

# Some Notes on Japan's Distorted Modernity

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## I. A General Note

It has long been said that the "trade friction" between Japan and various trading partners is, at bottom, "cultural friction." Historically speaking, the issues raised by foreign countries in trade negotiations with Japan have shown a tendency to shift from visible, measurable, commodity related areas to invisible, qualitative, cultural area. In the 1950's textiles were the focus of Japan-U.S. economic conflicts. Later the major conflicts between the two countries shifted to core industries such as automobile, steel, and electronic goods. By the late 1970's the issues such as non-tariff-barriers rather than specific commodities, had become the main source of controversy. Contemporary American and European criticism of Japan centers around the very nature of Japanese society itself. Indeed the problem is inter-locked with the way of life and the values that both Japanese and Americans hold.

In light of this change of the nature of the so called economic conflict between Japan and her trading partners as well as the rapidly increasing presence of Japan as an economic power in the world, we are witnessing a new Japan boom on different levels-academic and non-academic.

Indeed, the coverage of Japan by the Western mass media is extensive and wide ranging. It, however, indicates some common features in their approach to Japan. They, in portraying contemporary Japan, are replete with articles focusing on "male domination of political, economic, social life", "the extraordinary Japanese sense of nationalism", "the difficulties experienced by foreigners in seeking access to Japanese society", "comparative analysis of working days between Japanese and Europeans", e.t.c.... All these tend to suggest that in Western eyes, Japan, in spite of its accomplishments in the field of economic modernization, it has not yet fully committed itself to the values commonly believed to be universally held in all modern society. In fact, hidden under those articles is a serious questioning of Japan's modernity itself.

This paper addresses itself to the question of "distorted modernity" focusing on the rather limited aspects of Japanese political culture. It attempts to re-examine the causes of this alleged "distortion of modernity." The discussion of these questions

will be made through a couple of approach offered by Japanese political scientist

Needless to say, there have already been numerous discussions trying to set the standard criteria for modernity by both Western and non-Western scholars including Japanese scholars. As far as the economic/political social changes are concerned, two main lines of argument seem to have been predominant in Western discussions. The Marxist camp discusses the issues based on their interpretation of human history, i.e. prehistory-feudalism-capitalism-socialism-communism. Non (or anti) Marxist camp, on the other hand, may be represented by, for example, W. W. Rostow's take off theory, i.e., traditional society-preconditioning period for take off-take off-advancement to maturity-high mass consumer era. In the case of Japan the most notable discussion attended by the American experts as well as Japanese scholars took place in 1960. The meeting began with the question of the criteria for modernity, for which J. W. Hall took the lead. The seven major points tentatively agreed to by the participants included urban-centeredness, widespread circulation of commodities, widespread participation in economic and political affairs, mass communication, and another couple of point.<sup>(1)</sup>

In fact, the question of modernization, both in its general theory and in specific country by country cases, have been discussed at various levels, long and short range, macro and micro levels. I will leave the task of reviewing and examining the validity of those discussions.

My intention here is not to consider any of those specific issues, not even Japanese modernity itself, but to shed light on the possible connection between the question of modernity and current pressing issues which Japan is faced with in dealing with the criticisms of itself. This paper is not meant to be a typical academic work with logical precision and substantial supporting data. It is presented as discussion paper of an issue.

## II. Some Notes on the Issues of Nationalism

An American graduate researcher residing in Japan wrote an article in one of Japan's English language news papers with a rather sensational heading—"Nationalism Not Economics, Rules Japanese Market."<sup>(2)</sup> It was a timely and convincing article. Timely, because never before the irritations about the alleged closedness of Japanese market and Japanese society is more felt by non-Japanese people of all over the world. Convincing, because many foreign residents in Japan and foreign observers hold the view that the root problem of this closedness is the strong sense of nationalism sentiments widely shared by the inhabitants of this small island.

The article which appeared in 1985 cites many examples of the non-tariff barriers, starting with the government controls in favour of Japanese producers, unreasonably complex distribution systems, over stress on personal relationships in

business dealings, and finally the difficulty in buying existing companies and hiring qualified Japanese staffs. Re-stressing that there exist many special features in the business environment here based on Japan's social and cultural heritage, he argues that those special features were hardly thought of when the international trade system was set up after the World War II and the unspoken assumption was that "all market economies would conform more or less closely to Western practices as they developed and grew larger."<sup>(3)</sup> He goes as far as saying, "However, in Japan many seem to view trade as a kind of surrogate warfare rather than as a source of benefit for consumers. Exports equal victory and imports, especially of manufactured products, are seen as a defeat."<sup>(4)</sup>

We leave the question of which two factors, nationalism or economic rationality, actually governs Japan. The question here is whether or not Japan's nationalism shows an excessive degree of intensity and continuity as compared with the other advanced Western democracies, such as the United States. If so, for what major reasons? However, the answer to this question is given a priori. It is impossible to quantify the magnitude of intensity of nationalism in a comparative context. Each nation possesses unique modes of integration of nationalistic sentiments based on its historic and cultural context. The only meaningful endeavor we could possibly undertake, therefore, is to penetrate into the nature of nationalism revealed in a specific case, the Japanese case.

