



# A Socialist Century? Socialism as the Main Counter-Hegemonic Ideology of Contemporary Korea

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## Abstract

*Some scholars have recently discussed the supposed failure of socialism in South Korea. By failure, they tend to refer to the low parliamentary representation of social-democratic parties in today's South Korea, as well as a high degree of working-class fragmentation. I argue here that the rhetoric of failure does not do justice to the entirety of socialist experience in post-division South Korea. It is undeniable, of course, that the degree of working-class self-representational capacity was greatly affected by both hard-core Cold War anti-communist policies and the neoliberal fragmentation of wage laborers into many divergent, sometimes even mutually antagonistic, groups. However, the noteworthy revival of autochthonous socialist politics and ideology in the 1980s, as well as socialist success in entering mainstream electoral politics in the 2000s, reveals the potential of political socialism in South Korea. Moreover, I argue that socialist/Marxist influence on South Korean intellectual paradigms and debates is significantly more pronounced than research suggests. Rather than a failure, socialism in South Korea represents a continuum of struggle. Socialism did not triumph on the Korean Peninsula in the twentieth century. However, the struggle continues, and constitutes perhaps the principally important part of Korea's modern and contemporary history.*

**Keywords:** South Korea, socialism, Marxism, post-war, anti-communism, social democracy

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## Socialism, Capitalism's Inescapable Other

In the spirit of Marxist dialectics, one can say that, to maintain its existence and possess perspectives for development, any phenomenon—socio-economic systems included—needs its opposite. It is hard, for example, to imagine Europe's medieval feudal society developing somewhere beyond the level of "stationary bandits" (Olson 1993) extracting their protection rent from the impoverished peasants and lording over their serfs without the decisively non-feudal element of relatively autonomous cities or long-distance trade. One may also argue that the relative easiness with which East Asian states accepted the modern, non-dynastical forms of rule—be it a bureaucratic oligarchy of the Meiji type or the Party-State political form which eventually took root in China, North Korea, and Vietnam—since the late 19th century had something to do with the early development of a relatively rational, well-structured bureaucracy. The bureaucrats, who later adopted Western education as the main qualification for their positions, were, indeed, in any case to overcome the vagaries of personalized dynastic rule (Fukuyama 2014, 335–386). The dialectic struggle between the opposites of the castle and town, or the monarchical palace and the bureaucratic office in pre-modern times, has its obvious parallel in the contestation between the forces of (generalized) capital and various socialist movements in the twentieth century. While the former wanted the industrial modernity to fit into the logic of capital accumulation, the latter wanted different forms of mass politics to dominate and, ideally, abolish the accumulation process and, in the end, to reshape industrial modernity in accordance with their own priorities. This contestation between the forces of the economical and the social/political (Esping-Andersen 1985) largely shaped the world of the twentieth century as we know it. Many phenomena qualified with the adjective *mass*—from mass education to mass welfare, or even mass consumption (hardly thinkable in its current form without at least some elements of the social state needed in order to boost working classes' purchasing power)—are understandable only in this context.

In this paper, I will argue that South Korea's avowed anti-communism notwithstanding, its contemporary landscapes, both political and intellectual, are hardly comprehensible without referring to socialism as South Korean capitalism's main constituent Other, and to Marxism as the main counter-hegemonic discourse in South Korean history. By "socialism" I refer here to the whole spectrum of the political ideologies and practices which envision full or partial emancipation from the logic of capital accumulation as their goal. This definition will, accordingly, include both radical socialism (communism) and moderate socialism (social democracy), as well as the eclectic or derivative ideologies and practices genealogically related to them (for example, redistribution-oriented radical progressive politics, even if their practitioners do not necessarily position themselves as socialists or social democrats). I will delineate the history of socialist political movements in South Korea and point out the reasons for both their inability to acquire a share of political power and their importance in a broader social and discursive context. Furthermore, I will emphasize the role Marxism has been playing in forming South Korea's intellectual landscapes, its historical "truth regime," and the prevailing understating of the individual and society. My aim here is to demonstrate that, contrary to the assertions of some researchers (see for example, Y. Kim [2015]) about the *failure* of socialism in South Korea, socialism, despite having been politically excluded and suppressed for a large period of South Korean history, has continued to play a defining role in shaping the directions of social and intellectual movements from the 1950s until recent days.

### **Colonial-Age Socialism in Korea**

Given the essential role of socialism in shaping the twentieth-century world, defining the last century as Korea's *socialist century* implies that Korea, a (peripheral) part of the capitalist world-system since the late nineteenth century, was following general global trends—of course, in its peculiar form and perhaps with somewhat peculiar intensity. Intensity here does not necessarily imply the numerical strength of the socialist movement.

The movement, after all, was a persecuted underground opposition in an impoverished peasant-majority society where any modern-type political group was destined to remain a small minority in quantitative terms. For the early 1920s, the age of early socialist developments in Korea, researchers know from Japanese police materials of about 520 communist activists of some visibility. They were mostly educated males in their twenties and thirties; significantly, 82 of them studied abroad, mostly in Japan or Soviet Russia, at a time when the total number of Korean students abroad numbered only around a thousand (about 990 in Japan for the year 1924, and several hundred individuals in the United States, Europe, and China) (S. Jeon 2004, 83–94). In essence, colonial-age socialists were initially numerically small counter-elites with their own alternative modernity project. It is significant, however, that with time this counter-elite managed to penetrate the grassroots in a much deeper and thorough-going manner compared with the early 1920s, when the main preoccupation of the socialist radicals was to create a vanguard party modeled on the Soviet Bolsheviks.

