FOREWORD

Derek R. Ford and Curry Malott

Contextualizing the *Theses on Socialist Education*: Lessons for Revolutionary Pedagogy Today

Publishing the selected works of Kim Il-Sung on education might be a controversial move in the United States, especially within academia, where even the most critical of scholars almost unquestionably accept the position of the country that they otherwise critique. The very fact that it is controversial is, as we will see, one reason for the need to deepen and spread a proper understanding of Korean history and the Korean struggle for socialism, independence, and reunification. Why, after all, shouldn't educators in the U.S. study the educational projects undertaken in other countries? Why are some—like Finland—acceptable, while others—like the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or north Korea), unacceptable?[1]

On what grounds would it be deemed controversial? In fact, there's almost a proportional relationship between the demonization of the DPRK and the level of ignorance one has about the state, the country, its government, its people and Party, and

1 In this book, we have chosen to refrain from capitalizing "north" and "south" Korea to acknowledge the forced division of the peninsula by U.S. occupation into two separate entities. - *Editors' note.*

its history. This is particularly striking given the recent interest in "decolonial" and anti-colonial education, socialist and communist educational methods, and socialism and communism more generally.[2] Given these recent activist and scholarly interests, we think it's appropriate for a work like this to appear. This book not only provides key insights into the socialist educational project in Korea—including its pedagogical philosophies and practices, organizations, purposes, government institutions, and more—but it also helps to provide a more accurate description of the DPRK's socialist project as articulated by the state's founder and, for almost five decades, central leader. Reflecting on the ongoing implementation of the *Theses on Socialist Education* six years after their official implementation, Kim Il-Sung summarized the ethos of the *Theses* as one of intellectualizing and revolutionizing all elements of society.

Juche and Korean Liberation

While the mainstream media and bourgeois politicians in the U.S. portray the DPRK as an unpredictable, irrational, and ultimately unknowable entity, there is not only a general consistency in the decisions of the state and the ruling party (The Workers' Party of Korea), but also a consistent ideological reference: *Juche*. In fact, even a cursory investigation into any aspect of the DPRK—whether it be military affairs, foreign policy, education, or culture—will result in coming across the foundational concept of *Juche*.

Juche is predominantly translated into English as "self-reliance" or "independence," but a more accurate and comprehensive translation is "subjecthood." *Juche* was first articulated by

2 See, for example, Vijay Prashad, *Red Star Over the Third World* (London: Pluto Press, 2019); Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York: Verso, 2019); Jodi Dean, *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (New York: Verso, 2019).

Kim Il-Sung in a now famous speech included as the first chapter in this book, although its origins—like those of the DPRK itself—are found in the anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle. In particular, the founding of *Juche* is located in a speech Kim Il-Sung gave in June 1930 at a meeting of the Young Communist League and Anti-Imperialist Youth League in Kalun, a city in Jilin Province, although it wasn't explicitly articulated until a few decades later.

Jilin Province is located in Northeast China, in Manchuria, and shares a border with north Korea. Jilin is important in the history of the Korean struggle for several reasons. It's the place where Kim Il-Sung joined the resistance movement, and also where, as a teenager, he founded the Down-With-Imperialism Union, which contemporary literature in north Korea considers as the original foundations of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). A large number of Koreans had fled to Jilin to escape the brutal Japanese colonial occupation of Korea, and Jilin was home to the largest base of the Korean resistance.

In the struggle against Japanese imperialism, Korean and Chinese communists (and, at various points, nationalists) were part of a united front. In fact, at the urging of the Third International (Comintern), which at the time was organizing the world communist movement, Korean communists joined the Chinese Communist Party. It's estimated that, when the merging process was consolidated in 1931, as much as 90 percent of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was actually Korean, as their efforts at recruitment among the peasants in the region had been much more successful.

The formation of a united front was a complicated task, and one which had a profound influence on the *Juche* idea. Kim Il-Sung and the revolutionary leadership had to win the masses over from the bourgeois nationalists, who wanted to appeal to capitalist powers or solely on the Third International to bypass the struggle required for independence, which included the

"movement for cultivating national strength through education and industrial development."[3] The Korean communists under Kim Il-Sung's leadership also had to deal with social democrats and ultra-leftist theories and leaders, which he saw as dogmatic and inappropriate to the current conjuncture. The ultra-leftist theories were those that merely mapped on tactics and strategies developed elsewhere onto the Korean context, and the social-democratic theories were those that insisted on building socialism without establishing a proletarian dictatorship.

