

## FINDING CLASS CULTURE IN JAPAN: INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES AND THE BREAKDOWN OF AUTHORITY AND IDENTITY

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### *Introduction*

The question of reproduction within education must start with the identification of the means by which reproduction occurs. The self-evident answer is through the differential distribution of skills and opportunities. That is, a different set of skills is being taught at different schools depending on the types of opportunities made available upon leaving school. The different opportunities result in different eventual profiles of income and occupation. Thus, if you graduate from good schools, you have certain skills that enable you to climb to the top of the highly stratified social ladder.

Until recently, many Japanologists have argued that these patterns of stratification were no more than the result of the natural range of differentially skilled individual students sorting themselves by virtue of a meritocratic examination system. Actually, as remarkable as it may seem to those who are not Japanologists, the reproduction of patterns of social difference, in the form of social indicators such as income, occupation and education, has only recently been demonstrated in the literature.

The documentation by sociologists (Watanabe 1997 and Ishida 1993) of these statistical indicators and their reproduction across generations have in effect thrown down a challenge to more ethnographic types--how do sociological patterns of reproduction generate, affect, retard or obscure cultural differences? As an anthropologist among sociologists, I take as my contribution to this panel the defining of some notion of class culture as generated and reproduced in the context of secondary schools. As I will argue, the role of schooling in the formation of distinct class cultures is perhaps even more prominent in Japan than in other capitalist democracies.

The first step is to note that when patterns of stratification are manifest across generations, we are looking at the reproduction of social inequality. Schools are thus teaching more than skills--they are passing on privilege. In doing so, schools clearly do more than redistribute, track and train. The process of schooling imparts to the students at each school a particular set of attitudes and dispositions, aspirations and strategies, which taken together would seem to constitute the basis of a distinct way of life that is of course in accord with their expected place within society. Thus, the school culture prepares students to be part of what I will call today, class culture.

My ethnographic research has been at working class schools and so it is from this class I will draw my examples.

## I. *Situating Class Culture*

The most important theoretical step when talking about class culture is to disentangle it from the muddle of class consciousness. It has long been argued that despite the obvious patterns of stratification in Japanese society, these haven't and probably won't lead to divisive or even distinct types of class consciousness, in the way that they have in Western societies. According to theory that is most often linked to Nakane Chie's name, Japanese individuals do not locate social identity with those who share similar occupational attributes, and thus classes never become aware of themselves, as such. Rather, Japanese have a "group consciousness" and in the contemporary urban scene, that means they locate social identity within the bounds of their company, whether they are the president of the company or the janitor. The empirical fact that this theory only ever describes less than a third of Japanese individuals (males who work in large corporations) does not seem to have substantially compromised its popularity. Methodologically, the argument goes, if the researcher cannot find evidence of class consciousness, usually in the form of surveys or interviews, then it is meaningless, ethnocentric, or worse, ideological, to identify patterns of stratification as class formations.

The reasoning is clearly flawed because it assumes that since there is nothing that we might call full-blown class consciousness, class formations and class cultures are either nonexistent or insignificant. We are putting the cart before the horse. We should remember that class consciousness is a function of the political mobilization of some segment of the population around a particular set of explicit discursive issues. To collapse this distinction between class and consciousness results in the familiar claims that because organized labor is weak or few people will check the box reserved for working class or upper class on the periodic Prime Minister's social surveys, class distinctions do not exist in Japan.

What is necessary is some sort of acknowledgment of the intermediate forms of consciousness, which although they lack systematic political formulation, are still operative at some level. Class culture is one of those forms. We might imagine a gradient of levels of consciousness, with one extreme end manifest as in this full blown class consciousness (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). At that end, the terms of social identity are explicitly represented and systematically organized through an ideology of the politics of social identity. We might call this ideology. When we study labor strikes and surveys, it is from this extreme pole that we make our claim--a very limited type of data. At the other extreme is the hegemonic, the everyday, taken-for-granted going about one's own life. These hegemonic orientations and dispositions are rarely the object of self-reflection because they are so close to the bone, so much part of who we are. Following Gramsci, we know that this identity is nonetheless a product of class position, as a constitutive part of our selves. Taken-for-granted common sense is a function of our experience in the social world, and when that world is characterized by class formations and social inequality, that is what becomes taken for granted.

