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What Is To Be Done? : Political Change after the Economic Crisis and Basic Income Discourse in Japan

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Employment insecurity after the financial crisis of 2007, finally destroyed the “We are all middle class” myth. Another result of the crisis was the defeat of the Liberal Democratic Party (the LDP). After over half a century as the majority party in the Diet, the LDP lost the 2009 election to the Democratic Party of Japan (the DPJ). A prominent economist made the statement “The income security and household subsidies indicated in the DPJ's manifesto ultimately lead to the Basic Income discussed in Western Europe”(Ito, 2009). In this vein, the DPJ's Tax Policy Investigation Committee organized seminars on the topic of Basic Income in which I, and two other experts, gave presentations.

However the DPJ has never officially endorsed the Basic Income policy. Media treatment of Basic Income is extremely rare, and, even among people knowledgeable of the policy, the majority is of the view that the guarantee is not in accordance with the traditional ethics of Japanese society.

The goal of this paper to show the role we see starting to be played by the debate over Basic Income during the past few years of economic crisis and political change.

The first section will provide an overview of Japan's system of income security over the past half century and show the various causes of the current system's dysfunction. In the second section, following up on the situation just described in the first section, I will cover economic policy and political reality while analyzing the vocabulary to describe the situation. I will point out the lack of a vocabulary used to describe the new direction gradually being taken under the DPJ. After briefly outlining the debate surrounding Basic Income in the third section, I will use the fourth section to propose using the vocabulary accumulated in the BI debate to fill the explanatory gap in discussions of current economic and social policies.

(1) The Myth, the reality, and the collapse of the “Japanese Welfare Society”

After World War II Japan built up an income security system using the Beveridge Report as a blueprint. The Social Insurance pillars were pensions, unemployment insurance and health insurance while social assistance policies were built in as

supplementary additions. Pensions and health insurance systems for employed people preceded the establishment, in 1961, of the National Pension and National Health Insurance to cover the self-employed and the non-employed to achieve universal coverage for citizens.

In the second half of the 1960's, Socialist and Communist party candidates were elected to head local municipalities giving birth to many 'progressive' administrations. This led to 1973 becoming known as 'The Year of Welfare' as the LDP, fearing for its survival, passed large increases in the social welfare budget. As seen from the inclusion of 'to insure the completion of a welfare states' as a goal in the party's founding declaration of 1955, the LDP was never against welfare state. From the 1950's to the beginning of the 1970's, at least as a slogan, the welfare state enjoyed a broad majority of support among citizens.

This support broke down with economic restructuring after the oil shock of 1973. The "Japanese Style Welfare Society" policy paper put out by the LDP in 1979 can be taken as an ideological blueprint for the social security policies of the 1980's. The paper severely criticizes the welfare state that the party had intended to 'ensure the completion' of in its founding declaration. Since the U.K. had 'pursued equality and social security expansion' the diagnosis was that U.K. had caught the "English Disease," a kind of "economic diabetes."

Swedish life for the elderly is lonely, isolated and cold, resulting from a society based on extreme individualism. ... The Swedish philosophy of all-round welfare coverage that provides full benefits rather than regulation and control has brought about a tendency to shift the costs of personal troubles onto society... If an unwed mother gives birth to a child, the costs are shifted to society as the mother and child are on welfare benefits. Once this system is put in place people become 'complacent' and behave with the knowledge that society will bear the costs of their troubles. They become a kind of parasite, accustomed to exploiting the system. Suppose our country made a similar system with "divorce insurance" and made insurance payments to divorced women, or implemented generous protections and subsidies for unmarried mothers and their children, perhaps even establishing institutions for their care. This would give rise to "free love," or from a man's point of view "free sex," and we would certainly see lower rates of marriage, higher rates of divorce and more illegitimate children, all of which is seen in Sweden. Is this the kind of civilized progress of which we can be proud? No, this is nothing but foolishness showing an extreme lack of civilization and wisdom. (LDP 1979)

The principle of a “National Minimum” and “Equality of Outcome” were dismissed as harming civilization to no benefit. Families and corporations were put first and individual welfare became a matter of personal responsibility.

