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A Conversation with Brian Tokar

Brian Tokar is a leading spokesperson for the U.S. Greens/Green Party and author of *The Green Alternative: Creating an Ecological Future* (English edition available from R. & E. Miles, P.O. Box 1916, San Pedro, California 90733 U.S.A.; Japanese edition available from Chikuma Shobo, Masudaya Bldg., 6-4 Kuramae 2-chome, Taito-ku, Tokyo 111-91). Tokar teaches at the Institute for Social Ecology and Goddard College in Vermont. He was in Japan this past August visiting various environmentalists and organizations. An informal meeting was held in Tokyo on August 28 which included Tony Boys of the British Green Party, Masaharu Tanaka of Japan's Kibo Group, Morgan Gibson and Richard Evanoff of the U.S. Greens, and poet Keiko Matsui Gibson. A condensation:

Richard: Could you give us a run-down on where you've been?

Brian: I started out in Kyoto where I met some people who just started a Gaia Institute. I also got to meet with some of the folks at JEE, who are doing some really high-quality work in the schools in Kyoto. Then I went to Awaji Island for five days to participate in a seminar organized by Prof. Yamaguchi Kaoru, who teaches at Nagoya University of Commerce. He's trying to start a network university to bring together people who are interested in Green ideas, and especially in alternative ideas about the future. His outlook goes beyond mainstream futurism in that he's really interested in bringing together thinking from all over the world on how to move toward a more sustainable society.

Richard: What was the theme of your own presentation?

Brian: I gave a presentation on ecological movements in the U.S. I talked about the limitations of the mainstream environmental scene, the extent to which many of the well-known national organizations have in recent years become so much a part of the system that they can no longer be counted on as a voice for a real ecological outlook, and how over the past ten years various new movements have emerged to fill the gap. I talked about the grass roots anti-toxics movement, which in the last few years has come increasingly to describe itself as an environmental justice movement with the increasing understanding of how the most polluting industries and waste facilities are located not only in the poorest neighborhoods but even more consistently in minority neighborhoods. I talked about some of the radical wilderness activism around Earth First! and especially what's going on in the Northwest, where again there're some interesting syntheses between ecological and social outlooks, where some of the more politically astute Earth First! people have actually gone out and begun working with some of the dissident loggers who realize more and more that the companies treat them the same way they treat the forests! I also talked about bioregionalism and the Green movement and some of the international connections that we've been making, especially some of the ideas that we've been getting from Green activists in the third world. I tried to challenge these futurists a little bit around how Western ideas of globalism are starting to become yet another vehicle for colonizing traditional peoples with Western thinking. Professor Yamaguchi has created his own synthesis of ecological and bioregional ideas in a

Japanese context, toward the goal of what he calls “muratopia,” looking at the traditional Japanese village as a model and thinking about ways to restore the economic and social coherence of the traditional village as a way of breaking the trend of people abandoning the villages for the cities.

Richard: It’s interesting that a lot of that kind of rhetoric has traditionally been associated with nationalistic, right-wing politics, with Japan’s history going back to the *mura* [“village”] and that kind of thing. There’s always been a tendency for this tradition to be coopted by the right-wingers, but it’s interesting to see a connection along entirely different lines now with grass roots environmentalism.

Tony: I think the key word there is “coopted.” The social and cultural structures existed, and still partially exist even today. Japanese people haven’t gone through so many generations of industrialization that they can’t still go back to some kind of “muratopia,” to previous structures of mutual help and really a very Green ecological style of life.

Tanaka: I think, though, that the countryside in Japan—the mountains, for example—have already been destroyed. Most farming people have already moved to urban areas. But recently young people and some students have gone back to rural areas to live and create ecological spaces.

Tony: I don’t think that the movement as such needs to be reinvented in this country. The cultural aspects of the Japanese countryside haven’t been destroyed. It’s still living in people’s minds. People still remember how things were, even 50 years ago, when Japan really hadn’t changed all that much.

Richard: It’s probably being lost, though, among the younger generation.

Tony: People who are under 25 are beginning to lose it very quickly. They’re living in a different world. There’s a very short time frame in which people are suddenly beginning to lose a lot of the cultural values.

