

Studies

Postmodern Japan Middle Class Related Mythology and Nostalgia

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Postmodern Japan Middle Class Related Mythology and Nostalgia. The paper explores the transformations of middle class mythology in contemporary Japan, studying phenomena, connected to the objective and subjective middle class identification. After 1970s, when the share of people self-identified with the middle class reached 90% Japanese identity has been shaped around the sense of "all nation belonging to the middle class". The economic prosperity after World War Two and the fact that within two generations Japan turned from a poor country into a rich society, provide the foundations of the myth of "a middle class society", zealously maintained by political parties and the media.

Since the end of the 1990s, the issue of growing economic inequality is becoming a topic of intense discussion. During this period Japanese society underwent recessions and crises followed by periods of revival; as a result Japan changed its direction from the lavish lifestyle of the 1980s to growing sense of deepening social inequalities. These transformations brought about the popularity of a new myth, this time about melting and even vanishing middle class, and nostalgic reminiscences of "happy late 1970s and 1980s" when supposedly Japanese people used to live in better society.

The March 11, 2011 natural disasters and the ensuing nuclear crisis in Japan have destroyed another myth – that of prime importance of consumers' comfort, and of nuclear power plant safety. The ecologically and environmentally responsible consumption and lifestyle are an important resource for achieving vitally important task of revitalizing our-day Japan.

Key words: Middle Class, Middle Class Self-Identification, Middle Class Mythology, Nostalgia, Postmodern Japan

Mytológia a nostalgia spojená s postmodernou japonskou strednou triedou. Článok skúma premeny mytológie strednej triedy v súčasnom Japonsku a študuje javy spojené s objektívou a subjektívou identifikáciou strednej triedy. Po sedemdesiatych rokoch 20. storočia, keď podiel ľudí, ktorí sa sami stotožňovali so strednou triedou, dosiahol 90 %, japonská identita sa formovala okolo pojmu „celý národ patrí do strednej triedy“. Hospodárska prosperita po 2. svetovej vojne a skutočnosť, že Japonsko sa za dve generácie zmenilo z chudobnej krajiny na bohatú

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spoločnosť, poskytuje základy mýtu o „stredostavovskej spoločnosti“, ktorý zanietené udržiaval politické strany a médiá.

Od konca 90. rokov minulého storočia sa problém rastúcej ekonomickej nerovnosti stáva tému intenzívnej diskusie. V tomto období japonská spoločnosť prešla recessiami a krízami, po ktorých nasledovali obdobia oživenia; Japonsko v dôsledku toho zmenilo svoje smerovanie zo štedrého životného štýlu v 80. rokoch na silnejúci pocit prehľbjujúcich sa sociálnych nerovností. Tieto premeny vyzvali obľubu nového mýtu, tentoraz o rozplývaní sa a dokonca zániku strednej triedy, a nostalgické spomienky na „šťastné neskoré 70. a 80. roky“, kedy vraj Japonci žili v lepšej spoločnosti.

Prirodne katastrofy z 11. marca 2011 a následná jadrová kríza v Japonsku zničili ďalší mýtus – mýtus o prvoradom význame komfortu spotrebiteľov a bezpečnosti atómových elektrární. Ekologicky a environmentálne zodpovedná spotreba a životný štýl sú dôležitým zdrojom pre dosiahnutie životne dôležitej úlohy revitalizácie dnešného Japonska.

Kľúčové slová: stredná trieda, sebaidentifikácia strednej triedy, mytológia strednej triedy, nostalgia, postmoderné Japonsko

1. Introduction: Post-war myths and nostalgia in Japan

Myth-making and nostalgia are interconnected, for the creation, diffusion, and establishment of myths in public space inevitably, sooner or later, brings about nostalgia. This feeling can be provoked in some cases by previous myths that have been refuted in the course of time, social life having proven them untenable. But, instead of realizing that these social beliefs and expectations are mythical in nature, people rather tend to become disappointed in the current state of affairs in society. When the future seems unclear, uncertain, the situation is even more conducive to the rise of nostalgia. Public expectations clash with reality, and in this case the tendency of collective memory to idealize the past inevitably comes into play.

