The Korean Thermidor: on political space and conservative reactions

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In Metapolitics, French philosopher Alain Badiou uses the concept of a Thermidorean to denote a political subjectivity constituted through the termination of a political sequence. For Badiou, the actual Thermidor that followed the Jacobin insurrection of the French Revolution was not just a singular event but is a general type of political reaction. Badiou argues that a Thermidor is a reaction that is based on a corruption of political will and disarticulation of the political demands that inform a sequence of emancipatory politics. This article applies Badiou’s concept of Thermidorean politics to show how conservative forces in South Korea have targeted the political spaces of the Korean democracy movement. The afterlife of cold war representations of social space, the role of reform forces in the disarticulation of radical demands of the democracy movements, as well as the role of ‘renegade’ (formerly oppositional) intellectuals in the creation of a chimera of ‘pro-North’ Left are analysed here as sources of a Korean Thermidor.

Key words political space; Badiou; political geography; South Korea; democracy; conservatism

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To make a period illegible is much more than to simply condemn it. One of the effects of illegibility is to make it impossible to find in the period in question the very principles capable of remedying its impasses. If the period is declared to be pathological, nothing can be extracted from it for the sake of orientation, and the conclusion, whose pernicious effects confront us every day, is that one must resign oneself to disorientation as a lesser evil. Let us therefore pose, with regard to a previous and visibly closed sequence of the politics of emancipation, that it must remain legible for us, independently of the final judgment about it. (Badiou 2010, np)

Every reactive disposition is the contemporary of the present to which it reacts. Of course, it categorically refuses to incorporate itself to this present. It sees the body … and refuses to be one of its elements. (Badiou 2009, 54)

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to understand the significance of the conservative regime of Lee Myung Bak in relation to the political sequence of democratic reform undertaken by the South Korean democracy movement over the last 20 plus years. What does the return of conservative rule mean for the bloc of liberal-left political parties and social movements that emerged from the democracy struggle and their efforts to introduce greater transparency, participation, liberty and equality into Korean society? Using Alain Badiou’s (2006) notion of Thermidorean politics, I am interested in reading the conservative backlash in South Korea as an attempted corruption of political will that works through obscuring and reacting against the prior sequence of democratic reform.

For Badiou, the actual Thermidor that followed the radical, Jacobin phase of the French Revolution signifies not just a singular event, but a general type of political reaction: one that can be seen after major historical uprisings and social disruptions such as the Paris Commune, May ‘68, Tiananmen Square, or, as I shall apply it in this essay, the sequence initiated by 1987’s June Democratic Uprising in South Korea. Badiou’s usage of the term is fairly flexible: he uses it not only to describe reaction following revolutions (a sequence often led by former revolutionaries), but also other processes of conservative reaction that target emancipatory politics. The figure of this reaction, the Thermidorean, is ‘essentially politically corrupt … he [sic] exploits the precariousness of political convictions’ (Badiou 2006, 130), by negating or obscuring the subjective demands of political sequence. As Shaw puts it, the Thermidorian is a reactive subject that ‘refuses to incorporate itself into the present, despite itself being affected by the trace [of an event]: it therefore says “no” to the event’ (2010b, 400). Instead of accepting the consequences of political transformation, the reactive subject attempts to deny or obscure democratic events, often by putting them in the service of another political project: a political project that, essentially, aims to terminate a political sequence by rendering it illegible, obscure. The Thermidor is a containment
exercise in which political subjectivity, Badiou remarks, ‘is referred back to order, rather than to the possibility about that which is latent in a situation’ (2006, 132). To render a sequence illegible is to obscure its political space: the event-site(s) on which it operates and from where sequences can be charted and lessons drawn. This paper argues that the Thermidor is thus a geographical exercise: it represents an obstruction, a containment of space and/or the conjoining of particular spaces to an established order.

What follows is an investigation of Korean politics that utilises Badiou’s concept of the Thermidor to shed light on how conservative forces have targeted the political spaces of the democracy movement. Such an analysis, I feel, provides a welcome complement to existing accounts of Korean conservatism such as Choi’s (2005) Democracy after democratization by showing how the processes of conservative politics extend beyond the resilience of conservative institutions in the state and corporate sector to include larger struggles over the meaning of democratisation. I will start first by clarifying the concept of political space that I shall use in this essay as this will allow me to examine how it is not simply institutional spaces that are being targeted by conservative politics but, rather, a wider, multidimensional set of ‘spaces of encounter’ associated with Korean social movements: from geographic representations of a reunified peninsula to particular historical places of protest that have been vital for these movements. I will then move on to an empirical discussion of the politics of conservative reaction in South Korea under the government of Lee Myung Bak. I interpret how this reaction can be largely related to the politics of Cold War industrialisation as experienced on the Korean peninsula, a politics that continues to shape the present. The final section explores how some of the terminology affiliated with Badiou’s wider philosophy of politics – particularly his understanding of events, fidelity and truth procedures – can further help illustrate the politics of reaction and the spaces it targets. Throughout the essay I draw on the work of Korean and other East Asian intellectuals both to illustrate the present conjuncture and to show how cognate notions of political space, as a site of encounter irreducible to mere institutional topography, have influenced the practices of intellectuals associated with East Asian democracy movements.

