THE JAPAN ASSOCIATION OF ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHERS

The Association held its 36th national convention on 20th and 21st, May 1989 at Chuo University in Tokyo. The second day was devoted to the symposium on the common theme “New Approaches in Economic Geography”.

The main objective of this symposium was to explore how the recent changes in the Japanese economy, that is widespread high technology rapid expansion of software and information industries, and more close connection with international economy, require re-examination of conventional framework and approach in economic geography.

These changes have largely altered the concept of industry and also the meaning of “distance” and “location” for industry. With growth of the important role of information and technology in our economy, their impact on regional economy also has increased. This has raised questions on the validity of conventional concepts in both regional analysis and location theory. One of the characteristics of the recent Japanese economic policies is the increasing importance of regional policies and regional planning.

The methodological examination of the study of regional policies and the systematization of the regional planning methods are the urgent task for the economic geography. Without tackling these tasks, it will be impossible to criticize effectively and suggest alternative policy.

As living standards have improved, encouraged by higher income levels, so case of the environment has become one of the important tasks of the government policy. This is now reflected in the fact that it is an important function for the promotion of the public benefit to consider the “green” issues in the agriculture in addition to the primary requirement of producing agricultural products. It does mean that the regional economy should no longer be narrowly defined, and we should include the culture, the politics, and the people’s consciousness in the regional concerned within the purview of our study.

The three speakers were requested to present these problems boldly.

The first paper entitled “The Tasks for Economic Geography in the Information-oriented Society” was read by Akinobu TERASAKA (University of Marketing and Distribution Science).

He argued that the information explosion has been changing the regional economic structure, and that recent regional policies have been closely related to the location of information industry. He gave as examples plans for “Technopolis”, “Teleport”, and “Teletopia”. However it is mainly the primary and secondary industries which the economic geography has dealt with so far and the study on the tertiary industry is very rare except with regard to retail trade.

There was a vigorous discussion following this paper. Seiji KOMORI (Kobe University of Commerce) threw some doubts on lecturer’s conclusions asking how the tables on the distribution of information industry at the Prefectures level should be
interpreted. Wataru NOZIRI (Osaka City University) argued that it was necessary to examine not only the quantity but also the quality of information. Fujio MIZUOKA (Hitotsubashi University) asked the ultimate question, is economic geography becoming useless, because transportation cost have greatly decreased in the information-oriented society? Kozo NARITA (Osaka City University) asked how the existing spatial structure was being transformed in the information-oriented society.

The second paper presented by Iwao KANEYASU (Tohoku University) was on “A New Approach to Spatial Planning”. He examined the regional planning process at local government level, using the case study of Shiroishi City, Miyagi Prefecture. He argued that the history of regional planning could be divided into five phases. The first is the period of the master plan in which the ideal design is described as a blue print in terms of physical planning. Then comes the period of systems analysis, which is followed by a period of participation by the local people. It is important at this stage to reconcile conflicting interests. The fourth phase is the period of coexistence of unified and guerrilla plannings in the 1980’s. Many consulting firms mainly located in Tokyo prepared the stereotype regional plans at the request of the local government, but nowadays, grass-root movements of local people to re-vitalize their economies often presented their alternative plans. The final phase is the period of planning to take account of the necessary software requirements. He insisted on the importance of maintaining regional concepts and identity, and claimed that skills in both science and art were required for regional planning. Tatsuo ITO (Mie University) said that the overview of regional planning or regional policy was very wide and it was impossible for economic geographer to cover the whole field.

Hidenori OKAHASHI (Hiroshima University) presented a paper on “Economic Geography and Core and Periphery Theory.” He argued that the periphery was always marginalized although there was always an integration process taking place in relation to the core area, which is the metropolitan area. What is now the function of the rural settlement? Previously the rural settlement was the principal unit for formation of social capital. Now this function has been taken over either by the local government, by the agricultural co-operative society and by the forest society, which are dependent primarily upon the government resources. These peripheral organizations might be expected to expand the outside economy, pursue public interest functions (outside the ordinary operation of the market mechanism), and provide the means of social satisfaction to those people involved.

Keichi KUMAGAI (Hannan University) questioned the applicability of the dependency theory in relation to regions within one country.

The Association was phased to launch this symposium as the first step in the exploration of a new approach to economic geography.

(Masanori KOGA)