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North Korea and the Enigma of Survival¹

Counterfactual History

Despite the soft focus of the orientalist media, North Korea is not an enigma. The fact of its mere “brute existence” shouldn’t seduce or astonish us any more than the “diversity” of the capitalist system that seemingly hems it in on all sides. And yet its stubborn long-term survival, much like capitalism’s, quite arguably does represent something of an enigma. The question of North Korea today is that of the political endurance and continuity of a regime whose “social experiment” should long ago have been jettisoned into the dustbin of history. Its blanket demonization and ostracism by the “international community” is proof of a profoundly abnormal country, a zombie state which certainly resists the norms of the modern liberal state. As Jon Halliday once put it, “no state in the world lives with such a wide gap between its own self-image and self-presentation as a socialist ‘paradise on earth’ and the view of most of the rest of the world that it is a bleak, backward workhouse ruled by a megalomaniac tyrant, Kim Il Sung.”² And yet, all appearances aside, what I want to suggest is that there is a rational kernel at work here, not so much “beneath” the thin veneer of paranoid propaganda that comprises its overtly repressive state apparatus, but in terms of North Korea’s position within the uneven and combined development of global capitalism. Modernization too is a process which, all appearances aside, North Korea has been strongly committed to since its foundation, even if in this respect the ideology is prone to part company with the reality, as the much-trumpeted “successes” of its social plan become ever more symptomatic of massive and grotesque system failure. North Korea didn’t suddenly fall from the sky. The evil features of this “hermit kingdom” have grown out of the very traits of the modern state in general. Journalistic platitudes and general bias aside, North Korea is not a feudal state or an anachronistic theocracy, but rather

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² Jon Halliday, “The North Korean Enigma” in: *New Left Review*, London, 127, 1980, p. 18.

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a nation-state with an obsessive attitude towards modernization as well as the strong ambition to be one of the most advanced countries in the world.

Superman didn't land in North Korea. In *Superman: Red Son*³ Mark Miller presents us with a counterfactual history which explores what might have happened had the rocket ship carrying the young alien from Krypton landed on Earth slightly ahead of time. In this case the "advanced" landing deposits the future superhero in Ukraine, where instead of growing up in the free state of Kansas and becoming a journalist on the *Daily Planet*, he grows up on a collective farm and becomes a journalist on *Pravda*. One needs to set aside one's prejudices in order to begin to bring North Korea into proper focus—although granted such formal reversals of good versus evil are limited in their critical scope. My contention here will be that the "monstrosity" of North Korea is nothing more than the unmasked identity of the modern state, the naked face of state violence. What one should question here is not what kind of country North Korea is, but instead what North Korea contributes to questions of modernity and modernization. In short, the supposedly "enigmatic" aspect of North Korea lies at the extremity of modernization, which has been pursued by both the socialist bloc and the capitalist bloc in the postwar world. As such the North Korean question should be revised in order to ask why the dual process of modernization and democratization ends up in the strange accomplishment of its secular theocratic regime.

The Democratic Paradox

The political ambition of North Korea as a modern state seems to lurk in its official name: The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Like South Korea, North Korea insists on being the only legitimate government of the entire peninsula. North Korea calls itself a "democratic" people's republic—unlike South Korea, which is simply "republic" (ROK)—whose people (*dēmos*) are nominally deprived of power (*krátos*). Historically the appellation of a Democratic People's Republic is certainly not unique to North Korea (one thinks of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1987–91) under Mengistu Haile Mariam). The idea of popular fronts as adherents of "democracy" can be traced back to Stalin's (failed) attempt to create a multi-class form of government in the Soviet Union. In the case of North Korea the obsession with modernization

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³ Mark Miller, et. al., *Superman: Red Son* (New York: DC Comics, 2004).

and nation-building under the direction of the country's communist party, the Worker's Party of Korea, goes some way towards explaining the endurance of the idea of "democracy" in a supposedly socialist state.

