

CROSS-CURRENTS



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REVIEW ESSAY

Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know? The Strange Allure and Elusive Reality of North Korea

John Lie, University of California, Berkeley

Sandra Fahy. *Marching Through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 272 pp. \$40 (cloth/e-book).

Hazel Smith. *North Korea: Markets and Military Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 394 pp. \$90 (cloth), \$33 (paper), \$26 (e-book).

Lady Caroline Lamb famously called Lord Byron “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.” In describing North Korea, Hazel Smith replaces “dangerous to know” with “sad,” but she, like Sandra Fahy, seeks to recuperate the ultimate humanity of North Koreans. Both Smith and Fahy have spent considerable time in North Korea or with North Koreans, and they convey the contemporary dynamics of North Korea without relying on the ready-made caricatures and stereotypes that dominate in the West (and the rest) (see Choi 2015; Ryang 2002). After all, in matters North Korea, knowledge and experience seem to have little cachet; instead, stentorian denunciations silence voices of information and insight. To be sure, there’s much that cannot be known about contemporary North Korea: it is secretive and hermetic like most authoritarian states, if not more so. Seemingly surmountable but surprisingly recalcitrant, too, is the general scholarly (and non-scholarly) penchant to regard North Korea as a singular, unique case: incomparable and inscrutable. In the West and elsewhere, what we do know is that North Korea is, inter alia, a totalitarian society and a rogue state to which the only rational and reasonable response of North Koreans should be to seek regime change or personal exit. Political loyalty can be explained by the privileged status of the elite or the deluded nature of the populace.

In their new books, Smith and Fahy challenge the received and dominant view. Far from being just mad or bad, North Korea is presented as a country of fellow human beings whom we can therefore comprehend. If they cannot study North Korea and North Koreans in broad daylight—from the inside, as it were—then they strive at least to capture the elusive reality from the outside, somewhat like viewing it in the night of starry skies. Smith, who spent considerable time in North Korea as a World Food Program officer in the late 1990s and early 2000s, examines historical, statistical, and policy records, whereas Fahy listens to and interprets individual North Korean voices, albeit outside of North Korea and as retrospective reflections. These books—along with the recent historical work of Charles Armstrong (2013), Suzy Kim (2013), and Andrei Lankov (2013)—mark significant contributions to the Anglophone scholarship on North Korea.

Smith's *North Korea* is something of a textbook on North Korea. The diligent reader will learn much about North Korean history, political legitimation, and political struggles, as well as its economic policy and foreign relations. Smith's guiding assumption is that North Korea is legible; as she says at the outset: "North Korea is far from unique and not a very difficult country to explain. North Korea has an authoritarian government that rules over an economically struggling society" (1). She spends some energy on demolishing the dominant caricatures of North Korea, whether as a monolithic and homogeneous polity or as a savage, dangerous, and irrational polity. In her analysis, the pivotal moment that defines the current reality is the mid-1990s famine. Thereafter, North Korea has experienced the steady encroachment of market forces. Largely as an unplanned and unintended response from below, starving, suffering, and struggling North Koreans sought employment and trade—legal or illegal—and in so doing generated a proto-capitalist economy. The spread of the market in fact affects nearly every facet of North Korea, from the ruling party and the powerful military to the malnourished and suffering masses. One profound consequence, according to Smith, is that the regime faces a legitimation crisis. Unlike the earlier, post-World War II Kim Il-sungist period—as Smith infelicitously calls the post-liberation, pre-famine North Korea—the post-famine North Korean regime is bereft of popular support. In stressing regime survival, the powers that be valorize military rule and squelch dissent. Regime survival catapults the military as the foremost institution; the military-first policy in turn shapes North Korean domestic and foreign policy.

Smith's meticulously researched book wreaks havoc with the conventional caricatures that would portray North Korea as monolithic and unchanging. In point of fact, North Korea is diversifying significantly and undergoing rapid change. Smith's analysis underscores Daniel Tudor and James Pearson's journalistic account, *North Korea Confidential* (2015), which stresses the burgeoning of the market economy in North Korea without coeval advances of liberalism or democracy. *North Korea* is especially insightful about the fragmentation of the once-unified elite and the widening chasm between the ruling party/military elite and the ordinary population, which in turn experiences growing inequality. The vulnerable population—the young and the old, the poor and the poorly connected, religious and political dissidents—suffers, even as the regime rushes headlong into nuclear-weapon programs. Simultaneously, the tottering state regiments the young and the deviant, making the country into a human rights disaster area. As much as Smith seeks to portray North Korea as a normal authoritarian polity, she is aware of its punitive and repressive rule.

