

Traditional and Modern Thought in Japan: Some Notes on the Problem of Continuity and its Meaning

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My thoughts on the problem of continuity centre on post-1945 studies of Japanese thought of the Tokugawa period (1615-1868). In raising the issue of 'traditional' and 'modern', we face a problem of perception with which both western and Japanese researchers have to grapple in their investigations of Japanese thought. I shall confine myself to three questions: 1. Can we detect an endogenous development of modernity out of the context of traditional culture in the Japanese history of thought? 2. What can a question like this tell us about the consciousness of the scholar who is searching for traces of modernity? 3. Is it advisable to continue the hunt for modernity in traditional Japanese thought? For a tentative answer to these questions I am going to propound four theses.

1) Conjectures on what might be considered 'traditional' or 'modern' are the result of a generalization of experience derived from within the context of the European and American consciousness of history.

As the question of 'modernity' has been the object of scholarly research from the times of Biondo (d. 1463) until today, we might have reason to assume that the various disciplines of scholarship, above all the social sciences and philosophy of history, are ready to give us some definite idea of the essence of modernity. But they are not. There are quite a number of disciplines and schools within each discipline struggling for a description and analysis of what we call 'modernity'.

On the other hand, it is true that there exists some understanding between bourgeois modernists and Marxists regarding their teleological understanding of history. Science, technology and capitalism are conceived to be the starting point of the One World as one of the ends of mankind. Further, they are considered to be the aim of global development until the time of their appearance. Thus science, technology and capitalism take the role of a central criterion for all historical phenomena before them as well as—and this is even more deplorable—for the evaluation of non-scientific, non-technological, non-capitalist societies. (1) From this point of view, change in history is looked upon as historical development, as the unfolding or

action of a universal principle, an entelechy implanted in history, causing mankind to develop towards modernity, the pre-condition for the One World.

In a way, it is fascinating to see to what degree the Hegelian interpretation of history has kept its appeal, not only by way of Marx, but along many other paths too. In this respect, the historian Reinhard Wittram speaks of the unchanged suggestive power of Hegel as the *hegelianische Zauber*. (2)

2) The quest by contemporary Japanese historians for continuity from 'Kinsei' to 'Kindai-Gendai', through the evidence of endogenous elements of modernity in pre-modern Japanese thought is the expression of their search for orientation in view of the Amero-European world and a form of articulation of their political beliefs.

In post-war Japan, modernity came to be a value in itself which could not be questioned. The maintenance of social and political values could only be successful by the evidence of their modern character. Generally speaking, he who wants to prove the rightness of his political persuasions tends to avail himself of the past to legitimize his convictions. He will find that his ideas were realized once in some ideal form or, at least, that they are implanted in principle in the history of his particular society.

In other words, the statements of Japanese studies of the history of thought concerning modern elements and developments out of traditional thought can hardly be understood correctly without reference to their extra-scholarly likings, their respective *leitendes Erkenntnisinteresse*. From that point of view, we may distinguish four main streams of intellectual historians.

First there is a group of scholars such as Nagata Hiroshi, Saegusa Hiroto, Hani Gorô and Fukumoto Kazuo, who saw themselves above all as Marxists. Their central motive was their wish to make use of and verify Marx's or Marxists' theory of history. To these historians we owe quite a lot of ingenious studies on the history of thought in the Tokugawa period, the most outstanding of which may be Nagata's *Nihon hôkensei ideorogii* and his *Nihon yuibutsuron shi* where he analyses the line from the bourgeois materialism of the period to Meiji enlightenment, or Saegusa's excellent *Nihon no yuibutsuronsha* and his studies on Miura Baien. (3) A very impressive study, in spite of all its weak points arising from its extreme parallelism, is Fukumoto's *Nihon runessansu shi ron*, where he treats the history of thought in the Tokugawa period as analogous to European renaissance thought. (4)

Secondly, we should mention the so-called 'modernists' (*kindai-shugisha*), with Maruyama Masao once being their spiritual leader. Between Marxists and modernists there was agreement in their

opposition to the scholars of *Kōkoku shigaku* and the 'overcoming of modernity' (*kindai no chōkoku*). (5) The modernists asked for modernity above all in respect of political thought. The reaction against modernity under the wartime regime had more or less strong anti-democratic elements. Behind their attitudes there was often the idea that the essentials of western modernity (a very diffuse concept in their thought) were fundamentally incompatible with the Japanese spirit. So their proximity to and, in a lot of cases, companionship with fascist thinking was evident.