The characteristics of two social security reforms in 1985, symbolize policies based on the above principle of subsidizing the family as opposed to the individual. Payments to single mothers for their dependent children were attacked and decreased. This “reform” is usually explained away as the result of a financial need to cut budgets in a slowed economy. However, we cannot accept this explanation upon considering another reform of the same year: A new tax exemption for the pension and insurance payments covering the housewives of employed men.

Japan was often seen as a society with a “traditional” division of labor between the sexes, where men worked outside the home while women became housewives. This view of “traditional” society is not correct. In 1970 Japan's rate of employment for women was second highest among OECD nations.(1) The employment rate for women in Japan has been losing ground to other OECD countries ever since. Japan's characteristic high number of full time homemakers is not “tradition” but the intended consequence of policies taken after the oil shock of 1973. The manifesto for this system change is the LDP's 1979 policy paper and the reforms of 1985 were the culmination of these policies.

Was the sexist content of social security severely criticized? Other than criticism by a handful of feminists, the majority of Japanese society, unfortunately, takes for granted the sexist nature of the system. These views remain unchanged today. Of course, the social movements of single mothers and other minorities criticized and struggled against the “reforms” at the time. (2)

“The Japanese Welfare Society” depends on the family, and at the same time, upon corporations. This dependence on corporations has brought about inequalities between the employees (and their families) in large corporations and people excluded from such employment. This gap has met relatively strong criticism from scholars. However this criticism has remained limited to academics and a small minority in the labor movement while the media inundates viewers with the myth that “All Japanese are Middle Class”. The reality is that only workers in large corporations, and their families were able to attain middle class lifestyles. The Japanese Welfare Society actually opened up a gap between these workers with their families and the rest of Japanese society. How have the myths that “everyone is middle class” and about the existence of “Japanese welfare society” survived for so long in this unequal society? Perhaps the myths didn't die because many male college graduates had the opportunity to secure employment in large (and mid-sized) corporations. This avenue was open to some high school graduate men also, and women, well, whether

they continued working or not, it was assumed that they would marry a man.(3)

The myths survived until the mid-1990's. Let's look at the data for the “welfare society” at this point in time. We'll start with a six country comparison of social security expenditures. (Figure 1 on the slide) As a percentage of GDP Japan looks to be more of a 'small government' society than the U.S. Looking at just social assistance expenditures makes Japan stand out even more for its form of “small government.” (Table 1 on the slide)

Does this “small government” match a similarly small problem with poverty? Unfortunately, this is not the case when considering relative poverty, or even absolute poverty. In 1994 OECD calculates Japan's rate of relative poverty at 13.7%. This rate is higher than the OECD average of 10%, and even higher than England after the desolation of Thatcherism. By comparison, Sweden's rate is 3.7%.(4) It's difficult to pin down absolute poverty with statistics but let's use social assistance criteria. In 1995, 7.45% of households lived beneath the line for meeting social assistance requirements. Among these households, the percentage actually receiving assistance, the take-up rate, was only 19.7% (Tachibanaki, Urakawa[2006]). There was an actual need for a budget 5 times as big as current expenditures.

At any rate, until this period the myth that Japan, being an equal society, was different than Western societies with their economic classes went unchallenged. However, looking at the “Japanese welfare society” while considering poverty exposes the myth as a lie and “welfare society” as just another name for a “dual society” of the secure middle class and the impoverished.

The “Japanese Welfare Society” was based on the possibility of entering the middle class if you graduated from college for men, and for women if you married one of those men. This state of affairs ended in the 1990's with the collapse of the bubble and the “lost 20 years” that bring us to the present day.

The corporate manifesto for dismantling the welfare state was put out by the Japanese Business Federation (Nikkeiren) in 1995. The document is titled 'Japanese-style Management for a New Era: the direction we should strive for and the concrete measures entailed'. The document divides workers into three groups, “core members with accumulated expertise,” “highly skilled specialists” and the “flexibly employed.” The permanent employment previously guaranteed to almost all male university graduates would now only be continued for a handful of workers with hard-to-replace “accumulated expertise”. The other groups are to be utilized in a 'flexible' manner. Actually the Worker Dispatch Law passed in 1985 occasioned some deregulation and it was in the 90's that more deregulation took off. The proportion of irregular employees has consistently increased from the mid-90's

to the present day.