By the late 1930s, in the atmosphere of stiffening police repression, (re-)creating a nation-wide party was hardly realistic. However, the whole country was by that time covered in a network of grassroots radical organizations: red peasant unions, radical labor unions, socialism-influenced reading societies, and various smaller underground groups of generally socialist persuasion. Only in Myeongcheon County (*gun*), North Hamgyeong Province, did local communists manage by 1935 to organize a county-level peasant union with 28 branches in various villages and 58 different peasant groups affiliated with these branches. By 1936, 1647 persons had to be arrested in the county to prevent the spread of grassroots radicalism (Ji 1991). Admittedly, Myeongcheon County, close to the bases of the anti-colonial resistance in Manchuria, had a special reputation for militancy during the 1930s. Still, at least some form of left-wing radical organization was present in the majority of the 220 counties of colonial Korea (Yun 2006, 125). The ubiquitous peoples committees (*inmin wiwonhoe*), the basic form of post-colonial popular self-organization of the Korean population which mushroomed all around the country in the wake of the Japanese surrender in August-September 1945, were often led by those

with experience in left-wing organizational work during the colonial period. Whereas the US military administration quickly moved to suppress these committees in US-occupied southern Korea, they were eventually integrated into the Soviet-controlled local administration in the northern part of the country. Subsequently, they functioned as an important cadre reserve for the North Korean socio-political revolution of the late 1940s (Suzy Kim 2013, 43–52). Colonial-period Korean socialists did not manage to produce their dreamt-of national *and* social revolution on their own, but they were vital to the success of the socio-political changes facilitated by the Soviet military presence in the northern part of Korea during 1945–1948. Eventually, these changes laid the foundations for North Korea’s independent statehood. This statehood eventually evolved into a model of its own, both similar in certain ways to its original Soviet prototype and at the same time very unique, after the country gained de facto geopolitical autonomy in the late 1950s (on the North Korean model, see Cumings [1982/1983]).

### **North Korea and the Global Socialist Century**

I am not going to deal with the history of North Korea in detail here. That North Korean experiences were Korea’s contribution to the global socialist century is obvious. That today’s South Korea too is shaped in certain aspects, inter alia, by the socialist legacies is much more counter-intuitive, hence I am going to focus on this part. However, since North Korea and the issue of twentieth-century global socialism are mentioned, one question is hard to avoid. To what degree can one refer to a society where the producers have, admittedly, very little influence over the management of the production system—and, indeed, even over the management of their own lives, their workplaces being assigned in a top-down fashion and even their domestic travel strictly controlled by the state security apparatus (Lankov 2013, 39–41)—as *socialist*? If *socialism* is what Marx and many original Marxists initially meant by it, that is, the abolishment of the capital accumulation process in favor of an alternative society based on free association of producers, industrial democracy, and social priorities, in which the state

is destined to “die out,”<sup>1</sup> then North Korean society may be regarded as standing even farther from this ideal than the countries which allow, at least, some degree of democratic participation by the citizenry in national politics. Indeed, the broader question will probably have to encompass the relationship between North Korea’s original models and those of its competing great-power benefactors, the Soviet Union and People’s Republic of China, and the socialist ideas as outlined above. There is, in fact, vast amounts of Marxist literature arguing that the Stalinist Soviet model per se, including by extension its Chinese or North Korean variations, was hardly more than “state capitalism” of sorts, the state substituting private capitalists as the main (or even only) subject of capital accumulation and catching-up industrial development (see the summary of these arguments in Van der Linden [2007]) Admittedly, it is close to impossible to discuss North Korea’s role and place in the history of global socialism without taking a position of principle on this question first.

If we view the stream of global history in a holistic way, from the time when Marx first suggested his alternative modernity ideals to our own day, one thing is clear. Be it the Euro-American core of the world capitalist system or its semi-peripheries and peripheries involved in a variety of catching-up developmental schemes, capitalism as the dominant mode of production remained intact. Indeed, in its core areas, it was strengthened by the social-democratic reforms of the twentieth century. These reforms politically and socially enfranchised the working class ensuring the place of the workers in the welfare capitalist societies as mostly loyal citizens, efficient producers, and keen consumers (Wallerstein 1995, 108–125). If

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1. Friedrich Engels, for example, envisioned the state disappearing (‘abolishing itself’) after the final act of socializing the means of production: “Whilst the capitalist mode of production more and more completely transforms the great majority of the population into proletarians, it creates the power which, under penalty of its own destruction, is forced to accomplish this revolution. Whilst it forces on more and more of the transformation of the vast means of production, already socialized, into State property, it shows itself the way to accomplishing this revolution. The proletariat seizes political power and turns the means of production into State property. But, in doing this, it abolishes itself as proletariat, abolishes all class distinction and class antagonisms, abolishes also the State as State” (Engels [1880] 1970, 149–150).

such was the case in the Western cradle of industrialism, with its well-established democratic mechanisms and high degree of worker organization, it would then be difficult to expect that European social democrats' (semi-) peripheral ideological cousins, the Bolshevik radicals or their local heirs (and sometimes competitors) in China or North Korea, additionally constrained by the task of defending themselves from the imperialist impingements of the core's hegemonic forces, could have managed the task of breaking up with the capitalist mode of production per se any better. The post-revolutionary peripheral societies, North Korea included, ended up being reconstructed with the revolutionary state as the new axis, providing hitherto unheard-of possibilities for upward social mobility and educational enhancement to the formerly downtrodden (Armstrong 2003, 215–240). However, one could hardly realistically expect the new state, involved as it was in developmental competition and international geopolitical rivalries, to switch from essentially capitalist accumulation strategies, the surplus being reinvested for the sake of extended reproduction, to any form of post-capitalist or post-state associative sociality the Marxist classics once imagined. That state eventually replaced the labor and capital markets with its own administrative structures but could hardly modify the essentially unchanged mode of accumulation to which it was forced to subscribe.