Kim Il Sung, its visionary leader, not to mention the country's deity, was the Superman sent down from Soviet heaven to construct a new country. In North Korean propaganda, Kim promised his people daily rations of "rice and meat soup" for participating in guerrilla warfare against the Japanese imperialists. After liberation, the guerilla figure took power during the Soviet occupation and started to implement a strongly partisan agenda. First of all, as much as in other post-colonial countries, Kim Il Sung and his followers set about reinventing the past. The situation whereby the North Korean leader created the racial self-image of his nation is described in the following terms:

Though most Koreans in 1945 had no memory of life before Japanese rule, neither the Soviets nor the Americans saw a need to de-colonize hearts and minds. That the Koreans now hated Japan was taken as proof that they had always done so. Nor did either power punish former propagandists. In Seoul, the cultural scene's spontaneous efforts to come to terms with its past were soon undermined by the settling of personal scores and a general refusal to acknowledge a collective guilt. Obscure ex-collaborators condemned the famous ones, those who had propagandized in Korean asserted moral superiority over those who had done so in Japanese, and erstwhile 'proletarians' acted as if their brief prison stays in the 1930s made up for everything they had written afterward.⁴

When Korea was liberated from colonialism, a ground zero emerged on which anybody obtaining power could fabricate anything about history. The situation provided the perfect condition for modernization. Even though Kim Il Sung was one day a commander in Mao Zedong's army and spent a year at an infantry officer school in the USSR during the Pacific War, his ideological background was unlikely to have familiarized him a great deal with Marxism-Leninism. As North Korean propaganda frequently emphasizes today, he was in those days more inclined to the alliance between socialism and nationalism. He even insisted that Korea was on the stage of democratic reform and construction, not

⁴ Bryan Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2010), p. 30.

socialism as such.⁵ Needless to say, this does not mean that North Korea came to “communism” via nationalism. The communist regime was implanted in Korea by the USSR and backed up by the Red Army from the time of its foundation.⁶ Challenging the nationalist intellectuals such as Cho Man Sik, Kim attempted to consolidate his support base and mobilized more people to participate in constructing his regime.

The official name of North Korea indicates the historical background of Kim’s nation-building project. The “democratic people” are those who join in the democratic reform and construction against the United States-led world order. The emphasis of *the people* who advocate *democracy*, i.e. common people’s rule, reveals the “democratic paradox” as such: if everybody rules, who would be ruled? As Carl Schmitt points out, those who command and those who obey are identical in democracy.⁷ If democracy means that the sovereign of an assembly composed of all people can change the laws and constitution at will, the question remains who belongs to the people and who does not? The people able to decide the law at will must be determined. Accordingly “Democratic People’s Republic” is inclusive and at the same time exclusive in its constitutional arrangements. It seeks to include those who agree on democratic reform and construction and excludes those who disagree, as the very basis of its constitution.

Chantal Mouffe regards Schmitt’s definition of democracy as the means by which a people comes to exist through the determination of who to include and who to exclude. She says that “without any criterion to determine who are the bearers of democratic rights, the will of the people could never take shape.”⁸ Of course, this definition of “democracy” is ill-suited to liberal accounts of democracy. However, Schmitt’s critique of liberal democracy is in some sense amenable to the constitutional dynamics of North Korea. Clearly North Korea does not endorse liberal democracy, but rather the dictatorship of the proletariat. Interestingly, there is a crucial clue to Kim Il Sung’s *political* concept of democracy in his speech on the dictatorship of the proletariat from 1967. In these remarks,

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⁵ Chong-Sik Lee and Robert A. Scalapino, *North Korea: Building of the Monolithic State* (Berwyn: The KHU Press, 2017), p. 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁷ Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Allen Kennedy (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1988), pp. 14–15.

⁸ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 43.

Kim criticized both “the Right opportunist view” and “the Left opportunist view” on the dictatorship of the proletariat in relation to the transition period of the communist revolution, before setting out his own theory of the third way, the so-called *Juche*:

We must take into account such specific realities of ours in order to give correct solutions to the questions of the transition period and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Bearing this point in mind, I consider it excessive to regard the transition period in our country as the period up to the higher phase of communism. I deem it right to regard it as the period up to socialism. But it is wrong to believe that the transition period will come to a close as soon as the socialist revolution is victorious and the socialist system is established. Considering the issue on the basis of what the founders of Marxism-Leninism said, or considering it in the light of the experiences we have gained in our actual struggle, we cannot say that a complete socialist society is already built just because the capitalist class has been overthrown and the socialist revolution carried through after the seizure of power by the working class. We, therefore, have never said that the establishment of the socialist system means the complete victory of socialism. Then, when will the complete socialist society come into being? Complete victory of socialism will come only when the class distinction between the workers and the peasantry has disappeared and the middle classes (particularly the peasant masses) actively support us.⁹

