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Toward an Environmental Paradigm with a Priority on Social Life

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1. CLARIFYING MY OBJECTIVES

This paper does not directly address the issues, which have been discussed over the last two days, of environmental problems in China and Thailand. My goal is rather to introduce what I have come to feel, in the course of my field research in Asia, and especially in Japan, is the most persuasive paradigm for solving environmental problems. What I mean here by persuasive is environmental policy that is implemented not as a sociological theory within an "ivory toweresque" framework, but which has persuasive power over citizens and local residents.

The paradigm I have come to accept is life-environmentalism, and it is fundamentally different from the paradigms based on ecology that have become accepted in the advanced industrial countries and by international institutions like the United Nations. It is inconceivable, of course, that there is a single effective paradigm to solve environmental problems. The reason for this is that all places around the world have unique characteristics. The life-environmentalism which I espouse is of particular value in Asia and some parts of Africa, with their high population densities. I do not believe it would be particularly applicable to the United States, for instance, where there is a lot of leeway in terms of land, and where there is great cultural diversity. By density here I do not mean simply the statistical relationship between geographical space and population, but rather density in terms of production and living. By dense I mean a situation in which as much living and producing is taking place in a place as it can support. Consequently, Mongolia, which has grazing as its primary industry, may have a very low population density when measured by population and geographical space, but it is dense in the sense that any further increase in grazing would render the industry unsustainable. It is within densely populated areas, in this sense of the term, that the paradigm of life-environmentalism becomes powerful.

2. WHY HAS IT BECOME IMPORTANT TO MAKE RESIDENTS THE FOCUS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES?

In simple terms, the attraction that theories based on ecology hold for environmental policy is that it is difficult, in general, to find anybody opposed to the idea that humanity must pay more attention to nature. The reality, however, is that although this generalization is accepted to some degree everywhere, there are many regions where it is only partly accepted, often because their own regional living conditions are intertwined with nature, but not to always stand on the side of nature. In other words, there is an unexpectedly large number of regions where, although respect is professed for the principle, there is a need for strategies that are closer to the lives of the inhabitants in order to promote better environmental policy.

I would like to begin, then, by explaining why this paradigm places its major focus on residents, and will then go on to describe the paradigm of life-environmentalism.

As Japan entered the 1960s, a series of realities came to light. Concrete research was conducted on a development project in Kashima (the Kashima petrochemical complex), and it was found that (1) it did not vitalize the local ports in the area; (2) there was no population increase in area towns; (3) it failed to attract related industries to the region; and (4) it did not promote the local economy. The reason for this is that the very idea of a petroleum complex is to build a closed system with the purpose of rationalization. In other words, this system failed to bring any system to the local economy right outside it. The benefits accrued to the company headquarters in Tokyo, and the economic ripple effects benefited other cities with existing corporate facilities. The only things that Kashima got were new pollution problems and land disputes.

Beginning at that time, it became known that there were many other similar examples, and that the problem was not limited to urban and rural areas in Japan alone, but could also be seen in the relationship between the developed and developing nations.

To describe this situation, sociologist Takamichi Kajita from Hitotsubashi University developed the terms victimization zone (*jukuken*) and benefit zone (*juekiken*). Kajita felt compelled to use these terms for the following reason. In the period before Japan's high economic growth in the 1960s, the benefit zones and victimization zones were not very far apart, and often overlapped, so in many cases it was possible to reach mutual understanding and compromise. The megadevelopment projects of the high-growth period, by contrast, had the following three salient characteristics: (1) the benefit zones and victimization zones were totally separated; (2) the zones of benefit became larger, and separate from each other; and (3) the zones of victimization tended to concentrate in one place (Kajita, 1988, pp. 8-9).

This new reality objectively demonstrated the need to develop new paradigms from the perspective of the zones of victimization. This was the reason for the emergence of the life-environmentalism paradigm.

3. THREE PARADIGMS

In 1980, when I began espousing the life-environmentalism paradigm, there were two major perspectives on environmental conservation. One was the call for protecting the natural environment on the basis of ecology, which is related to the field of biology. This we term natural environmentalism. The other is the idea that the development of modern technology

will allow us to solve environmental problems, and we call it modern techno-centrism. As I looked at various cases at that time, however, I found many that could not be fit into either of these two paradigms, and in response I developed the idea of life-environmentalism. This view is that the most important thing for local residents of a locality is the conservation of the area's local life system.

