

The Nara International Discussion Series on Globalization, Local Identity and Ekistics

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Introduction

Over the six months leading up to the 2005 Annual Meeting of the World Society for Ekistics, a group of residents in Nara, Japan, met nine times and discussed questions relating to Globalization and Ekistics. Participants met for two hours at a time and discussions were held in English and Japanese. The number and backgrounds of the participants varied over the course of the discussions.

Following the discussion series a paper was presented at the Hikone Conference by three members of our discussion.

This paper is a summary of the questions raised during our discussions and serves as a comment on both Globalization and Ekistics. It is a non-academic viewpoint that reflects the views of participants in the series, who ranged from Organic rice farmers, computer technicians, business people, students, academics, English language teachers, guides, travelers and artists. Our members came from seven different countries and various regions within Japan.

What is Globalization?

First discussion

In the first meeting we discussed the question of definition. It was agreed that Globalization should be understood as Glocalization:

"A process and the emergence of a global culture, which has both detrimental and advantageous effects for local people."

Participants from different countries had vastly different experiences of globalization and this influenced their conception of what it was and would be in the future. For many, who worked as part of the Japanese Exchange and Teaching Programme (the JET Programme), a distinction between internationalization and globalization was important. It was felt that internationalization was a communication and exchange between nations and peoples, whereas globalization was the emergence of a global culture driven by economic interests.

The degree to which the cultural exchange was unbalanced was the key point of difference. In particular, the Japanese and Indonesian participants felt that globalization was a new version of Americanization of their cultures and economies.

It was pointed out, however, that there was a significant local reaction to this emerging global culture. Moreover, the Japanese participants did not realize the extent to which Eastern thinking and culture was flowing into the West.

Despite this disagreement, all participants felt that the neo-liberal economic reforms from the World Trade Organization (WTO) and World Bank were having disproportionate economic and social effects, especially for example, the widening of the gap between rich and poor.

Second discussion

The second discussion focused on the issue of culture. It was primarily a discussion in Japanese about the possibility of harmony between local and global cultural influences. Participants identified the ways in which our identities and lifestyles are comprised of global and local elements. This discussion raised the issue of whether culture is a positive controlling force, and whether harmony is simply another name for normalization. Some participants talked openly of the alienation caused by the various kinds of cultural norms in Japan, while others explained the conflicted cultural identity that they felt they had to resolve.

This discussion was symptomatic of the struggle within the process of globalization, and the identity crisis that it engenders. All participants were members of local communities and global networks, which contributed to our own self image. We all understood ourselves in terms of elements drawn from the emerging global culture and local cultures. We could not come

to agreement about what would be the best way to manage or reconcile this conflict between global and local. Instead, our attention turned to the relevance of group membership and, in particular, the relevance of our own membership in the Nara Discussion Series. This raised the question of why we were meeting and what we hoped to achieve.

The definition of Glocalization that we began with meant that our discussion series was not held by an “anti-globalization” group. It was felt that it would be better to join existing groups if we wanted to fight certain aspects of globalization. Indeed, because globalization was a process in which we were all caught, and which generated different consequences for all involved, both positive and negative, it was agreed that it was not possible to simply be anti-globalization. We needed a more specific target, or a different strategy.

The value of our discussion group was thus considered to be in the opportunity to genuinely think freely, to reflect upon and discuss this question of how to balance global and local influences within ourselves and communities. It was the process of sharing of our thoughts and ideas that was valuable. We aimed at coming to our own conclusions about how to relate to globalization. However, this approach would later come under criticism.

There was no requirement to agree or come to conclusions in the discussion series because of this position. So it was argued that we did not have to take responsibility for our comments. We were engaged without taking action and not arguing for any particular position. Thus as a group we were not achieving anything. The discussion amounted to a talkfest without any bearing beyond ourselves.

So the definition of globalization was debated once again.

Does Globalization represent positive change?

Third discussion

The third meeting was intensely political (figs. 1 and 2). It looked at the economics of globalization and its impact on local identity and local economies. There was general disagreement about whether globalization (and the neo-liberal reforms that it sponsored) was a positive change. The argument was that although neo-liberal reform and globalization were currently driven by greed, it was impossible to deny the positive benefits from the process or offer any alternative to it. “You can’t stop it,” “it’s happening!” was the view of several participants. The real question, they argued, is how to drive it in a positive direction.

But this idea was not accepted by other participants. In response they claimed that we need to consider alternatives to global capitalism. A discussion about the role of sustainable industries and grassroots local economic projects ensued. But the question of just how well grassroots activities could confront, compete with and engage the larger economic force generated by neo-liberal reform, were left unresolved. The discussion turned to a detailed look at how globalization was affecting local Japanese culture. This was done in terms of Ekistics.

