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## ***Asia's Unknown Uprisings Volume 1: South Korean Social Movements in the 20th Century***

By George Katsiaficas. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012. 435 pages. ISBN 978-16-0486-457-1.

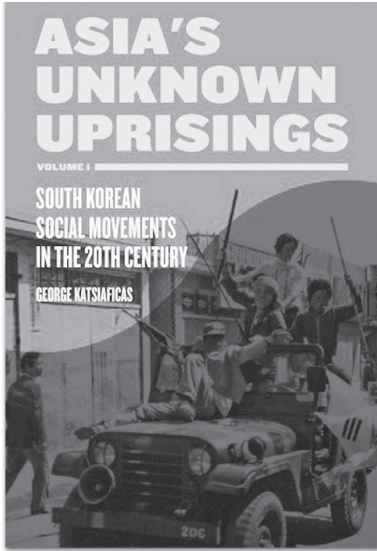
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The first volume of George Katsiaficas' *Asia's Unknown Uprisings: South Korean Social Movements in the 20th Century* is a comprehensive analysis of both the major and minor social movements that have shaped South Korea's long twentieth century. The focal point of Katsiaficas' narrative is the period stretching from the Gwangju Uprising in 1980 through the June Uprising in 1987, a period in which the democracy movement put an end to military dictatorship, a combative industrial working class emerged, and neoliberal regimes came into power. Katsiaficas' study of history from the bottom up highlights the fact that "in few places other than Korea have social movements accomplished so much in the previous three decades" (xxiii). While this work primarily addresses scholars, artists, and activists working in Korean studies, it also offers valuable insights to those working in Asian studies, postcolonial studies, Asian American studies, and American studies. Given the specter of authoritarianism that is currently haunting the country, this is sorely needed new scholarship.

Katsiaficas' first trip to South Korea was in 1999. His book, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968*, had become a bestseller in South Korea, and when he arrived, an "intense media blitz" wanted to

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understand the concept of “eros effect” which anchors his understanding of 1968. Describing his reception, Katsiaficas, a former student of Herbert Marcuse, recalls: “One of the highlights of my first few days was a presentation near Seoul National University at a movement bookstore. People stayed for four and a half hours passionately discussing the eros effect, revolutionary movements, and the future of Korea. At one point, when the slide projector jammed, people spontaneously began to sing movement songs until we had fixed the problem” (xx). This joyous reception

symbolizes for Katsiaficas the politics of eros, which involves the spontaneously sensual and emotional coming-into-being of a community of struggle, one that builds on past movements and gives birth to new ones in its desire to change the world. For Katsiaficas: “The eros effect is not simply an act of mind, nor can it simply be willed by a ‘conscious element’ (or revolutionary party). Rather it involves popular movements emerging as forces in their own right as hundreds of thousands of ordinary people take history into their own hands” (xxi).

*Asia's Unknown Uprisings* engages the pivotal social movements that have made South Korean civil society a model for insurgencies around the world: the Donghak Peasant Revolution (1894), the March First Movement (1919), the Autumn Uprising (1946), the Jeju and Yeosun Uprisings (1948), the April Revolution (1960), the Buma Uprising (1979), the Gwangju People's Uprising (1980), the June Uprising and Great Workers' Struggle (1987), the General Strike against Neoliberalism (1997), and the Candlelight Protests (2008). Katsiaficas' passionately detailed analysis of these events, which draws on a wide range of primary and secondary sources in English, recent-

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ly declassified documents, and interviews with over a hundred South Korean citizen-activists, leads him to conclude that “the source of these earth-shaking events is a remarkable capacity for popular action—a gift of Korea’s deeply rooted civil society” (5). Perhaps the best example of this “remarkable capacity for popular action” is the fact that for 19 days in June 1987, hundreds of thousands of people occupied the streets of every major city of South Korea, with police reporting an average of more than 110 demonstrations per day, every day, with an overall total of around 3,362 demonstrations (279).

Katsiaficas works to address the lack of focused attention on social movements in Korean studies. He also wants to correct the tendency of progressive historians to concentrate on vanguard parties and exceptional leaders at the expense of ordinary people. The chapter entitled “Gathering Storm” addresses the period after the military suppression of the Gwangju Uprising, which witnessed the emergence of a staggering array of major and minor insurgencies all over the country, from Incheon to Masan, with varying agendas, from anti-imperialism to women’s rights, from no nukes to no military training on campus, that brought people from all walks of life onto the streets and into activist communities. Katsiaficas weaves a compelling and exhilarating narrative through this turbulent time, revealing that even if minor actions and organizations were short-lived, they were essential to the democracy movement as a whole. Yet rather than remain fixed at the grassroots level, Katsiaficas approaches South Korean social movements from multiple and overlapping spatial scales: local, regional, national, and international. At the international level, for example, we learn that the March First Movement in Korea inspired the May Fourth Movement in China, and the overthrow of the Rhee administration in April 1960 inspired the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the United States. Katsiaficas sees the Gwangju Uprising not as simply a local or regional action but in terms of an international, “New Left impetus for universal liberation . . . which helped set off the chain reaction of revolts and uprisings throughout East Asia” (16). This is the Korean Wave that deserves our attention and admiration, not the latest commodi-

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fied song and dance routine. The second volume of *Asia's Unknown Uprisings* focuses on struggles in Burma (1988), Tibet and China (1989), Taiwan, Nepal, and Bangladesh (1990), Thailand (1992), and Indonesia (1998).

