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MODERN JAPAN AND WESTERN DEMOCRACY: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN LIBERALISM AND NATIONALISM*

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I. *Introduction*

Until the post-1945 era, studies of political philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, who are regarded as the main architects of modern liberalism in the West, had hardly started in Japan. As a Japanese student of political thought, I was greatly impressed by the ideas on society and politics offered by both Hobbes and Locke. Such ideas on modern democracy were hardly known in pre-WWII Japan. Indeed from the Meiji Restoration of 1868 to the defeat of 1945, Western liberal democracy remained an alien concept.

Today, our conference focuses on Jeremy Bentham and his ideas of liberalism. In pre-WWII Japan Bentham's ideas of modern society and politics were regarded as too individualistic, too epicurianistic, and too selfish to be accepted as legitimate. The reason for the exclusion of such Western liberalism is quite straight-forward—the Japanese emperor system, which even assumed the emperor was a living god. Indeed, the unfettered submission of the Japanese people to the emperor meant Anglo-American concepts of democracy were rejected out of hand by pre-war regimes. In addition, socialism and communism were completely ostracized under the emperor system, as both socialism and communism criticized the authoritarian, imperial regime.

In this conference, there appears to be many papers devoted to the seventeenth century social contract theory and British liberalism with special reference to Bentham and Mill. Here I would like to review Japan's 80 years of political modernization since the Meiji Restoration of 1868 to 1945. My aim is to discuss the conflict between Western liberalism, as represented by thinkers such as Bentham and Mill, and Japanese nationalism.

II. *Political Change and Democracy*

Looking back, it is interesting to note that, from the Meiji Restoration onwards, almost every two decades, Japan's politics has experienced radical change. Following this, the

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dominant and popular political idea (ideology) has also changed. The first period is from the Meiji Restoration (1868) to the enactment of the Meiji constitution (1889). This was a time of enlightenment. While the government was not a supporter of liberal democracy, it was keen to introduce western ideas and institutions. Two opposing concepts of politics were presented: on the one hand, British-type parliamentary government; and on the other, a German-type authoritarian regime. At the time, there emerged not only scholary discussions on these concepts but also actual political conflicts between the two camps. The conclusion to this dispute is clear, however: when Japan introduced its first modern constitution in 1889, it followed a German-type authoritarian regime. The political system under this constitution was a unitary and centralized government. Precisely as a result of this decision, the Anglo-American notion of liberal democracy was never recognized as a legitimate ideology in pre-war Japan. In this sense, Japan's main path of political modernization in the twentieth century was dictated by pro-German theorists.

In the second period, from the enactment of the Meiji constitution to the first decade of this century, Japan strove to become a strong nation, nationally and internationally. In this, a powerless parliament was controlled by a handful of bureaucratic and military elites: they fought two great wars with China (1894–1895) and Russia (1904–1905), thereby making Japan a strong nation in East Asia. Democracy did not develop. Instead, the process of becoming a strong and authoritarian state proved militarily successful. Needless to say, some journalists and political leaders of liberal persuasion tried to criticize the government; alas, their efforts were fruitless.

The third period, starting at the end of the Meiji era in 1909, can be characterized as an era of democratic reform. The reason for this democratic revival depended upon the rise of the middle and working classes as an independent and visible political force, and the development of Japanese capitalism. This period is usually called "Taisho Democracy." Indeed, some democratic trends can be identified—the introduction of universal (male) franchise (1925), active party politics, and academic discussion on Japanese democracy. Even socialism was discussed openly and some supporters of this ideology appeared.

The fourth period from the 1930s to 1945 saw Japan's involvement in war and colonial expansion towards Asia and the Pacific. Japan's territorial ambition in China became clear in 1931 as a result of the Mukden incident. With regard to national politics, authoritarian controls were imposed on academic freedom, as well as on freedom of expression and speech. At this time, militarism and ultra-nationalism became Japan's dominant ideologies. In 1937, the Sino-Japanese War broke out. In 1941, Japan finally attacked Pearl Harbor. This cast Japan into direct military confrontation with the United States. As liberalism and democracy were prohibited as the ideologies of enemy nations, they disappeared from the stage of Japanese politics.

