

INTRODUCTION

JAPANESE CRITIQUES OF TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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Many reasons have been offered to explain how Japan was able to industrialize so rapidly after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, but surely one of the most important must have been that the country was ruled by military men. The great value of Western technology, however it may be disputed by philosophers, traditionalists, or ecologists, is perfectly clear to soldiers. However "feudal" and conservative Japan's samurai rulers may have been, they knew that what rules in the end on the battlefield is the impersonal laws of physical force. When Francis Xavier wrote in the middle of the sixteenth century that the Japanese value weapons "more than any people I have ever seen,"¹ he was describing a crucial element in the thought-system of the samurai class.

This military universalism operated powerfully when Japan was thrown into crisis by the Western demand to open the country after Admiral Perry's visit in 1853. It is a famous fact, insufficiently pondered by "modernization" theorists, that the two clans most violently opposed to opening the country, Satsuma and Choshu, were converted by devastating attacks from the sea by Western fleets, in 1863 and 1864 respectively. Displaying "an amazing ability to reorient their thinking,"² they built fleets and rifle units of their own with which they attacked and overthrew the Tokugawa government, seized power, and established the industrializing Meiji state structure.

Moreover, these soldiers were quick to understand that Western military technique was not simply a matter of ships and cannon. It is recorded that as early as 1841 a demonstration of Western infantry drill was given in the capital. One cannot help wondering what went on in the heads of those robed warriors on seeing such a thing for the first time. Human beings arranged in precise geometric order, their motions coordinated with the precision of a well-oiled machine, disciplined to obey instantly the commands of a single leader — military drill is a perfect allegory for demonstrating the organizational basis of Western power: would not the military mind be the first to see the beauty in it? It is recorded that some of those who observed the demonstration condemned it as childish, but that the senior officials ordered that it be further studied.³ When the new government was formed, one of its very first major reforms was the establishment, in 1873, of universal military service in a Western-style army.

As the Meiji government carried out the reorganization of the country into a centralized, industrialized nation state, it did so under an official ideology that

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only technology would be imported from the West, while the Japanese spirit would be preserved, but we must suppose that the wisest among the leaders knew that Western technique has a spirit of its own, and that it was precisely this spirit which was needed.** For surely it was the hegemony of the spirit of Western technique — the rational organization of means — that joined the various reforms (centralization of power, centralization of sacredness in the Emperor, establishment of a unified national ethical system, compulsory education, military conscription, the civil code, the factory system, etc.) and made possible the transformation of a land of semi-autonomous farm and fishing villages into a world power.

Nevertheless the *idea* of a Japanese spirit remained, in the form of ideology. Thus in World War II when the Japanese militarist government, already at war in China, chose to take on the Western allied powers as well, it was explained that it was Japanese spirit which would be able to overcome the material and technological advantages of the new enemies. Of the many deep and lasting effects which defeat had on the Japanese people, there is one which is not often mentioned — that since the war was ideologically so defined, defeat was perceived as a victory of technology over spirit, as proof of technology's invincibility. In fact the war proved no such thing, since a major part of Japan's defeat took place in China and other Asian countries, at the hands of troops who had poorer technological and material resources, but more important things to fight for (a country, not an empire), than the Japanese. One of the reasons why the Japanese people still cling to the fixed idea that Japan was defeated by the United States, rather than by an alliance in which Asian regular and guerrilla armies all across their empire played a crucial role, is that the latter view would suggest an entirely different set of lessons from the war than the ones they have drawn. A man who is old enough to remember the end of the war once told me

* "It was in the army, finally, that the process of mechanization was first applied on a mass scale to human beings, through the replacement of irregular feudal or citizen armies, intermittently assembled, by a standard army of hired or conscripted soldiers, under the severe discipline of daily drill, contrived to produce human beings whose spontaneous or instinctive reactions would be displaced by automatic responses to orders." "Thus the pattern of the new industrial order first appeared upon the parade ground and the battlefield before it entered, full fledged, into the factory. The regimentation and mass production of soldiers, to the end of turning out a cheap, standardized, and replaceable product, was the great contribution of the military mind to the machine process." Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974, p. 150. Sansom notes that Western dress was first introduced into Japan in the form of the military uniform, then later for government ceremonies. "This was an important departure, for it so to speak legalized trousers and abolished flowing robes, thus symbolizing the current change from a leisurely, processional life to a busy, practical striding about the market place." Sansom (cf. note 3) p. 382.