However, the post-revolutionary, radicalized activist states of North Korea and a number of other peripheral countries sharing a similar post-colonial trajectory could also utilize at least some share of surplus, which they now commanded for the aims with which the social-democratic reformers of the core states hardly could disagree. North Korea's version of top-down authoritarian leftist corporatism implies a number of restrictions on its citizenry's spatial mobility (domestic travel) or information access that few other activist states can rival. However, simultaneously, the same North Korean state was one of the pioneers of Third World welfarism from the 1950s. It was perhaps the first-ever post-colonial state to develop a comprehensive welfare system, with free education and medical services, already by the end of the post-Korean War reconstruction in the 1950s (Hunter and Solarz 1999, 207–239). It was also running relatively large overseas aid budgets in the 1960s–1980s, waging a campaign of

“international anti-imperialist solidarity,” which had many developing states among its beneficiaries (Armstrong 2009).

It is easy, of course, to discard these redistributive policies vis-à-vis North Korea’s domestic populace and its overseas anti-imperialist partners as simply tools of regime consolidation through fostering a healthier, better-educated workforce at home and strengthening state legitimacy via altruistic gestures abroad. However, a similar assessment may be persuasively made of the welfare policies of post-war European social-democratic governments. Did not universal health coverage, tuition-free universities, and overseas aid budgets contribute to creating societies of relatively content producers-cum-consumers tending to believe in the humanitarian roles claimed by their governments? While the limitations of redistribution in the overall capitalist accumulation context—in North Korea or elsewhere—are plain and obvious, it may be highly unwise for a historian of global socialism to write off all these attempts at supposedly social solidarity-based policies as phoney, or simply geared to benefit the existing socio-political structures. No doubt, these policies indeed worked beneficially for their architects too (on social policy as a Cold War international competition tool in the German and Korean cases, see: Obinger and Lee [2013]), but in the final analysis, their historical significance exceeded their role as social governance tools. They also were instrumental in demonstrating that industrial societies can organize at least parts of their citizens’ lives relatively free from capital accumulation considerations. They were important for making clear that at least some spheres of societal activity could be de-marketized and that de-marketization worked to the greater good of the underprivileged majority, consistent with the original socialist spirit. Seen from this angle, North Korea’s role as a global Third World welfare-state pioneer is worth positive reappraisal by the world’s socialist historians.

### **Anti-Marxist Censorship, Colonial and Post-Colonial**

The implications of national division and the post-1953 state of constant military preparedness on the both sides of inter-Korean border were

not, however, salubrious for the fate of the socialist quest in either Korea. Systemic competition implied the need to accelerate the capital accumulation processes in both North and South Korea, and all the welfare policies of North Korean authorities notwithstanding, the bulk of the surplus had to be reinvested or used for military purposes rather than for the benefit of the producers. Indeed, the North Korea producers of the 1950s and 1960s were driven to overwork to the extent that bears uncanny resemblance to the exploitive capitalist practices of contemporary South Korea. North Korea's Cheollima Movement of the late 1950s and 1960s, for example, included a mini-campaign aimed at inducing the workers to "drink no soup" so as to spare the time (which would have been otherwise used for visits to lavatories) and produce more (Snyder and Lee 2010, 168). A more perfect antithesis to what is supposed to be socialist labor management is hard to find.

Militarization of labor and, broader, the general militarization of both Korean societies, was accompanied by the imposition of censorship regimes in comparison with which even the censorship practices of the Japanese Empire of the 1920s and 1930s would pale. In 1920s Japan, in Miriam Silverberg's words, the quality and quantity of the legally published and available Marxist texts encompassing works on theory and revolutionary strategy equaled that of Weimar Germany (Silverberg 1990, 48). By comparison, as Marxists in the West sometimes mention in disillusionment, the access to the works of Marx or Lenin appears to be seriously restricted in North Korea (classical Marxist works were normally unavailable in bookshops in the late 1980s, see Goodman [1988, 16]).<sup>2</sup> Marxist classics were frequently cited until the 1960s by North Korea's ideologues and officials (Stock 2019). However, they were seemingly removed from the open shelves following the imposition of the uniform *Juche* thought in the 1970s (Seo 2002, 122–124). In South Korea, after the post-liberation boom in Marxist publications in 1945–1948, Marxism became a virtually tabooed

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2. For a Marxist criticism of such restrictions, see John Peterson and Fred Weston, "Where is North Korea Going?" *In Defence of Marxism*, April 26, 2017, <https://www.marxist.com/where-is-north-korea-going101006.htm>.

subject until the late 1980s under the regime of Cold War ideological confrontation. In the 1950s, the criticisms of Marxism were tolerated by the censors only as long as no substantial Marxist content was being introduced to readers (Jae-hyun Kim 1999). In a word, in both Korean states, locked in military confrontation and in the pattern of mutually competitive developmental authoritarianism, Marxism eventually came into conflict with the dominant official ideologies of nationalistic mobilization, be it South Korea's anti-communist orthodoxy or North Korean *Juche* ideas.

