

THEORIZING THE FORMATION OF THE JAPANESE NATION-STATE
THROUGH PHILOSOPHIC AND RHETORICAL TEXTS

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“All revolutionary societies are faced with the dilemma of maintaining the momentum of radical change and also legitimizing their rule. Given that Meiji Japan organized itself in such a revolutionary moment, show how at least three of the following texts made attempts to move from a *theory of knowledge* to an *organization of power*.”

By viewing intellectual history as a form of epistemological labor, rather than something merely interesting or academically novel, we gain a vivid and text-based window into the ways that thinkers/writers were *intervening* in history as it was happening. Theoretic texts therefore are extremely valuable artifacts of the ways in which people sought to make sense of their historically-specific contexts and prescribe ways forward. Even texts which deviate from outrightly prescriptive forms (manifestos and the like) had consequences within their time. Using theoretic texts, I will attempt to chart some of the crosstalk between abstract thought and tangible consequence during the Bakumatsu-ishin, as intellectuals and activists sought to move from a theory of knowledge to an organization of power.

At the end of the Tokugawa period and in response to the looming threat of being colonized by imperialists, the general consensus among proponents of the ishin becomes to transform Japan into a modern entity in the eyes of the encroaching Western powers. To paraphrase Anthony Giddens, during this time it could be said that “modern powers were nation-states, existing within a nation-state system”¹. In the Tokugawa period, there existed administrative structures and some forms of social organization (*shi no ko sho*²), but there was not a unified Japan with clearly-defined boundaries, broadly-felt national character, or sufficient means of social control. These are characteristics we may attribute uniquely to the nation-state form, and as imperialists began showing up on the shores of what was becoming Japan, there was imminent need for a transition to nation-statehood (or at least the performance of nation-stateness to imperial powers), in order to avoid colonization. The overturn of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce was another major priority for Japan during the entire Meiji period. Its terms were considered grossly unfair and a hindrance to both Japan’s domestic economy and ability to participate in global trade. In order to overturn or renegotiate terms with Western nations, Japan needed to be seen as a sovereign state that merited bargaining with, and thus it must achieve nation-state status.

However, there is much to be answered about the nation-state form. Where are the boundaries of this unified Japan? What are the relations between Japan and the external world now? These questions fall along an external axis. Internally, questions of identity and social control abounded. What *is* this Japan thing and how ought we govern it? What is the relation between the central government and the people? A concept of “sovereignty” is one of the ways that theorists try to give some coherence to the internal and external pulls of the nation-state form. As such, the concern of many theoretical texts became the question “who or what is sovereign?”. Generally, sovereignty may be understood as something inviolable and autonomous. Borders are the limits of sovereignty. The laws go to this line and not across. Sovereignty is also associated with notions such as “self-governed” and “independent”, belying a

¹ Giddens, Anthony. *The Nation-State and Violence*. Cambridge, England. Polity Press, 1985.

² Shi No ko sho refers to the divided feudal understanding of the difference between samurai and chonin.

certain degree of sophistication. A nation that is sovereign is not barbaric, has organization, cohesion, a head of state, the means to defend its borders, etc.

In *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, Fukuzawa tries to construct a unified method of understanding the history of nations and development, situate Japan within that framework, and ultimately loosely chart a path forward. He is writing in response to what he terms “disturbances”, including increased contact with other countries who differ both in “cultural elements... and in the degree of their evolution”, and the Meiji Restoration, which he says functionally spurred the collective desire to “(elevate) Japanese civilization to parity with the West”. Fukuzawa begins “A theory of civilization concerns the development of the human spirit. Its import *does not* lie in discussing the spiritual development of the *individual*, but the spiritual development of *the people of the nation as a whole*”³. To civilize is to holistically elevate human life within collectives to a higher plane.

The drive to become civilized is similar to the the drive to become a sovereign nation in order to survive, to be not trifled with by outsiders, and to evolve in such a way that the problems and uprisings⁴ of pre-Meiji periods are not replicated. As such, one may be inclined to view his ‘civilization’ as a loose synonym for sovereignty, but this is incorrect. Civilization is the uber-category which allows Fukuzawa to say that Japan may become sovereign. The *means* to civilization is the nation-state, and thus the nation becomes an implied subcategory. Fukuzawa has abstracted civilization into a universal goal towards which all relative particulars progress along different lines. He relativises not just Japan, but indeed locates all nations in orders or proximities to each other and to civilization. Similar to Hegel’s theory of the stages of history, Fukuzawa lays out a set of successive stages, the arc of which ultimately curves toward a universal (in this case, civilization). However, starkly unlike Hegel, Fukuzawa’s theory is not a teleology and nations pass through the ‘ages of civilization’ not in a dialectic way, but rather in accordance with liberal notions of evolution.

