

## “Formalized Discourse and the Specter of Phantom Language: The Rise of Elitist Hegemony in Contemporary Japan”

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### Introduction

In this paper, I depict some implicit and possibly disturbing features observed recently in Japan with particular attention to how they are prepared by some fundamental changes in the modality of discourse and subjectivity. Due to the relentless intrusion of advanced technology into the realm of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, contemporary Japanese discourse is fragmented and formalized to the degree public discourse as core democratic institution can no longer convey the voices of people, while the same discourse is also charged by an immanent and inarticulate aesthetic desire seeking a means of outlet. In somewhat surprising way, those suffering from neo-liberal economic restructuring policies are speaking in the language of their oppressors, supporting the position that would further marginalize themselves and threaten their barely kept rights for survival. Another surprise came from the way mass media reported on the three Japanese people taken hostage in Iraq in April 2004, and the subsequent debate on the issue in public discourse in which they were made targets of unhesitant curiosity and unfair criticism, which seemed no less than the publicly sanctioned bullying of those taking an ‘anti-establishment’ position. In the present climate under the government initiated neo-liberal economic reform, a powerful corporate culture is aggressively transforming the parameters of debate, in which the language of elite discourse successfully usurps the majority’s inarticulate feelings and fears and redirects them towards their own oppression or intolerance to others, giving rise to the culture of ever intensive competition, meanness, and a widely held sense of powerlessness. I argue that this troubled state of public discourse was instrumental to the ascent of an elitist hegemony, whose primary means of control rests upon the Social Darwinist ideology of the ‘fittest survive’ on the one hand, and the stricter social control by authoritarian policy measures on the other.

I employ Horkheimer and Adorno’s classical text *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a guiding theory to understand how the process of what they called ‘self-alienation of reason’ immediately contributes to the erosion of democratic foundation of society and the cultural climate for violence. Following their basic argument, I problematize the intensification of the capitalist ‘law of equivalence’ under the so-called IT revolution and globalization, that has rapidly been eliminating the reflection of aspects of ‘things empirical’ in discourse, which the authors discuss in terms of the transformation of enlightenment reason to its deteriorated form, i.e., instrumental rationality. They argue that when the self-alienation of reason reaches a point where discourse becomes an amalgam of “blindly pragmatized thought,” or synchronic space devoid of ‘transcending quality’ and ‘connection to truth,’ it opens a door to the *ex post facto* reconstitution of historical events, completely nullifying the institutional operation of public discourse. In a highly technologically oriented social environment of contemporary Japan, truth and reality came under the danger of arbitrary construction, as exemplified in the case of ex-hostages in Iraq, which is indicative of the troubled state of public discourse dissociated from history. Moreover, a society with such conditions of representational malfunctioning is prone to violence; if directed, those inarticulate resentments immanent in discourse would find an outlet in attacking arbitrarily constructed ‘public enemies,’ upon whom those feelings are projected and consumed as moments of aesthetic satisfaction.

### 1. Creating Internal Others

An observation of the state of recent Japanese public discourse would make one wonder to what extent universal moral values can still stand as values in a culture where many come to think different views are just as equally true and real, and the credibility of ‘objective reality’ and ‘truth’ are constantly assaulted by the arbitrary image constructions in the mass media. The issue at stake is not about the truth-value of media report as such, but about the credibility of knowledge itself where an event becomes subject to active reconstruction by the media, in collaboration with the interests of the state, large corporations, and the populace. This was most clearly observed in the recent media’s reporting of the ‘Iraqi hostage incident’ (April/May 2004) in which three Japanese people were taken hostage by Iraqi militias, who demanded a

withdrawal of Japanese Defense Forces from Iraq in exchange with the hostages lives. The ex-hostages are well-educated, politically aware, middle-class Japanese civilians (a 32 year-old male freelance photographer, a 34 year-old female voluntary worker for Iraqi street children, and an 18 year-old NGO activist concerned about the effects of depleted uranium), who went to Iraq to pursue each of their activist goals. On returning home after being safely released, however, they 'voluntarily declined' from making any public announcements in the climate of rising bashing, and this rather odd scene made a foreign observer claim that they "looked as if criminals returning home."<sup>1</sup>