The corporation-dependent “Japanese Welfare State” had already begun to collapse as corporations pulled out of the system. Employment insecurity after the financial crisis just hastened the fall.

(2) From ”Civil-Engineering Keynesian” to “Neoclassical Deregulation”

Until last September's election the LDP held power, with very few short-term exceptions, for the half century since World War II. The LDP arose in 1955 as an amalgamation of the conservative camps. The Socialist Party was the LDP's rival and largest opposition party, but working from a platform of Marxist-Leninist socialism in the context of the Cold War and the U.S.-Japan Alliance effectively left the LDP as the only party with real power in the system.

However, the LDP did not simply coast along relying on the geopolitics of the day. Theodore J. Lowi has described the U.S. polity as “interest group liberalism.” The LDP successfully used similar conditions in Japan to rationalize their system of power dominance. With “interest group liberalism,” decisions regarding distribution and regulation are decided, not in discussions at the Congress or the Diet, but outside the official political process as various interest groups pressure bureaucrats and politicians.(5) Japan is unlike the U.S., where the two parties rise and fall with the backing of interest groups. As there was no likelihood of a change in the party in power, the power dynamics among interest groups and political parties in Japan favored the single party with unbroken power – the LDP.

A kind of “Civil-Engineering Keynesianism” is one of the factors that made the LDP the agent of distribution in Japan's “interest group liberalism.” President Roosevelt's economic stimulus policies to remedy the Great Depression had two aspects. The public works aspect of his policies are well known. Less attention has been paid (by Japanese economists) to the social aspects of his economic stimulus. Roosevelt also made efforts to maintain effective demand in the economy by guaranteeing people's income with the Social Security Act and a federal minimum wage. After World War Two it was the social support policies , the “Keynesian Welfare State,” that spread throughout the West to become economic policy.

The LDP's “interest group liberalism” can be seen in the same vein as Roosevelt's public works aspect of the New Deal, as specialized policies for stimulating effective demand through public works. Stimulus through public works can be seen as an unintended policy in the 1950's with reconstruction after World War II. However, after being presented for a

period in the 60's as the "Plan for Doubling the National Income," Kakuei Tanaka, conscious of their role as an economic stimulus, made the policies his own under the title 'Building a new Japan; a plan for remodeling the Japanese Archipelago' in 1972, the same year he became Prime Minister. The "Plan for Doubling the National Income' aimed to achieve full employment through the development of export industries, while at the same time correcting income and development disparities between varied areas in Japan and different types of industry. The second group of policies taking aim at disparities in the country were taken and built upon as Prime Minister Tanaka's "plan for remodeling the Japanese Archipelago." Ostensibly to re-distribute some of the nation's wealth to the peripheral countryside under the banner of "well-balanced land development," public works were increased with the intensive construction of railroads, highways and dams.

There are differences of opinion on whether the civil engineering projects of the "well-balanced land development" policies actually contributed to lessening disparities for underdeveloped areas in Japan. However, it cannot be denied that regular employment in the relatively underdeveloped areas was attained through the public works projects. Even after Kakuei Tanaka's reign as Prime Minister, his faction utilized their control over the distribution of money for public works to maintain their power and remain the central, authoritative group within the LDP until the 1990's. (The DPJ's secretary general, Ichiro Ozawa is from the Tanaka faction.)

The large deficits run up by Civil-Engineering Keynesianism led to a debate among the Ministry of Finance and some economists over the need for a shift in policy. The economic slump during "The Lost Decade" of the 1990's after Japan's asset price bubble burst made it clear that the LDP's traditional economic policies had ceased to function. At the same time, the political realignment after the end of The Cold War had the LDP facing, not the marxist-leninist Socialist Party as their main rival, but the New Frontier Party at first, then the Democratic Party of Japan, both made up mainly of former LDP members. As the urban electorate, not benefiting from public project largesse, started voting for these new opposition parties the LDP began seeking new policies to gain popularity and votes. Representative of this period is the Koizumi administration with the rallying calls of "Destroy the LDP" and "Without reform there will be no growth." Emblematic of the Koizumi administrations shift from Civil-Engineering Keynesianism to Neoclassical economic policies was economist Heizo Takenaka's entering into the Koizumi cabinet and taking up the post of Economic and Fiscal Policy Minister. The two pillars of these policies were deregulation and privatization.(6)