The reason I added "-ism" to these paradigms is that they can all be termed philosophies or ways of thinking, and that because they can be classified as standards concerning value, they can be termed ideologies. And just as no ideology can be unequivocally "correct" or "mistaken," none of the three can be considered fundamentally superior to the others. However, the reason we stressed the idea of life-environmentalism is that there were at the time no systematic policies based on these values, and as a result, completely inappropriate policies were being taken.

4. COMPARING THE THREE TYPES

I would now like to describe the characteristics of life-environmentalism by contrasting it to the two other paradigm types, and in the following section will give a description of it. Because natural-environmentalism enjoys wide support throughout the world, and because it provides the theoretical pillar for many environmental movements, I would like to carefully point out the differences.

The paradigm of natural environmentalism has many worthwhile ideas, such as its criticism of human exceptionalism (the viewpoint that human beings are different from other life forms) (Catton and Dunlap, 1978, pp. 256-259), and its emphasis on the significance of biodiversity. Unfortunately, however, observations from actual sites of environmental problems demonstrate that there are sometimes cases in which this paradigm is inappropriate.

As an extreme example of the differences between natural environmentalism and life-environmentalism, I would like to point to this statement from the floor at the World Commission on Environment and Development:

"You talk very little about life, you talk too much about survival. It is very important to remember that when the possibilities for life are over, the possibilities for survival start. And there are peoples here in Brazil, especially in the Amazon region, who still live, and these peoples that still live don't want to reach down to the level of survival" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 40). When a certain tropical forest is poised to undergo development, there are always discussions on the fact that food shortages may threaten the survival of the indigenous people, but there are hardly ever debates on the social life led by the families and local community. The statement quoted above concerns precisely this issue. However, because natural environmentalism is founded upon ecology, which is a branch of biology, it considers first and foremost the "survival" of human beings, as it does that of other species, and it does not go so far to consider the daily "lives" of the people, complete with joy and sorrow. Can it be proper, though, to establish environmental policy on the basis of the idea of survival?

I would like to use some examples from Mongolia, where I conducted field research. This country currently has six major environmental issues, including three serious ones, (1) the destruction of the grasslands, (2) deforestation, and (3) air pollution in and around Ulan Bator, and three potential problems: (1) the decline in species diversity as a result of habitat destruction, (2) water pollution caused by mining, and (3) various negative changes in

lifestyles due to urbanization and industrialization such as overcrowding, pollution, and ecosystem destruction.

Because the Mongolian government believes in the importance of preserving nature, it introduced ecotourism (a style of tourism that also respects nature) as a way to balance environmental protection with the acquisition of foreign currency, and it received assistance from the United Nations and other agencies in formulating a blueprint to transform this style of tourism into an industry.

I was shocked when I discovered the strategies proposed by this blueprint. It suggested creating 12 natural reserves, with an area equivalent to the land mass of Portugal. The areas inside the reserves would be for nature, and those outside for human beings. Admittedly, this would help to make the nature inside the reserves "natural," and the blueprint proposed making these areas the focus for ecotourism. Finally, it called for the establishment of a government agency to oversee the reserves. This is a typical pattern of natural environmentalism.

So what is the problem? Under this plan, which the Mongolian government accepted and is now implementing, the country's overall environment will be sacrificed for the sake of protecting some sections. The first sector to be devastated will be livestock grazing, which is one of the country's traditional industries. As is well known, grazing requires livestock to be moved from place to place, and under the new plan, in principle, this activity will no longer be allowed in the natural reserves. As a result, the rest of the country will suffer from overgrazing, leading to the destruction of the grasslands, which will bring poverty to the grazing farmers, in turn forcing these people either to become dependent on the forests (through logging) or to move into the cities. Even today, the city of Ulan Bator is surrounded by 40,000 encampments of *gers* (tents) inhabited by former nomads, causing many problems of urban pollution such as garbage. Thus, causing even more people to move into the city will create unbelievable troubles. In sum, this policy will only intensify all three of the most serious environmental problems facing the country.

From the viewpoint of life-environmentalism, the above-mentioned problems will occur because the government, with its natural environmentalist attitude, has only looked at the ecosystem and has failed to see the social life system. Now, how would life-environmentalism propose to solve these problems in the ecotourism plan? First of all, it would not recommend setting up natural preserves and forcing local people out. The reason is that the nomadic people live with nature, so it is the very harmony of the local residents with nature which should be the focus of the tourism. We believe that the point should be to show the relationship between people and nature. Concretely speaking, the tourism should not be conducted by the central government, but rather by the locality, which understands best how people cohabit with nature, and it should be a project for the local governments. Thus, policies dictated by life-environmentalism differ greatly from those of natural environmentalism.

