



EDITORIAL

Maurie J. Cohen
Editor

Turning Japanese

Let me begin with a proviso. Since the inception of *Sustainability, Science, Practice, & Policy* a half-dozen years ago, I have believed that this modest piece of editorial real estate is best used to offer a diverse array of perspectives. Accordingly, during my editorship I have suppressed occasional impulses to appropriate the space for myself and instead have sought out a range of voices with something interesting to say. A preoccupation with Japan's social and economic path impelled me for this issue—with all requisite apologies—to deviate from this tradition.

The urge to speak up is partly motivated by the degree to which sustainability scientists and practitioners have come over the last few years to appreciate the salient role that macroeconomic variables play in regulating the global flow of material and energy throughputs. At the same time, it has become commonplace to recognize the intimate connections between recurring financial crises and the quality of our social and ecological environments. The intractable dilemma of climate change is only the most prominent manifestation of this indivisibility.

Our inseparable macroeconomic and socioecological fates have prompted me to fixate on Japan. The storyline during the 1970s and 1980s was that Japan was a “miracle country,” home to a constellation of unassailable industrial corporations, an unwavering work ethic, and an unquenchable appetite for consumer goods. However, for the past two decades economists, media pundits, and numerous others have incessantly derided the country as the underperformer of the global economy. Zombie banks! Dysfunctional politics! Entrenched bureaucracies! Lethargic consumers! The conventional wisdom is that since the bursting of its own spectacular financial bubble during the late 1980s, Japan has been beset by sluggish economic growth and generally poor prospects. Despite ardent attempts to revivify the national economy, using both conventional and unconventional interventions, the country as a whole has remained unmoved. What if the textbook economists have it all wrong? Could it be that Japan has accidentally found itself a frontrunner of a novel and emergent mode of societal development where

growth has become unnecessary? What if the economic preconditions that have facilitated consumer-driven economic growth for the past several decades are now dissipating and fading from relevance?

One has to delve into reform (or new) economics to find an interpretation that helps to navigate this situation, one suggesting that Japan may not be the beleaguered deviant it is frequently portrayed to be. The contrarian perspective further contends that the former Asian economic powerhouse may already be well along a path that other affluent countries—perhaps most markedly the United States—are poised to follow.

Nobel laureate Paul Krugman aired this outlook in late August when he wrote that “America is now very much in a Japan-type economic trap, only more acute” (Krugman, 2011). Given his prominence as a regular *New York Times* columnist, Krugman's pronouncement signals new awareness within the economics profession, especially within its progressive wing. In other words, the heterodox perspective is now moving toward the mainstream. What might we make of this diffusing sensibility that the United States (and by extension other wealthy countries in their own time) is “turning Japanese”? The scaffolding that enabled economic growth in Japan has largely fallen away. Are we about to witness a similar process elsewhere? Social scientific appraisal attests that favorable demographics, expanding middle-class opportunities, rising wages, incessant advertising, and easy credit have variously buoyed the economy for decades.¹ How will we carry on as these once-auspicious trends move in reverse and start to interact in unfamiliar ways? What are the sustainability implications of these circumstances? Given its head start of nearly a generation, Japan likely holds some instructive lessons.

The evidence indicates that Japan is in better shape than often depicted, with some interesting developments taking hold at the cultural periphery. Japan's relegation last year to number three in the global economic race (behind the United States and

¹ See, for example, Cohen, 2010.

China as measured in terms of gross domestic product) passed with relatively little emotional upheaval. This reaction stands in stark contrast to the peculiar combination of screaming and hand-wringing that occurs in the United States when it is reported that China will be the world's largest economy by 2030.

Japan's slippage in the league tables needs to be put in a wider context as news of its pending demotion was obviously anticipated for some time. Part of the reason for the country's seemingly enervated economic performance in recent years is that its youth, members of so-called Generation Y, are less inclined than their predecessors to get on the work-and-spend treadmill. The country's irrepressible twenty-somethings have grown up during an era of diminished expectations and have accordingly lowered their sights. With employment opportunities scarce, and little likelihood of change in the foreseeable future, these young people are contentedly opting for less consumption-laden lifestyles. Most notably (and consequentially), automobile ownership has been on a protracted downward slide for some time now, in part because Gen Y-ers display little enthusiasm for cars. A newly coined Japanese phrase *kuruma banare* (translated roughly into "demotorization") captures this disinclination to take on the expense and responsibility of a personal vehicle (Kageyama, 2009). Interestingly, we are now beginning to witness the emergence of a similar trend in the United States and several other wealthy countries and indications are that it is not simply the result of recession-related austerity.²

