CHALLENGES TO REFORM IN NORTH KOREA: STRUCTURE, AGENCY AND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SELECTORATE

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Discussions concerning reform in North Korea have generally spent little time considering the impact of the social structures that underpin North Korean society. Instead, material factors—such as economic restructuring, foreign aid, or subversive new media—have taken precedence in discussions concerning change. Yet predictions of impending reform or collapse in North Korea that have drawn from material cues have, evidently, fallen short of their marks. In light of these failures, this paper seeks to refocus our collective lens upon the foundations of the society that we seek to understand. It asks why and how North Koreans reproduce and sustain a social order that, from the outside at least, appears highly imbalanced. In doing so, North Korean society's enduring ideas and norms, its accepted rules and beliefs, and its collective knowledge and language are all seen to inform how transformative power is employed. This duality between North Korea's social structure and its agency serves as more than an abstract imagining; rather, it is crucial to understanding how reform in North Korean society may materialize. While not denying the impact that material changes have brought to North Korean society—for example, the collapse of the Public Distribution System—this paper places a greater emphasis on understanding society's foundations and the stability of its institutions and power relations. Using Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory, the social institution of ideology in North Korean society serves to illustrate this approach. The paper concludes by arguing that an understanding of North Korea's social world will be vital to future discussions concerning stability on the Korean Peninsula.

Introduction

Since Kim Jong-un came to power in 2011, the longstanding dichotomy in North Korean analyst circles between "collapsists" and reformists has seemingly swung in favor of the reformists. From the agricultural reforms of the "June 28 New Economic Management Measures" to the development of Spe-

cial Economic Zones, suggestions of change have not gone unnoticed by the more optimistic observer. But what if Kim Jong-un and North Korea's ruling elite at-large are not as free to choose a different path for their country as we may think? What if they are as constrained by its rules, its institutions and its conventions as the North Korean populace? Prevailing physical conditions still matter as impediments to reform in North Korea but more fundamental still is an element that few have held aloft to scrutiny: North Korea's social structures.

Easily misunderstood, North Korea's social structures have endured relative anonymity in academia alongside studies of the country's economic, political and military drivers. Admittedly, minor reforms such as the proliferation of mobile phones or the rise of *jangmadang*[1] offer more immediate and noticeable glimpses of change. Yet these reforms rarely prompt the key question: have these or similar elements, either individually or collectively, rebalanced North Korea's state or society in the last decade? An objective evaluation suggests they have not.

Structure and Agency in North Korea

Rather than getting caught up with microscopic indications of social change, social reform requires an analysis of North Korea's unique social structures and their interaction with human agency. One tool for doing so is Structuration Theory. Developed by Anthony Giddens in the late 1970s, Structuration Theory moved away from the longstanding sociological debate concerning the primacy of either structure or agency in social life and, much like Pierre Bourdieu, saw the relationship between the two as equal in society's constitution.[2] Placing both structure and agent at his theory's axis, Giddens saw the fabric of society—notably its institutions, such as language and government—as the causes and effects of human agency. This interplay, Giddens argued, gradually normalized and created expectations for accepted modes of conduct within society, which then led to the patterning and routinization of social behavior, the legitimization of social institutions and the reproduction of social practices across time and space. To understand why enduring behaviors and institutions within North Korea persist, and how they enable and constrain North Koreans, Structuration Theory offers us a well-placed lens.

At the core of Structuration Theory lie social structures. As the temporal principles that guide social life, structures enable and constrain social interac-

1 For a detailed definition of jangmadang, see "Jangmadang," *Daily NK,* http://www.dailynk.com/english/db_info.php?db_name=jangmadang.

2 Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

tions through their existence in "the memory traces... of knowledgeable human agents."[3] Binding time and space, structures make "it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist" across society and forge a sense of togetherness that provides individuals with a shared understanding of what to do and why to do it.[4] Described by Ludwig Wittgenstein as the "things that cannot be put into words... [but] make themselves manifest,"[5] Giddens terms this human understanding of structure "knowledgeability."[6] Importantly, knowledgeability of how one should and should not act is not innate—it is experienced, learned, and informed by structural rules and resources. These rules may be implicit, such as linguistic norms, or more explicit, like codified laws; while resources, such as influence or control over material capabilities, act merely as the conduits through which power and knowledge is exercised and structures are actualized. In this sense, structural rules and resources do not exist independently from society. Instead, they exist through, and are given meaning by, the agents of society themselves.

