

## **The Reasonability of Uprisings**

Building upon the notion that collective grassroots insurgencies are key factors in social development, the logic of history can be traced within the unfolding reasonability of self-directed actions of thousands of people in revolutionary situations. In broad outline we can observe transitions from protracted wars of the American and French revolutions in the eighteenth century to armed working-class urban insurrections in 1848; from centralized party-led seizures of power at the beginning of the twentieth century to the diffuse global revolt in 1968. Comparing the development of movements from 1789 to 1848, and from 1917 to 1968, the multitude's ever-expanding contestation of power in everyday life becomes apparent. From national independence to freedom from toil and poverty, people's visions of freedom continually moved forward. Popular struggles became increasingly self-organized and autonomously intelligent.

"The people make history," little more than an empty rhetorical device in the mouths of politicians and pundits, came alive in 1968. A wide variety of forms of protest and political foci emanated from below. The inner tension among differences inside the insurgency, far from being reflective of the global movement's weakness, showed its diversity, its vibrant inner dialectic of development, differentiation, and progression. Free expression of dissonant viewpoints meant for some observers that the 1968 movements were purely negative. Were there universal dimensions to what appeared to be contradictory and sometimes even conflicting issues and tactics? Was there a unifying grammar of liberation that clustered many aspects of struggle into an overriding logic? Or did the "post-modern turn" doom insurgency to fragmentation, isolation, and an inability to challenge the system as a whole?

By carefully assembling fragments of national histories in my book on 1968, I uncovered the movement's universal meaning and logical structure—previously conceptualized solely in national terms, or at best in the linear addition of struggles in many countries—in the twin aspirations of self-management and internationalism, qualities evident in the actions of

millions of people during New Left general strikes of May 1968 in France and May-September 1970 in the United States. Both these upheavals occurred without the “leadership” of a central committee or the permission of elite groups. Social movements in the 1960s provide astonishing evidence of the capacity of ordinary people to create participatory forms of popular power that contest the established system. In May 1968 in France, the entire country convulsed in near-revolution as organs of dual power sprang up everywhere from the grassroots. Two years later in the United States, four million students and half a million faculty declared a nationwide strike in May 1970 in response to the killings at Kent State and Jackson State Universities, the invasion of Cambodia and repression of the Black Panther Party. Once again, no central organization brought together this strike—the largest in U.S. history. Despite the absence of centralized organization (or should I say because of it?), people were able to formulate unified national demands around *political* issues and to question the structure of the militaristic system that compelled universities to be part of weapons research and development. In 1970, U.S. national chauvinism and racism were negated by international solidarity; in place of competition and hierarchy, cooperation and egalitarianism became people’s values; instead of individual advancement and accumulation of wealth being individuals’ primary concerns, social justice and alleviation of inequality were at the center of people’s actions. Although the movement fell short of its long-term goals, it provoked numerous political reforms and thoroughly transformed civil society.

Since the global revolt of 1968, a string of uprisings swept away East

Asian dictatorships and overthrew East European Soviet regimes. Immanuel Wallerstein, Terence Hopkins, and Giovanni Arrighi understood the movements of 1989 as “the continuation of 1968.”<sup>29</sup> The wave of Asian uprisings predated events in Eastern Europe and did not flow from decisions made by world leaders to end the Cold War. A New Left impetus for universal liberation was especially evident in the Gwangju Uprising of 1980, which helped set off the chain reaction of revolts and uprisings throughout East Asia. Gwangju’s “beautiful community” among the city’s citizens is especially noteworthy. Their spontaneous ability to drive out the military; to defend, govern and manage their own affairs; to rapidly organize their Citizens’ Army and Citizen-Student Struggle Committee; and to live without crime and competition are legendary. In the liberated city, daily rallies involving tens of thousands of people directly made the most important decisions. Gwangju’s participatory democracy illustrates concretely how the New Left’s vision of greater democracy, far from being peculiar to Europe and the United States in the 1960s, remains globally central to insurgencies.

In 1871, the Paris Commune arose as the existing National Guard mobilized with a long drum-roll and seized control. In Gwangju in 1980, people spontaneously *created* a Citizens’ Army and drove thousands of the best troops of the South Korean military out of the city. Inside liberated Gwangju, as in the Paris Commune, liberty and democracy defined the essential character of people’s lives. Crime rates plummeted and cooperation flourished within communities based on love. The erotic energies unleashed by these movements tie people together in intimate ways with more force

than years of sharing jobs, taking the same classes, or living in the same apartment buildings are often able to do. Our primal impulses to live in communities based on love and respect for one another, to observe basic notions of peace and justice, create a cathexis that propels continuing insurgency.

In the years after Gwangju, a chain reaction of uprisings swept East Asia. In 1986, the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines was overthrown in an uprising led by the Catholic hierarchy and key elements of the military. More popularly remembered are the million-plus people who stubbornly stayed in the streets despite being ordered by the army to disperse. Once the bulk of the military defected to the side of the opposition and Marcos left the country, the very words "People Power" were enough to frighten even the most entrenched dictators no matter where in the world they ruled. The Philippine Revolution helped animate the 1987 June Uprising in South Korea, a nineteen-day marathon endeavor in which Christian groups also played a leading role. In this same period, when leaders at the highest levels of government seeking to shift power blocs precipitated regime changes in East Europe, the eros effect in East Asia emanated from an accumulation of experience and street actions by millions of people. As I discuss in detail in Volume 2, other East Asian uprisings of the 1980s and 1990s involved global awareness amid manifestations of New Left attributes such as autonomy, direct democracy and solidarity: Burma (1988), Tibet and China (1989), Taiwan, Nepal, and Bangladesh (1990), Thailand (1992), and Indonesia (1998). In 2011, similar grassroots dynamics were the driving force of the Arab Spring.

