De-Growth, or Questions of Subjectivity in Reconstructing Local Autonomy: The Case of Minamata’s Environmental Politics

Yoshihiro Nakano

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in the 1980s, the academic school of post-development has provoked a wide debate over the legitimacy of the modernist conceptions of development, showing theoretical and practical limits of the modern paradigms of the economy, science and technology. Despite its progressive and innovative contribution to development studies, the post-development discourse recieves a number of criticisms as it so far has not provided concrete visions of alternatives to development.

However, the recent works by post-development scholars are elaborating concrete programmes of local alternatives and ethics, reframing the relationship between culture, ecology and the economy. In particular the de-growth project instigated by Serge Latouche provides a theoretically distinct vision of alternatives to development by constructing a path of revitalising local autonomy outside the conceptual framework of modern political economy. In the world where the hubris of the global society of consumers, especially overexploitation of natural resources and corresponding rise of ecological footprint, threatens Earth’s life support system and the survival of the majority of humanity, de-growth seems one of the most radical but realistic options to assure fair and

* The original version was presented at 10ème Colloque de la Société Franco-Japonaise de Sciences Economiques (18 Mars 2010, à la MSH de Paris Nord). I am grateful to Cedric Durand for his insightful comments on the paper.

---

** Research Assistant and Research Fellow, Social Sciences Research Institute, International Christian University. E-mail: nakano.aube@gmail.com
sustainable living conditions to peoples in both developed and developing worlds. To enact de-growth in concrete local contexts, however, one must investigate complex processes of local struggles, extending the scope of analysis to non-economic institutions and organisations as well as to the dimensions of narratives, memories and subjectivity. In what follows, I examine political viability of de-growth project with a case study of Minamata city’s initiatives of eco-model city and argue that Latouche’s theory of de-growth needs to be further developed through analysis of the various types of violence and injustice that can be found in particular local contexts.

In the first section, I briefly introduce Latouche’s theory of de-growth. In the second section, I shall analyse Minamata city’s initiatives by situating them in the history of post-war Japanese development politics. The case study establishes two observations. First, in the high time of Minamata pollution (the 1950s-1960s), Minamata city revealed the scenery in which discriminations and exclusions of the Minamata disease patients became a norm. Second, however, the recent local movements against the construction of industrial wastes facility in Minamata (2004 to 2008) gave birth to a new collective subjectivity that unified diverse local residents in sharing the memories of Minamata pollution. From these findings, I argue that de-growth project needs to be complemented with a political analysis of local histories, identities and violence.

II. DE-GROWTH AS AN ECOLOGICAL POLITICS OF SELF-MANAGEMENT

De-growth is a social movement theory proposed by Latouche and other French and Italian ecologists since the early 2000s and constitutes part of broad currents of anti-globalisation theories, together with Jean-Louis Laville’s solidarity economy and Susan George’s global justice movement.

Latouche’s de-growth project is unique among these currents in that it attributes the root cause of economic globalisation to the idea of exponential economic growth. For him, the development project and globalisation that follow the logic of growth-based economy are not the solution to poverty and
misery; they are the real cause of deepening environmental degradation and material and cultural deprivation of people in the peripheries. Therefore, distinct from the prevailing theories of economic development, Latouche elaborates alternative path of societal development that does not centre its value on unlimited economic growth.

The de-growth project, according to Latouche, aims to dismantle the productivist and consumerist lifestyles that have today become norms of advanced industrial countries such as United States, Europe and Japan. It urges these countries to abandon the myth of unlimited economic growth and to construct ecologically sustainable societies that cultivate a different quality of life from the modern industrial societies:

Its goal [i.e. the goal of de-growth] is to build a society in which we can live better lives whilst working less and consuming less. It is an essential proposition if we are to open up a space for the inventiveness and creativity of the imagination, which has been blocked by economistic, developmentalist and progressive totalitarianism.\(^{(7)}\)

Latouche develops such theme of de-growth, drawing upon the works of renowned critics of industrial societies such as André Gorz, François Partant, Jacques Ellul, Ivan Illich and Cornelius Castoriadis.\(^{(8)}\) His central argument is summarised as follows. Firstly, the present economic system is neither sustainable nor desirable. Ecologically, it continues to exploit finite natural resources on Earth for infinite production of consumer goods. The wastes and pollutions produced are destroying the reproductive capacity of biosphere on which human societies depend.\(^{(9)}\) Growth-based economy also has negative effects on social life. It subordinates human existence to the capitalist production system. In this system, an entire human life is organised for producing and consuming commodities. As a consequence people reinforce their dependence on market system and lose autonomy.\(^{(10)}\)

