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Growth versus the environment in Japan

A “navel” engagement

The December wind blew cold over the choppy waters of Beppu Bay in southern Japan. Fighting the blast and cutting through the waves, 200 boats proceeded along the coast, each flying a red flag. Their length and shape marked them as fishing craft: 20 to 30 feet long with a tall cabin near the bow. Normally their owners spent their days far apart on the shallow waters of the bay, fishing for the prized *tai* red snapper. Today they sailed in a grim convoy toward the shipping port of Oita City. Each vessel carried several fishers, their faces tanned by sun, wind, and salt. The boats were dwarfed by the towering candy-striped smokestacks of steel and oil refineries along the shore.

On the other side of the smokestacks, a convoy of buses and cars rolled along the main road. It headed toward the same destination as the fishing boats: the office of the governor. About 250 villagers filled the vehicles: old women with scarves covering their heads, teenage girls dressed in high school uniforms, farmers with hands gnarled from years of wielding the hoe, and several high school teachers, some silver-haired and others young. They joked noisily, but the nervousness in their laughter betrayed their anxiety about their undertaking.

The fishers and the other villagers opposed Governor Taki's plans for further industrial development. The second phase of the New Industrial City (NIC) would cover their beaches with concrete and fill in their shallow offshore waters with mud to make an industrial site. They feared that the factories would pollute their air. In 1971, the year before, the previous governor, Kinoshita Kaoru, had held a meeting in Kozaki Village to explain his policies.¹ He had assured the villagers that the proposed factories would not produce much pollution. But they had already witnessed how much the first phase of the project had disrupted the fishing villages of Nakajima, Misa, and Iejima. The paper mill had

1. All names are in Japanese name order, with family name first and given name second.

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pushed Nakajima aside. Misa and Iejima now huddled in the shadow of gigantic smokestacks. The villagers had come to distrust Kinoshita's reassurances and felt demeaned by his refusal to take their concerns seriously. His successor, Governor Taki, apparently intended to treat them in the same way.

Even so, they were afraid to confront the governor directly. After all, he had graduated from Tokyo University, the seat of academic authority and the incubator of central government officials. He now held the most prestigious job in the prefecture.² Only a few decades ago, until the end of the Second World War, such officials had handed down directives from the Emperor. Even now, some people thought of officials as above them in social status, and bowed uncritically to their will.

Beneath their outward confidence, the citizen protesters struggled with these doubts. As farmers, fishers, and schoolteachers from quiet villages, who were they to question the governor's judgment? Could they understand the experts' larger plans and purposes? Could they, should they, did they dare intrude their little demands on such plans? Though nervous and uncertain, their anger and worry impelled them forward.

The fishers moored their boats and marched to the prefectural government office building. There they converged with the rest of the villagers, who were emerging from the buses and cars. The buildings, constructed in the squarish 1950s "bureaucratic modern" style, projected an air of impersonal authority. Not by accident, the office building stood across the street from the green moat and sheer white walls of Oita's old feudal castle.

During the feudal period, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the local lord had little fear of invading armies. Rather, the castle walls protected him from local peasants who rose in protest in times of famine. On those occasions, the peasants smashed the sake brewers' warehouses and redistributed the rice hoarded within. Then they appealed to the feudal lord for help. They were never admitted to the castle; at best, the lord gave temporary help in feeding the villagers. To discourage such audacity in the future, however, he often executed the peasant leaders and displayed their heads on spikes (Broadbent, 1975).

Times had changed. The castle now housed a Hall of Culture for community events and performances. On Respect for the Aged Day (*keiro no hi*) the elderly met there and received the mayor's congratulations. Sometimes, women staged flower-arranging exhibits and traditional dance performances. Popular musicians and Kabuki troupes stopped there on their national tours. On May Day,

2. Japan is divided into 47 prefectures (*to*/*dofuken*), each with a prefectural government (*jichitai*). The country as a whole is slightly smaller than California. The average size of a prefecture is 3100 square miles (8000 square kilometers).

even the red banners of the socialist labor unions massed in the castle yard before moving out onto the city streets in orderly parade.