On political space

It was Henri Lefebvre who first argued that space is political in the sense that has inspired critical traditions within human geography. In his essay, Reflections on the politics of space, Lefebvre argued that space is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics; it has always been political and strategic. If space has an air of neutrality and indifference with regard to its contents and thus seems to be ‘purely’ formal, the epiphenomenal of rational abstraction, it is precisely because it has already been occupied and used, and has already been the focus of past processes whose traces are not always evident in the landscape. Space has been shaped and moulded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process, political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies. (1975, 31)

This sense of space as a sedimentation of the political and strategic seems fundamental for political geography. However, the term political space, while often used by geographers, is but rarely defined. In practice it is generally used as a shorthand for the juridical and institutional spaces of state and civil society (cf. Agnew 1995; Walker 1991), while at other times it denotes particular spaces that have become targets of political action and/or politicised by various events such as protests, war and other phenomena (cf. Dalby 2005; Häkli 1998; Magnusson and Shaw 2003; Pile and Keith 1997).

I prefer to think of the term political space as containing something of a tension between these two usages: that is, a sense of the political as a process shaped by events and sequences that exceed, or are not limited to, the formal institutions of the state. This understanding resonates with how Wang Hui (Wang 2009; cf. Zhang 2010, 79) uses the term ‘the political’. Wang argues that the state does not have an absolute capacity to encapsulate the political within its operations (2011, 35–6). ‘The formula state = political’, Wang argues, ‘describes not the normal situation but rather the result of a process of depoliticization within the political domain’ (2011, 36). In Wang’s terminology the political acts as both a noun denoting a sphere of power and interest, and an adjective denoting active subjectivity and human agency (the state being a site where active subjects attempt to become ’structural-functional’). For Wang, it is through a tension between power and interest and active subjectivity and agency that space becomes political, or, conversely, depoliticised, removed of popular agency.

A similar sentiment is echoed in recent interventions by contemporary critical geographers. For example, Dikec has argued that the political cannot be restricted to institutionalised practices even if such practices may formally constitute the sphere of ‘politics’ (2005, 184). Political space is not a topographic inscription of the distribution of power and interest, but rather a point of ‘openness and undecidability’ that ‘implies the calling into question of the very structuring principles of the established order’ (2005, 184). The political is thus ‘shaped by episodic
encounters and does not have a “proper place” (2005, 186); rather, Dikec argues, ‘space becomes political as a site of the disruption of the “natural” order of domination as the place where a wrong can be addressed and equality be demonstrated’ (2005, 183). Swyngedouw argues that a true political space is always a space of contestation for those who have no name or no place (2008, 31). Political space, in this sense, is a site of an encounter that is both ‘specific, concrete, particular’ but also ‘stands as the metaphorical condensation of the universal’ (2008, 25) in as much as it targets a ‘condition in which the axiomatic principle of equality is perverted through the institution of an order’ (2008, 19).

Finally, this understanding of political space resonates with the concerns of a number of Korean and East Asian scholars (cf. Chen 2003; Kim 2006; Wang 2009) who have called for a more flexible understanding of political society in East Asia. Kuan-Hsing Chen (2003), for example, argues that the normative distinction between state and civil society is too simplistic because it ignores the experience of an East Asian modernity in which civil society has been subordinated to the state and social struggles kept mostly excluded from both spheres. Chen speaks of an additional sphere of the min-jian (the Korean pronunciation is minjung) or people’s sphere as a space of political society. This is a space of subaltern struggles that is relatively autonomous from dominant institutions of state and civil society. While the latter may appropriate these struggles as part of a hegemonic project, political society, in Chen’s usage of the term, cannot be reduced to a stable location within state and civil society. However, as a site of engagement, it can have effects that modify established relations of power and interest. Politics, then, always exceeds the established order; it is not primarily located inside the state, even though it may target locations within it.

This is a particularly important insight in cases like South Korea, where key reformers and social movements have emerged from popular people’s or minjung movements. The three core demands of the minjung movement – for equality, democracy and reunification – were called the ‘Three Mins’ (samminjooui) as each contained the Chinese prefix Min, for people: minjung, meaning the people; minjok, meaning folk or nation; and minju, democracy. While these movements have helped transform the institutional design of state and civil society, their demands are not solely confined to the formal political sphere (cf. Kim 2006; Lee 2007 2007b). Kim (2006) argues that it is important to historicise the usage of terms such as civil society, lest one assume that the Korean usage of the term denotes a passive sphere of interest group mediation. Kim shows how the concept of civil society (simin sahoe) largely emerged in the reconfigured political field created by the democratic uprising. Social movements began to embrace the idea of civil society and participatory democracy as an alternative to populist protest. This began shortly after 1987 with the formation of the Korean Council of Citizens’ Movements, which included groups such as the Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice, Korean Federation for Environmental Movement, Lawyers for a Democratic Society, and the Korean Women’s Associations United. They were later joined by more broad-based organisations such as People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (Korea’s largest NGO), and People’s Solidarity for Social Progress, which are more explicitly concerned with expanding popular, democratic participation within Korean society, and providing a forum for both popular and diffuse social struggles: from popular campaigns for economic justice to individual casework against employers and urban development projects. Korean civil society groups have been quite successful in their mobilisations and many of their former members went on to become advisors in the reform-oriented governments of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun (1998–2008). These were the first governments to be formed from the wider reform bloc of movements, politicians and NGOs that emerged from the democracy movement. Nonetheless, civil society here is not simply a supplement to the state, but has remained a space of conflictual and transformative politics: one that is still largely centred on the demands of the Democracy Movement for procedural democracy, socio-economic equality and peaceful engagement and reunification with the North, not to mention the demands of new social movements.

