A Green Fin de Siècle

By Hisanori Isomura

The other day an American friend told me a new joke. It seems President Bush was in an auto accident and fell into a deep coma. He was in this state for many years. However, near the end of the decade, thanks to Japanese advances in biotechnology, a new drug was discovered that brought him out of his long sleep unharmed. He immediately called Dan Quayle to his bedside, thanked him for taking over in the interim, and asked him what had occurred during his long slumber. What about the U.S. economy and the twin deficits? Quayle happily responded that the deficits were no longer a problem and that the economy was in good shape. Then he asked what had happened in Europe after the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. Quayle's response was that there was now a United States of Europe. Surprised, Bush asked, "Who is the president there?" Quayle responded, "President Gorbachev." The questions kept coming as Bush sought to catch up on the state of the world. After a while, he asked Quayle how much a pack of cigarettes costs now, and Quayle answered, "¥200."

One moral of the story, of course, is its implicit assumption that the yen will replace the dollar as the world's key currency during the 1990s and that things will be priced not in dollars but in yen.

Hopes for a common European house

More important, however, is the implied prediction that a powerful Europe will reemerge by the end of the century. Hardest hit by the two oil crises of the 1970s, Europe was plunged into a mood of pervasive Europessimism. I was stationed in Europe during these years and saw firsthand how the coming Pacific Age and the Japanese challenge were viewed with both envy and fear in European capitals.

Rebounding somewhat, the European Community countries decided in the Single European Act (approved by the European Council in late 1985 to go into effect in 1987) to create a unified European market by the end of 1992 and were moving steadily along with these preparations when, on November 9, 1989, the breach of the Berlin Wall symbolized the release of what the Czech writer Milan Kundera has termed "kidnapped Europe" from the Soviet Union and raised the prospect of German unification and pan-European union centering on a united Germany and bringing together the 320 million people of the EC countries and the 110 million East Europeans. Some observers even predict that the Soviet Union may also be a participant in this "common European house" once it has liberalized, democratized, and gotten its economy back into shape.

Stretching from the Urals to the Atlantic, this common European house is conveniently located to join hands with the United States and Canada across the Atlantic–ties that would be reinforced by these countries' common Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions. Images such as this are breathing fresh air into Europe and have yanked Europeans out of their old pessimism.

There are, however, some who fear a back-to-the-future scenario and warn that the collapse of the confrontation between the two superpowers may allow the conflict of interests among the lesser powers out into the open and lead to a reversion to the state of affairs that existed following the 1919 Versailles Treaty.

While this *Remembrance of Things Past (A la Recherche du Temps Perdu)* weighs somewhat on the European mind, the outlook will be bright if the East European countries commit themselves fully to the establishment of market economies over the next dozen years or so.

Toward a cleaner and healthier world

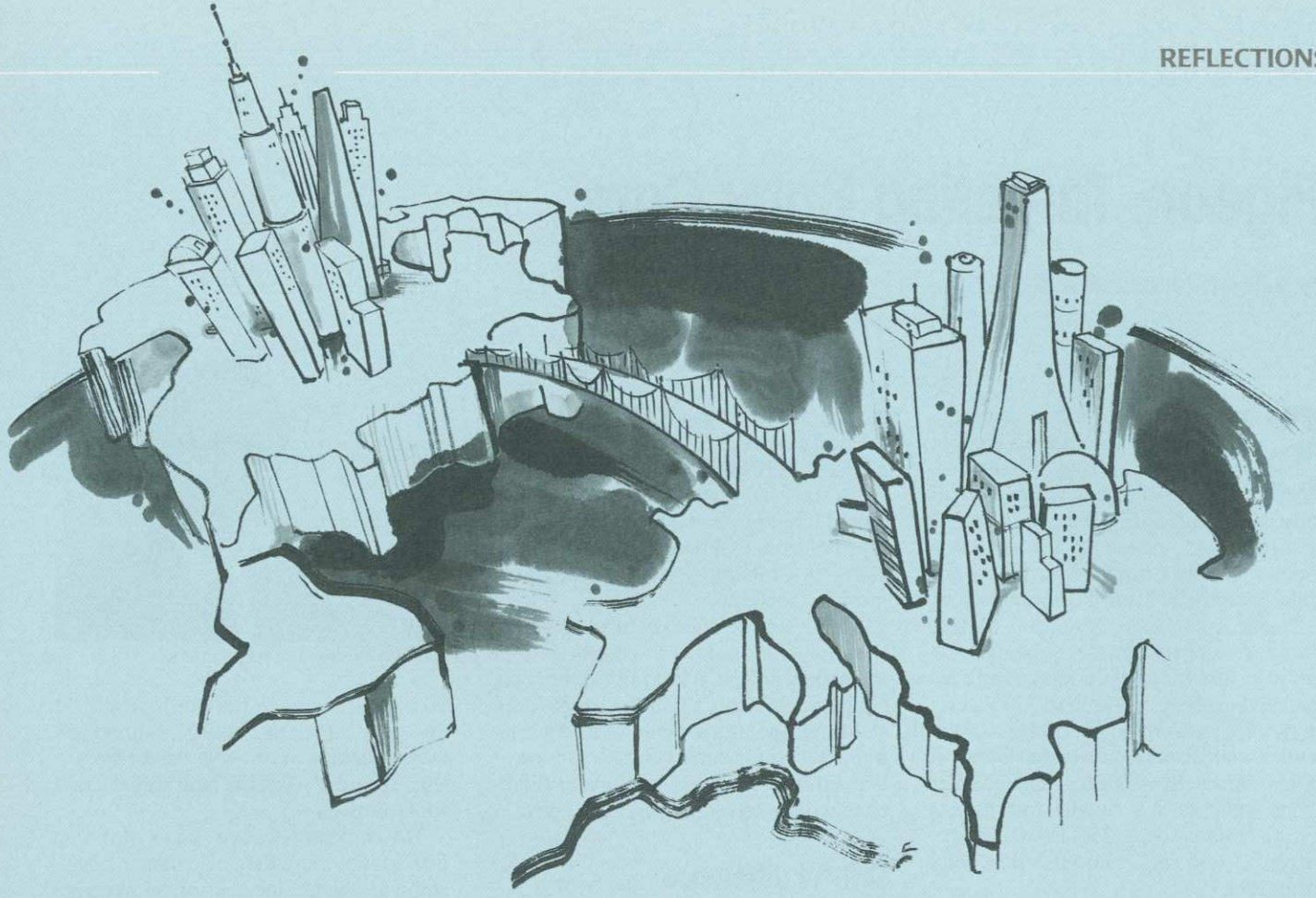
What all of this means is a massive movement away from blind adherence to old dogmas that called on people to sacrifice today for a better tomorrow and toward a new era in which people will want immediate prosperity. The new concentration will be not on military power but on economic strength, and this is expected to be an era in which the arts will flourish.