The new seat of authority, the prefectural office building, lacked the forbidding walls of the old Oita castle. A receptionist in a glass cage on the first floor was the only barrier. She stared in shock at the throng of villagers trooping up the stairs toward the governor's office.

The protestors filled the dimly lit hall outside the governor's office; thirty or forty made their way inside. At the far end of the room, behind a broad polished desk, sat the distinguished-looking, white-haired Governor Taki. The vice-governor and several other officials flanked him on either side. The governor looked upon the villagers calmly but gravely, like a father about to chastise errant children. They fell silent (Nishio, 1979).

A retired high-school teacher, the person of highest social status among the villagers, slowly stepped forward. He handed the governor a document stating the villagers' two central concerns: first, that the smoke from the proposed factories would be trapped over their village by the mountains just behind, and second, that the landfill would destroy the coastal spawning beds for the red snapper, ruining the fishers' livelihoods.

Governor Taki read the note carefully and then spoke. He understood their position well, he said. He promised to fairly represent their opinions in prefectural policy. Then he stood up in a gesture of dismissal. To his surprise, the assembled protestors did not respond with the expected humility.

Fishers have an independent streak bred by constantly risking their lives against the sea and can react fast in emergencies. They had braved heavy seas to sail in from Saganoseki; their tempers were short. One young fisherman, Nishio, could not restrain his anger. As he recalled later:

When I saw that (the governor was leaving), I got mad and said, "Just wait a minute" and made him sit. At that time I wasn't an official negotiator and hadn't made any preparations for a statement. Anyhow, I was mad and just let him have it.

"Hey, buster," I told him, "do you have a belly button?"

. . . As might be expected, the governor looked insulted and scowled back at me. But he answered, "yes."

Then I said, "Well, to tell you the truth, I got a belly button too; so if you got a belly button also, we got the same value as human beings."

He answered "Yes, that's right."

Then I shot back, "If that's so, how come you have the right to kill me?"

A photograph of the confrontation showed an unshaven Nishio scowling at the governor. Nishio continued,

That was the spark, and then everybody let loose at him. From that point the real talk with the governor began. During it, everyone got to say everything they wanted to.

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After that, we pulled out and went home in high spirits. For a while after that, the prefecture stopped its (development) activities (Nishio, 1979, p. 10–13).

Such effrontery from a poor fisherman, a junior high-school dropout, was rare and shocking in Japan. Japanese society, particularly in the traditional Oita Prefecture, exalts both officialdom and education. Many older citizens became deferential in the presence of either. Yet a tradition of protest coexisted with this tendency to deference. In feudal times, as mentioned earlier, peasants had marched against merchants and corrupt officials when confronted by famine or crisis (Bix, 1986). Now, under the growing threat of pollution, the villagers' concern had reached a peak. In the hearts of some, they had come to the governor as supplicants, begging him to consider their plight. The dignity of the governor's attempted exit had almost ended the audience. Nishio, however, cleared the air with a caustic frankness that opened the way for complaints.

A framework for understanding

Governor Taki and fisherman Nishio, and the groups behind them, expressed and embodied the two sides of a social dilemma – the contested choice between economic growth and environmental protection.³ The dilemma they faced – the growth/environment or GE dilemma – appears in many guises. This dilemma confronts authorities, entrepreneurs, activists and the general population in industrial and industrializing societies alike. Increasingly, it is at the root of many conflicts around the planet.⁴ As the effects of pollution and subsequent ecological disruption intensify, environmental protection may become less of a dilemma and more of an imperative. But it will always be contested. Each environmental solution will always have its pros and cons, its defenders and detractors.