The core of the blame was their lack of 'self-responsibility'<sup>2</sup>; that suggests those who went to Iraq for their own ends are themselves responsible for whatever happened to them and should pay the cost. It is reported that this notion was first publicly mentioned by a number of LDP politicians, who aimed to shift the location of public attention from Japan's participation in the war to those individuals who involved the entire nation into 'their own problems.'<sup>3</sup> In this discourse, ex-hostages are depicted as trouble-makers who pursue their 'wrong-headed idealism' and 'childish dreams,' without considering the possible nuisance to their fellow Japanese.<sup>4</sup> The degree of the readiness of the Japanese public to accept this government initiated condemnations of the victims as something reasonable was quite striking; the majority stood on the side of establishment and some even feeling entitled to condemn and punish others.<sup>5</sup> This elevation of a conservative 'common sense' to a moral position marked a point where the universal liberal value is superseded by the majority affirmation of 'common sense.' The avoidance of becoming a public nuisance becomes a prime ethical criteria for action in this view, which seems to represent the feeling of majority in contemporary Japan, and in this climate, universal values, such as freedom, equality and human rights, do not have much appeal.<sup>6</sup> The incident also demonstrated the disturbing fact that the determination of the nature of an 'event' is made open to interpretations apart from the experience of those who are actually involved in it; the ex-hostages' own experience and their causes are rearticulated in this conservative discourse as nothing more than troublesome acts, which are reproduced and consumed in numerous TV news shows and 'variety programs' where news are packaged into appealing stories in the manner of popular entertainment.

Naturally, such a problematic public and popular discourse did not emerge overnight, but was prepared by a gradual transformation reflective of the change in the broader socio-economic and cultural climate especially in the past decade. The Koizumi government initiated structural reform (*kozo kaikaku*), a reform along neo-liberal economic policy lines, both enhanced and accelerated the ideological climate in which ordinary participants speak in the language of the establishment in public discourse, even while its overall effects are detrimental to them as a group, occasionally resulting in catastrophic events such as homelessness, suicide and death from exhaustion.<sup>7</sup> This ideological mechanism is at the heart of the success of the government initiated structural reform in gaining legitimacy in the recent past. For example, this ideology often condemns social welfare policy for perpetuating 'inequality' in a society where equal opportunity for competition is given to all, and accordingly, those who are capable of winning competitions deserve to enjoy rewards, no reason to feel obligations to share their gains with others.<sup>8</sup> Japanese social scientist Nakanishi Shintaro argues that contemporary Japan is characterized by a wide-spread sense of powerlessness, closure and distrust of others, and the new corporate strategy of controlling and disciplining employees has been cultivating a 'culture of intolerance and meanness,' which are expressed in various forms of 'internalized' violence (self-condemnation) and bullying of others.<sup>9</sup> This ideology is also supported by those who are not included in winners' camp, but who are afraid of being identified as a 'deviant,' or 'anti-Japanese,' by not actively participating in the national economic project, or being excluded from the game altogether. Either by actively participating in the survival game or withdrawing from it – i.e., either directing violence to others or to oneself – the majority's subscription to this ideology means abandoning their own right to claim a natural entitlement to life and of a space for political negotiation in public discourse to secure their own places.

The shifting power relation between the state elite *vis-à-vis* society was perhaps most dramatically exemplified in the passing of a series of security related regulations in 1999, including the 'new guideline' for US-Japan defense cooperation (*shin-gaidorain kanren ho*), the phone tapping law (*tocho ho*), the national flag and anthem law (*kokki kokka ho*), the citizen registration law (*juumin kihon daicho ho*), and the government initiated study on the Constitutional reform.<sup>10</sup> Yamaguchi Jiro, another Japanese social scientist, pays particular attention to the 'double think' Orwellian approach to the use of language by politicians during debates in the diet over the introduction of those policies.<sup>11</sup> Orwell claimed in his work that to distort language and thereby wipe-out the critical consciousness that feels things contradictory as contradictory – in phrases like 'the war is peace,' 'freedom is slavery,' and 'ignorance is power' – is the

core ideological doctrine of totalitarianism, that virtually destroys the spirit and ability to resist oppressive control by the authority. This ideological tactic can be seen in the purposely misleading naming of the laws, such as ‘personal information protection law’ (*kojin jouhou hogo hou*) for the law clearly intends to extend the state’s control over personal information.<sup>12</sup> A critic warns that the government’s intention goes much beyond simply targeting anti-establishment writers and journalists, but it is a step towards building a nation-wide system of control that filters all information, as part of the greater project of preparing society for the war.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the deterioration of language in public discourse is a barometer indicating the declining power of civil society *vis-à-vis* the state.