Nostalgia is a “deeply social emotion... positively toned evocation of a lived past in the context of some negative feeling toward present or impending circumstance” (Davis, 1979: vii). As a particular form of recollection it plays an important role in formation, maintenance and preservation of collective identity by selective memory of the past. It is always evoked in the context of present fears and anxieties and it is seeking salvation in the special past.

Thus, instead of being refuted, the myth receives new support and new legitimacy in social consciousness. Very often this stabilization of a given myth is due to people’s insufficient understanding of the causes, the true nature, of certain social phenomena. The persistence of myths in the collective memory may also be a result of the fact that some of them are so strongly rooted in social consciousness that they have come to be perceived as part of the national identity. The discrediting of such myths could provoke extreme nostalgia for the “good old times”, but also an identity crisis.

This article studies the correlation between the phenomena of myth-making, and nostalgia, the focus of the analysis being on the Japanese middle class. The choice of the topic is not accidental: the development, stabilization of, and identification with, the middle class has been an important topic in Japan since the WWII. After 1970s the prevalent myth was that Japan was a country of the middle class, but since the 1990s a reverse trend can be observed: there is an increasingly popular myth that the middle class is melting away and vanishing. Of course, some important issues remain obscured by the mythologies in question: such as whether it is at all possible for such mythologized social-structural phenomena to occur in a modern society like the Japanese one. Can there at all be a society where practically all people belong to the middle class? And is it possible for this class to suddenly begin "melting away" and even vanishing in a developed society with a stable social structure, such as that of Japan? Are the actual processes not different but tending to induce such a feeling amid wide circles of a public that has no expertise in stratification theories? Of course, the creation and dissemination of social myths and the nostalgia the latter engender may oftentimes play a definite ideological and political role.

The above-mentioned myths regarding the middle class are not a phenomenon limited to Japan; under various guises these myths can be observed in other contemporary societies as well (Goldthorpe 1982, Savage et al. 1992, Crompton 1992, Butler and Savage 1995, Savage et al. 2001). In some societies during the same period of rapid economic development and increased prosperity there has similarly been a diffusion of the myth that the greater part of society belongs to the middle class. The data of comparative international surveys show that 90% of respondents in Canada, West Germany (71% in 1986), Italy, Brazil, India, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, USA and Australia self-identify as middle class (Yoka-kaihatsu Centre, 1980, quoted in Kosaka, 1994, 110). The phenomenon of "middle self-identification" itself indicates the importance of the middle class in societies of varying levels of development. The fact has been widely commented in relevant literature. J. Kelley and M. Evans have analyzed the psychological causes that make people identify as belonging to a certain group or community. According to the quoted authors, self-identification as middle class is a kind of relating to a social "mean". They see this as a typical phenomenon of mass consciousness. People avoid the "extreme" social positions and identify with the majority, with the "others" (Kelley and Evans 1995: 157-158).

In other societies, for example like some post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, economic difficulties and growing inequality have led to the opposite myth, that the middle class is entirely absent (Tilkidjiev 2002, Keliyan 1999). But the tendency to mythologize about a middle class

society has some specific features in Japan, where the myth holds a particularly important place and has been defining for the national identity of the country after WWII (Kosaka 1994, Sato and Arita 2007). In the last nearly two decades the myth has, to a great degree, been the source not only of nostalgia for the “happy late 1970s and 1980s” but also for the identity crisis Japanese society has been undergoing. This crisis, together with the economic problems resulting from global recessions and crises that occurred periodically in the late 1990s are among the leading causes why at the end of the first decade of the 21st century Japan perceived itself as a “sick society”. The contrast is obvious: after the middle of the 20th century, in the course of 65 years, the country not only recovered from war-time destruction but turned into a successful society, into a leading world economic power and a postmodern lifestyle leader; yet now, several decades after the start of this upsurge, the Japanese perceive themselves as an exhausted economic power that looks with pessimism to the future. And they prefer to seek coziness in nostalgia for the times when they lived in a better, optimistic society.

The tragedy, the destruction that befell the country on March 11, 2011 brought about the demise of one other myth – also not a purely Japanese one: I am referring to the blind faith in the infallibility of technology, of nuclear power technology in particular, the faith that people are capable of fully managing it and subordinating it to their goals and will. This naïve and risky belief is related to the priority assigned to efficiency and comfort in the modern world, values that are mythologized at the expense of security, of moral responsibility for preserving the natural environment and human health and life. At first glance these two myths – regarding the middle class and nuclear power safety – are not interconnected. But they arose, spread, and became popular at the same time, since the mid-1960s, and are linked to the post-modernization of contemporary societies.

