

# Invisible Politics

» TESSA MORRIS-SUZUKI

## IS THERE LIFE AFTER POLITICS?

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the success of democratisation movements in South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines and elsewhere led to a surge of hope and confidence in the ideals of democracy. The Cold War was over, and the forces of democracy and civil society appeared to have triumphed. There was a widespread belief that the continuing economic growth of countries like China would result in the further unstoppable global spread of democratising forces.

Two decades on, the optimism has been replaced by widespread gloom. China did not democratise, and in many of the countries that possess formally democratic institutions ('old' and 'new' democracies alike), the practical workings of the system evoke cynicism and apathy rather than enthusiasm and commitment. In an article published in 2009, Indian novelist Arundhati Roy evoked this mood by posing the ironic question 'is there life after democracy?'. Referring particularly to the situation in India—the world's biggest democracy' as it proclaims itself—Roy elaborates her initial question with a series of others:

What have we done to democracy? What have we turned it into? What happens when democracy has been used up? When it has

been hollowed out and emptied of meaning? What happens when each of its institutions has metastasised into something dangerous? What happens now that democracy and the Free Market have fused into a single predatory organism with a thin, constricted imagination that revolves almost entirely around the idea of maximising profit? Is it possible to reverse this process? Can something that has mutated go back to being what it used to be?<sup>1</sup>

The problem is not just one of democracy. The notions of liberalism, communism and socialism—the notion of revolution itself—all have lost their hold on the imagination. 'Politics' has become such a negatively loaded term that politicians compete with one another to distance themselves from it. United States congressional candidates boost their chances of election by emphasising their lack of mainstream political experience and their distance from the 'Washington establishment'; Asian populist politicians from Japan's Hashimoto Tōru to India's Narendra Modi flaunt their credentials as 'accidental politicians', and offer as their ultimate vision not the promise of better government but the promise of less government.

The quintessential expression of this phenomenon was surely the electoral success in May 2012 and again, on an even bigger scale, in

(above)

Help Japan  
Brighton University  
Peace Cranes

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February 2013 of Italian comedian Beppe Grillo, who was swept into parliament by grateful voters on the basis of his years of organising a series of anti-political rallies known as ‘*va fanculo*’ (fuck off) days, and ‘a political movement called *Cinque Stelle* (Five Stars), which seeks to encourage ordinary people in every locality to come forward and speak for the community’s distrust and dislike of mainstream politics’.<sup>2</sup> In a world where politics itself has come increasingly to be seen as the problem, not the source of solutions, Arundhati Roy’s question might be reframed: ‘is there life after politics?’

In this atmosphere of ‘anti-politics as ideology’, it seems important to reconsider the meaning of politics itself. To echo Roy’s words, we might ask: ‘What have we done to politics?’ How is it that a sphere of human life that, in its earliest Aristotelian formulation, was supposed to be about the collective search for the (materially and morally) good life has become a realm firmly identified with the formal institutions of the nation state, and with the opaque and self-serving actions of their office bearers? The purpose of this essay is to argue for a broader reinterpretation of the ‘political’, and to draw attention to a non-state world of politics that has been relatively neglected, even in the post-1980s proliferation of writing about civil society and social movements.

## WHAT IS POLITICS?

The term ‘politics’, so widely used in everyday life, is surprisingly seldom defined, and those who try to pin down its meaning have produced a remarkably diverse array of definitions. In its oldest, Aristotelian sense, the notion of politics had to do with the search by a community of people for the physically sustaining and morally virtuous ‘good life’. Politics was seen as a distinctively human activity, because it relied on the human capacity for speech and reasoned discussion. It was also an activity whose only subjects were free and rational human beings; therefore an activity (in the Aristotelian order of things) that excluded children, women and slaves. Aristotle recognised that a wide variety of human groupings or ‘communities’ (*koinonai* in Greek) might pursue a better life in various partial ways, but it was the *polis* that constituted the overarching communion and sought the good life as a whole. So the *polis* was the ultimate *koinonia politike*, the vessel of politics. As Kostas Vlassopoulos reminds us, though, it is almost impossible for us fully to recapture the mental world in which Aristotle’s ideas were developed, and modern reinterpretations of his ideas are profoundly influenced by the context of their own times.<sup>3</sup>