According to Kim’s argument, the problem is not so much the transition of the capitalist mode of production to a socialist one as that of the “*working-classization*” of the middle classes. Kim points out that “as long as the peasants are not *working-classized*, the support they may give us cannot be firm and is bound to be rather unstable”.¹⁰ How then is social transformation to be achieved? Kim places the emphasis on rapid economic development as the means for the consolidation of socialism. He argues that “to this end, the technological revolution should be carried out to such an extent as the advanced capitalist countries have turned their countryside capitalistic, so that farming may be mechanized, chemicalization and irrigation be introduced, and the eight-hour day be adopted”.¹¹

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⁹ Kim Il Sung, *Juche! Speeches and Writings of Kim Il Sung*, ed. Li Yuk-Sa (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972), p. 117.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

This utterance reveals the meaning of *working-classizing* the peasants. Despite railing against the orthodox doctrine of Marxism-Leninism, forever emphasizing how North Korean realities differ from those of Europe and Russia, Kim's theory of socialism is a somewhat circular argument which sets out how the stable material basis of socialism is to be achieved: socialism is its own theory's goal. This is nothing new for anyone already familiar with Stalin's theory of socialism in one country. In his letter to Ivanov, "On the Final Victory of Socialism in the USSR," Stalin claimed socialism in one country does not mean the final accomplishment of revolution; instead, the international alliance of the proletariat can solve the problem of one-state socialism. Moreover, "this assistance of the international proletariat must be combined with our work to strengthen the defense of our country, to strengthen the Red Army and the Red Navy, to mobilize the whole country for the purpose of resisting military attack and attempts to restore bourgeois relations."¹²

What should be stressed in Kim's speech is not his vulgar reception of Stalinism, but rather his adaption of Stalinist ideas in North Korea. Kim rejects Stalin's assumption that the USSR has successfully purged the legacy of the bourgeois society and asks rhetorically, "what, then, shall we say is the society that will exist after the triumph of the socialist revolution and accomplishment of socialist transformation, until the disappearance of the class distinction between the workers and the peasants?"¹³ Kim insists that the dictatorship of the proletariat must continue in order to eliminate class differences. This is a crucial point for understanding the ideological structure of nation-building in North Korea. However, what Kim really sought to achieve was not, as Barbara Demick says, "merely to build a new country; he wanted to build better people, to reshape human nature."¹⁴ This project to reconstruct consciousness is called *Juche*, which stands for the independence of people. Its doctrine is "holding fast to an independent position, rejecting dependence on others, using one's own brains, believing in one's own strength, displaying the revolutionary spirit of self-reliance."¹⁵ On the surface at least it certainly recalls the liberal rubric of self-government. Nonetheless, one distinctive aspect could be identified in

¹² Joseph Stalin, *Works, Volume 14* (London: Red Star Press, 1978), p. 320.

¹³ Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

¹⁴ Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2010), p. 44.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the ideology of *Juche*: people's confidence in their leader is essential to the establishment of such independence. This is where the psychic life of power is introduced into the political.

The Monstrosity of North Korea

North Korea may indeed be characterized as grotesque, but it is not the “Impossible State.” Victor Cha describes North Korea as being caught between life and death after the collapse of the “mighty Soviet Union.”¹⁶ Cha's understanding of North Korea betrays the typical bias shown towards the country, which is often misrecognized through the liberal prism of democracy. It is intriguing that Cha confesses his inability to solve the enigma of North Korea's survival. He suggests that the reason why North Korea has survived—though “many others of its ilk have long since collapsed, and as revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa spell the demise of the few remaining ones like it”—resides in the over-the-top personality cult of the Kim family.¹⁷ Cha correctly brings into focus what Kim Il Sung intends with the term *Juche*. The doctrine of *Juche* is nothing less than the secular version of Christianity, wherein fidelity to the supreme figure of authority sets one free from the fear of death. Kim is the “dear respected leader comrade,” the symbol of a political religion. However, the idolization of a singular political leader is hardly a feature unique to North Korea.

