The Kantoh Sociological Society: Its History and Perspectives

The Kantoh Sociological Society

1. Introduction

The Kantoh Sociological Society is a geographically-based academic society in the Kantoh area that caters to sociologists and scholars in sociology-related disciplines. The Kantoh area is comprised of the seven prefectures that make up the capital region around Tokyo. This region is home to over 30% of Japan's population, including the urban centers of Yokohama, Kawasaki, Saitama, and Chiba. Moreover, it houses approximately 140 universities, many of which offer courses in sociology, and this is reflected in our Society's strength of approximately 950 members. This number is equivalent to that of the Kansai Sociological Society.

In Section 2, written and edited by the Directors' Board of the Kantoh Sociological Society, we present some aspects of Japanese sociology by introducing a brief history of our Society since its establishment, trends in research activities, and our internationalization initiatives by presenting our path as one of Japan's regionally based academic societies. In Section 3, our former Chairperson, MIYAJIMA Takashi (Professor Emeritus, Ochanomizu University), a driving force of our Society for many years, raises a number of issues on Japanese sociology. We present this as a message from our Society to the world.

2. Challenges for the Kantoh Sociological Society: A Brief History

The Background of Our Society's Establishment

The Kantoh Sociological Society was first proposed at the Japan Sociological Society Intercollegiate Council in March 1952. At the April meeting, a Preparatory Committee for Establishment was organized and discussed how the Kantoh Sociological Society would maximize the debate on concentrated themes. In contrast to the Japan Sociological Society, where independent presentations predominated, our Society aims for interactive debate through forums such as symposia and themed panels. The Kantoh Sociological Society's Inaugural Meeting was held at Nihon University on September 27, 1952, and approximately 500 individuals participated. Two professors addressed the first session of the meeting, "Part 1: Public Lectures"—Professor UEHARA Senroku of Hitotsubashi University on "The Sociality of Historicism" and Professor SHINMEI Masamichi on "Realistic Recognition in Sociology." In "Part 2: Inaugural General Meeting" Professor BABA Akio of Nihon University was elected council chairperson. It was determined that council members should be elected from the following institutes: University of Tokyo, Keio University, Tokyo University of Education, Chuo University, Tokyo Metropolitan University, Nihon University, Waseda University, Rikkyo University, Rissho University, Toyo University, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Yokohama National University, University of Yamanashi, Tokyo Gakugei University, and Kanto Gakuin University. Therefore, our Society's establishment is unique in terms of its intercollegiate network of sociological researchers (members

of the Japan Sociological Association) based in the Kantoh area.

The first and second Regular Research Meetings were held in November and December 1952, the former dealt with "The Status Quo in Amerikamura," presented by FUKUTAKE Tadashi and OTA Takashi, while the latter dealt with "A Journey to Istanbul: The International Sociological Congress," presented by Professor USUI Jisho from Kyoto University. The first issue of the society's newsletter, *Kantō shakai gakkai nyūsu* (*Kantoh Sociological Society News*), was published on April 20, 1953, and the first annual conference took place at Yokohama City University on June 5–6, 1953. On the first day of the conference, 30 research presentations were given in six panels, and in the afternoon on the second day, a symposium was held on "Crime in the City" (presented by Fukutake with presentations by HAYASE Toshio, NASU Soichi, and IWAI Hiroaki).

Shift to a New System

After an ambitious start, the ongoing publication of newsletters, and annual conferences, by the 1970s the Society had entered into a period of stagnation. From its inception, the Society had arranged for the automatic enrollment of Japan Sociological Society members based in the Kantoh area free of charge. However, by 1979, the sense of belonging among Society members had greatly diminished. Only 60 out of approximately 1,000 members participated actively in the annual conference. Therefore, in 1979, the Society began to collect registration fees and membership dues. This resulted in a low registration count of only 90 people—less than a tenth of the membership. Therefore, in 1980, the Society's Council investigated measures to address this situation by, for example, stimulating research activities such as new policies targeted at young researchers, and forming an association of core members and groups.