Brian: Do you see any potential for a “back-to-the-land” movement like we had in the U.S. in the 70s? Given how completely insane and crowded Tokyo has become, is there a possibility that significant numbers of young people will decide to go back and create something as we have in Vermont, which is a kind of hybrid of the traditional Vermont way and what we who have moved there in the last 20 years have brought with us?

Tanaka: Some of the Japanese counterculture moved back to the country. But that was in the 1960s.

Richard: And there’s nothing comparable now in the 1990s?

Tanaka: Young counterculture people are not so interested in political issues.

Keiko: Young people don’t seem to be very hopeful for political change. They seem to be sort of stuck, disappointed by the way the world is moving. But when I taught Thoreau’s *Walden* last semester, I was surprised that the students were really interested in it. I thought they’d find it anachronistic, completely impractical and unrealistic. But students say that they are not satisfied with the way people live. It’s good if you can live in nature without depending on so many material things. It’s such a good alternative way of living.

Richard: On the other hand, there’s also an increasing amount of nihilism and alienation among young people, a loss of traditional values and nothing to take their place. There’s a kind of cynicism that sees all positive values as ultimately disillusioning.

So there's a tendency not to want to experiment, not to want to try out new ideas, but just to withdraw.

Tony: I think it's the kind of situation Murray Bookchin would have no problem figuring out in terms of the structures of domination that exist. Students are afraid to stand up or speak out or say anything or do anything for fear of authority coming down on them. They are totally resigned to things being the way they are. They don't expect to be able to do something or say something and to be able to have some kind of influence on what is happening in society.

Tanaka: But after Chernobyl young women became active in environmental issues, especially so-called "career women." They're sensitive, "soft"—their sense of politics isn't "hard" like the 1960s.

Tony: I was under the impression that NGOs and citizens groups were really supported by housewives.

Tanaka: Yes, especially in cooperatives.

Brian: It seems that cooperatives have sustained a sense of activism more than working on issues has. Issues come and go, and attempts various people have made to get people active around various issues haven't always gone very far.

Tony: Look at Amnesty International, for example, which has only 9,000 members in a country of 120 million, and probably a third of them are foreigners. Even human rights issues just aren't catching on in this country. On the other hand, there are quite a few NIMBY-type groups. People will gather together and say that they don't want something to happen in their particular area. Also, housewives who are concerned about what their families are eating—getting safer food seems to be the motivation behind the consumer coops. The point I'm trying to make is that once you get above the grass roots level to a higher level of abstraction, you find fewer and fewer takers for it. And once you get up to quite a high level of abstraction, like saying, "Let's form a Green Party!," you'll find that there are so few takers that it won't get off the ground.

Tanaka: In the 1960s, though, very political young people were interested in ideological issues and abstract ideas.

Tony: What I said was a generalization about what I feel is the situation in this country now. Of course, it's not true of everyone in Japan or what was happening 20 or 30 years ago.

Richard: To what extent would the same generalization fit the U.S.?

Brian: There's getting to be, both politically and also in terms of people's actual involvement, more of a gap between the kind of professional NGO-style organization (which are very prevalent—there are lots of them; they're very well-known; lots of people send a check every year to be a member and get a magazine) and real grass roots activism. In the anti-nuclear movement, which was very well-coordinated nationally back in the 70s, there have been local and state-wide groups popping up all over the country trying to stop the siting of low-level waste dumps. Local communities in various parts of the country have been pressured to take on low-level wastes, and there have been some incredible upsurges of activism around this issue. With a couple of exceptions, such a site in Texas, I know of no places where they've actually sited something. There's a huge battle in Minnesota where there's a plan to do short-term storage on an island right in the Mississippi River! It's land that gets flooded on occasion and it's directly adjacent to an Indian Reservation. As a footnote to that, Hazel O'Leary, who is Clinton's new

Department of Energy secretary, was the manager of that project. So don't expect any wonderful changes from Clinton's Energy Department!

Richard: Both you and Tony have written reviews of Vice President Gore's book.

