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Meaning of Area Studies

Hiroichi Yamaguchi

Why the Conflicts Occur?

After the cold war ended, the number of ongoing conflicts in the Third World grew much larger than during the cold war, and most of them have been domestic, rather than international quarrels. The usual, convenient explanation for this is that the loosening of the grip by the super powers has led to the free play of the various nationalist forces demanding a greater say in the decision-making process, regional autonomy, and ultimately separatism.

Would it not be possible to assume, however, that what has actually happened is rather the other way round, and the very work of those nationalist or democratic forces has brought the cold war to an end?

During the cold war period, two types of developmental dictatorship were maintained or brought into being. One, the older of the two, was the Soviet system, which took shape during the late 1920s and early 1930s, the early years of the Stalinist era. The other form was typical of South Korea and Taiwan after the Second World War, and came to be accepted widely among the developing countries.

What is relevant here is that, in both systems, internal tensions were the systems' own making, and the demand for democratization, often coupled with demand for minority rights, increasingly gathered strength, ultimately breaking up both of the systems almost simultaneously toward the end of 1980s. The breakup of the Soviet Union, which is now almost synonymous

with the end of the cold war, was a part of this larger process of world-wide democratization. The Soviet Union itself was undoubtedly the greatest casualty.¹ But the two former South Korean presidents who are on trial at the time of this writing are no less conspicuous cases.

The Leninist and Wilsonian principle of national self-determination has been confirmed by the United Nations Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples of 1960, which was the "Year of Africa." This was the first of its sort, and has effectively nullified Chapter 11 of the UN Charter, on the Non-Self-Governing Territories, allowing the colonial powers, as late as in 1945, to retain their colonies.

The above-mentioned trend for democratization shows that at last these ideals are being realized if not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. But the real question at the moment is how this principle of self-determination can be reconciled with not simply peaceful but meaningful coexistence of various national and other ethnic groups within a single country.

We know for sure how conflicts have occurred in certain cases. Yugoslavia had been a hope for such coexistence for a long time, no matter whether one liked their political ideology or not. But in 1991 such hopes were given a shattering blow. Slovenia and, more importantly, Croatia claimed almost unilateral independence. They became national states. But the crucial point was that no agreement had been worked out beforehand as to how the substantial Serbian minority in Croatia would be treated after Croatia's independence. This, coupled with the memory of the war time, triggered off conflict, which in turn paved the way for the war of atrocities in neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina. Under the circumstances, are the Serbians the only ones to blame? Is the West not to blame for having encouraged the Croatians to hastily split from the then Yugoslavia?

In this case, the idea of the Croatian national state as it stood then was apparently too narrow, too ungenerous, and premature. But this is by no means limited to that country. Multinational societies do not automatically generate conflicts among their component groups. Conflicts are preventable. But it takes certain measures to prevent them from happening, such as democratization, demilitarization, and alternative development, to make people free from fear and want.

We will return to this later. But it should be added here that it is wrong to assert, in the light of the above, that, with domestic conflicts happening in growing numbers, it is time for the international community to be prepared to deal with these tensions militarily, under the UN initiative or otherwise. This would lead to more militarization of the world, and only make it more difficult to ease these tensions in longer times.

On the National Boundaries

In the preceding section, it has been assumed that there are many countries which are multiethnic and multinational in character. This makes it necessary to look at the nature of the national boundaries as they exist today a little closely.

The first point to be made is that the present national boundaries are not always to be taken for granted. This is because the present boundaries have often been arbitrarily drawn.

This is, of course, not to suggest that they can be easily redrawn. But as the result of this arbitrariness, a state often contains more than one national group within its boundaries, and, what is more, some of those groups are not entirely within these boundaries. They are transnational.

This is a point often difficult to bring home to the Japanese. They are likely to be shocked to see that a country they come into contact with is, more often than not, a multinational one. They are much more at home with the notion of a country with one people, one color, and one language, symbols of a single-nation state.

Incidentally, the erstwhile nation-states themselves are increasingly found to be different these days. Theoretically a nation-state is a community of free men and women who have centered round a certain set of ideals—Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, for example—regardless of the difference in color, creed, or even language. These nation-states seem to have largely changed into as many multinational states by now. For those reasons, a researcher very often finds the boundaries of the country of his study extremely curious, interesting, even exciting.

Many such examples can be cited, and the case of Iran may be as good as any. In a recent book edited by Keith McLachlan,² literally the entire length of Iran's international boundaries is placed, section by section, under careful scrutiny, including its maritime boundaries in the Persian Gulf. It is shown that each of those sections has its own history. The evolution of Iran as a modern state has been very closely interwoven with the fixation, often in a hurried manner, of each section as part of Iran's national boundary. There are many other examples of boundaries which call for similar in-depth analysis.