### **“Reformist Parties” and the South Korean Social-Democratic Tradition, the 1950s to 1960s**

However, even under the weight of anti-Marxist censorship restrictions rather unprecedented in Korea's pre-1945 history, the influence of the socialist traditions so strongly implanted onto the Korean soil since the 1920s was still discernible in South Korea society. Even after 1948 national division and the massacres of local leftists during the Korean War, some surviving colonial-age revolutionary labor organizers still retained some influence at the shop-floor level well into the 1950s (K. Kim 2009; Nam 2009, 57–71). One easily perceivable aspect of this influence were the tenacious, often self-sacrificial attempts by survivors of the colonial-age socialist milieu to build some sort of legal social-democratic party in South Korea. While such parties could hardly openly exhibit any Marxist views, broadly socialist orientation was often palpable in their platforms and slogans. Jo Bongam (1898–1959), a former student of the Comintern's Communist University of the Toilers of the Orient (1922–1923) and one of the founders of the original Korean Communist Party (1925), famously founded his Progressive Party (Jinbodang) in late 1955 on the slogans of a non-exploitive mixed economy with a strong element of state planning, reduction of military expenditures, and peaceful unification with North Korea. After obtaining more than two million votes in the 1956 presidential election and proving himself a serious threat to Syngman Rhee's dictatorship, he was arrested on trumped-up espionage charges (1957), tried, and executed (W. Yi 2013, 141–207,

495–585). His death, however, did not discourage other social-democratic dissidents from further attempts at legal organization. After all, as Jo’s rather impressive 1956 election results amply demonstrated, social-democratic slogans had a good chance of achieving popularity and recognition with the South Korean public. The majority of South Koreans still remembered the prominence of socialist grassroots organizers in the colonial years and was disillusioned with the almost complete absence of social security guarantees in impoverished post-war society.

The April 1960 democratic revolution offered an opportunity for making social democracy legal again. Of course, the offending word “socialism” had to be avoided at all costs. As a veteran of the political and ideological battles of the 1950s–1970s, Jeon Changil (b. 1922), later explained, it was impossible to avoid the charge of being “pro-North Korean” once “socialism” was mentioned, so “reform” (*hyeoksin*) was used as an agreeable euphemism for “socialism” or “social democracy” (C. Jeon 2006). Several reformist parties (*hyeoksin jeongdang*) that emerged in the wake of April 1960 democratization—the Social Mass Party (Sahoe daejungdang), Independent Labor Party (Dongnip nodongdang), etc.—were demanding a shift to a planned economy. Other demands included a reduction in the military budget, repudiation of the February 8, 1961 economic agreement with the USA (which was alleged to transfer too much of control over the South Korean economy into American hands), and concrete steps towards peaceful unification with the North. The social-democratic political performance during the brief democratic interlude between the April 1960 Revolution and the May 16, 1961 military coup was *per se* hardly a success. The violent destruction of the Progressive Party eliminated much of the grassroots organizations, which South Korea’s social democrats badly needed in the context of scarce political funds and limited access to the mainstream press. To make a bad situation worse, social democrats’ ranks were also divided, mostly between the former Progressive Party adepts and the rest of the leftist opposition. As a result, only seven social-democratic politicians joined South Korea’s short-lived democratic parliament after the general elections of July 29, 1960 (Hwang 2006, 76–81). However, the long-term effects of the modest socialist renaissance of 1960–1961 were

much more salient. Many of the discourses popular among the socialist politicians—for example, the emphasis on strong state intervention in the economy for the sake of more planned development—were appropriated by the political mainstream already in the 1960s. Other discourses—such as that of peaceful unification—entered the mainstream later, becoming the official governmental policy by the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. I will return to the fate of South Korean socialists' brainchildren later, briefly narrating first the story of political socialism under the military dictatorships of the 1960s–1980s and beyond.

### **From the Extremes of Oppression to the Rebirth of the Grassroots Left, the 1970s to 1980s**

The story is indeed a sad chronicle of governmental suppression and political martyrdom. Typically, underground leftist groups detected and destroyed by military regimes' secret police were exaggerated into underground "parties," their activists often paying with their lives for what amounted to political discussions or non-violent organizational activity. The most notorious case is that of the so-called "People's Revolutionary Party" (Inmin hyeongmyeongdang). In 1964, amidst a heated popular struggle against diplomatic normalization with Japan (widely seen as a sell-off), 41 leftist intellectuals, mostly from Gyeongsang Province and the Seoul area, were arrested for supposedly forming an "underground People's Revolutionary Party in accordance with North Korean instructions." However, the evidence of any North Korean involvement was so glaringly lacking that the case resulted in only two convictions. Nevertheless, a decade later, facing growing resistance to an overtly authoritarian Yushin (Revitalization) regime (1972–1979), the military government re-arrested a few old and some new suspects on charges of forming a "People's Revolutionary Party." It then promptly executed eight of them in 1975. The victims were mostly veterans of "reformist parties" of 1960–1961. The executions triggered a significant international outcry (Hyeongtae Kim 2007).

The People's Revolutionary Party case was perhaps the most infamous

example of deadly anti-socialist repression, but far from the only one. The 1968 Unification Revolutionary Party (Tongil hyeongmyeongdang) case featured 158 arrests and three executions. One of the victims, Sin Yeongbok (1941–2016), then a young left-leaning economist, who managed to read (in the original German!) Marx's *Das Kapital* before the 1960–1961 democratic interlude ended, later achieved considerable fame as a progressive public intellectual. He had first, however, to spend twenty years in prisons (1968–1988).<sup>3</sup> Yet another victim, Pak Seongjun (b. 1940), survived thirteen years in jail to eventually become a leftist, socially oriented theologian (Jinho Kim 1997). It is important, however, to note that some of the victims of 1960s–1970s witch-hunts seriously attempted to link up with the growing workers' movement, for the first time after the destruction of most leftist unions in South Korea in the late 1940s (on the destruction of the progressive unions in the late 1940s, see S. Im [2007, 33–84]). Kweon Jaehyeok (1925–1969), a US-educated professor of economics fascinated by Paul Sweezy's (1910–2004) neo-Marxism, was from 1963 attempting to build a worker's party in South Korea. These attempts allowed the authorities to misrepresent a leftist group around Kweon as a *South Korean Liberation Strategy Party*, arrest Kweon and his comrades, and finally execute him.<sup>4</sup> These pioneering attempts were continued by yet another underground socialist group, the South Korean National Liberation Front (1976–1979), which, while being led by the surviving veterans of the 1960–1961 "reformist parties" movement, managed also to organize a group of teachers aspiring to build a teachers' union, and typographic workers (Jo 1991). The beginnings were modest, but it was a sign of the new, developing tendency. Socialist intellectuals were increasingly attempting to organize workers and "fertilize" the growing labor movement with socialist ideology, in the manner of

