Migrant Workers, State and Society in Contemporary Japan

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OVER THE PAST two decades the Japanese economy has expanded into the second largest in the world. This enormous rate of growth has profoundly impacted the rest of the world through Japanese export products, direct investments, Japanese aid (in dollar terms now exceeding that of the U.S.) and Japanese technology, fashion and popular culture. This growth has also been accompanied by massive social changes within the country: intensive urbanization, rural-urban migration and integration of the country through high-speed transportation and telecommunication links. Other changes have occurred directly because of economic shifts, for example, types of employment, patterns of work and women's labor force participation levels. Economic expansion has in fact outstripped the availability of labor despite technological solutions (robotization in manufacturing, the automation of most banking operations and so on) and the increase in female employment. This is in part because of declining fertility since the 1950s. In fact, the Japanese population is now actually shrinking. This combination of labor shortage at home and very visible Japanese presence overseas has made the country a magnet for foreign workers. Moreover, the presence of relatively large numbers of foreigners in a society that perceives itself (even if wrongly) as homogeneous, has triggered intense debates about ethnicity, human rights, Japan's role in the world and the so-called "internationalization" (*kokusaika*) of Japanese society. Some very practical issues, such as housing policy, have also been called into question.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMPACT OF FOREIGN WORKERS

The presence of foreign workers is much more than simply a "technical" problem to be dealt with by the immigration department and the labor ministry since it raises fundamental questions of social epistemology. The following three examples will clearly illustrate this. The only category of (legal) unskilled or semi-skilled workers permitted entry to Japan are the descendants of Japanese migrants. In practice this almost always means Brazilians and occasionally Peruvians of Japanese descent. These people, physically Japanese, but culturally, linguistically and one might even say psychologically, South American, pose very real questions as to the meaning of Japanese identity. There is uncertainty as to how they should be treated in Japan where their presence threatens the idea of the homogeneity of the Japanese, and raises questions about the relationship of Japanese minorities overseas to their host societies, especially when compared with other Asian migrant communities. Why, for example, is it possible to speak of "overseas Chinese" or the Chinese "diaspora" and its

now worldwide network of trading interests, when it is very difficult to speak of Japanese communities outside of Japan in the same terms?

If ethnic identity is threatened by the presence of South American Japanese, the presence of large numbers of illegal women workers challenges other forms of identity as well as the meaning of modern Japanese history. These women come mainly from Southeast Asia (especially the Philippines and Thailand), Taiwan and South Korea to work in the sex and entertainment industries. Several issues are involved. Japan, like Thailand, has long had a sizable indigenous sex industry. The economic boom, however, bringing with it unprecedented affluence, has enormously expanded this business at the very moment when widening employment possibilities were making it less necessary for Japanese women to consider entering this sector. The expansion of the sex industry, staffed largely by foreigners, has not been entirely welcomed by Japanese women, especially by wives. Its very existence calls into question the nature of Japanese marriages and the roles and status of women, as well as bringing into Japan some currently very topical issues such as that of AIDS. When placed in an international historical context, it is also obvious that these female workers are all coming from former Japanese colonies or countries invaded by or heavily influenced by Japan during the war. Moreover, all are societies receiving large amounts of Japanese investment or aid, or both. This fact has prompted debate about Japan's relationship to the immediate past and whether the colonial and military oppression of the 1920s-40s has been replaced by economic and sexual domination in the 1980s and 1990s.

The third example is suggested by the presence of substantial numbers of Middle Eastern workers, especially Iranians, and of some South Asian workers, especially Bangladeshis, who are Muslims. Inevitably, some marriages and other liaisons have occurred, resulting in the almost unprecedented conversion of Japanese women to Islam and the transformation of their dress, diet and lifestyle in appropriate ways. Although the number of individual conversions is not especially significant, it becomes so when seen against the background of broad cultural themes. Most Japanese avoid the discussion of religious issues, especially those involving transcendental theologies and absolutist ethics. This reticence is challenged by the presence of even a small Muslim minority. It becomes a serious obstacle when placed in the context of Japan's delicate diplomatic relationships with the various national and religious communities of the Middle East and Muslim Southeast Asia, and when seen in very practical terms, such as the provision of *halal* food for hospitalized patients.

These examples illustrate that the presence of migrant workers in Japan poses questions and triggers debate of a kind rarely faced before. These include, for example, questions of human rights for those workers who are in the country, legally or otherwise, and who are contributing to the Japanese economy. They draw attention to Japan's role in the total international division of labor, as workers from poorer countries come to Japan and ultimately contribute to the economic expansion of Japan rather than of their own needy societies. Beyond these questions and linked to them are two issues that are quite new in Japan. The first is the impact on the urban landscape (where most foreign workers are concentrated) of conspicuous numbers of non-Japanese who need housing, employment, public transportation and health care, or who may even become involved in criminal activities. The second is the impact of foreign workers on Japanese patterns of social stratification. Japan takes pride in its high levels of social equality, low income differentials and minimal class consciousness.

