

Evanoff, Richard (1993). "I Among Others: The Cooperative Vision." Review of Yokota Katsumi, *I Among Others*. *Japan Environment Monitor* 54:6–7, 19.

(Adapted from "Learning from Japanese Cooperatives," an academic paper to be published later this year.)

Yokota, Katsumi, *I Among Others*, translated by the Alternative Exchange and Translation Workers' Collective, 1991 (127 pp., ¥1680).

Yokota Katsumi has written a very comprehensive book on the activities, principles, and vision of the Kanagawa branch of the Seikatsu Club cooperative. The Kanagawa branch was established in Yokohama in 1971 and is part of the larger Seikatsu organization, which has branches in 12 prefectures and a total membership of 219,000. The last issue of JEM contained a general introduction to Japan's involvement in the international cooperative movement and interviews with two representatives from the Seikatsu Club. In this review-essay I'd like to summarize and analyze some of the key ideas of *I Among Others*.

Seikatsu Club is primarily a food coop, but its basic principles, goals, and form of organization suggest that it has vastly wider social aspirations. Seikatsu's basic organizational unit is the local *han*, which consists of seven to 10 households. The responsibilities of the *han* include gathering orders from individual members, passing on the orders to the local center, receiving products from the delivery truck, and distributing them to members of the *han*. The process sounds simple enough, but there are some extremely sophisticated ideas behind it, which Yokota's book explicates in eye-opening detail.

In the traditional market system the flow is from producers to consumers: producers produce goods which they must then advertise and persuade people to buy. The cooperative system, on the other hand, reverses this flow: consumers take the initiative by telling producers exactly what they want. The principle of *sanchoku*—"direct from the producer"—creates a relationship of interdependence between producers and consumers. Consumers are provided with quality products at a fair price and producers are provided with a secure livelihood at a reasonable income. Neither side has to subsidize the profit-skimmers of capitalism.

The advantage to producers is that, since they receive the orders in advance they can anticipate how much of a given product will be needed in the coming month and are often able to adjust production accordingly. Producers are thus able to fill orders directly to meet actual needs and are not simply producing vast quantities of a product which they must subsequently try to sell on the "open market"—with no guarantee that they will be able to sell everything that they have produced. The cooperative system thus eliminates overproduction and waste, improves efficiency, reduces the stress caused by differences in supply and demand, and helps to stabilize prices. Ultimately it provides more security for both producers and consumers: consumers can be assured that their demand for goods will be met (without being coerced by advertising into buying products they don't really need in the first place) while producers can be assured that the goods they produce will be sold (without needing to maintain large inventories).

The *han* system has several advantages over conventional stores. With the *han* system there is no need to invest in property and buildings. Even though there are still the expenses of maintaining an office for the cooperative, paying salaries to coordinators and delivery personnel, and servicing delivery trucks, overhead is still considerably lower for *han*-based cooperatives than for conventional stores. There is no need to hire managerial experts whose job it is to insure that the supply of goods in the store roughly matches actual consumer demand. Delivering directly to the *han* also gives members direct involvement in at least part of the labor process. The net result is that overall costs can be reduced and efficiency improved, resulting in lower prices for consumers.

Seikatsu consciously sees itself as providing an alternative to consumerism. The term “seikatsusha citizens” is used to describe members who are interested in creating an autonomous lifestyle for themselves, who want to be actively involved in making the decisions that affect their lives, and who are able to distinguish between mere consumerism and a more genuine quality of life. The phrase “quality of life” refers not only to eating healthy food, but also to the effective utilization of time, meaningful and creative work, and the kind of fulfillment that comes from individual and collective accomplishment rather than from the mere possession of material goods.