Brian: Gore's book is worth reading. It's an interesting exercise in corporate environmental thinking. In many ways it's the nicer side of corporate environmental thinking as opposed to the people who want to save a little bit here and there to make sure there will still be something to cut down in 10 or 20 years. Some environmental organizations have been extremely aggressive in pushing the idea of tradable emissions credits. People from organizations such as the Environmental Defense Fund, that for years have had really solid upstanding reputations, have basically done everything they can to push a system of emissions credits that can be bought and sold on the open market. At the Chicago Board of Trade, where they buy and sell grain futures and pork bellies, pollution credits can be bought and sold in the same way. The idea is that pollution will be controlled in the most efficient manner possible because the people who can do really state-of-the-art emissions controls cheaply will do it and the people who can't will buy these pollution futures. But what's happened is that big utilities have been canceling pollution-control projects that had already been funded because they can buy credits to pollute more, much more cheaply. And not only that, but utilities on the east coast are selling their emissions credits to utilities in the Midwest, which is ending up increasing the acid rain problem on the East Coast because the Midwest is where all the pollution comes from. So it's been a total disaster. There was a bill in Congress last year which Gore implicitly supports in his book, saying that there should be an international market of tradable credits in greenhouse gasses. Completely outrageous!

Richard: Given the problems with national organizations, what alternatives are the Greens proposing?

Brian: What we've tried to do in the Greens is to create a very loose decentralized network of groups of local activists all over the country. At this point there are about 200-300 groups that are affiliated with the Greens. Some of them are very small groups of half-a-dozen or even fewer people. Some of them are well-established activist groups in their communities in which dozens or even 100 or more people are involved in. The range of activities varies tremendously. Some of them are really focused on specific local issues, trying to bring a more holistic Green perspective to them. Some of them are involved in electoral politics. A few groups have tried to form political parties at the state level. There are now five or six states with certified Green parties on the ballot. But most of the electoral successes that Greens have had have been on the local level. There are about 60 or 70 people who have been elected to everything from school boards to planning commissions to county councils. There's one Green mayor in the U.S. in a small city in Alaska, just down the shore from where the Exxon Valdez accident happened. In places where Greens are really doing intensive local activism, the focus is often on really trying to create links between ecological and social issues. You know, activism in the U.S. is traditionally very single-issue oriented. When people get involved in an issue, especially an environmental issue, the tendency is to focus really narrowly on technical aspects of the legal system. What we've been trying to do in the Greens is to do our activism in the opposite way, to really emphasize wider connections.

For example, in New England, where I live, our main focus has been on James Bay, a body of water on the far northeastern corner of Canada. There are still large intact

communities of native people living there. A provincial utility company in Quebec, Hydro-Quebec, came out with a plan to dam up every major river system going into James Bay to produce electricity. A lot of the electricity will be used to support Canada's excess consumption and also to sell to the United States. Our main focus for two or three years was trying to stop our utility companies in Vermont and around New England from signing contracts to buy this electricity. In the course of doing that work we really tried to bring together all of the different aspects. We would talk about the ecology of James Bay and its importance regionally. We would talk about the methane problem and the effect on global climate change. But we also focused on native people's issues and brought Cree and Inuit people down to do events in the States. We've also been talking about the economic issues a lot, raising the question of what it means for our utilities to invest all their money in these long-term power contracts when they could be spending money on conservation and encouraging really renewable energy. Canadian hydro-power was sold to a lot of American utilities in the 70s during the height of the anti-nuclear movement as a way to get renewable energy. But the scale of dam construction is such that there's absolutely nothing renewable about it. They're destroying huge areas of land, as well as traditional cultures, and are incredibly in debt to American banks that have been financing this whole thing. In Vermont we managed, not to eliminate the contract, but to reduce it about 30 percent. In New York there were two major contracts: one was canceled entirely; the other is still being contested. The Greens have been trying to work on this issue in as encompassing and holistic way as possible. Last year another interesting project began in Detroit, which is probably the main symbol of the decaying industrial mid-Western city, where everybody who has any resources at their disposal at all has left. All the companies have left, especially the big auto plants. Social services have completely fallen apart. There isn't even a single public hospital left in the city.

Tony: I read that they were thinking of fencing off the inner city because it had died.

