The Civil Society through Self-Consciousness?

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Preface

The following paper is the manuscript that I prepared for the Japan-Germany Symposium 'The Civil Society in Germany and Japan—Concepts and Practices—' in Halle, Germany which was held on 9 and 10 October 2008. The symposium was sponsored by the Graduate School of Japanologie at Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg and the University of Tokyo Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. Both of these institutions arranged a joint programme called 'the International Graduiertenkolleg'.

In the Symposium I presented a report entitled 'The Civil Society through Self-Awareness?', following a report given by Prof. Naoshi Yamawaki of Tokyo University entitled "Zivilgesellschaft" and "bürgerliche Gesellschaft", Present and Historical Development in Germany and Japan'. Therefore my report is closely linked to the contents of Prof. Yamawaki's presentation.

In his report Prof. Yamawaki historically traced a series of theories of Civil Society in Germany prior to World War II, focusing especially on Hegel, Lorenz von Stein, and the German Historical School, and pointed out the influences of the German Historical School on the Japanese intellectual climate. In this context he paid attention to the ethical and normative dimension of civil society and the constitutional state in the theories of Hegel and Stein.

Then looking back on the theories of Civil Society after World War II, he mentioned Yoshihiko Uchida and Kiyoaki Hirata in Japan and Jürgen Habermas in Germany. While he commented on the lack of theories of democracy in Uchida and Hirata, about which I can't agree with him, he also criticised Habermas who separated the elements of the social market economy from the public sphere (Öffentlichkeit). Furthermore instead of delineating the idea of 'Zivilgesellschaft' he spoke about the 'public world' in the concept of the public philosophy that he has proposed in his books. He said that the concept of public world is more normative than that of civil society. The former has much to do with the public values such as human rights, peace, and welfare which the Japa-
nese Constitution guarantees for its citizens. The actors of the public world can be called ‘the public’ or ‘a set of people who share a common interest and activity accompanied by “civic virtues”’, according to Yamawaki. He concluded by proposing his methodology for discussing the civil society. He sees the need for the three-dimensional method of ‘what we must know’, ‘what we should do’, and ‘what and how we can do’ in order to combine the theory of civil society with the practice of people’. In responding to his report I posed the question on the ethical and normative characters that were hidden in the contemporary theories of Civil Society.

While preparing my report last year and for this publication, a colleague of mine, Prof. Hirofumi Horie, spared no efforts in refining my coarse English, for that I am deeply appreciative.

‘The Civil Society through Self-Consciousness?’

I’d like to speak about my thoughts on the relationship between the Civil Society and self-consciousness, ‘Selbstbewusstsein’, as I have been stimulated by Prof. Yamawaki’s presentation. I am always surprised at the extensiveness of Prof. Yamawaki’s knowledge when he proposes the ‘Glocal Public Philosophy’ and the ‘Civil Society’ in referring to the past and present Japanese as well as European philosophies. I agree with all the moral platforms he proposes on the basis of the Glocal Public Philosophy, which include the global environmental problems, Japan’s responsibilities to neighboring countries during the past wars, his critique on religious Fundamentalism, and so on and so forth. But I would like to pose one question on his view.

The key to Prof. Yamawaki’s ‘Glocal Public Philosophy’ is the responsive and multidimensional understanding of ‘the Self, the Other, and the Public World’. And the corporations, the NPO, and citizens who comprise them are the main actors that can understand ‘the Self, the Other, and the Public World’. This is the civil society that Prof. Yamawaki propounds, I believe.

When reading Prof. Yamawaki’s books, there is one question over which I always ponder. He speaks of public philosophy as seeking and being concerned with ‘a cool-headed recognition of the present situation’, ‘the possibility of the reform’, and ‘moral propositions’. Among these three, however, he seems to place utmost emphasis on ‘moral propositions’. In his books we often come across the expression ‘You should be conscious’. My concern here is where this consciousness or ‘Bewusstsein’ comes from and how we attain it.