Ironically, these taken-for-granted, implicit orientations have been well-studied in

Japan, symbolically and ethnopsychologically, (Doi 1985 and Lebra 1976) but always in an attempt to study the **Japaneseness** of Japanese Culture, itself assumed to be a unified monolith of common custom and shared values. This approach is mistakenly, or perhaps incompletely, applied as if these symbols and practices that make up the cultural were above history and outside of their social embodiment in relations of power and inequality. Where this approach should be applied is in the study of how the semiotics of the cultural work to different effects in different materials contexts, including different classes. This does not entail the reduction of culture into power politics--not all cultural forms are subsumed into hegemony, but by the same token, there are no cultural forms that are free of the effective history of political practice.

## II. *Gradient of Consciousness*

We have this gradient from the implicit to the explicit, from the taken-for-granted to the abstracted, from hegemony to ideology. I would like to note a few places along this gradient as a possible point of entry where we might be able to detect emergent class cultures in Japan.

We have already noted that there is little to differentiate classes at the farthest extreme of politically mobilized class consciousness. But, go all the way to the far ideological end, stop, turn around and take one step back, and consider a somewhat less theoretically or politically formulated level of consciousness. Here, social identity is defined relationally in collective "us vs. them" oppositions. In this case, there is little effort to consistently articulate the content of the difference perhaps, but there is a strong awareness of a boundary separating the two and a gut feeling of antagonism. This approach is used in the construction of national identity (Barth 1969), and Nakane (1970) uses it in her articulation of company identity. In Japan, these sorts of social distinctions are quite difficult to find among classes. Few researchers have documented this sort of class-based antagonism, and I found but little in my own research.

Moving further back from the explicitly political, we find what Paul Willis (1977) describes in his study of British working-class high schools. For these working-class "lads," class distinctions are synecdochically represented by the distinction between mental and manual labor--mental work is for "poufs"--real men work with their hands. Unlike the "us vs. them" distinction, there may not be a general recognition of class groups per se. Nevertheless, the marks of membership, working with your hands, can be contextually read and speculated on by these working class "lads." What they seem to be unable to do is to see the ways in which their rejection of school work, based on their valorization of the manual over the mental, probably means they will never get beyond the same shop floors on which their fathers work.

Now, we should always be wary of cross-cultural value comparison, and in Japan, different cultural constructions of masculinity reduce the chances that gender distinctions could be analogically transferred to mark out class differences. Still, though it is not enough on which to build a theory of class culture, like Willis's "lads," certain night schooler students (*teijisei kotogakusei*) with whom I worked, students at the extreme bottom fringe of Japanese society, do demonstrate a similar disgust with those day

schooler students (*zennichisei kotogakusei*) who mindlessly follow the orders of teachers and later bosses. (Relations to institutional authority will be discussed below.)

As we retreat still further from the precipice of ideology, we dip below the common sense understanding of conscious choice and volition in taking an approach associated with consumer culture. This approach focuses less on the process of schooling as such to define class culture. Popular among many Japanese academics is the study of mass society that both gives rise to and is shaped by the commodification of culture. William Kelly (1993) has given us an interpretation of the rise of a middle class consciousness as linked to the formation of a Japanese market-oriented consumer culture. Marilyn Ivy (1993) follows Adorno in problematizing the term "mass" as understood to be the "spontaneous" and "authentic" voice of the people. Mass culture becomes a product of the "culture industry," and class analysis is replaced by the discourse of marketing and management. Social distinctions cease to be based on productive relations, but rather are only fleetingly articulated by patterns of consumption. Below this level, the question of agency, as defined by Giddens anyway, becomes somewhat murky, as the parameters of choice within a commodified culture are limited by this year's product lines.