After this investigation, in 1982 the society decided to gain autonomy from the Japan Sociological Society through an amendment to the Society's constitution. The Society moved toward a new system, governed by an elected council. At this time, the following organizing principles were confirmed: to establish the Society as an autonomous group rather than as the Kantoh branch of the Japan Sociological Society, with its own board of directors and independent finances; to cease traditional operations that had been evenly split between research presentations and social functions; to fully invest in the organization of independent presentations by research committees and themed panels; and to encourage the voluntary contribution of presentations from young researchers. These organizing principles were adopted amid the emerging principles of voluntary organization that sparked conflicts at a number of universities and calls by young researchers for the dismantling of the lecture system. This trend has been linked with the critique of Talcott PARSONS and critical theory; moreover, phenomenological sociology was often selected as the subject of subsequent conferences, which attracted 150–200 participants, mainly young researchers.

Later the Society's research activities were enthusiastically promoted as themed panels at conferences, symposia, independent presentation panels, and other study groups. However, this did not result in any journal publications. Beginning in 1987, the possibility of an organizational journal was studied by the society's executives, including Chairperson AOI Kazuo (Ryutsu Keizai

University). Their efforts resulted in the publication of the inaugural issue of *Nenpō shakaigaku ronshū* (*Annual Sociology Journal*) at the 36th annual conference in June 1988 (at Japan Women's University), featuring 12 submitted articles. Thus, as with the dawn of the 1990s, the Society had been reorganized into its present structure.

Research Activities in the 1990s

In terms of membership, the Kantoh Sociological Society witnessed significant expansion during the 1990s. As compared to approximately 300 members in 1987, its membership strength rose to approximately 500 by 1993, 650 by 1997, and 800 by 1999. Let us examine research activities during this period by briefly outlining the themes at the conferences around which the Society came to be organized.

The first half of the 1990s witnessed themed panels that were relatively clear in terms of their division into separate domains. The first domain dealt with panels organized on the axis of "theory." These panels included a debate between sociological theory and topics such as environmental issues, eugenics, and feminism under "Rethinking Modernity: From Reality to Theory" (1990); moreover, YOSHIDA Tamito's theory of "self-organization" was discussed in the panel on "Revisiting Self-Organization" (1991). Examinations of the fabrication of identity and the emergence of sociality from debates with anthropologists and philosophers, respectively, featured in panels such as "Questioning the 'Self' Once More" (1992), "Communicating with the Other" (1993). Discussions on "power" from the perspectives of Michel FOUCAULT and Niklas LUHMANN, as well as from ethnomethodology were featured in "The Actuality of the Theory of Power" (1994) and "The Actuality of Power, Part 2" (1995).

The second domain dealt with "gender" and "inequality." In "Gender and Social Participation" (1990, 1991), the participation of women in society in child-rearing, lifestyle clubs, and cooperatives (Seikatsu Kurabu Seikyo), and political and administrative movements were discussed. Although gender was not raised as an independent theme at the 1992 conference, panels focused on social classes and education, such as "Cultural Approaches to the Study of Inequality: Can Bourdieu Save the Stratification and Social Mobility (SSM) Survey?" (1992) and "Educational Background and Inequality" (1993).

The third domain dealt with "area studies" and "ethnicity." At a panel on "Japanese Society and International Marriage" (1990), papers were presented on the arrival of brides from Asia. The following question was investigated in "A Sociological Approach to Issues Facing Foreign Residents" (1991): "What are the Issues Facing Foreign Residents?" Case studies dealing with the contemporary state of European studies and development studies in Japan were presented in "Area Studies" in 1992, and cases from Middle Eastern, Asian, Japanese, and French studies in "International Labor Flows in an Area Studies Perspective" were presented in 1993. These topics were followed with "Internationalization and Cultural Exchange" (1994) and "Japan and the Worlds of Southeast Asia" (1995). Although panels on "Transformations in Eastern Europe and Contemporary Socialism: Poland and Hungary in Perspective" and "Social Change and Democratization in Eastern Europe: The Import of Reform for Consumers and Workers" were

presented in 1990 and 1991, respectively, after the close of the Cold War no panels dealt with Eastern European themes.