It wasn't only the LDP shifting from Civil-Engineering Keynesianism to Neoclassical policies. When the Koizumi administration made postal service privatization

the central issue in the debate for the 2005 election, the DPJ also promoted neoclassical policies. Research into the policies favored by candidates showed the DPJ adhering closer to neoclassical economics. (7)

Since the Koizumi administration the LDP's economic policies have come about from inner conflicts among factions emphasizing fiscal reconstruction for balanced budgets, and factions emphasizing economic growth via deregulation. After the financial crisis of 2007, this tug-of-war has ended up weaving together Civil-engineering Keynesianism once again.

The main factor effecting the 2009 change in ruling parties after fifty years was rejection by both the financial sector and the voters as they said “no” to a revival of Civil-Engineering Keynesianism. However it's difficult to foresee the economic policies that will come out of the coalition government headed by the DPJ as the coalition, and even the DPJ itself, contains a mixture of conflicting ideologies regarding economic policy.

On the one hand, the group coalesced around Secretary-general Ozawa, along with the People's New Party, seem to have inherited traditional LDP-style Keynesianism. On the other hand the group around Prime Minister Hatoyama and the ex-Socialist Party fraction in the DPJ have, since the 1990's, been very critical of public works such as dams. However, a principled, consistent direction for an economic policy to replace old-style, pork barrel Keynesianism is not yet visible. Policies such as the child-care allowance have been justified under the slogan “Shifting from Concrete to People”, but were implemented due to a temporary alliance between the two groupings. Also within the DPJ is a third grouping with neoclassical economic designs which includes members such as Foreign Minister Okada and Transportation Minister Maehara.

One large problem is that the new policy direction termed “Shifting from Concrete to People” has absolutely no credibility as an economic policy in Japan's public discourse. The vocabulary used in public discourse on economic policy consists merely of “Keynesian equals old-style pork barrel politics” and “Neo-Classical economics equals reform.” Economic debate among reformists is limited to the choice between “economic growth through deregulation” or “fiscal recovery through higher consumption taxes and downsizing the budget.” As long as the DPJ doesn't commit to either policy, economists that narrow the problem to this limited number of choices will criticize the party for “having no economic policy.”

We, advocates of Basic Income have the potential to fill the gap in the vocabulary used for public discourse with regards to economic policy and expand the debate. We can promote Basic Income as a new Keynesian policy. Before developing this point in full I would like to present an overview of the Basic Income debate in Japan.

(3) Brief Overview of the history of BI argument in Japan

If we follow the explanation of history given on the BIEN's (Basic Income Earth Network's) website, it would seem that the idea for a basic income first appeared in Europe's Leuven when Thomas More's *Utopia* was published in 1616. However if we liberate ourselves from the limitation of focusing solely on European history an embryo of the Basic Income concept may be found in 6th century China and 7th century Japan. These ancient East Asian regimes sought to provide the "means of livelihood" in a secular way as a precondition for taxation and military service.

Apart from these historical episodes, modern discussions of basic income were introduced into Japan between the World Wars through the translations of John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell, and C.H. Douglas. Douglas's Social Credit enjoyed popularity at one point. Douglas followers labeled themselves as "Dauglasite" economists (artists, etc.) to differentiate themselves from Marxist economists (artists, etc) but the fad didn't last long.

The radical disabled people's movement of the 1970's developed a similar philosophy to that of the Italian social movements of the same period. Although the Italian movements demanded Basic Income, radical currents in the Japanese disabled movement never settled upon an actual BI. Their demands for social security were ignored at the time and forgotten later. More recently in 1990, Italian social movement expert Toshimaru Ogura called for an basic income called an "Individual Wage" but there wasn't much of a reaction.

The serious academic discussion on basic income started a decade ago, among social policy researchers and analytical political philosophers. Among them Shuji Ozawa, a Marxian public economist, published a book on BI in 2002. This can be said to be the first Japanese publication in favor of BI (Ozawa 2002). Several academic publications followed (ex. Takegawa (ed.)[2008], Yamamori[2002], [2009].)

