Does Information/Consumption Society Have a Future?

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With what should social science concern itself?

Hashizume: I think that the fundamental message of *Theory of Contemporary Society* [*1], which you published last year, was in the form of questions: what are our current problems, with what should sociology and social science concern themselves? The book does not present especially new information. The section on environmental problems seems roughly based on a World watch report and the theory of consumer society has precedents in Baudrillard and others. But you do not just rehash these--the strong point of the book comes through in the way you organize and present these questions. In the Afterword you write that "For a student of sociology, these are issues to which one can devote the energy of an entire lifetime without regret." I took that to be a reproach to young sociologists--you are including them in the problem. That problem is that the basic issues of industrial society have changed. In the past there was the problem of organization, but now that has become secondary and nearly resolved we are confronted with the limits of the environment. So long as there are limits to the environment the eternal problems of the existence of the rich and the impoverished, of rulers and the ruled, cannot be resolved. Most of the discussion in developed countries today amounts to palliative. Reduction of carbon dioxide emissions or aid to undeveloped nations to stop population growth. We will be stuck in this predicament as long as we do not extend our thinking to more fundamental points. My first impression of this book's strengths was that it pointed out problems that have to be examined. It is important that it is the sociologist Mita Munesuke saying this. Another person couldn't have done it. The image I have of you comes from reading *Toward a Theory of Human Liberation* [*2] and *Theory of Value Consciousness* [*3]. It is significant that a sociologist who has examined problems of human happiness and existence now is turning to macro problems. To me it is significant that rather than someone who thinks only about macro problems, you speak as someone in my own field, someone who has thought sincerely about micro problems, when you write in the Afterword, "I want to thoroughly reflect on questions such as the self and love, identity and reality, metamorphoses in the perception of the meaning of life, but I have come to the conclusion that in preparation for that one must establish a rigorous theory of the fundamental structure of contemporary society."

Mita: In fact what I really wanted to discuss were what you might call 'soft' questions: the question of how in contemporary society the self or the ego or the subject--what is called identity--crumbles and is reconstituted, and 'micro' questions such as those of 'the impossibility of love' and the contradictions of relationships. There was a time when people thought there was a hard theory that could be relied on when doing that kind of thing. But it is clear that no such theory exists at present, so if one doesn't bring together oneself what one can one doesn't have a base from which to think about soft problems. That's what got me started.

Hashizume: My second impression, and this comes from my understanding of your social theory as a whole, is that you continue to maintain a stubborn defense of modernity. You are a modernist and a rationalist. You take a clear position that happiness lies in the persistent extension of human freedom (rather than rights) and of the latent potential of every individual, that this is right, and that modernity is a society formed for this end. Perhaps everyone living in the modern world would take this position, but you are remarkable for your extreme clarity. I think that even among modernists there are various types. In Japan, for example, there were a lot of Marxist modernists: people who insisted that to realize individual happiness one had to fight social problems through Marxism. Of course this was the result of the era, which probably would be true of your attitude too, but even though it was a period when Marxism was strong you pursued a kind of micro theory that was not connected to macro theory in that way. Perhaps earlier than anyone else you looked for a way to think about the macro on the basis of the micro world, by freehand, so to speak.

Mita: There's an element of truth in what you are saying. I have the image of being more of an anti-modernist than not, and you have phrased this point better than I could. I have carried out a critique of modernity in *Comparative Sociology of Time* [*4] and other places, but at a fundamental level I was stressing things like the unity of the body, sensation, and naturalness against a certain kind of modern rationalism, valuing things that seemed important to me but were not 'modern.' If I had to say where the essence of modernity lies it would be, as you said, in the taking of reliance as a principle in contrast to freedom, in the existence of the individual as a discreet unit. I've been seen as a communalist, but my thinking is basically different on the point that while I certainly like the idea of a community, I reject the type of community that constrains the freedom of the individual. I prefer communities that can be freely dissolved. I didn't say this at length in the book and I'm surprised that it is so clear to you.

