The Social Origins and Consequences of Contemporary Japanese Populism

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The media discourse of 'winners and losers' is spreading. Yet in everyday conversation, people rarely describe themselves as 'winners'. Often it is nothing but the subject of a joke. We should reserve judgment about the extent to which this perspective has been internalised. It is difficult to apply the 'win-lose' vocabulary. To begin with, this new ideology of 'competition' and 'win-lose' is a choice by elimination due to the lack of an alternative. It is forced on people by the impact of globalisation and international competition. It criticises past ideology, but it has not been embraced on the basis of conviction. Hence it remains somewhat strange and unfamiliar to us.

Indeed, until some ten years ago, we took pride in the mass-middle-class society as unique to Japan. During the Bubble era, there was actually an assumption that the whole society was moving up towards the 'mass upper-class'. We believed that 'Japanese Management' enabled us to enjoy a wealthy lifestyle as the 'mass middle-class'. When the same people say that from now on Japan is a society of competition and 'disparity', we sense inconsistency. Naturally, a question emerges whether these people seriously believe in such a discourse. Or is it just a means of manipulating others?

I am not speaking of any concrete individuals, but of Japanese generally, particularly those who actively embraced the discourse of the 'mass-middle-class society' and who now identify themselves as the 'upper middle-class'. When someone changes one's belief without any principle, we call it a 'conversion'. In this sense, we can call the shift from 'mass-middle-class society' to the discourse of acceptance of 'disparity' a 'conversion'.
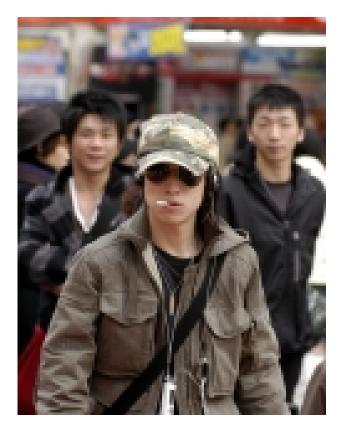
The subject of conversion is not concrete individuals but the entire 'middle-class' which dominates contemporary Japan. What has 'converted' may be called the 'collective will' of this class. If so, then there might be something like a collective 'shamefulness'. Indeed, this is connected to the 'lack of confidence' of this class.

The Existence of the 'Enemy' Cancels Out the Sense of Guilt

Let's consider what divides 'winners' and 'losers'. Clearly, the contemporary 'win-lose' binary is an unfair game. Consider the difference between those who were made redundant and those who remained in a restructured company. It is not 'ability' that determines the outcome. Since what is crucial for the company is reduction of the number of regular employees, 'ability' is close to irrelevant. Of course, there will be many cases where members of a powerful faction become the 'winners'. The worst case is when those who are responsible for the poor performance of the business blame the weaker ones. Those who excel at 'politics' survive. Of course, no matter how it is done, restructuring itself reduces labour costs and revives the business, making it look like a big success to outsiders.

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We can recall the process of dealing with bad credit. Some large banks survived due to bailouts from public funds, whereas many excellent small and middle sized companies went under because of the banks' unwillingness to organise loans.

We can think about this at a more fundamental level. What is the difference between one young person who can find a 'proper job' and another who can only be a 'freeter' (temporary worker from free + arbeiter)? If we consider the difference in how they start, that is, the difference in their parents' economic power (economic capital) that enables their children to go to cram school and university, attitudes towards education and access to information on education (cultural capital), then it is hard to say that these two young people are engaged in fair competition.

Freeters

As a description of this selection process, the

word 'exclusion' would be more appropriate than 'win-lose', for it connotes unfairness and arbitrariness. Of course, some of the competitions might be fair; but 'fair' competitions can take place only after certain 'exclusions' have been implemented.

Selection by 'politics' is closer to 'civil war' than to a 'competition'. I cannot help but think that those who have survived as 'upper middle-class' are the product of an inhuman and unjust 'civil war' that took place within the ranks of 'mass-middle-class society'. Those who have excluded others must be well aware that their survival was not a result of their own ability but was based on something else, certain non-transparent principles. It may be possible to conceal such reasons from others and pretend that one's current position as a 'winner' was a result of fair competition; but they cannot hide this knowledge from themselves – at least not from their unconsciousness. The memory of the 'civil war' returns to the winners, too, as a trace of a trauma. What we should really problemetise, then, may not be middle-class consciousness but middle-class 'un'consciousness.

Certainly in contemporary society where disparity is increasing, those who identify themselves as 'upper middle-class' may be 'winners' in terms of the outcome. What they can take pride in, however, is a mere 'outcome', and they cannot be proud of the process of exclusion that has led to that 'outcome'. Hence they cannot ethically justify themselves as winners. Sometimes inhumane restructuring by a company results in the lowering of morale of those who remained in the company. In a way, 'Japan inc.' as a whole is in a similar situation.

When principles and consistency are sacrificed, one cannot affirm the existence of the self and may even lose ontological stability. This is generally considered to precipitate mental illness. In short, it becomes difficult to remain

sane. In contemporary Japan, the majority class as a whole exists under such conditions. If so, this is a structural problem. In addition, currently, those in the 'upper middle-class' must negate their lack of confidence and pretend that they are confident. This is a hopeless situation. As the situation of those who have been excluded is not as complicated, they at least have some hope.

Populism is a means of gaining political following by manipulating the victim consciousness of oppressed people through positing and attacking a clear 'enemy'. However, populist scapegoating is not a 'privilege' of the 'losers'. For those who are considered 'winners', too, embracing populism may be psychologically inviting. The existence of the enemy that threatens us cancels out the guilty feeling of 'conversion' and 'exclusion'. Moreover, it seems as if, by attacking the 'enemy', one can recover lost confidence. What we can recover in this way, however, is not ethical confidence but only a temporary catharsis.

We can perhaps say that the 'new middle-class' of the 'mass-middle-class society' era were economy-supremacists, consumer culture oriented, and apolitical. That is, for better or worse, they were conservative. On the contrary, the new 'new middle-class' that is being reduced in size by the 'exclusion' in the contemporary 'post-mass-middle-class society' are certainly political and even radical. What they seek in politics, however, is not something positive such as an ideal but something that can fill in the lack of their own ethical base – lack of confidence; in this sense they are exceedingly political. Populism is a response to this situation.

Thus the largest source for this populism may not be the 'excluded' but the 'winners' who lack confidence in themselves – the majority called the 'upper middle-class'.

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