Social discrimination in the past has been focused primarily on ethnic minorities—Korean, Okinawan and Ainu people, for example. The presence of foreign workers from outside of Japan (most Japanese-Koreans have been resident at least since the war) poses the very significant question of whether a new underclass is emerging in this supposedly "classless" society. Discourses of ethnicity and class intersect in an especially interesting way in Japan today and pose some major theoretical challenges for comparative social analysis.

EMPIRICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE FOREIGN WORKER COMMUNITY

The issue of foreign workers has become a major topic of comment and debate within Japan as well as in the home countries of the workers migrating to Japan. Even as late as the early 1980s, Japan was a basically closed country as far as the legal or illegal employment of foreigners was concerned (excluding the well-established "resident alien" Korean and Chinese communities, and small numbers of managers and professionals with foreign-owned firms). Today, however, Japan has become a major recipient of migrant labor. Some categories of workers, for instance managerial level personnel in foreign companies, language teachers and foreign students who take on permitted part-time jobs, are both legally and socially visible and have full access to judicial protection, education and the national health care system.

While these professional-level foreign workers are of some interest in their own right, their overall significance in Japanese society is being overwhelmed by two other major groups—legal, unskilled guest workers and illegal workers. The first of these two groups consists almost exclusively of South Americans of Japanese descent. The number of these workers has grown ten-fold between 1988 and 1991 to a total of 71,495, mainly of Brazilian origin. These workers, while having legal immigration status, face their own characteristic problems. They are mainly concentrated in unskilled or semi-skilled activities, for example, in the auto parts industry, rubber factories and scrap metal works. While these jobs are relatively low paying by Japanese standards, they yield incomes up to 500% higher than those obtainable at home. Among the problems faced by this group are difficulties with language and culture. Despite their Japanese descent, and hence appearance, many do not have any Japanese language ability and fewer still are literate in the language. Consequently they face problems similar to those experienced by many other foreign workers: access to health care, lack of friendships with Japanese and cultural stress, intensified in their case by the local supposition that they must understand Japanese customs.

The second group, and by far the most diverse socially and ethnically, is illegal foreign workers. The immigration authorities estimate that there are approximately 100,000 individuals in Japan who have entered legally, usually as tourists, but have remained to work after the expiration of their entry permits. Human rights activists and church groups concerned with such workers estimate that the official estimate is far too low and the actual number is probably double that number. The research described in this article concentrates primarily on this group but will also consider the relationships between legal and illegal foreign workers, who in some cases are competing for the same jobs and are blamed for the same social problems, such as rising crime in urban areas, where both groups are concentrated.

Although foreign workers, especially illegal ones, are the subject of constant comment in the Japanese media, it is interesting to note that very little hard data exists (and as we have suggested, even the immigration

department's own data is suspect). The research in hand has four main objectives. The first is to provide a basic profile of the community of foreign workers: the size of individual national groups, age and sex distribution and occupations in Japan. Social networks and strategies for seeking jobs and accommodations are outlined along with access to legal aid and health care, income levels, diet and cultural problems. Patterns of competition are noted, both with other foreign workers and with Japanese day laborers and internal migrants, especially those from Okinawa and from the poorer, rural and snow-bound prefectures of northern Honshū (the main island of the Japanese archipelago). These issues are set within the context of national immigration policy, the health care system and such human rights provisions as do exist.

Secondly, research shows that the different subsections of the foreign worker community have varying relationships with the wider society. Relevant variables are the country of origin (including the way it is perceived in Japan), ethnicity, sex and the type of occupation engaged in while in Japan. Until about 1988 a high percentage of foreign workers were women, largely from Taiwan, the Philippines, South Korea, Thailand and China, who were in demand for the enormous Japanese entertainment industry. While this demand has remained relatively constant, demand for male workers has dramatically increased since autumn 1992, especially in construction, unskilled and dirty industrial work and in activities with relatively high health hazards (from fumes and pollutants, for example), such as the dry cleaning industry. This has triggered flows of men not only from such "traditional" sources as Taiwan but also from new sources such as Malaysia, Bangladesh, China, Nigeria and Iran. Detailed analysis of the adaptation; networks; ethnic acceptance levels; economic niches; and legal, cultural, housing and medical problems of each of these major groups is being undertaken. Furthermore, patterns of geographical spread and location, both within the larger Japanese cities and throughout the rest of the country are being studied as such workers are moving in increasing numbers to jobs in suburban areas, smaller towns and even in the countryside.