North Korea is a no-nonsense book. The wealth of documents and statistics does much to buttress the analysis, and it is as good as any English-language book in providing an overview of contemporary North Korea. Smith's analysis of the pre-famine, Kim Il-sungist period is well grounded and clear sighted as she pays due attention to the historical, organizational, and ideological factors that molded the robust system. Her synthetic and cogent approach to describing and explaining Kim Il-sungism is, unfortunately, not sustained for the post-famine period. Marketization and militarization are necessary but insufficient factors in making sense of North Korea in the twenty-first century. In particular, by eschewing firsthand accounts—both the extensive library in several languages as well as North Korean voices—Smith not only misses out on daubing blood and flesh on the bone of the book (Tudor and Patterson's book is not surprisingly much more reader friendly) but also elides some of the complexities of contemporary North Korea. Beyond the somewhat superficial desire for more Byron and less Casaubon, the elision of voices—however easy it is to dismiss them as anecdotes, though we should hasten to recall the old canard that the plural of anecdotes is data—makes it difficult to diagnose the social reality of North Korea. Smith suggests that there is a profound legitimation crisis, but I don't know how we can be sure of it except via "anecdotes." Given that there are no reliable surveys of the North Korean population, we must rely perforce on anecdotal accounts and ethnographic observations, however limited and even unreliable they are in and of

themselves. For example, Suki Kim's *Without You, There Is No Us* (2014)—a Korean American writer's account of teaching English in Pyongyang—suggests that considerable ideological work, evinced by the title of her book, goes into sustaining the regime. As far as I can glean, all North Korean defectors' accounts include some admission of their erstwhile belief in the regime and the country (see, e.g., the controversial, pioneering account by Blaine Harden [2012], Yeonmi Park's biography [2015], or any number of recent books by and on North Korean defectors who are rescued and liberated by the West or Westerners). Whether we call them lies or propaganda or ideology, they seem to constitute a significant element in sustaining regime rule. Smith insists on seeing North Koreans as active agents of their lives and destiny, but she gives very short shrift to social factors and ideological forces. Indeed, ordinary North Koreans manifest themselves only as more or less reliable statistics, anonymous categories, and impersonal forces.

Smith's understandable desire to supersede superficial stereotypes about North Korea leads her to stress its normality. If one were faced with choosing between the normal and the pathological in describing and analyzing North Korea, then one might be forgiven for taking the former, less-traveled path. However, we don't need to resign ourselves to the binary of either/or, general or particular. Flipping the conventional take on North Korea as the inscrutable other and declaring it an understandable case has its drawbacks. After all, North Korea is a relatively rare case of a former second world country that has survived into the brave new neoliberal world order and the age of globalization. Smith's analysis leaves one unsure as to why the ruling regime did not collapse after the end of the Soviet empire, the death of the charismatic leader Kim Il-sung, the extremely severe famines, the encroachment of market economy, or the consequent legitimation crisis that she stresses. The military-first economy and polity of North Korea would appear to be unsustainable. Here, the asymmetry of her analysis between Kim Il-sungism and the present vitiates the book. There is no point in downplaying the role of the military in Kim Il-sungism or the power of ideological and social forces in the contemporary period.

Sandra Fahy's book treads into the territory left underexplored by Smith's account. To be sure, it would be easy to bemoan the truncated nature of historical and political conspectus in *Marching Through Suffering*, but the book is telling not only about the famine survivors but also about the nature of regime legitimacy. Fahy rightly shows that famines are experiences that are lived through, and not isolated events. Her informants span the long decade or so not only

through and after the mid-1990s famines but also the near-contemporaneous demise of Kim Il-sung. We read the changing dynamics of famine experiences and coping strategies: from the initial, confused period during which denial and misinformation existed side by side with dawning recognition of the severity of the famines; to blaming outsiders and other, uncontrollable forces; to ideological justifications of suffering as something of a character-building exercise; to transformations not only of social relations but also of individual bodies, as well as in complex dealings with the dead and dying. The book is a tour de force of people's forced march through suffering, more suffering, and suffering unto death.

Fahy's sympathetic account illuminates not only individual lives but also North Korea at large. The slow recognition of the severity of the famines and the fast and furious effort to devise and exercise coping strategies do much to explain the absence of collective resistance or even of widespread political delegitimation. Indeed, she suggests that defectors are outliers unrepresentative of the North Korean population: bearing with suffering, not escaping, was and remains the norm. Fahy is especially sensitive to the multiple registers of people's communication. As she writes, "No one, from the most elite to the most dehumanized prison camp detainee, can enjoy the ability to speak openly with impunity" (170). Given the extreme regimentation on freedom of speech and expression, regime rule becomes yet another catastrophe with which people must deal. The consequent structure of widespread suspicion and distrust and the corresponding underdevelopment of democratic infrastructures and institutions suggest that, *pace* Milton Friedman and other theorists of capitalist democracy, market growth is unlikely to usher in liberal or democratic society. Indeed, Smith is no more sanguine on this matter.

