapons. The minority, however, refused to consent to such a surrender. As the night wore on, moderates resigned from the group, leaving the minority in charge. Workers and activists were then added to its leadership, and its name was changed to the Citizen-Student Action Committee (CSAC).

This transformation of the SAC into the CSAC reflected the leading role now played by the working class. Although students had sparked the uprising, they were unable to remain the leading force. I have already mentioned the Hwasun coal miners and women textile workers. There are numerous other examples of working-class leadership to which one can point. Peterson reported that on the 21st, "In a conversation I had with Pastor Chang, he was careful to emphasize that the ones who seized guns were not students. Instead they were young jobless and working men."²⁶ Lee reports that while many citizens surrendered their firearms to the Citizen Settlement Committee on May 22, "Workers

and members of the underclass, however, would not abandon their guns."²⁷ These militants hoped to spark a nationwide uprising to overthrow the dictatorship—and they were willing to die trying to restore democracy in one fell swoop. They demanded qualitative changes in Korean politics—not only the lifting of martial law, release of all prisoners, and a caretaker government, but the resignation of Chun Doo Hwan²⁸ and full democratization. The struggle for student autonomy had spontaneously metamorphosed into a struggle for social autonomy and democracy.

As should now be clear, the SAC served as the nucleus of an increasingly dedicated constellation of people whose resolute courage and clear vision guided the people's uprising. Of all the remarkable individuals who starred in the battle of Kwangju, no one shone brighter than Yun Sang-won. During the huge rally on May 21 (with over 200,000 people), Yun personally led one of the assaults on arms depots, and he was also involved in the group that took control of three armored personnel carriers and 350 other vehicles at Asia Motors Company. In the intense atmosphere of military snipers firing on public areas, endless meetings, daily mass rallies, and occasional skirmishes, Yun emerged as the "only one who had a strategic view."²⁹ He believed that by creating "pockets of resistance," thereby helping "to make the price higher" for the dictatorship, the uprising would raise the stakes, in effect telling the regime: "If you do not have the guts to kill more people, you surrender. And if you do have enough guts, then you prove yourself barbarians."³⁰ They also hoped other rebellions would break out.

Along with a small number of others, some of whom were members of groups like Wildfire (a night school for workers), Clown (an activist theatrical troupe), and the National Democratic Workers' League, Chun and Yun published a daily newspaper, the *Militants' Bulletin*, which they used to stiffen and inspire the armed resistance. They successfully outmaneuvered the mayor and more conservative members of the council. Making an alliance with Park Nam Son, the emergent leader of the armed fighters, Yun appears to have been the energy center as a spectrum of militant individuals merged together and devoted themselves to a single focus—continuing armed resistance. Significantly, many of the members of this more militant group had previously participated in a study group about the Paris Commune with poet Kim Nam-zu.³¹

Refusing to place his name at the titular head of the council, he approved the appointment of a chairman and vice-chairman. Named the "spokesman" for the council, he also coordinated public relations, planning and supply. The P.R. division organized four working clusters of people: one to drive vehicles with loudspeakers through the streets to make announcements; another publishing the daily *Militants' Bulletin* and other materials; a third to raise funds and encourage people to donate blood; and finally a group that organized the daily rallies. They also coordinated a rapid response unit and made sure the outposts were supplied.

On the night of May 26, families of soldiers stationed near Kwangju informed the resistance fighters that the military was going to move in the next morning. Yun was among the hundreds of people who fought to the death. In the final battle, on May 27, a tank column led the assault to retake the city, and dozens more people—including Yun Sang-won—were killed.

