



# Nature, Culture and the Debate with Modernity: Critical Social Theory in Japan

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The notion of critical theory in the West immediately brings to mind the work of the Frankfurt School and its many intellectual descendants; possibly also the deconstructive projects of the more politically inclined post-modernists (Baudrillard and Foucault perhaps), and the work of independent critical scholars such as Zygmunt Bauman. In this tradition, much of it rooted in Marxism and—as with both the mainstream Frankfurt thinkers and significant but more sociologically peripheral figures such as Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse and Bruno Bettelheim—in Freudian psychoanalysis, the thrust has been the critique of mass society, its cultural productions and the mystifications, false consciousness and distortions that they create and perpetuate. This has often been accompanied by an elaboration of the class nature of capitalist industrial society and its modes of cultural production and consumption, and, for many of the central critical theory scholars, a systematic attempt to advance the so-called “Enlightenment Project”: the pursuit of rationality, democratization,

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social justice and progress towards a more inclusive and equitable society best perhaps summarized in the venerable slogan of the French revolution: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

But both critics of mainstream critical theory and those who have built upon its foundations, without necessarily acknowledging their debt, have also pointed out some of the gaps and silences in the classical version, including the absence of any systematic analysis of gender, race, post-colonialism, religion or that most recently discovered area of sociological enquiry, the environment. However, all of these areas as they appear in mainstream social science discourse share with classical critical theory many of its epistemological and ontological assumptions, and, it must be said, its Eurocentrism. In an era of globalization in which many forms of local knowledge compete, and in which context as Marshall Sahlins has so cogently pointed out Western knowledge is simply one form which for historical reasons (imperialism being one of the main ones) has become hegemonic (Sahlins 1996), many possible sociologies and their accompanying philosophical anthropologies are conceivable. So there is no a priori reason to suppose that Western sociology, together with its particular philosophical underpinnings, is necessarily universal.

If this is the case, then it requires us as an act of intellectual honesty to explore the possibility that there might be other sociologies, and other forms of critical theory, rooted in quite different intellectual and historical soils. The very European (and specifically Central European) origins of critical theory and its sources in Marxism and psychoanalysis should inspire us to raise two issues. The first is that of the “sociology of sociology” and the question of the extent to which the preoccupations of Frankfurt, Berlin and Vienna, themselves shaped by central European history, Judaism and Christianity, and the grammatical structures of the German language, can in fact be projected onto the world as a whole. The other is to enquire empirically as to whether quite different traditions of critical social theory exist, the extent and significance of which (or even their existence at all) have been suppressed or marginalized by the hegemony of the Western varieties and the export to the rest of the world of Europe’s particular preoccupations by way of colonialism and its successor, “development.” To raise these possibilities is not to reject the immense contributions of Western critical social theory as such: rather, it is to situate it within its own specific socio-historical context which gave birth to it and has sustained it, and to open up the possibility of there being other varieties that spring from different philosophical sources and

differing historical experiences. Here I will explore some important aspects of just one of these possible and actually existing alternative traditions (and there are many others in Asia—India for example, South and Southeast Asian Muslim social thought, or Chinese non-Marxist social theory, to cite a few examples)—that of Japan.

Japanese social thought is particularly interesting in this regard. Japan has an extensive sociological tradition of great depth and antiquity, much of it unknown except to Japanologists, but which directly challenges the assumptions of Western social thought (Clammer 1995). While critical theory is only one part of this largely occluded body of thought (Chinese and Indian philosophy and to some extent social theory being much better known internationally), it is a very significant sector of Japanese intellectual culture because it clearly reveals an approach to society and the world different from, but potentially complementary to, Western critical theory. Certainly it is in a position to interrogate the latter on its epistemological assumptions and to raise the fascinating question of the nature of social theory rooted in a Buddhist/Shinto cultural nexus rather than a Judeo-Christian one.

