

## **Eurocentrism's Blind Eye**

European and American bias against Asia has a long and tragic history. Dehumanization of Asians played major roles in wars that took millions of lives. Without first turning Asians into evil demons of Americans' paranoid fantasies, how else could they be obliterated by the millions? "Gook" was the most common epithet hurled by hundreds of thousands of Americans in Vietnam—but it is actually Korean in origin. I have heard far too many stories from Vietnam veterans about how the first thing they would do on patrol was to "snuff the friendly gook," the South Vietnamese liaison who was suspected of being an enemy agent. In the admixture of racism and militaristic barbarism inflicted upon East Asia by the West, everyone may become dehumanized, but Asians were devastated. Sadly, in the eyes of U.S. policymakers and many others, an Asian life is simply not worth as much as that of an American or a European.

In the Academy Award-winning documentary film *Hearts and Minds*, U.S. General William Westmoreland unashamedly claimed that Asians do not place the same value on human life as Americans. The former commanding general of U.S. forces in Vietnam in 1968, Westmoreland's racism may be easily understood, because bias against Asians was so

pervasive among U.S. troops. It is more difficult to rationalize Hanson Baldwin, military editor for the *New York Times*, who called Koreans “the most primitive of peoples,” who live where “life is cheap,” or Telford Taylor, chief U.S. prosecutor in Nuremberg, who wrote that, “individual lives are not valued so highly in Eastern mores.”<sup>19</sup> When he was Harvard University president, Lawrence Summers (subsequently director of U.S. President Barack Obama’s National Economics Council) told an incoming contingent of students that there were close to one million child prostitutes in Seoul in 1970, when in fact, there were scarcely that many children there at that time. Although Summers apologized later for having “misremembered” a statistic, he made no concession about his image of Koreans.<sup>20</sup>

Like Western political leaders, scholars like Max Weber and Karl Marx chastised Far Eastern cultures for being despotic and feudal, lacking the ingredients for organizational success, and outside the grand narrative of Western civilization. Max Weber believed the West exclusively knew rational law and rational personal ethics. Most famously, Hegel developed the operative category of Oriental despotism: “The Orientals have not attained the knowledge that Spirit—man as such—is free; and because they do not know this, they are not free. They only know that one is free . . . that One is therefore a despot, not a free man.”<sup>21</sup> Over the years, Hegel’s formulation

has continued to be repeated. In 1956, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote that in the Orient, “despotic forms of government have been the rule for thousands of years.” Nor are anarchists immune from racism against Asians. Gentle and poetic anarchist prince Peter Kropotkin had many virtues, yet one encounters passages in *Mutual Aid* with consternation. His use of “savages” and “barbarians” is curiously antiquated. Moreover in his *Memoirs*, we find oblique, racist references to “Asiatic schemes” as well as mentions of “an Oriental fashion, in an abominable way” and “oriental amusements were looked upon with disgust.”<sup>22</sup> I assume that Kropotkin would have outgrown these prejudices, although in his own day, they were seldom questioned. Sadly, they are still alive in Russia as proven by the many public attacks on Asian people.

Communist policymakers in the Soviet Union similarly distrusted Asians. In 1937, under Stalin’s orders, some two hundred thousand Koreans living in eastern Siberia near Korea and Japan were deported to Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) for fear they would support Japan. In the same period of time, many Korean Communists were summarily executed for fear they might be Japanese spies.<sup>23</sup> Even “progressives” like former Czech president Vaclav Havel made racist remarks: Havel off-handedly equated Asia with despotism and Europe with democracy. Jürgen Habermas has also

associated Asia with evil during the German “historians’ debate.”<sup>24</sup> Ernst Nolte’s 1986 article had challenged the unique character of Nazi crimes and labeled the Holocaust an “Asiatic” deed perpetrated by Hitler and the Nazis. Nolte attributed their motives to fear of becoming potential victims of Stalin’s gulags and class murders—which he also considered “Asiatic.” In response, Habermas challenged Nolte’s conclusion denying the uniqueness of Nazism’s crimes, but he never challenged the “Asiatic” label of these crimes against humanity. Habermas’s acceptance of Nolte’s term is part of a substantial bias against Asians.<sup>25</sup>