Secondly, Latouche states that the break with the paradigm of growth-based
economy must lead to a renaissance of local society.\footnote{11} As opposed to the trend of economic globalisation that allows the transnational movement of capital and production systems, de-growth project proposes a localisation of productions and public spheres as well as a reactivation of cultural and ecological diversities. Latouche suggests that, by inserting the modern market economy in a web of vernacular social relations and local eco-systems as well as by cultivating an ethics of conviviality as opposed to the modern individualism, local society not only cultivates the original path of the flourishing of collective life but also becomes resilient to the negative impact of globalisation such as financial crisis and the downturn of economic cycle.

The radicalisation of self-management of local society has some practical consequences, as it introduces concrete methods of managing the environmental crisis and social disintegration that are perpetrated by economic globalisation. Latouche introduces a political project of rejuvenating local autonomy, which he refers to as a virtuous cycle of de-growth. The cycle is an articulation of eight distinct practices of reorganising local society and called 8Rs: re-evaluate, re-conceptualise, restructure, redistribute, re-localise, reduce, reuse and recycle.\footnote{12} These 8Rs are conceived of, to paraphrase Karl Polanyi, as a strategy of re-embedding the economy in local culture and local eco-system, so as to make the local society less affected by the modern state system and global capitalism. Not only does this virtuous cycle aim at recovering environmental sustainability (reduce, reuse, recycle), it also seeks to rectify economic and social unfairness and inequality (redistribute, restructure) under new paradigms (re-evaluate, re-conceptualise). Among all the eight phases, ‘relocalising’ occupies a central place. It stresses citizens’ participation to local politics and effective initiatives of local government in implementing de-growth project. Eventually the 8Rs are said to reinforce local democracy in such ways that ecological sustainability and well-beings of local people are simultaneously enhanced. As Latouche clarifies, the construction of de-growth society can be understood as a practical implementation of the ideal of ecological socialism, what Murray Bookchin calls the construction of ‘a commune of small communes that are perfectly in
harmony with their eco-systems.

III. QUESTIONS OF SUBJECTIVITY AND JUSTICE: A CASE OF MINAMATA CITY’S POLITICS OF ECO-MODEL CITY

Latouche’s de-growth project effectively points to unsustainable nature of growth-based economy and suggests alternative social practices applicable to many types of local societies including rural and urban areas in both developed and developing countries. That Latouche develops an ideal of de-growth society by reflecting on concrete practices in Western Europe (France, Italy, Britain) and West Africa (Senegal) also proves that de-growth project is aimed at a realistic transformation of local society whilst maintaining utopian visions of ecological socialism.

I argue, however, that de-growth project has limitations in terms of analytical scheme and normativity and hence it cannot fully explain complex dynamism of the politics of change. Despite his invaluable contribution to the critique of the paradigm of modern political economy, Latouche’s theorising is still half way through, for it misses reflections on the multi-layered structuration of the reality of local development, which is not necessarily affected by the modern economic categories alone. Indeed, the organisation of the capitalist economic system, as Laclau and Mouffe rightly point out à la Gramsci, results from the contingent articulation of diverse socio-cultural practices irreducible to the internal logic of the capitalist mode of production. One cannot therefore separate the analysis of economic reality from that of various social, cultural and political practices that give regularity and meaning to the modes of production and consumption. It follows from this that the deconstruction of the paradigm of growth-based economy must equally pay attention to local histories, narratives and memories and other non-economic effects of structuring local society, as constitutive part of economic reality.

