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**Recent Publications (all works are written in Japanese)**

Theory of Ethnos (Kyoto: Bunrikaku, 2007)  
On the 'alienated anthropo-centrism' Journal of Japanese Scientists, Vol.43, No.1  
(2007)

What can we learn from the argument over the extermination of black bass? *Journal of Japanese Scientists*, Vol.42, No.4 (2006)

Nature-centrism and Anthro-centrism: Criticism of the environmental ideologies *Journal of Japanese Scientists*, vol.41, No.7 (2005)

## **What is the Concept of ‘Ethnos’ and ‘Nation’?**

**[JP] Arisato MINAMI**

What is ethnos? What is the concept of nation? These may be the most difficult questions in social science. If we want Marxism, however, to be the leading theory in political practice to change the world, we have to answer these questions through the theory of historical materialism. From the viewpoint of epistemological theory of reflection, ‘national problems’ and our cognizance of ‘ethnic elements’ within the various social issues tell us the about the very existence of what make us feel ‘national’ or ‘ethnic’ in the real world. They are the essence of ethnos and nation that social scientists ought to analyze and clarify, and to do so per se, is the aim of this essay.

### **WHAT IS THE CONCEPT OF ETHNOS?**

On thinking what ethnos stands for, we would imagine some elements of it, for instance, ‘language’, ‘folkways’, ‘region’, ‘mode of life’, ‘economic area’, ‘religion’, ‘tradition’, ‘mythology’, and so on. We are not, however, able to understand ethnos by making such a list. To grasp the essence of ethnos, we have to analyze it and the abstract elements by which we can distinguish ethnos from other social categories, and to try to explain what is inherent to ethnos through these essential elements.

#### **1 The essence of ethnos**

Then what is the essence of ethnos? It consists of two moments below, I think.

##### 1) Commonage of the code of signature systems that mediate social relations

In general, permanent social relations, whether it is harmonious or antagonistic, premise the smooth communication among its members. Human beings, however, are unable to convey their thoughts in brain each other directly; they have to use the common signature systems. There are two types of systems in them. One is language, and the other is non-verbal signature system; human actions, behaviors, gestures, and forms or colors or

properties of objects, and so on.

Then, we should notice what Edmund Leach, the celebrated British social-anthropologist, has said.

In what follows I shall assume that all the various non-verbal dimensions of culture, such as styles in clothing, village lay-out, architecture, furniture, food cooking, music, physical gestures, postural attitudes and so on are organized in patterned sets so as to incorporate coded information in a manner analogous to the sounds and words and sentences of a natural language. I assume therefore it is just as meaningful to talk about the grammatical rules which govern the wearing of clothes as it is to talk about the grammatical rules which govern speech utterances.

Clearly this is a very sweeping kind of assumption and I shall not attempt to justify it in detail. The basic argument is that the messages which we receive in different modes (through our various senses of touch, sight, hearing, smell, taste, etc.) are the readily transformed into other modes. Thus we can visualize what we hear in words; we can convert written texts into speech; a musician can transform the visual patterns of a musical score into movements of the arms, mouth and fingers. Evidently, at some deeply abstract level, all our different senses are coded in the same way. There must be some kind of 'logical' mechanism which allows us to transform sight messages or touch message or smell messages, and vice versa.1)

## 2) Reproduction of human life

As Engels had mentioned 2), the human society premises material production, whose purpose is producing means of living. And through consuming these, human beings are able to reproduce their lives: being alive and bringing up their children. And the reproduction of human life is the original purpose of human activities, in which we could build and develop ourselves. Material production and the reproduction of human life have to be distinguished categorically although they often have been practically mutually intertwined .

Human beings as social beings can reproduce their lives only when they are in social relations and communication with others. Therefore, human beings who want to survive, breed or develop must grasp the code of the signature systems that is used by people around them. Then human beings, in general, expect that they could get support in their reproduction of lives from people who have shared the same or similar code, and have little expectation to whom do not. We are, therefore, able to think that the essence of ethnos is 'commonage of the signature systems that mediate social relations carrying the reproduction of human lives '

By the way, the process of human life reproduction and material production are actually twisted and theoretically premise the other, so that the signature systems are the same on both processes in general. If two processes, however, should be distinguished categorically, they could be separated temporally and spatially, so that two processes are able to be mediated by the different kind of signature systems. For instance, immigrant

workers and their families could live their lives in their own ethnic community, working with or under the direction of ethnically different people. In this case, the signature systems they have to use in the process of material production and those in the process of reproduction of their lives would be different. Therefore, ethnic minorities that have been forced to use the signature systems of the ethnic majority could resist the ethnic assimilation if they are able to keep using their own signature systems in the social sphere where they are born, bred and raised.