This is the question I pose not only to Prof. Yamawaki’s theory but also to almost all the present-day theories of the civil society. The structure of current civil society theories assumes the position of the civil society somewhere between the state-government and the economy. And civil society organizations such as NPOs, NGOs or spontaneous civil initiatives groups keep an eye on and control the state-government and the economy. Of course, depending on whom you talk to, people have different ideas on who would be the main actor of the civil society. In Japan, there is a minority yet influential opinion, propounded for example by Yoshio Nakano, which claims that there exist two types of civil groups, the ones to complement the status quo and the others to op
pose it by existing outside the system, and that social reform would not be realised by the former groups. What is common for these theories is the structure through which the civil society controls both of these subsystems, the state-government and the economy.

In this case, however, how could one become a member of the civil society who may control or reform the two subsystems? Most theories of the civil society would answer that everyone should have self-consciousness. Then I would like to ask from where and how this self-consciousness would come. The issue of self-consciousness comes from Jürgen Habermas whose influence is still felt strongly among the theorists of the civil society and might have contributed to Prof. Yamawaki’s public philosophy. Although he said that the civilian public, die bürgeriche Öffentlichkeit, was formed through the development of commodities exchange, he also claimed that discussing reason or ‘Vernunft’ through which man makes communicative act is different from instrumental or tool-like reason. It is the reflective reason that could recognise the truth, the goodness, and the beauty of the universe. In this sense his civilian public is separated from the process of the economy and thus has the possibility of criticizing or controlling the political and economic systems that work with instrumental reason.

His intellectual efforts seem to have derived from the motive that civilian movements since the 1960s, which stand distant from the contemporary labor movements, have to be put in the right theoretical context. But I fear, if the civilian public is separated from the process of the economy, the civil society in the end depends more on the self-consciousness of its citizens. Of course it is not enough to criticise only the issue of his separating the civilian public from the process of the economy. If I am to embark on a full-dress investigation, I have to delve deeper into his concept of the communicative act and especially his theory of social system. It is not enough to criticise only a part of his theory. I do not have enough time to work on this here, nor enough ability to do it properly. But, while agreeing almost totally with Habermas’s motives and conclusions, I still have to raise a question on his basic assumptions.

Just think about this. When we try to lecture students on the American Civil War of 1861, do we try to explain it in terms of the conflict of ideas by saying that the democratic and humanitarian North fought the war against the slavery of the South? If that is the case, we did not have to listen to the wonderful speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with excitement 100 years after the Civil War since the democratic and humanitarian ideal would have prevailed. In fact, the American Civil War can better be explained when we start talking about the difference of economic interests with Great Britain between the North and the South. That is to say, the industrial North needed the free and cheap labor provided by the emancipation of slaves. The very idea of the emancipation of slaves had a close link with the economic situation in the 1860s. If the idea or self-consciousness is to be detached from the ongoing economic process, it would be extremely difficult to describe where it came from.

I have been wondering whether or not this is suitable as an example. But at least I would like to say that while the ideas are indeed important at certain historical stages, it is wrong
to explain history with these ideas. The idea or consciousness is always connected with the historical situations, especially with the economic process.

I, therefore, believe that the civil society or the civilian public should be first placed in the context of modern economic process, that is, the expansion of communication through the exchange of commodities and the deepening of the knowledge of objects attained through the labour process. In short, I would like to understand the civil society from the viewpoint of the system of production and exchange of commodities. Then going side by side with this modern system, the change of self-consciousness takes place followed by the emergence of the civilian public not distant from the civil society at the first level, as Habermas himself originally claimed in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962. In this respect, the civil society is the ultimate product of the Modern Era. Prof. Yamawaki’s interesting and thought-provoking speech provoked me to think about the civil society.

The theories of the Civil Society in Japan were developed in this framework of ‘self-consciousness’. They were developed independently in Japan from the time of the Second World War. We can name such famous scholars like Zen’ya Takashima, Kazuo Okouchi, Hisao Otsuka and Masao Maruyama, who all contributed greatly to the development of the theories. They insisted on the importance of breaking away from the pre-modern society in Japan. They saw the historic Civil Society in the world of the small-scale independent production in the 17th and 18th centuries as Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations* described.