Notions related to the search for a sustainable and virtuous community have

(above)

Renaissance Italian Vision of the Ideal Greek Polis: Raphael’s Mural of the Philosophers of Athens, with Plato and Aristotle in the centre. **The School of Athens.** Fresco by Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio). 1509, Stanze di Raffaello, Apostolic Palace, Vatican.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, PUBLIC DOMAIN (PD-ART).

existed in a very wide range of other societies from ancient times. Rather than attempting to explore this diversity of ideas, I shall simply illustrate this by sketching some outlines of a non-European set of ideas with which I am familiar—ideas about the ordering of society that emerged from classical Chinese thought and were elaborated and developed in Japan in the centuries before that country was extensively exposed to Western ideas of politics. These ideas are very difficult to summarise, since they were extremely diverse and dynamic. Broadly, though, concepts derived from the philosophies of Confucius, Mencius and other Chinese classical writers offered two ways of thinking about the ordering of human life.

One was a ‘bottom up’ approach, embodied in the vision of the virtuous human being (*C. junzi*; *J. kunshi*; *K. gunja*). From this perspective (expressed in different ways in the work of thinkers like Itō Jinsai, 1627–1705 and Kaibara Ekiken, 1630–1714) a peaceful and prosperous society could only exist if each individual pursued the tasks of moral self-cultivation. Thus the creation of the good community began from the moral human, who existed always in the context of the family.<sup>4</sup> The second approach was a ‘top down’ vision (vividly articulated in the early nineteenth-century writings of thinkers like Satō Nobuhiro, 1769–1850) which prescribed the tasks of the good ruler as being *keisei saimin*: to bring order to the realm and to relieve the sufferings of the people. From this perspective, the task was to consider the policies and organisational arrangements that would best achieve order and the wellbeing of the population. (From the term *keisei saimin* we derive the modern word *keizai*, which since the nineteenth century has been used as the Japanese translation, not for the English word ‘politics’, but for ‘economics’.)<sup>5</sup>

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, first in Europe and then more widely across the world, Hegelian and Marxian social ideas drew heavily on the Aristotelian tradition, while also radically rejecting elements of it.<sup>6</sup> Both Hegel and Marx were concerned with creating forms of social order that allowed human beings the greatest possible scope to fulfill their innate potential. Politics in this sense remained a search

for the ‘good life’, and could never be reduced to the mechanisms of government. For Marx, the ongoing conflict between political ideas arose out of the structures of everyday subsistence—out of the mode of production and the relations of production through which human societies sustained themselves. The aim of political economy (in which the political and the economic were inseparable from one another) was to understand and work with the contradictory forces that pushed the existing order towards collapse and the emergence of a new order in which human potential would be more fully realised.

In the course of the twentieth century, the growing power of the nation state encouraged the emergence of more firmly state-centred definitions of politics, and ‘political science’ became the study of the way in which nation states are governed and relate to one another. We can see this state-centred focus in two famous, though radically contrasting, mid-twentieth-century definitions of politics—one offered by US political scientist Harold Lasswell and the other by German legal and political theorist Carl Schmitt. Lasswell, in a work whose subtitle constitutes one of the most widely quoted definitions of politics, saw the political as a matter of ‘who gets what, when and how’.<sup>7</sup> More precisely, he understood politics as the study of ‘influence and the influential’ (or ‘power and the powerful’); in other words, it was the study of elites and of the material, organisational and psychological ways in which elites constituted and maintained themselves.<sup>8</sup> Lasswell’s view of politics was largely internally directed. He was interested in the constitution of national societies, and his central aim was to redirect attention away from the Marxian focus on social class as a source of power, and towards other factors such as skill, attitude and personality, which he saw as being essential but neglected bases of elite power.