It is my contention that de-growth project, if it is aimed at implementing real societal transformation in any concrete context, must be complemented with a sound political analysis that demonstrates the modality of complex power.
game that structures a given local society. Such analysis must first illuminate the various forms of violence, domination and injustice that constitute the identity of local people, and then demonstrate the possibility of social change by analysing the emergence of the subjectivity that engenders new social actions.\(^{(16)}\)

In what follows I draw on the case of Minamata city’s initiatives of eco-city model, in order to show the pertinence of political analysis to de-growth project. The reason for choosing this case is twofold. First, Minamata city experienced a tragic public pollution during the 1950s and 1960s. This incident revealed the existence of complex structural violence particular to this former small fisher village in the southwest of Kumamoto Prefecture in Kyushu Area. Reflections on the Minamata pollution therefore contribute to illustrating various social, cultural and political issues that are to be considered in the scheme of de-growth project. Second, Minamata pollution is important in that it marked the beginning of Japanese anti-/post-development movements. During the late 1950s and 1970s, Japanese civil society organised the movements of residents (Jumin Undou) in response to four big pollutions.\(^{(17)}\) These locally situated environmental movements resonated with other social movements, notably struggles for the self-governance of Okinawa and the recognition of basic rights of minorities (Buraku, Zai-nichi, and Ainu), and provoked the debate on the legitimacy of Japanese development projects. Against this background several critical scholars established Japanese schools of post-development, including regionalism (Yoshiro Tamanoi), theory of culturally endogenous development (Kazuko Tsurumi), critique of nuclear energy policy (Takeshi Murota) and the study of local commons (Hisahi Nakamura, Takeshi Murota). In this sense, the study of Minamata pollution serves as a platform for discussing the original model, especially a normative model, of de-growth in Japan.

1. The Structural Violence of Minamata Pollution: Radical Exclusion of the Victims

Minamata pollution became an object of public attention in the late 1950s when the post-war Japanese economy recovered from the ravage of the Second
World War and commenced a take-off toward unprecedented high economic growth. It is an environmental and human calamity induced by the mercury poisoning committed by Nippon Chisso Corp, a leading chemical company which is today famous for its biggest share in the world market of the production of liquid crystal (LC) used for the manufacturing of LCD for mobile phone and PCs. Chisso installed its factory to Minamata in 1909 and discharged methyl mercury, a by-product of the manufacturing of acetaldehyde, to Minamata Bay from 1932 to 1968. Methyl mercury, condensed in the sands and water of local Shiranui Sea, was transmitted to fishes via food chain and poisoned local residents, particularly the fishermen and their families who habitually ate local fishes on the daily basis. The first victim appeared in 1953 and the national government officially confirmed the discovery of Minamata disease in 1956.

As sociologist Harutoshi Funabashi explains, Minamata pollution was caused by a lack of effective environmental governance on national, prefectural and local levels.¹⁶ Both the central and the prefectural governments failed to identify the real cause of Minamata disease at the early phase and did not offer effective measures such as immediate ban on fishery and on the selling of local fishes. As a consequence the number of victims and affected areas increased in the course of time. It can be said, however, that fundamental problems came from complex political and social structures that surrounded Minamata city at that time. The structural problems of Minama pollution were summarised as follows:

- There was a monopoly by Chisso of local politics, economy and natural resources. Chisso was the sole cash-generating company in Minamata and the local economy was totally dependent on it.¹⁹ The local politics thus became subordinate to the interests of the company to such an extent that the factory occupied a large part of the city centre and monopolised the rights of water use.²⁰
- The subordination of local economy and politics to the single company also affected local civil society. Chisso was the sole largest employer in
Minamata. This fact deeply infiltrated the minds of local residents and established an unconscious social consensus that allowed the residents to support Chisso for fear of losing their jobs.

- As Chisso politically and economically occupied most part of Minamata, there was a structure in which the residents working for Chisso received privileges. Those engaged in traditional business sectors, particularly local fishermen and their families, were classified as one of the least recognised classes in the community.

- Chisso received support from both the prefectural and the national governments. It was imperative for the national government to protect the economic interests of chemical industry because the latter was a major contributor to economic development of the post-war Japan. In 1959, the hypothesis that the Minamata disease was caused by methyl mercury poisoning was rejected by Hayato Ikeda, the then minister of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), who soon became a prime minister in the following year to promote a high economic growth policy.\(^{(21)}\) The Cabinet followed his decision and did not adopt any effective policy to stop the pollution.\(^{(22)}\)

- There was a lack of autonomy in local research team. Minamata disease was initially investigated under the initiatives of Kumamoto University’s research team that defended the mercury poisoning hypothesis. However the team lacked sufficient knowledge, facilities and resources to conduct research and was made dissolved by the order of the national government. Chisso and MITI in turn organised a new research team of the pro-government scientists assembled chiefly from Tokyo University and published a report frequently manipulated by administrative organisations.\(^{(23)}\) This severely retarded the identification of real cause of the disease.