The third focal point of research is the sources of migration themselves. Evidence exists of well-organized recruiting syndicates in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, together with informal networks and agencies initiated by returned workers. In some cases these even include Japanese language schools (in the Philippines, for example) that prepare young women to work as bar hostesses and in similar occupations that require basic Japanese. The impact on other cultures of migration to Japan is also a major part of this third focus, and issues here center on the effects on the home communities. Aside from the economic impact and the remittance network, study is being made of marital patterns, child-rearing and the long-term cultural effects of the workers themselves when after several years they return, in some cases, to another and very different culture. This has had to be contextualized in relation to contemporary Japanese realities, such as the involvement of the *yakuza* (Japanese criminal syndicates), local labor agents and the obvious connivance of the Japanese immigration authorities.

The fourth, and most theoretical dimension, is the application of empirical findings to some of the broader questions. These questions include the relationship between Japanese official aid (Overseas Development Assistance [ODA]) and the flow of illegal workers from recipient countries, as well as Japanese perceptions of the foreign workers, an issue that becomes more problematic when such workers are associated with rising crime rates. The media also

plays a role in representing and constructing the issues as being "problems." Methodological difficulties arise in undertaking research on a group that is often hard to identify. From the project as a whole, policy questions have inevitably arisen. These include the issues of human rights provisions, rationalization of the existing immigration and residence laws and the provision of social services and medical care along with the protection of the labor laws to all categories of foreign workers.

Interestingly, the neglected problem of foreign workers in Japan opens up the possibility of developing a more general model of Japanese society. The mechanisms by which Japanese society includes or excludes new influences and flows of people and ideas relate directly to current Japanese debates about internationalization. The problem of foreign workers raises questions about the degree of internationalization, the role of the "other" in Japanese culture and the allegedly postmodern qualities of the country. It also relates to the attendant belief that as an information/knowledge economy comes to predominate, so a new lumpen proletariat of outsiders is being created to do the laborious, menial and dirty tasks that remain.

A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

There is a great need for the comparative study of the cultural and sociological characteristics of European and Asian societies. This is particularly true for the contrasting natures of Japanese and European social organization as these radically different social formations increasingly encounter each other on the world stage. Europe has long and deep experience with the problem of ethnicity (including issues of minorities and nationalities), a problem that is now arising in Japan because of the influx of (mostly illegal) foreign workers. An important question centers around the mechanisms by which different societies include or exclude new influences. European societies have accepted large numbers of people from alien cultures, while Japan, although excellent at assimilating ideas and techniques, has not been able or willing to accept people of different ethnicity and alternative customs and religions.

Europe, of course, is diverse, and there are widely differing experiences in the reception and assimilation of foreign workers as well as refugees among the countries of the western part of the continent alone. Management styles vary in addressing the social problems that often accompany the arrival of workers of very different cultural and religious backgrounds. One common factor, which points to the necessity of maintaining a historical perspective, has been the colonial record of many European societies. In almost all cases, except for Germany and Scandinavia, the major source of foreign workers has been former colonies. A parallel phenomenon is now occurring in Japan, where a high percentage of foreign workers are coming from China, Korea and Southeast Asia, areas that have all been under Japanese domination in the fairly recent past, and all places in which Japan has a major economic interest at present.

In the case of foreign workers in Germany, people who came originally as migrant workers have, for the most part, not returned home but have settled in Germany, and their communities have taken on the demographic and sociological characteristics of a natural society. This has not occurred in Japan, however, where the social structure of the migrant worker community is anything but natural in terms of age and sex distribution, types of occupation and ethnic background. There are, for example, large numbers of Filipino, Taiwanese and Chinese women, usually unmarried, but large numbers of Bangladeshi and Thai men, many of whom have families in their countries of origin. Little social

interaction takes place either between these different segments of the guest worker population or between the foreign workers and the resident Japanese population, except in the workplace. The generally low social status of most foreign workers, and the fact that most of these are actually illegal workers working in socially undesirable occupations, intensifies their alienation, marginality and vulnerability to exploitation.

Unlike Germany and other continental European countries, Japan does not have physically or administratively open borders. Virtually all foreign workers have consequently entered Japan as tourists, on cultural visas or officially as students, and then found work or overstayed their visas. Most are thus in the country with the knowledge or connivance of the immigration authorities. It is the immigration law that in a sense makes these workers illegal; and since they are illegal, they have no protection under the labor laws, a situation that raises serious questions about human rights. It also raises questions about international law, since a rapidly growing group of legal workers are Brazilians of Japanese descent who are allowed into Japan to do the types of jobs from which other Asians are legally excluded. However, these Brazilians are culturally remote from the modern Japanese norm.