Carl Schmitt’s idea of the political emerged against the background of the rise of Fascism in Europe, at a time when the state itself was intruding on more and more areas of human life, so that every aspect of economy, society and culture was in a sense becoming political. In this context, Schmitt looked for the specific element which characterised political life,

as opposed to other human realms such as aesthetic or ethical life: and he found that element in the distinction between enemy and friend.<sup>9</sup> While artistic taste distinguishes the ugly from the beautiful, and religion or morality distinguish the virtuous from the wicked, politics (says Schmitt) distinguishes friends from enemies. It is, in other words, an inherently conflictual realm. Schmitt's definition (unlike Lasswell's) has a strongly outward-directed element. The friend-enemy distinction of course operates within the nation state, but also provides the very cornerstone for Schmitt's vision of international relations. The political, according to Schmitt, embodies 'the most intense and extreme antagonism', and although politics does not always involve military combat, 'a world in which the possibility of war is utterly eliminated' would be 'a world without politics'.<sup>10</sup>

### THE CONCEPT OF LIFE POLITICS

By the end of the twentieth century, as globalisation complicated theories of the nation state, and as non-state social movements attracted growing attention from scholars, the vision of politics tended once again to broaden, opening space for the social and the political to intertwine in new ways. A notable example of this can be seen in the appearance of the notion of 'life politics' in the writings of theorists like Anthony Giddens. For Giddens, power means 'transformative capacity', and its exercise is therefore clearly not limited to governments or elites. Writing in the context of the end of the Cold War in Europe, Giddens identified a transition from 'emancipatory politics', concerned with 'liberating individuals and groups from constraints which adversely affect their life chances', to 'life politics'. In Giddens' sense of the word, life politics (or lifestyle politics) is practised by people who are not bound by tradition or by the desperate struggle for daily existence, but are already emancipated, free to focus on 'self-actualisation'. Life politics therefore involves defining one's identity and lifestyle in a world where tradition no longer provides any clear rules of behaviour.<sup>11</sup>

Giddens is one of a number of theorists who have helped to expand the vision of politics

beyond the realm of governmental action. Another is Ulrich Beck, who has coined the term 'subpolitics' to emphasise that 'politics is also possible beyond the representative institutions of the nation-state'.<sup>12</sup> But the content and form of Giddens's 'life politics' and of Beck's 'subpolitics' remain quite vague. Giddens himself strongly denies that 'life politics' is confined to middle class consumer culture. He insists that the very poor, as much as the relatively wealthy, are uprooted from tradition and need to seek out their own identities.<sup>13</sup> But if 'life politics' is practised by people who are largely liberated from the everyday struggle for physical survival, then it is difficult to see what relevance it has for a broad mass of poorer people in today's world. In this sense, it is important to emphasise that Giddens's vision of 'life politics' is quite different from the 'informal life politics' or 'survival politics' to be discussed later in this essay.

It is interesting to contrast Giddens's version of post-Cold War political thought with that of a contemporary but very different thinker: French political philosopher Jacques Rancière, who bases his definition of politics on a reading of Aristotle, but one that stands Aristotle's logic on its head. Rancière's criticises classical Greek thought for presenting an illusory equality: in theory, all citizens have a role to play in the *polis*, but philosophers such as Aristotle allot specific roles in society to the rich and the well-born (the *oligoi* and the *aristoi*), while leaving the ordinary people (the *demos*) with no role and no defined quality except their freedom. Freedom (according to Rancière) being a quality also shared by the *oligoi/aristoi*, is not a special characteristic or role at all. It is merely a role empty of substance, which condemns the *demos* to being 'the part that has no part' in the political order of things.

Modern political thought inherits Aristotle's image of man as a 'political animal', whose ability to be political derives from the power of speech: a capacity which distinguishes him from all other animals. While other animals (Aristotle tells us) use their voices merely to express 'pain or pleasure' (i.e. to make noises), human voices are able to communicate 'what is useful and what is harmful, and also what is just and what is unjust' (i.e. humans can

speak and reason).<sup>14</sup> But Rancière inverts this argument. For him, politics is not founded on a pre-existing division between speaking creatures and noise-making creatures. Politics, by separating those with substantive roles in the *polis* (the rich, the well-born) from the *demos* whose role is devoid of substance, is the process that separates a minority, whose vocal utterances are recognised as speech, from the majority, who are doomed to the ‘night of silence or to the animal noise of voices expressing pleasure and pain’.<sup>15</sup> At its core, politics is a contest over the issue of whose vocal utterances count as speech, and whose merely count as ‘noise’.