Seikatsu’s goal, then, is to offer individuals an alternative to modern capitalistic consumerism—in Yokota’s words, “...to seek another (an alternative) lifestyle based on the idea of a conscientious consumer’s autonomy, not just a rebellion against or assimilation of the industrial society” (p. 14). Seikatsu promotes the active involvement of people in choosing the types of goods they really want rather than mere passive consumption. Mainstream consumers may feel they are making a choice between various products when in fact they are often simply being manipulated into buying products they neither need nor want. Advertising creates artificial desires where none existed before. Fashions routinely change so that people will want to buy more things. “New improved products” convince consumers that the goods they already own are obsolete and must be replaced. Planned obsolescence insures that goods will in fact become obsolete in the short run and will be unrepairable, meaning that consumers will constantly have to be buying new products. All of this contributes to higher levels of consumption, the faster depletion of resources, the creation of vast amounts of waste—and, of course, ballooning profits for the already wealthy.

Seikatsu avoids many of these problems by selling only one type of each product. Superficial diversity is eliminated in an effort to offer one superior product that is suitable for most purposes. There is little real reason for marketing different versions of a single product in different size containers. Standardizing the size of containers makes them easier to recycle. Competition between brands is also eliminated, along with the need for superfluous but expensive advertising (the cost of which is passed on to consumers, of course). Each product is listed on the order form and no further advertising is considered necessary. As a result consumers are less apt to be manipulated and are ultimately more in control of their purchasing choices. Because the members are buying only a single brand, but in large quantities, they easily qualify for bulk rate discounts from the producers who supply Seikatsu.

Modern consumerism is based on buying the “best” product at the cheapest price, without considering the various processes that go into making the product. Seikatsu, on the other hand, checks the source of its goods to insure their safety and quality.

Production methods must be environmentally sound and nonexploitive, with a concern for the health, safety, and fair compensation of workers.

Seikatsu is concerned about the environmental impact of its products in several respects. First, the cooperative insures that environmentally sound processes are used at the point of production. Organic methods of farming with a minimum use of artificial pesticides and fertilizers are the norm. The speed of the distribution system—direct from producer to consumer—eliminates the need for storage, and thus the need for chemical preservatives or irradiation.

In addition the products themselves must be environmentally safe. Seikatsu developed its own original natural soap in 1979, for example, to replace synthetic detergents. This action was taken as part of a campaign to totally ban synthetic detergents, which involved direct petitions (220,000 signatures were collected in Kanagawa) and discussions with government officials. The discussions were ultimately unsuccessful—Yokota writes, “...we were all surprised and disappointed to know how few politicians were interested in the people’s quality of life” (p. 12). But the experience gave the members their first taste of grass roots citizens’ activism.

Because there is no need for products to be attractively displayed in stores, packaging can be simple and recyclable, reducing the total amount of garbage. Moreover, the efficiency of the system leaves no products unsold at the end of the day which must be thrown out. The bulk ordering system means that instead of ordering specific cuts of pork, for example, households can band together to “buy the whole pig” (see pp. 9-10). If every household were to order the same cuts of meat, other cuts would be wasted and costs driven higher. With the bulk ordering system, however, waste is eliminated and costs are reduced.

Since the cooperative system downgrades consumer lifestyles, unnecessary consumption can be reduced or eliminated altogether. The focus is on satisfying genuine human needs rather than on creating artificial wants purely so that corporations can sell more goods and reap larger profits. If the same principles Seikatsu applies to food could be extended to manufactured goods, there would be less of the “throw-away” mentality which both consumes precious resources and produces enormous amounts of garbage. By stressing quality, durability, and a simplified lifestyle over fashion and conspicuous consumption, goods can be made to last and planned obsolescence can be eliminated.

Seikatsu is also particularly concerned with empowering its members. Members are able to have a real voice in the operation of the cooperative, and through citizens’ initiatives and collective political action they are increasingly able to have a real voice in Japanese society as well. One particular area of concern for Seikatsu is the empowerment of women, and over 80 percent of the organization’s elected board members are women. There are also efforts to empower the aged, the handicapped, and the otherwise disadvantaged. In place of the government-centered, bureaucratic approach to welfare common in capitalistic societies, Seikatsu emphasizes self-help and local mutual assistance.