How could Ekistics further our discussion?

Fourth Discussion

The meeting was held in a traditional tea house in *Naramachi*, the old quarter of Nara city. We talked about the built environment and how it supports local culture. Professor Takashi Doi, organizer of the Hikone Conference, introduced the Ekistic Grid using examples of the tea room and scale of the traditional local buildings in Naramachi. He argued that foreign methods of construction and design were not as responsive to local con-

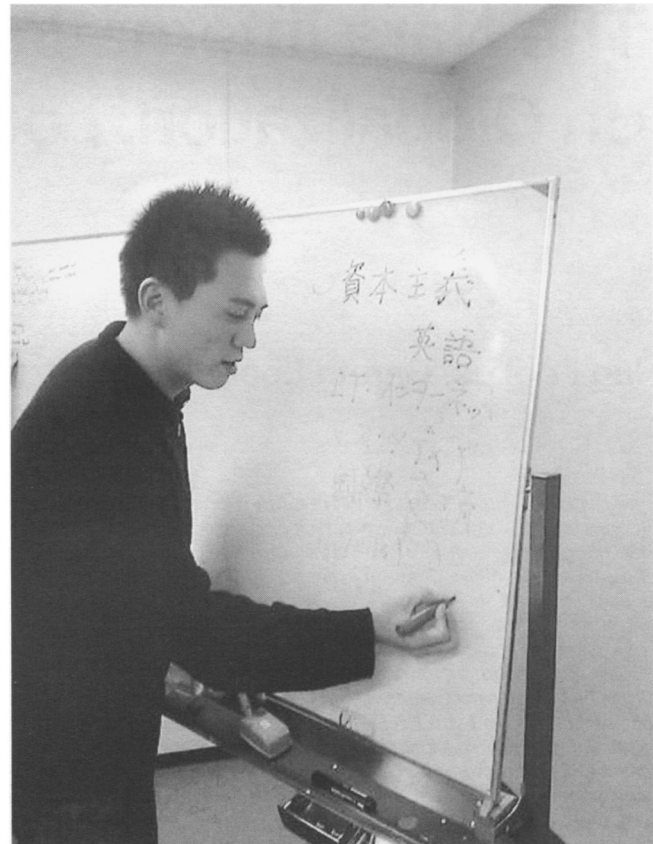


Fig. 1: Tatsuro Hirata takes notes during the third discussion.



Fig. 2: Members discuss their relations to Globalization.

ditions as local and traditional products. However, it was countered that global products were more popular than traditional designs giving rise to two pertinent questions:

- Should we actively promote local culture? And,
- What is our own role in supporting local culture as foreigners living in Japan? Indeed, what role did some of us as foreigners in Japan have to play in the local identity of Nara, for ourselves, and for the people of Nara?

So the discussion returned to the question of identity and culture, and the part we play in making that identity. The Ekistic Grid helped to structure and identify aspects of local and global culture. But it did not provide any answers to this question of how the individual should balance the competing influences of the global and the local.

What is the difference between a global citizen and a citizen of the world?

Fifth discussion

In the fifth discussion, competing influences from global and local culture were debated in terms of a distinction between a global citizen, who is well versed and has experience of various local cultures, and a global citizen, who, by contrast, is well versed in global culture. The key issue was whether global culture constituted a new and different culture, and whether this culture was exploiting local cultures. Some argued that the distinction itself was a luxury enjoyed by the rich who are able to travel to different places to experience local cultures "on location" as it were, while those unable to travel needed to rely on the derivative version via the media. However, one of the main objections to globalization was that it devoured and exploited local cultures. The global citizen was a product of this exploitation, enjoying the derivative global-stereotypical images of cultures while eroding their actual local practices. The need to protect examples of the authentic culture whilst letting the global version flourish was presented as one option, illustrated by examples of traditional culture within Japan. However, this seems to be simply ensuring that the resource is made readily available for global interests and does little to prevent the erosion of local practices maintained in less than stereotypical forms.

The authenticity, accuracy and/or depth of understanding afforded by globalization and an understanding of the world through the mass media became an issue. One participant's brother had always learned about Africa via the BBC. He travelled to one African country and worked as a volunteer in a camp. However, upon his return he complained that his understanding of that African country was limited to his experience in the camp and so his trip was not as effective as if he had relied on the BBC. The point argued was that the global perspective is better able to inform us than direct yet limited experience of local culture. However, this seemed to miss the point that the problem with globalization is not the ability of the media to present more than a shallow understanding of other cultures, but that the new stereotypical images of the local cultures constituted a new culture that was overwhelming the existing local practices. Global culture is furnished with a spectators' view of many cultural stereotypes from around the globe. These stereotypes overwhelm and prevent the practice of local culture, or more accurately, they corrupt and give rise to new forms. Why this was bad was not delved into; however, it could well be that such practices are negative because they are based on non-participation and consumerism. Our discussion then addressed the role of technology and people within globalization.