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3. Honggu Han, "Han Honggu gyosu, Sin Yeongbok-ui 60 nyeon-eul sasaekhada" (Contemplating Sin Yeongbok's Sixty Years), *Weekly Hangyoreh* 21, May 11, 2006, <http://legacy.h21.hani.co.kr/section-021075000/2006/05/021075000200605110609056.html>.

4. Changhun Yi and Gyehwan Yi, "Dangsi bogi deumulge nodong undong-eul han Kweon Jaehyeok!" (Kweon Jaehyeok, Whose Engagement with the Labor Movement was Rare for his Time!), *Tongil News*, November 4, 2012, <https://www.tongilnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=100496>.

the communist labor organizers of the 1930s. With the military regime's increasing loss of public support throughout the 1980s, the mass-based socialist movement began at last to come back after decades of persecution.

It is not my task to elaborate here on the history of the workers-students alliance (*nohak yeondae*) movement of the 1980s, since it has been so well explored elsewhere, including a number of monographic works in English (see for example the detailed treatment in Park [2007a, 75–201]). As Namhee Lee noted in her brilliant monograph on the politics of resistance in 1970s–1980s South Korea, the first attempts by socialist dissidents (Kim Munsu, Jang Gipyo, etc.), mostly hailing, like Sin Yeongbok, from Seoul National University, with its long-established tradition of underground Marxist circle activities, to unionize and radicalize workers at the factories date back to the 1970s. Then, however, left-leaning Christian groups, such as the Urban Industrial Mission (UIM), dominated the movement. They tended to theoretically rely on the Christian socialist, rather than purely Marxist, tradition, with Paulo Freire's (1921–1997) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) exerting a particularly strong influence.

In the 1980s, however, classical Marxism, mostly in its Leninist interpretation, returned and took root as the main ideology of the rapidly growing radical workers' movement. ALMSA (Alliance of the Labor Movement in the Seoul Area, or Seonoryeon, 1985–1986) was envisioned as a Leninist vanguard workers' organization, and aimed at a revolutionary consciousness-building that would enable the workers, in the spirit of Lenin's *What is to be Done?* (1902), to go beyond simple economic demands. ALMSA and a number of like-minded groups were subjected to savage repression, but their influence has contributed to laying the foundation for further shop-floor mobilizations from below. It was against the backdrop of such experiences that the Great Workers Struggle of 1987, one of the largest spontaneous labor risings in Korean history, took place, with the emergence of independent trade unions in its aftermath. These unions were often led by the workers who went through the school of underground socialist circles (Lee 2007, 213–268). The number of so-called *hakchul* (student-origin) workers, the young intellectuals of mostly socialist persuasion who chose to delay or give up their white-collar careers to go to the night schools

of factories and industrial districts to “enlighten” and organize workers, were relatively few. The highest available assessment for their number is about 10,000 nationally by the end of the 1980s (Park 2007b, 324); more conservative estimates put the number at 1000–3000 at best (Kim and Nam 2012, 276). However, due to their status as mentors to labor leaders, their influence was much stronger than the figure suggests.

### **The Korean Democratic Labor Party (2000–2008) Experiment and its Lasting Influences**

Such socialist intellectuals of the 1960s as Kweon Jaehyeok could, in their time, dream of independent workers’ organization decisively contributing to South Korea’s liberation from dictatorship. They hoped that such liberation would usher the country into the age of institutional democracy when further political struggle for socialism would become possible. Kim Segyun (b. 1947), one of the most important living Marxist scholars of contemporary South Korea, argued for building up an independent workers’ party in 1989. He forcefully rebuffed the argument of those who considered workers’ support for the liberal anti-dictatorial opposition sufficient to politically empower the working class (Segyun Kim 1989). By the 1990s, the dreams of an independent workers’ party were looking more realizable than ever. The Great Workers Struggle and the mass demonstrations of June 1987 gave an impulse to political democratization. Of course, at the beginning of the 1990s, “democratization” still did not translate into tolerance for political socialism. South Korea’s Socialist Workers League (Sanomaeng), a would-be socialist workers party organized in 1989 was destroyed by police repression in 1991–1992 (Jo 1993, 208–224, 256–280, 313–346) most of its leading activists remaining in jail until the second half of the 1990s. A short-lived experiment with the Mass Party (Minjungdang, 1990–1992), led, inter alia, by ALMSA veterans, demonstrated also that even a legal socialist party would struggle enormously in a society shaped by four decades of official anti-communism. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites by 1991, bringing South Korean radicals into a

state of shock and frustration and strengthening the ideological positions of the ruling conservative developmentalist elite, the Mass Party never succeeded in sending any socialist politician to parliament (Kang 1996). Things changed, however, after the demise of the developmental state and the imposition of neo-liberalism in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–1998. The crisis and the social dislocations in its wake shattered the confidence of the public in the economic growth the state has been promising them in exchange for political loyalty (see an analysis of neo-liberal restructuring in post-crisis South Korea in Lim and Jang [2006]), and made it possible for socialists to re-enter the political terrain.

