

THE INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN
JAPANESE POLITICS

JAPAN

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Introduction: A Perspective
on Modern Japan

Japan presents an ambiguous image to Western eyes. One hundred million people are visualized living on four small islands (Honshū, Kyūshū, Shikoku, and Hokkaidō) with a total land area the size of California. The islands are mineral poor. In defiance of this adverse environment, however, the Japanese have attained a level of technological and industrial proficiency that many see as a truly remarkable achievement. To others, Japan incorporates the worst features of the "advanced" nations in the West; understanding Western law and constitutional procedures yet adapting them, as in its construction of a national "corporation." This view is sometimes expressed by the outlandishly egocentric American remark, "What have we wrought?" Still others see Japan's industrial and urban development, including mass consumption, intellectual pluralism, population stability in incredibly congested conditions (some twenty-five million living in a sixty-mile radius of Tokyo alone), as evidences of a propulsion into postmodernity. And finally there are those who find that as Japan increasingly appears to resemble the West, it becomes less comprehensible; its idiosyncracies stemming from something vaguely "feudal" or "tradi-

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tional" that still pervades the psychology of the nation. Thus, we are reminded of the scattered pockets of lotus and chrysanthemum, aesthetic symbols of a feudal past that are immaculately preserved in an otherwise discursive sea of steel and electronics.

Behind this ambiguous image is a complex and elusive modern reality that needs to be penetrated before it can be comprehended. In this attempt, two themes will be emphasized that constitute, for the political historian, an elemental axis that is basic to an understanding of modern Japan. One of these is the pervasiveness of bureaucratic efficiency that stems from a tradition of "bureaucratism" (*kanryōshugi*). In this tradition, effective, measurable, bureaucratic performance is viewed as central to the realization of national well-being. The opposing theme, although perhaps less visible and certainly more elusive, denies the primacy of bureaucratic norms. It affirms an old and deeply felt value placed on the purity of human spirit (*ningensei; kokoro*), or the idealistic capacity in men to create and serve without regard to the self. A more modern concept of this addresses itself to the primacy of democratic value as a spiritual and cultural norm towards which society should aspire. A history of political criticism stems from an idealistic resistance against the principles of bureaucratism in modern Japan.

The importance of bureaucratism in modern Japan, of course, is beyond dispute. It undergirds the emergence of Japan as a powerful industrial nation. Certainly few will deny the amazing industrial transformation of Japan in the mid-twentieth century, following the devastating defeat in World War II, known as the Pacific War. Historians are agreed that this economic performance is neither accidental nor a mere transference of American capital and skills; and that its roots are planted deeply in indigenous soil prior to the onset of the modern century. It is part and parcel of an accumulated tradition of bureaucratic organization and of sophisticated reflections about, and attitudes toward, efficient action within structures.

The vitality of this tradition, unfortunately, is sometimes obscured. The outward features of Japan's industrial system appear

new. They seem more streamlined and powerful than anything the Japanese had before the Pacific War, and certain shifts in emphasis in industrial production, as from textile to technologically complex items, have contributed to this image. More important, the constitutional guidelines are now "democratic" in contrast to those applied before the war, a particular point often used to attribute, quite deceptively, Japan's industrial recovery simply as a by-product of the American Occupation.

The Occupation did not provide Japan with a radically new leadership or program for industrial recovery. Its initial concern was to see that the Japanese people were democratic and peaceful. Thus it emphasized such measures as land reform, antitrust legislation, and the decentralization of education and the police. Large industrial facilities that escaped bombing (only about 25 percent of the total) were scheduled for dismantlement, and aid from the United States (some \$2 billion over five years) came primarily in the form of surplus foodstuffs and not as capital for industrial recovery. The Occupation's vision for Japan's future was a democratic, peaceful, and basically agrarian society, a vision best captured in the now famous Article IX of the new constitution (known in Japan as the MacArthur constitution) in which the Japanese pledge as their sovereign right never to maintain "land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential."

The Cold War, however, forced the Occupation to revise its idealistic position. It then relied heavily on the bureaucratic and industrial leadership of the Japanese themselves; and the model of industrialization and the bureaucratic ideology first formulated and applied in the 1880s, during Japan's first industrial revolution, experienced a powerful resurgence. In the hands of Japanese leadership, the early reforms of the Occupation were revised, discarded, or ignored. The policy of dismantling Japanese industry was quietly scuttled, and antitrust legislation slowly gathered dust. The educational system was again centralized, as was the police force. Strikes and activities of the Left were suppressed as disruptive to economic recovery. High-level bureaucrats who had been purged shortly after the war ended were reinstated into government

service. A military force was established because, as admitted by MacArthur himself, every nation possessed the right to defend itself.

In the 1950s this leadership converged into a powerful "establishment."¹ It is presently ensconced in key institutions such as the Economic Planning Agency, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Bank of Japan, and the Federation of Industrial Organizations (*Keidanren*), which sends representatives from industry to work out long-term planning with the government. Politically, the leadership is integrated into a coalition called the Liberal Democratic Party, formed in 1955 when the two prewar conservative parties joined forces. Maintaining a continuous majority in the Diet, and in turn controlling the cabinet, this party has emerged as a formidable organization, one thoroughly familiar with the strategic manipulation of political patronage and pork barrel.