The problem with the bourgeois nationalists, the social democrats, and the ultra-leftists emanated from "the peculiarities of the development of Korean history, characterized by worship of great powers."[4] Not only were elements looking to the Soviet Union and China, but others even endorsed U.S. president Woodrow Wilson's doctrine on the self-determination of nations.

In response to those who wanted to build the anti-colonial struggle and the future independent Korea by relying on outside forces or self-styled leaders parroting theories from elsewhere, Kim Il-Sung formulated the slogan "The people are my God," which encapsulates "the spirit of approaching everything with the masses of the people at the centre and boundlessly treasuring them." As Kim Jong-Il recounts, Kim Il-Sung "clarified the truth that a revolution should be carried out not by anyone's approval or instruction but by one's own conviction and on one's own responsibility that all problems arising in the revolution should be solved in an independent and creative way."[5]

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3 Editorial Board, *History of Revolutionary Activities of President Kim Il Sung* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2012), 17.

4 Ibid., 19.

5 Kim Jong-Il, *On the Juche Philosophy* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2002), 24.

The Partition of Korea and the Charting of an Independent Socialist Path

After decades of arduous and complicated ideological and armed struggle, the defeat of Japan was imminent by the summer of 1945. As the Korean revolutionaries were sweeping down the peninsula rapidly, the U.S. proposed that Korea be temporarily divided at the 38th parallel, with the Soviets taking control of the north and the U.S. taking control of the south. The Soviet Union accepted this proposal. Having suffered catastrophic losses in their war against the Nazi regime, the Soviet Union was in desperate need of respite, and made several concessions to imperialism in response to this need. Under the agreement, both the U.S. and the Soviets were to withdraw troops from their respective territories in 1948. The Soviet Union did, but U.S. troops continue to occupy the south.

Although the imperialist narrative is that the Soviets installed a "puppet" regime, the real power in the north rested in the 70 people's committees set up by people in the north–complemented by 145 people's committees in the south. Thus, the U.S. proposed the division of the peninsula because it understood that the entirety of Korea would be under the people's communist control if it didn't militarily occupy the south.

While the Soviet Union set up a civil apparatus in the north, its primary function was to provide the legislative apparatus through which decisions made by the people's committees could be greenlit. These people's committees, which were locally organized, would consolidate with other socialist and revolutionary organizations to form the WPK in June 1949, knowing that they needed a unified revolutionary party in power with broad bases in the masses.

The U.S. war against Korea, which lasted from June 1950 until July 1953 has ultimately ended. The U.S. was forced to sign an armistice agreement after they had been unable to make any

gains above the 38th parallel. The north, however, was decimated in the war, having suffered years of carpet-bombing, massacres, and the use of chemical and biological weapons. The rebuilding of the country was an urgent and monumental task. At the same time, it's likely that the socialist Koreans signed the armistice as a result of pressure from the USSR and PRC. Internal debates also occurred within the WPK about how best to develop the country along socialist lines, and also about where the DPRK should stand in relation to the developing Sino-Soviet split.

Stalin died in 1953, and after an internal struggle in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev emerged as First Secretary in 1955/1956. Reactionary forces leapt on this instability in Poland and Hungary in the anti-Soviet revolts which arose and were eventually defeated. At the same time, differences between the USSR and the People's Republic of China were simmering. What began as a struggle over particular policies developed into an ideological and political state-to-state struggle.

The struggle between the PRC and USSR became so intense that in 1960 the Khrushchev leadership recalled all Soviet technicians, engineers, and advisers who were, at the time, playing a critical role in China's economic development projects.

Ultimately, however, the north Koreans needed assistance and cooperation from both the USSR and PRC, but the state and people didn't want to be dictated to by either of these socialist giants in a *quid pro quo* arrangement for aid and trade.

The divisions within the international communist movement came to a head in 1956. In February of that year, Khrushchev made his "secret speech," in which he repudiated Stalin and his legacy. In April, the USSR sent a delegation led by Leonid Brezhnev to the WPK's Third Party Congress. In his address, Brezhnev agitated against "cult of personality" issues in the DPRK. While Kim Il-Sung was visiting the USSR over the summer, the pro-Soviet faction and the pro-PRC Yonan faction conspired to depose his leadership at the upcoming plenary session of the

Central Committee.