Horio (1988) and others have discussed education's role within this darker side of the rise of Japanese "middle class" prosperity, showing how education promotes mindless obedience rather than develops responsible citizens. Clearly, this is a difficult model to use in the seeking out of distinctive class cultures because it really is a theory of the way that class formations are obscured and class conflict displaced, even while the reproduction of social inequality and control continues unabated.

This position also throws into doubt appeals to different "ways of life" as definers of class culture, an approach that would be even closer to the implicit extreme of the gradient. After all, the crassest form of the argument goes, if everyone has color tv's and air-conditioned cars, or in the case of students, cell phones and Nike Air Maxes, how different can they all be? I would reply that as ill-defined as a "way of life" might be, having the same sneakers, or even watching the same sneaker commercials, does not fully obscure the differences between the college bound and those willing to settle for a job at the local noodle shop, or later in life, between being driven to work and driving someone else, between making the mess and cleaning it up, as a member of Japan's growing service sector.

Some differences, I think, are often not manifest in patterns of consumption, but in more tacit structures of experience. Of course, sometimes these differences receive no discursive representation at all. Continuing to backpedal from the explicit, you get to the unarticulated practices that characterize the everyday experience of class culture, which in Japan is largely institutional, and this is a key point. Many have noted Pierre Bourdieu's lack of any sustained attempt to theorize the place of institutions within society. Nevertheless, he directs our attention to the way that implicit patterns of practice are structured through the institutional experience within the school, so as to become generative principles of social behavior. The trick of course, is to avoid limiting our analysis to Bourdieu's totalizing brand of reproduction theory(1977). Fortunately, any ethnographic study of the school forces us to entertain various sorts of more consciously constructed representations.

### III. *The School*

Within the triangle of family, school, and job that are usually thought to be the primary social institutions responsible for the establishment and maintenance of class culture, in Japan, the school stands out for a number of reasons. Due to near universal entrance rates in high school and the remarkable faith most people have in schools, there is a great deal of legitimation already built into schooling. Also, there are few competing social institutions: there is little neighborhood unity, outside of "traditional" pockets such as Shitamachi, no real social clubs and few extended family links, making it difficult to locate class culture in any of these places.

But like all fields, the capitalist secondary school is a terrain of struggle--over distribution of capital, over meanings, over relative positions. This is interesting because those institutions on either side of the high school, the elementary school and the company, are both supposedly preeminently organized around principles of group living (*shudan seikatsu*) with high levels of group consciousness. But in secondary school there is a structural conflict: while group living, or at least the remnants of group living, is supposed to define the moral order, individual, meritocratic achievement is the mechanism by which students are redistributed into their place within the class structure. Thus, while the school talks the talk of group living, students walk the walk of individual achievement. To put it another way, the explicit or ideological pole is filled with appeals to group living, while the implicit lessons the students learn is 'every kid for herself.'

Actually, even this is somewhat of a simplification because group living is everywhere, The **explicit**, such as the principal's speeches, is filled with admonitions to students to devote their energies to making their homeroom a bright and supportive place. This is balanced by the many **implicit** institutional structures that come to mold students' behavior that are equally organized around assumptions of group living: from simply knowing how to sit in a chair or walk through the school gate in the morning, to the more complex, such as how to publicly demonstrate knowledge or relate to authority. It is for this reason that we cannot limit ourselves to the implicit the way Bourdieu's educational analysis does.

