

## *Invisible Politics*

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### *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 democratization 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 (it was repeatedly argued) was over, and the forces of democracy and civil society had triumphed. There was a widespread belief that the continuing economic growth of countries like China would result in the further unstoppable global spread of democratizing forces.

Two decades on, the optimism has been replaced by widespread gloom. China did not democratize; there are fears of the emergence of a "Second Cold War" centred on Northeast Asia; 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? (Roy 2009)

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. US congressional candidates boost their chances of election by emphasizing 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 February 2013 of Italian comedian Beppe Grillo, who was swept into parliament by grateful voters on the basis of his years of organizing 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". (Lloyd 2012) In a world where politics itself has come increasingly to be seen as the problem, not as 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 often opaque and self-serving actions of their office bearers? The purpose of this essay is to argue for a broader re-interpretation 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 an astonishingly 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.



*Renaissance Italian Vision of the Ideal Greek Polis:  
Raphael's Mural of the Philosophers of Athens, with Plato and Aristotle in the Center*

Aristotle recognized that a wide variety of human groupings or communions (*koinoniai* 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. (Vlassopoulos 2007).

Notions related to the search for a sustainable and virtuous community have 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 summarize, 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. (See Najita 1987, 35-48). 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 organizational arrangements that would best achieve order and the wellbeing of the population. (It is from the term *keisei saimin* that 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 the English word "economics".)

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 some elements of that tradition. (See McCarthy 1992). 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 towards the emergence of a new order in which human potential would be more fully realized.

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". (Lasswell 1938/1951) 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, organizational and psychological ways in which elites constituted and maintained themselves. (See particularly Lasswell 1938/1951, 295-307) 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 characterized 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. (Schmitt 1932/1996, 26) 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". (Schmitt 1932/1996, 29 and 35)

### *The Concept of Life Politics*

By the end of the twentieth century, as globalization 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", which was 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 practiced 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-actualization". Life politics therefore involves defining one's identity and lifestyle in a world where tradition no longer provides any clear rules of behaviour. (Giddens 1991, 210-214; Giddens 1994, 90-91)

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 coined the term "subpolitics" to emphasize that "politics is also possible beyond the representative institutions of the nation-state" (Beck 2009, 92) But the content and form of Giddens' "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 (Giddens 1994). But if "life politics" is practiced 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 emphasize 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' version of post-Cold War political thought with that of a contemporary but very different political 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 criticizes 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) (cited in Rancière 1999, 1). 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 divides those whose vocal utterances are recognized as speech from the majority, who are doomed to the "night of silence or to the animal noise of voices

expressing pleasure and pain" (Rancière 1999, 22) 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 which 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" (Ranciere 1999, 29). "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" (Rancière 1999, 30). 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' reinterpretations of the Aristotelian polis, though, I want to 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 organizing 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 institution, 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 that 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 influenced policy or brought about the reform of local and national institutions, 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 Citizen’s Radioactivity Measuring Stations*

My particular interest here is in groups engaged in “survival politics” or “informal life politics”. By this, 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 take on tasks that they would not normally be expected to perform.

Some examples from Japan can help to illuminate the nature and dynamics of informal life politics. The 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 practiced.

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. 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). Though Mushanokōji himself was later to be criticized 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 “micronation” - in the village of Bishan, for example, draws heavily on the ideas of Mushanokōji’s new village movement.



*A reconstruction of Mushonokōji’s House in Hyūga “New Village”*

The search for a politics of self-reliance was continued by 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 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 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 in the small town of Mochizuki in Niigata Prefecture. (see Yoshikawa 2012) Named after Kobayashi Tatsue - a local teacher who was inspired by the work of the White Birch group in the 1920s, and who lived into the twenty-first century, dying in 2001 at the age of 104 - the community centre continues to promote ideas of local autonomy, respect for handicrafts and environmental sustainability.



*The Tatsue Peace and Handicraft Folk Art Hall, Mochizuki*

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 much less from any conscious ideology than from an pressing need to react to 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 has become incapable of carrying out its expected functions, or where the actions of government themselves have come to be seen as a threat to the wellbeing of particular communities. While the “new villages” seek a transformation of every facet of local life, survival politics as a response to crisis often has more limited and specific aims (though, as we shall see later in the Minamata case, it may also sometimes give rise to grand visions for the total transformation of the communion).

A good example of “crisis driven” survival politics in contemporary Japan is the story of the network of “Citizens’ Radioactivity Measuring Stations” (CRMS) 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 crippled nuclear plant. The government repeatedly assured them that there was no danger to their health, but a wide range of media reports 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 agonizing one.

Two key problems quickly became apparent: the first was that the government (both central and local) was unprepared for 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 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 a 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. (Citizens’ Radioactivity Measuring Station 2012) 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.

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 CRMS website, providing a valuable resource of information on the levels of radiation in various foodstuffs. (see <http://www.crms-jpn.com/>) 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 organizers 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.



*Inside the Citizens' Radioactivity Measuring Station, Fukushima City*

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 CRMS for a "second opinion" to verify the information that they have received from government agencies. (Tanji 2013) In this

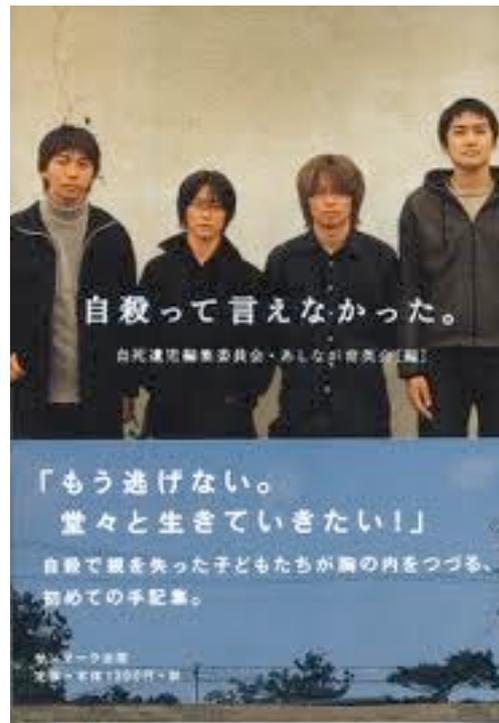
sense the CRMS works to protect community health and provide public education by taking into its own hands “governmental” activities that the government has proved to be incapable of carrying out effectively itself.