Hashizume: I would say the reason that critique and defense of modernity coexist here is that the principles by which one criticizes modernity are themselves modern. The macro system that currently exists is a bad form of modernity. The method of this critique, I would say, is to point out how far this system is in deviation from what modernity innately is aimed at. What modernity is is a question still in dispute, but nonetheless the individual and freedom are seen as its greatest results. If one adopts this as a basic point of view, then whatever sort of anti-systemic critique one makes of the modern system one will find something legitimate in modernity. I think this is where the influence and strength of your argument lie.
To touch on my own work, I myself always have meant to be a resolute modernist. I like modernity and don't think there is any other point of view one can adopt. For that reason I'm not interested in flirting with communalism, or with Marxism, post-modernism, or anti-modernism. Yet reading you, that is, my own predecessor, I had the feeling that even though you had the same point of view our views of modernity were a little different. I was interested in language, for the reason that in language freedom and rules coexist. It seemed to be like the world: there must be rules for there to be freedom, and the more order there is the more freedom increases. If one then thinks about the relation of the individual and society as a whole, since words are communication, the clearer

the individual is the more the circuit that connects the whole will be broken--this was a welcome and natural conclusion that I reached by examining society with sociology as my weapon. If one simply thinks that the individual is freedom, one usually can't avoid concluding that the whole constrains the individual and one can't help but return to the idea that unfreedom, rules, restrictions, limitations, to wit necessity, constantly weigh down on freedom. There may have been times when people thought that, but it seemed to me to miss the point. I wanted to shift the lines of support between the individual and freedom, and that is the reason I stuck to the question of language. All of this is a self-analysis of my own work, but it is the point where I am most conscious of the differences between what you and I are doing.

North-South Relations and Environmental Problems

Hashizume: The second and third chapters of *Theory of Contemporary Society* are on environmental and natural-resource problems and North-South relations, respectively. One could say that the chapter on the environment asks, "Can we really be completely happy?" and the chapter on North-South relations, "How can we all be happy?" You also discussed these problems, particularly the problem of North-South relations, in *Toward a Theory of Human Liberation*. One can't be sure that everyone can be happy when each person has independent desires, but at the same time it is not completely impossible. You seem to have taken that as a condition when you discuss the contiguity and complementarity of desires. One person's desire encompasses and sublets the desire of another, and the happier the other is the happier the first will be, so if this relationship can be established then everyone can be happy, indeed completely happy--you pointed out this theoretical possibility. But beyond the possibility of transforming socialism through the idea of the commune, you didn't talk concretely about what kind of macro social conditions would make this possible. In your most recent book you say that North-South relations are verging on crisis and that there are limits to the solutions to environmental problems, making the sense of crisis that you convey very concrete. What makes this book stand out is that you do so in a style that appeals not simply to people who only are interested in micro problems but also to people who are versed in macro theory.

Mita: I basically wanted to say that information/consumption society has plenty of possibilities in facing the future. But the problems of the environment and natural resources and of North-South relations can't be skipped over. The reason is that these two problems are a strong source of support for the argument that information/consumption society does not have a future. Those who affirm information/consumption society do not treat these problems adequately, but they can't be avoided. I suppose one could dodge criticism by saying that in comparison to these, inequality is a much greater problem. But one can't sketch out a position affirming information/consumption society in good faith without seriously confronting head-on the problems of the environment and natural resources and of North-South relations. I think these have emerged as the basis for critique of an affirmative position because they are the most concrete limits.

Hashizume: You establish a high threshold with extremely strict

standards for thinking about the possibilities of the future. My criteria are not as high, but I still think that the future will be difficult. You conclude that even though the threshold is high the possibilities are there, which makes me interested to know why you have such confidence. There are various predictions that in the future even the most ordinary lifestyle will be difficult to achieve. The population will reach 15 billion by 2050, carbon dioxide levels are increasing, the globe is warming--a lot of predictions don't paint a rosy picture. I take this seriously and find it pretty
dismaying. Where then will one find possibilities for coexistence that will clarify standards strict enough to found a micro theory? One strategy is a series of concepts that are relatively distanced from the material. That is important, isn't it.