Kazuo Okouchi, for example, wrote about Adam Smith’s idea of the Civil Society and said the Civil Society as a system of egotism had harmony with the industrial development of 18th century England. But, Okouchi continued, in the class society and capitalism of the 19th century this harmony was shattered. He then claimed that a system of egotism should be overcome by the virtue of righteousness or justice and that both labour and management should be conscious of the public interest with the virtue of altruism. Hisao Otsuka also propounded that the self-consciousness of the people was responsible for the modernisation of Japan by pointing out the importance of the Ethos equipped with rationalistic thinking.

Masao Maruyama wrote an essay entitled ‘Logic and Psychology of Ultranationalism’ in 1946. He said that the Japanese state before the Second World War played not only the role of government by the laws on the formal level, but also that of ethics or moral justice on the substantial level. As a result, both form and substance were attached to the state, leaving individuals not being able to carry out the moral-ethical functions and justice. These elements should belong to the individual in the private area, and thus in Japan the individual possessed neither responsibility nor obligation to build or to participate in the commonwealth. Here we witness the characteristics of Japanese Ultranationalism, according to Maruyama. Because of this fact, he added, in the newly established postwar society each Japanese citizen as a subject or an individual should have a modern and democratic spirit to build the modern Japanese society. I believe that here also lies the logic of the self-consciousness. This logic of self-consciousness is an underlying common characteristic of the so-called ‘enlightenment in
postwar Japan' not only for Maruyama but also for many others.

The next generation made an effort to overcome the logic of self-consciousness. Among them in this generation are names like Kiyokaki Hirata, Yoshihiko Uchida and Seiji Mochizuki, the latter two were formerly attached to the Faculty of Economics of Senshu University to which I also belong. Uchida based the deepening and expansion of rational understanding of the object in the process of labour. Hirata and Mochizuki, the latter especially, judged that the development of the exchange of commodities broke the traditional and pre-modern social relationships and stressed modern individuals who were free from the old social relationships. The deepening of rational understanding of the object through the process of labour and the modern social relationships among individuals in the process of the commodities exchange were, according to them, characterized and conceptualised in the Civil Society. Here the self-consciousness was placed in the process of labour and the exchange of goods. While criticising Marxism of the party politics, their theoretical efforts were based on their studies of Karl Marx. From 1980, however, the study of Marx saw a steady decline, resulting in the decline also of the interest in the theories of the Civil Society in Japan.

There existed a strong expectation in their thoughts that in the long modern history a man in labour would become a modern individual through the economic process. They then dreamed of a society in which free individuals with modern reason could build a free association in the future. Certainly there were many who criticised their theories. One of the critics said that their theories depended too heavily on the productivity of the modern society. Another critic concluded that modern individuals were those without warm hearts and who treated others and nature as their own instruments. According to him we should pay attention to what modern producing power and individuals in our modern society have done so far. Although opinions given by these critiques are worth listening to, in the context of my argument today let me put them aside for a while. What is missing in their theories is this: they failed to pinpoint exactly how and where the social or civil movements are placed today.

In this case I always think about the 1848/49 revolution in Germany. At the end of the 18th century various associations appeared. At first a variety of cultural associations appeared followed by political ones. From where then did these associations come? They appeared in the process of the collapse of the feudal system in the wake of increasing commodities exchange. The political associations channelled the riots without political direction to the political or national dimension. Of course the economic backgrounds for the appearance of associations in history still have to be explained.

The following generation, namely, the generation of 1968, while continuing their social and student movements, could not overcome this logic of self-consciousness in Japan. The same generation in Germany, on the other hand, at least left something concrete such as political parties, statesmen, Grüne and Joschuka Fischer, to name a few, in part a contribution by Jürgen Habermas, although I don't know if they had overcome the logic of self-consciousness at all. But Japanese leftists left nothing. They organised student movements voluntarily and got out of them quite freely. That's all they did. They
left nothing. In fact, I am a bit ashamed of myself as it did apply to me and I'm sure it did to many others as well. That is why I am extremely sensitive to this logic of self-consciousness. Let’s think about it. You may find many essays that end with a sentence like ‘It’s important and necessary for all of us to be conscious of the theme’. But it seems to me it is a sort of copout, giving up the theory or the logic altogether, because not every one of us can be conscious of each problem.

Thank you very much.

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