

**General Will 2.0 Talk at Genron Cafe
March 4, 2016**

Recapitulate the argument of Azuma's book, "General Will 2.0: Rousseau, Freud, Google".

Azuma Hiroki interprets Rousseau's controversial idea of "General Will" to mean something beyond the sum of the conscious "will" of individuals in a society (thereby disputing the popular suspicion that Rousseau endorsed totalitarianism). He stresses repeatedly that he takes Rousseau's idea to imply a general will that is "mathematical." Freud's idea of "the unconscious" is used to support this interpretation. The general will of a society cannot be known directly through political communications because what people claim to want or believe may not be true. People are "not conscious" of what they really want or need, but there is always a general will within a society, one that isn't easy to detect or understand by traditional social and political means.

This proposes a kind of existing driving force beyond human rationality and "free will," something not under human control. It seems to place Rousseau's General Will within the realm of natural science and therefore irrelevant to ethics and not at all dependent on political ideals. It is rather similar to how Adam Smith thought of the driving force behind economics he used to support his idea of the free market. There is an "invisible hand" that guides or creates the general will according to natural—or mathematical—laws, regardless of how humans feel about it.

In the twenty-first century humans have the technology to help us "visualize" that general will. A service like Google can generate information that is tremendously useful in informing us what the current "social unconscious" looks like, thereby giving us a more accurate portrait of ourselves as a society. Furthermore, this relatively new "information technology" may have great potential to assist, even revolutionize, current forms of government to serve the people in more efficient ways.

Azuma's argument does not imply that information technology can or will change society, let alone make it better. On the contrary, he believes that most social conditions will remain unchanged for a long time, despite the use of advanced information technology. To be able to "visualize" General Will through information technology does not necessarily mean that it's going to change anything. When General Will appears to be negative, or "ugly," such as the rise of right-wing nationalism or fascism in certain societies, the "visualized unconscious" does not bring about solutions to divert the ugliness. In an interview, Azuma states

that he is “simply saying that such a visualization of ugliness is necessary for us to move forward to our ideal society.”

-What is the ideal society? If the General Will 2.0 is something we cannot be fully conscious of, wouldn't having an “ideal society” be pointless, since it may not be what we really want?

-If General Will 2.0 is “mathematical” and “unconscious,” which imply that it is there no matter what, doesn't it mean that whatever direction a society takes is the condition it's supposed to be in at any given moment? For example, if a society seems to support a right-wing government, doesn't it mean that that society is simply following its General Will? And if that is so, how can such condition be regarded as “ugly”?

-The essays in General Will 2.0 were written between 2009 and 2011. Have Azuma-san's ideas changed or evolved in any way since then? Does he still believe that information technology, especially the internet, helps us to visualize the unconscious general will of a society?

-In discussing the internet, Azuma-san does not bring up the issue of consumerism which seems to be the driving force behind its current infrastructure. Services like Google, Facebook, YouTube, do not operate as charity. They are multi-billion dollar businesses that ultimately see people as customers. So do internet providers. This means that there is inevitably high level of manipulation through their services in order to prolong their customers' interest. Wouldn't this have collateral critical effects on how people use the internet, how they provide information? Wouldn't the capitalistic side of information technology be a kind of defect in the visualization of the unconscious will, since that unconsciousness may not be true unconsciousness, but something created by the process of consumerism?

-Social network services are seen as providers of wild space where people can be anonymous and therefore express themselves freely. In other words, people feel unafraid to show their “true selves” in cyberspace. But increasingly services like Facebook seems to show more and more that in fact behaviors of users can be, and often are, as complex and multi-layered as in “real life.” People create different personas for their online selves. They lie and cheat. They do not say

what they mean. If this is so, how can the internet be trusted as a storage of “true” data? Couldn’t it be that the internet is simply an “extension” of physical society? Worse, couldn’t it be that the internet is simply a way for people to escape reality and therefore become even less straightforward about their feelings and passions? Can a world of fantasy be seen as the visualization of General Will?

-The role of the elite class is mentioned in Azuma’s argument as no longer meaningful or influential as it used to be. While it may be true that their status quo has broken down significantly in the information age, it is also undeniable that a great number of people still rely on the opinions and actions of the elite, if only for lack of a different source of approval and certitude. In many circles, the elite still hold power to direct policies and lay down important foundations and ground rules. While it seems that the users of information technology have little respect for the elite, is the situation not vastly different in physical society in which people appear to lose confidence without leaders?

-Zygmunt Bauman brings up the frivolousness of contemporary culture in his *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*. In so-called postmodern society (which Bauman prefers to call “liquid modernity”), culture is less regarded as high human achievement than tradition and pleasure generator and the cultural elite no longer have the aura of superiority as they used to, for culture has become more “liquid” and it is more fashionable to mix and match, to juxtapose the so-called “high and low.” Most significantly, in consumerist societies culture has become a kind of tease. It aims to always seduce but never satisfy. Culture seems to take up a lot of space in information society, whether or not it is generated by the cultural elite. Culture also tends to be the crucial means in creating global connections, at least on the surface. But how does culture relate to General Will 2.0 specifically? Does culture matter when it comes to the question of collective well-being?

-For writers and artists living and working in the dawn of the twenty-first century, where culture seems to be simply a collection of pastime activities rather than a driving force for the human intellect, and the arts are increasingly disintegrating into niche “markets,” is it time to reconsider the role of creativity in the information age?

-The arts seem to be at odd with information technology. Artists have not been able to utilize the technology in any meaningful or revolutionary ways. Any creativity in this area comes mostly from engineers and programmers, with artists and designers adding only superficial “sophistications” to the surface. Does it mean that the arts as we have known them belong to the past and we are simply clinging on to nostalgic feelings when in fact information society has no real need for them in a practical sense?