Within the literature on neo-liberal globalisation a lot has been made of the Korean labour movement which, in the post-war period, has been seen as a late-comer on the international scene. Scholars interested in questions of resistance to globalisation have tended to locate the agency of the Korean labour movement in two different ways: the first is to read labour’s agency from the complexity of product cycles and their strategic vulnerability to worker disruption. The second is to chart the political history of the labour movement in order to show how the tools of struggles have been forged by trial and error over a long period of history and thus argue that labour struggles are deeply embedded in historical experience.

The first position is the one taken by scholars such as Beverly Silver, whose *Forces of Labour: Worker’s Movements and Globalization Since 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) charts the geography of worker unrest in the automobile product cycle, showing that even though capital moves in search of a “spatial fix” of new workers, certain industries tend to be affected by what she calls “Marx-type” industrial labour unrest wherever they may migrate. This is because, in many ways, the complex production networks of automobile manufacture are sensitive to disruption because of sunk costs and the agglomeration of workers that such industries require. Silver also shows how capitalists attempt to counter worker unrest by increasing automation and advancing into newer spatial frontiers and product lines (what Silver calls, respectively the technological, spatial and product fixes). While useful for understanding how particular production cycles provide effective organisational strategies for labour movements, Silver’s study largely confines labour’s agency to the restructuring of capital and thus we do not learn so much about the political contexts in which labour’s political agency is shaped. This is not to say that the political agency of labour is not addressed by Silver, but, rather, that the wider political projects and mobilisations by the labour movement beyond places of production are not dealt with at length.

The second position is taken by Kevin Gray in the book under review, *Korean Workers and Neoliberal Globalization*. This is a welcome addition to the literature on worker’s protest in that it is firmly grounded in the internal debates around strategy and tactics of the Korean labour movement. This is a step away from the instrumental response of capital and workers in selective industries to the more strategic political choices and factions within the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) attempting to shape labour movements aims and goals on multiple fronts. In a way, if Silver locates the dynamics of “Marx-type” industrial unrest that forces capital into innovation or relocation in the Ulsan, home of Hyundai Motors, then Gray locates what one might call the “Gramsci-type” political unrest in Yeungdungpo, home of the KCTU’s national office.

Gray situates his “political” investigation of the Korean Labour movement at the intersection of three different literatures: neo-Gramscian international political economy (IPE), the literature on neo-liberalisation and “low-intensity” democratisation and, finally, the debates on social unionism and international social movement unionism (ISMU) that animated much of the global labour movement during the 1990s.
In the first chapter, Gray develops his neo-Gramscian framework by discussing Robert Cox’s approach to the IPE in light of contemporary debates about globalisation, resistance and global civil society, finding that often within the global IPE as well as the ISMU literature resistance remains a rosy concept. Rejecting any *a priori* optimism about global resistance, Gray argues for a more nuanced and “historicised” reading of global IPE that can better account for the variations in neoliberalism, democracy and resistance between states in the global system (p. 25). To do so, he advocates a diachronic study of a national labour movement, of Korean workers, in order to show how resistance is not merely “uniform” or “automatic” in relations to changes brought about by globalisation but mediated by “experience” (p. 28).

After constructing his framework, Gray then reviews the literature on Korean development and brings the reader up to date with the main period under study: the events surrounding the crisis of 1997 (Chapter 2). This sets the stage for Gray’s discussion over the rise of “militant” unionism in South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s (Chapter 3) and the debates over social movement unionism (SMU) that animated the Korean labour movement during the 1990s (Chapter 4). Gray shows how the history of SMU in South Korea is a tricky one. On the one hand, the early strategies of the “militant” Korean labour and social movements became part of the generic model of SMU and ISMU developed by Peter Waterman and Kim Moody, who took note of the horizontal links between labour unions and social movements responding to lean production. However, Korean critics of “militant” unionism re-imported SMU as an internal critique within the Korean labour movement to criticise the very groups that had pursued “militant” mobilisation. This conservative faction attempted to use SMU to steer a course away from militant worker’s struggle and toward a more toned-down “social unionism” that stressed social co-operation with government and business. Gray argues that part of the confusion lay in the theoretical construction of ISMU to begin with, which drew on examples of labour struggle only to create a picture of global resistance without carefully understanding how historical experience informed each example. This is especially important in light of the Korean labour movement, where “militant unionism” emerged from the sort of struggles described by SMU theorists (p. 88) but was itself targeted by the domestic factions who used SMU to advocate for conservative strategies.

