

BELONGING AND THE NATION-STATE FORM IN MEIJI JAPAN

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*“What is a nation-state, and who belongs?”*

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It is simple enough to say “the Meiji period is the period in which Japan became a modern industrializing nation-state”, but the necessary work to unpack the content of this utterance is more complex. Indeed, the very sentence presupposes the existence of a Japan which could “become” at all. In order for this to be true, we have to appeal to some eternal essential Japan or at least assert that there existed a coherent national entity predating 1868 which people then could have called Japan. In actuality, under the Tokugawa shogunate there existed administrative structures and some forms of social organization but no recognizably unified Japan with clearly-defined boundaries, broadly-felt national character, or sufficient means of social control. It was not until the aftermath of the Meiji ishin that Japan was *produced* as a unified category by which to link a socially and regionally disparate people, reasonably term them a nation, and subject them to governance by a centralized state. Theorizing the nation-state form hinges upon the embedded content within the hyphen itself, but first I shall attempt to define the terms separately. Given that the nation-state form itself is a historically specific organization of power, I shall attempt to theorize up from the temporal moment of the Meiji era.

In my previous essay, I touched on the perceived urgent need at the beginning of the Meiji period for a transition to nation-statehood (or at least the performance of nation-stateness to imperial powers), in order to avoid colonization and overturn or renegotiate terms of unequal treaties with Western nations. The conditions of the playing field were such that “modern powers were nation-states, existing within a nation-state system”<sup>1</sup>. Sovereignty occurs at the unit of the nation-state and Japan needed to be seen as a sovereign entity that merited bargaining with. If sovereignty is the impetus, what is the nature of the nation-state? Imperfect coherence. In his 1971 piece “On Discrimination Against Okinawans”<sup>2</sup> writing of the late Meiji period, Inoue Kiyoshi writes “a people with a shared language in a shared space come to an inseparable, mutual relationship through production and exchange”<sup>3</sup>. “Shared language, shared space” is a

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

<sup>2</sup> Inoue Kiyoshi. “On Discrimination Against Okinawans”. 1971. Translated by Robert Stolz. Submitted for inclusion in *Archive of Revolution: Marxist Historiography in Japan 1930s-80s*, edited by Katsuya Hirano and Gavin Walker. (Under Review, Columbia University Press).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 6.

common phrase amongst various definitions of ‘nation’. Indeed, Inoue writes “A ‘nation’ (minzoku), according to Stalin’s famous definition<sup>4</sup>, is a human group concretely tied together by sharing four commonalities: a shared language, a shared living space, a shared economy, and a *shared national psychology* (this last is manifested as culture)”<sup>5</sup>. I quote Inoue at length because for all the conceptual and practical clash we can locate in the hyphen between nation and state, I believe his piece effectively captures the *interaction* between the two.

Put simply, with the beginnings and maturing of capitalism and the construction and development of a national market, *a shared economy* grew up. And with this *as its base*, a shared language and a shared culture were, too, developed; it was the construction of a people or nation (minzoku).<sup>6</sup>

Without naming the state, Inoue lays out the relationship between capitalism and the production of a nation.

A nation is a felt thing; internal, non-material. The development of a shared national psychology is both predicated upon some modicum of common interest and the achievement of such a psychology itself *supports* the more effective pursuit of a common interest. I am thinking of Risshin Shusse - loosely, “go out and make something of yourself, *in the name of the nation*”. It is economic development and capitalism which prompted “peoples’ scope of a shared economic existence (a shared living space), [to widen] beyond the bounds of the previous natural village”<sup>7</sup>. This isn’t to say that capitalism alone prompted an organic gathering of the people at a national level around naturally-occurring cultural commonalities. Rather, that a move toward capitalist development appears a precondition to the nation-state form in East Asia.