The fourth and final domain dealt with research on "the environment." This continued for four years after being first presented in 1992; presentations were made on renewable energy, organic farming, and Mutsu-Ogawara Industrial Development in "Contemporary Environmental Issues: Seeking Perspectives from Environmental Sociology." In 1993, "Seeking an Identity for Environmental Sociology" examined the relationship of environmental sociology with cities, farming communities, and social movements. In 1994, "Challenges for Environmental Sociology: The Effectiveness of Dynamic Theory for Solving Environmental Problems," focused on the social movements; however, in 1995, the perspective shifted toward disasters in "Seeking Points of Contact between Sociology and Disaster Research" in the wake of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of earlier that year.

"The body" appeared as a new approach in 1994. That year, "The Sociology of Death and Dying: Medical, Religious, and Family Perspectives" took up the "transformations of death" from the perspective of terminal care, funereal freedom, and the intersection of families, graves, and funeral rituals. In 1995, "The Regeneration of Life: The Sociology of Reproduction" sought to explore the subject of birth through new reproductive technologies such as infertility treatments and in-vitro fertilization.

Hence, in the early 1990s the themed panels focused on "theory," "gender and inequality," "area studies and ethnicity," "the environment," and "the body." In the late 1990s, this clarity began to blur, demonstrating a more mixed aspect.

Two themed panels of the late 1990s were of particular importance: "The Body and Society" and "The Ordinary and the Extraordinary.""The Body and Society" in 1996 dealt with domestic violence, eating disorders, and corporeal risk management. In 1997, "Casting a Sociological Light on 'Aging'" explored the possibility of aging. Panels on "The Ordinary and the Extraordinary" expanded sociological approaches to "the extraordinary" at the intersection of life and death, with presentations on the 1995 Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo cult in "Religion and Society in the Aum Phenomenon" (1996) and case studies on music, Disneyland, and backpackers in "Cultural Apparatuses that Produce the Extraordinary" (1997).

In contrast, the theme of "area studies and ethnicity" was considered in "The Comprehensive and the Regional." Examples of Okinawan identity and the relationship between tourism and indigenous Hawaiians were discussed in "Global and Local Entanglements: Post-national Identities and the Pacific World" in 1996. In 1997, "Migration, State, and Ethnicity" dealt with the problems of "Japanese" identity, migration, and virtual communities. In addition, "theory"-related subjects were succeeded by panels on "Action and Cognition," resulting in "Why Do Sociologists Theorize?" in 1996, and "Contemporary Basis for Sociological Theory: Questioning Order and Systems" in 1997.

Although four of the panels in 1998 and 1999 were well defined, the continuity with previous topics was less prevalent. Characteristic of this shift is the disappearance of the discussion on "theory" and the emergence of "qualitative survey methods," with debates over discourse analysis

in 1998 in terms of "certainty" in qualitative survey research in 1999. In addition, "gender"-related subjects were revived in panels in terms of "Gender and Nationalism" (1998) and "Gender and Sexuality" (1999). Two other panel themes focused on the welfare state—"Gender and the Welfare State" (1998) and "Justice, Publicness, and Citizenship" (1999)—and on "information and networks," the latter taking up the "Internet" (1998) and "Computer Mediated Communication" (1999).

Research Activities in the Twenty-First Century

For the Society, the first decade of the twenty-first century represents a heightened period of activity, in terms of membership and the number of presentations. Membership reached 1,010 in 2007, although a downward trend has begun ever since. Similarly, conference participation has begun to decline after peaking at 350 members in 2006, at the 54th annual meeting at Keio University. Moreover, the number of independent research papers has also declined after peaking at 61 in 2007, at the 55th annual meeting at Tsukuba University. We examine the characteristics of the themed panels during this period.