In *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics*, Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung discuss North Korea as a modern state by invoking Max Weber's concept of charismatic politics. Kwon and Chung argue that:

There is actually no mystery about the North Korean political system. The North Korean state is not an enigmatic entity and never has been. What North Korea had was simply a highly skillful political leader who knew how to build an aura of enchanting charismatic power around him. This leader understood the efficacy of this power for mobilizing the masses toward ambitious political goals, and he was committed to keeping the power not only during his lifetime but also beyond the time of his rule. Modern world history abounds with similar charismatic, visionary leaders and the stories about their rise and fall. The same is true

¹⁶ Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (New York: Ecco, 2013), p. 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

in the history of the Cold War and in the political history of the communist world that constituted the moiety of the Cold War international order.¹⁸

Kwon and Chung resist the demonization of the communist regime and attempt to deconstruct the fetishism of liberal democracy. They point out that “the performance of secular revolutionary politics, while aiming to demystify traditional religious norms and mystical ideas ... often involved the mystification of the authority and power of the revolutionary leadership.”¹⁹ As they rightly claim, what is at issue is not the cult of personality, but its sustainability in North Korea. How does North Korea’s charismatic politics outlive others? According to Weber, any charismatic authority must be subject to “interpretation or development in an anti-authoritarian direction.”²⁰ This anti-authoritarian direction leads to the “transformation of charisma.” If the enchanted charisma of the political leader is supposed to be disenchanting by the process of modernization, then the case of North Korea would seem to suggest that Weber’s theory of charismatic politics is problematic.

For Weber, the concept of charisma is related to religious dogmatism. In this sense, he describes the way in which the progress of rationalization in “the organization of the corporate group” demystifies the charismatic authority for whom universal respect was once a duty. From this perspective it is easy to conclude that the ruling ideology of *Juche* contaminates North Koreans and blocks them from progressive rationalization. However, as Weber admits, the charismatic leader cannot sustain himself without the people’s free will: “the leader whose legitimacy rested on his personal charisma” should be followed by the political support of those who are “formally free to elect and elevate to power as they please and even to depose.”²¹ Through free election, the leader loses his or her charisma and in turn genuine legitimacy. And yet the suspicion remains that Kim Il Sung and his partisan comrades successfully and “freely” managed to champion and sustain their legitimacy whilst retaining a charisma which goes hand in hand with modernization. This is where the central question aris-

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¹⁸ Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (London: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), p. 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: The Free Press, 1947), p. 386.

²¹ *Ibid.*

es. If North Korea thrives on the sovereign defence of its charismatic politics, is it really accurate to regard it, formally speaking, as a model socialist country? This question currently animates the political group of left nationalists in South Korea, who still concur on the pan-national authenticity of North Korea.

It seems that the problem with Weber's theory lies in his identification of rationalization or modernization with the marketization of capitalism. His conceptualization of charisma is descriptive and does not bear out the situation of North Korea. In respect of this weakness, Kwon and Chung put forward the concept of a "theater state" to account for the endurance of North Korean politics in citing the works of Clifford Geertz, Wada Haruki and Carol Medlicott.²² In short, North Korea is a theater state in which all members of the community play a part and, at the same time, watch "the drama of power transfer from the country's founding leader, Kim Il Sung, to his eldest son and the country's former leader, Kim Jong Il."²³ With this concept, Wada also underscores North Korea's obsession with the transmission of power down the generations and regards it as the ritualization of its partisan tradition. Wada's adoption of the concept of a "theater state" seems clear; to attribute the grotesque dimensions of North Korea to its pre-modern or feudalist remnants. Furthermore, Medlicott argues that "the North Korean political order is fundamentally Confucian."²⁴ However, outright displays of affection towards the beloved leader hardly provide decisive evidence that North Koreans are saturated with Confucianism. As Myers points out, "almost all cultures espouse respect for one's parents, and kinship metaphors have been part of political language since time immemorial."²⁵ In this sense it seems that Wada's and Medlicott's premise, commonly shared by other North Korea commentators, neglects the bigger picture. Their concept of a "theater state" is too anthropological, too mired in the myths of "primitive peoples," to capture the reality of North Korea and its political regime.

