# Blind Spots: Making Sense of Civil Society
# in a Comparative Perspective[*1]

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## 1. Introduction

Since the late 1980s, interest has grown among scholars in social and political sciences in civil society. Especially the events of 1989/90: the civic revolutions in Eastern Europe, the Tien'anmen Incident, and the democratic change in the Philippines, but also later events like the Arab Spring fueled this interest. Behind this interest lies the assumption that civil society bears significant influence on democratic developments in former non-democratic societies.

Being a fascinating topic in itself, this problem is not what I will discuss here. Rather, I will inquire into the theoretical and methodological problems inherent in comparative studies on civil society. There is a growing body of research in this area; especially comparing civil society in Asian countries with that in Western countries is en vogue these days. As I have to delineate the field of my inquiry, I'll focus on the case of Japan in comparison to that of Germany. However, the findings I hope to produce will transcend this limited area.

In the relevant literature, we find definitions of civil society like this: "[civil society is] a distinct public sphere of organization, communication and reflective discourse, and governance among individuals and groups that take collective action deploying civil means to influence the state and its policies but not capture state power, and where activities are not motivated by profit" (Alagappa 2004: 9; cf. Schwartz 2003: 2; Pharr 2003: 318; Pekkanen 2006: 3) Civil society in this sense is a salient feature of modern societies. It is, therefore, not surprising that Japan too has a vibrant civil society; after all, Japan is so far the first (and arguably only) non-Western civilization that could be said to be fully modernized (cf. Eisenstadt 1996). It would be odd if there were no civil society in Japan. However, there are striking differences between civil society in Japan and in Western countries. As has been frequently pointed out, compared to Western countries, civil society in Japan is fragmented, weak and with very limited influence on policy making (cf. Schreurs 2002: 211-213; Pekkanen 2006: 27-46; Ducke 2007: 40).

To give only a few examples: The annual budget of the largest Japanese civil society group in the field of international development (OISCA International) is only ten percent of its US American counterpart. Environmental groups have very few members in comparison with environmental groups in Germany or the USA. The biggest group in Japan, the Wild Bird Society of Japan counts 53 thou-

sand members; the biggest group in Germany, Deutscher Naturschutzring (an umbrella organization comprising 108 NGOs) represents 5 million individuals. In the USA, the National Wildlife Foundation also has 5 million members.The same applies to numbers of professional staff. The number of full-time stuff of the biggest Japanese civil society group in the field of international development (100 full-time staff) is only 1 percent of the leading group in the USA (for all numbers see Pekkanen 2006, 40-44).

How are we to account for these differences? This depends on how we explain state and functioning of civil society, what it is and what is does. One very influential explanation traces back state and functioning of civil society to the political and institutional framework within which it is operating.

Says Robert Pekkanen: "Through legal, regulatory, and financial instruments the State powerfully shapes the organization of civil society. Differences in these legal, regulatory, and financial instruments create varying incentives for the organization of civil society by the processes of group formation and development and institutionalization of social movements" (Pekkanen 2006: 7).

In other words, according to this view, civil society is shaped by the range of its options to operate. Hence, one would expect that similar frameworks of options bring about similar shapes of civil society, regardless its broader cultural setting, whereas differences in shape and structure are to be reduced to different frameworks of options, not to cultural factors. In fact, the political-institutional argument, as it is called, proposes a "causal argument" (Pekkanen 2006: 2) that leaves no room for explanations relying on cultural particularities. In this, causal arguments are meant to be culture-transcendent or universal. Hence, this model is expressively directed against another explanatory model which could be called the cultural model. Particularly in the case of Japan, the weakness of civil society is often explained by referring to proverbs and other linguistic phenomena or to specific cultural behavior patterns. The political-institutional explanation dismisses such attempts as scientifically unsound. Says Miranda Schreurs: "if culture were a dominant explanation, one would expect considerable continuity over time in the shape and activities of the movements within each country. This is not the case. There have been major shifts over time in their environmental movements and in the priorities of these movements." (Schreurs 2002: 22; cf. Pekkanen 2006: 12; Schwartz 2003: 4) This point is well made. Complex structures like those of civil society cannot be "explained" by referring to proverbs. Does this mean culture has no role to play in accounting for the peculiarities of civil society in Japan and elsewhere? On the contrary, culture does, as I will try to show, matter. However, it matters not as a factor of explanation but rather as something that allows us to make sense of these peculiarities.