Furthermore, it is increasingly obvious that foreign workers are not only being attracted to Japan by relatively high wage levels but also by the huge number of job vacancies that Japanese themselves are unable or unwilling to fill. The current labor shortage in Japan is not just a cyclical one; it is fundamentally a structural one caused in part by the rapid aging of the Japanese population. The de facto presence of the foreign worker community is creating a new proletariat in a Japan that perceives itself as overwhelmingly middle-class. In addition, this new class not only is a lumpen proletariat—rootless, unstable, legally unprotected and earning lower wages than the Japanese proletariat—but also is an "ethno-class" distinguished by its racial difference from the Japanese majority. The perception of cultural pluralism as "enriching" is largely absent from Japan, but the myth of cultural homogeneity has become an ideology, socially constructed and reinforced.

This calls into question the real meaning of the currently over-used term "internationalization." Studies have shown that in practice the term actually applies only to relatively superficial aspects of Japanese society, while the difficulties of assimilating people of even a slightly differing cultural background remain. This applies not only to foreign workers in low status jobs but also to the long-settled Korean minority and to Japanese "returnees," a category that includes people who have lived abroad for considerable periods of time and acquired foreign language skills and cultural knowledge, as well as foreign students (especially those who want to stay on in Japan to work for the long term after graduation). However, it is not enough to attribute these difficulties in tolerating pluralism to attitudes alone. The source of the problem lies deep in historical, geographical, cultural and sociological levels of Japanese civilization, and this must be carefully uncovered and analyzed.

The preceding discussion can be summarized as follows. First, Europe has a wealth of experience to share with Japan about the various models and experiments available for managing what has become a major social reality—the international movement of labor and expertise. Second, the existence of foreign workers in Japan, and the demand for even more such labor, points to the need not only to rationalize the existing legal (immigration, labor and human rights) provisions but also to create an infrastructure of housing, medical facilities, education and even religious facilities, sufficient to create a non-alienating environment for

guest workers. Third, it is significant that many foreign workers come from precisely those countries into which Japan has poured ODA (foreign aid). Whether or not ODA promotes genuine economic and social development is of course arguable, but it certainly does at this point in time create an awareness of Japan that draws workers from those very countries.

URBAN LIFE OF MIGRANT WORKERS

Hill and Fujita (1993,9) see Tokyo, the largest and administratively most significant of Japan's cities, as having "world city" status because of its threefold spatial division of labor as a global command center for corporations, as a center for high-technology industries and as a "regional milieu that encourages small firms to coalesce into flexible production networks." This is true, but what they overlook is that the transnationalization of the city also involves the transformation of labor and that the much-vaunted idea of "flexible production" requires a flexible (and disposable) work force. Since high levels of mobility (both physical and in relation to work functions) are less easily obtainable from expensive Japanese labor, foreign labor fills these gaps, especially in construction, low technology manufacturing, assembling, deconstruction (e.g., scrap metal processing) and labor-intensive services that require minimal contact with customers (e.g., dry cleaning, cooking). While foreign workers might compete with Japanese seasonal migrant workers, such as Aomori apple farmers who come south during the winter seeking work on construction sites, they do not compete with the other sources of part-time and flexible hours workers—women (especially housewives) and students—who tend to seek work in white collar occupations, sales or services involving public contact. The world status of major Japanese cities is not only a function of technology and Japan's role as a global command center but also of the ability, in a sense, to plunder the rest of the world for disposable workers, many without legal rights, who make the "flexibility" possible.

The "new poverty" (*shin bimbō*) of the Japanese salaried worker, characterized by declining access to affordable housing, a very high cost of living and longer commuting times under excessively crowded conditions, is a different phenomenon from the conditions under which foreign industrial workers live. Illegal workers, in particular, face housing in crowded dormitories or shared apartments of low quality, low wages and no access to formal medical or educational resources. They usually have no Japanese language ability or legal protection and are often controlled by Japanese underworld organizations with little job stability. While social inequality clearly exists within the Japanese community, the main contrast here is between the Japanese and foreign worker communities, the latter falling at the bottom of or even outside of the Japanese categories of social stratification. Indeed, something of a caste-like rather than a class-like situation exists. The "inner-city" problem of Japanese cities is not primarily a spatial phenomenon, but a quasi-ethnic one. However, *doya-gai*, quarters where primarily Japanese casual laborers live and seek work, do exist; for example, Tokyo's Sanya, Yokohama's Kotobuki and Osaka's Kamagasaki (Gill 1994).