Political sociologist Akira Kurihara states that these multi-layered institutional and structural problems, tightly connected to one another, formed what he calls an ideology of ‘productivist nationalism’.\(^{(24)}\) Productivist
nationalism exploits local eco-system and people as mere resources for national economic development. It destroys vernacular social space, which has cultivated sustainable livelihood of local community for generations, and marginalises those unable to catch up with industrialisation. In the case of Minamata pollution, multiple physical and psychological discriminations emerged from these institutional settings. For instance:

• Those affected by Minamata disease were segregated from local community, due to a public rumour that the disease was infectious.
• Mass media also contributed to making a false representation of the victims’ struggles against Chisso.
• Although methyl mercury was confirmed as the real cause, and even after the Minamata disease was officially recognised in 1968 as a disease caused by public pollutions, the local residents continued to discriminate the patients and their relatives as ‘accursed people’ to such an extent that the marriage of normal citizens and the patients or their relatives was conceived of as a taboo.
• The local residents, whose majority worked for Chisso, also prevented the patients from becoming an object of public debate, for they wanted to protect their economic security, especially employment, tightly connected to Chisso. Local labour unions defended their company (though some of them came to support the victims later). This incident demythologised the old Leftist credo that labour unions were the defender of social justice and equality.

The victims received discriminations from almost all areas and were deeply isolated. They at last came to qualify themselves as ‘abandoned people’ or ‘dead people’, i.e. a figure that had no presence in Japanese civil society despite its official status as Japanese citizens. They had to organise struggle on their own, asking supports from civil organisations and progressive intellectuals outside the community. Kurihara argues, therefore, that the problem lies not in the fact
of whether or not someone is a patient of Minamata disease but in a complex set of social, political, and economic backgrounds organised around the signifier ‘Minamata disease’:

‘That there is Minamata disease’ does not mean the presence of Minamata disease as an object. Minamata disease exists as la problématique, as relations, as bodies, and as the scenery that contains all of them. In the world in which there is Minamata disease, all bodies, qua relations, constitute a world of Minamata disease. In other words, all bodies function as a predicate and construct a world that can be described in the phrase ‘there is Minamata disease’. A body exists as an overdetermined field that establishes the scenery that can be described that ‘there is Minamata disease’, as a crossroads of relations, as a node of multi-layered identities.\(^{(26)}\)

Once Minamata disease appears in local community, the bodies of the patients are re-inscribed in a set of narratives, gazes and institutions that classify them as ‘abnormal’. Such violence in turn introduces new social divisions to the community, disapproving the presence of the patients. The case of Minamata pollution exemplified the extent to which pre-existing social bonds of local community were destroyed due to the egoism of the privileged majority of local citizens who wanted to defend the security of their interests and living conditions in front of the victims’ demand for collective responsibility. This dissolution of social bonds was, according to economist Kenichi Miyamoto, caused by the subordination of local culture to an economistic logic of private corporations:

In Minamata, it is local society that was destroyed first...Like a governor in the feudal era, private corporations monopolise local administration and fiscal policies. Then they destroy cultures and life styles unique to each local community. In this situation, residents become more faithful to corporations than to municipality. For example, according to the opinion poll conducted
by national TV station NHK, Minamata citizens were still disapproving the victims and hoping to protect Chisso, when the result of the first court case was announced in 1973.\(^{(27)}\)

The social division in Minamata thus demonstrates a paradox of the movement of residents. This movement is normally conceived of as a self-organised social movement by ordinary citizens to defend the life world of their communities and positively recognised as an innovative social practice invented by the post-war Japanese civil society. However, in Minamata, the majority of local citizens organised social movements to protect themselves against the discrimination and stereotypes posed by the rest of Japan and eventually excluded the patients from the membership of local community. Takabatake explains the power game that underlies the incident:

In fact, what happened in Minamata, Narita or the anti-railway movement in Yokohama, are the conflicts between the minority of victims and the majority of residents whose livings and benefits depend on private corporations. These events ended in the oppression by majority of minority.\(^{(28)}\)

Indeed, the Minamata disease patients were treated as a scapegoat for protecting the pre-existing security of the majority of local citizens, which was tethered to the corporate logic of Chisso.