Cases like these would also suggest that, when writing a history of one country, the historian should not treat it as self-contained. This applies even to a country like Japan with a seemingly long and uninterrupted self-contained history. Japanese historians have repeatedly warned, at least since the early

1970s, that the history of Japan should be written within a wider perspective, encompassing East Asia, for example. Otherwise, its history would be an isolated one, and its achievements and failures would have to be accounted for primarily on the basis of the characteristics of the Japanese people.

Today, however, history of some countries is being written with practically no reference to the international context, as if those countries have existed within the same boundaries since time immemorial. Such an attitude has dangerous implications, as it may cause tensions with neighboring countries, and also may make some of the minorities in those countries themselves feel alienated, and outside the mainstream of national life.

National Background of a Researcher

Here we would first like to take up the issue of the national bias of the researcher himself. By this we mean that a researcher's view is conditioned by the particular experiences of modernization that his country or, assuming that he belongs to a multinational society, his own national group has gone through. It is by no means implied here that it is wrong to be conditioned like this. On the contrary, he will get a tool for comparative analysis if he uses those experiences properly.

When a Japanese researcher studies the nation-building process of a certain country, it will make a very substantial difference if he critically uses the experiences of nation building of his own country, like the life-and-death struggle between the Meiji government and the *jiyū minken* (freedom and people's rights) movement—it was the latter that a Japanese historian Shisō Hattori aptly called “the Revolution of Meiji”—and the emergence of the strong Meiji state after the collapse of the *jiyū minken*. It will be to his great advantage, and it will enable him to take part in an international academic division of labor on the country under study by making use of his own national background.

A point not dissimilar to this was made by a noted economist from India, the late Sukhmoy Chakravarty. In his talk in Japan in 1989 on how the Japanese and Indian scholars could interact, he expressed the view that what would be of greatest interest to the Indian side was what particular concepts or categories the Japanese social sciences had produced.

Another point is whether it would be possible to exclude certain societies from the applicability of social science disciplines, ostensibly because various functions in those societies are not easily separable from one another. Sometimes Africa is discussed as a case in point, and it is said that African study is an academic discipline by itself.³ One wonders if this is not really

cultural relativism in the extreme. Such an argument makes Africa a very special case, different from all other societies, and renders communications between Africa specialists and others, or between anthropologists and other social scientists, almost impossible.

Let us turn to the word "Asia," which can at times provoke very emotional response among Asians. Broadly it has two different meanings.

One is revealed when the non-Western people want to criticize the West, in the name of Asia, for its corruption, decadence, colonial exploitation, and the like. This is when "Asia" is a positive and progressive concept embodying universal values such as independence and human rights.

The other "Asia" is used when the non-Western people want to camouflage their dictatorial regime, also in the name of Asia. This is when "Asia" becomes a negative, even a mysterious concept, and does not represent any universal values.

In recent years, "Asia" is often used in this latter meaning in order to defend developmental dictatorship in a number of countries. Recently, a protagonist of this view, a well-known statesman, made news by sitting in the cockpit of a fighter plane newly acquired from Russia, thus contributing to the trend of overall armament in Asia as well. According to this version, democracy in its "classical" sense is derived from the specific circumstances of the West, and not applicable in the different socio-political climate of Asia. This version helps to keep people obedient and voiceless, urging them to wait until enough growth has been achieved to permit democracy, which is by then a luxurious institution.

The crucial demarcation between the two seems to be the difference of attitude towards human rights. This point will be referred to later.

A Short History of Area Studies in Japan

There is a real fear that the uncritical use of the twin terms "developed countries" and "developing countries" may produce in the mind of people an idea that the demarcation between the two is rigid, unsurmountable, and has been there all the time, although the use of those terms is a relatively recent one. Indeed people often lose sight of the fact that the distinction between the two gradually became apparent owing to certain historical circumstances.

In the history of area studies, it may be observed that one theory after another has been put forward in order to justify colonial subjugation, or, to explain why some countries have experienced little socioeconomic uplift since decolonization. In other words, some societies were deemed stagnant, unable to produce their own leverage for change.

A glimpse into the history of the Asian studies in Japan would show, however, that some noteworthy attempts were also made to overcome the notion, persistent in Japan and in Japanese social sciences, of stagnant Asian society, sometimes against extremely heavy odds during the war. The debate on China's unification during the late 1930s is a case in point.

This was set off by an article published early in 1937 by Tadao Yanaihara, on the eve of Japan's all-out attack on China, and under the direct impact of the Xian Incident of December 1936. There he argued that China was well on the road to capitalist unification under the leadership of the Kuomintang, supported by the powerful business community from Shanghai. Japan should accept this as a fact and try to adjust its China policies accordingly.