As significant as the role of Yun Sang-won was, he and his small organization were unable to control the popular movement. In the dialectic of spontaneity and organization, it was clearly the popular movement's impulses that held sway in Kwangju. Many of the militants who fought the army used their own initiative rather than following the suggestions of the Citizens' Army. On May 22, for example, Bag Naepoong refused to head to Youngsan-Po as the CA thought he should. Instead he went to Hwasun train station with four others, where they were able to procure arms for themselves and return to Kwangju.³² This particular case of individual initiative ended well, yet the lack of strategic organization cost the communards dearly. The *Militants' Bulletin* called for people to "occupy the KBS [television station] to let our reality be known to the whole country through broadcasting."³³ During the fighting, however, the crowd torched the place. If people had listened to Yun's group, would they have been able to broadcast news of the uprising to the rest of the country? Would a nationwide uprising have then occurred? Clearly, strategic leadership both in Kwangju and the nation was needed, particularly for the militants to have succeeded in overthrowing the government.³⁴ In hindsight, of course, this weakness of the movement is easily visible, but options were limited in the heat of battle. The main feeling in Kwangju was one of solidarity, and it is to this dimension of the Commune that I now turn.

Organic Solidarity

The city was no longer under government control. The people of Kwangju were building a commune, but the price for the new system was their blood. The morning of May 21 saw a new sight on the street corners. Meals had been prepared for demonstrators and were prepared on every street, at all the busy intersections. Women stopped the appropriated vehicles to offer food to the occupants. Street and market vendors, some of the main eyewitnesses to the government's brutality, organized food distribution. Meanwhile the rich parts of town emptied out...Hundreds of housewives fed the demonstrators on Kumnam Avenue. Nobody drank...This unity fed the fighting spirit of all the rebels.³⁵

After the military had been driven out of the city on May 21, hundreds of fighters in the citizens' army patrolled the city. Joy and relief were shared by everyone. The fighting was over and the city was free. Markets and stores were open for business, and food, water, and electricity were available as normally. No banks were looted, and common crimes like robbery, rape or theft hardly occurred—if at all. Foreigners freely walked the streets. Indeed, Peterson reported that his car, flying an American flag and with a large sign reading "Foreigners' Car," was cheered by people in the streets.³⁶ Coffins, gasoline and cigarettes were in short supply. While the CSC attempted to procure more coffins from the army, gasoline was rationed by the CSC, and cigarettes were shared by people with their newly found comrades-in-arms, happy to be alive. For some people, sharing cigarettes symbolized an important part of the communal experience.³⁷ Storeowners who still had cigarettes often sold—or gave away—one pack at a time (to be fair to everyone). Blood had been in short supply at the hospital, but as soon as the need became known, people flooded in to donate it, including barmaids and prostitutes, who at one point publicly insisted that they, too, be permitted to donate. At many of the rallies, thousands of dollars for the settlement committees were quickly raised through donations. All these examples are indications of how remarkably the whole city came together. Many eyewitnesses commented on the new feeling of solidarity among the populace:

...during the whole period of the uprising, Kwangju City coped with the crisis through humanitarian cooperation. Kwangju citizens shared possessions with each other, and being dependent on each other, they encouraged each other in their isolated

situation. They shared food with those who were in need of it, donated blood to the wounded, and willingly helped anyone who was in need...In spite of the complete absence of an official peace and order system, the Kwangju citizens maintained peace and order perfectly. Though so many firearms were in the hands of citizens, no incident took place due to it. Even financial agencies or jewelers' shops in which crimes are apt to happen in ordinary times were free from any criminal act.³⁸

A professor at a Kwangju university who remained anonymous for his own safety wrote:

The citizens, who used to buy up everything in sight no matter what the price, shared their daily necessities. Merchants who used to be impatient and charge high mark-ups didn't raise prices at all. Citizens participated, offering tobacco, pajamas, food, and drink...No infamous crime which might have been expected was committed, no robbery of money from defenseless banks was undertaken by the armed citizens. They did not harm any of the resident aliens in Kwangju.³⁹

Indeed, the Japanese Catholic Association for Peace and Justice wrote a statement on June 6, 1980 in which they verified these observations:

The ones who didn't join in, who didn't witness the firmly united citizens, can't understand this feeling of liberation. They could have seen the tears on the faces of the young men, who devoted themselves to defend democracy. Their chests were splattered with blood. They shouted the slogans with bloody bands around their heads, until their throats got sore. Our beloved neighbors, young and innocent children, and even housekeepers were now joining the parading cars...People who couldn't get on the cars brought rice wrapped in seaweed and drinks...They wanted to give eggs, bread, cokes, milk, and juices to the demonstrators. Stuffing all the food into a box, an old man was not able to lift it up. I lifted it up and put it into a car that I just stopped. I could read the resolution to struggle to the death on their faces. Housekeepers who couldn't prepare food brought buckets of water, offered it to them to drink and cleaned up their faces. Some citizens ran along with the vehicles...It was a struggle of blood and love to share lives with others: a man who tapped a participant's back to cheer, a pharmacist who brought out medicines and drinks, and the crowd who did their best, clapping and cheering.⁴⁰

In June 1980, the Roman Catholic priests of Kwangju Archdiocese reiterated these same themes:

While the army cut off communication with the outside and no necessities or food were provided, no one made undue profits by buying things up or being indisposed to sell things. Without knowing when the situation was going to end, people shared their food with each other. As the number of patients who got shot increased and blood was needed, the number of citizens who donated blood skyrocketed...Kwangju citizens swept the scattered stone, glass and fragments of tear gas canisters, doctors and nurses moved patients from the city while risking getting shot; bus and taxi drivers protected young people without thinking about their own lives; juvenile vagrants and abandoned children were more virtuous than ever before...⁴¹

How do we explain this sudden solidarity, this emergence of a new form of bonding between people? How do we understand the suspension of normal values like competitive business practices and individual ownership of consumer goods and their replacement with cooperation and collectivity?

For days, 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 Kwangju. Spontaneously a new division of labor emerged. The citizens' militia, many of whose members 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"). They protected the people and the people, in turn, took care of them. Without any indoctrination and none of the military madness that elicits monstrous behavior in armies around the world, the men and women of the CA behaved in an exemplary fashion. Unafraid to impose a new type of order based on the needs of the populace, they disarmed all middle school and high school students, an action for which the *Militants' Bulletin* took responsibility.⁴² When the final assault was imminent, Yun Sang-won personally insisted that the high schoolers among the militants return home so they could survive and continue the struggle. After many protests and with tears in their eyes, the younger militants departed.

The CA served the people, and the popular will was directly formulated at daily rallies around the fountain at Province Hall Square. Renamed "Democracy Square" on May 16, the space was holy even before the liberation of the city. A poem written that day by the Congregation for the Democratization of Chonnam Province began with these inspired lines:

The sky of the south was beautiful
There was no angel blowing a trumpet.
Nor colorful butterflies scattering flowers around.
Still the sky of the south was beautiful.

The day when the fountain stopped scattering
colorful water,
The day when the artificial flower withered,
I came to you and you came one step closer to me.

The day when the pepper fog and tear gas stopped.
People came from the Mujin plain.
All democratic citizens: intellectuals, laborers,
farmers.

People gathered in front of the fountain of the
of the provincial capital.
People tried to touch the fountain.
Sitting on the lawn, hugging each other
Exchanging smiles with each other

There is no song as beautiful as this,
The song we sang all together.⁴³

The ability to assemble peacefully by the thousands was a right won through the blood of too many friends and neighbors. Instinctively, the people of Kwangju recognized the square as their spiritual home, and they assembled there every day by the tens of thousands. The daily rallies became the setting for a new kind of direct democracy where everyone had a say. Of the five rallies that occurred during the time the city was liberated, huge crowds attended each. The first massive rally was a spontaneously organized gathering to celebrate the defeat of the military the day after the army retreated. The next day (May 23), at the First Citywide Rally for Democracy, the crowd swelled to 150,000. It ended with the people singing "Our Wish is National Unification." On May 24, over 100,000 people assembled; there were 50,000 on May 25 (where the resignation of the Settlement Committee was demanded); and 30,000 at the end of the final rally on May 26. At this last gathering, the demand for a new government of national salvation emerged. The final act of the people that day was to sing once again "Our Wish is National Unification."