\section*{2. Difficult Process of Reconciliation and Social Integration}

On a practical terrain, anti-pollution movements of the victims and their supporters nonetheless produced several positive outcomes. Internationally, the association of Minamata disease patients declared the Stockholm Appeal to Minamata Disease at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Stockholm, 1972) and made Minamata disease a global concern. In domestic contexts, the Minamata movements, together with other
environmentalist movements, led the national government to launch the Environmental Agency in 1971. Minamata city was officially certified as a polluted area eligible to receiving national compensation. The anti-Minamata pollution movements also succeeded in founding the Minamata Centre Soshisha in 1974, a centre aimed at supporting everyday lives of the victims as well as recording and diffusing information and data of Minamata disease. Furthermore the Minamata movements ruled the first court case (1969-73) in which the corporate responsibility of Chisso for Minamata disease was officially acknowledged for the first time. They successively struggled for the clarification of the criteria of identifying potential patients in the second and third court cases (1973-85, 1980-96).

However the reconciliation process faced a bureaucratised power politics, which can be denoted as a politics of forgetting and a politics of dividing. First, the issue of identification of patients has been provoking a controversy for decades, because the discourses of national government and Chisso always opt for the institutionalisation of the mechanism of removing their responsibilities from the history of Minamata pollution. They manipulate the criteria of identification in order to minimise the number of officially certified patients of Minamata pollution and to reduce the total amount of compensations. Thus the politics of forgetting has dual structures: the responsible agents are removed from the official history of Minamata disease whilst potential victims are made invisible. However the Supreme Court ruled on the responsibility of both the national and the Kumamoto prefectural governments on 15th October 2004 and ordered them to include in the compensation scheme the people whom The Committee for the Certification of Minamata Disease Patients once declined to nominate as officially certified patients. The result of the 2004 court case led to an increase of the number of the application of potential patients for official certification. Nonetheless the politics of forgetting is lingering over the situation. On 8th July 2009 the Diet passed the Law concerning Special Measures for Compensation of Minamata Disease, followed by cabinet decision on 16th April 2010. This law prescribes, apart from the compensation to approximately
34,000 officially certified and uncertified patients, to divide Chisso into the original company responsible for compensation and the sub-company exempted from the responsibility. Some members of anti-Minamata pollution movements warn that, if this law is validated, the original company takes a limited responsibility for the limited number of Minamata disease patients and no further identification of patients occurs after it finishes compensation under the scheme prescribed by that law, let alone the compensation to next generations.\textsuperscript{31)} Despite the controversy, some groups of the patients accepted the scheme. The application for provisional compensation (2.1 million yens per patient) began on 1\textsuperscript{st} May 2010 and the sub-company JNC Corp started its business on 1\textsuperscript{st} April 2011.

In parallel with this process is the politics of dividing. Minamata disease patients have been divided into more than twenty groups in the course of reconciliation process. Some groups are seeking compromise with the national government in the hope of ending their struggles by receiving compensation. Others demand real justice and continue the struggle for a permanent rescue of all potential patients in the present and future generations. There have been irreconcilable divisions between these groups of patients and their unification is extremely difficult. In this situation the Minamata disease patients lost trust from their fellow citizens and, in one aspect, this has reinforced internal social division in Minamata.

The social division introduced in the post-pollution period of Minamata was so strong that discrimination against the patients still occurred unexpectedly even in the 1990s, the period when Minamata city adopted social integration policies. The municipal government of Minamata declared ‘Moyai Naoshi’ (i.e. ‘Repairing social bonds’) in April 1992 as a policy to end the longstanding social division between the victims and the rest of local citizens. A number of educational programmes and environmental and social activities that intended to promote mutual understanding between the patients and other local residents were implemented. However such efforts did not fully eradicate the roots of discrimination. In May 1996, the year that commemorated the forty-
year anniversary of official discovery of Minamata disease, an event called Minamata Disease Exhibition took place in Shinagawa, Tokyo. The executive committee of the event initially proposed to hold a pre-event festival with the patients. The original plan was to demonstrate a ritual of bringing the souls of the patients from Minamata to Tokyo through the navigation of a traditional ship of Minamata fishermen, ‘Utasebune’. However several citizens in the committee opposed the idea by saying that citizens had freedom to choose religion and that it was impossible to do a religious practice in the event organised by citizens: ‘to talk about souls is bizarre and frightening’. In the end the pre-festival event was carried out by Hongan No Kai, an association of Minamata disease patients, and not in the name of Minamata citizens. Kurihara states that citizens excluded the souls of Minamata disease patients again.\(^{(32)}\)