## **2 The emergence of the ethnos**

As we have seen above, there must be two types of signature systems—verbal and non-verbal ones—that mediate social relations carrying the human life reproduction cycle. The commonage of verbal one appears as ‘the common language’, of course. But how would that of non-verbal signature systems function? We should see what Leach had said, again.

However, it is also important to recognize that there are major differences between the way individuals convey information to one another by the use of ordinary speech and by coded conventions of non-verbal behavior and non-verbal signs and symbols.

The grammatical rules which govern speech utterances are such that anyone with a fluent command of a language can generate spontaneously entirely new sentences with the confident expectation that he will be understood by his audience. This is not the case with most of forms of non-verbal communication. Customary conventions can only be understood if they are familiar. A private symbol generated in a dream or in a poem, or a newly invented ‘symbolic statement’ of a non-verbal kind, will fail to convey information to others until it has been explained by other means. This shows that the syntax of non-verbal ‘language’ must be a great deal simpler than that of spoken or written language.

3)

In language, a phoneme itself—the most basic signature in the system—is free from any meaning, but phonemes can be articulated to a syllable, syllables to a word, and words to a sentence, therefore the language is able to express meanings flexibly so that it can carry numerous kind of messages. In the non-verbal signature system, however, each of basic signatures has its own meaning so that it is so much harder for us to express long or complicated messages through the non-verbal signature system than through language. Then we can not easily regard them as ‘signatures’, and what we would recognize is the existence of ‘common code’ among people, so that the non-verbal signature system mediating social relations in human life reproduction appears as ‘familiar customary conventions in human life’, which are called ‘folkways’. ‘A people of common language and folkways’—this is the appearance of the ethnos.

## **3 The ethnic consciousness: the subjective moment of the concept**

Human beings are able to get support for the reproduction of their lives from whom we are using the same signature systems, and have little possibility from whom do not, so that

they feel intimate with the former and not with the latter—this is the primitive form of an ethnic consciousness. At first, the ethnic consciousness is only the cognizance of difference between human groups. But it grows up to the consciousness containing the tendency of solidifying fellowship and excluding the aliens when human beings are faced—actually or subjectively—to the crisis of the reproduction of their lives.

The ethnic consciousness is relatively independent of its material basis: the essence of ethnos, so that it could continue to exist for some time, even if the unity of the signature systems that people would have been lost through transmigration, dispersion, and conquest or assimilation by other ethnos. And the ethnic consciousness is able to move people to strengthen their signature systems: encouraging grammarians and editing dictionaries, studying their traditions and folklore, building schools to make their children to learn their language and traditional culture including mythology, publishing papers and magazines, for example, and these would reinforce the ethnic consciousness itself. Discrimination or oppression, therefore, to the ethnic minority that has almost been assimilated in language and folkways could often stimulate their ethnic consciousness and make efforts to stand against ethnic assimilation and rebuild their original signature systems.

We should understand these processes as the reaction of the subjective moment against the objective ones in the concept of ethnos.

## **WHAT IS THE NATION-STATE?**

### **1 As the capitalist state**

The nation-state is, above all, a state. The class society that is divided into classes having fundamentally different economic interests, requires the state as the organization of political power to maintain itself against division. The state, suppressing antagonisms between classes, has tried to carry out the common services needed to keep the conditions for human social lives, in the form of contributing interests of economically ruling class. In this sense, the state is an agent for ruling and exploiting the oppressed classes.

Today, almost all the states are based on capitalist production, so they are called ‘capitalist states’. The reason of its existence is to maintain the conditions for existence of capitalist production, and to support its development and expansion. The capitalist state has performed its duty—giving public services to society—so as to accomplish its purpose. For instance, giving social security is one of the most indispensable activities to keep the good conditions for the reproduction of human lives, but the capitalist state has been devoted to watch out, suppress, and eliminate what would be regarded as obstacles to the accumulation of capital.

The capitalist state has obtained its basis of existence by supporting capitalist production through public service, and the capitalist production could not exist without

political assistance by the state, therefore, the two are actually inseparable.