Even though the rallies were huge, many people were able to express heartfelt needs. As Lee Jae-eui described it:

The fountain was now the center of unity. All walks and classes of people spoke—women street vendors, elementary school teachers, followers of different religions, housewives, college students, high school students and farmers. Their angry speeches created a common

consciousness, a manifestation of the tremendous energy of the uprising. They had melded together, forging a strong sense of solidarity throughout the uprising. For the moment, the city was one.⁴⁴

Alongside the unity of the city, regional loyalties—long the cause of division and strife in Korea—became less important than the struggle for democracy. On May 21, the Jeonnam *Newsletter of Democracy* proclaimed: "Let us actively participate in the struggle for democracy, remembering that what we want is not to blur our goal under the spell of regional animosity, nor do we want indiscriminate destruction but autonomous action based on the democratic spirit."⁴⁵ The suspension of regionalism is another indication of the universal appeal of the revolt—an appeal not confined to Cholla or even to Korea. I now turn to the uprising's international implications.

International Revolts After the Kwangju Uprising

In 1985, East Asian dictatorships, in power for decades, seemed unshakable. Both Kim Dae Jung and Benigno Aquino, popular leaders of vast democratic strata, were in exile in the U.S. where they got acquainted. Although brutally repressed, the Korean movement continued the struggle to overthrow the dictatorship. After the massacre of May 27, 1980, it took two years for the families of the victims to meet, and five years passed before the first book about the uprising appeared. On May 17, 1985, coordinated protests at 80 colleges and universities involved some 38,000 students who called for the truth about the killings to be made public. A week later, 73 Seoul students occupied the US Information Service building for three days in an attempt to compel an apology from the US government for its role. On August 15, as protests continued, Hong Ki Il burned himself to death on Kwangju's main street because of the government's failure to reveal the truth.

After decades in which democracy was repressed throughout East Asia, a wave of revolts and uprisings transformed the region. In 18 days of February 1986 in the Philippines, the walk-out of 30 computer operators counting the votes in an election sparked a sudden end to the Marcos dictatorship. The confrontation was won by hundreds of thousands of people who refused to leave the streets. The Philippine people-power revolution in turn inspired the slowly rebuilding movement in South Korea.⁴⁶ Less than a

month after the outbreak of the people-power revolution, the Cardinal and his Bishops in Seoul began talking about the people of South Korea having learned a lesson. Within a year, the military dictatorship was overthrown.

The glorious victory of the Minjung movement centers around a massive outpouring of popular protest beginning on June 10, 1987. For more than ten days, hundreds of thousands of people mobilized in the streets demanding direct presidential elections. When Kwangju native Yi Han Yol was killed in a student protest near Yonsei University, more than one million people gathered to bury him. As in the Philippines, massive occupation of public space compelled the military to relent—in this case by agreeing to hold direct elections for president. In July and August, thousands of strikes involving millions of workers broke out. Although major concessions had been granted by the government, the struggle continued.

All through Asia, people's movements for democracy and human rights appeared: an end to martial law was won in Taiwan; in Myanmar (Burma) a popular movement exploded in March 1988, when students and ethnic minorities took to the streets of Rangoon (much as had happened in Kwangju). Despite horrific repression, the movement compelled President Ne Win to step down after 26 years of rule. In August, five days of new student-led protests forced his replacement to resign. A general strike committee representing workers, writers, monks and students coordinated the nationwide movement for multiparty democracy, but the military shot down thousands more people—bringing to 10,000 the number of people it killed that year. Arresting thousands more, including over 100 elected representatives, the Burmese military government continues to use an iron fist to remain in power.