This redefinition of the political rests on a distinction Rancière draws between ‘policing’ and ‘politics’. By policing, he does not mean simply the control of law and order exercised by the people whom we normally know as ‘the police’, but rather, much more broadly, the whole ordering of society: ‘the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying’, the creation of ‘an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise’.<sup>16</sup> ‘Politics’, on the other hand, is the opposite of policing. It is action that breaks the existing order of the visible and sayable.

Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination. It makes visible what has no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes heard as discourse what was once only heard as noise.<sup>17</sup>

Politics, in this definition, is always transgressive: it involves people ‘speaking out of turn’ or acting in ways which are contrary to their normal, socially sanctioned roles.

## ANOTHER POLITICS

The ideas of Giddens, Beck, Rancière and others, in their diverse ways, suggest possibilities for broadening our concepts of the political. Here I want to build on those ideas by offering a somewhat different perspective on

what I call ‘non-governmental politics’. In using this term, I am drawing on the idea of politics as a pursuit of the materially and spiritually ‘good life’ by groups of people. In this sense, I see politics as centrally embodying a sense of movement through time from present to future. Politics is the effort by a communion (*koinonia*) of people to secure a good future—and this is true of ‘conservative’ as well as of ‘reformist’ politics, since human communities do not simply maintain themselves without effort. Even the attempt to prevent change or to restore a previous state of affairs involves future-directed effort.

Drawing on Vlassopoulos’s reinterpretations of the Aristotelian *polis*, we can suggest that ‘politics’ does not exist only at the macro, or state, level. It is not confined to debates about the grand design of all facets of social life. It also exists at the micro level, in efforts to change, preserve or restore more limited aspects of human existence. In modern nation states, and in the modern international order, this form of political activity can be carried out in two ways. The first way may be called ‘governmental’. By this I mean that the subject who takes actions to achieve a future goal is part of the formal machinery of government—whether local, national or transnational government. So, political actions carried out by a town council, by a national government department (with or without a formal resolution from parliament) or by an agency of the European Union are all examples of governmental politics.

But it is important to stress that governmental politics does not simply involve politicians and bureaucrats. Civil society plays a crucial role in governmental politics, by demanding, protesting and lobbying for action, and by organising and educating voters to vote for parties with particular political agendas. All of this civil society action remains ‘governmental politics’ in the sense that it aims to bring about actions by the formal institutions of government.

‘Non-governmental politics’, on the other hand, occurs when people decide to seek a particular social goal, not through demanding action by government institutions, but through their own efforts. We can further divide non-



governmental politics into two versions—philanthropic or humanitarian politics, where one group of people brings about changes in the lives of another group; and self-help politics, where a group of people seeks to change their own lives.

Consider a situation where a group of parents are dissatisfied with the education their children are receiving in the state (or state-sanctioned private) education system. One response to this would be to lobby the local or national government to make changes to the education system—a ‘governmental politics’ approach. But another, ‘non-governmental’, self-help approach would be for the parents to take their children out of the state system and start to educate them by themselves.

We can see from this example that governmental politics and non-governmental politics are not necessarily distinct from or opposed to one another. The same group of people may be involved in both. For example, a group of parents who have decided to home-school their children may at the same time continue to lobby for changes in the state education system. The problem with a rather large part of the ‘civil society’ literature, though, is that its interest has been weighted towards the governmental side of the equation. In other words, it has tended to focus on cases where social groups have aimed to influence

policy or bring about the reform of local and national institutions, and has had less to say about non-government actions—the situations where groups try to shape the present and future of their own lives without recourse to the intervention of the state.

### INFORMAL LIFE POLITICS IN ACTION: THE CITIZENS’ RADIOACTIVITY MEASURING STATIONS

My particular interest is in groups engaged in ‘informal life politics’ (or ‘survival politics’) in East Asia. The extensive literature on issues of civil society in East Asia seldom pays much attention to these groups, but their presence is an important element in the rapidly changing sociopolitical world of the region.

