

THE POST-WAR SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF THE JAPANESE PEOPLE

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I. *Introduction*

Five years after the surrender, Japan stands in the midst of radical changes in the political and economic spheres of her national life. The results of a number of studies have been published on the subject of Japanese society and people along these lines, but attempts to survey or grasp the changes and shake-up in the mentality of the Japanese people, who are experiencing such an historic transition, have never been undertaken, and lag far behind other branches of social science.

This article aims at finding clues to future systematic studies regarding the social psychology of the post-war Japanese people, and attempts to sift some of the most outstanding features of their changing mentality.

Before entering upon a discussion, it is advisable to clarify the meaning of "social psychology" as used herein. Needless to mention, social psychology refers to group psychology rather than individual mentality, though it must be pointed out that the concept of "group psychology" has not been made explicitly clear. In this article, group psychology is divided into intra-group psychology and group psychology proper.

In the study of intra-group psychology, efforts are made to delve into the difference in the mental states of an individual when he is in a group and when he is alone, in that he may perceive or judge things differently when he is alone and when he is in a group. In other words, his social perception may differ from his individual perception.

However, group psychology proper or group behavior, as referred to in this article, denotes the psychological conditions or behavior tendency common to all, or a major portion of the members belonging to a specific society or social group. Put in more concrete terms, by the social psychology of the Japanese people in the post-war period, we mean the psychological conditions or the behavior tendency displayed by a majority of the Japanese, though somewhat in varying degrees, after their defeat in the second World War.

Reference to "a majority of the Japanese people" has been made because their class, profession, social status and their way of living are excluded

from consideration here. Efforts were made to find something like the greatest common divisor that remains in the psychology and behavior of a majority of the Japanese people after their individual difference are subtracted. Here, however, adults only, male and female, are concerned, excluding young people, for the reason that the latter have gone through an era radically different from that of the former, and that it is difficult to point out the psychological characteristics of those who were youngsters in pre-war and wartime days and to compare them with those in the post-war period.

With these facts in mind, we will proceed to a study of some of the features found in the social psychology of the people in post-war Japan.

II. *Dim Idea of the Lost War*

Even today the Japanese people prefer the term "the end of the war" to "the defeat in the war." This does not mean that the Japanese people harbour any feelings of bitterness. They are the victims of political trickery practiced on them by the then Japanese Government, which sought at the time of the surrender to impress on them the idea that hostilities had been suspended by the Imperial rescript.

Immediately after the surrender, the greater part of the population was given to understand that the war had been stopped by the order of the Emperor. The consciousness of the defeat grew gradually stronger in their minds much later on. Furthermore, the idea that Japan was defeated by the atomic bomb alone, or by the military and material strength of the United States, prevails among many Japanese. In other words, they still believe that their country was defeated as a result of the quantitative superiority in material strength between the United States and Japan, and that the Fascistic Government of Japan did not suffer an inevitable defeat at the hands of the democratic Powers, the United States and her Allies.

The idea that Japan's defeat was not a political inevitability but a military failure leads one to believe that if Japan had had sufficient military strength, she might have won the second World War, which is one of the reasons why the consciousness of the defeat is rather superficial and narrow among the Japanese people.

III. *Fatalism*

Directly linked with the consciousness of defeat, as just referred to, is a sort of fatalism inherent in the Japanese race. If one considers the defeat an unexpected result of the atomic bomb and the subsequently issued Imperial

rescript, rather than a political inevitability, he may come to the conclusion that the defeat was a kind of predestined "natural" phenomenon beyond the control of the Japanese people themselves. In fact, the destructiveness of the atomic bomb, that was virtually beyond human imagination, was regarded by a large number of the Japanese as something resembling an act of God, a super-human or super-natural accomplishment, a view which implanted in the Japanese mind an idea that the defeat was an overwhelming predestination or Heaven's judgment, over which, the people could exercise no control.

The psychological basis of fatalism, however, surely existed in the Japanese mind in pre-war days, who were disposed to think every happening in terms of fate predetermined in the past, without attempting to understand it in the light of natural or social laws.