** In his discussion of the fact that the Meiji government failed in democratization while succeeding in industrialization, Sansom comments, "machines will enter where ideas cannot penetrate." But this misses the fact that machines are congealed ideas. In particular, the machines of large-scale industrial production have built into them certain notions of social structure and behavior, in the sense that only in the context of such social structure and behavior can they be put into efficient operation. Sansom (cf. note 3), p. 355.

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that he had something close to a conversion experience on the day in 1945 when he first saw some GIs riding in a Jeep. "I asked myself," he said, "how could we ever have imagined that we could defeat a country capable of developing the Jeep?" One can catch the flavor of Japan's postwar ideology by comparing this question to another which could be asked, but rarely is: "How could we ever have imagined that we could defeat so many people fighting for their liberation?"

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In the postwar period the Japanese people committed themselves to two political principles, peace and democracy, an astounding reversal considering that authoritarianism and expansionist war were the very basis of the Meiji system. It is a great mistake to think of these as merely ideas imposed from the outside, without domestic roots. It is true that the Japanese Peace Constitution was written and adopted under the power of the Allied Occupation, and it is also the case that the Japanese ruling class has not fully accepted its principles to this day. But the commitment of the people to those principles is rooted in their historical experience. Their revulsion against war and fascism was real, and when, with the beginning of the Cold War, U.S. authorities relented and launched a project, in alliance with Japanese reactionary leaders, to undermine Occupation reforms and to reestablish military power (a process that came to be known as the Reverse Course) they fought every step of the way. It was in this fight, more than in the original ratification procedure, that the Peace Constitution was historically legitimized in Japan.

But beneath these political ideals there lay another set of beliefs, so deeply and universally held that no one would have thought of labelling them ideological: the belief in technology and in the value of economic activity. These beliefs, present from the beginning of the Meiji Era, were if anything strengthened rather than weakened by the ideological shift from militarism to pacifism. It was a Pakistani diplomat, not a Japanese, who first labelled Japan an "economic animal," and given the form Japanese economic activity has taken in poorer Asian countries the expression has a critical tone. I think it is insufficiently appreciated, however, that the work ethic which has so powerfully driven Japanese working people since the war is not purely economic, but contains a strong political element: the belief that economic activity is the peaceful and democratic alternative to military activity, a way that one can work for the good of one's country without harming others.

The irony and the tragedy of the postwar period is that the structure within which Japanese workers carried on economic activity was objectively organized as to operate against both peace and democracy. The Japanese economy has increasingly come to depend on North-South exploitation, a relationship which in the end can only be defended by military power. At the same time, economic activity has increasingly come to be a form of struggle in the arena of international capitalist competition: rather than an alternative to war, a kind of warfare carried on by other means. In this situation, the units of struggle — the corporations — increasingly display the characteristics of military organization, both in structure

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and in ideology. The military aspect of the forms of technology and social organization adopted by the Meiji leaders — the precise aspect which they found attractive — was not so easily exorcised, even by the adoption of a war-renouncing constitution.

The shape of the technological society projected by present developmental trends can be discerned in the articles that follow: As Yoshioka shows, it is ruled by a military-industrial complex; as Muto shows, it has a working class crushed under a combination of direct oppression and the most advanced form of scientific management; as Muro shows, it places the language and culture themselves under the hegemony of the logic of industrial efficiency; as Hirose shows, it is powered by nuclear energy; as Kogawa shows, it has a public befuddled by a pseudo-public life of consumerism and mass media — some people even wired in directly to the broadcast headquarters: a new display of “electronic individualism”.

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The above is of course a picture of the technological society triumphant; it is not a picture of Japanese society today. It is a picture of what Japanese society would look like if the peace movement, the workers' struggle, the environmental movement, the efforts to preserve the integrity of Japanese language and culture, and the struggle for autonomous and critical democratic consciousness, should all fail. They have not, but they are in a state of retreat today.