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The theatrical spectacle of power is just a symptom, not the cause of the grotesque. The theory of a "theater state" reiterates the problem that Weber's theory of charismatic politics reveals. These approaches fail to gain access to the

²² Kwon and Chung, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁵ Myers, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

truth of North Korea. The spectacle they validate as evidence of pre-modern ritualization has nothing to do with the regressive re-enchantment of the secular theocracy. My contention is that the theocratic aspect of North Korea is the hidden truth of the modern state as such, the brutal revelation of extreme modernization. Its grotesque spectacle is to be discerned as the mirror image of Western modernity.

The North Korean Lesson

In *Secret State: Inside North Korea*, Will Ridley's CNN special report of 2017, a North Korean boy, whose birthday party is being prepared by his school, informs the foreign journalist that the dear respected leader, Kim Jung Un, cares for him and his classmates more than their own parents, and gives them more love than their parents could ever provide.²⁶ Setting aside the overt ideological agenda of such hot media, the journalist takes the interview with the boy as confirmation of an ultra-paternalist leadership in North Korea. Should we be surprised by the deep roots of such authoritarian constitutions, of which North Korea is admittedly an extreme variety?

Cicero wrote that "since our country provides more benefits and is a parent prior to our biological parents, we have a greater obligation to it than to our parents."²⁷ The idea of a parental constitution, or the fundamental bond that links *pater familias* and *res publica*, is in actual fact an intriguing philosophical question. As Jochen Martin has argued:

those aspects concerning the agnatic *familia* and the power of the *paterfamilias* are not to be taken as "private" aspects relegated to domestic life. Instead they are essential to the political and social organization of the *res publica Romana* – especially the extensive powers of the *paterfamilias*, his *ius vitae necisque*, have to be paralleled to the magistrates' *potestas*.²⁸

²⁶ *Secret State – Inside North Korea*. CNN, 2017. Available at: <youtu.be/9CozTmjMxEg>.

²⁷ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Commonwealth and On the Laws*, trans. James Zetzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 1.

²⁸ Ann-Cathrin Harders, "Beyond *Oikos* and *Domus*: Modern Kinship Studies and the Ancient Family" in: *Families in the Greco-Roman World*, eds. Ray Laurence and Agneta Stromberg (London: Continuum, 2012), p.17.

One should be wary of trying to transpose a politics from the domestic realm into the realm of real politics and the executive power of the state, which in the case of North Korea amounts to the charismatic leadership of a sole figure. In the Roman context the authority of the *pater familias* is limited—“embedded”—by and within the overriding terms of the *res publica*. Occasions were few when the *pater familias* could act on behalf of the state and take the law into his own hands.²⁹ One should be equally wary of practicing Orientalism by contriving to make North Korea conform to certain “universal” patterns of political constitution, which are no less embedded in Greco-Roman myth for all that.³⁰ For those who consume North Korea as the spectacle of grotesque political failure, its outlandish society cannot fail to be mysterious or, better still, “exotic”. Nonetheless, the “strangeness” of North Korea is equally intelligible through the experience of foreign intervention and the encounter with Western political traditions. As Myers argues, North Korea’s conflation of nationalism with socialism was founded on the “blood-based Japanese nationalism of the colonial era.”³¹ Like South Korea, the whole nation-building process in North Korea is “the slavish imitation of foreign models and an often contemptuous indifference to indigenous traditions.”³²

Kim Il Sung himself emphasized a break from the traditions of feudalism and urged his people to renovate everyday life according to the USSR’s superior culture. Kim’s compulsion to modernize North Korea was consistent with his theory of a socialism conceived in terms of *Juche*. Adopting Lenin’s New Economic Policy, Kim set up the Seven-Year Plan to clean up the residues of feudalism:

The fundamental tasks of the Seven-Year Plan in our country are to carry out the all-round technical and cultural revolution on the basis of the triumphant socialist system, thereby laying the solid material and technical foundations of socialism and greatly improving the material and cultural life of the people. In a country like ours, where there were no industrial revolution and normal

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ On the relation of myth and law see Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1988). Jason Barker references the book in his fascinating analysis of the drama of civil war; see his contribution to this volume.