The next year, student activists in China activated a broad public cry for democracy, only to be shot down at Tiananmen Square and hunted for years afterward.⁴⁷ Even within the halls of communism, however, as the chain reaction of revolts against military dictatorships continued, a member of the Politburo of Vietnam, General Tran Do, publicly asked for multi-party democracy in Vietnam in 1989, an unprecedented event. The next country to experience an explosion was Thailand, when 20 days of hunger strike by a leading opposition politician brought hundreds of thousands of people into the streets in May 1992. Dozens were

killed when the military suppressed street demonstrations, and because of this brutality, General Suchinda Krapayoon was forced to step down.⁴⁸ In 1998 in Indonesia, students called for a "people-power revolution" and were able to overthrow Suharto. Interviews conducted by an American correspondent at the universities in Indonesia determined that the people-power slogan was adopted from the Philippines, as was the tactical innovation of the occupation of public space. Students successfully surged into the parliament building and were able to compel a resolution of the conflict only by the withdrawal of Sukarno.

The relationship of these revolts to each other is an understudied dimension of these movements. Elsewhere I have developed the concept of the eros effect to explain the rapid spread of revolutionary aspirations and actions.⁴⁹ By the eros effect, I mean events like the spontaneous chain reaction of uprisings and the massive occupation of public space—both of which are examples of the sudden entry into history of millions of ordinary people who act in a unified fashion, intuitively believing that they can change the direction of their society. In moments of the eros effect, universal interests become generalized at the same time as the dominant values of society (national chauvinism, hierarchy, domination, regionalism, possessiveness, etc.) are negated. This is what I referred to as the organic solidarity of participants in the Kwangju Commune. The eros effect is not simply an act of mind, nor can it simply be willed by the "conscious element" (or revolutionary party). Rather it involves popular revolutionary movements emerging as forces in their own right as thousands of ordinary people take history into their own hands.⁵⁰

By developing the concept of the eros effect, I seek to rescue the revolutionary value of spontaneous actions of millions of ordinary people from the scorn of theorists. I also seek to stimulate a reevaluation of the unconscious and emotions, to overturn their portrayal as being linked to reaction rather than to revolution. My notion of the eros effect seeks to bring emotions into the realm of positive revolutionary resources whose mobilization can result in significant social transformation. As Marcuse said, nature is an ally in the revolutionary process, referring not only to external nature, to nature out there in the world, but to internal nature, to human nature. Humans have an instinctual need for freedom—something that we grasp intuitively, and it was this instinctual need that was

sublimated into a collective phenomenon during the Kwangju uprising.

Is the eros effect an analytical construction or a tactic for a better world? It is certainly the former. The sudden emergence of people massively 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: these are dimensions of the eros effect in Kwangju. After World War 2, the sudden and unexpected appearance of massive contestation of power has become a significant tactic in the arsenal of popular movements.

Future Prospects

If the eros effect can be activated, I see at least two possibilities for how this dynamic could be crafted in practical situations. When the Zapatistas used the internet to call for demonstrations against neoliberalism during the summer of 1999—and activists in several cities responded, including in London which experienced its largest riot in at least a decade—clearly they were seeking internationally synchronized popular uprisings. For this method to succeed, the group(s) initiating the call must be a socially legitimate leadership in the hearts of many people and must wisely wield hegemonic power. Most significantly, the spark lit by organized forces of the movement must land in flammable territory. Besides the Zapatistas, Kwangju might increasingly play such an international role. Like the Battleship Potemkin, Kwangju's actions might again signal the time for uprising—and not only in Korea. In 1972, the Vietnamese revolution meticulously prepared an internationally synchronized offensive. After convening a Paris conference to coordinate the action calendars of anti-war movements in over 80 countries, the Vietnamese launched a military offensive in April 1972, during which they declared the existence of a Provisional Revolutionary Government.

Secondly, confrontations with the principal instruments of global corporate domination (the IMF and World Bank meetings in Berlin in 1988, Clinton's recent visit to Athens, anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999 and the more recent protests against the IMF and World Bank in Washington DC) help to create a global dynamic of escalating confrontation that spreads throughout the world like a wave in a

stadium. Abetted by global institutions of capital (the IMF, World Bank and WTO), local ruling classes—both in East Asia and in the USA—use force when persuasion fails to maintain the regime of corporate exploitation and cultural hegemony. When people confront such dictatorial tendencies in one country, they intuitively mobilize movements, creating a global dynamic of solidarity and struggle.