In contrast to the "better red than dead" antinuclear activism in the 1980s, the slogan for the 1990s is "better green than red."

As *Le Monde* wrote recently, commu-

Photo: Kyodo News Service

Bush and Gorbachev–the collapse of confrontation



nism is now a subject for cultural anthropologists, and the environment is the central issue for Europe in the 1990s.

At the beginning of January, I had the opportunity to serve as a panelist at a Global Forum conference in Moscow to discuss environmental issues. There, I saw close up the frightening havoc that environmental destruction has wreaked in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. There are places where people are exposed on a daily basis to air that is 10 times more polluted than the law allows. The Aral Sea has been transformed into a festering cesspool and the Volga River into a dangerous drainage ditch. Disregard for the environment is rampant throughout the socialist bloc, and events at Chernobyl were but the tip of the iceberg.

There is, however, a silver lining to this cloud. For one thing, it can be argued that the rapid onslaught of environmental destruction has made it easier to enact much-needed environmental legislation. People have a natural tendency to ignore gradual changes in their environment but to react violently to sudden changes.

If I drop a frog into a vat of boiling water it will jump out immediately, yet if I start by putting it in lukewarm water and gradually increase the temperature, the frog will not try to jump out but will be content to be boiled alive. The deterioration of the global environment is akin to a gradual heating of the water in the pot, and we need something to shock us out of our complacency.

Japan suffered a number of environmental catastrophes in the 1970s, including the Minamata poisoning, and was at the time considered the worst-polluted country in the world.

It was the shock of these incidents, however, that pushed Japan to deal seriously with environmental concerns. In the automobile industry, for example, Honda, anticipating strict enforcement of the Muskie Law, developed a new engine that achieved nearly complete combustion and thus met the dual goals of energy conservation and environmental acceptability. In turn, it should be noted, efforts such as this contributed to the Japanese auto industry's success.

Japan has also developed superior technology for handling other types of environmental pollution. At the meeting in Moscow, Japan came under heavy fire for its whaling policies, its apathy on the protection of wildlife, and its wanton clearing of the tropical rain forests. Population and environmental policies, however, were a different story, and here there was great interest in using Japanese technology to clean up the Soviet and the East European environments.

Looking back at history, I think that the end of the 20th century bears a striking resemblance to pre-Renaissance Europe (in the late 14th and early 15th centuries) and Japan in the waning Edo period (mid-19th century). In both of these other periods, there was an outpouring of the arts alongside of serious environmental problems such as deadly epidemics, population increases and starvation.

Japan is today a leader in environmental technology, and if we can, as the joke suggests, develop new drugs to combat AIDS and to revive people from comas, this would perhaps be the greatest contribution we could make to solving the problems confronting humankind in the 1990s and beyond.

(This is the second of five essays by Hisanori Isomura.)

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