## 2. Underlying Factors Causing Democratic Erosion

In the highly technologically and commercially permeated cultural climate of contemporary Japan, then, reasoned argumentation and invocation of universal values, such as human rights and justice, no longer appear ‘realistic’ to many younger generations. Moreover, it seems contemporary Japanese society has lost an interest in sustaining a historical memory of a troubled past, and the ‘common sense’ of society has grown increasingly insular, losing an external and universal reference point and means of objectively testing itself.<sup>14</sup> A deeper underlying factor lying beneath these tendencies is the transformation of cognition that took place during the so-called IT revolution, in which advanced technology comes to redefine conventional senses of reality.<sup>15</sup> Many young Japanese people today are not open to a dialectical cognition of the world, and think that giving too much credit to the ‘objective’ world is an old-fashioned modernist attitude that assumes a hierarchical value between the objective/material and the subjective/imaginative in favor of the former. For example, in the so-called ‘philosophy of *Matrix*,’ which has gained immensely popular currency in Japanese discourse, the materially existing world is seen as *shoyo no genjitsu* - i.e., ‘the given-reality,’ a mundane, mechanically operating world apart from human will and creativity, and thus not to be taken too seriously.<sup>16</sup> In this relativist philosophy, each existing narrative has equally valid truth and reality, and claiming for the universal truth/reality is an ungrounded hegemonic belief inclined to erase all other narratives. Once reaching this mode of cognition, there is no objective criteria to judge among different political positions, as they are just a matter of taking different perspectives.

Such relativistic ideas cannot be easily dismissed as groundless thought, since the everyday life of a highly technologically oriented and tightly networked society is increasingly affirmative of it. Unlike in most Western societies where personal computers play the central role in the Internet-based communication, the same role in Japan was played by the *keitai* – mobile phones equipped with most of simplified function of personal computer (such as access to websites, e-mail, digital camera etc).<sup>17</sup> The *keitai* has enormously enhanced one’s accessibility to a digital communication that is extended from office desk to the virtually limitless wireless communication space, allowing the crossing of the boundary between digitally defined and materially structured territories in the midst of actual city space. Indeed, it appears that Japanese urban centers are increasingly transforming into info-techno-social amalgams where the material, digitalized signs and images, and imputed feelings are circulated and regenerated in the speed of digital flow.<sup>18</sup> Being immersed in this highly technologically oriented environment would involve a transformation of subjectivity and the mode of cognition, from the modern enlightenment being that objectifies the world with its transcendental perspective to an ‘ontogenetic of becoming,’ receiving and processing the fast moving digitalized information and sense-stimuli.<sup>19</sup> If this is the case, subjective cognition and discourse lose structure and exteriority, dissolving everything into the now all inclusive phenomenological consciousness. For the mobile body capable of freely crossing the virtual-real boundary, then, life may be more accurately grasped as a series of shifting narratives s/he momentarily ascribes to from one moment to another, and where the self permeated by such multiple narratives could be described as a being living in different temporalities and spatialities. For those who accept this mode of living, notions of universal values and meaning, unified self, and a singular and consistent reality/truth would appear more of an ideological construct than a convincing fact.

As increasing numbers of young Japanese people interact in digital mode of communication in their intimate communal circles, a fundamental challenge came to be posed to the authority of public discourse and the universality of democratic principles. By universality, I do not mean the singular hegemonic values that dominate an entire discourse; instead, I use it to designate the presence of universal framework that assures a common argumentative ground by means of which arguments from different