Japan once was an embodiment of ultra-nationalism, demanding human sacrifices unparalleled with the major modern nations. Today, contrary to the views of foreign observers of Japan, the average Japanese person, if asked face to face, responds quite negatively to their attachment to their country. If we follow the "swing" theory often used by this country's intellectuals to explain the mood of each era in Japan, this country now live in a time of a ultra-non-patriotic air. Singing the national anthem, and putting up the rising sun flag for public occasions are still much resisted by large part of liberal element supported by the media and teachers union. It is, for the time being, unthinkable to introduce the anthem before the opening of a professional baseball match. As Japanese themselves feel that they are quite detached from nationalistic sentiments, they are puzzled to hear foreign voices condemning the country's strong nationalism pertaining to the question of trade conflicts and other international issues. Perhaps the answer to this gap between outsider's view and the insider's feeling can be found through examining the particular nature of Japanese nationalism.

Japan's nationalism is a topic widely discussed about by both Japanese and non-Japanese on various levels, but it is a issue that is not well penetrated and elaborated. Maruyama Masao is the one among many Japanese political scientists who felt most strongly the need to scrutinize the nature of Japan's ultra-nationalistic

fever which was exemplified during the last war. In fact, his clear cut discussion on this issue carried out in his short article "Theory and Psychology of Ultra-Nationalism" stands out, even today, as the most penetrating holistic analysis. His main interest was to understand and demonstrate the peculiar factors that have made ultra-nationalism possible. He focussed on the mental structure of Japanese people, and not on the international political or economic environment at that time.

His main thesis can be illustrated by the two main points. First the meaning of the state to the Japanese, particularly in their inner/spiritual life. Second, the role and actual functions of the Emperor as the agent of integrating force of the possibly separated two elements, public life and inner life.

In discussing the qualitative difference of the role of the states between European and Japanese, Maruyama begins with the analysis of the neutral, therefore technical, nature of the European states. "The State adopts a neutral being *ain neutraler Staat*. That is to say, the State adopts a neutral position on internal values, such as the problem of what truth and justice are; it leaves the choice and judgement of this sort to special social groups (for instance, to Church) or to the conscience of the individual. The real basis of national sovereignty is a purely formal legal structure, divorced from all questions of internal value,"<sup>(5)</sup> he argues. On the other hand, he maintains that the post-Restoration Japan saw no effort to recognize these technical and neutral aspects of national sovereignty in the process of building a modern State. As the result, "the Japanese nationalism strove consistently to base its control on internal values rather than on authority deriving from external laws."<sup>(6)</sup> In short, Japanese faced with the situation "in which national sovereignty involves both spiritual authority and political power."<sup>(7)</sup>

What then was the core of this mechanism which made national conduct and the just cause invariably coexist? The emperor assumed that role of being the center of all authority and the fountainhead of all virtue, without subjective freedom of his own.

Maruyama's article had received much support and enthusiasm from Japanese intellectuals in 1947 and has remained as the most important voice on the issue. It looked, however, as if his contribution would gradually lose its direct relevance as Japan underwent substantial changes after the war. The unprecedented social transformation of Japanese society after the war seemed to overshadow the issue of the ultra-nationalism, leaving it in the history book, but in light of the revived interest in the national characteristic of the Japanese people which was aroused mainly by Japan's unexpectedly strong economic presence in the world, his work seems to have a fresh meaning today.

Japan has changed a great deal in many ways after the war, but the elements which formed the psychology of ultra-nationalism seems to have remained. They are certainly not replaced by some other type of inner authority. Lack of the

religious or ideological core worked positively in rebuilding post-war Japan, but that very characteristic of Japanese modernity is now faced with new challenge from abroad.

### III. Some Notes on the Question of Democracy

If the mental structure of Japan's ultra-nationalism is one area where a fresh penetration is greatly demanded in order to discuss the alleged "distorted modernity" then another related issue may be the question of Japanese "distorted democracy."

Kamishima Jiro who has been greatly influenced by Maruyama's work on Japanese political culture, takes us into the long ranged and holistic world of analysis on Japanese modernity and democracy. His main focus is on the mental structure of carriers of Japanese modernization. Analyzing the differences among the English, American, and Japanese modernization processes in terms of the development of each country's political culture, he comes to grasp with reasons why Japan managed to create a rather unique (distorted from the Western view) type of democracy, largely neglecting an essential feature of orthodoxal (Western) democracy, i.e., evolution of procedural mechanisms for political participation. He introduces the term "status democracy" for Japanese case as against "opinion democracy" for English or orthodoxal type.<sup>(8)</sup>

As it's known, Japan's modernization, when it started in late 19th century, did not experience either the class-struggle of the English type or religious persecution of pilgrim fathers of the American type. It was the modernization from the top. The very factor that necessitated the evolution of the mechanisms to absorb the voices of the suppressed class such as English city labors was lacking in Japan as the factors for drastic social changes such as enclosure movements and religious persecution were largely absent. The conditions in Japan's case were so different, giving little chance for Japan to follow the orthodoxal path.