In whose interest is the development of a capitalist economy? It serves the generally-accepted imperative to modernize, to civilize in the Fukuzawan sense. Through Fukuzawa, 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. The *means* to civilization is the nation-state and Fukuzawa locates a major step toward

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Stalin, “The Nation - Chapter 1,” *Marxism and the National Question*, accessed May 13, 2021, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1913/03a.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Inoue, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 6.

civilization in the formation of a centralized state. From his comparisons of the “semi-developed” to the “complex” countries, we may infer that Fukuzawa prescribes a system of governance which permits enough intellectual freedom for the glorification of the human spirit to take off. 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.<sup>8</sup>

Fukuzawa’s vision seemingly situates the state as the balancer of these “forces and pressures” and thus a necessary mechanism for the elevation of the Japanese nation to a higher ideal plane.

That “some” in “some reach a state of relative equality” becomes key. Pure competition isn’t pure and competition itself is historically installed. Foucault says it well: “Competition is a historical objective of governmental art and not a natural given that must be respected”<sup>9</sup>. Hence the state functions as the “regulator of interests”<sup>10</sup>. But this is too vague; whose side does the state come down on? We factually know that the development of capitalism necessitated the state to take actions that systematically expropriated peasantry<sup>11</sup> in order to create a mobile surplus labor force, some of which was herded into heavy industry and some of which was left dispossessed, “stagnant”, and largely destitute.<sup>12</sup> In *Japan’s Emergence as a Modern State*, E. Herbert Norman lays out the Japanese state’s imperative to capitalize:

“The Restoration was not merely a continuation of [Tokugawa] policy of trade expansion ... [the 19th century was] a race to overtake the advanced Western nations with their machine technology and armaments and Japanese economic and even political independence were at stake”<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> Senellart, Michel., Burchell, Graham., Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978--1979*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault. *Security, Territory, and Population*. 346.

<sup>11</sup> Norman, E. Herbert. *Japan’s Emergence as a Modern State: Political and Economic Problems of the Meiji Period*. United States: UBC Press, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Per Norman, this stagnant surplus population was “an important factor limiting the standard of living and the wage level of Japanese Labor”.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 109.

From this, it is self-evident that the state's motive is to strengthen capital by any means necessary. Through the Land Reform acts and countless other governmental actions, we see clearly the Japanese state as the functional producer and legitimator of bourgeois rule. Engels presented the historical role and contemporary meaning of the state as a "product of society at a certain stage of development"<sup>14</sup> wherein classes with conflicting economic interests must be held in some kind of order by a third party entity, else all of society would be consumed by all-out class struggle.<sup>15</sup> We see the state physically preserve order by putting down the farmers' jiken, jailing and executing socialists, and openly rejecting decades of pleas from the people suffering as a result of waste from the Ashio Copper Mine<sup>16</sup>.

Why don't the people rebel? Why do we not see successful popular revolutions? Successful production of a national consciousness linked with a centralized state or head-of-state can make a people collectively identify with a state even when the state is antagonistic to their actual material interests. The interpellation of the national subjects, producing a sustained Japanese subjectivity, is a role that the state takes up. State institutions like schools participate in producing and reproducing a sense of nation-ness among the progeny but even beyond that, we can observe the psychological/rhetorical functions of governmental co-option/manufacture of ritual elements in public life. Fujitani illuminates exactly these. 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. 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"<sup>17</sup>. The state acts to create a constant subjectivity which in turn contributes to the formation of personal identity and finally

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<sup>14</sup> Frederick Engels. "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State" *Selected Works*, Vol. 3, Moscow, 1973. 326-27.

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Lenin, "The State and Revolution - Chapter 1," *The State and Revolution*, accessed February 23, 2021, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/ch01.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> "the government officials persist in vague, non-committal responses, and have taken no appropriate remedies whatsoever. Worse, even the regional authorities have shown no concern, and so the people, no longer able to endure their suffering, band together and petition for their preservation; yet the officials order the police to slander the people as rioters and throw them in prison" - Tanaka Shozo's Appeal to the Meiji Emperor (1901). Translated by Robert Stolz. Draft not for circulation.