3. A Contingent Production of New Collective Subjectivity: 2004 to date

Up until now I discussed the history in which social division of Minamata city was repetitively reproduced through discrimination and exclusion of the patients. The patients are still represented as the Other of the history of post-war Japan, contrary to the effort of social integration and reconciliation. This tells the difficulty of overcoming the structural violence perpetrated by Minamata pollution. One can identify a positive movement in the recent politics of Minamata city, however.

The Minamata municipal government started the initiatives of ‘eco-model city’ in 1992 as a policy associated with the aforementioned ‘Moyai Naoshi’. It carried out a series of progressive measures to transform Minamata city into an ecologically sustainable society. The major achievements are as follows:
Table 1: The achievements of Minamata city’s initiatives of eco-city model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Declaration</th>
<th>• Declaration of the Construction of Eco-City Model (1992)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recycling</td>
<td>• Recycling and classification of wastes to 22 types (1993-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Women’s Committee for the Reduction of Wastes (1997-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Authorization System of Eco-shop (1999-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Recycling of raw wastes into fertilizer (2002-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISO</td>
<td>• ISO140001(1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ISO for Household (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ISO for School (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ISO for Kindergarten and Nursery School (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ISO for Hotel (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ISO for farming (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Initiatives</td>
<td>• Convention on Ecological Ward (1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Decree of the Construction of Minamata ‘Vital’ Village (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Appointed as Eco Town (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Local Currency ‘Moyai’ (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transformation of the whole village to a ‘museum’ (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Model Enterprise of the Reuse of Bottle (2003-)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Takashi Miyakita, an environmental engineer working for the Minamata eco-model city project, the above listed activities are recently developing around two initiatives: a policy of reusing used bottles and the project of transforming the whole village to a museum. In the first place, the reuse of bottles aims to shift from a recycle-based society to a reuse-based society and contributes to cultivating practices of 3Rs (Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle).\(^{33}\) One of the problems in the existing Japanese environmental policies is that, whilst introducing many laws associated with recycling, the society as a whole does not reduce the scale of production and consumption; hence the recycling practices do not contribute to reducing a total amount of wastes.\(^{34}\) In contrast the Minamata model centres its value on reducing wastes and aims to exit both productivism and consumerism at one and the same time.

Then the project of transforming the whole village to a museum is a recreation that contains a pedagogical aim. To participate in the project, all members in a given community must agree on the Convention on Ecological Ward. Once the Convention is adopted, they carry out various activities to let
themselves acquainted with the natural environment of their community. They invite people from other communities and guide them to ecological spots of the community. The entire village is thus turned to a natural museum.\(^{(35)}\)

These initiatives are comparable to Latouche’s de-growth project in that both aim at the change of values and lifestyles. A more politically concerned incident took place, however. In March 2004, the IWD Toa Kumamoto Construction Company announced the construction of industrial wastes disposal facility on the mountain of the southeast Minamata. The construction site overlaps one of the rare spots of fresh water springs that provide 600 tons of portable water for local residents per day.\(^{(36)}\) The initial plan of IWD Toa was to dispose total 4 millions tons of industrial wastes collected outside Minamata through the following 15 to 20 years.\(^{(37)}\)

In June 2004, the Association for Protecting the Life and Water of Minamata (APLWM) was launched by local residents. They went to negotiate with the governor of Kumamoto Prefecture in August 2004. However, the then Minamata mayor Ryuichi Eguchi maintained his ‘neutral position’ by saying that ‘as an eco-model city, Minamata cannot reject the plan.’ The citizens of Minamata reacted against the pro-construction mayor and the anti-construction movements were spread over all sixteen wards of Minamata city. The Minamata Centre Soshisha also joined the movement and published a manifesto in September 2005:

\[\ldots\text{Today, Minamata City is working the renaissance of local society with all. The construction of ‘eco-model city’ is a difficult task of converging negative heritages of Minamata disease to positive ones. However this is a rare experiment in the world and it is not exaggerating to say that the future of Minamata city entirely relies on it. All projects, including industrial wastes disposal facility, must be assessed in terms of the long-term vision of Minamata city. If we do this, our answer is crystal clear…}\] \(^{(38)}\)

One can read this passage as an attempt at translating the tragic past of
Minamata disease to the future responsibility of Minamata city, a reinterpretation of the present situation of Minamata in the light of intergenerational responsibility and environmental sustainability.