One should note that, within the political-institutional approach, the factor of culture is not entirely dismissed. However, while Pekkanen, Pharr, and others give credit to the role of culture to some extent, they remain unspecific as how to culture ought to be implemented into their methodological framework. As we will see, the unspecific stance towards culture results from the theoretical assumptions underlying this framework.

## 2. NIMBY and the Greens

However, before we turn to examining the role of culture, we should look at an example first. In the representative research literature, Japanese anti-nuclear movements are often characterized as-

NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) movements, as are environmental movements in general (Schreurs 2002: 71; cf. Krauss/Simcock 1980: 199; Broadbent 1998: 184; Pekkanen 2006: 122). For a very long period, nuclear energy had not been conceived of as a problem concerning the whole of Japanese society, but only the people in those regions where a power plant was located. That is, there were local, even regional protests, but they did not gain enough momentum to elevate their case to the national level. The situation changed after the accident at the Fukushima nuclear plant on March 11, 2011. After the accident, numerous mass demonstrations occurred throughout the country; people gathered in front of the headquarters of Tokyo Electric Power Company and the Prime Minister's office to express their dissatisfaction and anger with how the accident had been handled. This gave rise to the hope, the idea of "direct democracy" could take hold in Japanese society (Gonoi 2012). However, number and scale of these demonstrations quickly dropped (from 200,000 on March 11, 2012 to only 2000 on March 11, 2016; cf. Japan Times March 11, 2016). According to many polls, in the upper house elections in July 2016, energy policy was the issue people were least concerned with. It seems, as if the problem of nuclear energy has dropped again to its pre-Fukushima NIMBY level.

To this, the anti-nuclear movement in Germany forms a stark contrast. An emblematic placard from the mid 1970s reads: "Kein AKW in Wyhl und anderswo!" (No Atomic Plant in Wyhl and anywhere else!) In the small town of Wyhl in Southwest Germany, the government of Baden Wurttemberg had planned to build a nuclear power plant. Local protest quickly grew into a nationwide anti nuclear-movement that brought together such diverse groups like feminist groups, labour unions, peace movements, christian organizations, and boy scouts. Moreover, the protest drew solidarity even from neighboring countries like Switzerland and France. In the end, the nuclear plant in Wyhl was not built, but nevertheless, the anti-nuclear movement there is still active (cf. BUND 2015). Viewed in a wider context, the protest movement in Wyhl was a nucleus of the rapid growth of the anti-nuclear and the environmental movement in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, which lead to the foundation of such powerful umbrella organizations like BUND and of the Green Party. Nuclear energy still is on the public agenda. Only three days after the Fukushima accident, chancellor Merkel, building on a broad consensus in German society, announced the plan to phase out nuclear power in Germany by 2022. Nothing similar occurred in Japan.

If we follow the political-institutional argument, these striking differences can be explained by reducing them to causes that exert certain effects on civil society groups from outside. "Social movements," says Pekkanen, "which are similar in scope but do not result in similar final institutional forms differ because of the influence (direct and indirect) of state institutions" (Pekkanen 2006: 166). This is to say, on one side, we have the political and institutional structures; on the other side there is civil society with its members who have concerns they wish to articulate and aspirations, hopes they wish to put into practice. The former exerts causal force on the latter. In Germany, these structures worked in favor of the rise of social movements, in Japan they didn't. To see how this could be spelled out in detail, we can refer to the research of Schreurs.

According to her findings, many of the environmental groups in Japan melted away in the 1970s because they lost their "raison d'être" (Schreurs 2002: 89). According to her, state, bureaucracy, and industry had launched a strategy of containment. This means, environmental movements were kept at a local level, because state, bureaucracy, and industry cooperated with them and made concessions, for instance on limits for emissions of fumes or radiation, or promised financial support, development of infrastructure and so forth. Hence the movements, in some way, reached their objectives and, thus, lost

their raison d'être. "This," says Schreurs, "reduced the potential for remaining groups to use the courts or to attempt change by mobilizing at the national level. [. . .] There was no serious effort on the part of Japan's environmental community to form a Green Party as occurred in Germany" (Schreurs 2002: 89; cf. Avenell 2010: 191-4; Upham 1987: ch.2).