Modern technology can be both beneficial and harmful to the environment, but everybody knows that its use is causing grave environmental problems, so I do not feel it is necessary to demonstrate this in detail in this paper. However, since the assembly of modern technology into a petroleum complex rationalizes the internal structure, but causes incredible damage to the local community surrounding the complex, we would suggest that the focus needs to be shifted away from techno-rationality toward life-rationality in the region where the technology is employed. In addition, rivers are put to many uses, so we would point out that they should not be seen simply as water supply, and that it is odd to put concrete linings on rivers without considering the effect on the lives of residents.

5. A ROUGH SKETCH OF LIFE-ENVIRONMENTALISM

The core of life-environmentalism is that the maintenance of local social life should be given the first priority. Since this social life usually functions through social life systems, our attention is usually focused on families, kinship organizations, neighborhoods or small communities. This means a community that encompasses people's lives, so its size can depend on the locality's history and culture. Through observations of a variety of places, I have discovered that whenever such a system is maintained, residents can mitigate the impacts of harsh development, and the community can sometimes act as a barrier against environmental destruction. In contrast to this, the absence or collapse of such systems can lead to tragic environmental devastation, and in many cases to the destruction of life itself. Moreover, these communities can often become the subjects of resistance, so at least in the case of Japan, developers often implement a strategy of attempting to split them internally and thus weaken their power.

Life-environmentalists have primarily analyzed the following factors: (1) the logical base and rights upon which the community calls for environmental protection in opposition to developers and governments; (2) the values and norms which govern decision-making among the residents; and (3) an organizational analysis of the factors behind splits in the organizations. Here, however, I would like to limit my description to factor (1) as an example of the logic of life-environmentalism (for a more detailed understanding of the paradigm, see Torigoe, 1989, pp. 64-73).

Whenever severe environmental problems are brought to a community by development, the residents tend to oppose it and occasionally file lawsuits, appealing to "environmental rights" as defined by the Declaration on the Human Environment, however, which was adopted in Stockholm in 1972. They have been turned away by the courts, because they do not suffer any direct damages infringing upon their private rights. This is because the private right to property is given great weight under the law. For instance, in one case in Kyoto, a developer purchased a beautiful and historically famous hill called Ichijo-Yama, and subsequently shaved off its top to make a residential development. The local residents possessed no legal title to the land, so they were not able to apply for a restraining order. In the end, the trees were cut off the slopes, leaving only those on the top, and the hill now looks as if it has a Mohawk haircut. People in environmental movements often stress their "environmental rights," but these rights are not recognized by the courts.

In Kobe City, there is a 20-meter wide river called the Togagawa River. Like many other rivers in the city, it was very polluted, and a group of residents launched a movement to clean it up. They spent a great deal of energy convincing individuals and hotels upstream to stop dumping wastewater into it, and asked the city administration to support their efforts. After a great deal of work, the river was cleaned up, and local children were able to play in its water rather than using the pools at their schools. At the beginning, the city government took a rather dim view of the movement, finding the activists "lacking in common sense," but began to support it after it emerged as a model for community-building. The case even appeared in city government pamphlets, which described it as an example of the environment being beautified through the efforts of citizens themselves. As a result, it is now impossible for the city government to undertake construction work without getting the approval of this local group. This kind of right is termed "common possessory rights." The reason this sort of right was so easily established is that it existed historically in Japan. People had some form of right to things they had contributed to in order to receive benefits, even if

they had no private property rights. Similarly, tenant farmers had some rights vis-à-vis the landowners. During the planting season, the tenants had a great deal of leeway in decision-making. Life-environmentalists put their efforts into uncovering such historical and cultural rights. Because these rights existed traditionally, we find that asserting them is more effective in present day Japan than claiming new ones such as "environmental rights." In other words, life-environmentalism, is a method to form effective logic through an analysis of the historical and cultural values of people living in a region.

What I have learned from my field research is that the preservation of the local community is the key to environmental conservation. This is likely because all regions have their own specific features. Residents of small communities have not forgotten, as the ecology and modern technology paradigms seem to have, that people have long lived in relationship with nature. Whenever we find cases of people in a small community backing the environmental destruction of their own locality, it is certain that one can find contradictions at the larger social level, and it is only that the responsibility is falling upon the shoulders of local residents. When working to solve environmental problems, the most important need is to analyze the maintenance and way of conducting social life systems or small communities.

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