Even among those who celebrate the reasonability of uprisings, does Eurocentrism account for many people’s study and adulation of the Paris Commune more than 130 years ago while simultaneously being ignorant of Gwangju’s uprising? Lack of interest among many Westerners for Asian history, while rapidly coming to an end, has left a gap between Koreans and Americans. Korean activism may be legendary among U.S. activists (and in Latin America as well after the 2003 Cancun protests against the WTO), but few people could say even one basic thing about it. Images of Molotov cocktails being thrown, of well-organized street protests, or of activists’ suicides may appear in the media, but substantial analysis of the movement is seldom available.

Less overt Western claims to superiority are also at work today. Many analysts judge civil society as having originated in Europe and only arriving in Asia in the last few decades. By somehow limiting the definition of civil society to its European form, they exclude Asia's rich history of nonstate social organization, values, and norms. Following Hegel and Kant's understanding of social development in Europe passing through stages from barbarism to feudalism and capitalism, civil society is comprehended as the flowering of the bourgeois individual amid a postfeudal public sphere. When only that model is considered to have produced a "true" civil society, analysts fetishize European individuals and salon culture at the same moment as they deny the existence of Asia's autonomous forms of civil society. (This is not the place to engage in a prolonged discussion of Asian values, but it is worth noting that U.S. cities remain unsafe and dirt-strewn while families disintegrate, at the same time as East Asians far more often enjoy safe and civil public spaces and nurturing family structures.)

Rather than come to terms with some of the advantages of Asian civilization, Westerners all too often impose Eurocentric categories. In so doing, they make the presupposition that Europe's trajectory—especially the phenomenon of individualism—is both universally desirable and applicable. By civil society, Habermas understands solely its appearance in the West (as

a “bourgeois public sphere”).<sup>26</sup> He creates an eternally valid category from a historically specific phenomenon—precisely what György Lukács considered the chief characteristic of all forms of “bourgeois” thinking.<sup>27</sup>

By idealizing civil society as it developed in the West, contemporary theorists ignore the destructive power of the individual that is institutionalized in corporate capitalism. Rational choice theory preserves this Western model of behavior on the false premise that if everyone aggrandizes his or her own personal interests, the entire society benefits. As an economic principle, the notion of the “invisible hand” powered the creation of postfeudal forms and helped win expanded individual political rights, but today it has turned into its opposite, freeing billionaires to amass even more wealth while billions of people live on the margins. Even those with substantial benefits are impoverished spiritually by corporate “me-first” culture that pervades everyday life. The extension of the idea of the “invisible hand” of the market led to the financial crisis of 2008 and was quickly rejected by those most in favor of it. Massive government intervention across the world was required to avert complete meltdown—practical proof of the futility of this invisible hand in the contemporary world. In the “free market” neoliberal equation, where does the common good exist? In a phrase: it doesn't.

True to Western bias, Habermas also privileges individualistic discourse and elevates certain forms of discourse (those in university lecture halls) over others (such as public assemblies in the streets and demonstrations). From Koreans' point of view, Western “rationalism” is often unreasonable. “In Western philosophy, reason is derived from solitary individuals.” However, during the Gwangju uprising, “reason was achieved by human beings who were conscious of being members of the community, not that of individuals.”<sup>28</sup>

*York Times*, July 16, 1950.

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Stephen M. Marks, "Summers Apologizes for Korea Remark," *Harvard Crimson*, July 16, 2004.

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Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 18.

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Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 76, 82, 310.

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Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (New York: New Press, 2004), 118.

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Friedman, *Politics*, 14.

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See the discussion in Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), xvii.

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Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989). See also JaHyun Kim Haboush, "Academies and Civil Society in Chosun Korea," in *La société civile face à l'État: dans les traditions chinoise, japonaise, coréenne et vietnamienne* (Paris: École-française d'extrême-orient, 1994).

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György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).

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Choi Jungwoon, *The Gwangju Uprising: The Pivotal Democratic Movement that Changed the History of Modern Korea* (Paramus, NJ: Homa and Sekey, 2006), 134.