The largest agenda during the early 2000s was "globalization." This subject was repeatedly discussed in the wake of "Area Studies and Ethnicity" and "The Comprehensive and the Regional." In 2000, "Globalization and Nationality" and "Ethnic Resources/Movements/Strategies" were discussed. A third panel on "Employment, Gender, and the Household" was held; however, it mainly focused on family policies in Sweden and America. In 2001, two panels were organized on globalization, "Globalization and Civil Society" and "Ethnicity and Changing Social Structures." Subsequent panels were organized on topics such as "Globalization and the Reorganization of the Urban Base" (2003) and "Class and Hierarchy in the Midst of Globalization" (2005). In other words, the concept "globalization" was viewed as a contextual premise to understand cities and social classes.

The early 2000s also witnessed a number of new themes such as "care." Following the 1990s theme of "the body," in 2002, discussions on "care" focused on the developmentally challenged, the elderly, and the physically disabled. "Care" and "family-related" was the theme for 2003. Another theme was "culture." Panels on cultural topics were held over a period of four years, beginning with "The Potential of Culture for Sociology" (2002), developing into discussions of the relationship between culture, capitalism, and Americanism (2003); postcolonial theory (2004); and studies of "Cultural Strategies" in light of Bourdieu's theories of reproduction. In 2004, gender and inequality were discussed in "The Multifaceted Nature of Gender Inequality." In 2004 and 2005, "theory" was again the central concern in "Sociological Practice and Theory" and "The Identity of Sociology."

Thus, while "globalization" was the leading panel theme in 2000–2005, perspectives were broadened to include the additional themes of "care" and "culture." From 2006 onward, the number of organized panels per annual meeting dropped to two; however, more than having organized themes, the panels focused on experimental attempts to realize a certain standard of problematization.

The themes for 2006 and 2007 focused on "youth" and "conservatism," respectively. On the one hand, the panel "Communication among Youth Today" (2006) focused on the social network among youth. On the other hand, the panel on "Pluralism in Youth Cultures" (2007) focused on historical, generational, and regional differences in youth culture in an attempt to understand youth as an issue. Panels on "Ascertaining 'Growing Conservatism'" (2006) and "Contemporary 'Conservatives': What's New?" (2007) sought to portray contemporary Japanese society under the subject of "growing conservatism."

Themed panels in 2008 and 2009 were set against the actual problems of contemporary Japanese society in "Community Building in an Age of Demographic Decline" (2008) and "The Sociology of an Age of Demographic Decline" (2009). Issues included were intrinsic to academia in terms of "Significance of and Methods for the Use of Historical Materials in Sociology" (2008) and "Sociological Approaches to 'Lived History'" (2009). This division of labor continued in 2010 and 2011, with panels on "The Sociology of Risk and Exclusion" (2010) and "Anti-Risk and Anti-Exclusion Social Movements" (2011) dealing with the themes of risk and exclusion and resistance movements against them in contemporary society, and other panels on "theory" seeking to reexamine basic concepts such as "Re-examining the 'Action-Order' Relationship" (2010) and "Aspects of Publicness in Sociology" (2011).

Annual meeting panels in 2012 and 2013 were organized with consideration given to the Great East Japan Earthquake Disaster in March 2011. These dealt with the twin themes of "Social Movements and Social Policies" and "Social Theory and Social Initiatives." Of these, the former sought to understand the possibilities inherent in the divisive conditions and resistance movements surrounding "the socially vulnerable" in the wake of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactor incident, and the latter attempted to find a theoretical framework to grasp Japanese society as based in the risk society and individualization theories of Ulrich BECK.

Our Society's themed panels have thus treated new topics reflecting an acute sensitivity to the contemporary situation of Japanese society. We believe that our ability to incorporate these themes attests to our Society's merits. However, our Society has an integral limitation in that we do not share the problems being focused on as a Society. Amid downward trends in membership and annual meeting participation, we take the responsibility to seek new directions to strengthen our relevance as a regional academic society.

Internationalization Initiatives

As opposed to specializing in certain areas of expertise, our Society has promoted the work of sociologists in the Kantoh area, particularly young researchers. As an organization, however, no initiative toward internationalization has been taken just yet. Nevertheless, a number of factors, such as convenient overseas access to the capital region where annual meetings are held and the preponderance of universities with specializations in sociology in the Kantoh region, show great potential for future research exchanges with overseas institutions.