perspectives can be successfully accommodated. This notion of universality, therefore, is not in opposition to plurality and diversity, but is a counter-concept to the distorted representational frame of a formalized discourse that dissociates language/knowledge from history. The philosophy of Matrix and the digital sub-communities would fall into this category of 'anti-universal' thought, not because of their embracement of local and intimate non-hegemonic narratives, but because of their detachment from historically grounded notions of truth/reality and the complete relativization of all values and meanings, that are made possible by the formalization of discourse. In this mode of cognition, there is no longer a transcendental subjective perspective that holds the world as a structurally unified whole, and in this non-structured cognitive/discursive terrain, the subject is objectified and diffused to an aesthetico-phenomenal terrain, receiving and processing digitalized information and images, sense-stimuli and desire as an integral part of it.<sup>20</sup> In this structureless, relativistic, aesthetically oriented and formalized socio-cultural and discursive conditions, the universal truth, reality, moral value is not easily envisaged; i.e., all positions are made equally valid, the subject is deprived of agency, and words are reduced to nominal designations. Seen in this perspective, political inertia in contemporary Japan goes beyond the problem of a lack of interest in politics, but is fundamentally derived from the structural problem of discourse and the transformation of cognitive modality that made the notion of universality "obsolete."

### 3. Reason's Self-Alienation and Aestheticization of Politics

Beneath the rise of elitist neo-liberal hegemony in contemporary Japan, therefore, lies the weakening of universal reason and enlightenment values, as well as the weakening power of civil society to defend itself from the state control. In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno critically discuss the inherent problem in enlightenment thinking that reason gradually alienates itself and is ultimately reduced to instrumental rationality subordinated to technology.<sup>21</sup> Such self-alienation of reason arises from the transcendental nature of scientific knowledge as it aspired to achieve man's dominance over nature by virtue of departing from its own empirical base. This is a move that jeopardizes the foundation of critical thought itself. The authors see the same impulse also in the core structural principle of modern capitalist society, i.e., the commodity structure and the law of equivalence.<sup>22</sup> The authors treat this capitalist law as a rational form of 'mythology' that transforms the world into stereotypical and idealized form by which unique empirical objects are transformed into 'commodities' – mutually differentiated equivalences made exchangeable under the universal gaze of capital (and thus endowed with dual-ontology of use value and exchange value/value). In their view, this dual ontology is not restricted to commodities, but is also manifest in modern society itself, in which atomistically divided individual citizens rationally act and interact with each other guided by universal public law.<sup>23</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno argues that this 'mythology' intensifies degrees of objectification as capitalism matures, and reason's self-alienation continues to impoverish discourse in due process. The authors see this troubled form of reason, in which "[t]hinking objectifies itself to become an automatic, self-activating process" and "[m]athematical procedure became... the ritual of thinking. ... turn[ing] thought into a thing, an instrument."<sup>24</sup> At this point, the authors argue, reason deteriorates into "blindly pragmatized thought" losing "its transcending quality and, its relation to truth," giving rise to a form of knowledge that assumes "the equation of spirit and world."<sup>25</sup> To put this differently, what is lost in this rise of instrumental reason is a dialectical cognitive process; the imposition of a linear and synchronic logic upon empirical objects freezes the feedback process involved in cognition, in whose temporal delay the cognizing subject operates a reflective thought process aided by the expansion of semantic chains and associations of meaning. In other words, as capitalist society matures, the discursive space becomes increasingly synchronized, devoid of temporality, as manifest in the impoverished form of reason that can no longer mirror neither transcendental nor historical immanence. In this synchronic discourse whose structural frame for mediation is failing, the unique, irreducible empirical attributes of objects becomes inaccessible.<sup>26</sup> It is not difficult to see the similar scheme of instrumental rationality is at work in the rising neo-liberal hegemony, and in its troubled discursive structure.

Horkheimer and Adorno warn us that the normalized power of language is conducive to fascism, arguing that the irrationality of aesthetic politics is already inscribed in the deteriorated form of reason and the universal law that causes it.<sup>27</sup> What happens then is nothing less than the breakdown of discourse as a system of representation; as the instrumental rationality of scientific reason and the formalized discourse is

no longer capable of offering satisfactory means of articulation, those things thrown beyond representation seek non-conventional means of articulating themselves outside the universal law.<sup>28</sup> This state of discourse opens up a passage for the arbitrary construction of truth and reality. Even more concerning is the intense ambiguity in the ‘law-less’ discourse where conventional meanings become less convincing, while increasingly hosting an immanent desire seeking articulation. In this case, society is put under an immediate danger of elevating tyrannical popular feelings and ungrounded common sense to the position of self-proclaimed justice, allowing these feelings take their own expression and lead in their own way to violent ruptures.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, one may argue that the universal frame of discursive representation is not only a guarantor for critical and moral reason to operate in public discourse, but it is also a guarantor for peace and order that contains violence by providing appropriate logic and limited channels.

