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<th>Issue Date</th>
<th>1989-08</th>
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<td>Departmental Bulletin Paper</td>
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<td>The Development of Liberalism in Modern Japan: Continuity of an Idea - From Taguchi and Kuga to Hasegawa</td>
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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Tanaka, Hiroshi</td>
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<td>Citation</td>
<td>Hitotsubashi journal of social studies, 21(1): 259-268</td>
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<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://doi.org/10.15057/8406">http://doi.org/10.15057/8406</a></td>
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THE DEVELOPMENT OF LIBERALISM IN MODERN JAPAN: CONTINUITY OF AN IDEA— FROM TAGUCHI AND KUGA TO HASEGAWA*

HIROSHI TANAKA

I. Introduction

Although numerous works on Japanese political thought have been published, one glaring gap remains: a major work on the development of liberalism in Japan has still to be published. In other words, students of Japanese politics have examined socialism, communism, traditional conservatism, and fascism, but none have carried out an in-depth study of liberalism. This article is an attempt to correct this situation by focusing on the development of liberalism in modern Japan.

There are at least two reasons why we need to pay more attention to Japanese liberalism. First, it is essential to deal with three distinctive phases of democracy in Japan: the Liberty and Popular Movement (Jiyū Minken Undō) of the 1870s to 1880s; the Taishō Democracy of the 1920s; and, finally, the democratization of post-war Japan by the Allied Powers (the 1940s). While there are some works that deal with the Meiji and Taishō democratic eras, they do not necessarily discuss their topics within a common frame of reference—the idea of liberalism and its continuity. This is important for the success of post-WWII democratization not only results from external impact, but also from Japan's orientation toward democracy itself, as seen through its earlier development. Indeed, it is precisely continuity which made democracy in Japan possible. Second, as a political ideology, liberalism was so fragile that it never became a dominant ideology in Japanese politics until 1945. From

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* I would like to thank Professor Glenn D. Hook, Director, Centre for Japanese Studies, The University of Sheffield, for his assistance in preparing this paper.

† Black stars in the footnotes indicating that they are written in Japanese.


the political point of view, there was a complete failure of liberal forces or parties in the struggle against Japanese authoritarianism. Two reasons can be given for this. First is Japan's modernization process, *per se*. Although in the early Meiji period government leaders were influenced by the western enlightenment, they opted for a different strategy of modernization: internally, a strong authoritarian regime was needed, and the supremacy of the state over the citizens and democracy was proclaimed. Externally, Japan became a mini-(western)-colonial power that would go on to invade and control neighbouring countries like Korea, China and Taiwan.

This type of authoritarianism and expansionism adopted by the Meiji government was legitimated as follows—since the western powers would colonize Japan someday, Japan had to establish a strong state in the "Far East" alone. There was thus no room for the very idea of liberal democracy, human rights, freedom and peace. The second reason is more complicated. Since the founding ideas of the Japanese government were so powerful that countermeasures had to be strong, too, socialism and communism were regarded as effective measures to oppose the powerful state. Compared with such ideologies, liberalism was less appealing to opposition leaders. In addition, Japanese politics did not countenance the practice of liberal politics to a large extent—compromise and accommodation—in severely and ideologically divided situations. As a result, the idea of liberalism was rejected by not only the government elites but also by the opposition leaders. But this does not mean that liberalism was totally ineffective in Japan. For in spite of the practical failure of liberalism, liberal ideas have been developed and refined by some Japan's leading intellectuals.

In this article, the continuous development of liberalism will be discussed through an analysis of three liberal intellectuals—Ukichi Taguchi, Katsunan Kuga and Nyozekan Hasegawa. These liberals have been chosen as both Kuga and Taguchi reflect the essence of Meiji liberalism; Hasegawa, that of Taishō liberalism. Needless to say, although the three supported the concept of liberalism, their approaches differ. Thus, we are able to evaluate the development of liberalism through three different perspectives: Taguchi, a historian's perspective; Kuga, a nationalist's perspective; Hasegawa, a social democrat's perspective. We will go on to examine the intellectual environment of Meiji, for the three were not attached to formal academic institutions, but were rather active in the field of journalism. Following this we will deal with Taguchi, Kuga and Hasegawa respectively, comparing and contrasting their life and thought. Finally, a number of theoretical comments on political development in Japan will be presented. While a short article like this can not present the entire picture of liberalism in Japan, it will hopefully make a contribution to understanding the role of liberalism in the evolution of Japanese politics.