The international character of these insurgencies reveals an action-alternative to both Soviet-style state “socialism” and Western capitalism. They prefigure a kind of revolution entirely different than those in the past, which sought to capture national power and centralize control. International solidarity expressed in today’s alterglobalization movement has no central organizing point. From below, millions of people have autonomously chosen to make the planet’s economic structures their strategic target. Recognizing the global economic system as the root cause of permanent war, systemic starvation and misery, and ecological catastrophe, millions of people around the world focused energies on transforming it. International proliferation of the tactic of confronting elite summits indicates a deepening of popular intuition and intelligence independent of any one group or individual’s decisions. From below, millions of people enunciated and acted upon their own understandings.

Directly democratic forms of decision-making and militant popular resistance are intimately woven together in these liberatory movements. The conscious spontaneity and self-directed actions of hundreds of thousands—sometimes millions—of people, is nourished by beloved communities of struggle. People’s self-organization is contained within a grammar of autonomy, solidarity, and decommodification. Histories of struggles on various continents and in different countries may seem juxtaposed across unbridgeable divides, but they nonetheless hang together in these qualities and in the connections forged by people as they struggle for peace and justice.

In moments of great love for fellow human beings and for freedom, a

form of release occurs which is similar to a traditional Korean shamanistic ritual, or *shinmyong*—a collective feeling of ecstasy when *han* (sorrow, pent-up grief) is discharged. In contrast to Western individualism, Korean culture has bequeathed unique forms of collective emotional vitality in *shinmyong* and *han*, and they remain central to Koreans' self-understanding.<sup>30</sup> Korean social movements spontaneously reproduce moments of *shinmyong* in their eruptions, and people grasp the emotional and erotic core of activism. During my initial visit to Korea, I was struck by how popular my concept of the eros effect had become. On my second visit, as I walked to the inauguration of a new statue of poet-activist Kim Nam-ju in Gwangju Biennale Park, I was approached by a stranger about my age who recognized me with a smile. "Katsiaficas," he said, and before I could respond, he continued, "eros effect!" Those were his only English words.

In the twentieth century, people's capacity to create autonomous organizations dramatically altered the relationship of spontaneity and organization. An example of the intelligence of crowds can be found in people's adaptations of new technologies and tactics. From the grassroots, social movements' energies resonate across national boundaries stimulating "echo effects" with greater velocity and more force than goods and services can be traded. No centralized organization sent out its agents to spread People Power, yet it is a concept whose power resonates in every continent. Without highly paid trainers, insurgent activists adopt new technologies and bring them into the field faster than even the corporate elite can be trained to employ them. By connecting us to each other in new ways, people's adaptation of emergent technologies forms unsupervised collectivities, for

which the established forces of law and order are unprepared. We witnessed this phenomenon from the fax machines of 1989 China to cell phones of 1992 Thailand. Even in impoverished and highly repressed Burma, with only a handful of Internet servers in 2007, people used text messaging, blogs, and video imagery to funnel reports out of the country. Despite enormous repression during the Arab Spring, people continued to connect with each other and coordinate actions via social media networks.

Insurgent groups may form and disband, crowds may gather and be scattered, but they leave behind a residue of collective capacity for thought and action that builds upon previous incarnations. Leaders may be killed or imprisoned and tremendous casualties inflicted, but the open expression of dreams and aspirations continues to undermine the system. In the back of their minds, people cherish what they hold dear.<sup>31</sup> This intelligence and intuition of popular movements, the basis of People Power and the eros effect, is one of humanity's greatest resources.

In contrast to insurrections at the beginning of the twentieth century, more recent uprisings have emanated from civil society, not political parties. While conventional wisdom tells us that uprisings belong to the nineteenth century, mainstream media bombard us with apocalyptic visions of the future. As Fredric Jameson quipped, as a result, most people find it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. In the final decades of the twentieth century, however, an enormous wave of change swept the world, overthrowing dozens of dictatorships in a matter of a few short years—and posing the possibility of a radically different social universe. Popular intuition seemed to anticipate forthcoming political upheavals with

greater efficacy than many tomes churned out by the academic social movement industry or even by many “Left” presses. Despite common portrayals of quiescent accommodation, struggles of epic proportions today animate millions of people’s lives. Latin America is embroiled in arguably the most significant transformation of its political and cultural landscape since Columbus. From the Zapatistas to the comunards of Arequipa (Peru) and Venezuela, people’s daily lives are being bettered through ballots, protests, and all manners of political activism—including popular insurrections. In addition to overthrowing dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt, People Power’s arrival in the Arab world has forever transformed the relationship between rulers and ruled in the area.

Produced from the accumulation of centuries of movements and experiences, the multitude’s wisdom far surpasses that of elites. Would anyone argue that the peace movement is not far more intelligent than the “great” American presidents who make war after war against poor and defenseless countries? Would anyone propose that South Korean military dictators were wiser than the people of Gwangju—who risked life and limb to realize democracy? Who would defend the corporate elite’s greed, rather than human need, as the method by which we should make use of the vast wealth our species has accumulated over generations of labor? We can find an alternative use of banks and insurance company assets, we can downsize corporate behemoths and dismantle military might—but only if we believe in the power and wisdom of ordinary people.

## 29

Giovanni Arrighi, Terence K. Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein, “1989: The Continuation of 1968,” in *After the Fall: 1989 and the Future of Freedom*, ed. George Katsiaficas (New York: Routledge, 2001), 35.

## 30

For Hagen Koo’s discussion of *shinmyong*, see *Korean Workers: The Culture and Politics of Class Formation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 145–46.

## 31

Conversations with Basil Fernando on this subject have been enormously helpful.