### Conclusion - The Rise of Elitist Hegemony

Seen from this perspective, the ascent of neo-liberal elite discourse to hegemony in contemporary Japanese society is more symptomatic of a declining hegemony manifesting its failure to keep institutional mechanism working in democratic ways. It instead has to rely on oppressive means, such as ideologies for competition, fear, and intolerance to others, and associated controlling measures such as tight security policies, surveillance and language manipulation. In this emergent and less productive form of hegemony, the state’s authoritarian gaze tacitly doubles itself upon the transcendental gaze of technology. While this reigning pair of gazes relentlessly objectify and displace the material/empirical and nullify content/meaning, and as a result, foster nihilism, irony and cynicism in society, they also nurture a peculiar phenomenon where those nullified words regain lost contents and meanings. Once the original linkage between a word and its meaning, between a signifier and its historical referent, is dislodged, discourse allows categories and narratives to find their equivalents rather freely, often deteriorating original meanings into common sense versions or more provocatively and violently ascribing contradictory meanings as exemplified in ‘double-think.’ As these equivalents are charged with inarticulate feelings seeking channels to externalize what is contained in the subjective interior, this institutional breakdown is immediately conducive to violence, one that may call for another form of violence to contain it.

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<sup>1</sup> Both *Le Monde* and *New York Times* reported the event as regretful and unfair, with a tint of educational voices which Japanese media largely failed to convey to its own population. However, I should note here about the exceptions to this tone of bashing in Japanese media, such as *Asahi Daily Newspaper* and its weekly magazine *AERA* among other handful, that consistently maintained the critical position to the mainstream media report and position taken throughout the incident.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Self-responsibility’ is a direct translation from the Japanese term ‘*jiko-sekinin*,’ and I am using this term in a different way from Western liberal notion of ‘individual responsibility.’ While the latter is used to designate the location of responsibility divided between the state and society in a liberal democratic society with substantial consistency and rationale, the translated Japanese term is used in a more ideological sense to excuse the government from taking responsibility for its population.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Koike Yuriko, the Ministry of Environment, claimed that “one would think a large part of it is their ‘self-responsibility’ since they went to a place commonly known as high risk.” (*AERA*, *ibid.*, p. 16.) *Yomiuri Daily Newspaper*, the most widely circulated daily newspaper in Japan, commented: “Those three people... threw themselves right into the dangerous area with their own will, and invited this incident to happen. The bold and irresponsible action of them lacking a notion of self-responsibility is imposing enormous and unnecessary burden upon the government and related institutions.” (*ibid.*) According to a survey by *Sankei Newspaper*, another right-leaning daily newspaper, 80% of readers who cared to send

opinions supported the ‘self-responsibility’ argument, whereas *Asahi Daily Newspaper*, the largest center-to-left leaning paper reported only 12 out of 160 opinions sent to the editorial were for the same argument. (*ibid.*)

<sup>4</sup> Not only was these victim’s privacy scrutinized by unnecessary disclosure of personal and familial details irrelevant to the issue, they were also described in subtly dishonoring ways – reports included the disclosure that the 18 year-old boy’s mother is a communist and that the quality of work by the 28 year-old freelance photographer was not up to standard – portraying them as not socially appropriate or credible people. In the matter of a week or so after the incident, they became favorite targets of increasingly aggressive, if not militant, condemnations for their lack of ‘responsibility’ as ‘Japanese nationals.’

<sup>5</sup> “‘Jiko-sekinin’ funshutsu no kokoro,” *AERA* April 26, 2004, p. 16. The families of ex-hostages fell victim to senseless and vicious attacks of aggressive accusations and harassments by phone messages, e-mails, letters and on various web-cites. The messages included “die,” “shame on you” and “dishonored national” which were sometimes sent with images and sounds associated with death and shame - many of these communications represented efforts at nothing more than deflecting negative feelings inside themselves and to the publicly acknowledged ‘enemy elements.’ One could imagine what kind of pressures the ex-hostages and their family members must have borne during the whole event and its immediate aftermath, when harassment was at its most intense.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the following opinion represents a popularly held view among large segments of the public: “Even if one thinks what one is doing is right, if that causes nuisance to others, such an action would be nothing more than self-satisfaction.” *AERA* April 26, 2004, p.17.