The Korean Thermidor

It is the spaces of encounter, the political spaces, created by this political bloc of social movements, intellectuals and politicians that the conservative bloc has targeted for dismantling and obstruction. This reaction has been perhaps the most evident in the actions that the conservative government has taken, since the inauguration of Lee Myung Bak in March 2008, to target the reforms of the proceeding governments that emerged from the democracy movement. While I have argued above that political space cannot be confined to the state, this is not to say that particular locations of state policy are not political spaces; they are, but only in so much as they are identified as part of a sequence of encounter, a trajectory of demands and mobilisation, that, as such, cannot be confined to the state but have emerged from sequences of politics that exceed the state, i.e. that begin elsewhere. This is especially the case, I would argue, with many, but not all of the reforms initiated by the Korean ‘reform
bloc.’ They emerged from a larger sequence of political emancipation and constitute important sites of encounter for the democracy movement in opposition to the politics of the old regime.

For example, most of Kim Dae Jung’s Sunshine Policy of peaceful engagement between North and South Korea has been discontinued and the Ministry of Unification restructured. The Ministry of Gender Equality, established and expanded under the reform period, has lost most of its budget and mandate; the National Human Rights Commission has been restructured and its powers subordinated by pro-government appointees, diminishing its independence and leading to an exodus of all its original commissioners (Hankyoreh 2010a); likewise, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has had its powers curtailed and has faced significant reorganisation and budget cuts. Parachute appointments and political dismissals have even taken place across arts, culture and media organisations (Hankyoreh 2009c 2009d). The National Intelligence Service and the National Security Law has increasingly been used to investigate social movements for reunification and social equality (Hankyoreh 2010b).

Beyond the state apparatus, the majority of state funding for NGOs has dried up and funding has been denied to any NGO supporting ‘illegal’ public demonstrations. Using this criteria, the police have included 1842 social and civic organisations in the latter category, from women’s help lines to economic policy NGOs, for participating in the massive candlelight demonstrations against Lee Myung Bak’s conservative policies during the summer of 2008 as part of a broad coalition of NGOs (cf. NGO Report 2010). Meanwhile some of this funding has been diverted to conservative civil society groups belonging to rightist movements (such as anti-communist veterans’ organisations) that have in the past violently attacked the left-liberal opposition (cf. Hankyoreh 2009a 2009b). The Asian Human Rights Commission has reported that ‘according to statistics from 2009, only one percent of subsidies to civil society organisations was allocated to politically progressive groups in Seoul’ (Asian Human Rights Commission 2010).

Conservative politicians and new right intellectuals associated with the conservative bloc articulate this reaction as a project to cleanse the state of the ‘leftist’ legacy of previous reform governments. As former Minister of Unification Jeong-Seok Lee has remarked, ‘in a South Korean society that adopted anti-Communism as national policy, to call someone a leftist meant to affix a scarlet letter accompanied by the image of someone to be ostracised or purged’, to be turned into an ‘eternal minority’ (Lee 2011). For the conservative bloc, the sequence of reform politics since the 1980s, and especially the governments of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun, are considered a period of leftist aberration, even though these governments can hardly be considered to be ‘leftist’ at the ideological or policy level. Although they were constituted out of the elements of the former oppositional bloc during the dictatorship period and represented an attempt to institutionalise the popular democratic demands of the 1980s, the reform governments were dominated by liberal politicians supported by strong regional voting blocs. Nonetheless, these regimes allowed for greater participation by NGOs and democracy movement activists who desired to reform aspects of Korean state and society, and work towards eventual reunification through inter-Korean engagement. Conservative forces associated with the Grand National Party see this kind of participation as a threat to their political control of the state administration and the economic sector. They seek to delegitimise the drive for democratic reform by tarring this bloc with a chimera of left nationalism that labels even mild policy innovations as the product of a Korean left that seeks its guidance from North Korea. Large segments of this conservative bloc cannot acknowledge the legitimacy of the democracy movement’s demands and so instead they seek to obscure or negate their significance, and with it the fact that present-day Korean society owes much to the democracy movement. This has the effect of obscuring the political demands of the democracy movement by framing politics in the anti-communist language of the Cold War, a language that in Korea makes even many liberal demands out to be a radical threat.