In September and October 2012, a large number of our members participated in a series of invited lectures and symposium featuring Professor Robert N. BELLAH (University of California,

Berkeley), co-hosted with Rikkyo University. In light of this experience, a plan was initiated for an "Invitation Themed Session" at the 61st annual meeting in June 2013 (at Hitotsubashi University). This entailed planning a session on the basis of invited foreign researchers from members' affiliated universities to coincide with the annual meeting and the Society providing support in the form of honoraria. The program for the 2013 annual meeting included a themed session and public lecture featuring Professor Alejandro PORTES (Princeton University) at the joint invitation of Hitotsubashi University and Rikkyo University.

Thus, by incorporating research exchanges by our individual members and universities into our Society's annual conferences, the Society can envision a more organized research exchange with overseas institutions. We expect these initiatives to expand even further, on account of our Society's geographical situation, the stable foundation on which its operations are based, and the wealth of human potential among our young members. In spite of the recent onset of the internationalization of our Society, we are hopeful that our members' strengths will move us in this new direction, and thereby change international initiatives from being the exception to being the norm.

3. Challenges towards the Contemporary World: Some Perspectives

From a Regional to a Globalized World

Today, as society continues to reorganize itself according to globalization, the interests of many sociologists have become oriented toward international and global issues. However, according to a Japanese proverb, "It is darkest at the base of a lighthouse." This proverb cautions us against locking our sights solely into the distance. It is important to retain an overall global perspective, focus on local problems, and interpret the trends and significance of globalization through local problems. Is it not an attitude cognizant of the implications of this neologism of "glocal" that is the desideratum of the sociologist?

In Japan, Kantoh is often associated with the Tokyo metropolitan area. The central municipalities of Tokyo and Yokohama are large international cities (cf. MACHIMURA Takashi, *Toshi sekai Tōkyō no kōzō tenkan* [Structural Changes of the Urban World Tokyo], 1994). After including surrounding cities, such as Kawasaki, Yokosuka, Chiba, and Saitama, they can be referred to as a giant "compact mega-city," housing more than 20 million inhabitants, world-class office districts, numerous commercial centers, as well as one of the world's finest Chinatowns in the Yokohama Chukagai District. We also have the Korea Towns of Tokyo's Okubo district and Kawasaki. However, the social lives of the inhabitants of those places also touch upon the shadows cast by the light of an era of globalization.

One such reality is the collapse of the traditional community. The momentum of Japan's industrialization from the end of the 19th century did not result in the rapid fragmentation of small producers and the agricultural sector as in Western societies. It is notable, rather, that such sectors were present even in 1955 on the eve of the high economic growth period, when marginally less than 40% of the working population were farmers and 55% were self-employed including them.

This allowed for the survival of ties among families and relatives and local communities, and also provided for the maintenance of urban communities of friendship and mutual assistance, as with neighborhood associations (*chonaikai*). In the past three decades, however, these ties have weakened and collapsed with shocking rapidity. Professor Beck takes the "precarious freedoms" of individualism as one of the realities of life in our global society. In Japan, however, there has been an increase in the number of households of the elderly and young living in isolation, and some entertain a pessimistic outlook on the arrival of a "society without ties (*muen shakai*)" that has lost the relationships of territoriality and kinship.

With the advent of societies centered on the service economy, there has been a significant increase in the labor market participation of women. The enrollment of women to higher education surpasses that of men, with this figure in the Kantoh metropolitan area surpassing 60%. However, in social terms of gender equality, deep-rooted systems and values (norms) still present obstacles to equality. The gender-based wage gap is large, with further disparities in rates of promotion in firms, and inadequate fluidity in the gendered division of domestic labor. The globalizing economy continues to enhance disparities between regular and non-regular employment, and the majority of women workers may be viewed as victims of such disparities. How might we move toward the realization of a society of gender equality?

