

Beyond "Cultural Differences"

by Richard Evanoff

In the last two ecoLogic columns we've been pointing out that while "foreign pressure" can sometimes bolster the environmental movement in Japan, it can also lead to a nationalistic backlash which marginalizes protest as an attempt to impose "Western cultural values" on Japan. To avoid this kind of nationalistic response, I propose that we stop emphasizing *cultural differences* so much and begin to emphasize *cultural similarities*. The emphasis on cultural differences promoted by many well-meaning interculturalists, both Japanese and foreign, simply plays into the hands of those people, both Japanese and foreign, who are all too eager to maintain an "us vs. them" mentality. Instead of making the primary dividing line between "Japan" and "the West," I propose making the primary division between *oppressive* and *progressive* forces that exist in both societies. That is, there are certain similarities between ecologically oppressive forces in both Japan and the West, as well as certain similarities between ecologically progressive forces in both Japan and the West.

The tendency to side with one's own country in an international dispute, rather than look at the ethical merits of the case, is precisely what leads to nationalistic tensions. At the same time, however, the simple "us vs. them" mentality overlooks ways in which progressive forces in two countries can join together to oppose oppressive forces in the same two countries. Let's illustrate this point with a concrete example. When Japan's Sony Corporation bought America's Columbia Pictures, there was a high degree of nationalism on both sides of the Pacific. In typical "us vs. them" fashion, the American press treated the purchase as an instance of "Japan buying out America." I hate to think of Columbia Pictures as "representative" of American culture, but that's the way the American media tended to portray it. All the old stereotypes of Japanese as "economic animals" came to the fore again, as well as a feeling that America was losing yet another battle in its competitive war with the Godzilla of the new global economy. A feeling of resentment spread across the U.S., which led to a considerable degree of "Japan-bashing." At the same, however, public opinion in Japan tended to look at the purchase as a kind of triumph. The U.S. may have won World War II, but Japan was winning the current "economic war" against the American King Kong. Among many Japanese there was undoubtedly a feeling of nationalistic pride.

Indeed, if we make the primary dividing line between "Japan" and the "U.S." it certainly looked to both sides as if Japan had "won" and America had "lost." But who were the real winners and the real losers in the buyout? My contention is that there were *both* Japanese and Americans who "won," and *both* Japanese and Americans who "lost." I arrive at this conclusion by making my primary division not between "Japan" and "America," but between those who control money and wealth in both Japan and America, and those who do not. The American owners who sold Columbia Pictures to Sony undoubtedly made a profit from the deal; otherwise they wouldn't have sold the corporation in the first place. But at a time when the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, we can see why those who profited from the deal wouldn't want it to be seen that way. Because most Americans accept the premises of the capitalistic system, there was no outcry against those Americans who profited enormously by selling out an American corporation. Rather criticism was deflected to "those Japanese" who are "buying out America." How convenient! And a Japanese transnational corporation was also able to extend its global reach by investing money outside of Japan instead of bringing it home to improve the lives of the Japanese workers who created that wealth in the first place. Thus the pattern of Japanese corporations getting richer while the lifestyles of ordinary people continue to show little or no improvement repeated itself. But would Japanese corporations want to admit this? Of course not. Better to deflect public opinion against Japanese corporations by rallying people around a nationalistic image of Japan as a "strong economic power." How convenient!

The trouble is, most people in both Japan and America have been so thoroughly indoctrinated into the "us vs. them" mentality that they fail to see how those who control wealth and power in both Japan and America benefited from the deal, and how ordinary citizens in both Japan and America lost out. What I've tried to point out here is that there are fundamental similarities between those who control wealth and power in both countries, as well as fundamental similarities between those who don't. Thus instead of the nationalistic analysis presented in both the Japanese and American press, we need a more truly international analysis which shows how those who are oppressed in both countries can join together against those who oppress them in both countries.

The same type of analysis can be made in the case of most environmental problems. There is not much difference between a Japanese transnational that exploits the environment for profit and an American transnational that exploits the environment for profit. Thus, both Japanese and American environmentalists can criticize both Japanese and American transnationals without worrying

about "America-bashing" or "Japan-bashing" respectively. The tendency of cultural relativism to benignly "respect cultural differences" leads to an amazingly uncritical analysis of environmental issues and simply treats existing cultural standards as normative. Neither Japan nor the United States have homogenous cultures in which all people think and act alike, and overgeneralizations about "cultural differences" simply feeds nationalistic stereotypes. The creation of a "global world order" means that there are people in both countries who favor ever-increasing economic growth and ecologically destructive consumption, and people in both countries who favor ecological sustainability and simpler lifestyles.

The presence of divergent points of view within cultures means that environmentalists in Japan and, say, the United States have more in common with each other than they do with pro-growth advocates in their own respective countries. Both Japanese and American environmentalists need to develop the kind of internal criticism that can effectively criticize the status quo within our own respective countries. At the same time, however, we need to stand side by side with one another in solidarity against our obvious common national shortcomings. I would not regard a Japanese environmentalist as an "America-basher" for criticizing faulty U.S. environmental policies, just as I should not be regarded as a "Japan-basher" for criticizing faulty Japanese environmental policies.

Undoubtedly there will be differences in how Japanese and Westerners ultimately formulate their respective environmental ethics. The West will undoubtedly emphasize the "rights" of nature and the need for more "democracy." Japan, on the other hand, will probably emphasize "obligations" towards nature and the need for greater "cooperation." Both sides have a lot to learn from each other, both positively and negatively. Western "rights" and "democracy" can easily degenerate into selfish egoism without an equal emphasis on social responsibilities, just as Japanese "obligations" and "cooperation" can easily degenerate into mindless conformity without an equal emphasis on individual responsibilities. What Japanese and Western environmentalists need to do is to bring together the best features of their respective cultural traditions and eliminate the worst. □

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