Labor movement activists launched a social-democratic electoral alliance, People's Victory 21 (Gungmin seungni 21), immediately after the crisis in 1997. One of them was an ALMSA veteran, Sim Sangjeong (b. 1959), perhaps the most recognizable social-democratic politician in South Korea at the point of this writing. In 2000, the alliance was restructured and re-launched as the Democratic Labor Party (DLP, Minju nodongdang). It represented a broad coalition of radical, social-democratic, and labor groups. Some of them subscribed to a version of leftist nationalism, which prioritized anti-hegemonic struggle vis-à-vis the US presence in South Korea and unification with North Korea (*jajupa*). Others were pursuing either socialist/social-democratic or welfarist agendas (*pyeongdeungpa*). The breadth of the groupings, which the party united, was initially its strength, helping it to secure more than 13 percent of the vote in the 2004 parliamentary elections. These was the best results South Korean social democrats managed to achieve since Jo Bongam obtained more than two million votes (about 30 percent of the total) half a century earlier, in 1956. However, factionalism, especially tensions between leftist nationalists and social democrats, ultimately led to the party being split into three in 2008 (the factional strife and the history of DLP in general are well documented in Y. Jeong [2011]). Currently (as of fall of 2020), five successor parties, only one of which (Justice Party) has parliamentary representation (six deputies), represent the spectrum from leftist anti-hegemonism to moderate social democracy in South Korean politics.

The first generation of South Korea's social democrats, represented

by such people as Jo Bongam, with long experience of colonial-period underground communist work, was mostly mowed down, excluded from the public politics or marginalized by the repressions of the 1950s–1960s. The next generation, that of Sin Yeongbok or Pak Seongjun, were schooled after 1945 de-colonization. The repressions of the 1960s–1980s mostly excluded them from politics, leaving them only to the role of progressively minded public intellectuals, and even that was in many cases made possible only by the democratization of the late 1980s. Sim Sangjeong and her colleagues at the Democratic Labor Party and its successor parties effectively represented the third generation. Its maturation took place in the context of 1980s socio-political struggles. Often it happened in the crucible of factory-floor fights where socialist *hakchul* organizers were, like their predecessors in the 1930s, to organize the workers for the defense of their rights, and ultimately for a political revolution. When the former activists, like Sim Sangjeong, joined electoral politics in the late 1990s, revolution had to be dropped. Even the social-democratic agenda was not an easy sell in a society such as that of South Korea so strongly permeated by developmentalist hopes and desires following the high-speed growth of the 1960s to mid-1990s (see an analysis of the developmentalist ethos and its influence on South Korean public consciousness in: E. Kim [2000]). Shunned by dominant print and electronic media, the DLP never joined the political mainstream, despite relatively good (for a smaller party) approval ratings in the early 2000s, during the first years of post-crisis neo-liberal restructuring.

However, just as the real scale of influence eventually exerted by the 1980s *hakchul* activists is not necessarily fully represented by their moderate numbers, the DLP and its successors changed South Korean politics more than their approval ratings or voting results might indicate. The Democratic Labor Party's original program featured, inter alia, promises to transfer *jaebeol* (large family-owned corporations) assets to public, socialist ownership and to abolish the unequal military alliance treaty with the United States. Moreover, it made clear that the party wished to force US troops out of South Korea and proclaim neutrality in foreign policy. It also wished to reduce (in cooperation with North Korea) the standing army more than six-fold, to 100,000 troops, and to abolish the current conscription system in

favor of an all-voluntary military, in addition to a very significant increase in social spending (Steinberg and Shin 2006). Such a degree of radicalism was hardly digestible by the South Korean political mainstream, given the degree of *jaebeol* influence over the country's society and politics (on the corporate influence over the policies before and after the Asian Financial Crisis, see Kalinowski [2009]) or long-standing embeddedness of conscription into the fabric of social life (Moon 2005).

Nevertheless, the social-democratic credo still influenced the programs of the other parties eager to target the working-class vote and appeal to other social groups, among which the support for the social-democratic agenda was relatively strong (educated urban youth, etc.). Indeed, the liberal Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003–2008), its commitment to neo-liberal restructuring notwithstanding, chose to pursue the policies of drastic welfare expansion, enlarging the proportion of welfare spending in the state budget from 19.9 percent in 2002 to 27.9 percent by 2006. Part of preschool education was made free, and long-term care for the elderly was strengthened. In 2007, 8.6 percent of South Korea's GNP was used for welfare purposes. Roh's ambitious long-term strategy, *Vision 2030*, envisioned expanding this proportion to 21 percent by 2030. Indeed, the Roh administration may be said to have built South Korea's—albeit still rudimentary—welfare state (Ito 2011), partly under the pressure of the competition vis-à-vis the Democratic Labor Party for organized labor (Yang 2013) and youth support, although, of course, other factors (for example, the need to alleviate the social consequences of neo-liberal restructuring to which Roh's government was otherwise committed) are also thought to have influenced the direction of its social policies. Indeed, since the DLP's 2000 debut on the political scene, welfarism became so entrenched in South Korean political culture that even archconservative Park Geun-hye campaigned in the 2012 presidential elections on the promises of expanding welfare spending and reducing economic inequalities. Her failure to make good on these promises (welfare spending stagnated under her rule) might be one important element in the dramatic collapse of her administration in 2017 (Hyejin Kim 2017).