The GE dilemma has gradually ripened since the mid-1960s, as many nations grew in population and prosperity. Most people want to enjoy the fruits of material progress. Widespread popular hopes, as well as demands from those who profit most, have exerted a strong push for continued economic growth.⁵

3. "Social dilemma" is a formal sociological term, defined as a situation in which a group holds two competing goals which are mutually contradictory (Messick & Brewer 1983; Yamagishi 1995). It is related to the larger class of events known as dilemmas of collective action (Ostrom, 1990).

4. Even recent ethnic conflicts in Africa have been traced to the dilemma of a growing population and scarce resources (Homer-Dixon, 1993).

5. Growth has been seen as desirable by liberal economists and Marxists (Baran, 1957) alike, albeit seen as working best under different institutional circumstances. Economic growth is usually defined as the increase in a nation's average per capita goods, services and income (Teune, 1988, p. 14). If the size of a nation's population increases at the same rate as its economic expansion (or

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With growth, societies discarded greater amounts of waste, some of it toxic, into their surrounding air, water, and soil.⁶ Overwhelming the absorptive capacity of the natural environment, this waste turned to pollution – substances which damage the health and functioning of nature and its inhabitants, including human beings (Franck & Brownstone, 1992, p. 246).⁷ As the damage intensified, so too have the complaints of its victims and their supporters.

To resolve the GE dilemma, we will have to find a way to define and satisfy needs and wants that does not destroy the environment. Some commentators call this ideal state a sustainable society or steady-state economy – one that keeps its consumption and waste at levels that will enable long-term survival.⁸ The attainment of such a society, though, seems blocked by more than technical difficulties. Conflicting interests and beliefs have littered the politics of the environment with broken promises.

A sustainable society seems unlikely unless we better understand the processes and policy decisions that have created the GE dilemma in the first place. We also need to study the successful steps toward sustainability that some societies have already taken. The case study method allows us to investigate thoroughly the *how* and *why* of such policy decisions and processes.

This book looks at how and why the GE dilemma arose, and was partly

greater), however, growth by this definition will not occur. Nonetheless, even under such conditions, the society's total output of waste, and hence pollution, will increase. Accordingly, the GE dilemma will still arise. At some point, the pollution will overwhelm the region's or planet's carrying capacity, disrupting the necessary conditions for various species, including the human (Arrow, Bolin, Costanza, Dasgupta, Folke, et al., 1995; Catton, 1980; Gore, 1993). This point has come to be termed a "limit" to growth (Hirsch, 1976; Meadows & Meadows, 1971). As a result, wealthy nations have already started to "export" their pollution. A globally sustainable solution, however, might require a steady-state economy that does not grow (Daly, 1980). At the same time, some forms of growth, such as those which emphasize services, by not increasing the sum total of pollution, may be sustainable (Brown, 1991; Commoner, 1990; Daly & Cobb, 1989, p. 147).

6. "The environment," in this usage, consists of the natural ecological processes necessary to sustain the present forms of animal and plant life. These processes are in dynamic and delicate equilibrium, forming an ecosystem with a limited carrying capacity (Harper, 1996, p. 12–22). This definition would include, for instance, the necessary balance of chemicals in the atmosphere to prevent cosmic radiation and the "greenhouse effect" of global temperature rise, within the natural ecosystem (Harper, 1996, p. 110–31).

7. In nature, when organisms expand their numbers beyond the carrying capacity of their environment, they tend to suffer sudden and catastrophic decline. The use of stored energy, mainly from oil, has given humanity the ability to overshoot its normal carrying capacity in terms of numbers and living standards. However, the capacity limits are now starting to reassert themselves in the form of declining fisheries, desertification and degradation of soil, changes in air chemistry leading to acid rain and global warming, and a host of other problems (Catton, 1980; Harper, 1996).