The school is a powerful force in the creation of **class** culture because in the school, the contradictions between groupism and meritocracy, self-determination and reproduction, are manifest and exploited in different ways from different class positions. That is, even if the explicit is filled with images of harmony and prosperity, unity and collective responsibility, these images are only part of students' class culture, and they are recontextualized and redeployed differently at different levels of society. Thus, meritocracy motivates those students at the top, even to the point of their tolerating schools' lip service to groupist internal harmony. But meritocracy is then cold comfort to those students who have realized that no matter how well they do in the low-level schools, they are not going to get a job they want. How different groups of students resolve these conflicts, that is, how students transform the contradictions in institutional structure into personal strategies, will determine the shape of class culture. Of course, the

type of social capital different groups of students bring with them, the resources that they can bring to bear on their situation, will be different as we go up and down the highly stratified educational and social ladders. As a result, the strategies will also be different.

Although it is politically unsatisfying, I am tentatively suggesting that class culture, and especially working-class culture, is not as much a function of the romantic subaltern opposition to the dominant, as some cultural studies would have it. Rather, it is more a product of the breakdown of the institutional order characteristic of dominant society. That is, the lower-level schools, where students are not going to college or white collar office work, train students to follow orders without expectations of supporting or being supported by the paternalism and collectivism supposedly characteristic of Japanese society. Let me outline what breaks down and how the contradictions between groupism and meritocracy generate class-specific strategies and cultures.

#### IV. *The Breakdown of (Teacher) Authority and (Student) Identity*

I think that the most significant way to chart the differences in class cultures is relative to the variations in institutional authority of teachers and social identity of students. Legitimate authority is idealized in most schools, and indeed, most Japanese social institutions, as based on intimacy and empathy, and a sparing use of coercive power for fear it will lead to alienation. Social order is secured less by the recognition of and respect for external force (in the person of a superior, such as a teacher or boss), and more by the centripetal force that pulls all group members into the moral center, secured by personal relations and reciprocal obligation. Group membership is not secured by commonality of belief, but “naturally” develops through participation in the routines and rituals of a given group, which implicitly reinforces collective authority. To be a student, or any group member, is to recognize this authority as legitimate, thus linking institutional authority and student identity as mutually reinforcing and relationally defined features.

Most models break down in patterned and even predictable ways. That is, just as the breakdown of methodological individualism, the model that underlies much of the practice of meritocracy, can lead to the Hobbesian war of all against all, what is lost in the breakdown of the group model, *shudan seikatsu*, is the paternalistic care offered by those in power for those below them. When unchecked, this leads to authoritarianism and outright coercion of social inferiors. But even when there are sufficient checks and balances to prevent such extreme abuses, as I think there are in the public high school, the warmth and care that are necessary to secure superior/inferior status relations are still threatened. They cannot, after all, be restored by legislation, the way, say, individual student rights can. What often happens when those at the top stop taking full responsibility for their charges, is the fall into a bureaucratic, rule-governed processing of students.

In these schools, the moral center has atrophied, and the time-consuming practice of establishing relations with students has been replaced with a discipline process that is external to the most operative group in the school, the homeroom. Anti-social behavior,

which was once recognized as the result of poor collective relations, must be individualized so that the discipline system can be applied with *baransu* (balance). It's four strikes and you are out. Social order as a function of rule. In such a context, teachers are forced to establish authority through the prudent application of these rules. The separation of power and authority, a distinction that was once a defining characteristic of authority's claim to legitimacy in Japan, collapses. (See Dore 1987 and Haley 1991)

At the same time, this drying up of the once wet interpersonal relations of authority, also forces new forms of social identity on the kids. The school is no longer the social center of the students' life, but instead, simply one of the many things that fill their day. The role is still intact: they are still "gakusei" (students), but the interpersonal connectedness within the school that once enabled it to serve as a training ground for adult society has withered. Without trying to privilege one or the other, we can see that participation in unified school life is withdrawn by the students as teachers replace the intimacy of guidance (*shidou*) with the coercive power of discipline (*shituke*).