Schreurs findings bear witness to the massive influence the "activist state" (Pharr 2003) has on civil society in Japan. As research in recent years has shown, in Japan, civil society and the state are not to be understood as two poles forming an exclusionary opposition, but rather as interacting entities. On one hand, civil society organizations often seek cooperation with the authorities to achieve their goals (Krauss/Simcock 1980: 221; McKean 1981: 8; Haddad 2007: 6; Pekkanen 2006: 121); on the other hand, the authorities often show flexibility to respond to the claims of civic activists (for the case of environmental movements cf. Schreurs 2002: 87-89). This often results in a very close cooperation that has been called "state-society partnerships" (Estévez-Abe 2003). In this respect, the case of Japan is similar to that of Germany, whereas it differs from that of the United States (Haddad 2007: 110).

Given the structural similarities between the cases of Japan and Germany, one wonders why there are decisive differences in the "final institutional forms": in Germany, the emergence of powerful umbrella organizations like BUND and of the Green Party — in Japan, the NIMBY phenomenon and the political insignificance of environmental movements. It is not my intention to investigate into how this question could be answered within the methodological framework of the political-institutional approach. In fact, as I will show, it needs to be left behind to address these questions. Therefore, I will try to identify several blind spots inherent to the political-institutional approach. Taking them into account will not lead to its invalidation, but it will make it necessary to reassess its explanatory range (for a similar vein of critique, although from another direction, cf. Vinken et al. 2010: 3-14). These blind spots occur because the causal-claim argument is indebted to a certain notion of agency, the origin of which can be traced back to the age of Enlightenment, particularly to David Hume.

## 3. Final and efficient causation

One of the great achievements of the scientific revolution in the European Enlightenment was the rejection of the older teleological view of nature and its replacement with a mechanistic view. Newton and Galilei are the names that readily come to mind. Their dissatisfaction with the pre-modern philosophy of nature, as most explicitly developed by Aristotle, was sparked off by the assumption that the natural world was organized in the scheme of matter (ὕλη) and form (μορφή). For Aristotle, form is the end of any natural thing, it is the *telos* towards which matter develops in order to fully actualize its functionality. This means, if we wish to give an account of an event in nature (the growth of plants and animals, their reproduction, but also the movements of the planets, and so forth), we have to enquire into its final cause, that is we have to ask the question, why this thing develops or moves as it does. The question asks for the intrinsic principle of the event, that is its purpose (ὄυ ἕνεκα; cf. *Physics* II:8).

Obviously, a view that relies on notions like final causation and purpose is inconsistent with findings in modern science. According to the new paradigm, the planets are moving as they do not because they are following some intrinsic principle, aiming to actualize their form, but as a result of an outer, neutral force: gravitation. Trees do not grow because they are meant to develop their potential

towards a fixed end, but because in their capillary vessels nutrition is carried upwards. The forces at work in nature have nothing to do with teleological ends and purposes, but only with efficient causation. Focussing on this model of causation enables us to establish unambiguous chains of cause and effect. The apple fell from the tree because it was attracted by the earth's gravitational pull. The water in the bucket outside on the veranda froze because, last night the temperature was below the freezing point of water. Subsequently, in the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the notions of form and purpose were rejected as metaphysical constructions without any explanatory value. According to this new paradigm, scientific explanations of events in nature were to be established through experiments, and the careful examination of what is empirically given and can be objectively proven.