### CRITICAL THEORY AND JAPANESE SOCIETY

Japan, with its opening to the wider world beyond that of China and Korea at the time of the restoration of the Meiji Emperor in 1868, after two centuries of feudalism and self-imposed isolation, has been an eager enquirer after and adaptor of knowledge from and about the international environment. Protestant Christianity, Marxism, new agricultural practices, military, industrial and marine technology, Western fashions, philosophy, foods, architecture, law and constitutional forms, and political institutions derived from the Occident all flooded the country in the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. But all were also selectively utilized and adapted. Christianity, which in the modern period has never attracted more than 1 % of the population, while rejected theologically as undermining fundamental Buddhist- and Shinto-inspired aspects of the culture, was nevertheless an important source (largely through missionary activities) of innovations in agriculture, education and medical care. Marxism on the other hand, which is of course a secular theory and which appeared to address the emerging problems of a newly industrializing country, became and has remained very influential, both as a political and as an intellectual movement (Hoston 1986).

Yet psychoanalysis, that other major source of Western critical theory, has had almost no impact in Japan, where there are to this day only a very tiny number of practitioners, almost all of whom have modified the strict Freudian method to accommodate Japanese cultural expectations (e.g. Doi 1971, 1985). So while Western critical theory is read (and many of its central works have been translated), its cultural and intellectual ingredients and the particular historical and sociological experiences that it addresses remain alien to most Japanese. The question then arises as to whether an indigenous Japanese critical theory exists, or even can exist, in a religious and historical environment dominated by Buddhism and Shinto, in which any notion of class is weak despite the existence of socio-economic differences and considerable hierarchy in the society, and in which civil society is weak and social movements fragmented (Clammer 1997; Pharr and Schwartz 2003)? Let us first set this in context.

To generalize somewhat, it could be cogently argued that Western critical theory, including its later manifestations in the work of Habermas and the critical postmodernists, has several major characteristics that separate it quite radically from many of the main traditions of Asian social thought, Indian and Chinese as well as Japanese. These include a deconstructive rather than a constructive (the latter often characterized in the West as “Utopian”) approach to social analysis; an “external” view of the significant aspects of social, cultural and psychological reality rather than any central concern with self-knowledge (in the Buddhist tradition) or self-cultivation (in the Hindu and Confucian traditions); an almost complete aversion to any discussion of the transcendental dimension of human experience; the resounding absence of any discussion of the place of humanity in nature; and a fundamental belief in the superiority of rationality/reason over emotion/imagination.

Paradoxically, Western critical theory, in its striving for a just society, has suppressed the utopian impulse and as a consequence has marginalized such significant social thinkers as Ernst Bloch (Jacoby 1999) and has banished to the edge of social thought the role of art, religion and the non-Western humanistic traditions. The economism of both Marxism and neo-liberal economic thinking has displaced the social, and the unconscious of psychoanalysis has displaced the spiritual. Can we therefore find in Asian forms of social theory a balance to this on-sidedness? Given that Asia constitutes almost half of the whole of humanity, it would be myopic if not downright ethnocentric not to attempt to discover the nature of any such theory and its possible contribution to the social heritage of humankind as a whole.

While the contours of such a theory clearly exist in Gandhian thought (Kappen 1990) and in classical Chinese social philosophy (Hall and Ames 1998), few attempts have been made to discover it within Japanese social thought, or even to ask if there is such a thing as a Japanese critical social theory. Here I will attempt to demonstrate that there is, although it is often disguised, for the simple reason that in Japanese culture the boundaries between the social and the religious, religion and philosophy, the cultural and the economic, the self and the transcendent, do not exist, are much more permeable than in the West or exist, but form a different map of reality than is found in European or North American cultures. Understanding this map may suggest a very different set of configurations of the notion of the just society and the ways of achieving it than those we are more familiar with from mainstream Western social theory.

