

Beautiful harmony in an angry world – Japan Times 28.10.19

BY DAVID HOWELL

LONDON – Lucky Japan with its new imperial era of beautiful harmony. How the Europeans wish they had some of the same elixir. Of course Japan has an unlucky side, too, when it comes to the ravages of nature, with terrible typhoons, tsunamis and earthquakes visiting with seemingly unfair frequency.

But perhaps it is these dreadful visitations that make for the harmony, or at least the unifying resilience of the Japanese people in the face of nature's fearsome challenges. At any rate, the disuniting populist clamor, digitally surcharged, that has paralyzed the United Kingdom (over Brexit but also other issues) and filled the streets of Europe with protest, sometimes verging on violence, and brought politics to the boil of bitterness, seems so far to have bypassed Japanese society.

And populism is not just a European disease. In the United States it has produced an erratic presidency. In the Middle East it has brought unrestrained tribalism and war (now taking a new downward turn in northern Syria). In Iraq, Chile, Venezuela, Lebanon, Hong Kong, Sudan, the mobs are on the streets with increasing frequency. This is indeed, to borrow the heading from one recent Times editorial, "an angry world" that conventional politics seems sadly unable to address.

So what or where is the way forward out of this turmoil? As with any disease or debilitating condition, to begin finding answers and cures one has to understand causes. And although politicians and commentators have been reluctant to acknowledge the roots of chaos they are in fact quite easy to identify.

Of course, since the dawn of history there have been oppressed and angry peoples ready to rise up, from the slave rebellions against the Roman empire to revolutionary France, to Britain's million-strong 19th century Chartists (who nearly overthrew the throne) and to the hideous, weaponized 20th-century populism of the Nazi and communist eras, which almost destroyed civilization.

The difference now – the enabling, magnifying, hyper-contagious new factor – is the tiny microchip: a computer on a chip. It is this that has empowered protest, enabled organized rebellion, spread grievance, filled the entire planet with rumor and fear – often based on fake information – and opened up for viewing all the glaring inequalities of life on a scale and with a transparent visibility never matched before in history.

The skeptic might argue that the computer age has been around for 40 years or more, so why has it taken until the last decade or so to light the fuse of outrage and angry protest so widely? Why suddenly has the tone of public discourse changed, with every argument polarized, every debate driven to extreme positions and extreme language, with the middle ground area of moderation and compromise crushed out of existence? Why suddenly have respect for, and trust in, political hierarchies and institutions collapsed like a house of playing cards?

The answer lies in the laws governing the upward spiral of communications technology. Revolutions start slowly. The speed of microchip processing started some decades ago, like a geometrical progression. Double anything every year and soon quite modest numbers turn into colossal figures, heading off into infinity. As speed has risen, along with access in every corner of the planet, cost has fallen to near-zero.

It has taken the iPhone and the iPad to place in the hands of two-thirds or more of the human race the access to knowledge, the power to link up, the means to challenge, the technology to defy and disagree, to bring the cacophony of opinion and demand to its present pitch. And ahead lies much more, as value-free algorithms take over, as quantum computing delivers unimaginable speeds and as blockchain brings everyone into everything.

Such a world is bound to be confused, bound to be fluid and disordered, bound to breed disappointed expectations, bound to look for new focal points to fill the empty spaces left by collapsed faiths and doctrines.

Contrary to centuries of Western philosophy, about the sacred importance of the individual, human beings yearn to be associated, to be in families, communities, societies and to have a common cause or national story to which to be loyal.

But stories need a storyteller whose wisdom commands respect and admiration and followers. Absent such a figure, or such a story, the whole pyramid of trust and cohesion crumbles all the way down. Smaller nationalities break away from bigger ones (as Scotland threatens to do from the U.K. or Catalonia from Spain). Smaller communities pull away from more central institutions; traditional local leaders lose respect; family patriarchs, matriarchs and parents lose control; children break away into a moral wilderness of knife and drug gangs.

In Europe, and certainly in the U.K., it is all happening before our eyes. The internet, which was going to bring citizen liberation, has ushered in forces of social disintegration. For the younger generation in particular a sense of purpose and national direction has been lost in ceaseless argument and disillusion. Possibly the cause of saving the planet and its species from climate destruction can fill the gap, but even there doubts prevail.

Repair and restoration are possible, once the algorithms have been curbed and the communications leviathan harnessed and pinned down. Roles and purposes are out there to be described, but they will need 10 times more elan, imagination and historical perspective than anything now forthcoming.

So step forward the new articulate leaders of wisdom, foresight and true understanding now urgently required. With their intervention and guidance, a fragmenting and disputatious world can be calmed and a bit of that Japanese harmony shared and regained.

But without them — not a chance.