Mita: This is a difficult question. To begin with the examples closest to hand, the three hit products last year were Purikura,

'Final Fantasy VII,' and the Tamagotchi. FFVII cost ·6800 for two CD-ROM disks. The cost of the materials was less than a few hundred yen, and the rest was the value of the information. Since informationization and consumption are bound together, if you use informationization as a lever you can increase market value even if you reduce the plundering of resources. This may not seem like much but in fact it is quite important as a first-hand, real example of how to resolve the problem of resources and the environment with the current market economy and consumer society as given. Capitalism requires the possibility of expanding market demand. While this possibility is unlimited in principle, I think that the difficult issue of how actually to meet that requirement while reducing the plundering of resources and the destruction of the environment becomes resolvable through informationization. In the book I offer Cocoa Puffs as the classical example, but you could say the same thing about Purikura, 'FFVII,' or the Tamagotchi. Why North-South relations necessarily enter into this problem is not obvious from common sense. If one looks at various data I think one aspect of the problem emerges strongly, that the South bears the brunt of the North's rich, high-consumption society. Places like Africa are the classical example. It is reported that famine arises because of floods, droughts and other natural disasters, but the reality is that through the intervention of dictatorial local authorities the land that once was used to grow necessary foodstuffs has been taken over by multinational corporations for the cultivation of luxury products aimed at developed countries. Supply of basic foodstuffs for the general populace has been chased to marginal land where the natural conditions are poor. That kind of land is easily damaged by natural disasters. Television in rich countries only shows the floods and droughts, but this problem is in the background. You can say the same thing about why there are dictators, or about the population problem. To put it the other way around, if it is possible to develop a rich society without plundering natural resources, then it is possible to solve the problem without that plundering. Therefore being able to solve the problem of the environment and natural resources means being able to solve the problem of North-South relations. There are a lot of people who are too optimistic about this, while some think that we will have to establish a lot of controls and restrictions. One example is the idea that if coercive controls are not maintained through the first half of the twenty-first century by international agreements the human race will not be able to survive. What is important is to realize that this is a tunnel

and that there is a light flickering in the distance. Fundamental-
ly, information/consumption society can survive without plundering
natural resources endlessly, and the determination to endure con-
trols for around fifty years in order to reach this goal probably
will arise precisely for this reason. Thinking that the human race
will die out no matter what is not exactly a case of Mannheim's
'self-fulfilling prophecy,' but it won't
produce this kind of determination. For the same reason I won't
say optimistically that we don't need controls or anything else.

Hashizume: We must have hope, but also controls. These go togeth-
er, and if there isn't some prospect for the future it will be im-
possible to get through the present--this is a very persuasive way
of thinking and I tend to agree with it. But I sense our images of
what kind of restrictions are necessary differ slightly. I agree
that is worthwhile to encourage--within the limits of possibility-
-the production of added economic value in ways that do not depend
on materials, in the belief that a liberal economic system can
function with reduced burdens on the environment. Germany and oth-
er places strongly promote the idea that producers have respon-
sibility for disposal of the product and should add that cost to
the cost of
manufacturing. I would say that your argument is close to that
perspective, an extension of it.
I once tried to think about where capitalist society would go if
it developed in this way, and concluded that it would draw closer
to nature. For example, power lines are extended in order to bring
energy to places that need it--a pretty careless method. But in
nature there are various ways, such as sunlight, to deliver energy
where it is needed. There are insects and other tiny creatures,
plants gather minute amounts of metals and do all sorts of other
things, and this exists in a kind of harmony. I imagined that hu-
mankind's artificial world might be moving toward an imitation of
this. Today's micro-robots and high-temperature superconductors
may be pointing in that direction. But this really is talk about
the distant future.

