1979–80 as a Pivotal Moment in Japanese Postwar Conservatism

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1．Did Everything Begin in 1979?

The years 1979 and 1980 were a pivotal moment for the world and for Japanese conservatism alike. This paper focuses on the policy-making group of Masayoshi Ōhira, who was the prime minister of Japan during this transition.

1979 saw the birth of the Thatcher administration in Britain, along with the full-fledged implementation of liberalization measures by Deng Xiaoping in China; these formed an important transition leading toward the subsequent trend of an increasingly rapid spread of market values. The Iranian revolution occurred in Iran at the same time, while the Afghan resistance movement against the Soviet invasion gathered pace. Hence, this was also the year that marked the start of the current Islamic revival. Looking back, one can say that 1979 was the year that gave us advance notice of the dawn of the age of market values and religion.

In addition to these four events, journalist Christian Caryl, in his book *Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Birth of the 21ˢᵗ Century*, covers the visit of Pope John Paul II to his native Poland in the same year（Caryl 2013）. In the sense that this event was the first step toward the dissolution of the socialist system in Poland, 1979 should also be remembered as the "beginning of the end" for the socialist system as a whole.

If one considers the twentieth century as beginning with the Russian Revolution of 1917 and ending with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, this was definitely a century spent in the company of "socialism as an alternative." In this sense, looking back to 1979, a point ten years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, one can say that "socialism as an alternative" was already in the process of being lost. The events of 1979 demonstrate that people were instead looking to the market—or, alternatively, to religion—as driving forces for the advancement of society.

Against this background of world events, where, one might ask, does Japan fit in? In retrospect, it seems truly ironic, but 1979 is also memorable as the year that saw the publication of Ezra Vogel's *Japan as Number One*. It was precisely in this year, when the world was searching for a new direction, that this "Japan-worshipping" book appeared.

In fact, it is certain that Vogel did not write the book with the intention of being

a Japan worshipper. The question was how America should handle the economic progress of Japan. The book, which was written as a re-examination of American society, was received in Japan as an unadulterated piece of Japan worship. While it may not be the case that *Japan as Number One* instigated the trend, a distinctive tendency toward self-affirmation became highly apparent in Japanese political and social discourse thereafter.

It may well be that 1979 was the fateful year in which Japanese society, rather than opting for either market values or religion, chose for itself to continue with the status quo. Bearing this awareness in mind, this paper traces the fate of a policy-making group founded in 1979. Looking back at the legacy of this policy-making group, positive and negative, this paper examines the choices Japanese society made at the time.

2．Prime Minister Ōhira's Policy-making Group

In Japan in 1979, the administration of Masayoshi Ōhira had been in power since the end of the previous year. As a politician, Ōhira continued in the mainstream of Japanese conservatism as it had been since the time of Shigeru Yoshida; simultaneously, however, he was mentally searching for an image of the future of Japan after the period of high economic growth. In his opening address on January 25, he stressed the transition from the modern to the postmodern, along with a shift in emphasis from the economic to the cultural, as critical issues for Japanese society.

Ōhira meant what he said. He immediately formed a policy-making group (known in Japan as a "study group"), the "Ōhira Policy Study Group," composed of nine sub-groups. Under Ōhira's own initiative, the group investigated research topics such as garden cities, the Pacific Rim Solidarity, and the shift of emphasis from economics to culture. The chairmen of the sub-groups, such as Tadao Umesao, Tadao Uchida, and Saburō Ōkita, were appointed by Ōhira (Nagatomi 2000). Ōhira himself was apparently extremely keen on the group's work and enthusiastically participated in its research, paying close attention to the opinions of junior and middle-ranking academics and bureaucrats in attendance.

The study group failed to produce almost any results in political terms because of Ōhira's sudden demise in 1980. Ōhira received merely three policy papers from them during his lifetime; other papers were hurriedly compiled after his death. Although some of the group's themes were later taken up by Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, important differences in approach emerged in the meantime, as will be discussed later. Ōhira's initiatives, it must be concluded, ultimately misfired.

However, the work of this policy-making group was certainly not meaningless. First, the group was established with an awareness of the radical changes that faced postwar Japanese society, which had in a sense achieved completion and which had weathered the oil crisis of the 1970s. It cannot be said that the majority of the issues that the policy-making group tackled were adequately dealt with subsequently. The debates undertaken by the policy-making group were to have a major influence on subsequent political and social discourse in Japan over numerous issues, including the reform of the centralization of administrative power, the development of regional communities, the pursuit of a less materialist lifestyle and less materialist values, the development of a new middle class, the approach to be taken toward the advent of an information-based society, and international policy with regard to the Pacific Rim.