Since structures exist solely through human agents and are "temporally 'present' only in their instantiation," agency—that is, the capacity of an individual to affect an outcome—is as central to Giddens' theory as structure.[7] In essence, every human is an agent and all agents draw upon knowledge gained from their social environment to perform day-to-day acts. As an agent is invariably pre-existed by social structures and institutions, their choices will inevitably be bounded by the knowledge they have acquired from society.[8] Acting within their known boundaries, agents unavoidably monitor their actions to adhere to social rules and norms, which in turn reproduce, legitimize and reinforce structures. This interplay between structure and agency is, Giddens contends, the "duality of structure."[9]

The most important and deeply embedded social structures within any society are its institutions. Defined by Giddens as "the more enduring features of social life," institutions embody structure, agency and power relations within

3 Giddens, *Constitution of Society*, 17.

4 Ibid.

5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus" (First published in Annalen der Naturphilosophie, 1921), quoted in Stephen P. Schwartz, *A Brief History of Analytic Philosophy: From Russell to Rawls* (Chichester, Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2012), 57.

6 Giddens, *Constitution of Society*, 21.

7 Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 64.

8 Furthermore, agents will inevitably be constrained by their physical capabilities.

9 Giddens, *Constitution of Society*, 19.

society.[10] They reinforce structure and are realized through agency. Visible in formal arenas, such as government, and in less perceptible arenas, like ideology, institutions will compel and imitate the dynamism of human society.

As Giddens' notion of duality suggests, social structures and institutions are not as deterministic for human agency as many Structuralists, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, would insist. For while structures and institutions may indeed be compelling, Giddens contends that human agents can always exercise at least a modicum of power. Termed the "dialectic of control," power may simply be an agent's choice between living and dying, or for agents with greater social capital, power may be exercised to "regulate the overall conditions of system reproduction either to keep things as they are or to change them."[11] Power is, therefore, both enabling and constraining for agents.

The strength of Structuration Theory for studies of North Korea is two-fold. Firstly, Structuration Theory moves the debate on reform away from the reductionism of micro and macro theories that seek to explain North Koreans *or* North Korea. Just as domestic and international politics cannot be separated, North Korea's social structures and human agents are similarly indivisible. Secondly, Giddens' notion that agency and structure are inherently relational, not just in theory but also in praxis, ensures that our scope of analysis can be concentrated on the *processes* of social interaction that will either enable or constrain reform on the Korean Peninsula.

North Korea's One Percent

When we look at the potential for reform, we look for the agents in society who hold truly transformative power. As a totalitarian state, power in North Korea—in both its allocative and authoritative forms[12]—is highly concentrated within the various political, military and economic institutions that are dominated by individuals from the three "rings of power"—the Kim family, the Korean People's Army and the Korean Workers' Party (KWP).[13] However, true transformative power—that is the ability of individuals to alter embedded social structures—is held by an even smaller group of North Korean agents.

10 Ibid., 24.

11 Ibid., 28.

12 Allocative resources refer to material entities while authoritative resources refer to the tools that enable control over other agents.

13 Ken Gause, "The Role and Influence of the Party Apparatus," in *North Korea in Transition: Politics, Economy, and Society*, ed. Kyung-Ae Park and Scott Snyder (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 30.

Known as the "selectorate,"[14] this group has long fulfilled the role of "system *Guardian*s."[15] Comprised of "between 200 and 5,000 people"[16] who occupy the most influential seats in North Korea's principal institutions—such as the National Defense Commission and the KWP—as per Michel Foucault's power-knowledge nexus, the selectorate's preponderance of social capital has granted it the ability, and the legitimacy, to construct a "regime of truth" in society and to "intervene…with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs" through institutional rules and resources.[17]

Yet power has not been limitlessly enabling, it has simultaneously restricted space for autonomy. Given meaning by the social system and thus subject to society's rules and norms, power is a means rather than an end. In this vein, power has not simply been a resource for elite self-interest in the halls of Pyongyang. Instead, power has been given meaning by structure and agency—and it is this interplay that merits further analysis in any discussion of reform on the Korean Peninsula. Following this outline of Structuration Theory, a brief exploratory impression of the interplay between structure and agency within one of North Korea's principal institutions—ideology—is offered.