Brian: Well, there's a million or two people still living there under increasingly desperate conditions. The reason they want to fence it off is because the adjoining suburban neighborhoods don't want Detroit people to be able to take a stroll down their streets. But there are some Greens active in Detroit and they've gotten really involved with a lot of the neighborhood organizations in the black community especially. Last year we did a pilot project where the Greens in Detroit invited people from all over the country to come for three weeks and participate in all kinds of sustainable projects, helping people rebuild fallen-apart houses, community garden work, painting murals, some beginning alternative energy work, all oriented toward helping people in Detroit create a more sustainable way of life for themselves, given that the dominant institutions of the society have completely abandoned them. There's a lot of hope among people there that they can create a model for a more sustainable way to live in an urban setting, especially for people who have had their ties to the system forcibly broken. This year the Detroit project is continuing and there are new pilot projects in two or three other cities. Working in the inner city to do ecological rebuilding is an idea that's really caught on in the Greens.

Richard: It seems that this comprehensive approach is a real alternative to one of the problems environmentalists have in terms of image. Environmental issues are often portrayed in terms of "jobs vs. the environment." If you're an environmentalist people

think you're totally unconcerned about jobs. It would seem that in fact that the Greens are trying to get beyond that split and to come up with a more comprehensive approach, given the fact that workers are sometimes exploited as much as resources are.

Brian: That's why the work in the Pacific Northwest has been so exciting and why everyone's been following it so closely. Up there you have communities that are completely dependent on resource extraction—cutting down the forests for several generations. Yet people live there because they want to be close to the forest. But for a lot of people who grew up there, they really understand that if the forests go, there's not going to be much left for them. At the current pace of logging the forests will be all gone before the current generation lives out its working life. So people in some settings are really looking for alternatives and there have been some new projects around groups of people who have worked together in the forest industry contracting with a landowner who wants to see their land managed sustainably, and they'll actually do very selective cutting in order to try to restore the health of the forest in that area, especially places that have been cut over so many times that if you just let it grow back on its own, it would take a really long time to regenerate anything sustainable. Then they go to the cities and try to sell this lumber at a little bit of a markup to people who are really concerned about getting their wood without contributing to the destruction of the forests. There are some people who are coming together to see about creating a foundation for a sustainable forestry movement in New England also. The timber companies have gotten used to such a high rate of production in the 1980s that they're now trying to speed up the rate of logging all over the rest of the country, particularly in New England and the South.

Tony: In fact all around the world.

Richard: Which brings us to the next question: What type of international links do you see developing between Greens in the U.S. and like-minded people elsewhere?

Brian: Because the Greens have always been an international movement and much of the inspiration for the Green organizing in the U.S. came from Europe, there have always been some connections between Greens in the U.S. and in Europe. People have traveled back and forth and attended each other's conferences. So far, though, it's mostly been informal. Through our publications, especially *Groundwork*, we've gotten pretty consistent reports from U.S. Greens who have traveled throughout the world. There is also an effort underway, which began last summer at the U.N. environmental conference in Rio, of establishing a more formal international Green organization.

Morgan: In public consciousness is there a recognition that the standard of living or style of life will simply have to change if we're not going to destroy the planet?

Brian: I think a lot of people are starting to realize that things are pretty bad out there and that real changes are necessary. But there's also a lot of denial. Capitalism is really good at pacifying people's concerns by giving them more new and different things to buy. There's a whole line of environmental products now that people just rush to grab up. They feel that they're doing their thing for the environment by buying recycled toilet paper for twice as much money or spending 50 dollars to have a fancy composting bin. But if people are really getting involved in composting, hopefully it creates some deeper connection and helps to expand people's thinking. But the problem is that everything gets translated into products.

Richard: What links are Greens in the U.S. making with Japan?

Brian: There's certainly a lot of common thinking. The U.S. and Japan are seen by the rest of the world as being models of developed, sophisticated societies, and people in Third World countries are being sold on the idea that they want to be like us. Among those of us who have experienced life in the fast-paced, crazy, high-consumption world of the U.S. and Japan, I think the more closely we work together the better chance we have of helping other people see the limitations of our way of life. Certainly we can work together around specific issues, like the rainforests, where the role of U.S. corporations and Japanese corporations is becoming increasingly clear, and where it's obvious that the only way any real pressure can be put on any of these companies is through more coordinated international activism. But how do you extend the idea of local democracy and local economies to an international setting that's dominated by huge corporations that have no clear rooting in any one country? The only way to do it is to create the kind of international pressure that companies have to respond to. We've seen some of that emerging around the whole trade issue in the U.S., where Clinton is trying to push through the NAFTA agreement with Canada and Mexico. There have been some gatherings of environmental activists and union activists from the U.S. and Mexico to explore the implications of NAFTA, and also to look at corporate strategy and what can be done internationally to counter it. The Rainforest Action Network in the U.S. has been promoting the idea of an international boycott of Mitsubishi because of its involvement in Malaysia. That's something that certainly can only be effective if it's also happening here. Of course, there's concern among some Japanese activists that boycotts might be seen as another Western import. They're struggling with how to talk about influencing corporations without being accused of importing Western tactics.