This reactive campaign has its source both within the conservatives of the old regime and also the New Right Movement, who are a curious assemblage of rightists and former left-nationalists who have become statist politicians and economic libertarians. The New Right’s political campaign is largely targeted toward demands for national independence and reunification, which they regard as an excessive demand of a ‘pro-North Left’. I should be clear that left-nationalism has been a key current in reform movements, but not the only current, and not all nationalists, and perhaps to this day only an extreme minority, are pro-North (cf. Bae 2009). If a positive imagination of the North inflected currents of left thought in the 1980s and early 1990s, it was akin to what Bosteels (2005) calls a ‘vanishing mediator’, i.e. an ideology that activists passed through on their way to other positions. While left-nationalist movements continued after the 1987 protests, even gaining some momentum among student activists in the early 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tiananmen Square protests and the experience of student activists who did manage to visit North Korea ensured a more general transition away from positive evaluation of the North. Very few
activists would consider themselves to be adherents of a ‘pro-North’ line after the mid 1990s, though many remain critical of US foreign policy and the continued division of the Korean peninsula. And yet the New Right has portrayed even the politically moderate engagement policies of the reform governments as a product of pro-North ideology. Their insistence of the peaceful-coexistence to which they refer is not with the North Korean people but with Kim Jong Il’ (Kim Il Young quoted in Kim 2007). Ironically, the right levelled this charge the most vociferously against the government of Roh Moo Hyun, even though it joined the US war in Iraq and Afghanistan, facilitated US base relocation and negotiated a free trade agreement with the United States.

Since the election of Lee Myung Bak, the government has also used this chimera to order history textbooks to be rewritten to clear up other ‘inaccuracies’ about the past that conceptualise modern Korean history as a struggle for national independence. Here even the geographic representation of the space of the nation-state becomes a site of encounter. Members of the New Right Textbook Forum have written alternative textbooks with more positive appraisals of Japanese colonialism and US intervention on the Korean peninsula. They argue that it is wrong to criticise Japan and the United States because, in their opinion, without the colonial and post-colonial interventions of these countries Korea would have never developed a modern economy on its own. Echoing domestic theories of historical stagnation that were developed initially by Korean Marxist historiographers (a number of whom became leading figures of the new right), these thinkers depict 19th-century Korea as a country ‘doomed . . . to perpetual backwardness or the tutelage of a more advanced nation’ (Miller 2010, 5). In other words they imbue their analysis of Korean colonial modernity with strong moral overtones that seek to legitimise the colonial experience rather than simply account for its influence on the genealogy of modern power relations.

This reframing of political history also involves reimagining the territorial geography of the Korean peninsula as a set of binational territorial regimes, a representation that marginalises the views of national independence activists from the March 1st Movement of 1919 to the present, who have advocated a unitary Korean nation-state. In 2008, the conservative government rebranded the August 15th Liberation day holiday as Foundation Day of the Republic of Korea. Reform politicians boycotted these events, citing that Korea’s constitution states that the Republic of Korea does not begin in 1945 but succeeds the peninsula-wide Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea, which was formed following the March 1st Independence Movement of 1919 (Hankyoreh 2008).

It is not just left-nationalism and demands for national independence and reunification that attract the ire of conservative reaction. The conservative bloc also paints the neoliberal policies of the reform governments of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun as policies of ‘leftist’ regimes, ‘imprisoned by old ideology and populism to incite the masses’ (New Right Liberty Union 2004). This is very problematic, however, as the reform governments of Kim Dae Jung (1997–2002) and Roh Moo Hyun (2003–2008), while endorsing a politics of participation by NGOs, and including many former democracy and labour movement activists in their ranks, have been regarded as predominantly hybrid liberal–conservative regimes by domestic political theorists (Choi 2005). As Choi (2005) describes, conservative regional forces and liberal politicians dominated progressive voices in these regimes. While reform regimes did introduce mechanisms for greater accountability and transparency into the state apparatus and facilitated a moderate expansion of social welfare and civic participation, these reforms were accompanied by trenchant neoliberal financial and labour restructuring after the 1997/8 Asian Financial Crisis and in the years since then (cf. Gray 2008). This negation of even Kim and Roh’s neoliberal policies as ‘leftism’ thus obscures a coherent analysis of the Korean political spectrum and of the contradictions of the democratisation process.

The role of renegacy

Badiou regards the Thermidorean as a subjectivity constituted on the termination of a political sequence; however, it seems that there are a range of subjects that can be regarded as Thermidorean and thus there is some ambiguity in the application of the term. In the Korean context, the term could be used both for those politicians of the reform bloc whose policies subordinated the egalitarian demands of the democratic movement, as well as those conservative political forces that try to consciously and wilfully obstruct reform forces and the sequence of politics that they have emerged from so that it is illegible and obscure for actors in the present moment. Many of the economic policies of the reform governments had the effect of closing off politics to elite interests (Badiou’s statification). These governments pursued neoliberal trade, labour and financial policies, and clamped down on large, anti-globalisation and labour protests; however, they did not directly attack the legacy of the democracy movement with the same force as conservative forces. If anything, reform politicians represented their policies as a continuation of democratic activism, albeit one in which pragmatic decisions had to be made. They acknowledge that the trace of the past democratic events shapes the present, unlike the
new right who tend to regard the whole sequence of progressive and liberal reforms alike as leftist excess. The difference here is between what Badiou (2009) calls a ‘reactive’ and an ‘obscure’ subject; subjects that either refuse to incorporate themselves into the present or attempt to obscure that present so that its content is unintelligible (cf. Badiou 2009, 54–62). Both can be Thermidoreans, but while one attempts to negate a democratic subjectivity, the other obscures it (cf. Power and Toscano 2009).