Ideology

What makes North Korea's system so sustainable is its ideology. To be sure, such a status is difficult to achieve and therefore highly valuable. It takes a long time to be built and for its sustainability needs symbols and rituals that are replicated and performed again and again. Importantly, there is little room for flexibility: in order to turn a process into a ritual and an image into an icon, *stability* and *consistency* are key strategies.[18]

Charles Armstrong has commented that "in no country in the world is political ideology more visible than in North Korea."[19] Yet—structurally speaking—ideology is a virtual institution. It exists within the memory traces of knowledgeable agents and unlike other institutions, such as government, ideology is

14 Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, "Pyongyang's Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea," *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 60.

15 Nicolas Levi, "A Big Day for the Elite Clans," *Daily NK,* http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk03600&num=9051.

16 Byman and Lind, "Pyongyang's Survival Strategy," 60.

17 Giddens, *Constitution of Society*, 14.

18 Ruediger Frank, "North Korea's Ideology after April 2012: Continuity or Disruption?," *38North*, http://38north.org/2012/05/rfrank050912/. [emphasis added]

19 Charles Armstrong, "The Role and Influence of Ideology," in *North Korea in Transition: Politics, Economy, and Society*, ed. Kyung-Ae Park and Scott Snyder (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 3.

not easily materialized or codified. Indeed, ideology may only be instantiated through its reproduction in the behavior of agents. For this reason the *visibility* of ideology within North Korea is not only indicative of its embeddedness as a social institution, but it also hints at the power that North Korea's selectorate have invested in its subsistence.

Existing as a virtual structure, ideology, Giddens argues, becomes embedded and institutionalized by way of "signification."[20] Referring explicitly to the *communication* of ideology through modes of language, discourse and symbolic orders, ideology conveys a set of rules—language, beliefs and norms—and sanctions a set of resources—knowledge, authority and education—for agents to interpret and draw upon in everyday life. As agents utilize these rules and resources, ideology will increasingly mirror their social reality and provide agents with a very real "ontological security."[21] Once these structured social practices are embedded across time and space, ideology can then be said to have become the "medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organizes."[22]

In affording society with an understanding of its social reality, ideology can be utilized by those agents who hold authoritative power to justify an existing social hierarchy, to enact some form of social-good, or, conversely, to protect a set of unequal power relations. In this regard, Giddens' observation that domination, power, and ideology are coterminous[23] is not dissimilar to Antonio Gramsci's notion of a hegemonic political bloc that manufactures consent through its control of knowledge. Still, ideology will not always be enabling for those who wield power. Ideological structures also impose normative constraints upon agency and the use of power—and this is no more evident than in North Korea's selectorate.

Juche

Inside North Korea, Juche ideology functions as the sole "legitimate Weltanschauung."[24] Signifying a distinctive philosophy of social life, Juche is communicated through a set of implicit and explicit rules that help to constitute meaning and sanction social conduct in day-to-day life. In Giddens' terminology, Juche ideology is one of North Korea's "more enduring features of social

20 Giddens, *Constitution of Society*, 29-33.
21 Ibid., xxiii.
22 Ibid., 374.
23 Anthony Giddens, *Sociology*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 582-583.
24 Han S. Park, "Military-First (Songun) Politics: Implications for External Policies," in *New Challenges of North Korean Foreign Policy*, ed. Kyung-Ae Park (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 96-97.

life."[25] Open to a plethora of translations, Juche can broadly be defined as the "essence of self-determination" (from the Chinese character *ju*, meaning rule, and *che*, meaning essence).[26] Whether Juche stems from, or even masquerades as, the Confucian logics of self-defense and sovereignty, Marxism-Leninism, anti-colonialism, Korean race-based nationalism, or even Kim Il-sung's understanding of Woodrow Wilson's concept of self-rule is debatable. One certainty, however, is that Juche's durability owes much to the ongoing interplay between institution and agent.

Evidently, the failures in the practical application of Juche are glaring—but we must always bear in mind that ideology exists in the "memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents."[27] Hence, structures will exist both within and apart from the material world. For this reason, the application of Juche in North Korean policies should be seen as distinct from the application of Juche within the practical consciousnesses of North Korea's agents. In this vein, the restrictions that Juche imposes upon the selectorate can be viewed as "more 'internal' than exterior," and rather than being limited by material factors, are born from a tacit knowledgeability of structural constraints and negative sanctions.[28] Here, structural constraints refer to the limits that an agent's knowledgeability imposes upon their perceived choices for action; while negative sanctions refer to the limitations placed upon choice and action by other agents that exercise power, which may range from "the mild expression of disapproval" to "the direct application of force or violence."[29]