The initial intention of this article was to study the myth of the Japanese middle class, the causes of the emergence and spread of the myth, of the deep conviction of Japanese people in it, the transformation it underwent in the last two decades, and the deep social nostalgia it engendered. But the March 11 tragedy, in addition to the other destruction it caused, also led to the demise of the myth of the nuclear power safety. Something more, according to the moving words of Japanese writer Haruki Murakami “The situation marked the collapse of the myth regarding Japan’s technological prowess, of which the Japanese people had been so proud²”.

² See Murakami’s acceptance speech titled “As an Unrealistic Dreamer” on receiving the Catalonia International Prize, 2011.

The catastrophic events changed the agenda, goals, values, and priorities of Japanese society, as they did the agenda of the whole world, even though not all societies may be aware of the change. All this justifies tying the myth about the Japanese middle class to the myth of nuclear power safety, and to the question of balance between, on one hand, safety and the protection of the environment and of human life, and, on the other, comfort and effectiveness.

2. Development of the middle class and transformations of myths related to it

Before beginning our analysis of the development and stabilization of the middle class in postwar Japan, it is necessary to briefly specify what the middle class is and how it is defined in authoritative modern stratification theories.

I am following the neo-Weberian tradition in the theories of classes and social stratification, elaborated by British sociologists (Goldthorpe 1982, Savage et al. 1992, Butler and Savage 1995) and by our Bulgarian colleague Tilkidjiev (2002). According to the proponents of this view, the middle class is defined on the basis of an aggregate of criteria (Tilkidjiev 2002). They include not only ownership of the means of production, income and assets, but also the type of employment, the work situation, profession, occupation, education, prestige, power resources, cultural status, lifestyle, consumption patterns, values system, political views and behavior, etc. The middle class holds an intermediate place in the stratification ladder, in the so-called "stratification middle".

Since the middle class is not a homogenous social group, within it we distinguish old and new middle class, and upper-middle, middle-middle, and lower-middle class. The *old middle class* encompasses all the strata whose existence as social groups is derived from the pre-industrial and pre-modern society. These are predominantly the small artisans, traders, farmers, and people exercising independent professions, such as doctors, dentists, lawyers, etc. By *new middle class* we mean all the social strata that have been created in modern times. These are people connected with large social organizations, institutions, etc., and include managers, specialists, professionals, experts, technicians, civil servants, etc. *Upper-middle class*, also called "the elite or elites" encompasses people with considerable power, economic, cultural, and other resources. Upper-middle class is those among the middle class who have been relatively more successful in their business or profession, have higher income, greater civic activeness, and better consumption opportunities. The *lower-middle class* includes groups with more limited financial capacity, with a secondary education, such as skilled workers, civil servants, traders, and other non-manual workers, small businesspersons, small farmers, etc.

In Japanese we can recognize three major notions pertained to the concept of middle class: "middle economic class", "middle prestigious class", and

“middle strata” (Odaka, 1966: 543; Kosaka 1994: 95-97). “Middle economic class” is used to denominate the middle class which some conceptions define as “bourgeoisie”, or as a middle class defined on the basis of owned means of production and economic power. “Middle strata” is used as a concept characterizing the middle class as regards their intermediate position in the stratification space. After 1970s, the sociological concept, equivalent to the understanding of a middle class in western sociology, is “middle prestigious class”, or in Japanese *chuuryuu kaikyuu*, situated between the upper and lower classes (Kosaka 1994: 103-104).

The growing economic well-being after the WWII brought to the gradually expanding of the middle class in Japan. According to SSM³ surveys the Japanese middle class share, defined on the base of objective criteria, grows from 30% in 1955 to over 50% in 1985 (Seiyama, 1993: 26), its share remaining relatively stable during following decades. The share of those who self-identify with the middle class in Japan in 1964 reached 90%⁴ (Kosaka, 1994: 9). These data differ from those of the SSM survey, according to which 70-75% of the population self-associate with the middle class during the same period, mainly because of differences in the classification categories and schemes used.