This intra-WPK struggle was not taking place only behind closed doors, however, but was actually fought out in public. For example, on August 1, 1956, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the WPK, *Rodung Sinmum*, ran a column endorsing all Soviet criticisms of the Stalin era, including the "cult of personality." This was clearly a direct, public attack on Kim Il-Sung from within the top leadership. At the plenary session that began August 30, leaders of both factions attacked Kim, arguing that the state and party apparatuses should be headed by separate leaders. They also attacked him over the path of economic development. Under Kim's Il-Sung's leadership, the state and Party at the time emphasized heavy industry and military development while also prioritizing light industry and agriculture. Importantly, which we'll explore more below, Kim's "economic policy increasingly emphasized mass mobilization appealing to people's patriotism, and the fundamental task of installing socialist consciousness in the masses through ideological education."[6] Kim's opponents, however, argued that the country should focus on consumer goods, and should therefore rely on the USSR and PRC for heavy industry.

During their speeches, both factions were shouted down by the rest of the Central Committee. Almost all of the leaders of both factions were expelled from the WPK.

In Kim Il-Sung's words, the crisis in the international communist movement came to a head in 1956-57 and "the world imperialists and international reactionaries, availing themselves of it, unfolded an extensive 'anticommunist campaign.'"[7] U.S. impe-

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6 Moe Taylor, "Between Market Socialism and the New Man: Cuban and north Korean Economic Discourse in the 1960s," *North Korean Review* 17, no. 1 (2021): 13.

7 Kim Il-Sung, *Juche! The Speeches and Writings of Kim Il-Sung*, ed. Li Yuk-Sa (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972), 27.

rialists stepped up aggression as "anti-Party revisionist elements within the Party came out to attack the Party, taking advantage of the complicated situation and with the backing of outside forces. The anti-Party elements within the Party and their supporters abroad, revisionists and big-power chauvinists joined forces in opposition to our Party and carried out conspiratorial activities to overthrow the leadership of our Party and government."[8] There were internal factions within each of these elements: "Nationalists divided themselves in different groups and got engrossed in bickering, turning to big powers, instead of thinking of struggling by drawing on the forces of the popular masses."[9]

By making *Juche* official policy, the WPK and state apparatuses fastened the country's direction around "the principle of solving for oneself all the problems of the revolution and construction in conformity with the actual conditions of one's country, mainly by one's own efforts."[10] *Juche* was formulated against "dogmatism and flunkeyism towards great powers" as a dynamic doctrine organized around "independence in politics, self-sustenance in the economy, and self-defense in national defense."[11]

Education was a central component in the production of comrades who looked to outside forces. Although the new socialist government immediately prioritized education according to the *Juche* idea, they nonetheless had to send students to foreign countries to learn technical and scientific skills. "Those who had studied abroad as well as those who had returned home from abroad preferred foreign things to ours, trying to copy foreign

8 Ibid., 28.

9 Kim Il-Sung, "On the Korean People's Struggle to Apply the Juche Idea," in Kim Il-Sung, *Answers to the Questions Raised by Foreign Journalists* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1991), 41.

10 Ibid., 45.

11 Ibid., 46.

things mechanically."[12]

The importation of foreign ideas was not merely of an ideological or political nature, but of a cultural nature as well. That is to say, some in the WPK were looking to the USSR and PCR not only for economic support, but also for cultural support. Some were arguing, for example, that Koreans should adopt Soviet dressing styles or Chinese artistic styles. Because Korea is a nation with thousands of years of history, and a nation which was (and is) still colonized in the south, the opposition's portrayal of Korean culture as "backwards" or somehow inadequate repelled many in the DPRK's leadership and population.

Juche was thus 1. born out of the anti-colonial struggle, 2. forged through the experience of forming a united front, 3. sharpened in response to different factions within the party that ultimately rejected the *Juche* approach to development, and 4. implemented to mobilize the Party and people to forge an independent path that would secure their state from efforts by the much larger socialist countries—who were both valuable allies—to impose their own agenda on the DPRK. The mobilization of *Juche* allows for endless tactical flexibility in foreign, economic, and social policy even today.

