

## **Seoul and Warsaw: Between Two Transformations in Opposite Directions: Ego-history of a Korean Historian Working on Poland**

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I studied history from the bottom up, pounding the pavements of cities with contrasting histories: Seoul and Warsaw. The streets of these two cities, presenting entirely different landscapes in the 1980s and 90s, became my library and archive. Longing for a transformation from capitalism to socialism in Seoul during the 1980s, in the following decade I was to witness regime change in Warsaw in the opposite direction -- from staid socialism to unbridled capitalism. Often I became lost in the maze of the two opposing historical changes. In retrospect, however, I had been lucky to have personally experienced two diametrically opposed transformations at street level, as a participant observer.

I began to read history at Sogang University in 1977 when President Park Chung-hee's "developmental dictatorship" was at the height of its power. I thought Korea was traveling along a winding road toward the primitive accumulation of capital, experiencing the many forms of violence foreshadowed by Marx in *Das Kapital*: robbery, murder, conquest, and enslavement. Marxism struck me at the time as the authentic key to understanding the world including my society. A *narodnik*-like concern for others suffering from the process of the primitive accumulation of capital and a deep-seated anger directed at the ideological taboo against leftist thought enforced during the Cold War in fiercely anti-communist South Korea combined to provide me with the moral and intellectual impetus to follow an inclination to embrace Marxism. I became an angry, young, dissident Marxist history student.

In the 1980s the underground polemics over the social formation of colonial and postcolonial Korea between the NL (National Liberation) and PD (People's Democracy) factions was a magnetic field that attracted all leftists. Inspired by this debate, I decided to challenge the relationship between Marxism and nationalism in theory and praxis. Political democratization in Korea, begun in 1987, made it possible for me to submit the following year a dissertation proposal under the title "Marx, Engels and the National Question." The liberal climate at Sogang was helpful too. However, as a self-taught Marxist, I was not quite sure if my dissertation made sense and therefore I wanted to expose my work to critical analysis by members of the international Marxist scholarly community. That is why I knocked on the door of *Science & Society*.<sup>1</sup>

As part of my preparation for my dissertation I began to read the works of classical Marxists including Rosa Luxemburg. Thanks to Luxemburg, I came to be fascinated by the polemics on the national question of the Polish Marxists of the late nineteenth century. The dichotomy of the socialist patriotic PPS (Polish Socialist Party) and the proletarian internationalist SDKPiL (Social Democracy in the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania) was reminiscent in my mind of the Korean NL-PD controversy. Since I could not be satisfied with fragmentary German or English sources, in 1989 I began to study Polish. Not knowing that the Berlin Wall would fall in a matter of months, I could not predict that I would soon be allowed to go to Poland. Prior to 1989 ordinary South Korean citizens were not permitted to travel to communist countries. (Un-)fortunately the Berlin Wall collapsed in November of 1989 and the velvet revolution in neighboring Czechoslovakia triggered regime change in

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<sup>1</sup> See Jie-Hyun Lim, "Marx's Theory of Imperialism and the Irish National Question," *Science & Society*, vol.56 no.2 (Summer,1992). *Science & Society* was the most familiar Marxist journal to me and a great source for the debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism in which Takahashi Kohachiro was an active participant. Prof. Takahashi became my role model as an East Asian Marxist historian.

Poland as well.

Freed from Cold War restrictions, I was able in 1990 to make what would be the first of many visits to Poland. The shock therapy administered during the early 1990s to accelerate the transition from a command to a market economy shook Polish society. Communism came to be branded as the political Right while anti-communists were labeled as the Left. Many Poles came to regard communism as an ideology that oppressed workers and peasants, a system that had been imposed on their country by Soviet Russia. When they spotted the works of Rosa Luxemburg or Polish Marxists in my hands, they did not hide feelings of contempt, disdain and even anger. My research plan was to compare PPS-Leftists, PPS-Rightists and SDKPiL's theory and praxis of nationalism with Polish irredentism. My ideas on this subject received a cool reception from ordinary Poles.

What surprised me the most during my first encounter with the reality of socialism as it existed in Poland at the time was that primitive nationalism had become the ideological pillar of the Party. The anti-Semitic graffiti on the walls of the ruins of the concentration camp in Oświęcim (Auschwitz) came to me as a cultural shock. Later I realized that after 1968 the Party camouflaged its racist anti-Semitism under the cover of anti-Zionism. Luxemburgism, national nihilism, social patriotism, objective patriotism, proletarian internationalism and all other ideological inclinations belonged to the realm not of ideas but political power. I was totally disenchanted by the realization that the history of ideas cannot convey the reality of a communist regime and as a result I began to have doubts about my own research agenda, namely the history of ideas of Polish Marxist irredentism. It was the legacy of Rosa Luxemburg that first attracted me to Poland, but after having encountered the ruins of the reality of socialism in the People's Poland, I began to distance myself from Marxism.