Globalization as we know it has been built on the backs of the world's working poor. The concentration of greater quantities of capital is based on the increasing misery of hundreds of millions of people at the periphery of the world system. As the global tendencies of the world system intensify in their impact on millions of people's everyday lives, internationally coordinated opposition is more and more a necessity. For the eros effect to be activated, thousands and then millions of people who comprise civil society need to act—to negate their existing daily routines and break free of ingrained patterns. This process is not simply enacted by the will-power of a small group—although it may be sparked by one. Like falling in love, enacting the eros effect is a complex process. It appears that leaderless situations often produce the eros effect. If the eros effect were continually activated, we would have passed from the realm of what Marx called prehistory, to the realm of real human history in which human beings for the first time are able to determine for themselves the type of society in which they wish to live.

To catch a glimpse of such a society we need look no further than the Kwangju People's Uprising, for during the brutal reality of May 1980, Korean workers and students briefly tasted freedom. The example set by the people of Kwangju in their spontaneous capacity for self-government and the organic solidarity of the population may well be their most important legacy. Alongside these indications of the unrealized potential of human beings today, there were concrete gains—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—the need for strategic organization and the centrality of working people to fundamental change. Today, twenty years later, the uprising continues to provide all of us with a palpable feeling for the dignity of human beings and the necessity of intensifying the struggle for liberation.

NOTES

1. Although the Western media did carry reports at the time, the Kwangju Commune and the massacres were never fully analyzed, nor have most non-Koreans even heard about it. In the US, it has been buried beneath a stream of reports on the "Korean economic miracle." US complicity in the massacre is embodied in the man who is today our United Nations ambassador—Richard Holbrooke. Although he has claimed that "the Americans didn't know what was going on," Holbrooke was the leader of the US team that approved the release of the South Korean troops from the DMZ to crush the Kwangju uprising. In the midst of negotiations for a peaceful settlement in Kwangju, the citizens' councils asked the US to mediate: Holbrooke and Co. refused. Rather he promised the Korean government that the "US would not publicly contest" their version of whatever events transpired. After hundreds had been killed, Holbrooke stepped up US economic and diplomatic ties to the new military government, and he personally profited by serving as a key adviser to Hyundai in the 1980s. Apparently Holbrooke's complicity in hundreds of murders earned him a promotion to UN ambassador.
2. Lee Jae-eui, *Kwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age* (UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 1999). This is the single best source in English and I highly recommend it. It can be ordered from Mr. Leslie Evans, 11372B Bunche Hall, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1487.
3. Other English language sources I have relied on in my research include a collection of foreign journalists' accounts, *Kwangju in the Eyes of the World* (Kwangju Citizens' Solidarity, 1997). The above quote is from an article by Bradley Martin, p. 94. Also helpful was *The May 18 Kwangju Democratic Uprising* (The 5/18 History Compilation Committee of Kwangju City, 1999). Arnold A. Peterson's essay, "5/18: The Kwangju Incident" is contained in a Korean-language book. Last but not least, I have benefited greatly from the May 18 Institute's recent translation of documents and personal testimonies (hereafter referred to in my footnotes as *Documents*). These are available in digital format. In some cases, I have tried to make the translations flow more easily.
4. Sanjeewa Liyanage, "Kwangju, The Flame of People's Power," *International Youth Net*, Volume 1, 1996, p. 29.
5. Lee Jae-eui, *Kwangju Diary*, p. 41.
6. *The May 18th Kwangju Democratic Uprising...* p. 121.
7. Lee, p. 46.
8. *Documents*, p. 79.
9. *The May 18th Uprising*, p. 127.
10. *Documents*, p. 113.
11. Lee, p. 64.
12. *The May 18th Uprising*, p. 138.
13. The firing began at 1:00 sharp on the afternoon of the 21st, and at 2:30, weapons and ammunition was commandeered from the Sampo Branch office of Naju police station, and police boxes at Youngkwang, Keumsung, and Suan. The first groups of armed protesters began firing back at 2:20. Arnold Peterson relates that "At about 2:00 p.m. some of the citizens captured the military arsenal in the town of Hwa Soon, just south of Kwangju. From that time on many of the citizen fighters carried guns." Peterson, p. 44.
14. *The May 18th Uprising*, p. 143.