Fukuzawa threads the needle through Japan, sovereignty, and civilization in the following way:

Now the only duty of the Japanese at present is to preserve Japan’s national polity. For to preserve national polity will be to preserve national sovereignty. And in order to preserve national sovereignty the intellectual powers of the people must be elevated ... first order of business in development of our intellectual power lies in ... adopting the *spirit* of Western civilization.⁵

Fukuzawa delicately severs the notion that civilization is inherently western in nature; rather western nations are further along in the process of civilization because they have taken up within their own societies a certain “spirit” which allows them to evolve towards civilization. He writes “although we call the nations of the West civilized, they can correctly be honored with this designation only in modern history”⁶. In making this distinction, he has created the intellectual space to stave off the notion that Japan is inherently playing a losing game. Through Fukuzawa,

³ Fukuzawa Yukichi. *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*. Preface. Translation by David. A Dilworth and G.Cameron Hurst III. (Publication date unknown). Keio University Press. 1-5. Emphasis mine.

⁴ He mentions “military insurrections of several years ago”.

⁵ Ibid. 36-37. Emphasis mine.

⁶ Ibid, 19.

it becomes thinkable that Japan could potentially overtake the other relative nations and furthermore that Japan need not merely emulate Westernness in order to approach civilization.

Fukuzawa locates a major step in the formation of a centralized state, but he does not identify the state itself as sovereign. From his comparisons of the “semi-developed” to the “complex” countries, we can infer that Fukuzawa prescribes a system of governance which permits enough intellectual freedom for the glorification of the human spirit to take off. Of autocratic “Heaven-bestowed” rule, he writes “since the minds of those who live under such rule were always faced in one direction, ... their activities of the mind were always simple (never complex)”⁷. He writes of a social order which permits greater freedom in the following way:

A hundred thousand enterprises spring into life together to enter the struggle for the survival and development of the fittest. Finally some reach a state of relative equality and equilibrium. In this balance of forces and pressures, the conduct of men cannot help but advance to a higher plane.⁸

This vision maps neatly onto another concept of that period - Risshin Shusse - loosely, “go out and make something of yourself, in the name of the nation”. It is notable that Fukuzawa does not tie “the nation” to some national essence rooted in a storied past or the imperial lineage. The nation is, more organically, the group of people writ large who act to bring the nation-state into sovereignty, toward civilization.

In stark contrast, contemporary historian Fujitani Takashi posits a theory of nation-state formation during the Meiji period wherein there was conscious effort to install the emperor as a symbol around whom identity and subjectivity and Japaneseness may be constructed. Fujitani’s text *Splendid Monarchy* is different from the others in this paper because it is a retrospective written in the 1990s. Nonetheless, Fujitani’s work illuminates the ideological and rhetorical weight of actions taken by the Meiji government and theorizes the role of these actions in the agglomeration of state power. Fujitani coins a category of “mnemonic sites” to include shrines, rituals, pageants, and even statues, which he contests are “material vehicles of meaning that ... helped construct a memory of an emperor-centered national past that, ironically, had never been known”⁹. Applying a Foucauldian lens, he views ceremonies, parades, and physical monuments as reproductions or reminders of the imperial gaze, contributing to a quasi-panoptic sense of observation and a resulting internalization of authority. It’s this internalization of authority and the accompanying self-discipline that produces the Japanese social citizen.

Foucault writes “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection”¹⁰. The mechanism of social control of which Fujitani writes isn’t exactly “surveillance” in the same way it is discussed in *Discipline and Punish*, but perhaps

⁷ Ibid. 26

⁸ Ibid. 25

⁹ Fujitani, Takashi. *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan*. Introduction. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. 11. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon, 1977. 202-203.

more like the Althusserian “interpellation”¹¹ which is producing a sustained Japanese subjectivity. To borrow more from Foucault, one might say that a sense of internalized authority is one significant source of power for institutions and their norms. In this way, the coining of the emperor as the symbol of Japanese essence and sovereignty is itself producing some of the strength behind the formation of the imperial government. The emperor’s progresses are an actual performance of the sovereign walking the limits of his sovereignty. In his public appearances, the emperor is functionally interpellating the people as subjects, as Japanese. From Fujitani, “the image of the seeing emperor facilitated the production of the nation-state as a bordered space of visibility within which the people could imagine themselves as objects of observation”¹². The line is being drawn from constant subjectivity into formation of identity and finally into development of nationality.

Fujitani describes attempts to give coherence to the nation-state as a kind of “suturing”. The invention or development of Japaneseness and the nation of Japan is not a form of liberal evolution nor a dialectic synthesis of opposing forces; the sutures stay in and are uncomfortable. Perhaps the most visible suturing takes place between the two capitals of Kyoto and Tokyo, each of which had a starkly different character and function. The actual suturing itself lies in the construction of narratives linking between categories of *tradition* and *modernity*. The ultimate higher category that subsumes both of these seemingly incompatible things is the emperor (the representation of national sovereignty, functionally the stand-in for Japan itself). By understanding Kyoto and Tokyo as embodying respectively a mystic past and practical present-state, the space is created for conceptualizing Japan as a unity and the clash between tradition and modernity becomes civil in nature.