This hitherto-entertained fatalism has persisted among the Japanese people, since modern rationalism failed to guide them in their daily thoughts and activities. Basically, fatalism was deliberately encouraged through feudalistic policies and education, with motto, "Don't let the people know but let them come and look up to you," a basic principle to which some people are still faithful, who cannot as yet pass individual judgment and act independently and rationally in their daily life, although they have, let it be emphasized, adopted a democratic or modern tendency in such fields as law, political institutions, customs and manners.

IV. *Psychological Instability*

Until the termination of hostilities, the Japanese people, rightly or wrongly, were able to maintain a psychological stability within the scope of their daily life on the basis of the Emperor system, Fascism and militarism. The defeat however, served to rip to pieces all these authorities at one stroke, and the Emperor's renunciation of his own divinity served to deprive the common people of their spiritual support.

The concept of democracy has not demonstrated its strength sufficient to fill this psychological void among the people. The decisive factor is that democracy was not won by the Japanese themselves through their own efforts, but was given them from outside, as a sequel to the defeat. It seems inevitable, therefore, that the people should become psychologically unstable when they lost their old spiritual support and gained nothing new to replace it. Inasmuch as psychological instability arises from the loss of authority and a search for a new spiritual support, efforts must be exerted in two directions to regain the feeling of psychological stability and equilibrium.

V. *The Spirit of Rejecting Authority—
Skepticism and Nihilism*

A way to avoid a feeling of psychological instability is to be found in the assumption of a skeptical attitude, which casts doubts or rejects not only the old authority but all other authorities as well. Such an attitude, negative to all kinds of thought, creed or religion as well as worldly authority, turns into nihilism or sheer egoism.

Many Japanese, possessed with this spirit of skepticism, not only cast doubts on authority but also are disposed to judge truth and knowledge in the light of the immediate advantage or success they may derive therefrom, or from a self-seeking point of view. It is clear that such an attitude springs from a state of mind common to all those who have endured failure and come to doubt any authority, because they have endured a series of trials and tribulations as a result of their complete reliance on authority during the war.

However, this skepticism is found only among those Japanese who have not yet been driven into a hopeless state of mind. Among them is developing a tendency to independent judgment, in rejection of the attitude of dependence on authority. Although in the same direction of negation to authority, nihilism is to be found among those who are so exhausted mentally and physically that the idea of doubting anything is beyond them.

A large number of Japanese people after the end of hostilities were in such a condition of having consumed all their mental energies through economic suffering, that they are passing their daily lives in a state of sheer inertia. But it is felt that no blame can be attributed to them in view of the recent international situation, following a brief breathing spell, propelled as they are into an atmosphere pointing to a dark future. In their mind a feeling of emptiness born of complete skepticism has sprung up, and such people are devoid of the urge to do anything in particular and live from day to day simply as a master of routine.

Their feeling of emptiness or mental void, linked with fatalism as already referred to, breeds the feeling of utter helplessness. Some, for instance, even say that they would not go to the extent of digging fox holes for themselves, or undergo anti-airraid training, but would simply trust to luck if war should again break out. Such nihilism is spreading among a large number of the Japanese people.

VI. *Search for New Authority and Worship of Power*

If we regard such a spirit of negation for authority, as already discussed,

as an indication of passive resistance, we should conclude that the worship of power, which will be referred to later, reflects a search for new authority or power, or is a positive reaction to the loss of the old authority. The worship of power is a kind of defense mechanism designed to convert a state of psychological instability into a somewhat stable condition. This is a probing for a new psychological authority by the present-day Japanese, who must have a substitute for their old social authority. This authority firstly displays the notion of tremendous vitality and determination in general. As at present the most serious concern to the majority of the Japanese people is how to secure a minimum of material welfare in their daily livelihood, what the common people long for, or admire most, and have a great respect for, is not political authority but the courage and determination displayed by successful gangsters, blackmarketeers and the like, who apparently have acquired the technique necessary to enable them to get along well materially; these members of society are respected as a symbol of a vital force.

The Japanese language has an old expression, "the incarnation of power," and people look up to those who are considered to possess it. If one surpasses, overwhelms or bests others by sheer determination or by a display of shrewdness, he surely will become an idol in the worship of power. In popular Japanese parlance, the expression "strong heart," implies an active energetic or pushing individual ("guts"), but today is used with envy, tinged with some disdain. Unlike such similar expressions as "brazen-faced," "thick-skinned," or "hard boiled," this expression has turned into an eulogy of a superior person.