In particular, while academics and critics such as Ken'ichi Kōyama, Seizaburō Satō, Shunpei Kumon, and Masakazu Yamazaki, as well as Yasusuke Murakami who had strong personal connections, although he was not directly involved with the group, were actively involved in popularizing the debate on these issues in mass-circulation magazines such as *Chūō Kōron*. As an example of the concerns of the time, one could indicate Murakami, Satō, and Kumon's "*Bunmei toshite no ie shakai* [The society of 'household' as a civilization]," Murakami's "*Shin chūkan taishū no jidai* [The age of the new middle mass]," and Yamazaki's "*Yawarakai kojinshugi no tanjō* [The birth of a soft individualism]."

If hitherto the debate in Japan had been led by "Iwanami intellectuals" such as Masao Maruyama, who understood the state of Japanese society as the remaining vestiges of a feudal society, the stage was now set for the age of the "*Chūō Kōron*ists."

3．The Background to the Policy-making Group

So, let us ask, why did Ōhira decide to organize such a large-scale policy-making group, composed of 130 academics and intellectuals and 89 members of the bureaucracy? One reason that could be given is the heightening sense of crisis that was felt within Japanese conservatism at the time.

One salient point here is the essay "Japan's Suicide," published in the literary magazine *Bungei Shunjū* in 1974. The essay was published under the Orwellian pseudonym "Group 84," but it is now clear that "Group 84" consisted of Ken'ichi Kōyama, Seizaburō Satō, and Shunpei Kumon. At the time, these three were young academics in their thirties and early forties. They had met Ōhira through Jirō Ushio, the president of the electronics firm Ushio, Inc. These three, while inducted into the policy-making group by Ōhira, were to play a central role in its proceedings.

The salient feature of the essay "Japan's Suicide" is its sense of crisis. The essay, picturing contemporary Japanese society in terms of the downfall of the Roman Empire, warned that the collapse of the Roman Empire was not due to attacks by barbarian tribes from beyond the frontier but due to a "forfeit of the ability for self-determination" brought about by "spiritual disassociation" and "social collapse." The essay warned that the same phenomena were apparent in contemporary Japanese society. Their diagnosis was that Japanese society, enervated by the exigencies of the period of high economic growth, faced the prospect of psychological and spiritual dissolution.

Another background factor behind this diagnosis was the structural changes taking place in Japanese society. In 1963, Hirohide Ishida, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) politician and advisor to Tanzan Ishibashi, published the essay "Hoshu seitō no bijon [The vision of a conservative political party]." In this essay, Ishida predicted that the population drift from rural villages to the city would adversely impact the political fortunes of the LDP, which had a rural support base. The evident message was that the LDP, as a conservative party, faced extinction under the prevailing circumstances. The essay helped spark an internal revolution within the LDP aimed at the modernization of the party.

How did Ōhira handle this state of affairs? While several policies such as the rationalization of party organization, the eradication of internal party factions, and the introduction of a single-seat constituency system were seriously argued, his thinking was not entirely in tune with the reformist movement within the LDP (Nakakita 2014). His overriding concerns were the limits of modernization and the catch-up model of economic development as the central axis. Timely enough, the publication of the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* came in 1972. Stressing the limits to the planet's resources, this paper's warnings of a tragic future of overpopulation and environmental collapse had a major impact. Since the late 1960s, Ōhira had already been claiming that the accepted model of modernization through economic development in imitation of the advanced economies had reached its limits; he now began in earnest to think through the "next stage" of modernization with economic growth at its core. The oil shock of 1973 did all the more to demonstrate the legitimacy of his concerns.

Ōhira increasingly formulated his own position as "proceeding beyond modernization into an age with its emphasis on culture." It is certain that what lay behind this approach was Ōhira's feeling of opposition to Takeo Fukuda, his rival for the post of prime minister. In Ōhira's eyes, Fukuda's noted hawkishness in foreign policy and enthusiasm for military preparedness and amending the Constitution seemed to point toward a route "back to the pre-modern era." (It is certain that Fukuda's approach

takes its contemporary form in the cabinet of Shinzō Abe.） Standing against this policy, Ōhira argued for the continuation of the lightly-armed/economics-driven model inherited from Shigeru Yoshida. Indeed, he aimed to shift the emphasis of this model from economic to cultural concerns and, in doing so, to seize the commanding heights of Japanese conservatism. Rather than an opposition of cities and farming villages, Ōhira sought a blending of the two; he was zealous about the devolution of powers to the regions. This approach would later factor into his thinking on garden cities; at the same time, he was conscious of the distinction between his own thinking and that of his rival Fukuda, who placed more emphasis on the role of central government.

4 . The Double Character of the Ōhira Policy-making Group

These policy papers had a double character. On the one hand, there was the recognition that Japan's modernization had reached a certain turning point, a reappraisal of the Japanese lifestyle in favor of a new approach to society and organizations that transcended the concerns of economic development.

