The Contradictory Locations of the Intellectuals in State Socialism: A Case of the Cultural Revolution in China

Jaeyoun Won*

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of inequality under state socialism through a careful examination of the nature of the Cultural Revolution. First, I review the New Class Theory on state socialism to understand the positions of intellectuals under state socialism. I argue that state socialism is not a classless society nor a workers' state, but a new class society in which the power of capital is replaced by the power of knowledge. If the intellectuals are really the ruling class in state socialism, can the Cultural Revolution be understood as an effort to eliminate the privileges of the intellectuals? In other words, was the Cultural Revolution a Revolution against cultural capital? Or was it merely an example of conflict between two groups of the ruling class, namely bureaucracy and intellectuals in state socialism? My discussion centers on how to understand the characteristics of the Cultural Revolution with the positions of intellectuals under state socialism in this contradictory sense.

Keywords: State Socialism, the Cultural Revolution, Intellectuals, the New Class, China

* Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology of Social Science Yonsei University
134 Sinchon-dong, Seodaemun-gu Seoul, South Korea 120-749
e-mail: jywon@yonsei.ac.kr
I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of inequality under state socialism through a careful examination of the nature of the Cultural Revolution in China. In order to accomplish this task, first I review the New Class Theory on state socialism to understand the positions of intellectuals under state socialism. In the first section, I argue that state socialism is not a classless society nor a workers’ state, but a new class society in which the power of capital is replaced by the power of knowledge. This kind of discussion is based on the previous case studies of state socialism (Djilas, 1957; Konrad and Szelenyi, 1979) in Eastern European countries where the “New Class” was observed to have enjoyed class privileges. For this, I discuss Djilas’ theory of bureaucratic class, and Szelenyi’s and Gouldner’s intellectual class theory. My main interest is in their discussions of the fractions of this New Class. I do not believe that the New Class is a homogenous group in that everybody shares the same interests. Rather, there may be the possibility of struggle within New Class itself.

In the second section, the problems of how to interpret the Cultural Revolution in China are the primary focus. The following questions are addressed in this section. If the intellectuals are really the ruling class in state socialism, can the Cultural Revolution be understood as an effort to eliminate the privileges of the intellectuals? In other words, was the Cultural Revolution a Revolution against cultural capital? Or was it merely an example of conflict between two groups of the ruling class, namely bureaucracy and intellectuals in state socialism? I think the Cultural Revolution embodied both aspects represented in these questions, so it is hard to generalize about the Cultural Revolution as an unified process. My focus centers on how to understand the characteristics of the Cultural Revolution with the positions of intellectuals under state socialism in this contradictory sense. I divide this section into two parts, in the first, I examine the background of the Cultural Revolution with reference to the relationship between the mass populace and the New Class. In the second, I investigate another aspect of the Cultural Revolution, namely the fractional conflicts within the New Class in relation to the generational changes of leaders in socialism. For this paper, class struggle means not only struggle between classes, but also struggle within classes. The Cultural Revolution is an intriguing case to understand the nature of internal class struggle.

Finally, to contribute to the debate on New Class Theory, I summarize some issues