

BEYOND ELECTRONIC INDIVIDUALISM

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At the level of international "common sense," Japan has been considered a society of collective conformity. Most accounts of the now-famous "Japanese management" are based on this notion. However, as Takatori Masao once pointed out, the Japanese have been far more individualistic than they are usually considered in their use of table things such as chopsticks, teacups, and rice bowls. Long before Western individualism was introduced to Japan in the 19th century, the Japanese has been careful about how to use their table things:¹ even today, for instance, *waribashi*, the throw-away chopsticks which seem to be the Japanese counterpart to plastic tableware in the fast-food shop, are not thrown away so much to save the time to wash them, as from the desire to use them as a very private thing, only one time. In the history of Japanese literature, there is a long tradition in which the writer is an isolated recluse (*inja*), a lonely wanderer (*hyohakusha*), or a dissolute loner (*gesakusha*).² Thus, the problem is not whether the Japanese are collectivity-oriented or individualistic, but why they have behaved "collectively" in spite of their individualist tradition.

As I have explained elsewhere,³ the multiplicity of Japanese folk culture was destroyed, on a large scale, by the newly established Emperor System of the Meiji Period and then by the more sophisticated post-war Emperor System. The Emperor System is the "transcendental scheme" under which people are coerced or persuaded into submitting to a collective conformity. It regulates not only the form of the State but also the form of people's consciousness. The pre-war Emperor System replaced the spontaneous, regional and diverse collectivity with a highly artificial homogeneous collectivity, what I have called "*banzai* collectivity." *Banzai* is a special shout and hand gesture of a person or group who blesses the authority (the State, the Emperor, the employer). When a group shouts "banzai!" with one voice, their leader shouts it first, and the others follow. *Banzai* collectivity is not spontaneous but manipulated as a cult. This manipulated collectivity was especially organized after the middle of the *Meiji* era, around 1890, by means of total integration of the educational system, the military system and family life into the Emperor System.

Nihonjin nikansuru Junisho (*Twelve Chapters on the Japanese*)⁴ convincingly criticizes the myth of "the group model of Japanese society" as propagated by Nakane Chie, Doi Takeo, Herman Kahn, Ezra Vogel, and Edwin O. Reischauer.⁵ Harumi Befu, Yoshio Sugimoto, Ross Mouer and others in this book revealed that such stereotypes of the Japanese as "workaholics" or "devoting the self to the group" are not spontaneous social patterns but political phenomena which

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are largely imposed from above by the authority. If the pre-war Japanese society is a good model for such stereotypes, it is so just to the extent that people were forced to submit to strongly centralized and homogenized doctrine. Careful investigations can find a distinct gap between the intention of the dominant system and the "pretended" obedience of the people. The Japanese people never surrendered to the authority but have also resisted it directly or indirectly: what looked like surrender was basically a popular cunning in managing "*hone*" (true intentions and desires) and "*tatemae*" (official stance) properly. According to Yoshio Sugimoto's provocative study, *Popular Disturbance in Postwar Japan*,⁶ Japanese society is far from a "uniquely harmonious whole," but every age has witnessed its own kind of conflict. Between 1952 and 1960, there were 945 cases of popular disturbances in Japan which resulted in human injury, property damage or police intervention. By contrast, in France between 1950 and 1960 there were only 163 such cases.

Few popular disturbances are perceived because the control apparatus to quickly absorb them is fully established: mass media. In Japan, mass media tend to function as an apparatus of social amnesia. The prewar Emperor System, lacking in a persuasional apparatus, had to resort to the police to threaten the people into submission. By comparison, the postwar Emperor System stresses the persuasive side of domination with the help of the mass media, and the System is incorporated into a larger reproduction system that has been reorganized on the U.S. model. The centralizing and homogenizing function of the Emperor System harmonizes operated in sync with the mass media and the economic system of mass production and mass consumption. This is the main reason the Emperor System is usually invisible today.⁷

As early as the late 1960s, the life style of Japanese had become largely Americanized. Over fifty percent of Japanese households owned a refrigerator, a vacuum cleaner, an electric washing machine, and a television set, all indispensable to the American Way of Life. Nevertheless, the work ethic and the social behavior were, in the '60s, not so different from the prewar period in their collective conformity. Japanese consumer society was introduced from outside and the "instrumental reason" of advanced capitalism did not yet come into full operation but remained within Emperorism — a variation of State capitalism. Thus, the full growth of advanced capitalism must change and go beyond the structure of the Emperor System. This has, in a way, begun in the late 1970s. If the Japanese system can develop along the lines of technological capitalism as it stands, it might defuse the Emperor System by itself. However, the dilemma of capitalism is that it has to suppress its own potentiality to develop itself: otherwise it will abolish itself. The Emperor System is the decisive factor in the contradictory development of Japanese capitalism. In this sense, today's Japan seems to be on the brink of changing either into a more democratic society or into a far more repressive society.