Looking back from today, one might well say that Ōhira's grasp of the issues at stake was indeed valid. This is because 1979/80 was undoubtedly the turning point where Japan changed into a mature society and began facing a future of declining birthrates and an aging population.

For example, in 1980, Yasuo Tanaka—then a student—published his novel *Nantonaku, Crystal Feeling* and became an instant celebrity. This work gained wide attention for its coverage of youth culture and lifestyles; it is also famous for its vast amount of author's notes. The majority of them explain and critique brand names that appear in the text; however, it is deeply interesting that the very final note in the book is a prediction hinting at the advent of declining birthrates and an aging population. The note quotes a special report on trends in birthrates prepared by a governmental committee on the population problem, along with a 1979 report（released as a white paper in 1980）by the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

In this sense, we can say that the trend toward declining birthrates and an aging population, which has continued until today, was already forecast in 1980（even in a best-seller novel!）. Additionally, as the subject matter of this novel spells out quite clearly, the cause of declining birthrates and an aging population centers on how the genders relate to each other. Also apparent in the novel is a clear awareness of the impact of changing value systems and lifestyles. However, given that the work was read, at least at the time, as a novel of manners, it is also clear that awareness of these problems had by no means become general or mainstream.

In this context, it merits our attention that, among the policy-making sub-groups established by Ōhira, one was devoted to strengthening the family unit. In fact, the participants in this sub-group included gender scholars, such as Hiroko Hara, and debated topics such as new approaches to work for men and women. In the work of this meeting, it is not impossible to discern the beginnings of one of the currents leading to changes like the employment gender equality legislation of 1986.

However, that said, the main problem also lies here. As clarified by a glance at the material produced by this sub-group, the family model depicted at the center of the deliberations is basically that of a husband working in an industry and a wife who stays home as a full-time homemaker. It must be said that the model is completely that of the male breadwinner. The other sub-groups displayed a strikingly positive view of the Japanese-style management model and Japanese-model system of industry, also discoursing eloquently, it should be clear, on the traditional family model, which even today exerts a powerful sway, and on the traditional model of working life.

On this basis, one may clearly observe the differences between two papers produced with the same group of intellectuals at the core of the discussions: "Japan's Suicide" (1974) and the 1980 policy papers of the Ōhira Prime Ministerial policy-making group. While "Japan's Suicide" is brimming with a sense of crisis toward Japanese society, what stands out about the 1980 policy papers is their air of self-satisfaction and commitment to the status quo. It is certain that what lies between these two dates is the performance of the Japanese economy, which recovered from the oil crisis at a relatively early stage.

Regarding what came to be known as "Japanese-style management," the 1982 OECD Report on Labor in Japan had already touched on the themes of "lifetime employment," "seniority by length of service," and "in-house unions," which constitute so-called "Three Sacred Treasures" of the system overall. It is not impossible that this kind of overseas reassessment of Japan—as we have already mentioned, Ezra Vogel's *Japan as Number One* was published in 1979—working in conjunction with the typically Japanese way it was received in-country, gave birth to the Ōhira policy papers, as the "ideology of 1980." Therefore, having weathered the oil crisis and now facing the birth of the bubble economy, Japanese society confirmed its self-affirmation and commitment to the status quo. Additionally, we see here the reason Japan's socio-industrial way of life, along with its concomitant apportioning of gender roles to men and women, became "mythologized."

In that sense, although Ōhira's policy-makers set out on their deliberations with an exceptionally keen and accurate awareness of the structural changes taking place in Japanese society and the issues stemming from such, one might characterize their

end as a mechanism for the creation of a powerful ideology arguing in favor of continuing the status quo. In selecting these policy-makers, Ōhira had urged his cohorts to "choose a crowd of people who are going to have a big impact in the twenty-first century." This indeed proved the case. The group as it was put together included many of the bureaucrats and intellectuals who were to dominate Japan thereafter. （Indeed, the group included Haruhiko Kuroda, currently the president of the Bank of Japan.） In terms of individuals involved in the group as well, the paradigm of this group continues to have a decisive impact on subsequent Japanese society.

5．The Legacy of the Ōhira Policy-making Group

Finally, let us examine the legacy of this policy-making group. As we have already seen, the policy-making group came to a close with the sudden demise of Ōhira. Zenkō Suzuki, who succeeded Ōhira as prime minister, showed no interest in the group, and in this sense, the group's recommendations failed to achieve any political impact.