Looking back from 2022, it's indisputable that the *Juche* political ideology has been successful. The Koreans played a key role in defeating Japanese imperialism, forced the U.S. to sign an armistice in 1953, and survived the Cold War, the opening up of China, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the overthrow and collapse of the European Socialist Bloc countries. While navigating these endlessly complex geopolitical challenges, they've managed to rebuild their country from rubble. *Even the CIA* admitted that the DPRK includes "compassionate care for children in general and war orphans in particular; 'radical change' in the position of women [and no prostitution]; genu-

12 Ibid., 45.

inely free housing, free health care, and preventative medicine; and infant mortalitiy and life expectancy rates comparable to the most advanced countries until the recent [early 1990s] famine."[13] This doesn't include other accomplishments, such as the genuinely free educational system, which includes daycare and goes from preschool to the highest levels of academia.

Socialist Education

The particular characteristics of socialist education that would be developed in the north stem from a need created during Japan's colonial reign between 1910 and 1945. For example, under Japan's rule, Korean culture and political independence was viciously repressed, as the Korean language and political organizations were outlawed. Koreans were even forced to adopt Japanese names.[14] In the remedial forms of education that existed during the colonial period a curriculum that glorified all things Japanese, including Japan's imperial flag, dominated.

The super exploitation, dispossession, and extreme violence that accompanied Japanese colonialism was justified by biological and cultural racism. This bigotry audaciously portrayed Koreans as lazy, unsanitary, untrustworthy, immoral, and unstable. So-called "bad" Koreans were portrayed as making it difficult for "good" law-abiding, virtuous Koreans. Socialist education has to counter the destructiveness of Japanese propaganda that continues to be perpetuated by Japanese and U.S. imperialism in their ongoing efforts to overthrow the people's self-determination in the northern half of the peninsula.

The communists in Korea, while part of the broader class struggle and working at different times—and in different capac-

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13 Cited in Bruce Cumings, *North Korea: Another Country* (New York: The New Press, 2004), iii-ix.

14 See Ken C. Kawashima, *The Proletarian Gamble: Korean Workers in Interwar Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

ities—with their comrades in the Soviet Union and what would become the People's Republic of China, were from the beginning untethered to the theoretical dictates of either grouping. This is one way in which the *Juche* idea can be traced back much further than the 1955 speech. When the time came to engage in the reconstruction of the country after the devastation of the U.S. war, there was no doubt that the country needed to build—and rebuild—its heavy industry. Yet this was no mere economistic formula. On the contrary, as indicated earlier, it was predicated upon the promotion of socialist consciousness in the north. In other words, the material and ideological foundations of communism had to be built, and here we see Kim Il-Sung emphasizing that "it is the ideological one that is most important to conquer." This is because the construction of new material foundations depended upon the enthusiasm of the masses, which in turn was predicated on their understanding of communism.

Immediately after the liberation of the north from Japan, the WPK set out to correct the lack of indigenous cadres to build their socialist society and, to pursue this task, Kim Il-Sung told a Delegation of the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance of Peru that they "set up a university before anything else in the teeth of every hardship […] We did not waver in the least," he says, and they "brought in teachers and intellectuals from all over the country, some of the intellectuals even from the southern half of Korea."[15] Already by the time of the writing of the *Theses*, the Korean government established a universal eleven-year compulsory education system and several prestigious universities that trained intellectuals, technicians, artists, professors, and more. He himself had already enacted a *Juche* approach to education at the very beginnings of the anti-colonial struggle when he formed the Down-With-Imperialism Union. "Some of my

15 Kim Il-Sung, *On the Korean People's Struggle to Apply the Juche Idea*, (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1983), 39.

comrades," he reported, "advised me to go to Moscow and study at the university funded by the Communist International."[16] He understands why they wanted him to do so, as that was the premiere international school in revolutionary leadership, organization, and struggle. But Kim Il-Sung disagreed, "thinking that it would be better to learn while struggling among the people than studying in Moscow. Our people, not people at Moscow or Shanghai, were my teachers."[17]

The philosophy underlying the educational program is the belief in the masses to make their own history through, specifically, their *independent* and *inventive* ideas and actions. Kim Il-Sung spoke of this as making *Juche* the principle and guiding force of pedagogy, insofar as revolutionary education "is creative work to develop the people who live and act in specific conditions." "We must solve all the problems of theory and practice that arise in education," he continues, "creatively by our own efforts in accordance with the situation in our country and in the interests of the Korean revolution."[18] This was a well-rounded curriculum encompassing communist theory as well as the natural and social sciences, artistic practices and aesthetic theories, culture, and more.