The worship of power stems from the spirit for the negation of authority, though it must be added that special conditions surrounding the government in Japan have something to do with such adoration. For instance, corrupt politicians and bureaucrats who may be involved in public scandals seem to escape punishment almost without exception, by a persistent resort to bravado. Rather than being taken to task by the people for their shamelessness, they are often afforded the chance to demonstrate their "political ability" in order to invite public esteem, which is reflected in the growing tendency toward a revival of movies, novels and songs with of gangster and crime themes, representing these anti-social persons as heroes.

VII. *Flesh-ism and Negation of Spirit-ism*

In the worship of power is included a mentality bent on resisting the principle that stresses the spirit (expediently called here "spirit-ism") hitherto prevalent in Japan. This tendency finds expression in the attitude favouring material and practical considerations in daily life against the teachings

on moral culture that emphasize the importance of spiritual matters. This negation of "spirit-ism" is showing a tendency to turn to what may be called "flesh-ism" in a more clear-cut form. In its broadest sense, "flesh-ism" holds that the spirit is subordinate to the flesh. Concretely speaking, however, it appears in various forms in the daily life of the Japanese people today.

In the first place, mention must be made of the admiration for bodily conditions. Until the end of the last war, the idea of "spiritual mobilization" was predominant among the Japanese people, and a victory of the spirit over the material strength of the Allied powers was anticipated. The defeat in the war completely upset this principle, opening the way for a respect of physical conditions and the body.

In sports, too, "spirit-ism" was in vogue until the end of the war, stress being laid on the idea of "A fight to the death." As a whole, physical education was considered as a means of moral and spiritual training. Recently sports have become more and more on a professional basis in Japan, and there is a tendency to regard sport as the skill of the body. Even in traditional Japanese style wrestling, known as "SUMO" for instance, the champions acquire great popularity because of their skill rather than anything else.

A second form of "flesh-ism" is to be found in the so-called "literature of the flesh," characterized by sensual descriptions and an exhibitionistic tendency. Not only a phenomenon linked with the liberalization of sex morality, it is also a feature in the sexual life of the people in post-war Japan, the primary cause for its rise being that the Japanese people, liberated from the suppressive sex moral restrictions of a feudalistic nature after the end of the war, have assumed a far greater freedom in sexual life than before. The popularity of sensual literature and erotic entertainments, such as strip-tease shows seems to be sustained by a popular search for sex knowledge.

As has been mentioned, the ordinary individual in Japan has been hindered in his attempts to learn the facts of his own accord; he has been unable to acquire a correct knowledge of sex matters because of feudalistic education and cultural policies implemented by the Government. The desire to know facts about sex problems is common among the Japanese people, in an urge to learn more about a subject which was hitherto considered secret, as clarified by the fact that popular sex magazines sell so well.

Likewise, strip-tease shows have become a post-war fad in entertainment circles, the masses visiting these performances not for sheer entertainment, but for chance to see the female body, an assumption substantiated by the serious mien of the spectators who display a complete lack of any vulgar intent. Adults hope to acquire knowledge from these shows about sex which was kept from them by insufficient sex education and feudalistic sex morals, up to the time of the defeat.

A third form of "flesh-ism" is noticeable in the tendency to sensualism exemplified by sexual indulgence, drug addiction and alcoholism. In other words, people seek to escape temporarily from their psychological instability and repressed desires, as has been mentioned, by indulging in bodily and physiological pleasures, in an effort to avoid a psychological crisis, and rely on a paralysis of the flesh. Hence, various popular entertainments as well as gambling are considered to play the role of an anaesthetic.

VIII. *Conclusion*

An attempt has been made to indicate some of the special psychological conditions common to the majority of the Japanese people in the post-war period. It can be said that their common denominator is the considerable psychological difficulties they are encountering, because of their complete inability to visualize even their immediate future, and the absence of any new spiritual basis following their sudden loss of psychological stability.

This psychological difficulty interwoven in a complicated form with a psychological defence against it, burdens the individual Japanese and induces tremendous mental strain.

This article has endeavoured to explain some of the focal points in the complicated psychological conditions of the post-war Japanese. To further this study as a comprehensive social psychological research, through the collection of more concrete data regarding each item, is a task to be undertaken in the future.