Mita: To tell the truth, I agree that within limits capitalism is
moving closer to nature. I think the idea that the more culture
develops the farther it moves from nature is just dogma. If one
looks at clothes, for example, people walking around New York are
a lot closer to nature than at the beginning of modernity or dur-
ing the Victorian age. A type of deculturalization has taken place
from the feudal period to modernity. Modernity appears as the nat-
uralization of the highly cultured feudal period, and one could
even say that the shift from the aristocratic culture of the anci-
ent period to the rise to power of warriors in the middle ages was
a kind of deculturalization and return to nature. Then in the feu-
dal period culture appeared again; at the beginning of modernity a
naturalization took place with respect to it; naturalization was
followed by the multiplication of forms of culture, and now natu-
ralization is taking place once more. On the other hand because
the refinement of anti-natural technology has been advancing, I
see naturalization and the refinement of anti-natural technology
as mutually opposed poles with the amplitude between them gradual-
ly increasing. I don't know if this is the same as what you are
saying, but I don't believe that people only are developing tech-
nology and are being irreversibly denaturalized.

Transformations of Reality

Hashizume: I would like to talk about an issue that you don't
bring up directly in your new book, transformations of reality and
identity. First of all to explain my own thoughts, I don't think
of 'reality' as the real itself, but rather as its image. If one
considers perception, what I mean is clear. Certainly there is a
real here, but that real itself is not 'reality.' I perceive the
real, I feel it using my body, I conceive of it in my head and
give it meaning and value. 'Reality' is what is reconstituted on
my part when the real is represented in this way. This basically
is an image, a projected image. Therefore many types of reality
must be possible, depending on the process of production of this
image. I'd say this is the most simple definition of reality. Hu-
mans normally create reality as they live.
Informationization refashions the relations among images, indepen-
dently of human mechanisms of perception. Recently this has been
particularly accelerated by electronic technology. For example
when one looks at a picture one has an additional perception that
this is an image representing a real thing--there is a double re-
lationship. The content of perception becomes richer as a result.
Instead of looking at a real flower one looks at a picture that
depicts a flower, and thus there is a relationship that can be en-
joyed at two levels. There are similar relationships in photo-
graphs and cinematic images as well as in the images of reality
created in language. These are again reproduced, making one's per-
ceived world both indirect and wider. Reality thus becomes multi-
layered and more refined. One person can easily refine his sense
of reality by perceiving another person's perceived world--isn't
this informationization? The phenomenon of informationization
could be seen as the creation of large changes in a person's real-
ity. If I may speculate as to why you are interested in the ques-
tions of reality and informationization, it is because you are
concerned with happiness, that is, a perception of value that peo-
ple create as they give meaning to living. Naturally, then, you
are interested in the forms of reality. And by extension, with
transformations of reality by informationization. This is related
to the problem of natural resources too. If one accepts that in-
formation is an important parameter in
the achievement of human happiness, we have what could be called
an amplifier for happiness. Even if real materials are constrained
at a certain level, if informational, secondary manufacturing and
reality are rich, one can live quite happily, can't one? This cir-
cuit brings into question the form of information/consumption so-
ciety, I think.

Mita: I think you're right that informationization can become a
kind of amplifier for happiness. To me, information existed before
information society and exists in animals as well. Information
'gives form.' That is, information is what gives form to different
materials--for example, to stay with the question of happiness,
what one feels happiness toward depends on the form that it takes.
Information is a kind of source of values and in principle has
been so since primitive times. Thus in today's so-called informa-
tion society the media technology for information advanced, these
media amplified the possibilities that information possessed, and
there is the potential for various forms of it to continue to be
invented.

Hashizume: But I do think that it is still undetermined whether

the advance of information media and technology are a condition for human happiness. Surely people who live smack in the middle of nature without information media and the like can be happy. And one really needs to think about whether or not people become more happy and whether or not the level of freedom increases the more information media advance. To take an extreme example, the media bring with them heretofore unseen possibilities, such as people who watch only videos, lose their sense of actuality, and commit serial murders. This is a point that I sense one can't be optimistic about. A little doubt needs to be cast on representations of information/consumption society as having one fixed pattern of making human happiness possible.