8. The quest for a sustainable economy and society received increasing attention in the late twentieth century (Daly & Cobb, 1989; Gore, 1993; MacNeill, 1990; World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

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resolved, in Japan during the decades from the 1950s to the 1990s. Within Japan, the story of the GE dilemma in the southern prefecture of Oita, where the “navel” engagement happened, represents Japan’s broader dynamics in a nutshell. Japan and Oita represent good sites for several reasons.⁹ Western-born theories about those causes and cures, and about politics and protest more generally, require testing in non-Western societies to determine their scope (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 29). With its Western institutions but Eastern cultural background, Japan represents the perfect case of “experimental” variation for this task. If Western theories hold in Japan, they should hold anywhere.

Moreover, Japan’s unusual performance in both economic and environmental matters adds to its significance, making it a critical test case for theories of the GE dilemma. In the 1960s, Japan produced an “economic miracle” – the fastest economic growth then known in the capitalist world (Johnson, 1982). Along with the miracle, unfortunately, came an environmental debacle, the world’s worst pollution. Despite its pro-growth momentum, though, in the 1970s, Japan reduced its sulfur dioxide air pollution much more quickly and thoroughly than other advanced, capitalist, industrialized democratic (ACID) societies (Table 1.4). Japan’s pollution improvements left many environmental problems untouched, as discussed below. For a crowded and resource-poor country like Japan, though, its speedy reduction in air and water pollution, compared to its wealthier ACID counterparts such as the United States or Germany, indeed has some miraculous qualities. Oita Prefecture mirrored and embodied these dramatic changes.

Japan’s mini-pollution “miracle,” so contrary to the theory that taking care of pollution is a luxury, may shed light on how to solve the GE dilemma as well as the pitfalls of such attempts.¹⁰ By the same token, Japan’s environmental politics present an opportunity for inquiry into the politics of ACID societies. The scope of our theories about the state, political power, democracy and the role of social protest movements can be tested and expanded through the study of Japan. Its pollution-related miracles and debacles, by their very unusualness, prompt one to ask *why* – what political processes and larger social structures brought about Japan’s reduction in air pollution, unmatched in the West, yet in so many other environmental issues, led to default? Japan’s urban debacle – its inability to redistribute industry to the hinterlands despite trying – constitutes a

9. I use the term “societal,” rather than “social,” to emphasize that my analysis includes all relevant dimensions of society: culture, social relations, and social institutions, as well as politics and economics in the more “realist” sense.

10. A critical case is one that seems to run contrary to the predictions of a theory. It is therefore a good choice for study because it has the strongest possibility of either confirming or disconfirming the theory (Lijphart, 1971; Walton, 1992).

representative case of the politics of default. Do Western ideas about the state and politics, such as pluralist democracy, class domination, state autonomy, corporatism, and party-centric models, adequately explain such outcomes? Or do these policy outputs require a home-grown theory, like the “network state” described below? Likewise, do social movements operate by the same principles as in the United States or Europe, and to similar effect? Are new resources and new ways of framing problems as important to their mobilization? Japan’s environmental miracles and debacles, then, promise to reveal especially telling lessons about a number of subjects: the GE dilemma, politics, social movements, and the nature of Japanese society.

We want to ask both *how* and *why* Japan’s miracles and debacles came about. The *how* question concerns the pattern of power and influence – who did what when, with what effect on policies and outcomes?¹¹ The *why* question, in contrast, concerns the reasons that such a pattern of power and outcomes exists – an explanation in terms of general societal theories. *How* did organizations, groups and individuals in Japan – social actors – create and then partially solve the GE dilemma? But also, *why* did they do so – what personal, organizational and societal motivations and conditions drove their decisions and actions? And especially, a crucial question to environmental sociology, how and why did the “voice of nature” finally achieve voice, if it did, within the political process?¹²

These questions all contribute to answering our central problem – what determines a society’s response to rising levels of pollution? Does the *natural intensity* of pollution (for example, the concentration of sulfur dioxide in the air) determine the intensity of a society’s attempt to fix the problem? Or does the *social intensity* – the sheer numbers of people affected – determine its response? Japan’s pollution miracle, the social intensity view implies, may have come about simply because the victims of pollution outnumbered those benefited by growth. Americans tend to see the world in those kind of terms – majority