Similarly, while the composition of the Japanese labor force has not fully matched changes in the industrial and service sectors, this mismatching has not led to unemployment in large urban areas. Rather, there has been a shortage of labor especially in blue-collar occupations, leading to a demand for foreign workers. Miyamoto (1993) demonstrates, for example, that the theory of "urban decline," which predicts decreases in population and increases in inner city problems, unemployment and fiscal crisis, may

be applicable to New York City but does not work when applied to Japan's two biggest cities—Tokyo and Osaka. In Japan, a very real consequence of this influx of foreigners has been an urban life that is increasingly molded by international factors as well as by indigenous dynamics of urbanization. Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, Kobe and Yokohama at least have become "international cities" not only in terms of being command centers for global Japanese corporations but also in terms of the changing composition of their populations. Twenty years ago there were far fewer resident foreigners. The impact of a relatively small number on housing, in particular, but also on crime, availability of foreign goods, employment and medical facilities is highly visible. Japanese foreign aid (ODA) and the increasing presence of Japanese manufacturing enterprises overseas since *endaka*—the dramatic rise in the value of the yen since the 1980s—have also made Japan more visible to potential migrants and have created information networks, such as those developed by returned or deported foreign laborers. Japanese capital, which has spurred growth elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia, has also spurred the influx of labor from those very regions into Japan itself.

Foreign labor is a factor in "flexible" restructuring, which in practice has meant the relocation of manufacturing offshore, especially in Southeast Asia. Other trends, such as the move towards part-time employees, particularly in large companies, and the use of female workers at lower rates of pay than their male counterparts, have also involved the use of foreign labor, again generally at rates below those earned by Japanese workers (Douglass 1993). As income disparities have widened in the Japanese community, especially between homeowners and renters, the total picture of stratification has been complicated by the presence of foreign workers who are earning wages comparable to, or slightly less than, those of Japanese male migrant workers and part-time middle-aged Japanese women workers. Yet these foreign workers remain largely outside of, or peripheral to, Japanese society proper. Foreign labor, necessary to the Japanese industrialization process, has little way of participating in the society that it is helping to build, with the possible exception of the upper echelons of foreign professionals.

THE URBAN UPPERCLASS AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF JAPANESE CITIES

A key problem that emerges, but has not yet been addressed in the literature, is the existence of an urban underclass comprised of primarily illegal foreign workers. This is an extremely interesting situation as it forces a consideration of the nature of class in Japanese society. It raises the perennial question of the relationship between class and ethnicity and requires greater exploration of the similarities and differences between foreign migrant workers and Japanese migrant workers, especially those from the snow-bound regions of Northern Honshū and from Okinawa. It even creates something of a revolution in the way in which Japanese cities are to be understood sociologically.

In the United States and Western Europe, the possible creation of a new underclass through economic transformations, shifts in the composition of the labor market and the provision of housing has become a major question in sociology. This new underclass consists largely of people who are marginalized, young, poor, inadequately qualified educationally and with a high percentage of ethnic minority members.[1] Members of such an underclass, condemned to high levels of unemployment and with correspondingly high levels of poverty, are likely also to be stigmatized as exhibiting cultural and behavioral deviance. To the (debated) extent that such a

class does exist in Western capitalist societies there are clearly major national differences in its forms (Wacquant 1993). The question here is whether the concept applies to the situation of migrant workers in Japan; does it adequately describe their condition? The answer, as in so many of these comparative debates, is both yes and no, depending on how the notion of the underclass is itself understood. Here again, it must be stressed that our point of reference is the community of illegal workers and to a lesser extent legal unskilled (South American Japanese) workers whose economic position does not differ much, objectively, from that of illegal workers.

With this in mind, several points can be made. First, as in other debates about the underclass, there is a significant ethnic factor. Whereas in the United States the underclass may be largely black, in Japan it is comprised of indigenous migrant labor, the inhabitants of the doya-gai or flophouse districts of the major cities, and of illegal migrant workers. Illegal non-Japanese workers are almost by definition an underclass: economically disadvantaged by Japanese standards, excluded from political and most forms of social participation in the wider society, and ethnically different. In other words, economic status, cultural exclusion, isolation from institutions, ethnicity, often spatial concentration and association with deviant behavior (even if this deviation is only a matter of cultural practices) do to a great extent go together. This is not to argue that there is a "culture of poverty" among illegal migrants; the group is itself highly stratified internally by national origin, religion, sex and occupation. Rather, it is to argue that these differences are reduced to commonalities both by the perception of the host society and by the objective conflation of socioeconomic characteristics.[2]

The labelling process becomes important here, resulting in the stigmatization of illegal migrants as probable criminals who are sexually threatening, culturally unknowable and certainly exotic but not necessarily in positive ways. A behavioral definition of "underclass" accompanies and naturally reinforces the excluded nature of the foreign worker community, while racial discrimination and economic disadvantage also seem to go hand in hand. But whereas Japanese, even Okinawan, migrant labor may be marginalized, they are not excluded. They may spend some of their time in the informal sector, but they do not spend all of their work life in it, as do illegal workers during their stay in the country. In one sense then, illegal foreigners really are declassed rather than simply at the bottom of the Japanese class structure, although as Gans (Gans 1993:330) points out, strictly speaking, no one is actually outside of the total class structure if they have some economic or social functions to perform. Yet Gans somewhat weakens his own semantic point by arguing that those excluded from the post-industrial economy might better be understood as an undercaste rather than as an underclass (Gans 1993, 333).