What those who considered themselves as protectors of tradition held up as the strong points in Japanese thought, was considered to be the reason for the specific problems of Japanese political culture according to the judgement of Maruyama, as he explained in his article 'Chōkokka-shugi no ronri to shinri' in May 1946. (6) Nonetheless, in the years 1940-44, he had already undertaken the attempt to open the concept of tradition as held by its guardian angels, and to redefine it to find a way out of their cultural particularism. For Maruyama, the formation of Sorai's style of thought came to appear as an analogue to early modern western thought, whereas the supposed dissociation of *Shushigaku* seemed to be the symptom of the disintegration of the medieval world-outlook. Franz Borkenau had been the main sponsor of this interpretation. (7) While Maruyama himself had already mentioned some problematic points in his approach in his postscript to the 1952 edition of *Nihon seiji shisōshi kenkyū* (8), this view gave a considerable impetus to thought studies in the fifties and even sixties and, with good reason, is still held in high estimation for its ingenious approach.

Next, we should turn to the modernization theory (*kindaika ron*), the Japanese representatives of which appeared after the conference at Hakone in the summer of 1960, above all under the influence of E.O. Reischauer, J.W. Hall, the leading figure among modernization theorists concentrating on Japan, and R.N. Bellah. (9) Now the central question was no longer 'Why has Japan developed so late into a modern society?', as the Marxists wanted to know, or 'What modern political elements can be found in pre-modern Japan?', as the 'classical' modernists asked, but one that came from the functionalist approach: 'What were the economic, social, political and mental preconditions for the highly successful modernization of Japan since the Meiji Restoration?' This new approach had a considerable appeal in the sixties in face of the increasing economic power and the growing self-consciousness of the nation, and gave rise to a new, positive evaluation of the Tokugawa period in the formation of modern Japan.

The manifestly ideological character of the modernization theory, above all in its initial stage, its development out of the American tradition of missionary-type attitudes of superiority, its relation to

American crisis-consciousness in face of the advances of the Soviet Union after 1945, and its practical meaning for the Kennedy-Rostowian strategy towards the supposedly 'underdeveloped' states of the Third World, have given rise to so much criticism that we need not repeat it once more. (10) Among Japanese intellectuals, as among 'concerned Asian scholars' in the USA, it was above all the course of the war in Vietnam that opened many eyes to its ideological implications. Criticism towards the modernization theory in Japan is therefore primarily criticism of ideology and not so much of the underlying methodological assumptions.

Generally speaking, the ideological abuse of a given theoretical concept does not tell us anything about its true validity. The essentially weak points and inadequacies of modernization theories, which the historian will find more deplorable than the social scientist, may above all be found in the evolutionist convictions of their propagators and their combination with the methods of functionalism. Other shortcomings, such as their conceptual formalism and their fetishism of indicators, actually are not specific deficiencies of modernization theoretical thinking; but they do contribute to the dilemma of a discipline which is worming its way into the confidence of the humanities. The theoretical modernization approach does not in practice ask for the factual quality of pre-modern phenomena, but limits itself to the investigation of their functional value in respect to the social process since the Meiji period. Bellah's adaptation of the Weber-Parsonsian concept of 'rationalism' may be looked upon as a prominent example.

Last, I should like to mention the representatives of *minshūshi* 'plebeian-history' writing, such as the famous Irokawa Daikichi, Kano Masanao, Yasumaru Yoshio, and Haga Noboru. The *minshūshi* stream has been increasingly gaining appeal since the middle sixties. Their approach towards modernity is closely related to their critical attitude towards political change since the Meiji Restoration. Above all, they criticize the formation of a bureaucratic elite, and it gives a good impression of their political persuasions to notice their co-operation with the *jūmin tōsō* ('residents' struggle) movements. What they particularly want to know when studying pre-modern thought is the answer to the question: 'Does there exist in the pre-western thought of the Japanese a modern, alternative tradition of liberal thought, which is different from the system immanent in the ideologies of the "great thinkers"?' Of course they have already given a positive answer, and in doing so have found the historical basis and justification for an attempt which can be described as an endeavour to revive the autonomous individual as the actor of historical change. The best pre-conditions for this they hope to find in the villages of the countryside, which they hold in high esteem and make the object of their studies. So it is above all peasants'

thought that they mean when they speak of *minshū shisō* 'plebeian thought'.