In the current conjuncture, it is the reactive subjects of Korean conservatism that seem to provide the largest challenge for democratic social movements. However, in many ways, their current strength can be related to the internal problems of the reform bloc and their difficulty in maintaining political unity and institutionalising the demands of the democracy movement during their decade in government. As I have dealt with the internal politics of the reform bloc elsewhere (Doucette 2010a), I think here it is worth focusing more closely on the current conjuncture of conservative politics. Furthermore, there is a distinct difference in the degree of intentionality that separates conservative forces from dominant liberal actors of the reform bloc. Although reform politicians may have had bad fidelity to the popular aspirations of the democracy movement for comprehensive change, they lacked the intensity of the wilful obstruction and revision that one sees in the conservative bloc, and especially among the former left activists that became the New Right, who are the more appropriate bearers of a Thermidorian subjectivity.

In France, Badiou notes, the actual Thermidoreans of 1794 were not foreign aristocrats, or even Girondins, but were largely part of the Robespierrist majority in the Convention (Badiou 2006, 135); i.e. they were former revolutionaries. So too, the Korean Thermidor involves many former democracy movement activists, often of the left-nationalist, National Liberation faction of the 1980s movement, such as Kim Young Hwan, but also from various other factions, such as former People’s Democracy activist Shin Ji Ho. These were rival, socialist factions of the democracy movement. The National Liberation Faction believed that the division of the peninsula by foreign powers was the main issue thwarting democratic development on the peninsula and thus pursued unification as its primary political goal. On the other hand, People’s Democracy put their emphasis on the domestic configuration of capitalism and the establishment of domestic democracy as the priority to be addressed first, before considering re-unification. Over the last 20 years, the initial Marxist-Leninist background of these positions has largely declined, but a tension remains within the reform bloc between factions organised around nationalism (kukminpa), especially the critique of foreign policy, and egalitarian economic reform (pyeonganpa), especially labour relations and social welfare. The conservative bloc is certainly not solely composed of former radical activists; in fact, they are but a small minority alongside politicians from the older regimes, the southeast provinces, and other conservative pro-business interests. Nonetheless, the former leftist renegades that form the New Right have had a strong influence on the rhetoric of the conservative bloc, providing them with a vocabulary of reaction to target the reform bloc by radically obscuring its sequence and targeting its institutional innovations. This makes them ideal Thermidoreans. The combination of wilful obstruction and direct reaction against the reform bloc and the politics of democratisation set them apart from the less intentional forces of closure among reform politicians.

What is the source of this renegacy? One might say that Thermidorean politics shares a lot of the sense of factional division that accompanied earlier factional disputes of the 1980s movement (especially those between the National Liberation and People’s Democracy factions of the student movement; cf. Park 2008; Lee 2007a) and perhaps that is why many of the former ideologues of these debates are now part of the reaction – but it shares nothing of the sense of possibility of the earlier events, and if anything seems to be based around a politics of recantation. In his discussion of the politics of Thermidorean reaction following the May ‘68 events in France, Badiou discusses how former militant activists that became the ‘new philosophers’ grounded their politics through a similar staging of recantation. These reversals revolved around the idea that, at a certain point, absolute commitment to socialist politics becomes indistinguishable from absolute slavery, and the figure of emancipation indistinguishable from that of barbarism. . . . All this gave rise to a kind of standard discourse of repentance: ‘I learned how absolute radicalism can have terrifying consequences. As a result, I know that above all else we must ensure the preservation of humanist democracy as a barrier against revolutionary enthusiasm’. (2008b, 127)

While for some intellectuals this was an honest fear because of the problematic nature of their previous commitments (including naïve support for Stalinism, Juche ideology, etc.), ‘others instrumentalised this fear of totalitarianism and rode the wave it created’ (2008b, 128), taking it far beyond an embrace of humanist democracy towards a metaphysical loyalty to statist politicians and a defence of geopolitical adventures such as the US wars in the Middle East as embodiments of an abstract spirit of history or of western ideals (cf. Badiou 2008b; Lecourt 2001; Ross
Afterlives of Cold War Industrialisation?

While Badiou emphasises the role of decision and will as an integral aspect of political subjectivity, he does not reduce a political sequence to the matter of will alone, but examines the question of political will in relation to the social situation that it emerged from (cf. Hallward 2003 2009). It seems necessary, then, to examine both Korean conservatism and democratic reform in relation to the Korean social formation during the Cold War. This is a line of inquiry that many critical Korean intellectuals have undertaken in order to better understand conservative politics in the present. They have consistently argued that the experience of colonialism and the Cold War has left an imprint on Korean social formation and has residual effects such as the dominance of the chaebol in the economy and the survival of Cold War ideology and social regimentation in the post-Cold War age (Cho 2000 2008 2010b). For example, Han (2006), Im Ji-hyon and Mun Bu-sik (as discussed in Hong 2006) have all argued that the Vietnam War and Korea’s civil militarism (the Korean war and the Kwangju Massacre) have played a role in the domestic internalisation of militarist ideology and social control. These events are depicted as the darker sides of US–Korea relations. Seung Sok Moon (2005) has taken this line of inquiry further to look at how militarisation in the Park Chung Hee period (1961–1979) unevenly shaped gender relations with men mobilised to be productive, family providers through military socialisation and women ‘mobilized to be domestic’. A socialisation was ‘intended to depoliticize young single women working under extremely exploitative conditions’ (Moon 2005, 75).