The data on people identifying themselves as middle class show that those who have placed themselves in this category, i.e. the so-called “subjective middle class” are far more than those who fall into the “objective” one; this is a phenomenon that can be observed in all societies (Tilkidjiev 2002, Keliyan 1999, 2008). The explanations for this can be found in the impact of the following factors: the growing share of non-manual labor professions in postmodern Japanese society; the symbolic significance of the middle strata for the modern lifestyle; the prestige of the middle class; the changes that have taken place since the 1970s in living standard, consumption patterns, and lifestyles of large groups in Japanese society (Kosaka 1999, Imada 1998, Ishida 1993).

There is certain difference between those who believe they belong to the “middle prestigious class,” and the “middle economic class.” The majority of those who identify themselves as belonging to the middle class do so from the view point of prestige, consumption patterns and lifestyle, as well as of their position as a middle stratum in the stratification environment, but not according to their economic resources (Keliyan 1999: 97-103).

The economic prosperity after WWII and the fact that within two generations Japan turned from a poor country into a rich society, provide the

³ Social Stratification and Mobility National Surveys (SSM) are held every 10 years since 1955 and are representative for the Japanese population.

⁴ Quoted data are from PMO (Prime Minister Office) survey.

foundations of the myth of “a middle class society”, zealously maintained by political parties and the media.

In the 1960s and 70s, the growth and stabilization of the middle class became the goal of the ruling elites, and also the model of material success at the individual and social level (Imada, 1998). The increasing number of white-collar workers in the Japanese economy at that time was a factor leading to the development of mass society and mass consumption, which in turn promoted the myth that Japan was a “middle class society”. The political party platforms at that time were elaborated in this direction. These changes led to the emergence of yet another myth, according to which the country was turning, during the 1970s, from a middle class society into a “new middle mass society” (Murakami 1984). The new middle mass is understood to be a mass middle stratum, homogenous in respect to lifestyle, consumption patterns, and value system. This massification was due to the increased proportion of the new middle class of professionals, experts, and managers.

The particular place and importance of middle class in myth-making in post-war Japan is determined by the following specific features of this social-group formation:

1. Middle strata consumption patterns and lifestyle are emblematic for every contemporary society; they are a symbol and model of its characteristic and distinguishing consumer status, consumer behavior and culture.
2. In middle strata consumption patterns and lifestyle we can observe the latest and most topical consumer and lifestyle trends. The middle strata personify the changes and novelties in consumption, because they have the necessary resources (educational, cultural, and economic) needed to perceive, assimilate, and implement the innovations (Keliyan 2008: 60-70).
3. Japanese middle strata consumption patterns and lifestyle are models imitated in East Asia and throughout the world. They not only follow the latest global trends but in many respects create and impose these trends; the middle strata have long since become the biggest and “first” consumers and “exporters” of cultural and consumption symbols (*ibid*: 138-159).

In reality, after WWII the share of the middle class, especially that of the new middle strata, did increase, but Japan was never a “middle class society”, much less a “new middle mass society” (Keliyan 1999: 70-73). Starting from the late-1960s, the lifestyle, consumption patterns, and cultural patterns certainly did become factors of growing importance for stratification, but this does not mean that economic criteria had lost their impact. Past inequalities have intensified since the 1980s, and done so not only in the direction of growing differences in values, leisure, and cultural status. Under the impact of the “bubble economy”, the prices of real estate and land grew several times higher, thus engendering considerable inequalities between those who had

these resources and those who did not (Hashimoto 2003, Sato and Arita 2007). The “new rich” and “new poor” emerged: the former have the resources for leading an affluent and even lavish lifestyle, which the latter cannot afford even when they are employed and with an income above the poverty line. In studying the financial resources and capacity for savings of the households, Ozawa states that society is entering an “era of neo-stratification consumption”, brought about by the “birth of the divided masses” (1985). Similar conclusions are presented by Yamazaki, who writes about “the emergence of fragile individualism” of “masses divided with regard to consumption and lifestyle” (1984), while Fujioka entitled his article about these trends with the nostalgic phrase “*Goodbye, masses*” (1984).