The only exception is Yasuhiro Nakasone, who became prime minister after that. Nakasone did pay attention to the group's recommendations; Kōyama, Satō, and Kumon in particular became his advisors, thus becoming the driving force behind the Second Provisional Commission for Administrative Reform and the proposal of administrative reforms. However, some commentators indicate the existence of clear differences between Ōhira's and Nakasone's terms of office. For example, the political scholar Hideo Ōtake argues that the administrative reforms undertaken by the Nakasone administration were driven by economists and industrialists such as Hiroshi Katō and Yōichi Sando and that these reforms were predicated on an ideology of economic liberalism. However, Ōhira's advisors included more intellectuals involved with cultural affairs; Ōtake argues that this was a group different in tone, with its own distinctive set of values not based on the principle of market competition （Ōtake 1994）. Others, however, like Kōji Nakakita emphasize rather the similarities between the two groups, with emphasis on rejecting big government and on individual responsibility, along with cooperation in families, workplaces and the community （Nakakita 2014）.

Regarding this issue, this paper adopts the stance that while both groups rejected big government, the logic behind doing so was very different for the Ōhira and Nakasone groups. The point is that while Ōhira opposed nationalism and emphasized the importance of medium-sized groups such as the local community and the smaller business firms, the Nakasone group intended to forward a neoliberal reform program through means of privatization. Ideologically, the two groups were completely different. In this sense, it is difficult to claim that the legacy of Ōhira's policy-making group

had any direct connection with the Nakasone reform program.

Rather, if one were to posit a legacy bequeathed by Ōhira to Nakasone, one might search along the lines of conservatism of a new age. As stated previously, Japanese conservatism had trod a difficult path since the 1960s because of the structural changes taking place in Japanese society; this being the case, we see that the LDP has rapidly restored its strength since Ōhira's death in 1980. The LDP won a crushing victory in the Diet elections of 1980, which we could term "Ōhira's condolence." They went on to do the same in the Diet elections of 1986 under Nakasone. This was the juncture at which Nakasone stressed, "We've won the left wing over." With everyday life for the majority of people now more stable, Japanese conservatism won and maintained the support of a city-dwelling population that had been conservatized, propelling it into a new era. In this sense, one perhaps could say that Nakasone harvested where Ōhira had sown.

In this way, through Nakasone, the Ōhira policy-makers' legacy lived on, in a double character. Hence, a more optimistic sense of self-affirmation that policy papers represent kept inflating, partially due to the development of the bubble economy. This is one aspect of affairs. However, it is not as though a more positive aspect has failed to leave behind any impact on Japanese politics through the 1990s and beyond.

In 1992, Morihiro Hosokawa, who had just resigned as the governor of Kumamoto Prefecture, declared his formation of the Liberal Social Alliance (*Jiyū shakai rengō*) in the literary magazine *Bungei Shunjū*. Hosokawa's idea eventually found expression as the Japan New Party, which went on from 1993 to press administrative reforms and to form a coalition administration under Hosokawa. The person who drafted Hosokawa's declaration was Ken'ichi Kōyama (Nakakita 2014). The text of the declaration includes the following passage, in which the sense of crisis evident in "Japan's Suicide" is somewhat evident: "The greatest danger that Japan directly faces is that Japanese politics has failed to carry out the obligations which it has imposed on itself. Even if Japanese politics grasps the fundamental nature of this historic time of transition and produces a basic policy line to deal with this time of transition, the turmoil will continue unless we can forge a new national consensus aiming to change the policies of Japan" (Hosokawa 1992: 95). Additionally, the declaration's emphasis on decentralization of power continues Ōhira's line of thinking on the issue.

Furthermore, after the fall of the Hosokawa coalition, the LDP coalition with Tomiichi Murayama's Japanese Socialist Party (JSP) came under the influence of Kōichi Katō, a political successor to Ōhira. Opinions are divided on the Murayama administration, but at least the war apology Murayama gave, conscious of Japan's wars of aggression and colonialism, could only have been achieved through this coalition of

LDP and JSP. Certainly, within these limits, the mid-1990s were a kind of "conservative-liberal age." One might call this the time when the final spark of Ōhira and his policy-making group's legacy was visible.

If this is indeed the case, Ōhira's policy-making group's efforts were definitely meaningful, in that they drew a line between Japanese conservatism and its tendency toward nationalism, instead formulating another kind of conservatism that looked rather at the continual development of Japanese civil society. This trend showed a splendor of its own during the 1990s, before being completely silenced in the new millennium. However, the trend is not one that should be discarded completely, including the possibility of a "conservative liberalism" in Japan.

In this age of a trend toward market values and religion, it is clear that Japanese conservatism has made its own special choice. When we examine the issues through present-day eyes, it becomes clear that the choice has been for the continuation of Japan's own social status quo. Yet even so, the intellectual tendencies evident in the age of Ōhira also firmly grasped the seeds of dissent toward such a status quo. On this basis, the assessments of Japanese society offered by the Ōhira group of policy-makers may in a sense constitute a critical evaluation of the subsequent "two lost decades." At the same time, it may be found that they offer the key to transcending them.

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