In November 2005, the ‘We Say No! To Industrial Wastes Disposal Facility’ Civic Association held an inaugural meeting to elect a new mayor who opposed the construction of industrial wastes disposal facility, immediately followed by the launch of the Association of Sixteen Wards Against Industrial Wastes Disposal Facility (December, 2005). In February 2006, Katsuaki Miyamoto, an anti-construction candidate, was appointed to new mayor with a land sliding victory in the local election. In June 2006, the Citizens’ General Assembly for Stopping the Construction Project was held with the participation of 1200 people. From June 2006 to February 2007, a group of local residents conducted a research of the environment of the construction site under the initiatives of Soshisha and refuted the results of the environmental assessments reported by IWD Toa. The citizens attended a public hearing organised by Kumamoto prefectural government. Masato Ogata, a Minamata disease patient, mentioned the final landfill site at Minamata Bay in which the wasted mercury discharged by Chisso was stored and said: ‘the Minamata citizens already inherit this final landfill site. Do you impose poison on the suffering people again?’ Mrs. Sakamoto (80), the president of APLWM and whose husband used to work for Chisso, contended: ‘What we need for survival is clean air, clean water, and clean sea. People in Minamata are not that fool to change them to money. The lessons from Minamata disease are that we must not repeat the same mistake.’ In April 2008, the anti-construction movement held a small meeting in Tokyo and sent a request to stop the project to IWD Toa (headquarter), Yokohama Bank and Mitsui Sumitomo Bank. On 26th June 2008, IWD Toa Kumamoto announced cancellation of the project.

The movement against the construction of industrial wastes facility became a turning point for the local politics of Minamata city. First, the movement expanded through a remembering and sharing of tragic memories of Minamata pollution. The local residents who had cared little about the history of Minamata
disease until recently came to speak about the lessons of this tragic incident and opposed the construction project to not repeat the same mistake. Documentary film director Noriaki Tsuchimoto remarks with surprise: ‘Now that ordinary citizens are having an awareness that they are the persons concerned in the history of Minamata disease. Is it a local egoism to resist the construction project in the name of Minamata disease? We have to rethink the ‘lessons’. ’(42) Second, and more importantly, the anti-construction movement was spread over the entire city and formed a broad association of residents. This civic association in turn engendered solidarity between the patients and other residents and dissolved the existing social division during the period of protest. Third, the anti-construction movement elected a new mayor and stopped the construction project. This experience consolidated the bond between local municipality and residents and accelerated the initiatives of eco-model city further. Today Minamata city implements the initiatives under the slogan of 5Rs (Rethink, Refuse, Reduce, Reuse and Recycle) of which the first two were newly introduced during the period of anti-construction movements.

Likewise, the process of anti-construction movement exemplifies the emergence of new collective *subjectivity*. The new subjectivity of Minamata citizens emerged as a result of appropriating the memories of and the lessons from Minamata pollution and enabled the residents to collectively struggle against the construction project. The instance of making a collective subjectivity has both political and ethical significances. Politically, the anti-construction movement demonstrates what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe call the logic of *hegemony* that brings forth social change by contingently articulating diverse demands of people. (43) In the case of Minamata, the demands of residents were relatively homogenous in that they were all against industrial wastes disposal facility. However, the anti-construction movement contributed to motivating the majority of residents, who had initially been less concerned about the history of Minamata pollution, to attach themselves to the experience of the Minamata disease patients. It effected a temporal suppression of the social division caused by the series of incidents related to Minamata pollution, transformed the
representation of local politics, and radicalised the project of eco-model city under the initiative of the new mayor. The relationship between the new mayor and local citizens gave birth to a positive sense of change. This is proved by the fact that the mayor Katsuaki Miyamoto was re-elected to his second term in the recently held local election in February 2010.