The middle class, both old and new, was protected on the labor market up until the late 1990s. The new middle strata benefited by the system of life-long employment, and the salaries of people in this group were set according to length of service and age. The old middle strata were protected through the existing regulations on the activity of large corporations, rules that alleviated the competition pressure on the self-employed and small entrepreneurs. However, at the end of the 1990s there was a reevaluation of the existing economic order. Since the second half of the 1990s Japanese society, as part of the increasingly global world economy, has been undergoing recessions and crises, followed by periods of recovery (Keliyan 2010: 35-42). The first crisis of this kind was in 1997, and the earliest signs of recovery were seen in 1999. The second crisis came in 2008; the economy began to revive slowly from it in the middle of 2009, but the disasters of March 11, 2011 led to a collapse that can only be compared to the situation at the end of WWII.

As a result of the social-economic and structural transformations in the country and the world, important changes can be seen in the consumption patterns and lifestyle of various social strata in Japan. In the Japanese media there appeared indicative expressions such as *kachigumi* (the group of the successful) and *makegumi* (the group of losers). These terms are a sign of the increasingly perceptible social-economic changes that are depriving Japanese society of its past aura of a homogenous middle class, and ending the myth about Japan as a “middle class society”. The issue of growing economic inequality is being raised with increased emphasis in Japan, together with that of the “working poor” among the low-educated social strata and part-time employees (Tachibanaki 1998, 2005, 2006); it is regarding these problems that the discussion among the academic community and the general public first began about the on-going structural processes and their disturbing social consequences. There is an increasingly clear understanding in Japan and the world about the “end” of Japanese prosperity, about the “exhausted” potential of the country, and its “obsolete model”. Public discussion is going on about

the need for a change of the “economic model”, of the economic culture, and even of the value system. The traditional features of Japanese morality, such as harmonious relations and avoidance of conflicts, are pointed to as the primary cause of the “crisis of the model”, because they may inhibit creativity and lead to the toleration of corruption. Such views have been held in the past by Western and Japanese researchers (Benedict 1993/1946, Mouer and Sugimoto 1986, Voronoff 1990, 1997, Hashimoto 2003, etc.). The difference now is that these views are increasingly popular with the public and the media of Japan.

At the turn of the 20th century the growing income inequality in Japanese society made it be defined through key phrases popularized by the media, such as *kibou kakusa shakai*⁵ (the hope disparity society) and *karyu shakai*⁶ (lower-class society). Two contrary trends are emerging in the consumption patterns of the various social strata. On one hand there is a distinct group of upper strata demonstrating their affluent consumption. On the other hand there is an increasing share of people who must restrict their consumption because of their lower income. The media discuss poverty, and even the existence of working poor, as a considerable social problem. These two contrary trends in social stratification have determined the “boom” of stores and consumption centers meeting the different needs of these social groups: there are expensive stores offering luxury items and services, and there are stores offering cheap⁷ and “recycled”⁸ commodities. Together with this, the representatives of the new middle strata have a stable, though relatively slowly rising, income. The various kinds of stores and centers for consumption and recreation are offering increasingly varied products in order to meet the needs and demands of the consumers belonging to these different strata.

All these changes have an impact on the myth-making process in Japan: they tend to destroy the myth about the country as a “middle class society”. But how significant is this impact specifically on the *class self-definition* of the Japanese?

The results of a number of sociological surveys indicate that since the 1970s and until now the proportion of the *subjective middle class*, i.e. of those who consider themselves to be middle class, have remained stable. This is confirmed by SSM and by other surveys, for instance the Public Opinion on National Life survey, conducted by the Cabinet Office research centre. According to its findings, approximately 90% of the Japanese define

⁵An expression introduced by Yamada Masuhiro (2004).

⁶A concept introduced by Miura Atsushi (2005).

⁷These are stores where goods are priced at 100 yen (around 1 Euro); they are found near all the central stations of the public transport in Japanese cities and offer a great variety of goods, ranging from stationery to household appliances.

⁸This is an euphemistic expression for second-hand goods.

themselves as middle class; within this category, about 10% believe they are upper-middle class, less than 60% indicate they are middle-middle class, and about one fifth, lower-middle class (*Annual Report on The Japanese Economy and Public Finance* 2006).