While this may be true, the existence of an underclass of foreign workers raises questions about the Japanese class structure as a whole. In particular, it raises the question of whether such workers are an underclass in a totally Japanese class structure, or whether their existence, by focusing attention on an excluded and ethnically different economic segment, actually functions ideologically to draw debate away from the possibility that Japan is a class society. Japan, in other words, has class only in the sense that it has one class—that of foreign laborers; everyone else is outside of class by virtue of being Japanese. Foreign classness and Japanese classlessness are thus both ethnically, but contradictorily, defined.

Among illegal workers, too, joblessness is not necessarily high, although employment is often unstable. For others, especially

women in the sex industry, employment may be too stable—no opportunities for advancement or change of location at all. The robotization of Japanese industry has not abolished dirty work; in fact, high consumption and waste have in many ways generated more. However, most Japanese are not willing to work in the large "three K" (*kitanai, kiken, kitsui*) sector of dirty, dangerous and generally undesirable occupations that are thus created. While some spatial segregation takes place in the doya-gai, most illegal workers are distributed throughout the working class residential areas of Japanese industrial cities. As a result, there are no "divided cities," ghettos or slums of the kind now familiar in North America and Western Europe. Indeed, illegal workers are less conspicuous in their housing arrangements than they are in their leisure time or job-hunting activities, when they congregate in parks and the covered areas of large railway stations, networking contacts or simply sharing time with speakers of their own language.

In theoretical terms, then, both the terminology of race and the terminology of class are needed to describe the situation of illegal workers in Japan, together with a terminology of exclusion and stigmatization. But what also separates debate about the foreign underclass of Japanese society is the fact that, unlike the tiny indigenous underclass, a cultural evaluation based on the family and household structure is inappropriate. Most illegal migrants are young and either single or with families in their place of origin, but not in Japan. This does raise fascinating questions about the kinship, quasi-kinship and sexual arrangements of the illegals (Ventura 1992), but it is clearly a different order of reality from the situation of black American ghetto dwellers, for example.

In this complex economic-ethnic sense, illegal migrants constitute an underclass, but they do not, for the most part represent a class in itself. As Ventura (1992) has argued, attempts to organize are difficult because of the fragmentation of the illegal community and its spatial dispersion, and because of the natural unwillingness to draw attention to what is, after all, an illegal community. In fact, attempts to raise class consciousness have either come from the Japanese Communist Party, which is active among illegals, or from human rights groups within Japan that have taken up the issue and developed critiques of Japanese society and ethnic attitudes from this stance (Honda 1990). This increasing visibility has forced the Japanese Labor Ministry itself to take an interest in the problem (Employment Office 1991) and has turned the whole topic into a matter of concern for the media and authors addressing current social issues (e.g., Hanami and Kuwahara 1990). The paradoxical result has been the raising of class consciousness and awareness of human rights issues in Japan as a whole, but with little expansion of class consciousness among the illegal community itself, except for the few conspicuous exceptions of individuals who have used legal channels to gain redress over workplace abuses.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE JAPANESE CASE

In deepening the comparative understanding of migrant labor internationally, the Japanese case offers many suggestive insights. Some of the more important of these can be summarized as follows. First, there is an ambiguity of status with respect to class position in Japan and at home. The illegal migrant workers who have a very low status in Japan, who in Gan's terms are virtually members of a scheduled caste, may enjoy very high status at home: they have traveled abroad, have money, and may invest their savings from abroad in conspicuous consumption at home, such as fancy housing, electronic goods, toys for the children or

smarter clothing. This tension between low and high statuses is a source of stress for returned or deported migrants who often feel the need to return to Japan as soon as possible because savings do not last and a rapidly declining standard of living sets in soon after homecoming. This status ambiguity is reinforced by the paradoxical fact that Japan, even the doya-gai, represents a zone of freedom for many illegals—freedom from family obligations and the strictures of cultural or religious practices. On the other hand, to return home means to re-enter this network of responsibilities. The same person who has only low status in Japanese eyes is, in Ventura's words, a member of a privileged class from the perspective of (in the case of Filipinos) the barrio.