Such an expansive curriculum would require international help and the guidance and assistance of comrades in other socialist states. Yet, in accordance with *Juche*, none of this should be accepted uncritically or universally. The importation of scientific education, for example, was done not programatically but in a way that adopted it to the unique Korean conjuncture. This, in turn, meant the rejection of subsuming Korean education and development to any other major power, a subsumption that

16 Ibid., 43.

17 Ibid.

18 Kim Il-Sung, *Theses on Socialist Education* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House), 8.

would, in effect, amount to the very dogmatism urged against in the 1955 speech.

The method of approaching such foreign knowledge and educational practices through the *Juche* philosophy was, Kim Il-Sung formulated, through imbuing revolutionary education with revolutionary practice. "Theory for theory's sake and knowledge for knowledge's sake that are detached from revolutionary practice are utterly useless in our society," he writes. The beginning point of education are our concrete practices, which then compel the production of theories to understand those practices. Then, such theories are used to recontextualize the concrete practices out of which they emerged. Such praxis, however, can't be formulated sporadically across the country but has to achieve some level of uniformity. This is one reason why the socialist state has to take responsibility for education:

> Only by educating all members of society continually can any differences in the ideological, technical and cultural standards of people be eliminated and the aim of making our whole society working-class, revolutionary and intellectual be achieved.[19]

Another reason why education must be organized through the socialist state is precisely to produce a new revolutionary collectivity by unlearning the individualistic conceptions of people and society propagated by colonialism and capitalism.

One way in which this educational praxis takes place is through students actively participating in the production of their towns and cities. As Helen-Louise Hunter notes, beginning in middle and high school, university and college students engage in volunteer labor as part of their studies, even constructing the road connecting Kaesong and Sinuiju. Much of the work takes place in the evening which, she says, "has a certain excitement for teenagers. Students enjoy seeing friends whom they have not seen for a while. There is a sense of camaraderie and esprit de

19 Ibid., 11..

corps as they work together through the night."[20] Students are active agents in constructing and reconstructing their own built environment and, through doing so, experience the communist collectivity that works to overcome the individualism of capitalist imperialism. They do this by participating in youth organizations, including the Children's Union, the League of Socialist Working Youth, and others.

Beyond formal schooling, education in the DPRK continues through participation in Party and state organizations. This participation is not a separate or discrete but an integral part of their lives and continuing education. "Through their organizational lives people enhance their collectivist spirit and sense of discipline, strengthen solidarity and acquire consciousness of fulfilling their revolutionary duties," Kim Il-Sung reported.[21] Recognizing that students don't constitute a class separate from workers in Korea, the study-work system includes "university-level factory colleges" where workers study after the workday."[22] Kim Jong-Un affirmed the unity of organization and education in a text prepared for the 75th anniversary of the WPK's founding: "The solidity and strength of the party and all the success in a party depend on how the cadres and other members of the party are education and bound together organizationally and ideologically."[23]

In a 1983 speech to the First Conference of Ministers of Education and Culture of Non-aligned and Other Developing

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20 Helen-Louise Hunter, *Kim Il-Sung's North Korea* (Westport: Praeger, 1999), 56.

21 Kim Il-Sung, *On the Korean People's Struggle to Apply the Juche Idea* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1983), 52.

22 Ibid., 54.

23 Kim Jung-Un, "The Workers' Party of Korea is the Party of the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung," *Study of the Juche Idea* 91 (2020): 4.

Countries, Kim Il-Sung emphasized the priority of education above all else in the struggle for robust independence. Creating and reviving a revolutionary national culture is crucial, he insisted, in order to unify political and economic independence, and this in turn required education. "Our country's experience proves," he told the Ministers, "that in order to build an independent and sovereign country, national education must be kept ahead of all other work. Only when national education is developed on a priority basis to bring up people to be powerful beings equipped with independence and creativity and train a large number of native cadres, can we fully solve all problems arising in the building of a new society."[24] This task must not be delayed until the economic forces of society are built up. Even with few economic resources, education should be prioritized *now*.