The Western model for the transformation of society is essentially one of structural change in the institutions that make up the organizational framework of that society, rather than one of the primary (and prior) transformation of the self as the basis for any lasting social change. It is, however, this latter position that broadly characterizes Asian thought in the areas fundamentally shaped by Buddhism and Hinduism. There, reason becomes a tool in the pursuit of a deeper enlightenment—a notion that the Buddhist scholar Stephen Batchelor tellingly calls “the other Enlightenment project” (Batchelor 1998). This is close to what the major Indian thinker Sri Aurobindo called a “yoga of integral knowledge” (Giri 2003), and which has more recently surfaced in the increasingly influential philosophy of the Anglo-Indian thinker Roy Bhaskar with his notions of non-duality and self-realization understood as “the cessation of negative incompleteness” (Bhaskar 2002: 261). So in pursuing the nature of such (perhaps even radically Other) forms of social theory, we not only engage in a genuinely transcultural and global activity, but we may in so doing locate the forms of positive and humanistic social thinking that have precisely not led, as Zygmunt Bauman argued about the outcome of the rationalist modernist project, to the moral, physical and civilizational disaster of the Holocaust (Bauman 1999).

In broad terms, therefore, what characterizes Japanese social thought? What gives it both its own identity and distinguishes it from Western varieties of critical theory? I will suggest five main features.

The first of these is the nature of the self and the position of that self in relation to society. If in the West the dominant notion of the self emerging from Greek and Christian sources has been expressed as essentialist,

permanent/eternal and individualist (Morris 1991, 1994; Dumont 1985), in Japan the self has been understood as contextual—formed and embodied in a network of social relationships, not a free-standing entity and impermanent, subject in Buddhist thought to some form of transmigration or reincarnation and in Shinto as having very permeable boundaries with the natural world on one side and the divine on the other (Ono 1990; Yamakage 2006)—a position constituting a sophisticated but unmistakably animist view of reality. The self is thus something to be “overcome” if one has made the common philosophical mistake of identifying it with the ego rather than with the “deep self” or essential nature which is egoless; so self-realization is an activity of cultivation and philosophical transformation,, understood not as a solitary and selfish activity, but as something that can only be carried out in a relational context (society) and through intense ethical practice. Consequently, meditation and ritual (in the Buddhist context) are useless as means to enlightenment, understood essentially as insight into the true nature of things, and indeed to see beyond things in grasping their essential “emptiness” or dependence on “mutual arising”—their embeddedness in a huge network of causality with no beginning and no end, without the practice of justice. In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition that is found in Japan and throughout East Asia (as opposed to the Theravada schools of Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka), the ethical ideal is that of the Bodhisattva—the realized (enlightened) being who remains in the travails of the world until all other beings are saved rather than pass into nirvana. (On Japanese notions of the self see Roland 1991; Kondo 1990; Rosenberger 1992.)

From this perspective a number of new elements enter social theory—the transformation or transcendence of the self as a pre-condition for systematic social transformation; a position that requires a contextual theory of the relationship between self and society, in which social injustice is seen as one of the elements that negates or retards the realization of the integral self; and the recognition that self-cultivation and ethics inevitably go together. The cultivation of the self, which may be expressed through such demanding and disciplined activities as art, calligraphy, the tea ceremony, religious practice and/or meditation, can, however high the attainment in any of these cultural fields, be only genuinely achieved through just practice in the world.

The second factor is the place of nature in relation to humans and human society. Until the very recent emergence of environmental sociology as a small sub-discipline, nature has played a very small part indeed in

Western sociology, to the extent that many of its major practitioners have either simply ignored it or have argued that it is of no relevance to the understanding of the human subject. This position, now rightly coming under fire from within Western sociological circles (e.g. Bell 2004; Dickens 2004) as well as from ecological ones, is entirely alien to the Japanese understanding of both self and society as essentially “relational” and “interpersonal” (*kanjinshiki*), in that not only is society made up of such networks, but equally humans are not abstracted from nature but are very much part of it—a kind of modified socio-biology position shorn of the genetic determinism of some of its Western varieties (Hamaguchi 1982). Hence the deep “animism” of Japanese culture, expressed not only through Shinto as a religious system and set of institutions (International Shinto foundation 1995), but equally as a non-anthropocentric understanding of the place of humans in the total cosmos (Iwata 1991).