3) Statements concerning 'modern' elements and developments in pre-western Japanese thought are based on analogies, formed out of morphological similarities of isolated phenomena.

The analysis of a single idea cannot be undertaken without regard to the whole context of which it is an integral part. Its interpretation can only adequately tell something about its factual quality if it is done *in toto*. Actually this is a platitude, but a truism which rather often is not respected, for the simple reason that we want to prove something which is only possible through a selective perception of the object. It would be easy to give a lot of examples, such as Nakamura Hajime's 'parallel developments', Minamoto Ryōden's studies in 'empirical rationalism', Saegusa's conjectures on 'materialism', Bitō Masahide's detection of 'autonomy' in Arai Hakuseki as 'one face of modernization', or Matsumoto Sannosuke's analysis of 'natural right' in Itō Jinsai; but let us confine ourselves to one famous case of presumptive 'modernity'.

Ogyū Sorai has been an attractive target of modernist interest for about four decades. Especially in respect of Maruyama's 'from nature to invention' (*shizen yori sakui e*), Sorai was in the past often looked upon as 'modern'. Recently, R.N. Bellah once more followed Maruyama, stating that Sorai had, 'we almost might say single-handedly created "modern philosophy" in Japan'. (12) Indeed, in regard to the criterion of *sakui* or 'conceptual consciousness', as Bellah says (13), Sorai may remind us of a lot of thinkers we usually count among the demiurges of western modernity. One might think, for example, of Vico's idea that man could only gain full orientation when he lived in 'the constructed' (= *sakui*). (14) Conceptual consciousness, poetic subjectivism, gnostic immanentism or whatever we may call the phenomenon, may, it is true, be looked upon as one of the central characteristics of modern man. But while we have the dichotomy of man and the outer world as subject and object in both cases, the subject is very different in respect of its aims of creation. To put it in a very simple way, Sorai's 'subject' is a subject in a less radical and autonomous sense than we have in western tradition. It is a commonplace that the modern concepts of man in the West as the 'subject' of history can be understood as the secularized Christian concepts of God as the creator of the world and almighty father. 'Creativity' is the specific quality of the *creator mundi* and at the same time the foremost aspiration of modern western man, the projection of the Christian God. So we simply cannot understand Sorai's concept of 'invention' or western poetic subjectivism without looking at the whole context, the particular relationships to the specific concepts

of God, man, time, etc.

4) Western studies of the Japanese history of thought (and, in due course, also the Japanese study of the history of thought) should attempt to approach pre-western Japanese thought primarily as an alternative to western traditions. Japanese traditional thought should not be understood a priori—in regard to a presumptive continuity—as an abortive development towards modern thinking.

The analysis of pre-western Japanese thought under the aspect of modernity is pure Euro-centrism. To clarify the problem we should try to imagine a situation in which western humanities took their categories and patterns of thought for the analysis of our own culture almost exclusively from the context of Chinese and Japanese tradition. Western thinking has first and above all gained a consciousness of itself by the adaption and refinement of its own, that is, Judaeo-Christian and Greek, conceptual tradition. It is self-evident that this means a confinement of cognition and is a good reason for the principal necessity of comparative studies. But to declare the very opposite, namely, the interpretation of a particular culture by means of the supposedly universal categories of a presumptively superior culture, as a principle of interpretation, is much more problematic from the viewpoint of cognition.

From time to time it may be useful to give some thought to the significance of one's own pursuits. In my view, the specific significance of investigating a given alien culture lies in the acquirement and transmission of experience. To acquire new experience is a difficult undertaking. The psychology of the individual tells us that already, at an early stage, we tend to perceive those parts of reality which are likely to correspond to and legitimize given assumptions and judgements and that, as far as possible, we try not to notice those things which do not fit with our received worldview. Trans-cultural comparative studies in a way have the same problems. Scholars engaging in them seem to be rather inclined to confirm given worldviews through their selective perception of the object culture, thereby neglecting one of their greatest opportunities. It is a commonplace that the so-called 'advanced' societies are today in an unprecedented crisis of orientation, and this at a time when traditional western beliefs are gaining more and more attraction in countries of the Third World. At a time like this, it might be reasonable to bring our minds to bear on alternative forms of thought, which we can experience in traditions other than those of Europe and America. I should therefore like to suggest that we take Japanese traditional thought seriously, not in its presumptive function as a now obsolete stage towards modern Japanese thought, but as one of many possible alternatives which we should consider.