This new model turned out to be suitable for giving an alternative account also of human nature and, further, for investigating into moral problems. That is to say, the rejection of the teleological view of nature was accompanied by the rejection of the teleological view of agency. Again, a charge was made against Aristotle, whose notion of agency is analogous to his teleological account of nature (cf. *Physics,* II:3; *Metaphysics,* V:5). Teleology of action means that an action has to be understood with respect to its purpose. Purpose and action are inseparably related to each other; that is, the purpose of an action is the intrinsic principle according to which the action is carried out. Purposes are actualized only in and through acts. "The act carries within itself its end" (Bubner 1982: 71). Looking for other causes, which are supposed to be outside the act, means to misunderstand the teleological structure of agency; it would mean to misunderstand not only the fact that the purpose of an act is not realized only when the action has come to its end; it would also shut out a specific class of actions, the ends of which are permanently actualized in and through the act. Aristotle's examples like reading and thinking are well known. While reading, I have already read, while thinking, I have already thought, and so forth. It is important to note that this notion of agency puts emphasis on the significance, actions do have for the agent. This is evident when Aristotle speaks of "living" as the most comprehensive form of agency. The cause for a worthwhile, meaningful life, its purpose, cannot be explained independently from the acts that are constituting this life (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098 a 21).

All this is rejected by enlightenment theorists of agency. The most prominent figure in this regard is Hume (for the following cf. *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,* VII). The problem with the Aristotelian model of agency is, at least for Hume, that it cannot generate objective knowledge, the standard of objectivity being set by natural sciences and their methodologies. Therefore, to achieve objectivity, the cause has to be separated from the act. However, what is evident in the case of falling apples and freezing water, cannot so easily be explained when human agency is concerned. Here, several problems arise. For instance, how can the notion of human freedom be preserved when human agency is reduced to causes outside the act? Hume tried to solve this problem by transposing the cause into the mind of the individual; that is into the individual will which is stimulated by desires and intentions. Provoked by the will, the action takes its course. In this view, agency has the same structure as in the famous example of the billiard balls; the only difference is that the cause is not something outside, in nature, but rather something inside, in the mind. However, the common point is that, in both cases, the cause is separated from the act. Causation has nothing to do with intrinsic purpose. Instead, Hume proposes an explanation of human agency in analogy to natural events. With this move, he eliminates final causation and replaces it with efficient causation.

This view of agency has had a tremendous influence on the subsequent philosophy of action and

has found its way into the methodology of social and political sciences, methodological individualism being its most prominent offshoot (Cf. Taylor 1985, Part I). It is reflected in the political-institutional approach in that, in this approach, the range of explanantia is limited to factors of efficient causation like regulations and incentives, which have no intrinsic relation with civic agency. Thus, it fails to make sense of a class of actions, I would like to call "common practices."

## 4. Common practices, purposes, and horizons

Certain practices like voting and demonstrating make sense only because they are carried out collectively. In elections, a people, not just an aggregation of individuals, is making a decision. For that very reason, the result is binding also for those who haven't cast their votes or who supported the defeated party. Organizing a rally for or against something is meaningful only because it is done by a collective body. Most (if not all) of the activities in civil society belong to this class. They go along with (if not: require) a common understanding of the intrinsic purposes that are actualized. In other words, common practices have purposes that cannot be separated from the practice, since they are constantly actualized in and through the practice.

Consider, again, the example of voting. An explanation in terms of efficient causation would miss the point. That is, it would be a misconception to think that some efficient cause prior to the act of voting would bring about an effect which is equally separate from the act. It is rather so that the act is carried by the purpose. Casting one's vote makes sense not only after the elections have come to a close, the votes have been counted and the results announced, because then and only then the cause of voting had brought about its effect. This view ignores the intrinsic purpose of voting, which consists in giving expression to a collective will, and which animates the action from start to finish. The same can be said of demonstrating. Here too, the purpose is guiding the act. It would be, thus, inappropriate to say that only after the placards had been packed away, the banners rolled up again and the whole crowd had gone home, that only after the rally has come to its end, its cause had brought about its effect. On the contrary, every single step of organizing and carrying out a rally－getting permission from the authorities, making the placards and banners, planning the route, inviting people to join, and actually marching on the streets－actualizes the purpose of this particular common practice, which consists in giving voice to some common cause. Thus, it does not suffice to reduce civic engagement to efficient causation; one cannot do without final causation.