15. Lee, p. 77.
16. *The May 18 Uprising*, p. 164; *Documents*, p. 72.
17. *Documents*, p. 105.
18. *Documents*, p. 61.
19. Lee, p. 137.
20. In *Documents*, p. 132, the number of such struggles was placed at 719.
21. *Documents*, p. 43.
22. Peterson, p. 49.
23. See Cumings, "Introduction" to Lee.
24. This incident is described in *Documents*, pp. 9-10.
25. Lee (p. 107) says there were 15 representatives.
26. Peterson, p. 44.
27. Lee, p. 107.
28. Fighters' Bulletin No. 5, May 23, *Documents*, p. 71.
29. Chun Yong Ho quoted in *Kwangju in the Eyes of the World*, p. 88.
30. Park Song Hyon summarized Yun's strategy in *Kwangju in the Eyes of the World*, p. 88.
31. Interview with Chun Yon Ho, November 29, 1999.
32. *Documents*, p. 31.
33. *Documents*, p. 68.
34. See Lee's analysis as well as the insightful criticisms written two years after the uprising by the Kwangju Citizens' Movement for Democracy, p. 133 *Documents*. In my view, such organization needs to be decentralized for many reasons, chief among them being the ease with which centralized organizations are decapitated. For more discussion, see chapter 5 of my book *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Boston: South End Press, 1987).
35. Lee, p. 72.
36. Peterson, p. 47.
37. See *Documents*, pp. 11-12.
38. *The May 18th Uprising*, pp. 174-5.
39. *Documents*, p. 113.
40. *Documents*, p. 119.
41. *Documents*, p. 127.
42. May 23 Fighters' Bulletin, *Documents*, p. 71.
43. *Documents*, p. 58.
44. Lee p. 105.
45. *Documents and Testimonies*, p. 67.
46. "Lee Jae-eui, "The Seventeen Years of Struggle to Bring the Truth of the Kwangju Massacre to Light," in *Kwangju in the Eyes of the World*, p. 143.
47. Although the government claims far fewer, it appears some 700 people were killed. See Bruce Cumings, "Introduction," in Lee.
48. The Thai Interior Ministry claims 44 dead, 38 disappeared, 11 disabled and over 500 wounded. Human rights activists have noted that hundreds were killed or disappeared. No Thai government has ever been held responsible for massacres of pro-democracy demonstrators in 1973, 1976 or 1992.
49. See *The Imagination of the New Left* and *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1997)
50. With the psychic energy and swings in emotions of crowds, a mixture of sentiments co-exists simultaneously. While many sacrificed their lives, the survivors have many opportunities to quit. What Marcuse called a "psychic Thermidor," an internally conditioned process of self-defeating behavior within revolutionary movements, may have been operative in Kwangju. Do we see this in the release of the 45 riot police captured in May 18 at Sansu-tong Junction? Almost certainly the paratroopers' rampage after the release of the police would not have happened, but would the hostages have made good bargaining chips to free some of the prisoners being tortured? Other indications of a psychic Thermidor can be found. On May 23, thousands of carbines, M-16s, and pistols were abandoned. That same night Kim Ch'ang-gil and some SAC members permitted an explosives expert, in reality a military agent, to remove all the detonators from the arsenal of dynamite, rendering it all useless. Would the military have moved in so brutally if they had known they might have lost some tanks?