Mita: There are two questions that should be considered in what you just said: does the advance of information media increase human happiness, and does it increase the level of freedom. I don't know if it increases happiness--it certainly increases unhappiness too. The question of whether the increase in happiness or unhappiness is greater can't be quantified in the manner of welfare economics. But I think you can say that the level of freedom increases. Since it is certain that the level of freedom increases, it definitely opens up possibilities. That is, the capacity of people to choose among the kinds of happiness that they can discover in society has increased.

Hashizume: That is how it normally is seen. For example if there is both rose and a picture of a rose, one can look at either the rose or the picture. Certainly the capacity for choice is increasing. But couldn't this happen too? A child who has just been born is surrounded with picture books and the Internet. He knows fish from looking at pictures, he knows roses from looking at pictures. So experience that is mediated through the media becomes primary and he approaches real things by verifying them against the media. In that case doesn't he lose the most important form of experience, the ability to be happy, and the ability to correctly perceive the relationship between his own body and the outside world? This is a criticism one often hears.

Mita: That's not completely wrong in terms of what may actually be happening. But if someone only knows wild birds from pictures, it is because it has become unusual to see real wild birds. The level of freedom has increased, but there is another factor at work--the problem is that one half of the original pair has disappeared. So it is possible that the capacity for choice may not really increase. But rather than the result of the advance of media technology, this is more of a question of social structure.

Hashizume: When there is both a picture of a rose and a rose, if one thinks about it the capacity for choice increases and becomes richer but a struggle begins over which is real. Does what information media deliver have priority, or do real things that one confirms with one's own body have priority? Normally it is real things, but because informationization has a great amount of authority and influence, this gets reversed. If it is reversed the numbers don't increase and get richer, one just enters a different reality.

Mita: My conclusion as to why that happens is that it is not only the fault of information media. One can by turns feel and then not

feel an extreme sense of reality toward a certain object. The support of an other is at work here. That is, something that seems real both for oneself and for an important other becomes a support. In Proust there is a remark, 'I feel as if the rose now before my eyes is not the real thing.' He means that only the rose he saw as a child can feel real. The structure here is that of a rose that both he as a child and someone from his family or someone else close to him saw and shared together as an important thing. Wouldn't the reason that something seen on television seems more real now be that the structure of the other has changed? That is, for a person and an other that
is important to him, for a child perhaps a school friend--what everyone sees and shares is television. If that is the case, then 'the scene that was on that show' can be felt as extremely real. It's not visual media themselves, but a matter of the kind of other with which one holds that image in common.

Hashizume: Of course it is going too far to say it all is the fault of cinematic media, but I don't think you can say it's unrelated. In the past children got together and did things like raise stray dogs, and through that kind of shared experience they experienced intensely the meaning of that living dog or cat. But now the only thing they can experience together are Tamagotchi--they share an indirect image of life through media tools. They don't experience life and form their own image of it. And because if things are reduced to that mode, the media that create this space of two-dimensional experience are the media of information/consumption society, you can't say that they have no responsibility for it.

Mita: It's not that they have no responsibility, but if one asks why television or Tamagotchi or media have ended up possessing reality, I think that the structure of the relationship with the other enters in.

Hashizume: I know what you mean. I agree. The next question then is, if the relationship with the other has changed, if the relationship with the media has changed, if in information/consumption society people with a new reality are increasing, what meaning does this have for the fundamental, eternal issue of how humans achieve happiness? It could be positive or negative or, I suppose, even neutral.

Mita: If one considers just the influence exerted by media technology, I think it basically is positive. There certainly are negative aspects, but I don't think those come from the advance of media technology itself.

Hashizume: If that is the case, then have a mode of behavior and culture that correspond appropriately to media technology not yet taken shape?

Mita: That is so, but more fundamentally, isn't it a question of the dismantling of nature and things related to it? There is a negative dismantling of reality that results and which somehow may be related to the refinement of media technology, but I don't think it's a matter of this dismantling occurring because of this refinement.

Hashizume: I'd like to consider the possibility that they are two

sides of the same coin.