Considering these constraints upon autonomy, are North Korea's selectorate able to reform the meaning of Juche? Despite enabling the selectorate's domination within society, no North Korean agent—from Kim Jong-un down—is immune from the cognitive pushes and structural pulls of their social—and in this case, ideological—environment. Even those who are frequently exposed to competing narratives and philosophies—such as Jang Seong-taek, Kim Yong-nam, or Choe Thae-bok—cannot retreat fully from their knowledge, their identities and their learned ideological bounds. Theories of cognitive consistency demonstrate that agents will, more often than not, discount dissonant information that runs contrary to their beliefs.[30] This intrinsic human preference for

25 Giddens, *Constitution of Society*, 24.
26 Kenneth Quinones, "Juche's Role in North Korea's Foreign Policy," in *North Korea's Foreign Policy Under Kim Jong Il: New Perspectives*, ed. Tae-hwan Kwak and Seung-ho Joo (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 18.
27 Giddens, *Constitution of Society*, 17.
28 Ibid., 25.
29 Ibid., 175.
30 Craig A. Anderson, Mark R. Lepper and Lee Ross, "Perseverance of Social Theories: The Role of Ex-

consistency not only buttresses belief, it also results in the hardening of belief. As such, no amount of foreign travel, material goods, access to media,[31] or inflowing capital is likely to induce a mass ideological-rethinking within North Korea's selectorate.

Correspondingly, the participation of the selectorate in the application of negative sanctions—such as the removal of Pak Nam-gi, Kim Yong-sam and Ri Je-gang—evidences not just factional wrangling, but the upholding of tacit established social practices in the memory traces of agents. As Armstrong has rightly observed, "behavior [in North Korea]—both at the individual and the collective level—refers back to ideology and is justified by it."[32]

Structuration Theory does not imply that change within one of North Korea's most enduring and powerful institutions is unachievable. Instead, it puts reform into context. Even though individual agency and the dialectic of control may have afforded North Korea's selectorate with the *capability* to act outside of their learned ideological bounds, Juche's structural constraints and existing sanctions have, on balance, proved to be far more compelling. Faith in Juche does not imply a blind obedience or an unadulterated fideism on behalf of the selectorate—instead it demonstrates how structure interacts with agency to become an essential part of cognitive reasoning, practical and discursive consciousness, self-legitimation and social knowledge. As Giddens notes, "the knowledge they [agents] possess is not incidental to the persistent patterning of social life but is integral to it."[33]

Conclusion: Refocusing our lens on reform

This paper has argued for a third method to study reform in North Korea.[34] In this approach, the false dichotomy between structure and agency is rejected and replaced by a more equitable and interpretive analysis of the social structures and human agency that govern action. This third way finds that social change is not dependent upon the material world, but rests upon transformations in the agency and the structures that constitute society. Free from determinism and objectivism, social transformation will always be possible. While this approach

planation in the Persistence of Discredited Information," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 39, no. 6 (1980): 1037-1049.

31 See for example: Nat Kretchun and Jane Kim, "A Quiet Opening: North Koreans in a Changing Media Environment," http://audiencescapes.org/sites/default/files/A_Quiet_Opening_FINAL_InterMedia.pdf.

32 Armstrong, *Influence of Ideology*, 4.

33 Giddens, *Constitution of Society*, 26.

34 Not to be confused with Giddens' advocacy of a political "Third Way" that sought to reconcile diverging politico-economic policies. Still, this essay's intent to move beyond bifurcated theoretical standpoints is not dissimilar in its underlying objective.

does not deny the value of micro-transformations to society's inhabitants, it does point to certain factors—such as meanings, beliefs, language, norms and institutions—as the crucial drivers for transformative social change.

If reform in North Korea is possible, what conditions are required for the transformation of society? Significantly, societal reform will—almost certainly—be unintentionally constructed, for as Giddens argues, social happenings are "everyone's doing and no one's."[35] Bearing this in mind, the scores of social processes and daily interactions that constitute North Korean society suggest that changes to its social ordering are likely to be the consequences of complex, constantly evolving and multifaceted alterations to the relationship between the selectorate and the institutions that they dominate. However, if ideology can act as an approximate benchmark in North Korea, the routinized reproduction of rules and resources appear relatively stable, as does the social reality it generates. Juche's reification and accompanying power structure has left little room for competing norms, discourses, or agents to challenge its institutional underpinnings, implying that the social practices that support Juche will, for the time being, remain relatively fixed. **Y**

35 Giddens, *Constitution of Society*, 10.