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II. Intellectuals in the Meiji Period

It is important to note that an intellectual in the Meiji era did not necessarily hold a specific job or occupation permanently—he could be a combination of journalist, businessman, politician, writer, educator, publisher. One reason for this was functional differentiation or specialization in Meiji society. Specialization was rather undeveloped, and consequently, one person was able to move from one job to another without great difficulty. Both Taguchi and Kuga were typical examples of this type of multi-dimensional intellectuals. (An intellectual could work as a staff writer for a newspaper; if dismissed by that newspaper, he could establish his own company; in this sense, his role was multidimensional). We should emphasize that although such intellectuals may have exploited the social structure of the day, they may also have been men of entrepreneurship and independence.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that university professors did not necessarily contribute to the development of the social sciences in this period. Professors were considered to be experts on state-building or state-craft, and their role as enlightened critics was secondary and peripheral. In fact, those who specialized in the practical management of politics, law and the economy were highly respected. Thus a majority of social scientists were not “critical reviewers” of society, but worked as “pragmatic technocrats” of the Meiji state: providing their expertise to the state and educating future bureaucratic/political elites through their educational institutions. To criticize the government or draw attention to socio-political problems was not unimportant for such university professors, but it was beyond their academic and practical concerns.

Then who did carry out the critical role of the social scientist in the Meiji era? Here, we must mention those versatile intellectuals who were not formally attached to academic institutions; it was these men who played an important role as critic. Taguchi and Kuga are this type of intellectual. And although the time period is different, Hasegawa is a representative critic of the Meiji, Taisho and Showa eras.

This means that in order to understand the development of the intellectual in modern Japan; we must examine both university professors (experts in state-craft) and nonacademic intellectuals (critics of Japan). We should not, in other words, neglect the various types of intellectuals who were journalists, publishers, businessmen, or educators. These non-academic intellectuals, however, were not an ideologically coherent group, they occupying diverse intellectual space anti-western traditionalism, right-wing conservatism, nationalism, liberalism, Christian socialism, pacifism, communism. These intellectuals could claim legitimacy in the eyes of the Japanese citizenry. In addition, unlike university professors, non-academic intellectuals were able to express their views without fear for their job security (university professors were sometimes dismissed by the government as a result of their outspokenness).

7 Two books which deal with Japanese political development and journalism are the author’s edited volumes. The Political Function of Journalism in Japan* (Tokyo: Ochanomizu Shobo, 1982) and Journalists of Modern Japan* (Tokyo: Ochanomizu Shobo, 1987).

How can we evaluate the various types of intellectuals? At least two points are germane. First, as a nation entering the "western world," the Japanese elites had to pay heed to two different currents of thought—democracy and authoritarianism. In other words, the government had to choose either to introduce western democracy (liberal democracy) or to emphasize the importance of the state over the individual (authoritarian rule). Was democracy in Japan possible? If so, how was the idea of democracy understood by Meiji intellectuals? Alternatively, why was democracy rejected by the leaders of the Meiji state? Or what kind of relationship existed between the idea of democracy and authoritarianism? These are some of the questions to be addressed.

Second, Japanese intellectuals understood Japan's ambiguous position in the world. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when Japan was about to enter the world system, many European nations were anxious to expand their overseas colonies and territories. In fact, two large Asian empires, India and China, were in the process of losing their national identity and sovereignty as a result of western aggrandizement. Japan had to modernize her government, people, economy and technology immediately.9

There were two choices for Japan. The first was to become a quasi-western power and colonize other Asian nations. With this, Japan could protect herself from western imperialism, and also establish her own hegemony in Asia as a leading power. The second choice was to support the idea of liberalism, both at home and abroad; that is, support the creation of a peaceful and just order in the "Far East." The two choices were, in a sense, a logical contradiction of liberalism for Japanese intellectuals. If liberalism was indeed the guiding principle of the European nations, then freedom, peace and a just order had to be created not only among the European citizenry (domestic politics) but also countries (foreign policy). The contradiction inherent in the west was that the democratic framework was reserved solely for the citizens of the west (and mostly the middle classes at that); whereas the peoples of the non-western world were colonized and exploited. The Meiji intellectuals had to solve this contradiction.10 In the following pages, we will examine how three liberal thinkers tried to deal with this contradiction.

III. Taguchi, 1855–1905: A Historian's Perspective

Ukichi Taguchi11 was born in 1855, when Japan was forced to reconsider its sakoku policy (policy of separation and isolation) seriously. In fact, several diplomatic missions from Russia, Britain, France, and the USA were from time to time sent to the feudal state. All these diplomatic missions were anxious to establish contacts with Japan. In addition, the Tokugawa government was prepared to study western culture and technology, which were formally prohibited by the regime. Thus it was a period of uncertainty, but also a time of enlightenment and advancement for Japanese intellectuals.