Mita: The dismantling of nature and the rise of media technology certainly have advanced together and are intertwined with each other, but I think one should separate them as factors. If one thinks of everything as tied together and as one set, the future disappears. As I have said, one needs to critique different aspects of modernity at the same time that one defends absolutely the freedom of the individual as the result of modernity. I think one needs to take the same position with respect to the present. Separating these as factors is more productive for social theory.

Hashizume: I don't think that media technology can be restrained either, so I agree that one should search for a method that can take it into account well. But I do think that the dismantling of nature and the issue of media technology are intimately related. If you read what Yoro Takeshi has written, for example, the brain and nature are sharply opposed and this is the same problem as that of the city and other parts of the natural environment that can't be controlled. Images give birth to images and reality is reborn in media; this in turn is strengthened in the mode of 'the other is doing the same thing.' If this is the case then I feel that there is a high possibility that something you discuss at length in this book will happen: the disappearance of the entrances and exits to industrial society, which is advancing at the same time that nature is being destroyed and trampled under foot.

Mita: I think that is so, but if one turns to what kind of society one should imagine for the future, consider the following: if one had 100 hectors of green land but only the technology to build one-story buildings, all of the land would have to be dug up to achieve a certain number of square meters. But with the technology to build a fifty-four story building [this conversation took place on the fifty-fourth floor], one could get the same number of square meters while leaving more than ninety percent of the land green. In the relationship between technology and nature it is possible to separate and combine the elements in this way.

Hashizume: Don't build one-story buildings, build skyscrapers—that kind of choice exists if people want to build skyscrapers not because they think they are fantastic, but rather because they intend to protect nature. The problem is whether people have that intention or not. Exactly where will people who want to tear up nature and use it for build one-story buildings, through what media or philosophy will they get the inspiration to control themselves in this way? Is this being addressed in the media? At the very least, the information we normally get through the media does not have a strong ethics or philosophical quality urging that we control civilization and coexist with nature. A lot of young people now are enthusiastic about fiction, for example. It's a pattern of making things like games, anime, dramas, things that only exist within the media, into made-up stories. Nonfiction is losing power. They don't see this as something that is connected to some actuality, they don't approach the media with the assumption that high-powered media exist in order better to understand actuality. If that is the case, they wouldn't feel a thing whether they lived in a one-story building or in a skyscraper.

Mita: But in another sense nonfiction is popular. Before it would have been unimaginable that news shows would be at both ends of each television station's prime time and that they would get such high ratings. The shows have both sides—they certainly are popular because they are dramatized but at the same time they are saying that there is news behind the show, which must have some attraction.

Hashizume: That is what is peculiar about today's image-centered media. In the era when there was only movable type, fiction and nonfiction were distinctly separated. There was a conviction that a real truth existed and nonfiction was what pursued it. This conviction itself almost had the power of myth. This is a very tenacious way of thinking—a kind of unstoppable desire, as if based on religious premises, to pursue truth outside of the self and outside of society. The idea that there is something certain outside was one of the unassailable convictions of modernity. This fostered the notion that nature supports society or that truth supports the self, but it's really plausible to see these as produced in the opposite way, that because there is society nature exists outside of it and that because there is individual cognition the subject exists outside of it. One could say that this latter mode of production is really just the fulfillment of the change through which, in this age of media, fiction and nonfiction traverse the boundary between them and fuse together. To pursue this hypothesis further, behind freedom and the individual—the points of reference of modernity—lies the problem of whether there is an absolute point of reference outside of society. In the previous age of fiction/nonfiction, this was the benchmark for the reality of nonfiction. Yet it is possible that such a benchmark is a projection—to the point of infinity—of the desire that the market demands, that is, of the individual that modernity demands as a system. And of course I could say the same about myself, that I exist as a projection of the demands of modernity. I would like to know what you think about this problem.

Mita: That certainly is a big issue. I understand the outlines of what you mean, but if you could narrow it a bit, what specifically is the issue you want to get at?