Second, while the number of illegal migrants in Japan accurately reflects the current international division of labor, numerous policy and political problems, ranging from human rights questions to immigration regulations, are not being adequately addressed. The sending countries are, for the most part, pleased to see their migrants go because they remit funds. However, Japan, the receiving country which benefits most from the presence of cheap foreign labor, has so far shown no inclination to legalize the status of the migrants or to adopt an ordered policy for recruitment, protection under the labor laws and provision of medical and social services. The actual interdependence of the world economy, in other words, is not reflected in international migration policies: the liberal market economy is decidedly illiberal when it comes to the free movement of peoples (Zolberg 1991). The use of cheap and disposable labor to facilitate structural adjustments and to fill functions unattractive to Japanese labor is possible because Japan faces a buyers' market. Each supplier competes with all the others in a situation that obviously tends to depress the likelihood that an international code of conduct or of guarantees will ever emerge (Zolberg 1991:309). As a result, the growth of the most developed countries has been facilitated by the existence of an international labor market easily exploited by the expanding capitalist economies. This is certainly true in the case of Japan, but it should also be emphasized that as a percentage of the total work force, the actual number of foreign workers is relatively low in comparison with other industrialized societies (Germany, for example).

Thus the effect on the local labor market, while apparent, is relatively minimal as there is little direct competition for jobs, especially with Japanese youth and women, the groups that are sometimes seen as most disadvantaged by the presence of alien labor. Direct competition takes place with Japanese minorities, such as Okinawans, and with aging marginalized Japanese manual workers, rather than with young workers.

Third, it is important to look at the impact of foreign workers on the host society, not only on the labor market. Zolberg summarizes the issue as follows. Although he is speaking primarily of the European situation, his comments apply equally to Japan:

> International migration does bring about the encounter of culturally different groups hitherto separated from each other in space. Even under the best of circumstances, the arrival of a relatively large wave of immigrants who speak a different language, practice a different religion, or merely have different habits does challenge the cultural status quo of the receiving country and induces some collective stress. As it happens, however, these are not just any groups. In the course of establishing their hegemony over the world at large, Europeans and their descendants stressed their common distinctiveness from the subjected populations, founded in part on phenotypical

distinctions, and assigned to these differences values that legitimized domination. *Mutatis mutandis*, a similar process of cultural coding, tends to develop with respect to labor imported from the periphery. Once established, this configuration of beliefs serves as a foundation for calculations concerning the putative political and cultural impacts of various groups on the receiving countries. In effect, the very characteristics which make these human beings suitable for labor render them undesirable from the perspective of membership in the receiving society. This also has the effect of a self-fulfilling prophecy: The conditions to which the workers are subjected in fact render their incorporation more difficult" (Zolberg 1991,318).

It also creates an ethnic hierarchy, in which different groups of foreign laborers are assigned to different ranks largely on the basis of their phenotypical characteristics.

But the "collective stress" induced by the presence of a foreign population, especially acute in Japan with its long history of isolation, is not necessarily all negative. On the contrary, it has spurred fierce debate about human rights, about the responsibilities of Japan to the rest of the world and especially to its own former colonies. It has promoted reflection on the nature of Japanese society and ethnic attitudes, suggested new policy options and brought into being groups of Japanese citizens (doctors and lawyers, for example) who are concerned with the needs of foreign laborers. Awareness of cultural and religious plurality has grown, and debates over Japan's supposed "internationalization" have intensified while a huge body of literature, represented by writers (such as Utsumi and Matsui 1988; Hachiya 1991) has been spawned. The extensive Japanese sex industry has come under scrutiny, and discussion has begun to deal with addressing the problems and costs of managing the affluent society that Japan has now become, largely because of its access to foreign labor markets and foreign labor.

CONCLUSIONS

The "periphery" then, is exploited by the Japanese economy in two ways simultaneously: through relocation off-shore, to take advantage of cheaper labor costs (Clammer 1993) and through the officially unregulated importation of foreign labor. The study of foreign laborers in Japan then, actually needs to occur in three intersecting contexts, the first being the restructuring of capitalism on a global scale. Economic conditions and networks of information and recruitment in the sending countries, together with the impact of migration on family organization and other sociological factors, must also be considered. Finally, issues of ethnicity, rights and housing in Japan must be taken into account. Stress on only one of these distorts the total picture: to draw attention only to human rights issues in Japan, for example, takes attention away from the fact that many migrants are originally from highly inegalitarian societies where human rights abuses may be rampant. In such cases, even seen from the underclass, Japan appears to be a remarkably open society of opportunity.