A key cooperative principle is that knowledge should be widely diffused within an organization rather than remain in the hands of specialists. When knowledge is democratized, so is power. By sharing work and rotating responsibilities participants are given hands-on involvement in the organization. They are able to know its inner workings through direct experience and do not need to rely on the leadership of “experts”

who often tend to form managerial elites within organizations. Member participation is thus the key principle on which the entire democratic structure of cooperatives is based. This principle is not widely appreciated among individuals in modern capitalistic societies, however, where democracy remains at an extremely superficial level. The general attitude is not one of self-reliance and independence, but rather one of dependency on major corporations to provide both employment and consumer goods, and on governments to provide security and services (called “entitlements” when given to the rich and “welfare” when given to the poor). The appropriate skills and attitudes that enable people to “do for themselves” are correspondingly weakened. In both Japanese and Western cooperatives one can still observe a certain amount of resistance towards the assumption of collective responsibilities. Responsibilities are often denied in the name of a self-indulgent “freedom,” but it is precisely the assumption of responsibilities that will result in real, rather than merely superficial, forms of freedom.

While the emphasis in Seikatsu is on participatory democracy and face-to-face encounters within the *han*, there is nonetheless a need for large-scale coordination. Collective buying achieves “economies of scale” not as a result of marketing power but as a result of a cooperative’s membership base. The organizational structure of Seikatsu, however, provides for a strong measure of direct democracy. Ultimate sovereignty resides in the members. At the General Assembly, which meets annually, Seikatsu members elect a Board of Directors which is responsible for implementing decisions made by the membership as a whole. Policies are determined at the General Assembly on the principle of one member, one vote. Various committees are also formed to deal with specific projects. A high degree of national and international cooperation is equally stressed.

Yokota observes that consumerism in Japan has recently moved away from the idea of “I want what everybody else has” towards the idea of “I want what nobody else has” (see pp. 121-124). From a Western progressive point of view the whole concept of creating an “individual lifestyle” for oneself feeds directly into modern consumerism, since it typically emphasizes defining oneself in terms of the “different” products one owns rather than in terms of genuine personality differences. The media fuss over “lifestyles” is not about enhancing individual “originality,” but rather about enhancing corporate profits—and advertising revenues. While I myself am a bit wary, Yokota sees the new individualistic awareness in Japan as having the potential to go beyond the shallow consumerism of Japan’s “crystal clan” towards the creation of a demassified economy in which consumers have greater power to dictate what is produced. Yokota feels that the developing sense of “individualism” in Japan is the first step in moving away from a “nation-oriented society” towards a “citizen-oriented society.”

Cooperatives such as Seikatsu see a possibility for creating, in addition to the private and public sectors, an “associative sphere” based on producer and consumer cooperatives, cooperative financial institutions, and cooperative forms of welfare. The cooperative principle need not be limited to food but can be extended to all sorts of goods and services. Because the profit motive is eliminated, cooperative organizations tend to be more efficient than traditional corporations. Producer cooperatives are frequently able to provide higher wages and more job security. The emphasis on democratic self-management can also lead to higher levels of social empowerment and job satisfaction.

The economic system proposed by cooperatives such as Seikatsu is based on local production for local consumption. This decentralized model is the antithesis of the “global market” model. “Free trade” agreements often override local quality and safety standards, and also enable multinational corporations to more easily shift production to countries where wages are lower and environmental restrictions are laxer. On the export side, “free trade” causes untold misery to the workers who lose their jobs because of international competition, plant closings, and corporate “restructuring.” On the import side, “free trade” breaks down traditional distribution networks which, while sometimes cumbersome and inefficient, are nonetheless reliable. It is precisely these established local relationships which cause so much consternation to international “free traders,” who complain of “invisible trade barriers.” When these local relationships begin to break down, however, communities also begin to disintegrate. Cooperatives help to reestablish these relationships and keep communities intact. Whereas goods are impersonally sold to the highest bidder in a market economy, the personal needs of both producers and consumers are taken into account in a cooperative economy.