The representative panel studies that have been conducted by the Nomura Research Institute (NRI) every three years since 1997, encompassing over 10 000 respondents, have made it possible to outline the dimensions of the class self-identification in Japan since the late 1990s and until 2010. The interviewed persons were asked to assign themselves to some of the indicated classes on the basis of what they assessed to be their living standard. For the whole nine-year period from 1997 to 2006, the share of people who defined themselves as middle class, i.e. all those who placed themselves in one of the middle class groups - lower-middle, middle-middle, or upper-middle, decreased by 6% (Nitto 2008: 3). There was respectively a slight increase of those who assigned themselves to the lower class and to the lower-middle class, at the expense of the decreased share of people identifying as upper-middle or upper class. But the changes are too small to allow the assertion that the class self-identification of the Japanese during this period has changed significantly. The results of the survey conducted in July 2009 show that the average income of Japanese households had not changed by then compared with 2006 (Ishihara 2010: 6). The proportion of those defining themselves as lower-middle and lower classes decreased by 7%, while those identifying as upper and upper-middle classes grew by 6%. Ultimately, on the basis of NRI survey findings, it can be asserted there is a slight change in self-identification with the upper-middle class (rising from 7% to 8,5%) and with the lower-middle class (rising from 28% to 30%), but the share of those identifying with the middle class in general is relatively constant: between 85% and 90% of the respondents assess that, according to their living standard, they fall in this category.

Overall, the changes occurring throughout the entire period since the 1970s until today in the class self-identification of the Japanese on the basis of living standard have been inconsiderable and do not justify the claim about a "disappearing" or "melting" middle class. What then are the reasons for the demise of the "middle class society" myth and the appearance of the myth of the "vanishing middle class"?

Prevalent in Japanese society are egalitarian values; this is a communitarian society with a developed group culture. This makes it very sensitive to the growing inequalities in income, education level, consumption, and lifestyle. The increased proportion of part-time employees, of employed women, the end of the life-long employment system, has radically changed the labor market of Japan. The rapid aging of the population is a serious problem for social insurance, while the unwillingness of young people to create families of their

own, and the decreasing number of children born engender insecurity about the future. The periodic global recessions and crises in the end of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st are a serious challenge for the economy, while the rapid economic growth of China has ousted Japan from the position it held for half a century as the second strongest world economy. The Japanese know perfectly well that the ranking of world economies according to their nominal GDP does not give a realistic picture of the actual development of a society, and that, for instance, quality of life is a much better indicator. But this is certainly no consolation, for obviously their economy is finding it increasingly hard to deal with the contemporary global challenges. The political elites have proven powerless to find a solution to the problems of society, and the country has had a series of quickly changing governments.

Dissatisfaction with the present state of society inevitably generated nostalgia for the time when, in the balance, successes and hopes exceeded disappointments, when the country was developing quickly and astounding the world by its economic achievements and the powerful spirit of the Japanese. The late 1970s and 1980s have become the much-needed “special past” and symbolize the kind of society the Japanese would like to identify with.

3. The failure of the myth about effective control over technologies and the prime importance of efficiency and comfort

The myth of the safety of nuclear energy is part of the myth about the ability of people to control technologies effectively and with entirely beneficial results. Both myths are connected with that of the predominant importance of efficiency and comfort in the post-modern consumer’s world. The creation and spread of these myths has occurred in parallel with the myth about Japan as a “middle class society”, and this is no coincidence. The speedy and successful post-war development of the country, which turned it into a post-modern society, also created favorable social, economic, political, and cultural conditions for this kind of social mythology.

Since the late 1960s and the beginning of 1970s, as a result of the post-modernization of Japanese society (Keliyan 2010: 35-42), the myth was established regarding the importance of efficiency and comfort, which have become priority goals in the country’s economic development. Economic production and developing technologies are expected above all to be efficient and provide comfort for consumers.

In the 1970s Japan was a leader in the development of the so-called “fifth generation” computer systems and robotization. By the mid-1980s the country had achieved its goal and turned into an information society. Typically, Japan emphasizes foremost the social values of the media, communications, and information technologies, and their use not only in the sphere of production but

also in leisure, recreation, and consumption. Since then high technologies have found a permanent place in Japanese consumption patterns, especially those of the new middle strata. They have become a characteristic feature of the Japanese consumer society and lifestyle in general. Japan has practically realized its post-war ideal, and is a real example of the post-industrial society described by Daniel Bell (1973/1974). Japan has become a society oriented mostly to information and services, and its industry is based on the development of science and technology, particularly modern technologies. Japanese products symbolize high quality, and the country has a well-established image as the land of high technologies.