But it is its agreement on policy and a shared ideology of industrialization that has made this leadership unusually strong and tenacious. There is firm agreement from the outset that capital will be generated within the country through savings and not borrowed from abroad. Capital saved will be used for capital growth, with concentrated allocation for carefully selected economic targets, and not for equitable sharing in the country. An improved economic well-being for all is promised, but, clearly, certain sectors of the economy are explicitly favored. The income tax schedule is unprogressive; profits from international trade are tax deductible; consumption taxes are imposed on items such as *sake* and sugar as well as on electronic equipment and appliances; direct wages are kept relatively low and benefits are extended in indirect ways, such as in bonuses, subsidies for housing, commuting, and health insurances—all devices to induce capital investment and to regulate the level of domestic consumption. Under the rubric of "industrial rationalization" (*sangyō gōrika*), factory units at or above a

¹ Two recent books are Nathaniel B. Thayer, *How the Conservatives Rule Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969); and Haruhiro Fukui, *Party in Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

certain level of productive capacity are favored through a loan policy underwritten by the Bank of Japan and other large multi-regional banks. Finally, and as important a measure as not borrowing capital from abroad, the country's leaders maintain that Japan should feed itself to minimize the spending of foreign reserves on food imports. To achieve this end, the entire annual yield of rice harvest is purchased at a guaranteed price level, thus stimulating rice production (which has been maintained at surplus levels in recent years) and maximizing the efficiency of the trade structure. These various components of Japan's industrial recovery, including the facts and figures of economic growth, have often been recounted in Western-language presses and need not be detailed here.²

Behind this consistent policy, however, is an underlying ideological consensus, which I referred to earlier as "bureaucratism," that does deserve attention. The consensus, at times, appears to consist more of élan and mutual respect than ideology. There is also the bond of shared experiences. Members of the establishment are graduates of the same major universities. They have weathered the stringent screening for talent imposed on everyone by the educational system and the testing program—"examination hell" as it is agonizingly referred to by Japanese students. Sharing a similar theoretical, technical, and practical training, they are acutely aware of each other's abilities, which reinforces an elitist élan. But this élan also results from a shared set of ideological assumptions.

There is an ethic of achievement, of competitive self-betterment, which is at once egalitarian and elitist. It holds that everyone should have an equal opportunity (which is provided for to a significant extent through education), but that only the very best will succeed. To the successful will be entrusted the leadership of higher education, government, and industry, or, in short, the task of maintaining national well-being and dignity. This sense of responsibility for the wider society is often characterized as a remnant of "feudal paternalism," which it may well be. The psychol-

² See Kozo Yamamura, *Economic Policy on Postwar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

ogy behind it, however, is quite complex, and it might better be thought of as a bureaucratic vision of the nation's future, for there is enormous self-confidence that, despite short-term setbacks, the bureaucracy will survive as the crucial bedrock of the nation. The primacy of rational bureaucratic management is confirmed as central to Japan's historical development and this assumption is projected into the future as a core political reality. Thus, the bureaucratic and managerial legacy of the Meiji Restoration of 1868 is glorified but not the personal and charismatic "benevolence" that one finds in a feudal past. What is emphasized is the maintenance of national integrity through collective bureaucratic expertise.

A materialistic view of society and of national independence is clearly operative in Japanese bureaucratism. It is an unadorned yet persuasive perception, having deep historical roots in traditional Japan, that maintains the nation assures its autonomy only through economic power—*fukoku*. Although shorn of the shrill rhetoric of the prewar era, this economic bureaucratism remains an unchallenged conviction of the ruling class. Bureaucratic service in Japan, then, is not simply a prestigious career or an avenue to accrue vast sums of personal wealth: it is a "mission" (*shimei*) to enhance the well-being of the nation through the systematic creation of industrial wealth.

One of the fascinating features of Japanese society today, however, is that despite a dedication to this bureaucratic mission and a general acceptance of its importance, there is also a strong and continuous countervailing attitude towards it. Bureaucratism, it is believed, is not an ideology that concerns itself with the spiritual and intellectual, or nutritive need of the nation as a whole, but is primarily an affair among the elites to satisfy their own interests. Much of society retains an ethical distance from the framework of bureaucratism, and there is considerable ambivalence toward the leadership of industry and government. Although it is generally conceded that economic rehabilitation is unthinkable without that leadership, there is conspicuous lack of emotional loyalty toward it.

Added to this wariness of bureaucratism is a traditional idealism

that believes the spirit of human personality is fundamentally pure and true. It is this ideal self, or "cultural spirit," that affirms the deep value the Japanese place on humaneness (*ningensei*), that persuades men to create and act critically on behalf of others. The language of this idealism originates in the feudal past, and will be discussed as an essential component to a mode of radical protest called "restorationism."

Prior to the Pacific War, the imperial institution played a key role in this ethic. As the ultimate source of *de jure* power, it sanctioned the industrial revolution, but as a symbol of Japan's continuous cultural history it stood also for the principle of pure and selfless commitment to the national community. Above all, as godking the emperor stood for a cultural ideal that confirmed a capacity in ordinary men to transform themselves into something extraordinary, to fully realize the dynamic and creative potential embedded in the self. The identification with this ideal sometimes led to decisive action against the present, justifying such action with the imagery and rhetoric of imperial justice for all of society. Needless to say, the integrative potential of the emperor suffered irrevocable damage in the war. Compelled by historical circumstance to shoulder the grief of the entire nation in defeat, the emperor subsequently denied publicly his sovereign character.

Although cultural idealism has lost most of its radical character of the prewar era, it survives on the current scene. In ordinary social intercourse, it is best seen in the much-discussed relationship of *giri*. In its idealistic sense, *giri* is a humane feeling of obligation one feels or ought to feel in response to a pure "blessing" (*on*) bestowed on him by another person. This reciprocation is understood as being pure and without selfish intent, as springing from one's spiritual self. Actually, it is assumed that a person rarely concedes or surrenders everything of himself. Thus, a kind act invites a reciprocal or *quid pro quo* recognition of a legitimate residuum of self-interest in the actor himself although the relationship may be uneven. Still it is clear that the primary ethical legitimation in *giri* relations is drawn directly from traditional idealistic ideas about true and humane feelings.

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