Basic Income first appeared in the media in the beginning of 2007. I contributed an article to the Mainichi Newspaper in April, followed a month later in May with an article by Shuji Ozawa in the Asahi Newspaper. For radio, the first mention must have been my appearance on an NHK station in January of 2008. In December of that same year a famous IT entrepreneur, Takafumi Horie, spoke of BI on television after being exposed to debates over BI that welled up on the internet. The blog of Hajime Yamasaki, an economic commentator well known in cyber space, must have played a big role as a catalyst for the debate over BI. Yamasaki himself referenced the Basic Income debate from a publication featuring an exchange between myself and the VOL collective, a group of Autonomia

intellectuals. After reading Yamasaki's blog referring to our debate, Horie was moved to write in favor of BI on his own blog and even recommended the idea on a TV show. This year several BS channels shed light on BI, one of which I explained BI for 40 minutes at TBS Newsbird, BS news channel by one of major TV channels.

The internet debate over BI is developing with a vocabulary from the neoclassical, or neoliberal tradition. There are good discussions around these proposals on the internet. One of a good episode for letting know the impact of the internet debate might be a internet TV program in February. This program opened by my lecture and followed by discussion with several neo-liberalists and one left wing activist. Even though this program broadcasted after midnight, it was viewed by 50,000 people. Although I cannot sum up the varied discussions, I can say that their main concern is minimizing the administrative costs of government, rather than ensuring a decent life for the disadvantaged. So one could say that the discussion here is in line with the Neo-liberal rationale. Horie's BI advocacy floats in the currents of neoliberalism.

As far as politicians are concerned, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, MPs in the Democratic Party invited me to speak on BI in April of 2009, and it can be seen as one example of a growing interest in the BI proposal. However, it can be said in general that the political will has progressed no further than just "interest". The exception is one small party "Shinto Nippon". The leader of this party (and the only MP from this party) is a famous writer and is fascinated by the idea of BI. He adopted BI in his party's manifesto in the spring of 2009. Iwao Nakatani, an economist that supported the Koizumi/Takenaka reform track has proposed a very small basic income to be funded by a consumption tax. The majority of the internet discussion and mass media mentions for Basic Income are informed by the Neoliberal rationale. You might give them the benefit of the doubt and call it Neoliberalism with a human face.

The values informing street level activism for BI is in sharp contrast to Neoliberalism. Some single mothers' organization and women's trade unions call for a Basic Income with Pay Equity. Some Precariat movements call for BI with regulation for labor protection. There are voices in support of BI in the disabled people's movement also. People suffering from underdevelopment in rural areas have also pinned hopes on a Basic Income. For example the mayor of Nakagawa Village in Nagano Prefecture has voiced support for BI. A proposal to demand a Basic Income passed in the Kushiro chapter of the Construction Worker's Union convention of June, 2009. These are the voices of marginalized people, long excluded from Japan's "Welfare Society." (8)

(4) How Can We Make Marginalized Voices Heard? : A Strategy

When the mass media airs the voices of those excluded from Japan's Welfare Society the discussion is limited to individual tragedies and almost never expanded to cover economic and social policy issues. The media spent a great deal of time on employment insecurity and unemployment after the financial crisis but the coverage was limited to male workers. In the media, the problem was limited to the 'winners' in the "Dual System" of the "Japanese Welfare Society." Only the previously secure men that were no longer able to maintain their positions in the middle class had their grievances aired.

Let me introduce a representative case. On December 18th, 2009, The Mainichi Newspaper, under the headline "A Prescription to Cure Poverty?" featured three viewpoints, an economic policy issue specialist's view, a union activist's view, and my view. The economist felt that Japan no longer had the financial resources to maintain anti-poverty measures, and that the main issue was improving the poor economy resulting from the financial crisis. He prescribed financial deregulation and flexibility in the labor market. The union representative prescribed secure employment for middle-aged and older men. The choices were deregulation or secure employment, both sides of the debate shared common ground in that they had only the 'winners' of the "Japanese Welfare Society" (i.e. male workers) in mind. (It goes without saying that I prescribed Basic Income as a cure for poverty)

Of course, just as not all of the minorities excluded from Japan's Welfare Society are demanding BI, the Basic Income is not a cure-all prescription for the problem of poverty. However, promoting the Basic Income as a way to get the majority to consider marginalized voices has three points in its favor. The first two points are vital for minorities and the third point is strategic.