Such an account implies, on a deeper level, an understanding of what Charles Taylor calls "moral order." With this, Taylor denotes a set of norms, which are mostly unarticulated, but nevertheless are indispensable for making sense of our common practices; it is the backdrop against which purposeful common practices can be experienced as significant/meaningful inasmuch as it makes certain purposes realizable, i.e. worth striving for (cf. Taylor 2007: 159-211). In modern Western societies, this order is based on the concept of natural law deriving from the theories of Grotius and Locke. Modern societies are distinct from earlier forms of collective life insofar as the members of these societies have come to understand themselves in terms of being constitutive for the normative framework of social life. This view found expression in the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. From a chaotic state of nature (a fiction, though) where "man is the wolf of man" (Hobbes). individuals enter into a contract that forces them to convey their natural right to self-preservation to a sovereign. By this, a society that is ruled by the principle of peaceful production for mutual benefit comes into being. Here

are the (admittedly speculative) roots of the modern view that individuals are meant to actively constitute the society they belong to, and that constitution and maintenance of society ought to be matters of common concern. Elections and rallies are but two examples of this modern moral order. This presupposes a notion of society as "direct access society" (Taylor 2007: 207). where every member is equally immediate to the whole, which, in turn is only realizable on the grounds of a horizontal understanding of social order, in which there is a fundamental equality of its members. The concept of horizontal order provides even the possibility to challenge a concrete social order itself, that is it provides the (conceptual) possibility for a radical, revolutionary break.

As a result of complex historical processes (the "long march"; cf. Taylor 2004: 86), these moral ideas (social contract, direct access society, equality) have found their way into what Taylor calls "modern social imaginaries." A social imaginary functions as a background understanding that informs "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor 2007: 171). To put it metaphorically, a social imaginary is like grammar and vocabulary of one's mother tongue; it is mostly unthematic but nevertheless makes possible communication; it has certain rules that can be violated only at the price of becoming incomprehensible (cf. Wittgenstein's private language argument, *Philosophical Investigations,* §§ 244-271). Similarly, the social imaginary incorporates "the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life" (Taylor 2007: 172). With respect to the problem discussed here, it should be noted that among the ideas which inform the common understanding in modern Western societies, the idea of self-governance is of crucial importance for coming to grips with the cultural aspects of civic agency in these societies.

## 5. Moral sources and common problems

Without the "moral order" in modern Western societies, the anti-nuclear and environmental movements in Germany would have hardly been possible. The trajectory of these movements illustrates how the modern moral order had come to take hold in the whole of German society and how it had shaped its social imaginary. The very idea that the order of a modern society is constructed by its citizens, and that problems of common concern (like environmental issues or nuclear energy) ought to be discussed in the public sphere finds its expression in how anti-nuclear and environmental activists seek to legitimize their cause. The object of their protest is not just this atomic power plant or that refuse disposal site as such, which are, of course, potentially dangerous, but rather the economic and political forces behind atomic energy and environmental policy. Finally, the object is what has been called "the arrogance of power" (*die Arroganz der Macht*; Gräber 2011: 18). Here lies, I argue, the ultimate purpose, the "raison d'être" of German environmental and anti-nuclear groups.

Among the moral sources German anti-nuclear and environmental movements drew from were emancipatory and anti-authoritarian ideas that had also been key issues for the student movement of 1968 and, subsequently, the feminist movement and the peace movement. However, the idea of "ecological humanism" (Heidt 1980; Hasenclever/Hasenclever 1982) proved to be equally if not more important－not only in that it "was able to exert a significant influence on the ecological movement" (Engel 2006: 26), but also in that it contributed to its wider acceptance in German society. As Mayer-Tasch notes, this moral source harks back to the "humanistic ethos of self-temperateness, mean and

measure" (*Selbstbescheidung, Mitte und Maß*; Mayer-Tasch 1999: 31). It could be argued that by drawing from this moral source, the concerns of the ecological movement in Germany gained the capacity to resonate with circles in society that were not necessarily associated with staunch environmental activism. It is not accidental that not only leftists, feminists, and Marxist students voiced solidarity with the ecological movement, but also conservatives, devoted Christians, and non-leftist intellectuals. Ironically, this radiation-effect into "bourgeoise" circles was viewed with suspicion by the faction of so-called "*Fundis*" (fundamentalists) during the phase of formation of the Green Party in the early 1980s. (Gräber 2011: 22) However, the "*Realos* (pragmatic realists)" around politicians like Joschka Fischer, Rezzo Schlauch, and Winfried Kretschmann finally prevailed. Although the capacity to resonate with wider circles nurtured in the beginning an "uneasy coalition" (Schreurs 2002: 88), it proved to be of vital importance for the institutionalization of the ecological movement, epitomized by the Green Party's joining local governments in several *Länder* (states) and, if only once, in a Federal Government.