Against this, two diametrically opposed critical views were presented within a matter of several months. One was by Suehiro Ōgami, who said that China at the time was under strict semi-colonial and semi-feudal bondage, and it was utterly impossible to conceive of a way out other than by a force from outside. In theoretical terms, this argument was very similar to the latter-day dependency theory developed in Latin America and elsewhere, but, whether it was the intention of Ōgami or not, this was nothing but a way of justifying Japanese intervention in China.

The other criticism was by Kō Nakanishi. He accepted that China was under the dual bondage described by Ōgami. But he also pointed out that there was a strong possibility that China would overcome the crisis once its national bourgeoisie, the working class, the peasantry, and even the semi-feudal elements made a common cause against the predominant foreign power facing China, meaning Japan.

A triangular debate thus developed, which encompassed a number of issues that were exciting both from academic and practical points of view. It was soon discontinued because of the crackdown on the freedom of the press. We know, however, that even during the war years some studies were under way to analyze how in Asian countries, and particularly in China, conditions were ripening both for driving out the aggressors and for reforming the existing social structure.

These were indeed the beginnings of area studies in Japan which were made through a dialogue, or perhaps a monologue, with Asia under the strained wartime conditions. We may even say that the social sciences of Japan thus came of age, significantly at a time when the intellectual thinking of the West was practically barred from the country.

What was achieved during the war years, however, was largely forgotten for many years after the war, partly because researchers were overwhelmed by the Chinese Revolution and other events of history. At the same time,

occupied Japan was dramatically exposed to the cultural influence of the United States, at a time when the latter was going through the agony of McCarthyism and its aftermath, and the critical social scientific thinking there had to maintain a low key.

It was against this background that the modernization theory was introduced into Japan around 1960. Since then it has seriously jeopardized the social scientific thinking in Japan, at least in so far as it is related to the understanding of developing countries. The theory showed that Japan, and Japan alone, had made notable progress in Asia, implying that Japan would be the role model for other Asian countries.

But the theory has completely disregarded the cost, especially the human cost,⁴ that had to be paid in the process. It has been concerned only with the achievement of a society measured in terms of some artificial indices without any reference to the international context. When the result thus arrived at is compared with that of Japan, it only stresses the stagnation of Asia and the progress made in Japan.

The above-mentioned wartime research in Japan tried, in however scattered a manner, to find the human face in Asia which was struggling for reform, change, and uplift. In the now fashionable thinking of modernization, all this has been discarded and the demarcation between the developed and the developing has become rigid. As such, the modernization theory is a modern variation of the theory of stagnant Asian society.

When the newly industrializing countries (NICs) came into the spotlight from the early 1970s, it became necessary to look for some factors common to Japan and the NICs to explain the economic growth for both of them.⁵ Confucianism has sometimes been presented as one such factor. But the manner in which Confucianism is discussed in this context is, to say the least, controversial.

Need for Alternative Development

There seems to be enough evidence, either documented or obtained through field observation, to suggest that environmental degradation has been under way continuously in almost all Asian and other developing countries for the past two to three decades.

What is of particular interest to the area specialist in this regard is that this applies not only to those countries usually associated with high birth and total fertility rates, such as countries in Africa, or with massive clearing of forests, such as Brazil. It also applies to those countries in East and Southeast Asia associated with high economic growth.

In other words, when the high growth in East and Southeast Asia is talked about approvingly in terms of the virtuous circle of greater investments and exports, such aspects as environmental degradation usually go unheeded. But these are actually the other side of the development coin. It may be said, therefore, that the usual measurement of success is too simple.

Environment is, however, not the only thing that is left out when development economics talks about growth. At the symposium to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the Institute of Developing Economies (IDE), held toward the end of 1990 to review the experiences of the past three decades of development, probably the most outstanding feature that was revealed was that income disparities were widening everywhere in the developing world.⁶ Nevertheless, this also has tended to be hidden behind the talk of the virtuous circle.

Both the development economist and the area specialist will be held responsible for this state of affairs. An economist or any other social scientist who is not working on a particular area and may be called a "generalist" for want of a better term, likes to apply his formula from one country to another making use of country data primarily as input into his generalized conceptual scheme.

The area specialist, on the other hand, tends to be submerged in his area of research, and is often poorly positioned to undertake comparative studies. There should be more, and indeed much more, dialogue between the two. Otherwise, all the talk on growth will remain deprived of human flavor.

An interesting example showing this may be found in a paper read by an economist at another IDE symposium in 1989. There Chile was referred to as making exceptional economic recovery among the Latin American countries. But if one looked at Chile from a different angle, it might have been noticed that, simultaneous with this exceptional economic recovery, the resistance movement against the military dictatorship was being intensified, leading to the resounding victory of the people in the plebiscite in October 1988.