Fahy is well aware of the myriad problems inherent in her North Korean informants' accounts. After all, they hail from a place where people are acutely conscious that there's no free speech. However, I am not sure what it would mean to "speak openly with impunity" on sensitive or personal matters even in a free country. Power relations and political correctness, situational propriety and emotional considerations profoundly shape and even restrict speech, perforce and inevitably a social phenomenon. More importantly, as she relies on retrospective accounts from outside—her informants now live in South Korea or Japan—these oral-history narratives are not simple and direct expressions of personal and collective experiences but are profoundly shaped by the extant and powerful discourses about North Korea circulating in these

and other countries. Fahy is conscious enough of the problem to hem and haw in her study, but she doesn't really try to grasp the problem systematically or theoretically. She would have done well to take intellectual inspiration from anthropologist Alexei Yurchak's *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (2005), a brilliant study of the final years of the Soviet Union. In criticizing the conventional binary of Soviet subjects as engaged in either blind obedience or heroic resistance, Yurchak shows that almost everyone engaged in a ritual of pretending to obey Soviet rule and believing in Soviet propaganda. Beneath formal subservience proliferated substantive life rich in ambivalence and ambiguity, and relatively free from the ultimately superficial ritual obeisance. However, Soviet citizens were not merely acting cynically in sustaining this double life; after all, they shared many of the values of the otherwise problematic regime, such as solidarity, community, and altruism. These values were manifest in everyday life in the Soviet Union, as they surely are in North Korea past and present. The writer Yū Miri, a *zainichi* (Korean resident of Japan), writes warmly of North Koreans and North Korean life in her recent travelogue *Pyonyan no natsuyasumi* (The summer vacation in Pyongyang) (2011). It is not that she is unaware of the authoritarian character of North Korea, but she also experiences and stresses some of the communal norms—North Koreans singing together in parks, or people, not just lovers, holding hands as they stroll—that are manifestly absent in South Korea or Japan. The smiles that we see in the mass games or the glowing tints of North Korean pupils are not just figments of regime propaganda or ideological fiat. Even some of the defectors—the rare individuals who risked their lives and surely sacrificed those of their family and friends left behind—were nostalgic about North Korea, and a few even yearn to return: a variant of *Ostalgie*. It is difficult for outsiders to fathom how pure and how dear their dwelling place is for many North Koreans in spite of their knowledge of the foibles and crimes of the regime. A sort of homeland patriotism—attachment to a way of life—is surely ubiquitous and perhaps universal, and it would behoove any serious analyst of North Korea to take account of it.

Lest I be misunderstood: no, I don't want to live in North Korea, and I don't support the corrupt regime there. It is an authoritarian state with a high proportion of the population in an inhumane prison system (though comparative statistics suggest the United States has a higher rate of incarceration and conditions that are less than humane: see Gottschalk [2014]). My point is that focusing solely on the negative—as would be the case with any study of the United States that merely describes and accentuates its unsavory features, such as the unconscionably high

incarceration rate—would obfuscate how a polity survives and even achieves legitimacy, however problematic and contested. Surely we need to make sense of social relations, cultural life, and ideological forces in order to make sense of North Korea, at once changing and diversifying.

Finally, there is a shibboleth in area studies scholarship that those who study a particular culture begin to partake of that culture. In this regard, Lord Byron may have been mad, bad, and dangerous to know, but so too was Lady Caroline. In the case of North (or, for that matter, South) Korean studies, one truism is the contagious character of North (and South) Korean nationalism. I am concerned less with the hyperbolic and jingoistic nationalist discourses rampant in the two Koreas than with the inward and involuted character of almost all discussions about the two Koreas. Both Smith and Fahy are aware of this danger and do much to advance our understanding. Yet, regrettably, neither consulted the vast scholarship in Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Russian on North Korea. Nor did they consider seriously comparative cases, even if implicitly, or engage with the extensive theoretical and empirical writings on authoritarian regimes and populations. Hermetic and isolated as North Korea may be, analysts of North Korea don't need to be strait or shortsighted. Scholarly insouciance contributes in very small ways to North Korean inscrutability.

John Lie is professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley.

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