Now globalization can be noticed as the emergence of multiculturalism in the local context. In addition to the third- and fourth-generation descendants from Japan's former colonies, Japan's labor market since the 1990s witnessed a large surge of workers from China and the nations of South America and East Asia. The trend toward long-term settlement is taking hold. In particular, a growing number of foreigners and immigrants are settling in the large cities of the Kantoh region. Moreover, rates of marital migration are at a 20-year high, and the rate of mixed marriages between Japanese and foreigners currently stands at 4%. In the midst of such progress, how will it be possible for the Japanese, as a people with a relatively strong consciousness of being a "homogeneous nation," to successfully build a harmonious coexistence?

Redefinition of the Affluent Life: Some Issues with Japanese and Asian Modes of Development

Japan, and by extension, Asia, may be "semi-peripheral" in terms of world economic and social development. Nevertheless, Asia is an economically dynamic area with a large population, accounting for over a quarter of the world's GDP. However, in addition to Asia's remarkably unbalanced internal development, there have been a number of limitations in its attaining a certain quality of life. By observing the workers living in the Tokyo metropolitan area, we can conclude that they spend long working hours, with extremely meager vacation allowances compared with Western countries. There is material affluence, but many citizens feel disquiet about their old age. The reality of this disquiet with regard to social security is expressed in phenomena such as the declining birth rate. These anxieties persist, even though the demographic indicators, such as the total fertility rate, do not differ substantially from those in Western countries.

Considering these facts, we now suppose what a true and sustainable affluent life might be.

Being in possession of and effectively using a hard-working labor force with a relatively high level of education will result in high output in terms of production. This has been an Asian feature. However, no matter how large the flow (cash income) of these individuals becomes, there will be disparities and individuals' assets are not invested in improving the "quality of life" as a whole. Since the state's mechanisms for impartial redistribution are inadequate, the institutionalization of welfare, social security in particular, is not progressing. In Japan's past, the period of high economic growth in the 1960s resulted in health hazards and environmental destruction through various instances of industrial pollution. In the Kantoh region many health problems resulted from air pollution in the Keihin Industrial Zone. Although these pollution problems have been overcome through technical measures and civil anti-pollution movements, development is currently faster elsewhere in Asia and more than a few countries are now suffering from environmental destruction because of production-related increases. It would seem to be a good idea for Japan to make its advanced pollution prevention technologies available to these other nations. However, since inadequate consensus still exists within these countries over policy efforts concerning the redistribution of income, the majority of countries still remain far from the welfare state as described above. Only since the 1960s have the majority of citizens received medical and pension coverage under the social insurance system, even in Japan.

Although Asia's economic growth continues to draw attention, each country needs to bear in mind the just redistribution of capital flows. Major challenges remain in the establishment of public policies oriented towards valid spending on education, welfare, health, and basic infrastructure. Despite the need for more time, there is no room for delays.

Sociological Reflections on Technological Supremacy

On March 11, 2011, Japan experienced a huge crisis of an unprecedented scale since its wartime defeat in 1945. The enormous loss of life due to the violent earthquake and subsequent tsunami along the Tohoku coastline and the additional accidents and destruction at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant had a major impact, raising concerns not only in Japan but also in neighboring countries. Sociological researchers were affected since the Kantoh area is within a 50 km to 200 km zone from the nuclear power plant. Although it is still not possible to assess or conduct surveys on the destroyed nuclear reactor or the vast area that was abandoned soon after, this catastrophe has prompted reflections among many natural and social scientists (for a critical consideration by a sociologist, cf. HASEGAWA Kōichi's *Datsu genshiryoku shakai e*[Toward A Post-Nuclear-Power Society] 2011).

As is well known, Japan is the only country to have suffered the atomic bomb. Japan has drawn on its exemplary misery and suffering to appeal continuously to the world in favor of nuclear disarmament. However, we should reflect on the fact that it has not looked so unforgivingly at the construction of nuclear reactors for the "peaceful use" of nuclear power. It is true that its use of nuclear power resulted from Japan's recognition of itself as a resource-poor country forced to rely on foreign countries for oil. But one might ask whether it was a surfeit of confidence in the principle of economic growth and technology that led to a deepening reliance on nuclear power in

full knowledge of unresolved problems beyond anyone's control with nuclear energy (including the disposal of nuclear waste). Nevertheless, having pushed ahead with technological innovations and the pride of having achieved results in several huge developments (e.g. the construction of industrial complexes, the *Shinkansen* high-speed rail, and an undersea tunnel), Japan began to subconsciously think that any difficult problem could be resolved through the power of technology. Notwithstanding that overconfidence in technological development had once led to industrial pollution that eventually caused severe public health problems, it may be that confidence in resolving problems through preventative technologies that permitted the horrors of the past to be forgotten.