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10 The author translated E. Williams' British Historians and the West Indies (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964) into Japanese in order to identify the point although it is mainly discussed in a non-Japanese context.
Although Taguchi did not receive a formal academic education, he studied various subjects such as English, medicine, economics and history, and later became one of the leading intellectuals of Meiji Japan. During his career he was a translator, a novelist, a politician and a businessman. He was not only a man of talent and wide influence; he was also one of Japan’s best historians. His books are numerous—Japanese Civilization: A Concise Historical Overview (1877–82), Free Trade and the Japanese Economy (1878), Chinese Civilization (1883–87), and On the Nature of Japanese Civilization (1885). His works commanded wide respect as he analyzed Japanese history from a comparative and global perspective. While many historical works were completed by other Japanese scholars, many of them either simply described western history/ideas or merely explained events and personalities in Japan. Or books on Japanese history were written in isolation, without reference to the western world. Taguchi’s method of historical inquiry was innovative—he was able to examine Japanese history within the framework of western civilization. On reading his works, especially Japanese Civilization, three distinctive rules of history come to light: a) enlightenment and progress are inevitable trends in society; b) socio-political institutions unable to adjust to new trends are likely to be displaced and eliminated by other innovative institutions; c) the westernization and modernization initiated by the Meiji government is the only reliable means to establish a new nation-state able to protect Japan’s territory and people.12 Taguchi believed that the nation-state could provide a framework for modern politics and society—furthermore, the establishment of such a state was essential to protect the citizens’ life, freedom, rights and peace. In other words, the state, to Taguchi, was not the reserve of the ruling elites or the rich, rather, the state’s role was to protect the peoples’ security and peace.

What were the practical implications of his analysis? Two interesting points can be identified. First, Taguchi suggested that a new society should be free and open, including equal status for employers and employees, and the elimination of the privileged and the deprived.13 Hence his more provocative view of civilization: Asian civilization was promoted by a minority of aristocrats, on the one hand, whereas European civilization was promoted by the enlightened citizens, on the other. Thus, the open and free society of the west offered a better opportunity for the development of civilization.14 The second practical suggestion was his proposal for a free-market economy. According to his Free Trade and the Japanese Economy, free commercial interactions between nations could promise prosperity for all. He elaborated his idea later: “a free commercial republic” would be the best choice, for Japanese armament and military expansion would be useless, and the creation of a “garrison state” would bring national ruin.15

Taguchi’s historical view and his practical suggestions are clear indicators of his liberalism. He could not produce other interesting works, however, for he died suddenly when he was fifty, on April 13, 1905.

14 Ibid., pp. 118–126.
15 Taguchi, Revised Economic Policy* 1887.
IV. Kuga, 1857-1907: A Nationalist Perspective

Katsunan Kuga was born to a samurai family in 1857 in Hirosaki (Aomori), on the northern tip of the Honshu island, only two years after Taguchi’s birth. And, coincidentally, both these liberal thinkers of the Meiji period lived just a half century. Like Taguchi, Kuga’s career was multidimensional—a journalist, a civil servant, a translator, and a political activist. But Kuga is best known for his newspaper, Nihon (Japan), which provided a forum for political discourse. The time of publication of Nihon is suggestive: it was established in 1889 when the Meiji constitution, the first modern constitution of Japan, was proclaimed. Kuga intended to develop Japanese democracy and liberalism through his newspaper.

Kuga’s approach to liberalism was characterized by his “nationalism.” Yet his nationalism and liberalism were not contradictory but complementary. It had two elements: special improvement of national life (Kokumin no Tokuritu) with regard to Japan’s external relations; and national unification on the domestic stage. The first implies that relationships between nations should be equal and that no government should be allowed to invade and colonize another country. In other words, international relations should be democratic and peaceful. It is important to note that Kuga emphasized that the ordinary citizens’ welfare and security had to be confirmed in the world: the interests of big business or the ruling elites should not be a decisive factor in world politics at all. His prescription for the world was important for Meiji Japan’s foreign policy, albeit inconsistent. For when Japan was servilely negotiating with the western nations (for instance, over the amendment of several unequal treaties imposed by the western powers by the end of the Tokugawa era) and behaving as if Japan were another mini-European state, on the other hand, it was becoming a military power at the costs of the Japanese citizens and other Asian countries. The solution proposed by Kuga was special improvement of national life. It is clear that, for Kuga, the word “national” refers not only to “Japanese citizens” but also to the “other people of Asia.” In short, even though the word “nationalism” tends to evoke a sense of ethnocentrism and xenophobia, Kuga’s nationalism was wider in its geographical scope than the boundaries of the Japanese nation. Here we can find his liberal understanding of Japan’s role in Asia.