Richard: This seems to be a problem that foreign activists have. If you're being critical of, say, Mitsubishi Corporation, and organizing a boycott against them, it's very easy for the press to say "Japan bashing!" Foreign activists can be accused of not respecting the culture and traditions of Japan, and of being outsiders who "don't understand Japan." That's why I tend to see the primary dividing line not between Japan and the West, but between those who are in the position of dominating and those who are in a position of being dominated. There can be links, then, between those who are being dominated both in Japan and the West.

Brian: It's really clear to Greens in the U.S. and increasingly clear to mainstream environmentalists that for the tremendous excess consumption in the U.S., most people don't really benefit very much from it. As the economy gets worse and worse, and the distribution of wealth gets more and more askew, that becomes increasingly clear.

Richard: There may be less of a questioning in Japan than in the U.S. of the "dominant paradigm," though.

Brian: Someone was telling me a couple of weeks ago that Japanese don't have political opinions. It was hard for me to comprehend that.

Keiko: We are trained to not speak politically. We don't have that sort of education.

Tony: Some people believe that the educational system and the whole political milieu—the media and so forth—is all controlled, at least until very recently, by the LDP and by others in power to keep people basically away, to keep society on its normal level, to keep it sanitized so that people do not think about politics and talk about politics and become active and things like that.

Brian: Is the recent change in the government affecting that at all?

Richard: I don't think so. I think it's very deep-seated in the culture. The change of government is making some of the issues more explicit but, at least among young people, there's a sense that it's just another government.

Tony: That's the sense in which younger Japanese people are (a) cynical, and (b) resigned to the way society is. They feel they have no way of being able to influence or change society.

Richard: It's interesting to note the connection between cynicism and resignation. There's complete disillusionment. You feel nothing is worth trying.

Tony: But I think that the change of government has the potentiality for getting something done. I think that now that the democratic cat is out of the bag, the potential exists for something interesting to happen in this country, at last. Apart from really cynical, non-political people in their early twenties, the other people are really expecting something to change. They're not really sure whether something is going to change or not, but they're hoping there will be a change.

Richard: I think the kind of change people are looking for, though, is more of a top-down change than a grass-roots-up change, which is very disempowering. People look to the new government and say, "What are they going to do for us?" I think there needs to be more coming from the grass roots.

Tanaka: Grass roots organizations are the only organizations that I feel are really worth working with in this country.

Keiko: I think so. Japanese people in general distrust big words. Some Japanese students are aware that American students are working on such issues as "environmentalism." But they feel, "How childlike!" Even if you work hard, the world will be the way it will be. There's a certain sense of resignation—or put more positively, an acceptance of the way things are. American students get so excited talking about different issues—"Let's save the world!" and that kind of thing. That's the way Americans do, but we just don't feel like acting that way.

Richard: Americans are looked at as being naive?

Keiko: Right. "How naive they are!"

Morgan: Especially when dealing with abstractions.

Tony: I feel that Japanese who are working in grass roots movements in this country feel very frustrated because they're not able to get their message across to people. Maybe people aren't listening. Or if they're getting it at all they're not understanding it. Or if they're understanding it, they're not prepared to do anything about it. Japanese activists must find this really frustrating.

Tanaka: It's difficult for Japanese to coalesce around an abstract idea. That's why it's necessary to find a different route.

Keiko: That's why natural scientists and social scientists are failing in this country, because they cannot appeal to the senses or perceptions. Japanese people can really understand what environmentalists are talking about rationally, but they cannot really feel it. How can we really convince them? I myself feel that literature is one of the few means.