While the democracy movement reacted against militarism and social regimentation by fighting for strong labour and civil rights, nostalgic representations of the dictatorship period have come to play a role in the conservative approach to democratic politics. Korean scholars noted the early symptoms of the current politics of reaction through the phenomenon of Park Chung Hee nostalgia. This phenomenon has largely been associated with the 1997/8 Asian financial crisis and is expressed as a desire to remember the economic policies of rapid growth and high employment of the developmental period by forgetting the repressive politics. The right has used this phenomenon to resurrect a more positive notion of the Park Chung Hee dictatorship as one in which citizens were loyal and patriotic. As Hong (2006) notes, the extent to which Park Chung Hee’s virtues have been overstated by these efforts has been matched, and ‘even exceeded, by the degree to which the Korean democracy movement, which Park confronted throughout his time in office [has been] understated’ (Hong 2006, 319; cf. Cho 2010a). Hong argues, however, that this politics has not been completely successful because of the wide public knowledge of and literature on the corruption and violence of the Park Chung Hee regime. But in times of economic crisis, this nostalgia seems to aid conservative interpretations of the Park Chung Hee period.

The legacy of Cold War anti-communism in South Korea and its afterlives should not be seen as simply a set of geopolitical representations of a peninsula divided by two hostile states and world powers, but also as a set of internal representations targeting a variety of social spaces as sites of anti-communist intervention: from the factory to the home, spaces of state and civil society, and urban spaces associated with democratic events. The collective mobilisation that contested state-led industrialisation and civil militarism during the 1970s and 1980s produced these social spaces as political spaces, in as much as hierarchical and militaristic power relations in them were confronted with dynamics of human agency and subjectivity seeking to open them up and make them more egalitarian and less oppressive. For example, the civil uprising in Kwangju in 1980 had the effect of de-legitimising the division of the peninsula and American support for the regime, even though the movement was crushed. Similarly, the expansion of spaces of mass protest in the capital in the spring of
1987 led the transition to electoral democracy, and a radically new transformation of state and civil society through the expansion of political competition and explosion of NGOs and independent trade unions after 1987. These sites of protest remain powerful places for contemporary politics, and the obstruction of popular protest in symbolic places like Myeong-dong Cathedral, City Hall square or the gates of Yonsei University are often read as attempts to prevent contemporary social movements from articulating the continuity of their demands with the larger sequence of democratisation. Unfortunately, even the reform governments would periodically ban mass protests in these spaces around issues such as the Korea–US Free Trade Agreement. Likewise, the current conservative regime has also outlawed protests in these spaces, claiming that they have become spaces controlled by ‘forces with anti-government and anti-society leanings’, a terminology that conservatives such as Korean National Police Agency Commissioner Cho Hyun-Oh extend to the progressive activists that took part in the democratisation struggles. Cho has stated his aim to diminish the power of this bloc to mobilise public space, claiming that ‘we can only create a stable society when we gradually reduce this contingent’ (Hankyoreh 2011).

Faithful subjects

Politics, in Badiou’s sense, is not simply a practice but a truth procedure for understanding the implications of various events (cf. Badiou 2006 2007 2009). The truth of an event is always necessarily incomplete and varied since it is formed as much by what happens in a particular site as much as how a sequence between past events and the present is formed. This requires that political analysis remains open to both symbolic and material spaces that particular political sequences produce and pass through. Pre-emptory closure, or illegibility, is produced if the spatial and temporal dimensions of a sequence are wilfully obscured. Thus, in the case of the conservative reaction, the point of making the sequence of democratic reform illegible is not simply political opportunism in regards to specific policies but to obscure the wider potential of the diverse struggles over social space inherent in democratic events like the Korean democracy movement. It is the sense of rupture provided by this event (construed as a sense of contesting the problems of existing social structures), and the relations of fidelity among the generation of activists that experienced it, that is being made illegible, or forgotten.

For Badiou, fidelity is interpreted as a sense of faithfulness to great events that are constitutive of political subjectivity (cf. Badiou 2009, 50–4). This can be regarded as an ethical relation to political experience and to historical memory. While Badiou’s personal fidelity may be to understanding the ‘postevental’ consequences of the event of May 1968, for the Korean left it is the events of 1987 (itself a subset of the longer democracy struggles of the 1980s) that constitutes their current practice. In these events, the borders of social space, of exportist industrialisation, Cold War anti-communism and militarised masculinity were temporarily emancipated, and much of the sequence after 1987 has been based around an attempt to expand both the participation and emancipation associated with these events. This feeling of rupture is perhaps best captured by Kristen Ross (2002), who has dealt at length with the effects of events such as mass uprisings on social space (cf. Ross 1988). She describes how events such as uprisings and general strikes allow, ‘if only for an instant, the exploration of other possible lives, a vast unexplored area of possibility’ (2002, 141). This was a feeling of ‘democracy to come’ (Derrida 1993), one that goes beyond the space of democracy as is, and points to an open space that might never be filled but that is a constitutive part of political imagination nonetheless.

This feeling of potential is common to egalitarian politics in as much as the demand of equality is used to oppose situations that ‘perpetuate a form of inequality which otherwise might not exist’ (Bull 2011, 12–3).