### V. Working-Class Culture

What I want to argue is that this shift in deployment of authority and identity represents the basis of a distinct class culture. But where do we look? Not at the explicit end of the gradient. No riots in the streets (although the classrooms are a bit chaotic). They are few revolutionaries here. Students' tell of "dreams" that are usually in line with the dominant value structure--many want a car, a house loan, a job. But it would be inaccurate to say that these kids *aspire* to middle class status, white collar work: they know that it is not a possibility. Do they see themselves as different, a sort of "us vs. them" opposition? Well, the first thing that most will tell you when you ask about the school is that it maybe be at the bottom, but it is still in the loop. That is, they don't see themselves as different in any fundamental sense.

When seeking out cultural difference that far along the gradient toward the explicit, the results are patchy. For every interview I did with some students who voice hints of oppositional identity, I have a couple more who blame themselves for being where they are: *atama ga warui*, being stupid, or not having a head for school work, or simply being lazy. That is, they rationalize their dim occupational prospects by individualizing academic failure--just what one would have expected from the ideology of meritocracy. The difference is that even in these cases, the disappointment in themselves or the self-blame tends to not only rationalize dim prospects, low educational and social status, but also to push them further away from the moral center of the group, an isolating or alienating process. This is in direct contrast to the research of Wagatsuma and DeVos(1984) who identify and even glorify the capacity of the working-class to *gaman* and *gambare*, tolerate and persevere in the face of adversity. (As rising cram school percentages indicate, this working-class fatalism is not characteristic of the middle classes of Japanese society.)

I suggest that we have to look for such difference in the hegemonic the implicit. For example, as teachers seek to maintain school order through the deployment of rule and

harsh discipline, students also stop taking authority for granted. Gone is what Victor Koschmann has called "given authority" (1978:5). In its place is a contested authority, legitimated through rules to resolve conflict. That is, the workings of authority slide from the implicit to the explicit, objectified ultimately in the rule book. The teacher becomes the institution's representative, rather than the homeroom's personal guide. In the bureaucratization of schooling, the teacher stands alone, perhaps as an enemy, maybe as a friend, but always separate. As has been pointed out by Rohlen (1994) the denaturalization of authority serves to expose it to inspection, and thus, possible challenge. Students orient themselves not within the wake of a teacher's lead, but in juxtaposition to it. Order is imposed, rather than emanating naturally from the needs of the group itself. Any unity becomes temporary and conditional, and just as the teacher's authority must be earned and re-earned, school order is buttressed always by the threat of punitive sanction and coercive power.

How is this manifest concretely? Sometimes in the rejection of authority, something that is logically impossible to do in the groupist model of social order. But more often in subtle and implicit ways. We can see this shift in the pained expression of the older teacher when one student suggests that the class participation in a sports day be decided by vote. The admittedly old-fashioned teacher was looking for some consensus through discussion as a way toward unity, a common groupist practice. The student, in this case, was without ulterior motive--that is, she did not figure that she had the votes to push the issues her way, but only that she did not want to extend what she thought was a boring discussion. She unreflectively figured a simple majority was enough. Underlying this: Everyone makes their own choices and faces the consequences. Collective unity is not only not my responsibility, but is not even an issue.'

As rules become explicit tools in the establishment of school order, students learn the rules of use in order to strategize effectively. We see this in the questioning of authorities' reasons and ramifications: As authority is exposed to scrutiny, we hear students ask, "Why do I have to do this?" and more telling perhaps, "What will happen if I don't do it?" This is not theoretical analysis or a political stance, but simply *joushiki*, common sense borne of experience. More to the point, it is also a new construction of authority. Once authority is established by rule, then the particularism that once characterized group living is replaced by standardization. A new awareness of fairness thus enters into the application of rule: "Why do I have to do this, if others don't?"

The more daring students with greater facility in the rhetoric, will at times challenge authority. In one instance, a student was able to overturn a *douseki* ruling: this rule states that everyone present when a rule is broken is equally guilty--a practice begun when teachers took seriously their mission to encourage collective responsibility among students, which is retained today because it cuts down on the time taken to sort out alibis and blame. Still, such a rule was clearly at odds with the principles of individual responsibility and "balance" on which this new ethos of the school is based. This student was able to set these two parts of the contradictory logics of school practice to his advantage. Most students are not so clever.