This non-anthropocentric position, with its roots in Japanese religious culture, has many affinities with the position now known in the West as “Deep Ecology.” It derives not only from Shinto, but equally from the Mahayana conception of the Buddhahood (or potential Buddhahood) of all beings, including apparently non-sentient entities such as rocks, plants and mountains, and the consequent logical necessity to extend the concept of rights well beyond humans to include the rest of nature, a view that philosophical (and legal) thinking in the West has only recently caught up with (Stone 1996; Cullinan 2011). By radically extending the notion of rights in this way, Buddhist- and Shinto-based social thought stands in many ways opposed to the Western notion of modernity and of development, which is understood as extending dominion over nature, permitting unlimited extraction for human use of non-renewable resources, and the returning of pollutants and industrial byproducts to the Earth, which is understood just as a “sink.” It furthermore fundamentally undermines the Western conception of individualism (the fiction of the existentially autonomous individual separate from nature and in control of her/his destiny) and instead reasserts an ecocentered rather than an anthropocentric conception of humanity (Kaza and Kraft 2000). Nature thus reenters sociology, and the critique of modernism inherent in critical theory is given new dimensions that include both the inclusion of ecology and the recognition of the spiritual dimensions of existence, since nature and religion here appear as aspects of each other. A radical holism then exists in Japanese social thought that the West has been struggling to recover, but unsuccessfully as its conception of humanity is

over-sociological and insufficiently ecological, and where the philosophical implications of environmentalism have not been assimilated into mainstream social theory.

The third relevant factor is the inclusion of religion as a still significant category of socio-cultural analysis in Asia, where religious practice is still so widespread as to fundamentally undermine the sociological concept of secularization, a fact that has significant methodological implications for the sociological study of Asian societies (Clammer 2000). Japan is an interesting case of this, since amongst Asian societies public religious observance is not conspicuous, but closer acquaintance shows it to be pervasive and a significant social force, as the multiple-million membership of the so-called “New Religions” (*shin-shukyo*) attests (Reader 1991). Given the relative marginalization of religion in contemporary mainstream sociology, it is perhaps not surprising that these new religions, and the many older more established forms too, while they have been studied for their beliefs, have been little studied either as social movements or as the carriers of utopian ideas and ideals in which Japan is relocated in the globalized world as the new promised land—as the source of teachings of peace, new forms of spirituality, harmonious relations with nature and new socio-economic and ethical patterns that reflect this recognition of a new age (Kisala 1999; Clammer 2012a). From these have sprung many new ideas about social arrangements, ecology, communal living, alternative agriculture, artistic production, peace and conflict resolution, and healing, all of which have significant social effects. Part of the problem is that Western sociology (with the exception of a small, mainly Catholic French school of thinkers) has been concerned with the sociology of religion, not with religious sociology. There is a fundamental difference between attempting to analyze religion using sociological methodologies and understanding religion as the basis for creative social ideas, and it is largely the latter that prevails across huge areas of Asia, where religion is not something to be explained, but something to be lived.

Inherent in these fundamentally religious sources of social practice is the fourth element, notably ethics. This includes both the symbiotic relationship between self-cultivation and ethics noted above, and ethics reflecting humanity’s place in, and not above or opposed to, nature. A Shinto shrine is almost always located in a sacred grove: a space in which nature is protected, its presence enhancing the spiritual aura or power of the shrine itself or of its resident deity, and in which the total dependence of human life on the provision of nature is indicated in subtle ways. The



gardens often to be found in the precincts of Buddhist temples fulfill a similar function. It is significant that Japan's first major systematic ethicist of the modern period, Watsuji Tetsuro, was the author only of a major treatise on ethics, drawing in part on his discovery of Western philosophy, but also of a celebrated book on the philosophy of nature (Watsuji 1935). Ethics and social philosophy then become, if not identical, aspects of the same relationship to the world, both in its social and in its physical aspects. This ethical stance is not simply a philosophical one, but is reflected in a set of practices that has a considerable impact on the world. The average Japanese consumes less than half the energy of the average American or Australian and much less than the average European. Waste is considered harmful and unsightly, a notion captured in the Japanese concept of *mot-tainai* or literally "don't waste!", a concept promoted and internationalized in the writings of the late Nobel Peace Prize winner and environmentalist Wangari Maathai (Maathai 2010: 106–110).