<sup>7</sup> There is more than one way of defining ‘neo-liberalism’ and I should note that I am using the term in a similar way as Arthur MacEwan understands it, as derivative of classical economic liberalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that “proclaimed ‘the market’ as the proper guiding instrument by which people should organize their economic lives” (MacEwan, p. 4). I see policies strictly following this position as detrimental to democratic social values, since, as MacEwan argues, “[b]y reducing explicit social regulation of private economic activity and ‘leaving things to the market,’ neo-liberalism prevents the implementation of programmes that would allow people to exercise political control over their economic affairs, involve people in solving their own economic problems, and serve the material needs of the great majority” (p. 5). See Arthur MacEwan, *Neo-liberalism or Democracy? Economic Strategy, Markets, and Alternatives for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* London: Zed Books, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Broadly speaking, this ideological position is based on the Social Darwinian doctrine of ‘survival of the fittest,’ i.e., those with superior personal abilities are thought to be entitled to be placed higher than others in social hierarchy. In this new hegemonic discourse, the target of one’s frustrations towards the elite is typically redirected to those lower in the hierarchy, as exemplified in the blaming of recipients of social benefits as ‘free-riders,’ implying ‘laziness’ and ‘inability’ on the part of the latter. A number of critics see critical linkages between the conservative public opinion expressed in the ex-hostage incident and the general cultural climate under the Koizumi neo-liberal economic reform. For example, critic Tateiwa Shinya points out that the discourse of ‘self-responsibility’ reveals a widespread aggressive desire to condemn others that is immanent in contemporary Japanese society. According to him, the degree of such aggressiveness is growing, and the term ‘self-responsibility’ is used to cut those in-trouble off from public attention and responsibility to take care of them. Journalist Saito Takao analyzes the core of the problem as an intellectual laziness among a public that is strongly inclined for a simple and clear-cut explanation, just in the same way Koizumi’s political tactic of using sound bites appeals to the public. Similarly, Kayama Rika, psychiatrist and cultural critic, argues that the term ‘self-responsibility’ became a convenient instrument to exclude and blame those who have different values from those of the establishment, and the tendency to blame the victim has been increasingly manifest in the present dismal social conditions. *AERA*, *ibid.*, pp.17-9.

<sup>9</sup> Nakanishi Shintaro, “Neo-nashonarizumu o sasaeru ishiki kouzou – Sinjiyuu-shugi kaikaku to kokka tougou,” in Watanabe Osamu *et al* ed., *Shinjiyuu-shugi to neo-nashonarizumu*, pp. 26-8. This culture is exemplified in a widespread, snobbish trend/discourse focused on out-competing others, in which the dynamic operates along the juxtaposition of *kachigumi* (the winners) and *makegumi* (the losers). In this discourse, participants engage in game-like practice geared towards personal economic gain in which moral issues and social implication are made irrelevant. The winners are encouraged, so it seems, to agitate and condemn the losers for their incapability, and this turning of one’s economic life into a game makes this discourse appear perverted, pathetic, anti-social and immoral.

<sup>10</sup> Yamaguchi Jiro, “Yato wa ‘meikaku na kotoba’ o katate,” *Sekai* October 1999, p. 51. All of these legal and legislative changes took place under then Prime Minister Obuchi, who unhesitatingly identified himself as a ‘vacuum,’ without drawing much critical attention from the mass media and the public.

<sup>11</sup> Yamaguchi, *ibid.*, pp53-4. Original is: George Orwell, 1984. London: Penguin Books, 1977.

<sup>12</sup> Another example is the government’s insistence on changing the name of the law allowing the authority to taping phone and the internet from *toucho ho* (where *toucho* connotes secretly but intentionally listening to private conversations of those targeted) to *tsuushin bouju ho* (‘the communication interceptive law’; where *bouju* suggests simply technically hearing private communication between any parties). Moreover, the government inauguration of a nation-wide network of local registration centers in accordance with the citizen registration law (*Juumin kihon daicho*) was introduced as an aid to make people’s access to public services easier, while it allows the authority to gather the personal data of all Japanese nationals, who are represented in 11 digit numbers, including their educational and work profile, commercial banking accounts, medical record, family and other human relations, or even books recently borrowed from public libraries.