<sup>17</sup> Fujitani, Takashi. *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan*. Introduction. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. 25.

into development of nationality, now difficult to separate from allegiance to the state. We see “discipline” in the Foucauldian sense of interventions at the level of the individual through dissemination of government-produced etiquette pamphlets, policing on the streets, etc. Quoting an 1875 report to Emperor Meiji, “The urgent task for the state is to educate ordinary people to rid themselves of idleness and to guide and supervise them to be able to work for and persevere in building modern industries”<sup>18</sup>. This is just priming for submission under capitalism. I’m not sure how to thread the needle exactly, but there’s a class interest of nationalism and the particular way in which Japan produces a national identity among citizenry lays it really bare.

The nation-state form has to have the capacity to develop and also some grounding element. ‘Development’ comes in the form of capitalism and the static or essential grounding force is *culture*. Now, who belongs? Loosely, the national subject; more specifically, the ethnic subject. Finishing now the quote from Inoue which I used at the beginning, “A people develops from a dynasty to a race and finally to an (ethnic) nationality\* (minzokutai)”<sup>19</sup>. The choice of who the ethnic subject is is what Etienne Balibar was talking about when theorizing a notion of “fictive ethnicity”<sup>20</sup> produced through language *and* race. Frantz Fanon writes of language, “[to speak a language] means above all *to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization*”<sup>21</sup>. There is an almost internal form of colonization in this, like the language itself is interpellating national subjects. Language is however insufficient grounds for ethnicity precisely because it isn’t exclusionary enough; more than one nation can speak a language and individuals may speak more than one language. Capitalism requires the surplus population, requires unbelonging because exploitation and expropriation are most easily justified through the lens of a discriminatory ideology.

If there is something called “The Japanese” and it is a stable ethnicity, who belongs? In plainest terms, whoever is successfully interpellated as a national social citizen is “in” and whoever threatens the splendor<sup>22</sup> of the nation-state or whoever it is problematic to integrate or beneficial to economically cannibalize are “out”. The Ainu people are out; they are

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<sup>18</sup> Okubo Toshimichi (1875) via Katsuya Hirano. *The Politics of Dialogic Imagination: Power and Popular Culture in Early Modern Japan*. Germany: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Inoue, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Balibar, Etienne. “The Nation Form: History and Ideology.” *Race, Nation, Class*. Verso Books. 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. United Kingdom: Grove Press, 2007. 17-18.

<sup>22</sup> In the Foucauldian sense.

reincorporated into Japan as vanishing ethnicities<sup>23</sup>. They don't exist within the nation-state as people, but rather as objects of study, in the archives. They are erased as historical subjects. Okinawans are treated similarly, but not the same<sup>24</sup>. They are made objects for extraction. The Burakumin<sup>25</sup> are a unique case. Their othering is leftover from Tokugawa structures and that old category of exclusion is reincorporated as a modern category of exclusion because the development of capitalism needs these people to be seen as exploitable. Socialists are also out - an execution is a public announcement that who these people are and what they do is not allowed in modern Japanese society.

I think the nation-state form might be the “governmentality” of industrial capitalism. It's at least a form which naturally supports a move to capitalism.

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“Throughout the world, the period of the final victory of capitalism over feudalism has been linked with national movements ... Therefore the tendency of every national movement is towards the formation of national states under which these requirements of modern capitalism are best satisfied.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Katsuya Hirano, “The Politics of Colonial Translation: On the Narrative of the Ainu as a ‘Vanishing Ethnicity’” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 4-3-09, January 12, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Inoue. Trans. Stolz.

<sup>25</sup> Alistair McLaughlan. “Japan's Burakumin: An Introduction”. *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 4-1-06, January 4, 2006

<sup>26</sup> Vladimir Lenin. “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination.” *Selected Works* Vol 1, Part 2, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow 1950. 318-319.