This is an overview of Japan's political development in relation to liberalism. In the next section, I would like to discuss variations of liberalism in the first three periods.

III. *Limits of Japanese Modernization*

After Commodore Perry's arrival in Japan in 1853, Japan was pressured to modernize its society and politics by the other leading countries of the day, particularly the United States.

One of the most critical issues was whether or not Japan's modernization could be carried out by simply reorganizing the Tokugawa feudal regime: the answer was obviously no. With regard to the political aspects of the Meiji Restoration; it was necessary not only to completely destroy the old Tokugawa regime, but also to establish a new political regime which would provide for the "rule of law" and basic freedoms and rights. This implied that a democratic revolution like other Western nations was required. Those who actually controlled the new government were leaders of four local and peripheral clans (Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa and Saga). The reason why these four clans were able to carry out political reform was twofold: first, they were far away from the control of the Tokugawa regime (geographical distance); second, the clans' political leadership remained rather stable. The problem, however, was their lack of clear political legitimacy. In this they had to rely upon the authority of an emperor who resided in Kyoto. Needless to say, the emperors of Japan had been well respected for nearly 1000 years as the legitimizers of Samurai governments. The emperors did not hold actual power as rulers, but their political authority and symbolic rituals made them a unique force in Japanese history.

While the actual power of the Meiji Government was controlled by ex-samurai of the Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa, Saga clans, the political authority of the new regime was symbolized and articulated by the emperor. By this combination of political power (samurai) and political authority (emperor), the basis of the Meiji political regime was established.

With regard to the formation of the new nation, however, three problems remained. First, the Meiji Restoration was not a modern revolution at all—it was lower-class samurai who initiated the political reform, and they were not supporters of modern democracy. In other words, Japanese samurai were not the liberal-minded bourgeoise of Britain nor the revolutionary intellectual of the American or French revolutions. In this sense, the Japanese samurai were innovative in terms of political tactics, but not necessarily liberal or democratic with regard to their political ideology.

The second problem is that the young leaders of the new government did not understand Western political ideas and institutions. Of course, both leaders of the Tokugawa and Meiji regimes were exposed to Western political ideas, at least to some extent, and there was a band of young intellectuals who specialized in Western affairs. But one thing is certain—the ex-samurai leaders of Meiji Japan were not interested in the "democratization" of Japan.

The third problem is crucial. In contrast to the popular revolutions in the West during the 17th and 18th centuries, Japan was faced with the advance of the Western imperialist powers in its attempt to become the first modern state in Asia. In the second half of the 19th century, the Western powers were anxious to expand their territorial possessions in Asia, and the political integrity of India and China had already been eroded. Faced with this situation, Japan had to defend its territorial and political integrity by establishing a powerful central government at the cost of liberal democracy. In other words, Japan did not have the time to modernize its society, economy, politics and diplomacy. What was needed was rapid modernization to enable Japan to defend itself against the Western powers' colonial expansion.

Due to these three reasons, the modernization of Japan after the Meiji Restoration did not directly follow the path of liberal democracy. At the same time, however, we muct understand that the intellectuals of modern Japan tried to introduce concepts of modern

democracy. Indeed, in making a modern nation, there was no attempt but to learn from the West.

IV. *The Course of Liberal Democracy*

The Meiji Restoration was a theatrical drama in which a feudal Asian nation, Japan, was forced to become a modern nation under the pressure of the Western powers. The main actors in this drama were the lower-class samurai of the peripheral clans under the Tokugawa regime and those who specialized in Western ideas and technologies (about 500 students of Western studies). In this sense, the drama was organized by power (samurai) and intelligence (students of Western studies). The Meiji government was ready to listen to the voices and opinions of these young intellectuals. Two important figures emerged. Yukichi Fukuzawa, who introduced the idea of a British-type parliamentary government and founded Keio University in Tokyo. Second, Hiroyuki *K*ato, who introduced the idea of a German-type authoritarian government and was president of Tokyo Imperial University.