In the wake of the Boshin war, Seikanron, and questions about the next direction of the ishin, so-called “opposition movements” arose to articulate alternative visions, including the Popular Rights and Liberty Movement, wherein we locate Ueki Emori. Behind Ueki’s theoretical texts (which were themselves provocations), there was fighting in the streets, including an uprising of poor farmers against the Meiji government. Fittingly, the lineage upon which Ueki focuses is that of people rising up against the state. In “There is No Good Government Anywhere in the World”, he sets up a transhistorical universal in the antagonistic relationship between the people and the government. He writes that “the constitution”¹³ or fundamental makeup of a governed society lies in these “conflicts of interests”. This rhetorical move is noteworthy in that it establishes the government as an entity which may have interests.. The badness of government’s pursuit of own interests lies in the harms it exacts on the people. Ueki writes “Government seeks its own benefits, uses its power to oppress whenever it possesses such power and takes advantage of every opportunity to do so”¹⁴. He argues essentially that the people possess the ability to make a government into a good government, but the government is incapable of making itself good.

¹¹ “the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection”. Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. . Trans. Ben Brewster. (2001) New York Monthly Review P, 2001.

¹² Fujitani. 25.

¹³ Ueki Emori. “There is No Good Government Anywhere in the World”. (1878). Trans. Katsuya Hirano. *From Japan’s Modernity: A Reader*.

¹⁴ Ibid. 45.

Historically, he claims, any movement towards good or towards progress has resided with the people and not the government. Following this logic, he recommends a constant vigilance against the inherent creeping self-interest of the government; "people must be very attentive to what their government does"¹⁵. Ueki writes of the European "principle of liberty"¹⁶ wherein the people collectively acting to limit the rulers' rights to govern them, but even the establishment of this principle of liberty via a constitution is insufficient to safekeep the interests of the people from abuse by the government. Ueki recommends a constant skepticism of governmental actions so as to be poised for counteraction when necessary. He writes "If we do not maintain our skepticism towards and watch over the government, we permit the government to do anything it desires, and we never know what the government will do to us" and hence any belief in the goodness of a government is letting one's guard down"¹⁷.

Ueki implores his audience to understand themselves as the agents, subjects, and mechanisms of goodness. In this way, it is the *people* who are sovereign and the people collectively owe thanks to the protests of the past. He legitimizes, even valorizes protest against the government. In another short essay, he paraphrases Rousseau, running an argument for the innateness and central importance of individual liberty - "human beings are born free"¹⁸ and "liberty is a gift from heaven"¹⁹. He believes that people have been imbued with a complacency or downtroddenness and he's seemingly trying rhetorically to break them out of this habit. His prescription for organizing power is explicit: the people must exact from the government a constitution which protects their natural rights. However, even in a constitutional government, the engine by which progress is achieved is mass opposition, so therefore the collective people must exist in a permanent state of mobilization.

Another writer of that period, Kato Hiroyuki firmly refutes the concept of natural rights held by Popular Rights and Liberties activists like Ueki. The nonexistence of any in-born entitlements to free and full participation in the governance of society doesn't mean that the social organism cannot decide that citizens *should* have these things though. The form that rights take is not natural or god-given, but acquired and conferred by the state. He writes "the state cannot be formed apart from rights and rights cannot be formed apart from the state"²⁰. It is not the monarch, but rather the state which is sovereign. Until there is a state, people cannot really have rights.

The concept undergirding all of his logic is that of natural law. Kato follows in the social Darwinist tradition and believes that the mechanism of natural law is competition or "survival of the fittest" qua Herbert Spencer. This process of weeding out via conflict is to Kato a universal truth and the sovereign must work with and try to control natural law. Like an organism, the social unit needs to remain healthy, so there must be a method of sorting according to inferiority and superiority. Kato envisions a universal education system for the purpose of identifying the

¹⁵ Ibid. 45

¹⁶ Ibid. throughout.

¹⁷ Ibid. 47.

¹⁸ Ueki. "People Must Acquire Their Right to Liberty". (1880). Trans. Katsuya Hirano. *From Japan's Modernity: A Reader*. 49.

¹⁹ Ibid. 49.

²⁰ Kato Hiroyuki. "A Reconsideration of Human Rights". *From Japan's Modernity: A Reader*. 28

fittest and elevating them. The state's conferral of basic rights unto people and uniform provision of education were thought to create a more perfect and efficient form of competition.

Like Herbert Spencer's theorized military-to-industrial transition, natural law first manifests as brute struggle, but with the formation of the state and conferral of rights, politics becomes the mechanism by which struggle is carried out. Kato contests that if the physical kind is overweighting the intelligence manifestation of the struggle, then the state must intervene with its force to privilege the political form of struggle above the brute form. Kato depicts primitive competition as militaristic and violent and physical, while higher competition is enlightened, industrial, and capitalistic. On a global scale, some nations will not survive and Japan might well be among those. This is a grim outlook, relative to the possibilities we may see through other frameworks. Japan must create a strong central state and institutions that move it from primitive survival of fittest to higher survival of fittest.