Tanaka: During the 60s there was really a social collision in Japan. People were fighting, especially the students. There were a lots of social movements, a lot of opposition and confrontation. But as society moved into a more mature form, Japanese

people went back to their roots, so to speak, where they rediscovered their necessity to find harmony within their social lives, within their social existence. What Japanese would like to do now is look for a form of society which incorporates that feeling of Japanese harmony and then move forward to change society into some kind of ecologically framed society, working through the harmonious sort of sensibilities that Japanese people naturally have within their society. There's a great deal of frustration in society. How can we go from this society where we are now to a "soft landing"? How can we wind it down? After the 1960s the capitalistic system in Japan grew up very strongly. All the small opposition movements were cut away. The left in Japan now only exists in very isolated little groups here and there. So really the left is now effectively ineffectual against the economic system that exists in Japan at the moment. The only way the economic system of the country can be changed is through a nurturing of all different kinds of cooperatives—consumer cooperatives, worker cooperatives, and so on. At the moment, these movements are beginning to grow up within the cities. And because in the cities there are all kinds of groups based on single issues like education, local pollution, energy, etc., then hopefully the cooperatives can form a kind of nucleus for pulling these issues together and then can make the whole city an activist force against the old economic system. Now the problem in the countryside is that—and this is related to the recent GATT agreements and the agreements with the U.S. over food imports—Japanese agriculture is beginning to move into an era of, basically, disaster. Japanese agriculture is really going to get hit hard, because of cheap rice coming in and so forth. Now, in the cities there are lots of people who would like to get out of the cities and back to the country. Some of these people who are working in the cooperatives in the cities can be transported out to the areas which are now becoming depopulated. If these movements can start working back in the other way, this can begin to form an organic meshing of the countryside and the cities, with regard to the cooperative movements and that could begin to work against the economic system and effect overall social change in the country.

Brian: That sounds like a great model. It's a lot like what we talk about in Vermont, because Vermont's a place where lots of people who lived in the cities and got sick of them have come to try to create something new. The problem in Vermont is that in the 1980s, moving out of the city went from being something that really conscious, alternative-oriented people did to something that a lot of people started doing because it became fashionable. All of a sudden we had this influx of people from the cities who now were bringing their city and suburban lifestyles with them! So we had to spend a lot of time fighting new housing developments, big highway projects, and so on in the rural areas. One of the things that Prof. Yamaguchi talks about is that with the rise of the information society it's possible for people to move out into the country and maintain contact with the cities. There are some good things about that, but we've also seen the downside of that in Vermont where we have this phenomenon called "telecommuting"—which I can't completely put down because I do some of it myself. But there are also people doing much more corporate-style activities in the rural areas, hooked up to their modem and fax machine, doing accounting projects for big corporations.

Richard: I think another pressure on agriculture in Japan has been the fact that despite what the LDP has traditionally said about wanting to maintain food self-sufficiency, there's been a lot of pressure to develop farmland within the cities—Tokyo, for example. Taxes have been increased on agricultural land, particularly inside the city

limits, for the purpose of using the land for development projects. The rhetoric of the new parties follows the line, “We need to improve the quality of life here, and the way to improve the quality of life is to have bigger homes with larger gardens”—which means paving over the agricultural land.

Brian: There’s a pretty strong network of coops around food and some other areas, but what else is happening that represents important steps in that direction?

Tanaka: The first stage is consumer cooperatives, and there are quite a number of those, and they’ve been well-researched. And then the workers’ collectives that are starting up. And the next stage, which is just beginning to start but not really working yet, is the producers’ collectives. But unless these get well underway there’s really no hope that the economy can make a “soft landing.”

Richard: It will be a “hard landing” rather than a “soft landing.”

Tanaka: People who are living in Japanese society at the moment, people who are working in the companies, are basically being used like machines, being made to work very hard. And they’re very frustrated. They would like to get out of it, but they can’t. Japanese always explain the life of individuals in society with the metaphor of a railroad track. They’re on the track, they’re going down the track, and can’t get off the track. You go to elementary school, high school, university, you enter a company, you get your house loan, you get your salary loan. And there’s no way off the track. So the significance of the cooperative movement is to make an escape route, so that there’s some way to get off the track for people who are really frustrated and don’t want to be there and want to find a way out of this crazy social situation that they find themselves in. But the interesting thing about Japanese society, and the thing that Europeans and Americans probably find very difficult to understand, is that the way that human relationships work in this country make it very difficult for people to break away from the situations they are in. If people have arguments and disagree, if they have face-to-face confrontation, then they can break away. But usually they don’t, because the emphasis is on good harmonious human relationships. Even if people have something they’re upset about, they say, “Well, never mind. Let still be nice to each other.” And people can’t break away. The companies and the people who are employed by the companies want to hold each other in this kind of harmonious embrace.