11. At this point, it would help to define terms more closely. Agency, as a term in sociological theory, refers not to a bureaucratic organization, but to the creative attempt by any social actor, individual or organizational, to bring about change. Agency is the opposite of structure – a pre-defined set of roles that force actors into forms of behavior. Power, as I use the term, is the ability of an actor or a structure to control other actors and outcomes fully. Influence is partial power – the ability to affect or contribute to an outcome. This definition expands beyond the classic Weberian definition of power, which stressed the ability to dominate others and achieve ends, despite resistance (Weber, 1978). It includes the Parsonsian notion of power as the ability to produce effects, through not only domination, but cooperation as well (Parsons, 1960). It differs from Wrong’s definitions of power as intentional and influence as unintended (1979).

12. By “voice” I refer to Hirschman’s use of that term to signify political participation (Hirschman, 1970).

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rule and the clash of interest groups, each pursuing its own benefits. The pluralist view assumes that all such groups can achieve voice in politics. Other political models, though, argue that great imbalances in resources and power give effective voice to some and not to others. The natural and social intensity of pollution provide realist lenses to investigate a society's reaction to pollution.

More than such realist principles may have been at work, though. Japan's culture and social institutions may have profoundly affected its responses to pollution. Perhaps Japan's East Asian cultural roots – maybe its Shintoist respect for nature or its Confucian respect for authority – hastened response to its air and water pollution. Or perhaps its social institutions, such as the informal patron and client relationships that organize politics at all levels, channeled the society's response to rising pollution in the most effective ways.

Hunches and hypotheses such as these, rampant among social scientists and journalists alike, fall into three large theoretical camps: political-economic, social institutional and cultural. These three camps pitch their tents on very different “home domains” (Alford & Friedland, 1985). They adopt very different assumptions, that is, about the mainsprings that drive the interaction among politics, society and nature.

To illustrate their differences, for instance, the three camps would give us very different explanations of Taki and Nishio's “navel” engagement. The political-economic camp would point to differences in material interests – struggle over who should get the objective costs and benefits of growth had driven Taki and Nishio into confrontation. The social institutional camp would argue that the formal rules governing voting and parties, as well as the social status differences between the two parties, had kept the protestors from getting proper political representation, thereby driving them into unruly protest. The cultural camp would point to the dominant politicians' values of conquering nature in order to foster growth and national pride, versus the villagers' values of treasuring the natural sea and mountains that cradled their daily lives.

Even this cursory analysis, though, shows that no single viewpoint is sufficient, and perhaps all are necessary, to construct an adequate explanation. Larger political-economic structures, expressed as government and business demands, had forced Governor Taki to support a form of industrial growth that had serious drawbacks. When the protestors invaded his office to complain about these policies, institutional norms at first held them silent in awe of the governor. In pulling the belly-button metaphor out of his rough fisherman's background and applying it in those august premises, Nishio exercised creative agency with shocking effect. Nishio won the “navel” engagement by suddenly breaking the expected norms of proper behavior for an illiterate fisherman

toward a prefectural governor in rural, early 1970s Japan.¹³ Likewise, Nishio won by bringing the issues into the open, overcoming the governor's tactic of trying to avoid open discussion. In this incident, structural forces and creative agency interacted in a plastic malleability that shifted the course of events ever so slightly.¹⁴

As in this example, so do many incidents exhibit a complex mixture of causal factors. Moreover, the incidents multiply as politics pushes toward conclusions. To understand politics, I argue, we have to examine strings of incidents that lead up to specific, concrete and important shifts in governmental policies. In the case at hand, a number of explicit policy shifts produced, or rather embodied, Japan's pollution miracles and debacles. The strings of incidents leading up to these shifts appeared as encounters, conflicts and alliances, among movements, organizations, government ministries, businesses, political parties and others. As one incident sparked off the next, they traced networks of power and protest, constructing society and history in the process. These networks embody the "on-going accomplishment of collective action" (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1988) at all levels of society (Knoke, 1990). Our lack of knowledge about the dynamics of this unfolding process remains the most "glaring deficiency" in the field (McAdam et al., 1988, p. 728).¹⁵ Therefore, the study of numerous incidents provides evidence toward answering the big questions about the political process raised by the three theoretical camps. After discussing the GE dilemma and Japan's response at greater length in the next sections, I will probe deeper into these three camps and the questions they raise.