<sup>13</sup> Henmi Yo, “Kiki no kongen ha media no gengo ni aru,” *Sekai* October 2001, pp. 86-7. Henmi, critic and Akutagawa Prize winning novelist, sees ample examples of Japanese public speech employing the tactic of ‘double think,’ or ‘new speak,’ by which the authority tacitly covers the oppressive fact of certain policies behind pleasantly sounding words to make problematic issues into non-issues, often successfully leading people think those policies are beneficial to them.

<sup>14</sup> Here, I am referring to contemporary Japanese neo-nationalist discourse, for example, in which the past historical revisionism calling for the true identity of the Japanese and the view of history in ‘Japan’ own perspective’ is advanced to a solidified belief in one’s Japaneseness and a relativization of history to think every nation has its own account of history.

<sup>15</sup> I am unable to substantiate this point in this short paper, but I have written on this subject elsewhere such as the following: “Media Politics and the Reified Nation: Japanese Culture and Politics Under Information Capitalism,” *Japanese Studies*, Vol.23, No.1, 2003; and “Visible Nation/Ideology of Pleasure: Japanese Nationalism under Information Capitalism,” *International Journal of Humanities*, Volume 1, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> The ‘philosophy of Matrix’ refers to the popular serial film *Matrix* in which characters more vividly think and act in the imaginarily constituted virtual world than the real one. A philosophical discussion inspired by the vision of the world depicted in the film is summarized, for example, in *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, William Irwin ed. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> The function of *keitai* includes an access to websites, e-mail and/or short message system, digital photography, GPS (‘global positioning system’ to identify one’s location), the capacity for software application including digitalized film viewing and auditory devices, and so on. In Japan, those who registered for *keitai* are around 72 million, exceeding those registered for home telephones since 2000. Owners are mostly those under 40 years of age, and its images are favorably associated with female high-school students who are seen as dependent upon these ‘high-tech play-toy gadgets’.

<sup>18</sup> I share my understanding of the present state of society permeated by advanced information technology along the line of thought formulated by Manuel Castells, Scott Lash, Timothy Luke and others. The effect of the intense circulation of digitalized information needs to be seen sociologically and politically, rather than as the problem of ‘information technology’ as such, since it constitutes a part of society we live in. Similarly, this technological driven circulation cannot be satisfactorily grasped by the notion of ‘virtual reality,’ that assumes an oppositional co-existence between the virtual and the real worlds.

<sup>19</sup> I borrowed the term ‘ontogenetic of becoming’ from Slavoj Zizek, used in his *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> I tend to view that there is a transformation progressing in our cognitive orientation, from the one based on transcendental subjective perspective typically seen in Kantian metaphysics, to the one based on diffused subjectivity which no longer has the ordering center in ‘cognizing’ (or rather feeling or experiencing) the world. Zizek in the above cited work, conceives this diffused sense-oriented field in terms of ‘transcendental empiricism,’ which he identifies in Deleuze’s philosophy, the field of “pure ‘mechanic’ intensity beyond meaning,” and/or the field of “an interpersonal prereflexive consciousness, [and] a qualitative duration of consciousness without self.” (*ibid.*, pp4-5)

<sup>21</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> According to Marx, this dualistic ontology is embodied in the status of the commodity that simultaneously possesses two distinct values; one for utility derived from the unique empirical characteristics of the material (use value), and the other for exchange derived from ‘a common social substance’ (value). Exchange value in this regard operates in such a way to transcend this dualism, as a resolution between use value and value, by virtue of which commodities are made into exchangeable equivalents in the universal sphere of capitalist society where the law of equivalence prevails. See Marx, *Capital*, Vol.1, pp. 125-31.