The second element is the national unification of Japan. Kuga was highly critical of the Meiji government as its leaders were divided by regional factions (Hanbatsu Seifu), and political parties were incapable of representing the people’s real interests. Thus neither the political elites nor the political parties were acting in order to unite Japan. A solution suggested by Kuga was to make the Emperor the center of Japanese politics supplemented by the Meiji constitution and a new national parliament (the Diet opened in 1890). He seemed to draw a parallel between the British constitutional monarchy (just after the Glori-
ous Revolution) and the Japan of the 1890s. By establishing a British-type constitutional monarchy in Japan, Kuga hoped national unification could be fully realized.

Kuga and his associates, Seikyosha, are usually regarded as anti-western traditionalists. But Kuga was a nationalist of liberal persuasion and his understanding of world politics was logical and consistent. What was his attitude toward China? If he had indeed been an xenophobic nationalist, he would not have hesitated to recommend the conquering of Asian nations through power and armament. But he consistently rejected that type of colonization. He regarded a militarized policy as an obstruction to world peace: Japan should view China as an equal partner and not as a colony to be exploited, and no western policy to partition China should be tolerated. In relation to Japanese colonial expansionism, again he criticized the government: “Victory in war has made our national interest far more fragile than before, for the maintenance of a strong army will depend on the impoverished mass of citizens.” In other words, a militarized policy was being carried out at the costs of the rank and file. His comments on Japanese politics were insightful for a majority of “nationalists” directly related their “nationalism” to military expansion outside Japan. Wars like the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) accelerated this type of nationalism. Kuga’s liberalism was, in this sense, noteworthy.

Kuga’s insight did not last forever, however. He suffered from illness and handed over his Nihon press to a businessman in 1906. After his retirement, on September 2, 1907, he died at fifty in Kamakura.

V. Hasegawa, 1875-1969: A Social Democratic Perspective

Nyozekan Hasegawa was born in 1875 in Tokyo, and attended various academic institutions such as Meiji Law Institute (currently Meiji University) and Tokyo Institute of Law (currently Chuo University). However, his formal education was rather fragmentary due to health and financial difficulties. The schools he attended were all private institutions (not national universities). Since many national university students were said to have promise and were expected to become members of the political, bureaucratic or economic elite of Japan, Hasegawa’s education was, clearly, not of the main stream. But this in no way implies that he was intellectually inferior to students of the prestigious national universities. He learned politics, law, and economics at various institutes, and became one of the leading intellectuals of Japan. His activity began in the late Meiji era and lasted until the 1960s. In fact he is considered to be one of the main sources of intellectual stimulus for the leading intellectuals of the postwar-period. (Remember he was not a professor of a prestigious university at all. All his “students” were taught and trained by Hasegawa privately.)

Interestingly enough, Hasegawa maintained direct and indirect relationships with both Taguchi and Kuga. Having finished his education, he began his career as a journalist and

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20 Kuga, “A Message to Those Who Form a New Cabinet,”* Nihon, No. 2995, January 8, 1898.
22 Kuga, “Strong Soldiers and Impoverished Peoples,”* ibid., No. 4750, October 30, 1902.
was attached to the *Nihon*, the newspaper run by the famous Kuga. Hasegawa was influenced by Kuga's writings during his self-education. Therefore, for Hasegawa, it was a personal privilege to become a member of Kuga's coterie. Hasegawa later commented on Kuga's nationalistic approach to liberalism, and showed his appreciation of "Kuga liberalism."²⁴ Hasegawa also benefited from his colleagues at the *Nihon*, where there were plenty of talented journalists of liberal persuasion.²⁵ In other words, the liberal tradition was founded and developed by Kuga and Hasegawa to a large extent. On the other hand, although there was no personal connection between Taguchi and Hasegawa, the latter highly respected the liberal historian. This can be understood from the fact that he edited and published the collected works of Taguchi's papers in 1928–29 (8 volumes). Hasegawa intended to treat Taguchi's analysis as a counter-weight to authoritarianism and militarism. For Hasegawa, Taguchi's classical liberalism was not dated at all: Taguchi's ideas on Free Trade and the Liberal State were useful concepts to attack Japan's non-democratic politics. It is also important to recognize that many socialists and communists were critical of liberalism—hence they did not establish a unified anti-government opposition composed of the Liberals, Socialists and Communists in the 1920s and 1930s. Hasegawa hoped that both groups would cooperate effectively in order to challenge the monstrous giant, Japanese statism.²⁶ While his personal wish was not realized, his insight deserves consideration.