Tony: An “embrace of death!”

Tanaka: Yes!

Tony: In Japan people say *gaman* [endure the situation]. People have to put up with the frustrations because they can’t break away from the situation.

Tanaka: The whole purpose of the cooperatives and the agricultural communities that are trying to be formed in depopulated agricultural areas is to give these people a place where they can go and be embraced by something else, an escape route out of the conventional society, where they can break away from the embrace of the companies and the kind of work styles that exist, and get back to a traditional sense of Japanese community somewhere else. In other words, to give them a way to break away and then to form an alternative society and economic system within the country and to try to work for social change through that.

Richard: This “embrace of death” you were talking about before—from a Western perspective it seems as if “harmony” in Japan can be easily coopted because it’s easy for people to say “Let’s keep harmonious relationships, so don’t upset the status

quo.” Let companies continue doing what they’re doing. Let politicians continue what they’re doing. I see a “deep” sense of harmony—the “muratopia” sense of harmony—that could develop in Japan. But at the same time I see a very “negative” sense of harmony that could develop. I think the same thing happens when Japanese look at the United States in terms of us trying to build a Green movement on democratic principles. But if a Green movement develops in Japan it will develop along these principles of harmony and *wa*. In the United States I think it will develop along the lines of democracy. But as Japanese look to America, they tend to equate democracy with individualism in the bad sense—selfishness, self-indulgence, “give me, give me.” Japanese can see the democratic impulse of the U.S. Greens as being easily coopted by people who would say, “Well, what democracy really means is that we have a right to be self-indulgent.

Brian: At one of the meetings I had with Mr. Sakai, he said, “How can you base a movement on democracy when democracy is just people being left alone to do their own thing?” This was basically what his interpretation was.

Tanaka: A lot of people in Japan don’t believe that democracy can properly take root in this country.

Tony: I would add that it really depends on how you define or interpret what democracy means. In fact in Japanese society at the moment, it’s probably true to say that decisions are not made by having a vote and taking a majority decision. Decisions are usually made by some form of consensus-making. Once everybody’s more or less in agreement, they go with it, rather like the way political parties in the new coalition government have been behaving.

Brian: Certainly in the U.S. Greens the consensus model is what most, though not all, of us have really been trying to propose.

Tony: If you reinterpret democracy to be something else, such as participatory, grass roots democracy, I think you eventually end up with something that is pretty close to the Japanese, or Asian, way of thinking, which is more a consensual kind of decision-making process. In fact, I don’t think there’s all that much difference. To relate this to the frustrations many people, and particularly young people, in this society feel about their ineffectuality with regard to social change, they see their opportunity to effect social change solely through the ballot box. In this country, as in other countries, the word “democracy” has been coopted. Everybody believes that they effect social change through the ballot box, whereas in fact they’re not effecting very much at all. The same thing is true of “communism” and “socialism.” These words have been used in such a way that they don’t mean what they purport to. The same thing with democracy. Everybody’s using the word “democracy” but they aren’t really looking at the referent and trying to figure out just exactly what that is. They’ve taken something completely different, called it “democracy,” and said, “Hey, we have a democratic system.”

Brian: In the U.S. the one advantage that gives us is when we propose an alternative in the name of democracy, there’s a certain openness to listening, because the rhetoric of democracy is so much a part of the system’s official rationalizations for itself.

Richard: I would suggest that any democratic rhetoric that was brought into Japan would probably receive a negative reaction. The rhetoric that’s appropriate for Japan in the same way that the rhetoric of democracy is appropriate for the U.S. would be the rhetoric of harmony. In other words, what the Greens in Japan are trying to promote is

“deep” harmony in the same way that Greens in the U.S. are trying to promote “deep” democracy.