The fifth ingredient to which attention should be drawn is that of aesthetics. Many commentators on Japanese culture have of course remarked on the central role of aesthetic ideas and practices (Anesaki 1973; Keene 1990), but few have commented on the role of aesthetics as a social as well as an artistic or philosophical category. While there has been substantial discussion of the ethics of modernity and development, there has been little discussion of the aesthetic dimensions of these world transformative movements from a sociological (as opposed to an art history or cultural studies) approach (for two of the few sources that do see Giri and Quarles Van Ufford 2003 and Clammer 2012b). To introduce the notion of beauty into discussions of modernity and into the construction of social theory might at first seem frivolous, until it is recognized that there is an intimate connection between ethics and aesthetics (Maffesoli 1990) on the one hand, and on the other that empirical evidence is accumulating that the violence of many forms of recent and contemporary "development" is not only in its disruption of traditional forms of life, the introduction of monetization, forced migration and displacement and so forth, but equally in the ugliness and destruction of beauty that accompanies so much urbanization, industrialization and ecological destruction in the name of progress. The growing recognition of the relationships between stress and many forms of mental illness and not a few physical ones and the deprivation of access to nature and to cultural forms of beauty such as art (Pretty 2006) suggest that the appreciation of the aesthetic dimensions of society itself (and not just of its cultural productions) is a sorely neglected

field, and it is in Japanese social theory that we find the outlines of a conception of beauty (reflected in such social forms as courtesy) that is not merely a decorative feature of objects, but is a category to judge the whole process of modernity (along with its ethical dimensions) and to evaluate the appropriateness of social interactions. There is a “social style” as well as a “social structure,” and if it is to the latter that Western social thought has inclined, it is now also necessary to recover the former.

### THE SOURCES OF CRITICAL THEORY IN JAPAN

It is perhaps evident from the foregoing sketch that critical social theory in Japan is diffused and is in a sense an “attitude,” and no unified body of thought comparable to the Frankfurt School or its successors exists. There are, however, a number of contexts in which critical social thinking is expressed, and when these are added up they constitute a considerable body of work.

The first of these contexts is that of social movements. Whereas a great deal of Western social movement theory has concentrated on resource mobilization and the conditions under which a social movement can “take off” and sustain itself as a transformative movement, much less attention has been given to such movements as generators of alternative ideas—as not only explicit or implicit critiques of society, but also as experimental seedbeds where new forms of praxis are being worked out. While civil society is generally considered relatively weak in Japan (Pharr and Schwartz 2003), there are in fact a wide range of utopian, organic, religious, environmental, consumer and quasi-political movements involving farmers, housewives, nature-loving citizens, anti-nuclear activists, elderly people and many other concerned groups, often organized around the meaning of citizenship in globalizing and corporate-dominated Japan (for an excellent example and ethnography of the political lives of Japanese women, particularly housewives, see LeBlanc 1999). Similarly there is a wide range of non-governmental organizations devoted either to specific problems (e.g. environment, undocumented foreign workers) or to systemic change in the social order as a whole (Muto 1998). Many of these movements reflect either a feminist or an environmentalist position, or both, and both tendencies have been the source of potent criticisms of the statism and top-down governance typical of Japanese political culture (Mackie 2003). Some of these movements have also been critical not only of aspects of Japanese society, but equally of Western modes of critical and

deconstructive thinking. For example, Maruyama Masatsugu suggests that while Shinto points to a systematically ecological worldview, Western ecofeminist viewpoints do not work well in Japan, where the political context, social structure, culture and religions require that culturally site-specific strategies for change must be adopted, and that a universalizing version of ecofeminism imposed on Japan from outside is in fact ethnocentric (Maruyama 2003).