The usefulness of the eros effect as a prism through which social movements can be interpreted is most clearly articulated in Katsiaficas' thick description of the nine-day Gwangju Uprising. The Gwangju Uprising brought together a multitude of workers, farmers, businessmen, professors, students, lawyers, priests, politicians, sex workers, shop keepers, gang members, and others into what Choi Jungwoon, author of *The Gwangju Uprising: The Pivotal Democratic Movement that Changed the History of Modern Korea*, terms an "absolute community," a scene of intense emotional collectivity that closely parallels Katsiaficas' understanding of the eros effect. Choi told Katsiaficas when they met that he was surprised to discover how similar their ideas were (215). The occupation of public space during the uprising, most importantly of Democracy Plaza, where people came together to sing, cry, debate, educate, plan, organize, and donate, was a vivid manifestation of the eros effect weaving together the absolute community of Gwangju.

Katsiaficas builds a comprehensive timeline of the seven major rallies at Democracy Plaza while addressing the movement as a whole in terms of class, gender, and organizational dynamics. While the uprising assembled a multitude, commentators have failed to address the important role played by the lower classes. Following interviews with participants in the uprising, Katsiaficas discovered that "once the city rose up in arms, students were no longer the leading force—rather working class and lumpen were the core of the armed resistance" (205). Women played a crucial part in the organization of the daily rallies at Democracy Plaza, organizing blood drives, preparing food, gathering and washing the bodies of the dead, tending to the wounded, and consoling bereaved families (207). Summarizing the role played by women in Gwangju, Katsiaficas finds that, "despite the heroic participation of women in all facets of the uprising, it appears that within movement organizations, they were often confined to 'normal' roles and modes of behavior" (207). Women were included in the movement, but in

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roles that reproduced a patriarchal division of labor, as they were excluded from leadership positions and often served in subservient positions in relation to men (208). Because the Gwangju Uprising was not centrally organized, “the continual regeneration of its leadership from below was both possible and necessary” (201). For Katsiaficas, the “defining hallmark of their revolt” was the fact that ordinary people came together to create a form of direct democracy that expressed their capacity for self-government.

Katsiaficas celebrates the fact that although the U.S.-backed military government of Chun Doo-hwan won the battle in 1980, the democracy movement won the war and we can now speak of the Gwangju Uprising in glowing terms. Yet the war over Gwangju has not ended as the terrain of conflict has shifted to the politics of memory and representation. In recent years, through the Internet and groups like Ilbe (Ilgan Best), Korean civil society has become the site of a reactionary, right-wing discourse that has targeted the memory of the Gwangju Uprising. Netizens associated with Ilbe mock and vilify the Gwangju Uprising, cloaking it in the same lies and misrepresentations that were disseminated by the government-controlled media in the 1980s: that it was a riot led by violent extremists and communists who wanted to destroy the country. Controversy surrounded the opening of the 2014 Gwangju Biennale, as artist Hong Sung-dam was asked by curators to change a painting that was critical of Park Chung-hee and President Park Geun-hye. The effort to censor Hong, an important artist during the democracy movement in the 1980s, led other artists to withdraw works from the special exhibition. This situation reflects a broader political conjuncture in which the major accomplishments of the democracy movement—direct elections, trade unions, civil liberties—are being eroded.

These are dark days for progressive scholars, artists, and activists in South Korea. And yet, a new chapter of *Asia's Unknown Uprisings* is currently being written on the streets of Seoul. Thousands of people—students, parents, children, labor organizations, religious groups—have been coming together in Gwanghwamun to demand the passage of a special law that will investigate and prosecute those responsible for the sinking of the

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*Sewol* ferry. Spontaneous, self-governing social movements in South Korea have undoubtedly accomplished a great deal, but like Occupy Wall Street, they have yet to build a durable, progressive historical bloc. It would seem that the urgent question at the current conjuncture is how to move from this noble history of protest to politics at the level of the state. South Korean civil society is the support for both spontaneous uprisings and bitter, occasionally violent factionalism, as disastrously apparent in the inability of movement groups to present a unified presidential candidate in 1987. At times, Katsiaficas tends to idealize the spontaneously insurgent dimension of South Korean civil society while minimizing the messy terrain of hegemony through which ordinary people spontaneously consent to their own oppression by acceding to neoliberal common sense or to the resurgent Cold War paranoia offered by right-wing politicians.

Explaining his focus on social movements, Katsiaficas writes: "My emphasis on uprisings is part of the stream of *minjung* (people's) history, one of the many convergences of my own work with that of Korean scholars and activists who seek to build bridges from the insurrectionary past to freedom struggles in the future. Uprisings provide a means to understand the continuity in what is generally considered to be a discontinuous century" (6). These may be dark days for progressives in South Korea, and in much of the world, but by shining a wide and penetrating light on this exceptional history of social movements, *Asia's Unknown Uprisings* offers readers some much-needed optimism of both the intellect and the will.

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