## Working-Class Fragmentation and the Limits of Political Socialism in South Korea

As noted above, in the case of avowedly “socialist” North Korea, the extent of redistributive policies was in the end limited by the developmentalist drive, which took place in a divided nation, in a situation of systemic competition. The surplus had to be reinvested or used for military purposes rather than redistributed in the ways beneficial for the majority of North Koreans. In South Korea after the early 2000s, it is the corporate drive towards profit maximization that weighs down welfare-state development. Indeed, larger corporations prefer to buy off their full-time, high-skilled core workers (predominantly middle-aged or older males) and enterprise-based unions with generous benefits and company welfare packages (sponsoring, for example, the college tuition of their children), rather than agree to the higher tax rates which would finance a universal welfare system, or de-marketization of education and medicine. As a result, South Korea’s working class—which the socialists since the colonial period hoped to organize into a *revolutionary force*—is now badly fragmented (Cho 2006). Whereas better-paid, relatively privileged core employees of *jaebeol* plants—for a large part unionized—mostly limit their demands to purely economic ones, the peripheral workforce of short-term contract workers, dispatch workers, or laborers at small-time suppliers to the bigger firms has to fight for the basics, such as permanent employment or unionization rights (Chun 2009, 44–68). The conditions under which dog-eat-dog competition between workers prevents the emergence of any feelings of class solidarity are metaphorically described in the world-famous 2019 film *Parasite* by director Bong Joon-ho, himself a former student activist.<sup>5</sup> In terms of class power, the North Korean working class possesses little opportunity for independent organization or consciousness-building under the garrison-state mechanisms of societal control. As for South Korea’s working class, its negotiating power seemingly

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5. E. Alex Jung, “Bong Joon-ho’s Dystopia is Already Here: The Korean Director’s Ruthless, Bleak New Film *Parasite* is the Most Fun You’ll Have in Theatres this Fall,” *Vulture*, October 7, 2019, <https://www.vulture.com/2019/10/bong-joon-ho-parasite.html>.

peaked in the early and mid-1990s, in the aftermath of 1987 Great Workers Struggle and before the imposition of neo-liberalism in 1997–1998. All this does not promise a rosy future for socialism as a socio-political movement in twenty-first-century Korea, North and South. For the near future, the continuation of the present patterns—namely the steady development of bureaucratically controlled capitalism in North Korea and the very slow growth of redistributive mechanisms under alternating conservative and liberal administrations in South Korea—seems much more likely than any shift to the left.

### **Socialism as the Main Counter-Hegemonic Narrative and the Source of Dynamism in South Korea**

The reason why, acknowledging all this, I still insist on referring to the century following the introduction of socialism to Korea in the early 1920s as the *socialist century* is the importance I attach to the influence of socialist thought in the discursive sphere. Indeed, it is not necessarily that many South Koreans are themselves aware of the degree to which socialism influenced the ideas and thoughts that today constitute an organic part of the ideological and institutional landscape of the country. For example, most South Korean educators know, as a part of shared common-sense knowledge, that Bang Jeonghwan (1899–1931) was the father of modern Korean children's literature and the children's rights activist behind the institutionalization of Children's Day (May 5). Few know, however, that his pioneering ideas about respecting children's subjectivity and treating children as individualities—rather than the property of their parents—were inspired by his socialist convictions (Min 2014, 239–273). Bang was hardly alone. In 1920s Korea, socialism was spreading among the educated minority—including Korea's pioneering modern writers—much quicker than at the grassroots. Unbeknownst to many South Koreans who readily know the name from their Korean literature textbooks, such accomplished colonial-age prose masters as Yi Hyoseok (1907–1942) were until the mid-1930s regarded as fellow travelers of Korea's proletarian literature. The

connection to leftist writing tradition greatly influenced the way in which social antagonisms are depicted in his novels (Hughes et al. 2013, 89–90).

While, as noted above, the anti-socialist censorship in 1950s–1980s South Korea was stricter compared even to the 1920s Japanese Empire, the trajectory of ideas—from radical circles to the political and cultural mainstream—remained essentially the same. For example, by the late 1980s, peaceful coexistence and eventual peaceful unification with North Korea were enshrined as the official policy of the last military administration, headed by President Roh Tae-woo (1988–1993) (Levin and Han 2002, 8–9). Few could recollect by that time, however, that “peaceful unification” as a slogan was first launched by Jo Bongam’s cruelly suppressed Progressive Party and then popularized by the reformist parties during the democratic interlude of 1960–1961 (although of course, Roh Tae-woo’s policies took place in a completely different historical context, North Korea being crucially weakened by the collapse of its Soviet ally). Of equal salience was the socialist criticism of the inhumanity inherent in the South Korean developmental model, with its emphasis on export competitiveness buttressed by long hours of low-paid work. Reduction of maximum working hours (from the original 68 to 52) is the current policy of Moon Jae-in’s liberal government (2017–present),<sup>6</sup> but the criticism of the inhumanly long working hours was indeed pioneered by labor militants and socialism-influenced campus activists of the 1960s and 1970s (C. Yi 2014, 186–188). The demand for an eight-hour (or even seven-hour) working day goes back to the programs of colonial-age communist labor organizers such as Yi Jaeyu (1905–1944), a legendary underground communist leader of the early 1930s, although even then, such demands were seen as extremely basic, belonging to the agenda of *democratic* rather than properly *socialist* revolution (K. Kim 2007, 127–128). Such examples are indeed many, although it must be simultaneously remembered that a number of socialist discourses ended up as thought-provoking dissident narratives, of importance for the

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6. Benjamin Haas, “South Korea Cuts ‘Inhumanely Long’ 68-hour Working Week,” *The Guardian*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/01/south-korea-cuts-inhumanely-long-68-hour-working-week>.

general evolution of the ideological landscape but never adopted for policy implementation. For example, the Democratic Labor Party's programmatic position on South Korea's neutrality as a precondition for unification is genealogically related to the thesis on the possibility of unifying Korea via its neutralization, which was popular in the reformist milieu from the early 1960s (Im et al. 2016, 309–310). This position, however, stands little chance of adoption by the current liberal government or its successors, given the depth of US influence on the South Korean bureaucracy, especially its military.