It is impressive to see the extent to which the young intellectuals of the early Meiji era studied Western learning. A number of books were translated and published as a result of their efforts. Among the various foreign experts, Dutch, British, American and French scholars tended to be popular in Japan, especially in the first 15 years of the Meiji period (1868–1883). In particular, the works of John Stewart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and Jean Jacques Rousseau were carefully studied and criticized by these young Japanese students.

My research to date suggests it took about 15 years to consolidate Japan's political framework. Under popular pressure, the government decided to enact a constitution and establish a parliament. But when Japan's political framework was finalized in the early 1880s, the government decided to choose a German-type authoritarian regime as the model to be followed. In other words, liberal democracy of the British or American type was not selected as the model for Japanese politics.

After the Meiji Restoration, Kato criticized the feudal ideology of the Tokugawa regime, being in favor of a social contract theory as the basis for a new government. In this sense, he was a leading scholar of liberal democracy like Fukuzawa. But Kato decided to enter government. Once he became a powerful elite within the hierarchy of the Meiji regime, he changed his stance from a liberal to a conservative ideologue. In this he emphasized that human rights were not inherent rights; rather, such rights should be given according to the government's will. In other words, human rights could be limited by the interests and concerns of the ruling regime. He thought that the Japanese, unlike Western people, were not civilized and voting rights should not be given to them. He did not support the opening of a national diet. For Kato, the introduction of party politics was seen as useless. Thus his opposition to democracy was almost identical to that of the governing elites. When the national constitution was enacted and the Diet assumed its role, Japanese politics was virtually monopolized by bureaucratic and military elites who had nothing to do with party politics. However, Hirobumi Ito, who was one of ruling members of the Meiji government, decided to establish his own political party and participate in a parliamentary government.

It was Fukuzawa who continued to encourage the Japanese to accept the necessity

of parliamentary democracy. What he emphasized was the need to establish cooperative relationships between the government and anti-government forces, through political parties, in order to unify national sovereignty. Without this, Japan's political identity and security would be damaged. In other words, both sides should compromise for the sake of national unity. In this context, Fukuzawa criticized the government for its non-democratic policies toward the people, on the one hand; and attacked the leaders of the anti-government forces for their lack of a realistic perspective on the management of Japan's politics and diplomacy, on the other.

Fukuzawa was in favour of stable party politics, although the struggles between the government and anti-government groups lasted for fifteen years. In the end, it was foreign relations, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, which pushed the government side to decide to approve the introduction of party politics.

Despite this, Japan's liberalism and democracy remained minor and peripheral ideologies; the most powerful and visible ideologies were feudalistic and authoritarian nationalism. While the Meiji government decided to introduce a modern constitution and a national Diet in the 1880s, it also decided to promote a powerful Emperor state at the cost of basic democratic rights; in the area of education, for instance, the people were called on to respect the Emperor—the state—an emperor father-figure as the core of political authority. To this end, Confucian educational programs were selected. On the other hand, with regard to the relationship between the state and the individual, German political thought proved popular, as it emphasized the superiority of the state over the individual. In short, political thought to encourage an individual's freedom and identity was not allowed to play a part in Japanese politics.

This is one of the most basic and important points of departure in discussing Japan's democracy. Western nations were well aware of the importance of human rights and basic freedoms within the framework of a nation-state. From the outset, however, Japan did not respect basic concepts of democracy at all—the *sine qua non* of the Meiji politics was the supremacy of the state over the individual. It is for this reason, I believe, that Japan turned out to be a fascist nation in the 1930s. Let me now turn to the development of liberalism from the 1880s to the early 1930s to illustrate my points.