Tony: What Japanese people are looking for is a more harmonious, consensual, social decision-making process which is a Japanese channel, or maybe an Asian channel, possibly effective throughout the Asian region. But on a global level they’ll have to find a whole new way of interacting with different people and different cultures throughout the world.

Tanaka: The way that English-speaking people cope with conflicts is different from the way Japanese-speaking people cope with conflicts. If two people have completely different opinions, we talk and collide, and this is the end of it—forever. Or we try to find a common way. So we don’t have a real method for dealing with different opinions or resolving conflicts.

Tony: What usually happens is that people come to a consensus. If they didn’t come to a consensus, they would forever be arguing with each other and it would produce a very bitter kind of atmosphere or feeling. People would fly apart from each other, they wouldn’t speak to each other, they wouldn’t have anything to do with each other, which can be very difficult, in a workplace for example, if you have people who are never talking to each other. And it does happen in Japanese workplaces! People just never talk to each other, and they don’t seem to have any kind of method for resolving their differences. The problem, as I see it, with the consensual method is that it usually means effectively at least some of the people within the group do not agree. So they have to suppress their feelings and opinions.

Brian: When the U.S. Greens do consensus, we had to formalize it because it’s against people’s instincts somewhat. But when somebody disagrees, we’re careful to make sure that they voice what their disagreement is. Then they can make a decision, either to go along with the group or to leave the group or to suggest more discussion. Do people here say what their disagreement is, and then go along? Or do they just completely hold it in?

Richard: I’d say that the style you’ve just described represents what would be an ideal synthesis between the traditional Western approach of being able to speak your mind and the traditional Japanese approach of seeking consensus. What you’ve just said preserves both: seeking consensus but allowing space for the minority to have a different point of view. I would hope that in the same way that Greens in the West have learned to move towards consensus, Greens in Japan could learn to move a little bit towards allowing a minority to openly express its opinions. That would be a middle way.

Tony: The kind of election that Green movements have been getting involved in to an extent in Japan is the proportional representation section of the Upper House election. If you managed to get a million votes, you would probably get one representative. It would seem, then, that Green organizations could pool their resources, get together, form a Green coalition, and thereby garner more votes to get the million to get one or two people elected. Several months before the election several of these groups do get together and they talk, but so far they haven’t managed to form an umbrella group. Maybe two or three of the groups will come together and do something, but the others may feel there’s not enough common ground for them to work together. It’s a fragmented situation.

Brian: In the Green movement that we've been trying to create in the U.S. people do some local electoral work, but for the whole national organization the focus is on bringing together people from many different directions.

Tony: What Japanese find difficult to understand about the West is how we can have bitter, violent discussions and yet still remain friends.

Keiko: I really envy that.

Tony: If Japanese people have an argument or a violent discussion about some particular issue, that's it. The human relationship will be broken and there's a chance that they would never get together and talk to each other again. For some reason, we can have violent disagreements—

Brian: Oh yes, all the time!

Tony: —and yet we still remain friends; we can still remain in the same movement. The basic human bond and the basic bond of whatever it is that brought us together in the first place, the philosophical or the political bond, is not broken.

Tanaka: Why is that?

Tony: Because we separate the issues from the person.

Morgan: In Japan are there books and periodicals devoted to environmentalism in the way there are in the United States? In other words, do ideas circulate about ecology among the Japanese public in some abstract way? Or is it largely a local response with few broad movements?

Tony: Publications are starting. There aren't that many books on the shelf on ecological and environmental issues, but there's a hell of a lot more than there were a couple of years ago.

Richard: A lot of environmental writers overseas haven't been translated into Japanese yet.

Tony: There are a certain number of translations available. In fact most of the books that are available now are translations. There's very little original Japanese writing on Green politics, however. And I think that the Japanese people themselves have got to start writing it. If Japanese people are reading something that's written by a foreigner, there's something in their heads saying, "This is what a foreigner's saying, but it might not necessarily apply to us."

Tanaka: People read these things in order to get concepts, moral concepts for themselves, to learn from these things, and internalize these concepts into their philosophical thinking system.

Keiko: That's so remote from our feelings though. That's why Japanese people are sort of picky, just picking up something from the books and not really systematizing it.

Tony: And at the moment these concepts are not being translated into concrete action in the world for social change. It's not at that stage yet. Publication has really got to grow and people have got to read it.