Among this youthful cohort, parsimony has become a new social norm. Norihiro Kato, a scholar of Japanese literature, captures the essence of this realignment when he writes,

The rest of the world's population is still exploding, and we are coming to see the limits of our resources...Japan doesn't need to be No. 2 in the world, or No. 5 or 15. It's time to look to more important things, to think more about the environment and about people less lucky than ourselves. To learn about organic farming. Or not. Maybe you're busy enough just living your life (Norihiro, 2010).

It is further intriguing that across a range of Japanese products—from rice to furniture—production has evinced a notable downward drift (with no countervailing uptick in demand for imported substitutes). By all accounts, year by year Japan is gradually

downsizing, with positive effects for the country's greenhouse-gas emissions, rates of resource appropriation, and levels of energy utilization. As tragic events tend to do, the triple disaster (seismic, torrential, and radioactive) visited on Japan in March is likely to propel transitions already set in motion. The country's decision to step down its reliance on nuclear power is only the most visible indication of what is yet to come. People familiar with the innermost workings of Japanese society recognize that the current reversion to fossil fuel-generated electricity is just a stopgap measure and the country is mustering its capacity for major changes in its energy infrastructure.

Among the group of affluent nations, Japan is arguably at the head of the pack in demonstrating that the era of consumer-led economic growth is coming to an end, and other wealthy countries will likely follow. One of the benefits of this historical progression is that demand for material and energy resources will soften and, if we are smart, we can take advantage of this contraction to reduce pressure on natural systems, enhance social stability, and augment well-being. In addition, distribution of the gains of the supernova phase of economic expansion has been massively unequal. Persisting public support for the growth regime emanates more from a perplexing combination of political inertia, wistful nostalgia, and magical thinking than it does from the lived experience of ordinary people. After all, in most rich nations, the vast majority of the population has, in recent decades, hardly gotten a whiff of the expanding economic pie and the benefits it purports to deliver.³

As we continue to witness the inescapable withering of the demographic and technological engines that propelled economic growth ever-upward during the second half of the twentieth century, the most fervent champions of growthism will become increasingly out of touch. This may be the foremost lesson that we can derive from the Japanese experience. The end of growth does not necessarily precipitate cataclysm, but can bring liberation from a pervasive form of tyranny: the need to continually work more and spend more.

This does not mean it will be easy to cross the chasm to a post-growth economy. The notion of continual expansion infuses every facet of contemporary political affairs. It merits remembering that the impetus for measuring economic growth sprang from the need to manage the exigencies of wartime production and these tools then demonstrated effectiveness in dealing with a confluence of post-World War II challenges: civilian reconversion, industrial overcapacity, Cold War rivalry, and colonial devolution.

² See, for example, Puentes & Tomer, 2008; Millard-Ball & Schipper, 2011; Goodwin, 2010.

³ See, for example, Bartels, 2010.

Economic growth is not a natural law in the way that, say, gravity is, but rather a political salve that has proven an expedient and reliable way to meet certain objectives. At its most prosaic level, it is an idea, and as the necessity of this idea ebbs away, so too will the imperatives and contrivances that drive it. I submit that it is incumbent upon sustainability scientists and practitioners to pay close attention to Japan and to be attentive to its position on the leading edge of these changes.

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About the Author

Maurie J. Cohen is the editor of *Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy*. He is also Associate Professor in the Department of Chemistry and Environmental Science at the New Jersey Institute of Technology and Director of both the Graduate Program in Environmental Policy Studies and the Science, Technology, and Society Program. Dr. Cohen has held prior positions at the University of Leeds, Binghamton University (State University of New York), Mansfield College (Oxford University), and Indiana University. His books include *Exploring Sustainable Consumption: Environmental Policy and the Social Sciences* (with Joseph Murphy), *Risk in the Modern Age: Science, Social Theory, and Environmental Decision Making*, and *The Exxon Valdez Disaster: Readings on a Modern Social Problem* (with J. Steven Picou and Duane Gill). He can be contacted at email: mcohen@adm.njit.edu.