*From Informal Life Politics to Governmental Politics...*

Grassroots communions which begin by practicing informal life politics sometimes develop into organizations 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 response from community groups in Japan was 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 was on the plight of children who had experienced the suicide of a parent. From 1998 onward, a group called the Ashinaga Education Association [*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 organized summer camps at which they could express their 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 for the first time spoke out openly in public about suicide as a social issue. Meanwhile, other groups such as the Osaka-based Suicide Prevention Centre [*Jisatsu Bōshi Sentā*] offered telephone counselling and other support services to those a risk of suicide. (Hayase and Ishida 2007)

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 at a 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.



*Jissatsutte Ienakatta (We Couldn't Say it was Suicide) -  
One of the Booklets Produced by Young People Associated with the Ashinaga Education  
Association*

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 fulltime 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 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. (Hayase and Ishida 2007, 15-16)

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 emphasizing the state's social and political responsibility for the problem, so helping to overcome the personal burden of shame so often endured by families which 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. (Shimizu 2009).

*...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, as illustrated by the history of one of Japan's greatest twentieth century environmental crises: the Minamata pollution case. During the 1950s and early 1960s, many thousands of people in the southwestern fishing town of Minamata suffered incurable neurological damage after eating fish contaminated with mercury by waste from a local factory owned by the Chisso chemicals corporation. 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 Chisso corporation 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. Some within the Minamata movement have continued to focus on demanding recompense from the state, but over the course of time other victims of 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” which they identify as the cause of the Minamata disaster.

A particularly interesting example of the second approach can be found in the work and thought of Ogata Masato, a member of a local fishing family drastically affected by the disaster: Ogata’s father died of Minamata Disease, and Ogata himself and his seven siblings have all been officially recognized as victims of the disease. Although Ogata spent most of his early life engaged in the protest struggle 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. (Yoneyama 2012; see also Kurihara 2000).

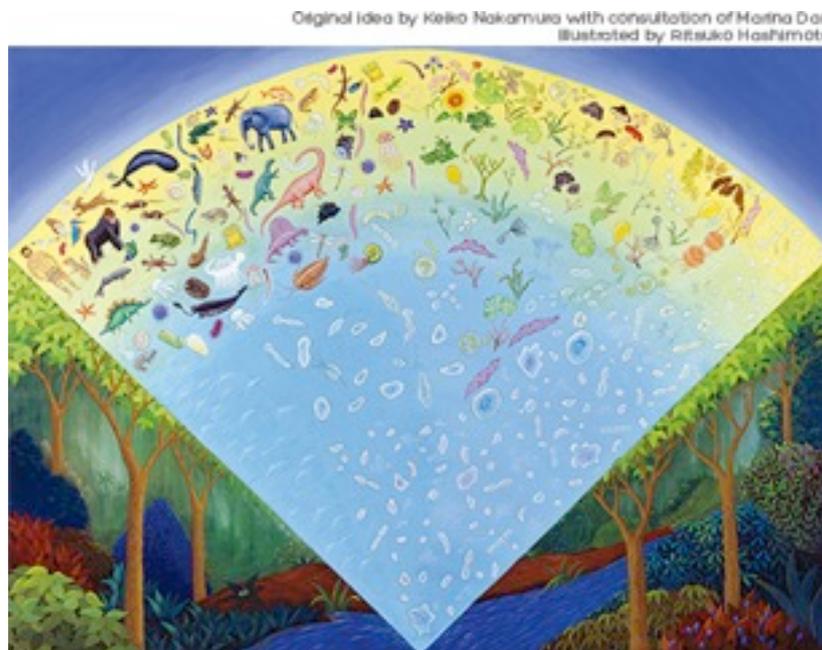
“The Minamata disease incident,” argues Ogata, “has left a question that cannot be dealt with as a political issue. Actually, it is the biggest and most fundamental question. In other words, there is a question that cannot be transformed into a question of policies or institutions. That is the question of the soul.” (Ogata, cited in Yoneyama 2012) 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 spiritual sense of mutual responsibility, and through practical projects such as the development of renewable energy sources. (Yoneyama 2012).



*Ogata Masato, photographed by Mick Stetson*

Those who have moved towards a survival politics response to the Minamata crisis sometimes express their aims in terms of a desire to have their voices heard as human speech and answered by the voices of fellow humans: “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” (Kurihara 2000, 66). It was this longing to go beyond the notion of financial compensation for irreparable injury, and to re-create 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*



*Nakamura Keiko's Symbolic Image of Biohistory*  
See <http://www.brh.co.jp/en/about/emaki.html>

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 the way that the Japan based Biohistory Research Hall (one source of inspiration for Ogata Masato and fellow Minamata activists) synthesizes insights from diverse disciplines and communication media (see image above); or the way in which Ou Ning's vision for the Bishan "micronation" combines artistic imagination with social experimentation:

CLICK HERE: <http://player.vimeo.com/video/17595481>

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 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 underly survival politics movements? Through what diverse methods is survival politics practiced? 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?

As the histories outlined in this paper suggest, 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 world - 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.

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