To put it briefly, socialism has been functioning as the central counter-hegemonic discourse of Korean modernity. It provided the most consistent criticism of all the systems and institutions of colonial and post-colonial capitalism, from the exploitive character of the labor management regime in the service of capitalist accumulation to the inequality inherent in Korea's relationship to the regional (Japan) and global (USA) centers of military, political, and economic domination. While the South Korean establishment could hardly be expected to share its power with the representatives of political socialism, or allow the socialist critique of capitalism to penetrate its ideological power apparatus (educational system etc.), some aspects of the socialist counter-narrative had to be adapted even in avowedly anti-communist South Korea for the sake of legitimacy or societal cohesion.

For example, the "(Korean) national history" textbooks during 1974–2010 developed uniformly for all South Korean schools by the National History Compilation Committee (Guksa pyeonchan wiwonhoe), were definitely marked by ahistorical ethno-nationalism (it was presumed that the *Korean* ethno-nation was the main subject of Korean history since ancient times) and militaristic undertones ('national history' was presented as a series of struggles against external enemies). However, they simultaneously subscribed to a version of the "colonial wealth drain" theory, originally known as Marxist and later appropriated in a variety of postcolonial contexts or by dependency theorists elsewhere. Japanese imperialism was accused there of "underdeveloping" colonized Korea in the interest of capital accumulation in Japan proper (J. Jeon 2002). While Marxist researchers have good reasons to be critical of the oversimplification

of the colony-to-metropole surplus transfer logic in the textbook version of wealth drain theory, there is no doubt about its original provenance. It was first developed by the Marxist economists of the colonial period (notably, Pak Mungyu, 1906–?) (T. Jeong 1997). South Korea's dominant classes, given their institutional and personal ties with the colonial-age pro-imperialist local elites, would have undoubtedly preferred the New Right version of colonial history, which praises “modern capitalist development's successes” under colonial rule. However, since it proved unacceptable for the majority of the South Korean public (Tikhonov 2019), the postcolonial narrative of colonial exploitation and wealth extraction, originally of counter-hegemonic provenance, has to be kept on as the official discourse.

As the official ideology of North Korea and the main counter-hegemonic narrative of South Korea, “socialism” plays a number of roles in early twenty-first-century Korean societies. Its entrenched place in North Korea's official worldview and broad social consensus may, for example, prevent North Korean authorities from withdrawing their *de jure* commitments to free medicine, education, and housing (however little these commitments may mean *de facto* in the situation when the welfare system is severely underfinanced), even amidst the ongoing transition to a version of bureaucratically controlled mixed economy. In South Korea, initially social-democratic notions of peaceful unification with the North and welfarist redistributive justice were appropriated by the political mainstream by the late 1980s and mid-2000s, respectively. The network of underground leftist activists that permeated much of grassroots Korea by the late 1930s was largely annihilated in the southern part of the country before, during, and after the Korean War. However, the worker-student alliance movement of the 1980s—a result of the long-term development of post-war socialist tradition in South Korea—educated a whole generation of labor activists in socialist thought. Granted, the attempt by this generation to organize a class-based, mass workers' party along European social-democratic lines has thus far failed. There are several parties in South Korea now claiming to represent the working class, but none of them has even the remotest chance in the near future to exercise a role in government commensurate to the size of the electoral segment they claim to represent.

## Socialism as the Continuity of Struggle against the Logic of Accumulation

However, does it signify a “failure of socialism” in South Korea, as some researchers claim (Y. Kim 2015)? The failure of socialist political representation—mostly due to the high degree of neo-liberal working-class fragmentation noted above—does not necessarily imply a drastic decrease in labor militancy. Indeed, the number of workdays lost to strikes per 1000 salaried employees in South Korea anno 2015 (twenty-three days) was somewhat lower than in 1995 (thirty days) but still remained significantly higher than the statistics for the US (five days), UK (six days), and Japan (zero days) (OECD 2017). Of course, much of the strike mobilization is usually driven by concrete, down-to-earth shop-floor demands: underrepresented politically and often facing hostile anti-union management, South Korean workers have to establish their societal presence through non-parliamentary, direct forms of militant activism. However, at the same time, in a broader context, this activism remains largely inspired by a hope for a redistributive justice-based society in which the technical progress associated with industrial modernity would serve the interests of the majority of the direct producers rather than the logic of capital accumulation. Recently, unions in South Korea outside the world of *jaebeol*-co-opted enterprise unionism are increasingly demanding workers’ right to participation in executive board decision-making. In other words, they are demanding the introduction of workplace democracy, if only in its rudimentary form.<sup>7</sup> While these forms, of course, do not constitute socialism per se, their introduction is directly related to a long-term struggle for a society where democracy exists on an economic and social, rather than only a political, level. This struggle, in the long-term perspective, is a part of the socialist project as we know it from the late nineteenth century. Rather than a failure, socialism in Korea—South Korea included—represents a continuum of struggle, with high

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7. Jeongsu Kwak, “Nodongja gyeongyeong chamyeo hwalbalhan yureop, galdeung jureo seongjang mitcheoneuro” (In Europe, Where Workers’ Participation in Workplace Decision-Making is Widespread, Conflict is Reduced and Growth Boosted), *Daily Hangyoreh*, January 8, 2018, [http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/economy/economy\\_general/826695.html](http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/economy/economy_general/826695.html).

and low points, intensifications and lulls, defeats and victories. Socialism did not triumph on the Korean Peninsula in the twentieth century (even supposedly socialist North Korea hardly represents socialist project's vision of the future), nor did it manage to do so elsewhere. However, the struggle continues, and this struggle constitutes perhaps the principally important part of Korea's modern and contemporary history.

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