After establishing the awkward ground on which ISMU has been constructed, Gray goes on to show the contradiction involved in the KCTU’s pursuit of social unionism following the 1997 financial crisis (Chapter 5), arguing that the double transition to democracy and neo-liberalism was in some way aided by the leadership of the KCTU’s embrace of social partnership during the crisis. The Grand Tripartite Agreement which came out of this campaigning improved some areas of workers’ lives surrounding pensions and health insurance but at the same time weakened the structural position of the labour movement in the Korean political economy. In subsequent chapters, Gray explores the transformation of labour movement strategies alongside and after the 1997 crisis. Chapter 6 examines the development of the Korean Democratic Labour Party and the international strategies of the Korean labour movement against neo-liberalism. Meanwhile, Chapter 7 analyses the “social reform struggle” of the KCTU in terms of the politics of co-ordination between the labour movement and civil society. Gray shows how institutionalisation
and bureaucratisation has been a part of the process of the transformation of the Korean labour movement from militant action over working conditions and social issues to national-level negotiations that left some unionists wondering if it was right for their movement to “base wage strategy on participation in a committee” (p. 148).

The strength of Gray’s book is the access he provides to internal labour movement publications and documents that are not readily available to non-Korean speakers. This material is complemented by interviews with Korean labour movement activists that help situate these debates and their continued relevance for the Korean labour movement. Gray’s discussion of SMU and ISMU are also necessary historical interventions that will help labour scholars and activists better situate labour movement strategy in comparative terms in the years to come. By way of criticism, though Gray reviews much of the internal literature of the Korean labour movement, complementing this material with a deeper look into the politics of partnership with other NGOs, especially in the women’s movement as well as some of the economic justice NGOs, he might have helped to better illustrate the tensions involved in forging critical social movement alliances. It might also have shown how Korean NGOs have recursively tried to influence the Korean labour movement as part of their own campaigns. All and all, Gray’s book is an excellent investigation of the internal dynamics of the Korean labour movement as it finds itself fighting both low intensity democratisation and neo-liberal globalisation at the same moment. As such, it is both a worthy attempt to historicise IPE by showing how historical experience mediates the politics of resistance, and a timely intervention into debates about the nature of SMU and the politics of labour movements under neoliberalism.

Jamie Doucette © 2010
Department of Geography, University of British Columbia, Vancouver
Email: jamie.doucette@gmail.com

The Unmaking of the Middle East: A History of Western Disorder in Arab Lands
Jeremy Salt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008)

Jeremy Salt, professor in Middle Eastern History and Politics at Bilkent University in Turkey, provides us with a solid analytical result. This book not only helps us to understand the upheaval and violence in the Middle East over the past fifty years, but puts the events in historical context, tracing events during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. It is an effort that is not normally found in mainstream media, for many of the reasons provided by James Petras in his excellent book The Power of Israel in the United States (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2006). For those numerous commentators around the world, particularly those in the USA who ask the rhetorical question: “Why do they hate us?,” Salt gives them the background that is essential for answering the question, assuming they are interested in answers.

The history of the Middle East is one of Western intervention, colonialism, imperialism and the racist slaughter of peoples in Arab lands. This ranges from the French and British colonialism in Algeria and Egypt in the nineteenth century to the Zionist murder and mayhem in Palestine in the twentieth century committed with