By ‘informal life politics’, I mean groups who are impelled by threats to their life, livelihood or cultural survival to engage in self-help, non-governmental forms of politics. A characteristic of the actions of these groups is that they are ‘political’ in Rancière’s sense of being transgressive: in other words, they involve people in activities which are outside the limits of their everyday social roles. Often in a quiet way, they shake up the social order by impelling people to ‘speak out of turn’: to perform tasks that they would not normally

(above)  
Mushanokōji’s ‘New  
Village’ in 1919.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA  
COMMONS, ABASAA,  
PUBLIC DOMAIN.

have been expected to perform. Some examples from Japan can help to illuminate the nature and dynamics of informal life politics. The three cases I shall consider here are driven by very different views of the world, and illustrate the diversity of ways in which informal life politics may be practised.

Japan has a long tradition of grassroots non-governmental political action. While the Japanese government from the Meiji Era (1868–1912) onward focused on the energetic promotion of industrial development, some oppositional streams of thought highlighted the social costs of high-speed industrialisation, and argued for a lifestyle based on self-sufficiency and self-government at the local community level.<sup>18</sup> One prominent proponent of such ideas was the novelist and philosopher Mushanokōji Saneatsu (1885–1976), whose ‘new village’ (*atarashiki mura*) movement was inspired by a mixture of themes from traditional Japanese social philosophy, anarchism and Tolstoyan utopianism. Participants in the movement did not resist the rule of central government, but aimed to create their own self-sufficient and self-governing communities based on agricultural labour, handicrafts and shared cultural activity. Mushanokōji’s ideas were closely linked to those of other members of the prewar ‘White Birch’ (*shirakaba*) group, such as the famous advocate of Japanese folk arts, Yanagi Sōetsu (1889–1961).<sup>19</sup> Though Mushanokōji himself was later to be criticised for his support of Japanese wartime expansionism, the New Village movement had a wide influence throughout northeast Asia, and its echoes are still heard in various parts of the region today. Chinese artist Ou Ning’s plan to create a self-governing rural art community—a ‘microstate’—in the village of Bishan, for example, draws heavily on the ideas of Mushanokōji’s new village movement.<sup>20</sup>

The search for a politics of self-reliance was continued in various streams of postwar grassroots activism, and survives in Japan today. One of the two ‘new villages’ created by Mushanokōji (in Moroyama, west of Tokyo) was revived after the Pacific War and still exists on a small scale. There have also been recent moves to re-establish the movement in the area of Miyazaki Prefecture that was home to the

first ‘new village’. The influence of this lineage of ideas can also be seen in places such as the Tatsue Peace and Handicraft Folk Art Hall (*Heiwa to Teshigoto Tatsue Mingeikan*), an art gallery and community centre in the small town of Mochizuki in Niigata Prefecture.<sup>21</sup> Named after Kobayashi Tatsue, a local teacher who was inspired by the work of the White Birch group, the community centre continues to promote ideas of local autonomy, respect for handicrafts and environmental sustainability. Local residents meet there regularly to develop their own proposals for community development, in dialogue with the prominent Japanese environmental economist Miyamoto Kenichi. Their ‘Residents’ White Papers from the Rural Village’, the most recent of which was published in 2013, set out collective visions of their region’s future: visions that have been put into effect in a range of schemes from community medicine to a local currency scheme.<sup>22</sup>

The new villages and their contemporary successors embody a coherent ideology of self-made (indeed, hand-made) politics—a mistrust of the state and a desire for an autonomous communion. They seek the ‘good life’ through the building of local small-scale communities far removed from the grand designs of the nation state. In many cases, though, survival politics emerges less from any conscious ideology than from a pressing need to react to a crisis which state authorities are failing to address, or may even have caused. Such survival politics movements focus on specific areas of social life where the government becomes incapable of carrying out its expected

(below)

Interior of the Tatsue Peace and Handicraft Folk Art Hall in Mochizuki.