The Emperor System functions just as long as individualism is repressed. The development of capitalism requires a middle class which is the relatively autonomous (i.e. individualist) stratum. The middle class is the social expression

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of individualism. Thus, capitalism has to "promote" the middle class to a certain degree of individualism if it does not so develop by itself. Such is the case in Japan. In the 1960s, when Japanese mass production-consumption economy had just been launched, the system still responded to collectivist needs. Workers and consumers within this system were still expected to form a collective, a (kind of) family. Workers were not so isolated (artificially "individualized") as in today's computerized factory and business office. However, the highly technological development of the production system in the 1970s (a response to the oil crisis and to wage increases) resulted in a major reorganization of the labor market. The current system has a tendency to employ a handful of full-time specialists (very skilled workers, professionals, and administrators) and as many part-time workers as are disposable at any time. This reorganization of the labor market results in an increase of unemployment among traditional workers, a cruel redistribution of labor, an abnormal acceleration of meritocracy, and an emasculation of labor unions and the workers' movement. On the other hand, a new labor market of part-time jobs presents married women with the possibility of freeing themselves from the domestic economy that would otherwise keep them totally dependent on their husbands. This helps, in a way, to raise women's social consciousness, which might burst out into a more self-conscious feminism or critical social movement in the future.⁸

For the moment though, the "independent" woman has become a new consumer. Nonetheless, the level of consumption has also come to have a dual meaning. In the 1960s, popular commodities of the day like refrigerators, furniture, and television sets were not for personal use but for the family. However by the end of the 1970s, the basic necessities of life were supplied in every household, and the system needed more segmented markets than the family or the group for the further development of consumption. A single person has become more desirable than the group. Moreover, even a unit of individual consciousness is segmented into various egos or moments of desire: for instance, various kinds of television sets are invented and sold to a consumer who uses them for different occasions and purposes! Thus market segmentation must diversify the society that had been homogenized by the Emperor System. Of course, marketing techniques cannot totally control such diversification but provide possibilities for consumers to liberate themselves from their forced conformity.

According to the 1981 *White Paper on National Life*, the consumption of quality goods increased in spite of the decrease of disposable income of the salaried classes. Various kinds of wine and cooked quality foods are displayed in the windows of shops, and they, along with other daily goods, are now changing the life style of the Japanese middle class. Even in Tokyo, a kind of "gentrification" is going on right now. Metropolitan areas house an increasing number of professional upper class people who prefer luxurious apartment living to a suburban residence.

The cultural difference between city and suburb is gradually becoming more noticeable. While single persons, childless couples, and the professional upper

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class want to live in the city, average middle class people and working class people have an inevitable tendency to live in the suburb. In the city it is expensive to get space enough for a household with children. In order to get their own house, people use a long-term (at least twenty-year) consumer loan, which is more suitable for salaried people with "lifetime employment." This debt then enchains them for the rest of their lives. Consequently, suburban culture becomes more conservative. Debtors of long-term loans can neither make a failure of their lives nor take a risk.⁹ This conservative culture is "individualistic" to the extent that its members are egoistic and less concerned about the world outside the family. Their main concern is to develop their family income and have their children go to a "good" school which eventually would guarantee a so-called successful job for them.

In this sense, it is doubtful that salaried people in Japan devote themselves to their companies willingly, in unique harmony with the system. It's more the case that they seem to submit unwillingly to the employer. In recent years, young employees don't like to get together over *sake* or beer with their bosses after work. Such meetings used to have an important function in unifying them as a "family" and was almost institutionalized. During the 1970s, the style of the get-together or party at the drinking establishments was gradually changed. One of the most remarkable changes is the appearance of *karaoke*, an electronic device with tape-recorder, amplifier, effector, speaker, and microphone, by which one can sing a song to the taped accompaniment of a professional orchestra. In a party with *karaoke*, people sing songs one after another. Even at a conventional party people used to sing songs, so it might seem that the appearance of *karaoke* has not changed the form of collectivity at all. However, there is a big difference. Careful observation of the relationship between the "performer" and the "audience" reveals that they are united only through the help of electronic media. *Karaoke* performs the function of unifying people who have lost their ability to communicate with each other by their oral media (the body itself).

As far as the present Japanese collectivity is concerned, it is electronic and very temporal, rather than a conventional, continuous collectivity based on language, race, religion, region or taste. A more vivid example of electronic collectivity is the "Walkman," a tiny cassette player with a headphone. "Walkman" is already an internationally popular commodity of SONY, but it has a special meaning in Japanese society. This device is for personal use only, so that the users are isolated from each other even if they listen to the same music source. They are united in the way of marionettes. "Walkman" users form a collectivity of marionettes, maintaining some kind of individualism of the user. When there is a weak pull on the string, the marionette can, to an extent, enjoy a sense of individualism: electronic individualism. When, though, there is a strong pull, the users will be totally integrated into an electronic collectivity just like with *karaoke*, without knowing they are being manipulated. This really happens to the extent that the music source is not diversified. In fact, most users of "Walkman" in Japan are listening to FM radio, which is awfully monotonous and is not free from the control of the government and the culture industries.