Insofar as the anti-nuclear movement in Germany succeeded in elevating its case to the national level of interest it can be characterized as a metatopical movement. That is to say, in this movement the self-understanding of modern individuals as being constitutive members of a horizontal direct-access society, in other words as citizens who are directly related to the whole of society, has found a striking expression. The metatopical character of many civil society activities in Germany is displayed not only by the anti-nuclear and environmental movements. More recent examples are protests against islamophobia, the criticism against the consultations on free trade between the USA and Europe (TTIP), and the discussions about the problems concerning refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. Even the protests against the extension of the central railway station in Stuttgart ("Stuttgart 21") in 2010/11, seemingly a local problem, became a nation-wide issue with live stream coverage of expert hearings that drew a large public to TV sets. In all these cases, we observe lively debates in mass media, internet blogs, and various internet fora.

If this account is cogent, we have to conclude that the political-institutional approach shuts out a wide range of issues which are crucial for a substantial understanding of civil society in Germany. To draw the analogy to the Japanese case, we have to ask for the moral order, the background understanding, the social imaginary in Japan to make sense of the fragmentation and weakness of Japanese civil society in general and environmental and anti-nuclear movements in particular. Hence, the political-institutional approach has to be complemented by a hermeneutical account that allows for understanding the intrinsic ends and purposes that guide the actors within Japanese civil society.

## 6. Social Imaginary of modern Japan?

Giving even a rough outline of the background understanding in modern Japan, its social imaginary, is beyond the scope of this paper; it would, in fact, take at least one major book to spell out what is involved here. Hence, I will confine myself to some tentative remarks.

i) Accounting for the fragmentation of Japanese environmental movements in terms of the social imaginary approach, as I would call it, would have to pay attention to how metatopical spaces are imagined, how they ought to be animated, and for which purposes they are sustained. Similarly, the idea of horizontal access society would have to be analyzed, its underlying moral order would have to be problematized, and the specific ways of how its constituting members are normatively bound to

each other would have to be clarified. In particular, the issue of metatopicality needs to be examined to understand why in Japan, environmental problems and issues of energy policy usually do not gain wider and sustained attention.

ii) The ideas constitutive for the modern social imaginary in Western societies have been introduced to Japan since the mid of the nineteenth century. The pains it took Japanese scholars and intellectuals to translate terms like "individual," "society," "freedom," and others (cf. Yanabu 1982), give us an idea of how alien the ideas behind these terms must have been for them. Reassessing the conceptual struggles Fukuzawa Yukichi, Nakamura Masanao and others were engaged in, provides the intellectual-historical backdrop against which the emergence of the social imaginary of modern Japan would have to be depicted; this would also enhance our understanding of the historical development of civil society in Japan (cf. *inter alia* Imada 2010), in that it provides the moral grammar indispensible for taking into account the cultural inflections of terms like civil society, civic action, voluntary organizations, etc.

For a preliminary orientation of what such an account could look like, we may draw on the findings of the Japanese historian Abe Kin'ya (1935-2006). Abe is known for his provocative thesis that in Japan, despite more than a hundred years of modernization, neither society nor individuals do exist in the original sense, but rather the structure of *seken* which provides the normative framework for human agency. A similar observation had been made decades earlier by Karl Löwith and Kurt Singer, both German emigres to Japan in the 1930s: Despite the rapid and thorough modernization processes Japan underwent in the areas of politics, law, economy, education, public welfare, and so forth since opening itself to the world in 1853, one area had been left virtually unaffected. Löwith and Singer who, due to the language barrier, had only limited access to Japanese society and culture, defined this area as the traditional way of Japanese life. In contrast to them, Abe avoids the pitfall of cultural essentialism; he does not assert the existence of a sphere of so-called traditional Japanese life beneath the surface of modernity. He readily concedes that modern Western institutions have been implemented in all areas of Japanese life; however he insists on differences in how these institutions are animated. Therefore, he characterizes these differences as the way how people interact with each other and what kind of sense of self this presupposes. If we follow Abe, this is comprised in the notion of *seken*. As we can put it, *seken* is an integral part of the background understanding of Japanese social life. For our purpose, it is worth trying to apply Abe's findings to the modern institution of protest.