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functions, or where the actions of government themselves have come to be seen as a threat to the wellbeing of particular communities.

A good example of 'crisis-driven' survival politics in contemporary Japan is the story of the network of 'Citizens' Radioactivity Measuring Stations' which emerged following the Fukushima nuclear accident of 2011. Immediately after the accident, people in a wide area around the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant found themselves facing a terrible dilemma. They were aware that large amounts of radiation had been released from the plant. The government repeatedly assured them that there was no danger to their health, but a wide range of media reports by journalists and scientific experts were issuing wildly varying and often very alarming assessments of the radiation risks. Particularly for families with young children, the choice between remaining in contaminated regions or leaving their homes, jobs and schools to avoid the risk of contamination was an agonising one.

Two key problems quickly became apparent: the first was that the government (both central and local) was unprepared and lacked expertise to deal with the disaster, and was very slow in establishing effective systems of radiation measurement. The second was that the reassurances issued by government agencies soon after the accident lacked credibility. Both national and prefectural governments were reluctant to release information that might cause alarm, and their suppression of important facts about the disaster resulted in a profound

(below)

Inside the Citizens' Radioactivity Measuring Station, Fukushima City.

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public loss of faith in official pronouncements about radiation levels and health risks.

In response to the crisis, on 1 July 2011 the first Citizens' Radiation Measuring Station was established in Fukushima City. The station was staffed by volunteers, and raised donations to buy relatively sophisticated measurement equipment, including a whole body counter imported from Belarus, and to rent premises in a small shopping centre. By the end of the year, a network of ten citizens' measuring stations had been set up in surrounding areas and as far away as Tokyo. The stations measure radiation (particularly that caused by caesium-134 and caesium-137) in food, and larger centres such as the Fukushima City station also measure levels of radioactive caesium in the human body. Anyone can request a measurement, which is carried out for a small fee.<sup>23</sup>

A key part of the work of the measuring stations is the dissemination of accurate information about radiation levels. For example, the results of all measurements are posted on the organisation's website, providing a valuable resource of information on the levels of radiation in various foodstuffs.<sup>24</sup> The centres also sell books and DVDs on radiation-related issues and participate in workshops and conferences on the Fukushima accident and its aftermath.

Though some of the group's organisers and volunteers had a background in physical or health science, most did not. For example, Tanji Kōdai, who was one of the group's founding members, had previously worked in an organic food cafe owned by his family, and had absolutely no expertise in nuclear science before the Fukushima accident. Like many in the region, he has become a self-taught expert out of necessity. Members of the group participate in activities to lobby the government for more effective responses to the Fukushima accident, but they also see themselves as performing a vital set of activities to protect public health parallel to, but separate from, those of the government.

As Tanji argues, the loss of public confidence in government authorities has made it essential for an independent body with no conflicts of interest to provide information to local citizens. From early 2012 onward the state-run radiation monitoring system has improved,

but local people still often turn to the the measuring stations for a 'second opinion' to verify the information that they have received from government agencies.<sup>25</sup> In this sense the Citizens' Radioactivity Measuring Stations work to protect community health and provide public education by taking into their own hands 'governmental' activities that the government has proved to be incapable of carrying out effectively itself.

### FROM INFORMAL LIFE POLITICS TO GOVERNMENTAL POLITICS...

Grassroots communions which begin by practising informal life politics sometimes develop into organisations engaged in governmental politics. A good example of this process is the history of the development of the suicide-prevention movement in Japan. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Japanese suicide rate rose very rapidly, and in 1998 the annual number of Japanese people committing suicide exceeded 30,000 for the first time. Reasons for the rise included the pressures of the educational system, declining employment opportunities for the young, and the growing isolation of old people as the support of the extended family diminished. But suicide remained a social taboo: the families of victims of suicide often felt ashamed to speak about their experiences, and politicians were reluctant to take up the issue publicly.