In her understanding of democratic events, Ross also touches on the impossibility of tolerating the present moment, the return of status quo politics, after experiencing revolutionary ferment.

When life has been lived differently, and when it seems as though it just might continue to be lived differently, when all this is fading and existence threatens to lapse once again into the dreary routine . . . how can this possibly be tolerated? (2002, 141)

When a sequence, a moment, is obscured or ‘taken back’ by the forces of order, it is lost, perhaps irretrievably; a loss that is spatial as much as it is social. For Ross,

what is lost is not simply the physical space of the occupation but also the act of the momentary taking (prise) of power, the taking of speech, the taking of conscience. (2002, 141)

I would add that it is not simply physical spaces where this closure takes place, but also collective memories. The faithful subject, then, is opposed to the politics of closure and attempts to keep open the memory of an event. In her discussion of the afterlives of May ‘68, Ross (2002) shows how French activists developed new practices of politics that demonstrated their fidelity to the event, keeping its memory and thus potentiality alive in the present moment. She discusses how militant practice in
France after 1968 remained guided by a principle of learning and investigation (enquête) learned from social mobilisation and applied by cohorts of community and left-wing activists to a variety of social issues in France, from the creation of community spaces to struggles for the inclusion of migrant workers.

As in France, similar practices of enquête have continued among Korean social movements that participated in the 1980s uprising, particularly the labour and student movements, but also among new social movements. These movements originated from a sense of refusal of mythic representations of Korean political space as a site of loyal, harmonious, consensual relations. For these movements, the memory of the 1980s and many of its spatial practices (sites of protests and tactical repertoires) continue to inform their practice (cf. Lee et al. 2010). These include habits of dress and speech, as well as places of protest and cultural repertoires of popular tactics such as traditional farmer drumming and mass-based actions adapted to current issues. The aim of these tactics is to continue to create in the course of the struggle ‘practices that act to constitute a common – though far from consensual – space and time’ (Ross 2002, 74).

In The common city (Kongdong Doshi), Korean political theorist and social activist Joe Jeong Hwan (2010a) argues that events like the 1987 uprisings and the 2008 candlelight vigils against the conservative government are examples of ‘constituent power’ (Che-hon Kwollyok), and that in many ways the failure of progressive forces from the minjung or democracy movement to maintain and institute this power led to the rise of conservative reaction (cf. Joe 2010b). At stake here is both the fragile democratisation of Korean politics, but also the lessons that can be drawn from the experience of the event: the experience of common rupture, of the ‘people’ or the minjung coming into existence in the actuality of their refusal of the status quo. For thinkers like Joe Jeong Hwan, the reason why the demands of the democracy movement for egalitarian democracy (and not simply national unification) are dangerous to the status quo is that past democratic events and uprisings show aspects of a common potentiality coming into being. This may be one reason why both conservative and liberal governments alike discursively replace ‘minjung’ with ‘somin’ (ordinary folk, or common people) as a marker for ‘the people’, as the latter is a subject with less will and political agency, in other words, a relatively depoliticised subject.

While this discursive shift is significant, a political sequence cannot be obscured by forces external to it alone (even renegade ones). Critics such as Joe Jeong Hwan and others are correct to point to the problem of political coordination within the reform bloc as a source of the current backlash. While I do not have the space here to provide a detailed chronology of government policy during the decade of rule by reform governments from 1998 to 2008 (but see Doucette 2010a 2010b), it is important to point out that even at the moments when the political hegemony of reform forces were strongest, such as after the National Assembly elections in 2004, reform forces suffered from an inability to implement further progressive change due to the neoliberal economic policies chosen by the reform governments. These policies deferred substantive participation by social movements in the name of economic inevitability of market forces, bartered on the premise that this is what was necessary in order for the reform bloc to continue its policies of peaceful engagement with the North. This deferral created an empty sense of time and space in which many social struggles for social equality were required to wait outside of the more strategic policy domains and let the economy run its course. Furthermore, the embrace of neoliberalism undermined the broader democratic goals and social solidarities that were co-articulated with reunification under past democratic struggles. In other words, the core demands that constituted the minjung movement began to be disarticulated by the governments that emerged from it. Choi Jang Jip remarks that although the Roh administration’s own explanation [was] that the resistance of the conservative opposition [was] too strong. The more important reason for its failure can be found within, in its lack of internal capacity to implement changes. (Choi 2005, 300; cf. Cho and Park 2008)

As such, it demonstrated poor fidelity to the wide democratic demands and practices of its political bloc.

The current conservative reaction, then, rather than being merely external to the sequence of reform politics under Kim and Roh, can be read as an intensification of the demobilisation of the Roh and Kim years. The problems of the reform governments show us that the duration of an emancipatory political sequence is not simply limited by external reaction, but also largely depends upon relations of fidelity among its internal actors and the way in which its many political spaces interact. Fidelity here should be seen not simply as the political unity of a power bloc. Rather it is a relation that extends beyond temporal coalitions and alliances and points to the constitutive political spaces and events that inform the composition of a sequence of politics, its feeling of rupture with the past and the composition of its prescriptive demands. Politics here is not merely a process of symbolic representation but is also an ethical relation (one of reaction, obstruction or fidelity) to the multiple and multi-dimensional spaces of encounter estab-
lished by past sequences of democratic activism. In other words, it is the collective experience and common potentiality of the minjung or democracy movement, its goals of democratic equality, reunification and peaceful co-existence and the material and symbolic spaces where these have been mobilised, that are at stake in the representation of its political sequence by both its former adherents and its conservative opposition.