Contrary to the case of England and the U.S.A., the inflow of the villagers to cities in the process of industrialization was minimum as they had never been exodus in any sense. Villagers came to the cities not as a family unit but as bachelors, leaving their family in the country side, thus losing the chance of creating a new city labor class consciousness which, in the case of England, formed the basis of the evolution of what Kamishima calls "opinion democracy." This difference of the conditions and the process of modernization marked the decisively different political culture, he argues.

Japanese immaturity in the area of opinion democracy or procedural democracy seems to invite us to the analysis of contemporary problems. Non-Japanese having direct or indirect contact with Japanese are often perplexed with the lack of the habit of discussion and naivete in procedural handling of common issues with their counterparts. It seems to apply both to private and public situations, thus

leaving the foreign negotiators and intellectuals visiting this country with a certain degree of frustration. Here again, in their eyes, Japan manifests a kind of "backwardness" or "distorted modernity." The visiting intellectuals know about cultural relativism and might consider the language difference as a major factor for their frustration in both intellectual dialogue and practical negotiations. However, much of the recent voice raised by Japan watchers who know the language tend to insist that the alleged "distortion" exists in Japan itself and not in the interpretation of the country.

The time of perception gap has passed. We are in fact in the time of value difference and conflicts. There had been legitimate reasons why Japan chose opinion democracy at the time of the Meiji Restoration. But that very choice is now creating a new problem, the problem of distorted modernity as seen by Western viewers. Largely due to the Western frustration, this distorted modernity which had been overshadowed by their exotic orientalism is now faced with the pressure for its full unmasking.

#### **IV. A General Note Repeated for Further Research**

Trade problems do arise also among Western nations. The fact that these problems often highlight political and cultural differences merely demonstrates the high degree of interaction among the trading partners. Therefore, there should be no grounds for pessimism about these matters. The Japanese case, however, seems to be substantially different. When Westerners discuss their trade problems with Japan in a cultural and social context, they are actually discussing the question of what we might call "Japan's distorted modernity." The Western democracies seem to be increasingly alarmed by the fact that Japan, when scrutinized at close quarters, does not appear to have committed itself to the values of modern democratic society.

In using the term such as "Japan Inc.," Western critics imply that "individualism", the essential features of democratic society, is in some sense deficient in this country. Discussions on the status of women in Japan frequently suggests that the Japanese, unlike the inhabitants of other advanced Western democracies, have failed to come to terms with the question of sexual equality and minority rights. The major Western societies, it is agreed, have seriously dealt with these issues even at the expense of economic productivity. At the same time, seemingly unrelated matters such as protection of the environment, fingerprinting, settlement of Vietnamese refugees, have been, increasingly drawn into discussion of trade friction between Japanese and the rest of the world. They are no longer treated simply as political, cultural, or social issues.

There has been, in fact, a clear and very disturbing tendency to transform the trade issues into a struggle between incompatible and ultimately competitive forms

of political and social systems. Japan's major trading partners are increasingly troubled by the fact that, in spite of the clearly demonstrated economic modernity, Japanese values and behavioral patterns still differ substantially from their own.

The concept of a vertical society and "dependency", are frequently used to explain Japanese society abroad, which has compounded the problem. "A hierarchical society" seems to be the anti-thesis of modern democracy. "Dependency" seems incompatible with the concept of individualism, at least as it is understood in the Western world. A fresh approach to Japan's modernizing process, which contributes to the understanding of Japan today is much sought after. Analysis of the problems of distorted modernity is also imperative, if the Japanese educational system is going to reform to produce greater number of men and women able to cope with the Western counterpart on an equal footing. In these circumstances, it seems importance to take a fresh look at the question of Japan's "distorted modernity."

#### Foot Notes

- (1) Prof. M. B. Jasen's article in *Changing Japanese Attitudes Towards Modernization*, (Princeton University Press, 1965).
- (2) Japan Times, Sunday, March 3, 1985.
- (2) Japan Times, Sunday, March 3, 1985.
- (3) *ibid.*
- (4) *ibid.*
- (5) English translation taken from Ivan Marris, *Thoughts and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics*, (Oxford University Press, 1963) p.3. Original Japanese Text written by Maruyama Masao.
- (6) *ibid.*, p. 4.
- (7) *ibid.*, p. 8.
- (8) See, Kamishima's *Seiji wo Mirume* (NHK Books 1979 Chapter. 1 available only in Japanese) and other works.