As Kim Il-Sung notes in the following pages, it is the entirety of society which has to engage in the educational endeavor of defending the revolution, building communism, and maintaining independence. Those tasked with this project are, importantly, teachers—unlike in the U.S. where elite capitalists like Bill and Melinda Gates and a rung of bureaucratic administrators guide educational policy and practice.[25] It is teachers themselves who are literally responsible for educational work. The *Theses on Socialist Education* position teachers not as those who prepare students for standardized tests but rather as "career revolutionaries who bring up the younger generation to be successors to the revolution and communists." Yet it is not individual teachers but collectives of teachers who are all integrated into regular political

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24 Kim Il-Sung, "For the Development of National Culture of Newly-Emerging Countries," in Kim-Il Sung, *Answers to the Questions Raised by Foreign Journalists* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1991), 9.

25 Wayne Au, *Unequal by Design: High-Stakes Testing and the Standardization of Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

and social work who determine the appropriate pedagogy for the moment. The closing of the *Theses* again emphasizes that education is not the domain of younger people and teachers: "In a socialist society all members of society must take part in educational work," which is why the DPRK's educational system includes a continuing education department that organizes educational programs that are part of factories, agricultural collectives, fisheries, and other places of production.

To determine the appropriate pedagogy and curriculum, teachers themselves must engage in ongoing education, become more tightly involved in Party life and the people's organizations—all tasks that are part of a broader unity of socialist education. Teachers have to learn the WPK's orientations not by reading Party publications but by becoming more active in the Party. They have to continually raise their political and academic qualifications, the latter of which include their specialties as well as "various fields, including the elementary scientific knowledge," "the internal and external situation, the specific conditions in our country and educational theory and methods." This is done formally through teacher-training programs but also, importantly, by engaging in "the revolutionary habit of study," which means they "must study regularly, study energetically and read a great deal."[26]

The Anti-Communism of Critical Pedagogy

The relentless demonization of north Korea within the capitalist world stems from a number of interrelated factors. First, imperialist hostilities toward the DPRK stems from the centuries-old geopolitical significance of the Korean peninsula. Second, and this would be true even without the peninsula's geopolitical significance, the DPRK has been under attack for the

26 Kim Il-Sung, *Theses on Socialist Education* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House), 8-44.

simple fact that they are a socialist country. For global capitalism/imperialism, the existence of the socialist movement, at any level, from organizations within capitalist-dominated countries to socialist parties who hold state power, represents a real or potential threat to capital's internal drive to expand its reach and influence over every inch of the planet. The fact is that today the DPRK represents not only an actually-existing socialist country, but an actually-existing alternative to the neoliberal world order.

More specifically, however, the DPRK emerged after WWII during a global wave of socialist-inspired national liberation movements. Updating Lenin's theory of imperialism, Ghanian Pan-African revolutionary Kwame Nkrumah (1965/2004) referred to this era as neo-colonialism. Describing this era, Nkrumah noted that—following the emergence of the Soviet Union as well as the post-World War II rise of socialism in both Europe and China—capitalism had lost "'large sources of raw materials and financial investment and commodity markets […] from its field of exploitation" with the emergence of the Soviet Union and then the rise of socialism in central and eastern Europe and China.[27]

Within this revolutionary and anti-colonial context, U.S. foreign policy sought, on one hand, to retain colonial domination by alternative means, and on the other, to tenaciously cling onto their remaining colonial holdings—including Korea. The U.S., desperate to take control of the entire peninsula, instigated the first global class war, the so-called Korean War. It was this war that birthed the military industrial complex, that unleashed for the first time new chemical weapons like Agent Orange, and that was fought precisely along class lines. That is, rather than the imperialist countries at war with each other over the colonial re-division of the world, for the first time capitalist countries lined up

27 Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last State of Imperialism* (London: PANAF, 1965/2004), 41.

on one side and socialist countries on the other in a global class war. To make sense of the on-going hysterical-level villainization of Korea, the country's modern history must be situated in this historical context.