V. *Japanese Liberals*

After the Meiji Restoration, in order to modernize Japan, various Western technologies and ideas were introduced. As a result, Japan's economic development and military expansion until 1945 were successful. Or, to put it another way, Japan could be counted as one of the leading nations of the world. But we must here point out that not all Western ideas were welcomed. On the one hand, Western technologies were introduced without limitation; on the other, Western ideas such as democracy and human rights were not appreciated by the government. Also the basic principle of modern democracy, the "rule of law," was not in the least respected in Japanese politics. As a consequence, modern Japan's appearance on the world stage presented a strange spectacle—a monster nation with "a feudalistic head" and "a body of capitalism." One psychological reason for this is theco mbination of "Japan's inferiority complex towards the West" and "ethnocentric

self-confidence in Japanese tradition." This combination of two opposing directions made Japanese modernization unique.

Still, it is important to note that there were some notable intellectuals of liberal persuasion in Japan. For example, Ukichi Taguchi (1855–1905) examined Japan's historical development from the standpoint of ordinary people. In this, he found that a kind of universal rule could be identified—civilization implied the development of liberty and equality. Thus, the Meiji Restoration could be understood as democractic reform. What Japan should seek to become is a liberal nation of commercialism and trade—a mercantalist nation—and not a nation of territorial expansion based on military conquest. In a sense, Taguchi's ideas was similar to that of Adam Smith's idea of a" commercial republic" of liberal democracy.

Another intellectual of note was Katsunan Kuga (1857–1907), who worked as a journalist. He criticized the government for not approving of freedom of speech, of assembly, of press, and of thought. Above all, he criticized the government as it called for too much loyality toward the state and Emperor.

By following the British journal, *The Economist*, Taguchi established his own journal, and Kuga issued his own newspaper (*Nihon*). Both appealed for the support of the middle class and intellectuals. This is an interesting point to note; that is, they started to educate and mobilize the middle class not through political action, but through intellectual analyses.

Unlike the development of democracy in Western nations, in Japan it was mainly journalists who criticized the government from the early Meiji era to the beginning of the Showa era (1870s–1920s). In other words, bureaucratic and military elites virtually monopolized government positions and became ideologues of conservative nationalism. Journalists, being away from the center of power, turned out to be the main group of anti-government opposition. In this sense, we must analyze the thought and behavior of liberal journalists in order to come to grips with the development of liberalism in Japan. The gover nmentwas too powerful, and political parties were less reliable as an opposition force. In the final analysis, only a handful of journalists can be said to have played an important role.

VI. *Conclusion*

Let me conclude by making a few remarks about the period when the oppositions were visible and powerful, that is approximately in the 1920s to 1930s. Again it was mainly publishing houses and newspaper companies that led the anti-government movement. One of the most important journalists in this era was Nyozekan Hasegawa (1875–1969). He worked as a journalist at Kuga's *Nihon* and *Osaka Asahi* and tried to organize a unified voice of democratic opposition in Japan. Then after retiring from the *Osaka Asahi*, he established his own journal (*Warera* and *Hihan*, 1918 to 1943). Through these journals he was able to maintain an effective forum for democracy and liberalism. His theoretical framework was much influenced by British political thought—he thought each person's freedom and liberty had to be respected and the government should not ignore this principle. Although I lack the time to examine Hasegawa's life and thought in my presentation here, I would like to emphasize that his contribution is enormous: it was Hasegawa who

influenced the young intellectuals before the end of WWII, and it was these same intellectuals who turned out to be the nucleus of Japanese post-war democratization.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize that while democratic voices were not so audible and powerful in Japan, the efforts and contributions of intellectuals and journalists like Fukuzawa in the Meiji era, Taguchi and Kuga in the 1890s to 1900s, and Hasegawa in the Taisho democracy era, positively helped Japan's post-war democratization. Then, was liberal democracy a failure in Japan? Within the context of Japan's modernization I believe the continuity and success of liberal democracy should not be underestimated.

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