## **2 As the sovereign state**

Capital has a tendency to develop globally, so that it would cross the border of its own states. But capitalist production, which is antagonistic in nature, must be protected by political power when they are active outside of the border. But the state there not being their own, they have to take the risk of not being vulnerable or having their accumulation obstructed. Then capitals are forced to call for the back up of their own state.

The state has two ways, one is to occupy the opponent, and the other is to negotiate for gaining good conditions for the capitals on which it has depended. The former had been often applied to pre-capitalist societies mercilessly, but among the capitalist state the latter has been usually taken. There are two reasons for this, I think. One is to avoid unnecessary wars that would destroy the conditions for accumulation, and the other is to shirk responsibilities, risks and costs on the governance of occupied areas. It is more advantageous for the capitalist state to dominate people in foreign area through 'their own independent' state than to occupy and govern them directly, which would explain the imperialist policy of 'neo-colonialism'.

And one of the conditions for the latter is formal equality of capitalist states as the contractor, which requires mutual recognition of the monopolistic dominance of the land and people by each state. This is the essence of the 'sovereign state system', and the state which belongs to this system should be called the 'sovereign state'. In this 'sovereign state system', capitals, which are in contradiction between their tendencies for nationality and those for global development, have obtained the actual conditions for their movement, and we could regard the system 'the institutionalization of competitive and cooperative relationships among capitalist states'.

## **3 What is the nation-state?**

As we have seen above, the sovereign state exclusively governs their people, which is the 'nation' at its most primitive dimension. In them, there are only individuals of the same nationality.

The second dimension of the 'nation' is a kind of political community. Individuals under an exclusive governance of a state are members of a capitalist society, so that they have got formal equalities among themselves as bearers of the exchange of commerce. Then as the result of the progress of class and popular struggle under the development of capitalism, the proportion of the individuals getting suffrage in the people had become larger, and social policies by the state have added a certain level of substance to the formal equality of individuals. These have made the nation transform to the political community which was democratic but closed to outer individuals—aliens.

The 'nation-state' is the state which is politically based on this 'nation as a democratic but exclusive political community'. Its essential characters are as below.

1) Nation-states recognize their sovereignty—the monopolistic dominance to land and

people—each other. However, this does not mean that there are no possibilities of wars, conquests, and colonization among states.

2) In the nation-state, individuals of its nationality are treated formally as equal. However, this does not mean that there are no substantial discriminations on the basis of property, job, gender, ‘race’, family, religion, language, and ethnos, which are often used by the state as an agency for class domination for their purposes.

3) In the nation-state, the legitimacy of a state power ought to originate in the nation, therefore the suffrage of an individual who belongs to the nation is usually recognized. And political institution of the nation-state is constitutional and representative, in general. However, the degree of democratization of the state is decided by the achievement of class and popular struggles.

4) The foreigners residing in a nation-state have been excluded from a membership of a political community, therefore their rights are at the discretion of the state. On the other hand they are put under the dominance of the state because of their residence in the territory of the state.

## **THE ETHNOS AND THE NATION-STATE**

### **1 Ethnos and State**

As we have seen before, the ethnos itself has no concern in the state in concept, so that there would be many patterns of relationship between them. But as nation-states have developed, there have risen the tendency that an ethnos wants to combine to a state exclusively. This combination should be called the ‘ethno-state’, I think. This ‘exclusive combination’ has two moments. One is an ethnic assimilation through state power by the dominant (state-combined) ethnos against people under the domination of the state; the enforcement of one signature systems that appear as a language and folkways. The other is the expelling of the people who is hard to be assimilated because of their ability of resistance or largeness of cultural or physical differences between the dominant ethnos. This policy is advanced sometimes violently as ‘ethnic cleansing’, or sometimes gradually as suppression to weaken the activities of ethnic minorities.

### **2 The Ethno-State and the Nation-state**

Then, what are the conditions for the realization of this combination? The first dimension is material; a certain degree of development of communication and traffic system. The progress of printing technologies and establishment of printing industry were the ground of mass production and popularization of writings—publishing of magazines, newspapers, and books, which would be the method for enforcement of a certain written language against individuals. And broadcasting would be that of a spoken one. On the other hand, the development of railways, automobiles, steamers and institutions for them has become material bases for the dominant abilities of the state against land and people.

The second dimension is socio-economic. As the development of capitalist production had dismantled traditional subsistence economies and local market areas, individuals were thrown into a vaster economic area where they were forced to encounter people of various language and folkways. Moreover, industrialization and modern market economy under the capitalist production have demanded individuals, who became managers, laborers or small producers of commerce, to be educated; obtaining literacy, having knowledge of science and mathematics.