The first point is the need to reexamine Japan's work ethic. Why wasn't Japan able to become like Sweden or the U.K.? As I explained in the first section of this paper Japan would seem to have the same welfare structures that are found in Western countries. Then why, with a similar system in place, does Japan have a mere 20% take up rate for social assistance compared with an almost 90% take up rate in the UK? This discrepancy is in the difference between the number of people seen by society as being unable to work and the number of people that are actually unable to work. One big reason that Japan was unable to become a full and actually functioning Welfare State is that, compared to the West, Japanese society is less accepting of people's inability to work. The BI debate has the potential to interrogate Japan's work ethic.

The second point is that, while the BI discussion is criticized for the potential number of "free riders," this criticism raises the possibility to show how the Japanese

Welfare Society has, all along, had a free ride on the unpaid labor of women.

The third point is strategic and brings me back to the economic policies of the government now headed by the DPJ. The government has explained its policy of cutting back public works such as dam construction while implementing a child allowance with the slogan “Investing in People, not Concrete.” While the mass media cheers the decrease in public works projects, the child allowance is criticized as not so much an economic policy but as an attempt to curry favor with voters. While working on the 2010 budget, Hirohisa Fujii, the Finance Minister at the time, countered this criticism saying that, by increasing demand, the policy would result in changes of industry structure from one that relies on export to one driven by domestic consumption.

The analysis introduced at the beginning of this paper that linked the logical outcome of DPJ's policies to the Basic Income proposal was Mitsuharu Ito's attempt to lend support to Finance Minister Fujii's argument. Ito is a well-known economist using Keynesianism to understand the traditional LDP policies of lowering taxes to increase consumption while increasing overall investment with public spending. Now that the DPJ policies have halted the public works stimulus in favor of “direct support for households” he understands the change as intended to stimulate the economy through increased consumption.

At present there are not many BI proponents using Keynesian arguments. I (Yamamori, 2009) maybe the only one using Keynes to support the Basic Income proposal. For the most part people in Japan think that Keynesian policy and Basic Income proposal are mutually exclusive, and that their proponents are on opposite sides of the economic debate.

However if we turn our eyes abroad to international discussions of BI, many proponents, such as James E. Meade for some time now, and more recently Antonio Negri, Andrea Fumagalli and others have been arguing that the Basic Income would be an effective Keynesian stimulus. Now is a crucial time to explain the Keynesian effects of a Basic Income. The new direction policy has taken in Japan, other than the rare exceptions like Ito's paper, has not been justified for its positive economic effects. Keynesian arguments for a Basic Income may reach the mainstream while providing justifications for this shift in policy.

As the Democratic Party of Japan has yet to fully define this new direction in economic and social policy, we have an opportunity to explain their policies as rational and effective and to push these policies towards the Basic Income proposal. It just may be possible to get 'dual society' problems and the Basic Income on the agenda both in the media and in policy-making circles.

The postscript

This paper was written before the change of prime minister in Japan from Yukio Hatoyama to Naoto Kan, which happened this June. Naoto Kan is on the one hand come from civil movements and on the other hand backed by ministry of finance and neo-liberal MP in his party. So the new government still has Janus face that I would not change the bottom line of the paper.

Notes

- (1) <http://www.gender.go.jp/data/files/z4-4.pdf>
- (2) Of course there were criticism and struggles among social movements by minorities themselves such as single mothers' activism (see my tomorrow's paper). In academics, see Osawa [1993].
- (3) This last tendency has been supported by the law that discriminates against children born out of wedlock. This law violates international treaties forbidding this kind of discrimination. But I will not discuss international law here.
- (4) <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/12/4/35445297.xls>
- (5) Lowi criticized this and propose "judicial democracy." See Lowi[1969].
- (6) Deregulation and privatization began in the 1980. However these policies before Koizumi administration only happned at the area where these policy can weaken the interests of labour unions, but never happened where they would weaken the interest of JDP on "Civil-Engineering Keynesianism."
- (7) Taniguch, Uenohara, and Sakaiya [2009].
- (8) I want to treat this issue in more detail tommorow.

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