The origin of the term *seken* is found in Buddhist sutras, where it translates the Sanskrit term *loka,* meaning place, space, or clearing. The Japanese philosopher and Buddhist scholar Watsuji Tetsurô (1889-1960) defines it as "place of life" (Watsuji 1934: 24) which is "in constant flux" (Watsuji 1934: 27). Phenomenologically speaking, *seken* means the spatio-temporal life-world in which relations between individuals are in constant change while preserving their relative stability. This definition in its general form can denote not only human relationships but also metaphysical relationships between human beings and gods/deities and natural relationships with animals, plant, rivers, mountains and so forth (cf. Abe 2004). Abe interprets Watsuji's ontological definition in terms of cultural history. That is, he interprets *seken* as a specific Japanese form of interpersonal relations.

For his interpretations, Abe draws from a vast body of literature: from the poems of the Man'yôshû (Abe 2004: 17-27) to the novels of Shimazaki Tôson and Dazai Osamu, the poetry of Kaneko Mitsuharu and others (Abe 1999: 13-32). If we had to sum it up: *Seken* is not to be equated with society; it means the connection of people who are bound to each other by origin, education,

work, common interests and so forth; while, under certain conditions, it makes sense to speak of "the Japanese society," the phenomenon of *seken* cannot be reduced in this way; there are irreducibly many *seken* in Japan. Every Japanese belongs to multiple *seken,* between which there are no clear-cut boundaries; they may even overlap, depending on the affiliation of its members, which is also the reason why *seken* cannot be identified with community (Abe 1997: 47). The size of *seken* can vary from intimate hobby-circles to neighborhood groups, sections within a company, factions in political parties, the party itself and finally, the Japanese nation as such; it does not include family relations (Abe 1997: 143-5). For our purpose, two points particularly merit attention: First, individuals belonging to *seken* do not understand themselves as constitutive members as they would under the premise of contract theory; for them *seken* is a structure already in existence, not something brought about by some act of common decision; there is no virtual founding act that would allow an individual self-understanding in terms of authorship and ownership. Second, the normative structure of interpersonal relations within *seken* is essentially hierarchical; status differences are not justified by functional requirements but by age, gender and other essential features. (As Abe points out, these two points resemble the prevailing self-understanding in medieval European societies; Abe 1999: 42-53.)

The concrete but unwritten norms deriving from thus structured human relations have first and above restrictive functions. They limit the range of possible behavior in order to stabilize and preserve the structure of *seken.* Since belonging to one's *seken* is an essential feature of social existence, the individual will readily comply with the norms in order not to be excluded. That is, for its members, the preservation of *seken* is of utmost importance; it has priority over abstract or universal principles (Abe 2001: 98-9). This means further, that the framework of *seken* is never to be challenged. If modifications of the structure of *seken* are necessary, they are kept at a minimum and remain always within the unchallengeable framework.

The findings of Abe have been further developed by Kashima Tôru (Kashima 2005). As Kashima points out, the self-understanding within *seken* has to be interpreted in terms of *miuchi.* Originally, *miuchi* denotes family members or relatives, whereas in the context of *seken,* it means a network of close relations that, depending on situation and circumstances, is sealed off from other *seken,* in that it is, like the units in the bureaucracy "a world and a law unto itself" (Boyd 2006: 52). Regarding the self-understanding of the individual, this means that she will experience the *seken* she is belonging to as her *miuchi,* while she will meet other *seken* and its members with indifference or, if they are in a competitive relation, will feel challenged by them.