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The recent mushrooming of free radio stations in Japan might overcome this electronic collectivity, and help to promote a movement towards an electronic individualism and then, hopefully, an autonomous individualism. Since 1982, hundreds of tiny FM stations, using legal, very low-power transmitters, have appeared in every city of Japan, and are broadcasting their own programs for their limited service areas. Although the area is only a circle with a .3 mile radius at best, in the dense Japanese city this may mean a potential audience of as many as 20,000 people. These tiny radio stations are now succeeding in changing the human relationships of communities in several places. Given the continuing proliferation of this type of station, this "boom" has interesting possibilities.¹⁰

Although Japanese society has never experienced a bourgeois revolution for individual freedom, today's technological development is paradoxically developing an electronic individualism. This individualism has a dual possibility. It might open up some conditions favorable to the development of radical democracy¹¹ or it might offer an opportunity for the system to control people in a very sophisticated way: a system in which everyone *felt independent* of the system. It is quite natural that the system tries to protect itself against radicalization by means of robotization in the factory, computerization in the business world and by extraordinary permeation of electronic media in the personal milieu. If people would radicalize this electronic individualism, they might work out a new form of democratic collaboration among individuals, and have an opportunity to overcome the whole form of the Emperor System.

Notes

1. Takatori Masao: *Nihonteki-shiko no Genkei (Original Types of Japanese Thinking)*, Kodansha, Tokyo, 1975, pp. 8-39.
2. As for this theme, hundreds of books and articles have been written in Japanese. Hirose Tamotsu: *Yugyo-Akubasho (Flânerie-Untouchable District)*, Miraisha, Tokyo, 1975 provides a brilliant account of the notions of *inja* and *hyohakusha*.
3. Kogawa Tetsuo: "Japan as a Manipulated Society", *Telos*, no. 49, Fall 1981, pp. 138-140.
4. Yoshio Sugimoto and Ross E. Mouer (eds), Gakuyo-shobo, Tokyo, 1982. This book is a revised edition from the special issue of *Social Analysis*, no. 5-6, December 1980.
5. The following books have had a great influence on establishing such a myth: Nakane: *Tate Shakai no Ningankankei (Human Relations in Vertically Structured Japanese Society)*, Kodansha, Tokyo, 1968; Doi: "Amae" no Kozo (*The Structure of 'Amae'*), Kobundo, Tokyo, 1971; Kahn: *The Emerging Japanese Superstate: Challenge and Response*, 1970; Vogel: *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America*, Cambridge, Mass., 1979; Reischauer: *The Japanese*, Cambridge, Mass., 1977. One of the best self-criticisms and de-mystifications of American Japanology and Ruth Benedict is in Charles Douglas Lummis: *Uchinaru Gaioku — Kiku to Katana Saiko (Inner Foreign Countries: A Reappraisal of «The Chrysanthemum and the Sword»)*, Jiji-tsushinsha, Tokyo, 1981.
6. Yoshio Sugimoto: *Popular Disturbance in Postwar Japan*, Asian Research Service, Hong Kong, 1981.
7. "Tennnosei-Bunkasochi no Kozo" ("The Structure of the Cultural Apparatus of Emperor System"), in my book *Hihan no Kairo (The Circuit of Criticizing)*, Sojusha, Tokyo, 1981, pp. 91-124.

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8. Traditionally, Japanese companies have had a full-time contract with a great number of young women office workers every year who are, however, expected to retire in their late twenties on their marriage. Most of them have been engaged in routine work. This tricky system has been recently going not so well as ever. As the number of single women is growing, companies cannot expect their "spontaneous" retirement. Thus, more "smart" companies have a tendency to reduce such employment and to accelerate the computerization of routine work. In this sense, the women worker in general faces and realizes increasingly explicit social contradictions.
9. Kamata Satoshi provided a shocking account of workers who suffer from "my home" ideology and the tragic cost. See his "Mochie de Jinsei o Kosokusareru Hitobito" ("People who are Disabled by their Own House"), *Economist*, April 28, 1981. Cf. *Japan in the Passing Lane: An Insider's Account of Life in a Japanese Auto Factory* by the same author, New York, 1983.
10. See my account on "Free Radio in Japan" in Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier (eds): *Cultures in Contention*, Seattle, 1984.
11. I use this term in the context of Charles Douglas Lummis: "The Radicalism of Democracy" in *Democracy*, Vol. 2, no. 4, Fall 1982, pp. 9-16.