Locating the demonization of DPRK within these efforts, Nkrumah explains how "this struggle has been given an ideological content by invoking anti-communism as the mainspring of the battle to bring the socialist sector of the globe back into the exploitative control Western financial monopoly." Anti-communism has commonly manifested itself in racist portrayals of north Korean leaders and government as unstable, irrational, and the Korean people as indoctrinated, mindless zombies. Attempting to turn reality on its head, the DPRK is painted as presenting a danger to the United States' national security as if the U.S. was somehow ever the victim.

Even so-called beacons of objective journalism such as *The New York Times* routinely publish racist articles arguing that millions of north Koreans are subjected to a totalizing, cradle-to-the-grave system of mind-control based on a cult of personality that demands complete, unwavering obedience. The imperialist narrative is based on the ridiculous assumption that the Korean people are required to accept the absolute glorification of the north Korean state, on one hand, and the fanatical hatred of the U.S., Japan, and south Korea on the other. During our visits to the primary, secondary, and higher education institutions of Chongryon, the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, we saw textbooks that praised the civil rights movement in the U.S., portrayed the Koreans in the south as their siblings, and the history of progressive movements in Japan. The common depictions of mindless Koreans uncritically following the so-called most repressive regime in the world are nothing less than racist caricatures. Depicting the people of an entire country as naïve fools with no agency is certainly racist.

In the preface to his short, popularly-written book, *North Ko-*

rea, Bruce Cumings took note of the stark absence in the U.S. of any counter-arguments challenging the racist caricatures of the DPRK, even among progressives.[28] In fact, this anti-communism is precisely one of the motivations behind the founding theorists of "critical pedagogy" as an attempt to dismiss socialism and the legacy of revolutionary Marxism. It's important to clarify, however, that "critical pedagogy" was first coined in Henry Giroux's 1981 book, *Ideology, Culture, and the Process of Schooling*.[29] He furthered this line of critique in his 1983 book, *Theory and Resistance in Education*, which contends that post-World War II both the imperialist and capitalist states as well as the countries in the so-called socialist bloc, suffered from the exact same increasing alienation and the suppression of political and economic freedom through repression and authoritarian rule. There's no mention of the enormous gains made by socialist or newly-liberated countries around the globe.

This wasn't limited to Giroux. Stanley Aronowitz, an early theorist of critical pedagogy, formulated a political line against communism as it highlighted the "best aspects" of "American democracy." He wrote that "the Soviet Union is far from an egalitarian society; privilege and nepotism are rampant."[30] The case against socialist revolutions was part of his set-up to dismiss the history and theory of revolutionary Marxism.[31]

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

29 For more on this, see Curry S. Malott, *History and Education: Engaging the Global Class War* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015).

30 Stanley Aronowitz, *Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics and Culture in Marxist Theory* (St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 23.

31 Much of this was based on misreadings of secondary Marxist literature. See David I. Backer, "History of the Reproduction-Resistance Dichotomy in Critical Education: The Line of Critique Against Louis Althusser, 1974-1985," *Critical Education* 12, no. 6 (2021): 1-21.

Elsewhere, Curry has argued that critical pedagogy emerged as an intentional betrayal of the global class of working and oppressed people.[32] As people's movements in the U.S. and around the world suffered major counter-revolutionary setbacks, what remained of the left tended to break from Marxism-Leninism as it was pulled to the right.

There is a particularly striking irony here since critical pedagogy has always been a coin with at least two sides. Critical pedagogy was not only part of the larger move to the right, but it was also a challenge to the move to the right, popularly known as neoliberalism. The beginning of the neoliberal era in education is symbolized by Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*. Mobilizing Cold War rhetoric, the White House and the Secretary of the Department of Education, Terrel Bell, in unprecedented fashion, blamed teachers and education for the economic recession of the 1970s.[33] The report claims the United States was falling behind its global competitors in education and technological innovation to such an extent that if it had been the result of an external imposition, it would have been considered an act of war.

Feeling directly threatened by this attack teachers and educators would join the critical pedagogy movement seeking understanding and action (*i.e.* theory and practice), only to find a critical pedagogy that functioned as the theoretical mechanism shifting the focus from class struggle and seizing state power to a form of liberalism focused on assimilating into, rather than dismantling and replacing, the global system of racist and sexist imperialism. In other words, it rejected outright the possibility or necessity for a revolutionary rupture, for the working and op-

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32 See Curry S. Malott, "In Defense of Communism: Against Critical Pedagogy, Capitalism, and Trump," *Critical Education* 8, no. 1 (2017): 1-24.