Obviously, on the whole, teachers have more leeway to frame the situations such that the rules can be used to their best advantage, and most students learn to tolerate the lapses in consistency of application of rules. The students learn to hunker down and stay



out of the line of fire as much as possible.

What **everyone** learns is how to withhold participation. School teams often fold or lack sufficient numbers to play games, and teachers have largely stopped scheduling anything not during class time. Students simply leave as soon as they can. 'Do what you have to and keep your head down. Doing more is usually useless and could even be dangerous.' In direct contrast to the groupist model, these kids are moving away from the moral center of the community, quite literally, as they leave campus at the first bell. Perhaps, this is like the Japanese population in general, which is becoming more adept at carving out places for themselves, some private realm that is protected from the reaches of institutional influence. The difference is that these students at the bottom lack the resources to find some other place, some social context that could provide some alternative source of identity. The students are forced to patch together what they can from here and there.

## VI. *The Job Search*

This learned attitude organizes the job search as well. Students' first criterion is that the vacations are long, the second, that the office is not too far away. They want to find as painless a job as they can, again, in obvious contrast to the long-term planning of the more elite students. Also, more students are willing to work in the burgeoning part-time service sector. They prefer independence from the constraints of a unified office setting, a place that expects social skills that they were not taught anyway.

The options for those graduating from these schools make for quite limited horizons, and the dispositions that they learned in high school provide them with a limited stock of strategies to exploit those horizons. But, these strategies land them in contexts where what they have learned in high school is reinforced, one of the facts of social reproduction. This is also the way that class cultures take shape and congeal.

The social utility of such students is of concern to some of their teachers. Many claim that their job is to make these kids "useful to society," and fear that they are not. But in fact, this sort of student is quite useful to society. Here is a student who is trained to follow rules, if not enthusiastically, then at least competently. Unlike those groupist types so well documented in the literature, they don't work out of loyalty in exchange for paternalistic care. They work for money. They don't want to be part of the complex web of moral obligation. They just need a job. Significantly, these kids are not going off to work at Bank of Japan or the Foreign Ministry. They are working in small, local companies, doing clerical work; dispatching taxis; selling retail; cooking; driving. Thus, they are working in those places that get hit hardest in times of slow growth and recession. From the point of view of management, it may be better not to have to invoke the image of a family when next month you may have to lay some of the "family members" off to protect profit margins. Employers seem prepared for the trade off of a lack of enthusiasm for a pliant work force, witnessed by the fact that these kids don't have much problem getting work, if, that is, they are willing to work full-time at what are usually considered non-career type and even part-time jobs. Clearly, the school plays an important role in producing, if not yet reproducing, the attitudes and dispositions that

inform the larger social strategies of these kids.

## VII. Conclusion

What the students learn at school, they carry with them into their jobs, which themselves are less coherently collective and stable than middle class jobs. It is here that their school strategies are reinforced: the habit of going it alone, of working without the expectation of paternalistic support or the desire to define themselves by their work. I suspect that families are increasingly becoming equally strong agents of reproduction, although for now, the mechanism most responsible for the redistribution of young people within the occupational structure, the schools, is also doing double duty in formation of class culture as well. In particular, it is within the tacit and hegemonic practices that are structured by the institutional experience of schooling, especially through the construction of authority and identity, that distinctive class cultures seem to be emerging.

It should not be surprising if class consciousness is still emerging and inchoate. It would stand to reason that the reproduction of a class culture takes a longer time than the reproduction of social indicators--dispositions need reinforcement and strategies need time to become fine-tuned and disseminated. Still, I think it is the breakdown of the moral order of the school that foreshadows the eventual solidification of distinctive class cultures.

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