If such things as environment, income disparity, and human rights are taken into account, the natural conclusion would be that an alternative scenario for development, other than the fashionable East Asian model, is needed. It will have to be consistent with our criticism of the past performance of East and Southeast Asia. At the same time it should provide a broad sketch of future development for those areas not covered by the East Asian model.⁷

Collapse of Dictatorship

There seems to be a general trend toward democratization the world over from around 1980. Indeed, there is a long list of countries where at least some measure of democratization has been achieved since that time. This itself shows that political democracy, a system in which people can elect their own government and keep it under their surveillance, is an essential part of any alternative development scenario. It is by no means a Western-biased institution not applicable to the non-Western world.

For this reason it has become increasingly difficult to defend dictatorial government in recent years. Still, some people, notable scholars among them, want to defend it, if not on the basis of the mysterious Asian mind, then on the basis of the need for ensuring effective resource mobilization. They may be right if people have agreed beforehand that they will restrain their political freedom and luxurious consumption until a certain level of economic development is reached, an extremely unlikely event.

On the contrary, the democratization that has occurred since around 1980 has been achieved not according to a prearranged schedule of any sort, but only after people have paid a cost, sometimes heavily.

Take, for instance, the case of South Korea, the largest of the NICs or the NIEs. It has experienced a painful history of persistent demand for human rights, of repeated nonviolent civil disobedience to use a Gandhian term, and of constant repression and reprisals culminating in the Kwajju massacre in May 1980.⁸

It is true that the growth of new middle and working classes has made it possible for the country to democratize. But it was not due to any voluntary action on the part of the government, or an automatic structural change in the way the government works. Without people's demand, the political change after the mid-1980s would have been unthinkable.

If the Korean people had known what would follow beforehand in, say, May 1961, when the military staged its first coup, would they have been happy at the prospect? It is doubtful that they would have agreed with "All's well that ends well."

Incidentally, South Korea under the military regime chose to tread more or less the same path as Japan did some generations earlier. To defend the way South Korea has developed up until now, therefore, broadly amounts to defending the way Japan has traveled since the Meiji era.

Use of Area Studies, and Beyond

We have discussed some of the issues which area specialists are likely to meet repeatedly in their research. It seems that the objectives of area studies are broadly the following three.

Firstly, to try to understand how conflicts occur, and to suggest ways that they can be solved. The conflicts referred to here are predominantly those between national groups. The first two sections in this chapter illustrated this point.

Secondly, to try to overcome the theory of stagnation of Asian society in its diverse variations. This will make it easier to find specific social classes or groups that may be considered the agents of change. The third and fourth sections have discussed this point.

Thirdly, to try to construct an alternative scenario of development, and to suggest ways that it can be adopted as part of actual development. The fifth and sixth sections have discussed some elements of this scenario.

Are area studies self-contained, or self-conclusive? Or are the above objectives high enough?

They are not, given the present circumstances of the world full of difficulties and uncertainties. Even before the above objectives are met, area studies will have to look beyond. They will have to be linked to the perspectives of such areas as international relations. This is necessary in order to put the problems of development in the context of searching for international peace, world disarmament, and the like. This is the ultimate challenge for the area specialists.

Notes

- 1 A book by Ephraim Nimni, *Marxism and Nationalism: Theoretical Origins of a Political Crisis* (Boulder, Colo.: Pluto Press, 1991), is an exciting attempt to salvage whatever Marxist concepts on the national question can be salvaged.
- 2 Keith McLachlan, ed., *The Boundaries of Modern Iran* (London: UCL Press, 1994).
- 3 For an example, see "Dr. Richard Rathbone on African Studies as an Academic Discipline," *African Review* (February 1989) 1, no. 11: 7-9.
- 4 See John W. Dower's Introduction to *Origins of the Modern Japanese State*:

Selected Writings of E. H. Norman, ed. John W. Dower (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975).

- 5 By the time economic growth got under way in South Korea, the modernization theory had already been created. This has led some to say that it was primarily meant for South Korean consumption.
- 6 For this symposium, see Teruyuki Iwasaki, Takeshi Mori, and Hiroichi Yamaguchi, eds., *Development Strategies for the 21st Century* (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, 1992).
- 7 Some proposals for an alternative development for Nepal were made in this writer's paper presented before a symposium, "New Approaches to the Least Developed Countries in Asia," organized by the Foundation for Advanced Studies on International Development (FASID) in Tokyo, January 31–February 1, 1995.
- 8 On May 18, 1995 this writer witnessed a huge crowd, mostly young men and women, about fifteen thousand in number according to Reuter, and completely nonviolent, who gathered in the city center of Kwanju to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the massacre.