The sociological aspect, especially when examined comparatively, is likewise important. The illegal community is a class made up of individuals that shift continually, suggesting yet another interesting problem for class analysis: a permanent underclass in which the individual members are always different. Despite some commonalities in general economic and class position, this community is split ethnically and linguistically. For example, Filipinos have little in common with Iranians. Likewise, Koreans, Taiwanese or Malaysian Chinese may "pass" in Japanese society, but Bangladeshis cannot. Kinship categories imported

from the home society play important parts in the symbolic structuring of the migrant communities, but have little role in reality because there is almost no kinship. There are few associations of immigrants in Japan, unlike associations of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, but other institutions, such as the Catholic Church for Filipinos, serve the same functional role.

Gender is likewise structured in complex ways. Most Iranian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani illegals are male. Filipinos, however, are split between men working primarily in construction and general laboring jobs and women working in the entertainment industry. This is also true of Thais, Koreans and Taiwanese, although in all cases there appear to be far more males than females. Networks exist within each national/ethnic community and between that community and home, but again, these networks differ from those of settled migrant communities, such as Asian groups now living permanently in Britain (Ballard 1987). Like Pakistanis in Britain, who lack a secure economic base at home but are highly vulnerable to recession in Britain, migrant workers in Japan form an example of what Ballard calls an external proletariat with no secure base around which to organize to protect their interests either at home or abroad (Ballard 1987, 39). Just as there is no perfectly integrated international labor market, so there is little integration, organizationally or spatially, among the migrant labor force itself. Indeed, there is an urban hierarchy, topped by Tokyo and Osaka, below which there are numerous peripheral cities and even small towns to which migrants are dispersing. This dispersal, while widening economic opportunities, also serves to make illegals more conspicuous and, at the same time, weakening networks of information and mutual protection (Kurtenback 1992)

Therefore, illegals in Japan do not constitute, strictly speaking, an enclave community; there are many (ethnic) "communities" that are actually dispersed networks of individuals, or more usually, small groups spatially isolated from each other. In a similar way, illegals do not strictly constitute an informal sector. Their economic activities are not for the most part self-generated (a partial exception might be street hawkers—often of jewelry and ethnic knickknacks—who are frequently young Israelis) but are in wage labor, either as full-time laborers or as laborers who seek work daily on construction sites, in the docks or in similarly fluctuating occupations. Furthermore, the work done by the illegals is not marginal to the mainstream economy but very much a part of it. Few are engaged in petty commodity production, none in subsistence activities and almost none in housework or "ambulatory work" (i.e., work done by skilled workers who move in a gang from factory to factory to perform certain decided tasks). What Yin (1992) calls "informal work" (i.e., that which consists of homework, ambulatory work subcontracting and out-processing), applies only in part to the work of illegal migrants in Japan, and should not in any case be confused with the more traditional definition of the informal sector as constituting an economic zone outside of the formal economy. An important consideration is the heavy dependence of the Japanese economy on small- and medium-sized businesses (SMB), many of which are tied into a complex and unstable system of subcontracting for larger manufacturers (Glasmeier and Sugiura 1991). This fluid sector requires flexible labor, both to cope with fluctuations in demand and to fuel growth and innovation within the SMB sector itself, but it is constrained in its use of purely Japanese labor by social conventions and laws governing indigenous labor. A partial solution has been to use foreign labor, both legal, skilled labor and illegal, unskilled labor. The position of migrant workers must be seen in

terms of both the global reach of the Japanese economy and the internal structure of industrial organization, especially as it pertains to SMBs, which is where the greatest concentration of illegals is to be found (big companies prefer to create flexibility of labor by using Japanese part-timers).

In sum, the issue of foreign workers in Japan, especially the illegal ones, can be seen at several levels: it reflects Japan's role in the new international division of labor; it raises questions about international migration policy; and it has implications for traditional questions in the sociology of migration, such as those of networks within the migrant community and between that community and its home base. This essay has attempted to situate the analysis of migrant workers in contemporary Japan within the global context and to draw attention to the intersection of ethnicity and class. In particular, we considered the formation of a new underclass that either displaces or is organized parallel to the traditional underclass (for example, the Burakumin) but which is defined in terms of both economic activity and ethnicity. This equation relocates the relatively privileged at home to a position at the bottom of (or even outside of) Japanese society itself. To see the issues in these terms is also to raise central questions about class in Japanese society and about the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion operating here. To raise such questions poses comparable ones—of contrasting immigration policies, of the validity of the concept of the informal sector and of adaptation mechanisms on the part of migrants in different societies (say Japan and Britain). Above all, the situation of foreign workers draws attention to the extent of international migration in the modern world and its huge economic and social impact. It challenges the international community to extend its management of the world trading system of goods to an equally public management of the movement of people.

NOTES

[1] For an informal account see Ventura 1992.

[2] The literature in huge: for examples see Anletta 1982, Glasgow 1980, Wilson 1987, Rex 1988.

[3] See Mingione 1993, 325, who sees this convergence of characteristics as not necessarily taking place.

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