³¹ Myers, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

³² Ibid.

stages of capitalist development in the past, the technical revolution poses itself as a task of special importance during the socialist construction. In conformity with the urgent demands of social development, we have completed the socialist transformation of production relations before the technical reconstruction of the national economy, thereby opening up a broad avenue for the development of the productive forces, particularly for the carrying out of the technical revolution.³³

It is not difficult to detect in this speech Kim's foregrounding of the "technical revolution". Needless to say this is a complete perversion of Marx's insistence on the driving *contradiction* between the forces and relations of production.³⁴ Interestingly, Kim identifies the technical revolution with the cultural revolution. In a characteristically circular argument, the construction of the *modern* nation-state is the *raison d'État* of North Korea as a socialist state. For Kim, moreover, the accomplishment of self-reliance and self-defense is the only path to the correct form of socialism. Needless to say Kim's grandson, Kim Jung Un, has taken this enthusiasm through his development of nuclear missile technology to its logical extremes.

It is undeniable that Kim's regime has succeeded in defending its legitimacy while ruthlessly pursuing its country's modernization. The two features of the regime strongly condition each other. Nonetheless we are still brought back to the question of how the charismatic leadership has managed to remain intact. Although it is often called a pseudo-theocracy, the political regime of the North is strongly animated by the idea of the modern nation-state. Countless observers regard North Korea as the pre-modern state ruled by sovereign power, but North Korea's incarnation of the state-form inevitably shares the disciplinary imperative characteristic of the demands of managing the masses in tandem with the real or imaginary threat of enemy populations. As Michel Foucault argues, disciplinary power and biopower are the modern forms of power to be distinguished from sovereign power. Where sovereign power wholly invests civil society with its political "will" and power of decision-making, disciplinary power and the scientific and techno-managerialism of biopower embrace "freedom" at the micro-political level.

³³ Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

³⁴ See Greg Sharzer's contribution to this volume on the selective readings by accelerationists of Marx's theory of the economic forces and social relations that define capitalism.

The difference between disciplinary power and biopower resides in the way in which the former focuses on the population as masses rather than on the body as a biological unit, or on human beings as a species. According to Foucault, liberalism is the framework of biopolitics: “the principle of the self-limitation of governmental reason.”³⁵ Liberalism celebrates limited government, and governing less, and maximizing economic efficiency by setting the individual to work in the element of its own design, or “program,” and thus in spite of any political structure that might limit its own self-governance. One might speculate that the relative autonomy of the social practices comprising the social formation as a whole today extends to individuals themselves: for every individual, a distinct practice; and, crucially, every individual *as* a distinct practice. Leaving the question of agency and the political *subject* aside—and there is cause to wonder whether there is any such thing in North Korea—what appears as the oxymoronic articulation of a bio-politics suggests a return to the metaphysical conception of the world as the *non*-interaction of monads.

But how does this leave the state philosophy of *Juche*? It is my contention, and in these few limited remarks I have attempted to begin to sketch out the thesis, that such a philosophy might be broadly compatible with the self-reflexive *praxis* of self-governing, and the formation of self-reliant individuals endowed with the “free will” to support the dear respected leader. It goes without saying that the state-form and the drive toward modernization is a near-universal political ambition, and has become a condition of the political the world over. All politics, whether radical or reactionary, must sooner or later “encounter” the liberal nation-state, whether in the guise of friend or enemy. But the ongoing and stubborn contradiction of North Korea resides in the fact that its grotesque incarnation of the state-form would seem untroubled by and, indeed, in certain key respects perfectly in tune with, the liberal incarnation. Accompanying the driving force and ideology of modernization there is the seeming paradox of an enduring charismatic leadership which revives and perhaps even outdoes the most blatant excesses of Stalin’s cult of personality—although, let us not forget, Kim Jung Un is hardly the only would-be Superman presently grandstanding

³⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at Collège de France 1978–79* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 20.

on the world stage.³⁶ For this reason, North Korea does not represent an alien form of humanity, but has rather come to symbolize one of modernity's monsters: the extreme outlier of a liberal system where the freedom of self-reliance on one hand, and more overtly disciplinary forms of government and state control on the other, are differences in degree, rather than qualitative differences in kind. Rethinking North Korean from this vantage point will arguably provide a more constructive basis for tackling the far more awkward question of the transition to new and more progressive political regimes.

³⁶ On 16 June 2018, days following the US-North Korea summit in Singapore, Donald Trump said (jokingly?) of Kim: "He speaks and his people sit up at attention. I want my people to do the same." Available at: <www.cnn.com/2018/06/15/trump-wants-people-to-listen-to-him-like-north-koreans-do-to-kim-jong-un.html>.