<sup>23</sup> In other words, the structure of modern, capitalist and democratic society mimics the same ordering principle identified in the relation between the universality of the market and the commodity. While this ‘universalist technology’ was ‘invented’ to institutionalize modern society to enable its political and economic system to operate, therefore, it also made certain trade-offs that in effect inscribed sources of instability in it. The authors lament the impoverishment of the world as a result of such an installation of universal representation that reduces everything to form and deprives a true identity of man and nature: “[b]ourgeois society is ruled by equivalence... [that] makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities,” and in doing so, it has made nature beyond the reach of man’s perception as “[t]he identity of everything with everything else [makes] nothing... identical with itself.” (p7 and p12 respectively) I should note that Georg Lukács has also forcefully argued on this point with his notion of reification. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, Rodney Livingstone trans. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1968.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p25.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p.xiii. The authors argue: “What appears to be the triumph of subjective rationality, the subjugation of all reality to logical formalism, is paid for by the obedient subjection of reason to what is directly given. The task of cognition does not consist in mere apprehension, classification, and calculation, but in the determinate negation of each im-mediacy. ... Factuality wins the day; cognition is restricted to its repetition; and thought becomes mere tautology. The more the machinery of thought subjects existence to itself, the more blind its resignation in reproducing existence. Hence enlightenment returns to mythology, which it never really knew how to elude.” (pp. 26-7)

<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, Horkheimer and Adorno do not argue in these terms, but one can hear the same idea echoing in various parts of their discussion; for example, they characterize such a regressive state of discourse as taking a form of populace’s “inability to hear the unheard-of with their own ears, to touch the unapprehended with their own hands.” Rather than viewing this as a sign of ignorance due to the lack of education as in previous ages, they conceive it as a result of alienation as “the new form of delusion which deposes every conquered mythic form.” (p36)

<sup>27</sup> In their words, “[t]he suggestion of something still akin to the terror of fetish did not inhere in conscious justification; instead the unity of collectivity and domination is revealed in the universality necessary assumed by the bad content of language, both metaphysical and scientific.” (p. 22) Terry Eagleton argues for a similar state of structural disarray in discourse as a result of the relentless development of consumer capitalism that ultimately aestheticizes discourse to the point of making it dysfunctional. For him, such rampant aestheticization of society is immediately conducive to fascism: “The wholesale aestheticization of society had found its grotesque apotheosis for a brief moment in fascism, with its panoply of myths, symbols and orgiastic spectacles, its repressive expressivity, its appeals to passion, racial intuition, instinctual judgment, the sublimity of self-sacrifice and the pulse of the blood.” In his view, similar conditions are observed more recently under the culture of ‘postmodernism.’ See Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1990, p. 373.

<sup>28</sup> When discourse is healthier, romantic nationalist discourse that asserts aesthetic desire for collective identity alienated from the formalized institutional operation of democratic polity could work as a constructive criticism. At the time of discursive breakdown, however, the same assertion further erodes the authority of the universal legal and liberal institutional principles, posing a threat to the structural breakdown of democratic society/discourse altogether.

<sup>29</sup> This danger was demonstrated in the above discussed the ex-hostage incident in which the distinction popular feelings are elevated to the status of morality and placed above the liberal internationalist values such as freedom of speech and the spirit of humanitarian aid that runs beneath international NGO activities.



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Hegemony in this case means the worldview, reality, and beliefs of the dominant classes coming to be accepted by the subordinate classes as "common sense". There is a general consensus that the view of the dominant class is the only sensible way of seeing the world. This was achieved through education, media propaganda as well as the fact that the ruling class owned the means of production. In a given hegemonic system, therefore, a hegemonic class held state power through its economic supremacy and through its ability to have, among other things, successfully articulated or expressed in a coherent, unified fashion the most essential elements in the ideological discourses of the subordinate classes in civil society.Â Indeed, this notion underlies Gramsci's definition of the concept of hegemony, and the notion itself is embodied in Gramsci's elaborate concept of power. Gramsci's concept of power is based simply on the two moments of power relations"Dominio (or coercion) and Direzione (or consensus). What are the characteristics of contemporary Japanese nationalism? And is there a "surge of nationalism in Japan," as so often claimed (Kitaoka 2001; Sasaki 2001; Hasegawa and Togo 2008; NYT 2013), or even a "drift to the right" in the country (Kato 2014; Nakano 2015)? Distinguishing between elite maneuverings and popular attitudes, in this article I first identify what I consider to be the major topics of current nationalist discourse, and then introduce the chief proponents of strengthening of nationalist attitudes in society.Â Following Japan's defeat in World War II, the belief in the superiority of Japan with its "eternally unbroken" imperial line stretching back to the age of the gods was shattered.