33 Derek R. Ford, *Education and the Production of Space: Political Pedagogy, Geography, and Urban Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2017), ch. 3.

pressed classes to overthrow their oppressors.

Again, however, as with the U.S. corporate media, popular culture, and the State Department, critical pedagogy has a sad history of either being cruel to north Korea or ignoring their existence and struggle completely. This is ironic and a missed opportunity because north Korea represents one of the "remaining self-proclaimed top-to-bottom alternative[s] to neoliberalism."[34]

Perhaps the worst position critical pedagogy takes lies in its lumping together of both left-wing and far-right countries; writing off both unequatable political regimes as simply "authoritarian." For example, north Korea has been put in the same category as Pakistan and India as countries with nuclear weapons who have threatened to use them. Joel Spring's *Wheels in the Head* denounces the DPRK even as the author seems to know little about the state and its ideology as, for instance, he mentions the "Korean Communist Party," which hasn't existed since August 1946.[35] In a disgustingly eurocentric and colonial gesture, Spring's critique of the socialist education system in the north is not only ahistoricized but is based primarily on Plato!

But the power and influence of U.S. imperialism continues to wane on the international stage. On the Korean peninsula, in particular, the south's successful Candlelight Movement in 2016 was responsible for the successful ousting of the repressive Park Geun-hye regime, which paved the way for the election of Moon Jae-in. Moon's administration has a much more progressive orientation and has made tremendous strides toward the peaceful reunification of the country, the normalization of relations with the north, and the campaign to get the U.S. to sign a peace treaty

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

35 Joel Springs, *Wheels in the Head: Educational Philosophies of Authority, Freedom, and Culture from Confucianism to Human Rights*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).

with the DPRK. In the north, the successful development of a nuclear armaments deterrent represents another major indicator that the global balance of power is shifting away from the imperialist centers of power.

Further evidence of this shift is the fact that the U.S. would come to the table in 2019 in a historic summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and DPRK leader Kim Jong-Un to discuss the peaceful reunification of a self-determined Korea. Although Trump's efforts were undermined by hard-right war hawks, the symbolic significance alone is undeniable.

It is precisely within this context of further global destabilization by U.S. imperialism, with Korea as a possible epicenter, that the works of Kim Il-Sung become increasingly relevant for countering the anti-communism aimed at Korean leaders. Such efforts challenge further U.S. aggressions while simultaneously revealing important lessons and insights from one of the great leaders, tacticians, and socialist thinkers of the twentieth century.

As a closing example, and despite grotesque caricatures of Korea and its leaders as doctrinaire, Kim Il-Sung's writings reveal deep, creative commitments—insights critical pedagogy would be wise to engage. Socialist pedagogy is not top-down but produced by the entirety of the society. Rather than the top leadership subjecting people to its dictates, the Party is the political collective of the entirety of society. It is this collective which educates itself, and which engages in endless "energetic study" in order to continue to inspire and to draw on the revolutionary enthusiasm of the people.

Dogmatism, according to Kim Il-Sung, is an enemy of the day-to-day assessment of the balance of forces needed in the creative, tactical process of leading a revolutionary, anti-colonial movement waged against powerful forces. In this context, dogmatically clinging to predetermined formulations can lead to catastrophe and the ultimate defeat of liberation forces. Because this dialectical truth holds true in any context and in any era, the

works of the world's great dialecticians like Kim Il-Sung remain important sources for revolutionary socialist organizers, including those working in education.

We see that education is not a discrete area of revolutionary struggle, but one which is inseparable from the social, economic, and political developments of society. At the same time, education is a *fundamental* feature of such a unity, which is why, as Moe Taylor relays, Kim Il-sung would state even before the *Theses*, that north Korea's transition from a colonized and underdeveloped country into a strong national economy "was achieved 'by relying on the high revolutionary enthusiasm and limitless creativity of our people,' harness[ed] through mass mobilization campaigns."[36]

36 Moe Taylor. "Between Market Socialism and the New Man: Cuban and north Korean Economic Discourse in the 1960s," North Korean Review 17, no. 1 (2021): 13.