The experience of Fukushima taught citizens, as well as many scientists and researchers, that nuclear power is a source of energy that cannot be completely controlled. Should its control valve fail just once, when that energy makes its fury known the damage will be serious to a degree beyond the possibility of response or compensation. What sociological lesson can we draw from this? To make people's lives safer and achieve affluence that brings balance to the spiritual and material aspects of our lives, what sort of energy and technology is necessary? How should they be controlled? In the words of Professor Anthony GIDDENS, the manner of "reflexive modernity" to be achieved must be conceived alongside careful sociological investigation, especially into the technologies involved. Many citizens intend to "move away from nuclear power," and sociology must contribute by specifically identifying paths to accomplish this goal.

Towards New Sociological Thinking

Today's reality is that social problems no longer have national borders. Western sociological research is also of interest to sociologists in Japan. Such situations definitely prevail in other Asian countries as well, including the transformation of the family, aging, inequality and hierarchy, reproduction and education, gender, sexuality, immigration and cultural change, and minority cultures. Traditionally, social self-perception among Japanese people has been marked by an undercurrent of Japanese exceptionalism, i.e., Japanese culture possessing a peculiarity that other cultures lack. This mindset was implicit in works such as DOI Takeo's *Amae no Kozo* (*Anatomy of Dependence*) and NAKANE Chie's *Tate-shakai no ningen kankei* (*Human Relations in a Top-Down Society*), in turn inspired by Ruth BENEDICT's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. However, Japanese sociologists today, particularly in the post-economic growth generation, have been critical of the view that there is any consistent cultural pattern unique to Japan. Beyond such a priori "culturalism," in addition to a stronger sense of sharing characteristics with other countries in social development, a common perspective has developed on the emergence of shared sociological problems. As international sociological exchanges have prospered, such views have further strengthened. These views are also suggested by the fact that the themes discussed earlier, which would have been peripheral to the interests of Japanese sociologists 30 years ago, have begun to draw interest today.

Currently, it seems a matter of course that researchers with specific themes propel international research. Since social issues have taken on a transnational quality, or else because

research problems have come to be held in common, Japanese sociologists now travel to countries in Asia, Europe, and North and South America. To offer two or three examples, the rise in foreign workers in Japan from South America and Southeast Asia led to Japanese researchers traveling to conduct social background studies in the immigrant-sending countries of Brazil and the Philippines. In addition, many family and welfare researchers have turned their interests to Northern European countries that have achieved a high standard of welfare leading to the development of new family lifestyles. Furthermore, environmental sociology researchers are actively engaging in exchanges with researchers in China and South Asia. Thus, being in possession of a sufficiently comparative gaze, researchers have comparatively learned to assess the manifestation of social issues in Japan, rather than from a culturalist position.

After the great crisis of March 11th, 2011, it is essential to pursue a theory of sustainable, just, and controllable human social development. Many sociological researchers who have visited the disaster sites have suggested various concrete challenges for disaster response and reconstruction from the wreckage. Some investigators have also proposed the maintenance of ties among Fukushima's scattered inhabitants, forced to evacuate to escape the radiation damage. However, we suspect that an even broader consensus is gradually taking shape among them. This does not assume high economic growth centered on material things, but rather the need for a concept of society that chooses technologies which do not disturb the harmony between life and the environment and that emphasizes the just redistribution of income, or in other words, welfare. Perhaps "sustainability" provides us with a keyword that includes the various senses of safety, justice, environmental protection, and guaranteed satisfaction of needs. The building and transmission of a sustainable society by Japan's scientists, including its sociologists, is something we believe we will bring one step closer to fruition in the future.

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