Japan's present stage of development may be compared to that of North America, particularly the United States, in the 1950s: just when a long-dreamed-of Consumer Utopia appears to have come at last. There is a complex of factors which seems to characterize both: a political shift to the right; anti-communism (both domestic and anti-Soviet); a silent generation of youth (who have no memory of what the earlier generations had done); universalization of TV and its domination over catch-words, fads and fashion; a low point in the workers' movement; explosive growth in the leisure industry; an ultra-romantic ideology of love, marriage, and the nuclear family, coupled with male-dominated, sexual pseudo-liberation; growing violence in the schools: all held together by a euphoria of stylish media imagery and consumerism.* In both cases, there is the illusion that political and social history have come to an end, that “history” henceforth will be limited to the process of economic and technological development.** Many of the books that were inspired in various ways by the particular balance of forces that characterized the United States in the 1950s,

* The comparison would be brought to an eerie perfection should Japan also have (as is quite possible) its War in Korea.

** An indication of the degree to which the ideology of technological progress grips the popular imagination is the fact that among the cartoon heroes which are popular today in children's comic books and television programs, human beings are overwhelmingly outnumbered by robots.

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one thinks of Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), the last part of Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), Bell's *The End of Ideology* (1960), Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1964), and Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964) — fit today's Japan remarkably well.

In the United States, of course, the 1950s balance of forces that looked like forever collapsed in the 1960s. Here, I believe, can be found the secret of the recent fascination in the United States with the famed Japanese Management System. It appears to American corporate directors that Japan has achieved what they thought they had in the 1950s: a society organized around the business ethic, anti-communism, and a belief in the inevitability of technological development; a society with loyal workers, uncomplaining housewives, unrebelling children; and a union movement broken at last to the will of the bosses. While this Managerial Utopia was shattered in the West, in Japan it seems that the balance may hold. The techniques of management science have advanced since the 1950s, and there are historical and social factors in Japan that appear to make those techniques easier to put into practice. This is what is meant by "Japan as Number One". If one accepts the model of capitalist development in which development is accompanied by the assimilation of more and more spheres of society under the rule of managerial technique, then Japan is not "thirty years behind" after all, but is quite probably the most "advanced" country in the world. This is the society where technology and rationalization have fused perfectly.

But still, the balance is not quite as harmonious as it appears from the outside. As the articles which follow make clear, social peace in Japan is not the result of main social contradictions having been resolved: rather, social peace is maintained by a *complex* of factors and forces — illusion, ideology, intensive scientific management, the absorption of more and more of social life by the corporations, the euphoria of a recently-acquired affluence, and finally physical coercion. As Muro states, the public has so far failed to oppose the computerization of culture not because this process lacks contradictions, but because a kind of *technological fatalism* has prevented people from seeing them. As Hirose convincingly demonstrates, opposition to nuclear energy is weak not because the people do not feel the danger, but because of the same technological fatalism, combined with the fact that most people have convinced themselves that the danger has been kept at a distance: a highly fragile settlement realistically and morally. In Kogawa's essay, manipulation through consumerism and mass media is by no means a sure thing, since it may lay the groundwork for unprecedented and unpredictable forms of democratic liberation. As both Yoshioka and Muto note, Japan's remilitarization — both the actual buildup of forces and the militarization of technological development — are taking place not because pacifism is dead, but because the government has managed to induce them to avert their eyes. Here the balance is particularly unstable and some sudden shock, such as a government decision to send troops to defend Japanese interests in, for example, the Philippines or South Korea, might bring down the whole house of cards. Finally, Muto's article makes clear that class peace in the factory is the result

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neither of some peculiar, ancient "Japanese way of thinking," nor of some exceptional benevolence on the part of the managerial class, but rather of a specific and bitter history of struggle, in which workers have been steadily losing ground. Here too management victory is far from complete, and their present dominant position can always be ruptured by unpredictable factors, such as changes in the world economy, the maturation of new generations, the appearance of critical ideologies or the rediscovery of old ones.

Just as history did not, after all, come to an end in North America in the 1950s, it is also not likely to come to an end in Japan in 1984.

Notes

1. Donald F. Lach. *Japan in the Eyes of Europe: the Sixteenth Century*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965, p. 669.
2. Edwin O. Reischauer, *Japan, Past and Present*, Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1953, p. 116.
3. G.B. Sansom, *The Western World and Japan*, New York: Knopf, 1968, pp. 251-2.