Since the return of conservative government, there has been a more concerted effort by liberal and progressive forces to re-articulate their fidelity to the project of democratisation. In this case, their return to an oppositional position might perhaps provide some of the resources necessary to eventually contain the rollbacks of the conservative reaction. Since 2008, these forces have begun again to mobilise the key sites of the democracy movement to criticise conservative reaction, with large public protests reminiscent of June 1987 occurring in both 2008 and 2009. This has been accompanied by an internal dialogue among the bloc about the failure of the reform government to combat inequality and to address the demands of the social movements that supported it. While it is too early to tell how these initiatives will play out should the political parties of the reform bloc be re-elected, the recent appointment of veteran feminist and democracy activist Han Myeong Sook to Chair of the United Democratic Party and election of People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy co-founder Park Won-Soon as Mayor of Seoul are two early signs that this political reconfiguration is having some effect. However, the degree to which these politicians will continue to demonstrate fidelity to the larger sequence of democratic activism and the egalitarian demands of its constituent movements active in a variety of political spaces remains an open question for further analysis.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have used Alain Badiou's concept of Thermidorean politics to show how conservative reaction has targeted the larger political sequence of democratic reform in Korea and its many spaces of encounter. These material and symbolic spaces have ranged from particular urban places associated with democratic mobilisation to territorial representations of the peninsula as independent nation-state versus bi-national regime, and the many institutional spaces of state and civil society: spaces that have been integrated through a political sequence of democratisation that has been shaped by constitutive events (the 1980s democracy movement) that contested the legacy of military dictatorship and Cold War industrialisation. I have argued that the conservative reaction has been largely oriented toward diminishing the power of the reform bloc of politicians and social movements by targeting the political spaces of the Korean democracy movement through both institutional changes and through political discourses based around obscuring the overall sequence of democratic struggles as the product of a chimerical totalitarian ‘leftism’. This pro-North chimera serves to obscure the political relations within the recent sequence of democratic politics since the 1987 democratic uprising, including the steps taken by both reform-oriented and conservative alike to re-segment social space after these events and to slow the sequence of egalitarian reforms through the embrace of neoliberal economic policy. By portraying this sequence as largely irrational, the conservative reaction makes it difficult to identify the periods where the reform bloc did not meet progressive demands, and where alternative arrangements were possible. It obscures political difference and makes the democratic demands and institutional innovations of the reform period out to be a form of left-nationalist excess.

I would like to conclude by arguing that Badiou's concept of the Thermidor and its conceptual vocabulary of events and political sequences, as well as reactive, obscure and faithful subjects, can provide geographers and other scholars with a means to study the legacy and multi-dimensional spatiality of democratic movements and their constitutive events. From Korea's June Uprising through to the protests in Tiananmen Square and, more recently, in Tahrir Square and Liberty Square, Badiou's vocabulary has the potential to allow a greater focus on how general demands for equality and democracy emerge from highly particular places, and also show the ways in which these spaces are mobilised and connected to other spaces through sequences of democratic activism. Furthermore, such an analysis can also show the ways in which these spaces and sequences are understood in the present can either facilitate or obstruct the ability for lessons to be drawn from them. As I have tried to show in this article, the Korean Thermidor is a fundamentally reactive approach to political space that tries, in the words of Badiou, ‘to make it impossible to find in the period in question the very principles capable of remedying its impasses’ (2010, np). Therefore, let us also pose, with regard to previous and on-going sequences of the politics of emancipation, that their sequences and spaces of encounter remain legible, so that lessons can be drawn from them and new spaces of encounter, political spaces, be forged in the present.

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Notes

1 To date, much of the engagement between Badiou and geography has focused on the internal logic and topography of Badiou’s thought (cf. Constantinou 2009; Madarasz 2009; MacCannell 2009). This essay is concerned more with his writings on politics than the mathematical ontology. I concur with Shaw, who notes that although Badiou’s use of set theory is criticised for being an arbitrary and prima facie limitation . . . his ontological and phenomenological axioms are anything but inflexible, and actually provide a language for radical change in the world. (2010a, 132)

2 Chen is developing this term out of a historical tension common to East Asia between officialdom and a people’s sphere (the space of the minjian or, in Korean, the minjung). Minjian and minjung share the same prefix Min ((Block:1779) a term that connotes the opposite to officialdom, or Kwan (Block:1779):

3 Specifically, Cho has levelled criticisms at prominent progressives, contending that the ones who took part in the democratization struggle in the late 1980s are professional activists who have infiltrated the labor community to make the politics about ideology. At the same time, he was reported as saying that the ‘numbers of those sympathizing with anti-government and anti-society leanings dropped from as high as 130 thousand to 80 thousand at the 2008 candlelight vigil demonstrations’ and that ‘we can only create a stable society when we gradually reduce this contingent’. (Hankyoreh 2011, np)

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