The third dimension is political. There must be state power, which could enforce whole population of a state upon a certain language and folkways as the normative, and could imprint 'ethnic tradition' or 'mythology' to the people dominated. The state would be, therefore, required to have an ability to mobilize its resident children to the general education system, and finances enough to build schools all across the territory, and employ many teachers.

Then what has required the emergence of the ethno-state; the exclusive combination of a state and an ethnos? There may be three reasons, I think. The first requirement is military one. The relentless military struggles demanded states to mobilize the people so as to build up a 'national army'. And vast difference in 'signature systems' among members—soldiers and commanders—must be diminished if this 'national army' had wanted to act effectively in their trainings and operations.

The second requirement is on capital-labor relations. The development of capitalist production has demanded the recruiting of workers from various regions. If labor needed by capital had been unskilled ones, the difference of signature systems would not be a problem. However, the importance of skilled and intelligent labor has increased, and so has the problem of communication among individuals in a factory.

The third one is on the administration of a border, which is an outcome of the exclusive dominance against the land by a sovereign state. A state must, as a new problem, have watched out individuals, goods and money which have come and go over the border. And if a people, which do not belong to the dominant ethnos, is resident across the border, it would become harder for the state to control the trends above. And in such a case, the border might be changed unfavorably to the state if the neighbor state is powerful enough to enforce the change.

These conditions and requirements on the 'ethno-state' are results of capitalist production. The capitalist state, sovereign state, and nation-state themselves do not conceptually contain the ethnic homogeneousness. But the growth of capitalism had prepared and required the elements above, so the ethno-state emerged. Moreover, a nation as a political community, which has the formal equality among members and exclusiveness against aliens, has affinity with ethnic homogeneousness. Therefore, we should recognize that the nation-state has completed through the development of the ethno-state.

## **WHAT SHOULD WE THINK OF THE NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE OF AN ETHNOS?**

As we have seen above, the ethnos is a social sphere where individuals could obtain the conditions for their smooth reproduction of lives, which is the basis of their human development. This sphere is restricted or destructed under the domination of other ethnos so that individuals belonging to the dominated ethnos are, as a result, have their lives disturbed seriously. The demand for the political independence of an ethnos is ultimately based on this serious disturbance of human lives, therefore we should think that the purpose of it is to secure conditions for smooth reproduction of human lives; not political independence. If political independence of an ethnos constantly brings a serious decline of a living standard of individuals, confusion of society, or increase of political suppression, it ought to be estimated that ‘putting the cart before the horse’. The strategic purpose of the ethnic policy today must be to realize the peaceful co-existence of ethnos or, at least, to control the violent friction between ethnos in regional or national areas. And the political independence of an ethnos should be regarded as one of the methods for preparation of better conditions for the reproductions of human lives and the development of individuals.

In global capitalism, however, a state has to be a capitalist state, and the capitalist state has to be a nation-state therefore the demand for political independence, if penetrated, would be oriented against the building of a nation-state. And this direction for the nation-state being founded on ethnic demands, the direction for the ethno-state would be empowered so that it would emerge as a ‘national independence of an ethnos (NIE)’. It would have been a great help for building a new state since it could widen the basis of the movement for the new state among individuals and encourage the popular struggle. But it might intensify conflicts between ethnos at the process of, or after, the building of states. And if, unfortunately, these ethnic conflicts ignite prolonged wars or civil wars, the conditions of the life reproduction and development for individuals must be seriously damaged therefore the NIE as such has to be refused because of its contrariety to the original purpose.

I think that the NIE itself ought not to be refused. However, headquarters and activists of the ethnic movement must be required that they should be very careful at the decision of realizing the NIE. And the government of an ethno-state and individuals belong to the dominant ethnos must remember they could not justify their refusal of the demand for the national independence of ethnic minorities, if the conditions for the smooth life reproduction and development of these people are left unfulfilled or damaged.

### **NOTE**

1) Edmund Leach, Culture and Communication: the logic by which symbols are connected, An introduction to the use of structuralist analysis in social anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) p10

2) According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life. This, again, is of a twofold character. On the one side, the production of the means of existence, of articles of food and clothing, dwellings, and of the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.

3) Frederick Engels, Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State, Preface to the First Edition, 1884, cited from Marxists Internet Archive (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/preface.htm>)

4) Leach, *ibid*, pp10-11