In 1985, in the city of Tsukuba, Ibaraki prefecture, north of Tokyo, the International Science Technology Exposition – Expo '85 was held. It popularized Japanese achievements and confirmed the status of the country as a world power in the field of science and technology. Advocated amongst the public and the media was the idea that information is of paramount importance for achieving and leading a "meaningful life"; especially receptive to this message were the new middle strata. Knowledge-related professions have enhanced their influence, and this has changed the stratification structure of society and the place of the new middle class in that structure.

At the end of the 1970s and by the mid-1980s Japan turned into an information society, which brought to the fore the social value of the media, of communications and information technologies not only in production but also in leisure, recreation, and consumption. Since then high technologies have held a permanent place in Japanese consumption patterns, especially those of the new middle strata, and have turned into a characteristic feature of the Japanese consumer society and of the lifestyles as a whole (Imada, 1998).

At that time the myth became established in the country that technologies can be fully controlled by Man and society; and Japan seemed to be among the world leaders with regard to the efficiency of this control. But with the great stress on the values of efficiency and comfort, the issues of safety, security and environment protection somehow remained in the margin of public attention.

The environmentally oriented lifestyle has been popularized and established as a kind of counterpoint to the commercialization of values. Japanese society since the beginning of the 21st century is increasingly imbued with the spirit of 'recycling': people are attaching increasing importance to a lifestyle in harmony with nature and 'green' values. Yet the ecological lifestyle is not a distant goal for Japan, it is the actual practice of large groups and strata of the population. The public is informed, concerned, and sensitive about natural environment protection. Japan has a developed and functioning policy for environmental protection and functioning laws for the application of that

policy. But despite the achieved results, many problems still exist, provoking the criticism and protests of civic movements.

In the last two decades there has been a debate as to the need for creating and maintaining a new attitude to consumption and lifestyle, one that would include not only the act of purchasing and using objects, but also consciousness about the results of that consumption, about the “after consumption”. This refers to the formation of an “educated middle class consumer” that is well informed about environmental and social issues, and whose consumption pattern is environmentally, socially, and community oriented. Middle strata are the most fervent social-group followers of this new, post-modern lifestyle trends; they are with the necessary income but also with the cultural potential to adopt these ideas.

In 2010 the government plan for power production envisaged an increase in the share of electricity produced by nuclear power plants from 30% to 53%. The crisis in the Fukushima nuclear power plant put an end to such plans. Now widely discussed in the media and in public space are revelations about the corrupt practices in the energy sector, about the suspiciously close relationships between high-ranking civil servants from the nuclear power sector and state officials responsible for overseeing the safety of nuclear power plants, about irregular activities in support of nuclear energy not only on the part of the nuclear lobby but even of certain representatives of the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA). Dismissals and resignations followed, as well as civic protests and appeals for altogether abandoning the use of nuclear power. The prime minister Kan Naoto even declared the intention that Japan would shut down its electric power plants and henceforth to rely mainly on renewable energy sources. This was the start of a long road towards what the media have called a “post-nuclear Japan”.

The nuclear crisis in Fukushima led to a rethinking of the myth of safe nuclear energy, of effective control over technologies, of the priority of efficiency and comfort over safety.

4. Conclusion: From myth-making and nostalgia to a revival of society

The tragic destruction on March 11, 2011 showed the world a somewhat forgotten aspect of Japan. Not the aspect of a post-modern society, a world leader in modern consumption and lifestyle, a land of globally influential youth pop-cultures; nor the aspect of an aging society in which fewer families are created, fewer children are born, in which young people are more interested in lifestyle and leisure than in work, and are incapable of sacrificing their comfort in the name of the common good; not the aspect of the “sick society”, of which the Japanese themselves are highly critical and which none of the transient governments has been able to reanimate.

The world saw a people and communities who were able to overcome the pain and suffering, to organize themselves without waiting for government decisions and support in order to help themselves. This is not a myth, it is not nostalgia, and it is not a search for identity in a special past when the Japanese supposedly lived in a “better” society. This is an authentic manifestation of the power of the human spirit, of real, not mythological, community solidarity, of the resources of Japanese society for recovery and growth.

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