His journal, *Warera* (We Proclaim), which changed its title to *Hihan* (Critique) in 1930, provided a forum of anti-statist discourse among Liberals, Social Democrats, Socialists and others of varied ideological persuasion. In this sense, Hasegawa was an outstanding organizer and propagandist of the anti-fascist forces in Japan.

Hasegawa's liberalism was, however, different from that of Taguchi and Kuga. Hasegawa saw the rising power of the working class and tried to incorporate this new trend into his liberalism. For him, it was not enough to discuss the political and economic structures of a liberal state; what was critically important was to pay more attention to the majority of the working class. Thus Hasegawa's liberalism was transformed from classical liberalism to liberalism of a Social Democratic persuasion.²⁷

If we put these three Japanese liberals into a British context, we can draw an interesting parallel—a liberal who supported liberal democracy but did not incorporate the working-class interest positively (J. Bentham and Taguchi/Kuga): a liberal who could see the rise of a new social force and introduced revised liberalism (J.S. Mill and Hasegawa). The main difference between the two groups is as follows: while Bentham understood the working class as a pivotal force in British society, he merely confirmed the majority rule of old liberalism—the "one-man one-vote rule." Mill moved one step further by adding a worker's collective right to his liberalism. Here we have emphasized the continuity of liberalism in Japan, but also the changing nature of this concept in accordance with the socio-political environment of the day. The three liberals discussed here reflect such variation and continuity at the same time.

²⁶ See *Warera*, Vol. 9, Nos. 5–7, 1927, especially, T. Kushida, "Mr. Taguchi and His Contributions."* ibid.*, No. 7.
²⁷ Hasegawa, "A Step toward a Controlled State,"* Warera*, Vol. 8, No. 9, September 1926.
VI. Conclusion: The Hobbesian State in Japan

Thomas Hobbes’s theory of *Leviathan* is occasionally misunderstood. Through his famous phrase “all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death,” and the notion of absolute and irreversible sovereignty, there is a tendency to see him as a theorist of authoritarian rule. If this is correct, then the Japanese state since 1868 to 1945 can be said to have epitomized the application of the Hobbesian paradigm of politics, where the supremacy of the state (kokken) over individual citizens (minken) has been firmly established, and where only the state has been able to protect Japanese territory from the west. As a result, the emperor system was reorganized, and mystification of the emperor was elaborated.

This type of interpretation is, however, misleading, for Hobbes’s intention was not the creation of such a repressive regime at all. He thought that since human nature was based on self-interest, only an absolute and inseparable sovereignty could provide a stable political society or “body politic.” While this sovereignty may be absolute, Hobbes’s intention was not absolutism: sovereignty was established for the sake of human rights and peace amongst all. In other words, sovereignty was legitimate as long as it could provide a framework of democracy for the citizens: absolute sovereignty is not reserved for authoritarian rule. The Hobbesian notion of politics was innovative in the seventeenth century due to his denial of the pre-existing hierarchical social order and his introduction of the “rule of law.” In addition, political power was considered as a tool to establish the citizens’ political rights and freedoms. Indeed, Hobbes’s theory is close to modern liberalism. First, he wanted the functions of the state to be limited: internally, the state should establish order, and externally, the state should protect its people from foreign threat. Here, we can see the idea of the minimum-state. Second, since the principle of politics in the Hobbesian paradigm was so clear (protection of selfish mankind), no other principle need embellish politics. In other words, the decorative elements of politics, such as glorification of the rulers or monarch and religious mystification, should be omitted in the world of Leviathan. Only rationality was the legitimate principle of the Hobbesian state. Again, this rational thinking in politics is considered to be an important part of modern liberalism. Perhaps Hobbes was a nationalist who wished to establish a British state, yet his ideas were not far away from modern liberalism.

The Japanese state unfortunately turned out to be the misapplication of the Hobbesian paradigm. But the leading Japanese advocates of liberalism—Taguchi, Kuga and Hasegawa—tried to correct the situation, although their efforts did not bear fruit until 1945. There might have been a different political path for Japan even before WWII if liberalism had been a more effective guiding principle for domestic politics and external relations. Social scientists, however, should not rely upon such a hypothetical premise. They should

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rather carry out a critical evaluation of Japanese political thought within the framework
of western political ideas.

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