The initial responses from community groups in Japan were therefore to address the problem by themselves, providing counselling and psychological and financial support for the vulnerable. A distinctive characteristic of the Japanese movement was its focus on the plight of children who had experienced the suicide of a parent. From 1998 onward, a group called the *Ashinaga Ikueikai*, which provided support to children orphaned by road accidents and other disasters, began to focus its attention on 'suicide orphans' (*jishi iji*). It organised summer camps and other events at which they could express their sense of grief and trauma, and this led to the publication of a booklet and the making of a television documentary in which young people who had lost a parent to suicide spoke out openly in public for the first time



about the social issue of suicide. Meanwhile, other groups such as the Osaka-based Suicide Prevention Centre (*Jisatsu Bōshi Sentā*) offered telephone counselling and other support services to those at risk of suicide.<sup>26</sup>

As the movement expanded, though, many members came to feel strongly that a self-help approach was not enough. They wanted to emphasise that suicide was not an individual psychological problem, but rather a social problem which the government should address both at a national and local level. From about 2001 onwards they moved towards a governmental politics approach, working closely with parliamentarians to produce a national Basic Law on Suicide Prevention, ultimately passed in 2007. This change in approach was strongly supported by the work of particular individuals who provided the link between the grassroots self-help movement and national government. One of the key figures was Shimizu Yasuyuki, a journalist with the national broadcaster NHK, who had made documentaries on the 'suicide orphans', and been so affected by the experience that he left NHK to work full-time on suicide prevention, becoming one of the founders of a new movement named 'Lifelink'. Another was Yamamoto Takashi, a former leading figure in the support group for orphans, who became a member of parliament and worked tirelessly to push through the Basic Law on Suicide

(above)

**Jisatsutte Ienakatta (We Couldn't Say it was Suicide)**, Sunmark Publishing Co., Tokyo, 2002. One of the booklets produced by young people associated with the Ashinaga Education Association.

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Prevention. Yamamoto's efforts won widespread respect and support in the Japanese parliament, particularly because he continued to fight for the law's acceptance after being diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2005.<sup>27</sup>

For Shimizu and others, a focus on the role of government in addressing the causes of suicide is essential. Making suicide a formally political issue is a way of emphasising social and political responsibility for the problem, so helping to overcome the personal burden of shame so often endured by families who have experienced the suicide of one of their members. A national policy is also needed because piecemeal approaches to the problem by medical, welfare and other agencies leave gaps in the support system through which the vulnerable can easily fall.<sup>28</sup>

### ...AND FROM GOVERNMENTAL POLITICS TO INFORMAL LIFE POLITICS

But social action can also move in the opposite direction—away from governmental politics towards informal life politics. One of Japan's greatest twentieth-century environmental crises was the Minamata pollution case, in which many thousands of people in the southwestern fishing town of Minamata suffered incurable neurological damage after eating fish contaminated with mercury from waste from a local factory. The human effects of 'Minamata Disease' vary from relatively vague symptoms of dizziness, lack of coordination, blurred vision etc. to total physical and mental incapacity and death. Many children were born chronically handicapped because their parents had eaten mercury-polluted fish. A large social movement emerged in response, demanding compensation from the government and the corporation responsible, through demonstrations, sit-ins and court action. Though the causes of Minamata Disease were identified by scientists in the 1950s, and the main sources of pollution were brought under control in the 1960s, court cases by victims continued until 2010.

Though sections of the Minamata movement continued to focus on demanding recompense from the state, over the course of time some victims of the pollution began to redirect their

attention toward the task of attempting to rebuild a local community based on principles fundamentally different from the 'production nationalism' they identified as the cause of the Minamata disaster.<sup>29</sup> One particularly interesting figure in this movement is Ogata Masato, a member of one of the local fishing families drastically affected by the disaster: his father died of Minamata Disease when Ogata was six years old, and he and his seven siblings have all been officially recognised as victims of the disease. Although Ogata spent most of his early life engaged in the struggle to obtain recognition and compensation for himself and other pollution victims, ultimately he came to question the meaning of monetary compensation, and to look for a locally based response to the meaning of the pollution disaster.