How does this translate into the functioning of civil society organizations, like environmental and anti-nuclear groups? For now, some remarks must suffice. First, the self-understanding in terms of *miuchi* helps explaining a phenomenon that has been repeatedly observed in scholarship: the reluctance of Japanese civic groups to integrate activists from outside (cf. McKean 1981: 162, Broadbent 1998: 184, Ducke 2007: 138). What has been tried to explain as "long established patterns" (Ducke 2007: 139) can be understood in a more concrete way as the distrust of members of a *seken* towards people outside this *seken.*

Second, the fact that "[t]he environmental movement in Japan [. . .] had arisen primarily as a victims' movement" (Schreurs 2002: 75), striving for response to grievance, makes perfect sense against the backdrop of an understanding that is mostly concerned with self-preservation. That is, the background of *seken* makes understandable that this purpose claims priority over abstract or universal ideals. Thus, the strategy of the authorities to keep protest at a local level, pointed out by Schreurs, is not

that much a restriction or an impediment as it rather accommodates towards civic groups and their expectations.

Third, the characterization of Japanese environmental groups as "residents' movements" *(jûmin undô)* is perfectly consistent with a social imaginary that doesn't allow for the possibility of challenging the framework of society. "If the term *shimin undô* [citizens movement] symbolized a textbook-like civic action by rational citizens on behalf of the public good, *jûmin undô* [residents movement] contained implications of the 'egoism' of protest that seeks a response to individual grievance with little regard to the complex problems and broader needs of the wider community" (Krauss/Simcock 1980: 199; cf. Avenell 2010). However, this is not just a lack of ecological consciousness as Krauss and Simcock put it; it rather examplifies how deeply entrenched civil society movements are in the background understanding of *seken*.

## 7. Conclusion

The social imaginary of *seken* enhances our understanding of some aspects of the state of civil society in Japan. *Seken* impedes the formation of metatopical spaces; it is also responsible for the hybridity of modern Japanese society, which has been noticed by Löwith and Singer.

For coming to grips with the peculiarities of civil society in Japan and in any other society, one has to take into account its intrinsic purposes; the "raison d'être" for civic movements in Japan can be described as seeking response to grievance, seeking amendments for harm rather as articulating a critique that transcends the topical context.

In contrast to the causal claim approach, culture does matter: the phenomenon of s*eken,* understood as an element of a distinctly Japanese social imaginary belongs to this class. Furthermore, as we have seen, culture matters for the case of the anti-nuclear movement in Germany too, because the Western social imaginary informs the cultural and historical pre-conditions for modern horizontal direct access society, without which the fundamental critique of this movement would not have been possible.

Regarding the relevance for further enquiries, we can say that the political-institutional-approach alone is not sufficient to give a comprehensive account of civil society in any country. It has to be complemented what I call the hermeneutical social-imaginary-approach. That is to say, culture is not to be understood as a factor of efficient causation, but rather as something that helps us understand the intrinsic purposes of agency in civil society. The question whether the hermeneutical critique proposed here is to be applied to other approaches in research on civil society in Japan (e.g. the contributions in Vinken et al. 2010) lies beyond the scope of this paper. There are many ways to take up and respond to "the call to take into account the cultural factor" (Vinken et al. 2010: 8).

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# Blind Spots:

## Making Sense of Civil Society in a Comparative Perspective

### ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines an influential strand in research on civil society. It argues that the so-called political-institutional-approach, proposed by Pharr, Pekkanen, Schreurs, and others, has several blind spots, for its methodology rests on problematic assumptions on human agency. Following these assumptions, the specific form of common practices vital for making sense of civic actions, is shut out. Consequently, this paper suggests an alternative notion of human agency; it argues that the political-institutional-approach has to be complemented by a hermeneutically grounded account that avoids the shortcomings of the former in that it takes into account the social imaginary of a given society. Social imaginary denotes the background understanding which provides the normative framework within which the purposes of civic action take shape. Taking into account the intrinsic purposes of civic action allows for acknowledging the culturally inflected shapes of the modern institution of civil society while avoiding the pitfall of cultural essentialism. These claims are exemplified by a comparative examination of environmental and anti-nuclear movements in Germany and Japan.

**Key Words**: civil society, social imaginary, efficient and final causation