On the international trade issue Yokota states that Seikatsu is “...against the complete liberalization of agricultural trade, because we believe every nation should support its own basic food production” (p. 67). Yokota writes, however, not out of narrow nationalistic “self-interest” (as most writers on the issue do in Japan) but from the sincere conviction that “every nation” should be moving towards forms of self-sufficiency which are both ecologically sustainable and in accordance with local cultural traditions. Yokota criticizes Japan for lowering its rate of agricultural self-sufficiency at the same time that it is increasing the amount of industrial manufactured goods its sells in the international market. The dominant trend of Japanese society has been away from agriculture towards increasing industrialization and urbanization, i.e., away from self-sufficiency towards the global market. This shift bolsters the profits of transnational corporations more than it satisfies the needs of ordinary people in local communities. (Witness how many regular workers in Japan complain of diminishing standards of living despite Japan’s rapid economic “growth”—what kind of environment and quality of life is all this “growth” leading to anyway, and who exactly is benefiting? Certainly it is not the common people.) The nationalistic arguments for agricultural “self-sufficiency” touted by the Japanese government and ideologues would be more convincing if Japan were taking other steps to become more self-sufficient in food production, such as diversifying its agricultural base to include other basic foodstuffs in addition to rice and protecting existing agricultural lands from urban development. From the ruling government’s point of view the main issue is undoubtedly not agricultural self-sufficiency in the first place, but rather retaining the rural vote and maintaining Japan’s position in the global economy. From Seikatsu’s point of view, however, the main issue is in fact agricultural self-sufficiency and the creation of alternative local economies. Consistency, however, should lead Seikatsu to the conclusion that disengagement from the global economy not only involves restricting imports of foreign rice and oranges, but also limiting exports of Japanese cars and consumer goods.

The global economy poses problems not only for local communities in so-called “First World” nations, but also for communities in the “Third World.” Development schemes typically focus on rapid industrialization, cash crops, and infrastructure “megaprojects” that are designed to pull developing countries into the global economy.

The result, however, is often the destruction of indigenous lifestyles, which are both self-sufficient and ecologically sustainable. The cooperative model of development focuses on maintaining local economies and avoiding the essentially imperialistic relationships that typically evolve between First World and Third World countries. Local production for local consumption replaces production for the purpose of foreign exchange.

International trade is not necessarily precluded in this model, however. Seikatsu currently has trade relations with local communities on the Negros Islands in the Philippines, for example. When sugar prices fell in the mid-1970s the entire economy of the islands collapsed. Since the land had been used exclusively to grow crops for export rather than crops for local consumption, malnutrition and starvation became serious problems. (This pattern repeats itself in famines throughout the world: during the recent famine in Sudan cash crops continued to be exported to First World countries on the pretense that contributing to the global economy would earn the country “hard currency” to enable it to buy food; the simpler solution, of course, would have been to use the land not affected by drought to grow food for consumption within the country rather than cash crops for export — but doing so would have prevented the powers-that-be from reaping any profits.)

Traditional relief agencies in the Negros Islands attempted to revive export-led growth, but this approach required constant new infusions of outside financial assistance (either from corporate loans at interest or donations from well-meaning folks like you and me) and did nothing to address the problem of food self-sufficiency or unequal income distribution.

A different approach was developed by the Negros Council for Peace and People’s Development (NCPD). The NCPD promotes group farming of rice, corn, vegetables, and livestock on unused land in order to sustain local populations. In addition local groups are encouraged to grow cash crops, such as mangoes, bananas, and vegetables for export. Japanese cooperatives, including Seikatsu, annually import 700 tons of these bananas directly from the producers, bypassing conventional profit-skimming distribution channels. Local producers avoid using chemical fertilizers, not only for ecological reasons but also to decrease costs. By this point in the article, readers should be able to guess who benefits from the oversale of fertilizers to poor farmers.

The goal of the cooperative movement is a more egalitarian and democratic society in which everyone is able to have a meaningful livelihood, an ecologically sound environment, and ready access to the basic necessities of life. Consequently cooperatives emphasize decentralization, local control, citizens’ participation, independent politics — and the basic idea that production should be aimed at satisfying genuine human needs for the many rather than generating excessive profits for the few.