Hashizume: For example, earlier we used the metaphor of a rose: if one has both a real rose and a picture of a rose, when the picture is added reality becomes richer and the degree of happiness increases, but if the real rose disappears, leaving only the picture, it does not. That argument depends on accepting the premise that a real self exists that can perceive a real rose. But what if in fact the new mode of perception fostered by information/consumption society cannot distinguish between the real rose and the rose in the media? When people like you who grew up before information/consumption society look at it, you distinguish between the real rose and the rose projected in the media. The reason is that the existence of the real rose can be confirmed with the body, the rose is natural and is in nature, the media are not and therefore are two-dimensional—you distinguish between types of reality. But that was the habit when information/consumption society had not developed. The habit of those of us raised in information/consumption society is not to make the distinction. And it is possible that one has the same right to do so.

Mita: There are two questions, a philosophical one of whether there really is no distinction, and another of what happens if

such a generation appears. The former is something that philosophy has dealt with for a long time, and I think that in the end it is not provable. I don't think you can prove an answer to questions like 'Is there really nature?' or 'Does the other really exist.?' Even if they are not provable, I believe that there really is nature and that the other really exists. Nonetheless, one could prove in several ways that that might not really be so, if one wanted to try. Since I find that dialogue to be mainly unproductive, I just tell people who raise that kind of philosophical argument that believing in nature or in the other is a point of faith for me. Regarding the social phenomenon, whether there are people who feel that the so-called existence of media reality and of a cup or of a rose flowering in a garden may be absolutely the same, I think there are things that aren't that way that remain. People have a corporeality: when cut they bleed, when they don't eat they are hungry, when hit, it hurts. That kind of thing remains. Since in any big city there is wind and sky, I don't agree with media theorists who go so far as to say that an era is coming when everyone will live in virtual reality.

Hashizume: That kind of person might say that modernity has reached this point and now we are entering the next era. The previous modernity thought of things, reality, the individual, freedom, as really existing and sought to build its system on them. For that reason it was possible to criticize modernity from within it. But since this kind of person does not think that information/consumption society carries the basis to criticize itself within itself, he does not think that that critique has any meaning and does not carry it out. This could be a kind of self-conformism, I guess.
I think freedom and the individual might possibly be derived from language. The advantage in that case--possibly the only one--is that in talking about information/consumption society we have the image of the rose versus the real rose, but there is no image to pit against language. No matter how many images one makes, language is still language. You can't transform reality in the case of written information. Even if you change it, language originally is an image so it is preserved as language. In this sense, it more easily forms a foundation for critique.

The Mechanisms of Society

Hashizume: One of the interesting arguments in *Theory of Contemporary Society* is that the fewer rules there are the better, and that this situation would increase the freedom of the individual who could take advantage of it.

Mita: Rather than fewer, the simpler they are the better.

Hashizume: I am talking about a minimalism of rules. Marxism uses the terms maximal program and minimal program. Maximal program refers to a proposition that is good because everyone agrees, while minimal program refers to one that is good because different people can take part; there is an argument based on these terms. In art, I think minimal program would be minimalism. It is a form of expression that uses the minimum of materials and lets different people find different meanings in it. Could one try to think about social minimalism? There are concrete examples of cultural strife and ethnic strife in modernity, but in history as well

there are the examples of Christianity, Marxism, and other systems that I think foundered because of an excess of added rules, while for a great number of people to live in freedom and enjoy the maximum of the results of modernity, it is a minimalism of rules that is needed. Coercion is necessary, but it should be the minimum. If one can demonstrate that it is the minimum necessary, then even if it is coercion no one will be injured in a deep sense because it is ethically correct. I want to ask you about this because I feel you say something close to it in the book.

Mita: I may have written that, but what I had in mind was Le Corbusier's architectural theories. In some ways the founder of modernist architecture, he used modules to build large-scale apartment buildings. Even in his own time there were critiques of mass society that attacked his work as standardizing people in a meaningless, insipid way, but he responded that simplicity would make the people living there more free. That is, if the design includes different fixtures one only can live in that layout, but if it only includes the minimum of necessary utilities, the person living there can divide it up according to whatever taste he has, in freedom. The more simple the basic framework is, the more freely the individual inside of it can choose. At first glance it seems standardized, but in fact because this allows each person to shape his individuality. That kind of structure might be very productive as a model for social theory. I think that that conception may be the most valuable aspect of modernity.