What is the importance and role of immigration and technological networks, tourism and international exchange in Globalization?

Sixth Discussion

Many participants were immigrants, or worked in internationalization projects, tourism or internet-based businesses. Our discussion also included people from the UK and France, and so the discussion focused on the problems of forming larger global networks. Difficulties in accepting a common European constitution, for example, were debated raising issues regarding immigration, working conditions and the necessity of different laws for different peoples and/or nations.

One major effect of globalization has been the ability of transnational corporations to exploit labor laws and working conditions in different countries. The impact of this advantage on smaller, local modes of production bound by the rules of one state or region is significant. It was suggested that international, or global regulation was needed to protect the workers in developing countries and to be able to prosecute people for committing indecent acts within the realm of sex tourism, acts which were prohibited in their own countries. In light of the rejection of the European Constitution by the French, it was argued that any common ground or fundamental, universal type of "global" regulation must take into account the diversity of attitudes that currently exist.

Participants began to look at ways to influence and regulate the new possibilities made possible by globalization. There was a tension between existing systems and values and challenges to them by new practices. So our discussion then looked to the longer term.

What are our long-term visions of Globalization?

Seventh Discussion

The discussion of our longer term predictions for Globalization was unsuccessful. In a drawn-out and difficult atmosphere the possibility of predicting where Globalization would lead was challenged, as was our ability to reasonably discuss various possible futures. The discussion was an important step however, as it demonstrated that when the required goodwill and desire to communicate was lacking among participants then the discussion broke down. In fact, it illustrates the need for the Ekistical framework as a means of discussing the future. In our discussion there were many challenges to the idea of being able to discuss future possibilities. Notions of Doxiadis' Megalopolis were introduced, but there was an unwillingness in participants to discuss on the macro-level. Indeed, as our discussions have borne out quite clearly, at the time of writing the future of globalization appears in the balance, fraught with issues and confusion. Most participants did not understand their own relationship to globalization, its implications for their identity and the future. However, there was a lack of the requisite understanding of the Ekistical framework to apply the categories and to make predictions. In short, in attempting to discuss this topic we encountered our limitations head on.

The following meeting, thus, returned once more to the question of how to deal with problems raised by increased global contact and interaction, in particular, the question of religious tolerance.

How do we reconcile religious differences within a globalized world?

Eighth Discussion

Religion and the mutual co-existence of points of view that make universal claims about how we ought to live were discussed here. It was argued that "religious conflicts" were not about religion at all, but rather, reflected an attempt by extremists within certain groups attempting to polarize the population and create more extremists. Religious conflicts were engaging the moderate population in an attempt to make them more extreme and hence ready to take action on pseudo-religious grounds. This view was accepted within the group and the case of Indonesia was discussed. It was explained that in Indonesia there are many faiths living together and that tolerance existed for the different groups. It was agreed that religious tolerance was indeed possible, except that in global conflicts religions were used as a means to mask or justify economic and political motives.

What three key issues emerged out of these discussions about Globalization and Local Identity

Ninth Discussion (final)

The final discussion before the conference called on participants to give their views on what had arisen from the Nara International Discussion Series. The consensus was presented at the

Hikone Conference and will be summarized as follows.

Globalization is a process and the emergence of a global culture, which has both detrimental and advantageous effects for local people. As such calls into question our identity, as individuals and as part of local cultures, our discussion series was a means of thinking about the implications of this process and to come to our own conclusions regarding our role within it. By discussing these issues we could come to a more conscious awareness of the impact of globalization and think of ways to engage with it. It was a process of growing up and establishing a balance, or harmony between the global and local influences. In short, we could become more aware of the role we have to play in making our own identity in this process of globalization.

The value of such a discussion was questioned and challenged. It was argued that it lacked responsibility because it did not lead to direct action.

By the same token, the application and the usefulness of the ekistical framework appeared limited in relation to our discussion. As a means of structuring our discussion and helping to identify aspects of globalization it proved useful; however, as a means of promoting a certain action in response to our questions it did not offer an effective approach. This is due to the lack of understanding of participants of Ekistics, but illustrates the need for the World Society for Ekistics to engage in more education about ekistical principles.

The question that our discussion raised in response to globalization was: How do we engage and manage this process of globalization? The question it raises for Ekistics: How can the Ekistics framework help us respond to meet this challenge?