In terms of ethics, the new subjectivity of Minamata citizens opened up a possibility of constructing a new sense of justice and collective responsibility. The event of anti-construction movement helped local citizens to share the memories of Minamata pollution and, though temporarily, bridged the psychological division between the patients and the rest of local citizens. One should not say that this event eradicated discriminations against the patients. The patients are still struggling for recognition and reconciliation, as they are constrained by structural and institutional violence such as the aforementioned politics of forgetting and dividing. However the anti-construction movement revealed to the local citizens that they cannot live their lives without responding to the memories of Minamata pollution. It is fairly argued that this experience has opened up a possibility to cultivate new social norms of Minamata’s local politics, as can be confirmed in the recent statement of the Minamata municipal government on the earthquake and tsunami of north-eastern Japan.\(^{(44)}\)

**IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This article examined the extent to which de-growth project is applied to the local politics of change in concrete contexts. Drawing upon the case of Minamata’s environmental politics, I argued for the necessity of analysing the complex cultural, social and political structures that construct local identity. In addition, I demonstrated the role of collective subjectivity in radicalising ecological transformation of local society. Minamata’s case shows that the identity of local society is constructed by ideology and power-relations and hence its ecological transformation does not progress without overcoming the multi-layered structure of violence and injustice. This suggests that we need to examine the process of enhancing local autonomy in concrete contexts whilst
being vigilant to potential exclusion and discrimination. The study of de-growth project is no exception to this rule. Its critique of the globalised consumerist society and the paradigm of economic growth and development must pay attention to the various discursive and institutional practices that regulate economic reality of each local society. In conclusion, de-growth project needs further elaboration on the politics of the discursive formation of local identity. It needs to be complemented by a political analysis that reveals local structure of power and violence, on the one hand, and by an ethics that examines justice and collective responsibility particular to local history, on the other.

Notes


De-Growth, or Questions of Subjectivity in Reconstructing Local Autonomy


(8) *ibid.*, 13-14.

(9) *ibid.*, Ch.1.

(10) *ibid.*, Ch.1.


(13) *ibid.*, 207.


(16) In this respect, I subscribe to the work of Iris Marion Young (1990).

(17) Four big pollutions are Minamata disease (mercury poisoning) (Kumamoto Prefecture), Niigata Minamata disease (mercury poisoning) (Niigata Prefecture), Yokkaichi Asthma (sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide) (Mie Prefecture), and Itai-itai disease (cadmium poisoning) (Toyama Prefecture).


(22) Funabashi, ‘Minamata Disease and Environmental Governance’, 11.


(24) Kurihara, *op.cit.*, 14

(25) It should be noted that the victims are using rhetoric in criticising structural violence of Japanese civil society. The Japanese rendering of abandoned people (‘Ki-min’棄民) and dead people (‘Shi-min’死民) phonetically sounds like the Japanese word of citizen (‘Shi-min’市民). The victims are arguing that they are treated like abandoned/dead people despite their formal
status as Japanese citizens.

(26) Kurihara, Politics of Disclosing of Being, 58.

(27) Miyamoto, ‘Minamata Disease and the State’, 170.


(34) ibid., 137.

(35) ibid., 137-8.

(36) ibid., 142.

(37) ibid., 142.


(41) ibid., 235.

(42) ibid., 236.

(43) Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics, Chapter 3.


This message announces the mayor’s concern about potential discriminations of the
De-Growth, or Questions of Subjectivity
in Reconstructing Local Autonomy

victims of earthquake and tsunami in Kanto and Tohoku areas and the accident of Fukushima nuclear power station.

References


Miyakita, Takashi. “‘Eco-Model City’ Minamata and Industrial Wastes Disposal Facility.’ In *Lectures...*


De-Growth, or Questions of Subjectivity in Reconstructing Local Autonomy: The Case of Minamata’s Environmental Politics

<Summary>

Yoshihiro Nakano

This article critically examines the research programme of the de-growth project recently instigated by French post-development theorist Serge Latouche. The paper argues that, whereas de-growth project contributes to conceptualising a vision of ecologically resilient local society as an alternative to neoliberal globalisation, it does not fully elaborate on specific social and political problems associated with local histories. To discuss this point, the paper draws upon the case of Minamata city’s initiatives of eco-model city that emerged as an effort to overcome the social divisions and discriminations introduced by the tragic incident of public pollutions. In analysing the emergence of new collective subjectivity in the local struggle against the construction plan of industrial wastes disposal facility, the paper remarks the importance of complementing de-growth project with political analysis of the structuration of local identity and normative investigation of social justice and responsibility.