The Minamata disease incident has left a question that cannot be dealt with as a political issue. Actually, it is the biggest and most fundamental question. In other words, there is a question that cannot be transformed into a question of policies or institutions. That is the question of the soul.<sup>30</sup>

Ogata focuses his critique on profit-oriented production nationalism, and seeks to develop an alternative. At one level, this alternative is a personal matter: a new consciousness of one's individual connectedness to the natural world. But it also involves the transformation of the local community, both through the creation of a spiritual sense of mutual responsibility, and through practical projects such as the development of renewable energy sources.<sup>31</sup>

Those who have moved towards a survival politics response to the Minamata crisis express their aims in terms of a desire to have their voices heard as human speech and answered by the voices of fellow humans. Citing one of the victims (referred to only as 'M.') who has been centrally involved in the struggle with the Chisso Corporation, which caused the pollution, Japanese social scientist Kurihara Akira writes:

M. kept insisting that it was necessary to find human beings within the Chisso corporation. But even when M. called out to them, no

human voice came back to him. All that came back to him was the echo of his own voice.<sup>32</sup>

It was this longing to go beyond the notion of financial compensation for irreparable injury, and to recreate a mutual acknowledgement of their own and others' humanity, that led some within the Minamata movement towards a local search for a different form of 'good life'. Like many forms of survival politics, their actions are not only a struggle to protect the basis of life and livelihood itself, but at the same time a struggle for the recognition of their voices and their humanity: a fight to 'make heard as discourse what was once only heard as noise'.

### SEEING INVISIBLE POLITICS

New forms of survival politics are emerging, not just in Japan but throughout the East Asian region and beyond. Often, though, they remain invisible to the outside world, falling below the radar of those who study politics, and even of those interested in social movements and civil society. Small-scale, local, loosely structured and fluid, they are easily overlooked. To see these realms of invisible politics, we need to step out of some of the conventional frames of academic thought, and to bring together approaches from politics, anthropology, sociology and history. This involves going back to the fundamental meanings of politics, often lost in contemporary political jargon and media rhetoric. Since survival politics movements are themselves often creative and transgressive, learning about (and from) them may also require a capacity to create new approaches to learning itself, and new approaches to communicating what we have learnt. We might consider, for example, the way that the Japan-based Biohistory Research Hall (one source of inspiration for Ogata Masato and fellow Minamata activists) synthesises insights from diverse disciplines and communication media,<sup>33</sup> or the way in which Ou Ning combines artistic imagination with social experimentation in the online social artworks that develop his vision for the Bishan 'micronation'.<sup>34</sup>

To learn about (and from) survival politics movements is not uncritically to endorse their aims and methods; nor does it suggest that non-

governmental approaches to social action are preferable to governmental approaches.

The purpose, rather, is to broaden our range of vision and imagination of the ways in which people make their social worlds. One question to be considered is why some groups of people choose governmental approaches to the communal search for a 'good (or at least a better) life', while others choose informal, non-governmental approaches. What explicit or implicit ideologies underlie survival politics movements? Through what diverse methods are survival politics practised? Can we develop a taxonomy of survival politics movements that will help us to see how they relate to one another? How and where do the worlds of governmental politics and informal life politics intersect?

The roots of informal life politics run deep. From the nineteenth century onward, informal self-help movements have often been the starting point for the emergence of modern institutions that have shaped the nature of formal political worlds—as, for example, in the case of the friendly societies that formed the basis of the modern trade union movement. But in other cases survival politics has remained small-scale and evanescent, yet still helped to change the lives of human communions in quiet ways. Making the past and present of these informal, non-governmental movements visible may open new ways to think about the future, and breathe new life into our vision of the possibilities and the horizons of politics. 🍷



TESSA MORRIS-SUZUKI FAHĀ holds an Australian Research Council Laureate Fellowship at the Australian National University. Her research focuses on aspects of modern Japanese and East Asian regional history. Recent works include **Borderline Japan: Foreigners and Frontier Controls in the Postwar Era** (2010) and **East Asia Beyond the History Wars: Confronting the Ghosts of War** (Routledge, with Morris Low, Leonid Petrov and Timothy Y. Tsu, 2013). In 2013 she was awarded the Fukuoka Prize (academic award) for contributions to the study of East Asia.

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