Hashizume: In the predictions for the future that you offer at the end of the book, you speak of a 'multi-layered social theory.' I wonder if you might be thinking of a conception of society that reconciles a minimum level of rules or regulations with a macro system. The maximum of individual freedom would coexist in harmony inside it.

Mita: You are exactly right, that is what the basic plan would be. The image of the inside is one of freedom, but I'm thinking of a commune with a sort of symphonicity. My style twenty years ago when I wrote about 'the symphonizing commune' [*5] and now in *Theory of Contemporary Society* are very different, but my point of view hasn't changed. The delusion that something like symphonicity would be possible on a massive scale--a kind of utopia of relationality--may be the cause of failure of the twentieth century's biggest social experiments. Communism was a kind of monster commune. Because the basic mistake was to imagine that things that were concretely possible only on the scale of a few or at most a few dozen people could be transferred to a massive scale, I think that civil society is the best thing to pursue for large-scale rules or for rules between communes.

Hashizume: Aside from demonstrating the future possibilities for the commune, you write that the macro society that subsumes the commune must have a macro design and that one should conceive of it from a minimalist point of view. The next interesting question, then, is specifically what kind of regulations or rules or content are you thinking of.

Mita: That is an important question, isn't it.

Hashizume: I think that modern society originally was built on that minimalist idea. I wonder then how your sociology is differ-

ent. The principles of modern society began with human rights, that is, the premise that rights are distributed among all individuals. Rights bring with them obligations, and therefore restrictions on freedom. Because this is based on the proposition that one person's freedom and another person's freedom are not compatible, a line is drawn between people. There is no mutual tradeoff according to which A's rights are B's obligations and B's rights A's obligations. Laws are imposed on the clear principle of blocking this kind of coexistence. I would say that this is one kind of minimalism. Your theory, on the other hand, is based on freedom and desire. These differ most from rights in that they do not necessarily encompass a principle that restricts them. In thinking minimalistically from this point, then, what everyone is most interested in is how to come up with the most fitting principle for restricting them.

Mita: That is a very specific question that requires a long answer. An essay I recently wrote called 'the Public Sphere and the Symphonic Sphere: a Multi-Layered Social Theory' [*6] actually deals with this issue from the fundamentals. If you would do me the favor of reading it you might find it is close to what you are thinking.

(Tokyo, June 26, 1997)

Notes:

1. Mita Munesuke, *Gendai shakai no riron--Johoka-shohika shakai no genzai to mirai* [*Theory of Contemporary Society: The Present and Future of Information/Consumption Society*] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1996).

2. Maki Yusuke, ed., *Ningen kaiho no riron no tame ni* [*Toward a Theory of Human Liberation*] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo 1971).

3. Mita Munesuke, *Kachi ishiki no riron* [*Theory of Value Consciousness*] (Tokyo: kobundo, 1966).

4. Maki Yusuke, ed., *Jikan no hikaku shakaigaku* [*Comparative Sociology of Time*] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1981).

5. Maki Yueuke, ed., *Kiryu no naru oto--kokyo suru komyun* [*The Sound of the Air Stream: The Symphonizing Commune*] (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo 1977).

6. Mita Munesuke, 'Kokyoken to kokyoken--shakai koso no juso riron' [The Public Sphere and the Symphonic Sphere: a Multi-Layered Social Theory] in Iwanami koza gendai shakaigaku vol. 26, *Shakai koso no shakaigaku* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1996).

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mu to shakai riron (*Language Games and the Social Theory*, Keiso Shobo, *Hajimete no kozoshugi* (*Structuralism for Beginners*, Kodansha gendai shinsho), *Seiairon* (*On Sexual Love*, Iwanami Shoten), and *Hashizume Daisaburo no shakaigaku kogi* (*Lectures on Society 2 vols.*, Natsume Shobo).

(Translated by Christopher L. Hill)