Concretely, this study investigates five major shifts in government policy that materially affected Japan's and Oita's GE dilemmas. These five policy shifts serve as the object of explanation or, in the language of statistics, the "dependent variable." The first two and the fifth policy shifts reflect the dominance of pro-growth interests, and therefore illustrate the politics of *causing* the GE dilemma. The third and fourth policy shifts resulted from the dominance of the

13. Sewell refers to this as the "transposition" of a sanction from one structural context to another (Sewell, 1992).

14. Here I draw on a social psychology of power and influence. French and Raven identified five types of exchange media through which actor A could influence B to comply with a request: coercion, (economic) inducement, provision of vital information, embodiment of a collectively motivating cultural symbol (such as a national office representing the nation and the flag), or presentation of an emotionally important reference (such as a photo of a starving child) (French & Raven, 1959). To this I added a sixth medium of influence, evocation of a collectively-accepted social norm defining proper behavior (Broadbent, 1989a).

15. See also Burstein et al., 1995, p. 276; Knoke, 1990; Tarrow, 1988, p. 435; Tuma, 1992, p. 1828.

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pro-environmental coalition, and therefore illustrate the politics of *curing* the GE dilemma.

The first policy shift concerned the contents of the NIC Law passed in 1962 (Chapter 2). The second, at the prefectural level, determined the type of industry brought to Oita in the early 1960s (Chapter 2). The third policy shift, back at the national level, consisted of the 1970 “Pollution Diet” and its fourteen strict regulatory laws (Chapter 3).¹⁶ The fourth shift, at the prefectural level, concerned Governor Taki’s 1973 concession to meet three conditions before resuming landfill No. 8: consensus, harmony and assessment (Chapters 4 through 7). The fifth was Governor Hiramatsu’s 1980 announcement that the government had met and fulfilled the three conditions, and was legally free to resume landfill No. 8 (Chapters 8 and 9). These policy shifts, resulting from strings of political incidents at national, prefectural and local levels, both exemplified and embodied Japan’s responses to the GE dilemma. Understanding their *how* and *why* carries us a long way toward explaining the GE dilemma, the relationship between state and society in Japan, and the entrance of the voice of nature into politics.

To foreshadow my conclusions, the relatively high numbers of people polluted in Japan (the social intensity of pollution) set up the potential for environmental policy. A pro-growth coalition between business and centrist labor (the “treadmill of production”) brought about this social intensity of pollution. Similar dynamics led to pollution in other ACID societies too. Japan’s formal and informal social institutions and cultural preferences channeled its particular policy response. Vertical networks helped elites dampen local protest by soft social control. Dominant Japanese values supported acquiescence to this social control. However, critical village subcultures supported protest. When pollution imposed or threatened enough harm, moral leaders mobilized local protests through vertical kinship networks. A national wave of protest forced elites to reduce the most evident types of pollution. But due to soft social control, the protest wave failed to set up strong national environmental groups.

The growth/environment dilemma

The GE dilemma calls into question the well-known motto of a certain manufacturing company, symbolic of the industrial age, that “progress is our most important product.” The dilemma forces us to question the assumption of this motto. It forces us to ask, is progress dependent upon increased industrial

16. The Diet is Japan’s national legislative body, consisting of an Upper and Lower House, or House of Councilors (*Sangiin*) and House of Representatives (*Shugiin*).