My disenchantment with the history of Marxist ideas led me to take an interest in the methodologies of new fields such as “New Cultural History” and “Subaltern Studies.” My theoretical episteme has shifted from Marxism to post-Marxism. I am convinced that the class essentialism inherent to classical Marxism corrupted the communist power because it disregarded oppression, inequality, colonialism and injustices in gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, generation, region etc. Together with postcolonial criticism, a post-Marxist stance encouraged me to view critically concepts such as red Orientalism, Eurocentrism and Marxist historicism.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically it was post-Marxist-cum-postcolonial criticism that rescued Eastern European historiography from the cliché of “the first model of underdevelopment,” a stereotypical historical view of hopelessly under-capitalized and underdeveloped Eastern Europe which Leninists rationalized using the label of “the Prussian path” of capitalism.

After a lengthy disenchantment with Marxism in People’s Poland, I came back to Poland with different problematics. The *Historikerstreit po polsku* (Polish Historikerstreit or Polish historians’ dispute) ignited in 2000 by Jan Gross’s book *Sąsiedzi* (Neighbors) and its aftermath inspired me to take an interest in victimhood consciousness in global memory space. Basing my work on Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of “hereditary victimhood,” I have been developing the working hypothesis of “victimhood nationalism” to comprehend postwar memory culture in Poland, Germany, Israel, Japan and Korea. Though the WWII experiences of these countries were not necessarily connected, they began to be entangled in global memory space. Hiroshima and Auschwitz, *Vertreibung* (post-1945 expulsion of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe) and *Hikiage* (repatriation of Japanese settlers

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<sup>2</sup> This intellectual meandering can be traced in Jie-Hyun Lim, “Rosa Luxemburg on the Dialectics of Proletarian Internationalism and Social Patriotism,” *Science & Society*, vol. 59 no.4 (winter, 1995/96);----- “The ‘Good Old Cause’ in the New Polish Left Historiography,” *Science & Society*, vol. 61 No.4 (Winter, 1997); ---- “Labour and the National Question in Poland,” in Stefan Berger and Angel Smith eds., *Nationalism, Labour and Ethnicity 1870-1939* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1999);----- “The Nationalist Message in Socialist Code: On Court Historiography in People’s Poland and North Korea,” in S. Sogner ed., *Making Sense of Global History: The 19th International Congress of Historical Sciences Commemorative Volume* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2001);-----, “Shifting Marxist Historiography: From Hard History to Soft History,” *Instytut Historyczny Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego ed., Społeczeństwo w Dobie Przemian Wiek XIX I XX: Księga Jubileuszowa Professor Anny Żarnowskiej* (Warszawa: DiG, 2003);-----, “A Postcolonial Reading of the German *Sonderweg*: Marxist Historicism Revisited,” *Journal of Modern European History* vol. 12, No. 2 (2014). .

mainly from Manchuria and the Korean peninsula after Japan's defeat in WWII), Holocaust and Comfort Women, martyrs and collaborators began to move in transatlantic and transpacific space, to intermingle and take root in alien places.<sup>3</sup> My concern about the transnational memory of victimhood would be unthinkable without the stimulus of Poland. Poland has been a bottomless reservoir for my historical imagination for more than a quarter century.

Last but not least I cannot fail to mention my Polish colleagues for their mentoring friendship: Feliks Tych and Anna Żarnowska (both lamentedly deceased), Jan Kancewicz, Marek Waldenberg, Michał Śliwa and many others. Thanks to their invitation I was able to participate in the ITH, Linz as an honorary member of the Polish delegation, where I could establish a close contact with the late Nishikawa Masao's corps of Japanese Central European historians. I'd like to express my sincere thanks to all of them on this occasion.

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<sup>3</sup> My recent works on this topic are Jie-Hyun Lim, "Second World War in Global Memory Space," in Michael Geyer and Adam Tooze eds., *The Cambridge History of the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015);-----, "Victimhood nationalism in coming to terms with the mass dictatorship," in Jie-Hyun Lim, Barbara Walker and Peter Lambert eds., *Mass Dictatorship and Memory as an Ever-Present Past* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014);-----, "Towards a Transnational History of Victimhood Nationalism: On the Trans-Pacific Space," in Naoki Sakai and Hyon Joo Yoo eds., *The Trans-Pacific Imagination: Rethinking Boundary, Culture and Society* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2012);-----, "Victimhood Nationalism in Contested Memories-Mourning Nations and Global Accountability" in Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad eds., *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010);-----, "犠牲者意識の民族主義", 『立命 言語文化研』 20(3), (2009);-----, 「"世襲的犠牲者" 意識と脱植民地主義の歴史学」 三 博他 編 『アジア歴史対話 — 国 と世 を越えて』 ( 学出版会, 2007).