So while utopianism is certainly not a uniquely Western phenomenon, in Japan it is expressed principally in the widespread peace movement, the New Religions, organic farming and communistic communes such as those of the Yamagishi farming movement, and in some forms of popular culture, especially the ubiquitous manga or comic books and their filmic and televisual equivalent, anime. As a result it is critical cultural studies rather than formal critical social theory that often prove to be the source of critique—of those cultural forms themselves, the consumerism and anti-environmentalism that they engender, and the corporate interests that so relentlessly promote them via the media and advertising (for some representative examples see Azuma 2001; Lukacs 2010). But probably the most significant area of a more systematic critical social theory in Japan has emerged from the critiques of modernity that have been an important feature of Japanese intellectual life at least since the 1940s. The various permutations that this has undergone, and its connections to shifting views of human rights, Japanese wartime responsibility, and post-war senses of identity is an important topic to which we will now turn.

The key framing issue here has been that of the nature of modernity, understood as a global movement, and Japan's relationship to that movement. Japan's war of aggression against China, Southeast Asia and subsequently (and fatally for Japan's imperial ambitions) the United States, while hiding behind a rhetoric of liberation from Western colonialism and the creation of a "Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," was in part ideologically inspired by a certainly extreme right-wing but nevertheless interesting attempt to theorize and reject the "modern" (seen as a largely Western hegemonic project). This took the form of the formulation of the concept of *kindai no chokoku*, or "overcoming the modern," formulated at the outbreak of the Pacific war by a group of prominent intellectuals meeting in Kyoto. This theory was aimed not only at providing an intellectual and ideological rationale for the overthrow of Western colonialism in Asia, but also to provide an alternative model of social development based not on simple nativism, but on the rejection of the very philosophical principles

on which Western modernity was based—its universalism, secularism and progressivism, and their replacement by largely Shinto-inspired values of what many Japanese intellectuals thought of as being an unfairly marginalized (although by 1940 militarily and economically powerful) world culture—notably their own (Hiromatsu 1989). This view had deep cultural roots, going back to much older forms of Japanese nativist thought, in particular to eighteenth-century attempts to differentiate Japanese culture from that of its dominant neighbor—China (Nosco 1990).

The main post-war critic of this position was the major political theorist Maruyama Masao, one of whose books, consisting of a series of linked essays, is fortunately available for those who find Japanese inaccessible (Maruyama 1966). In this book Maruyama wrestles with what was the overwhelming intellectual (and moral) issue of the 1950s—of how Japan, with its sophisticated culture and after centuries of isolation from most of the rest of the world, could have become involved in a violently aggressive imperialist project abroad that was allied with fascism and repression at home. And, indeed, could it happen again? Maruyama offers a set of reflections on this question that involve several controversial theses. These are essentially: that the real problem facing Japan during the immediately pre-war and war years, and extending into the postwar period, was not so much political coercion as psychological coercion, made possible by lack of freedom of belief until 1946; the very under-developed legal system or culture of legality; and the socio-political expression of this in what Maruyama calls “vertical dependence”—a hierarchical social structure creating little room for independence or initiative at its middle and lower levels. An important result of these patterns is, according to Maruyama, what he terms “the externalization of morality”—the absence of any subjective or interior sense of ethical responsibility in a social system in which group norms trapped the individual in a network of obligations originating outside her/himself, and with a consequent loss or absence of moral autonomy. The weakness of an ethical sense strong enough to resist the onset of fascism was not a result of the absence of such ethical values in Japanese philosophy (as we saw above), but the difficulty of translating those values into action in a social structure greatly emphasizing conformism and obedience.

The validity of these claims is strengthened by Maruyama’s explorations of the sociology of Japanese modernism. In Maruyama’s view, Japan is indeed “unique,” not in the sense commonly argued by its large community of nativist or *Nihonjinron* (“the theory of Japaneseness”) writers with

their intense cultural nationalism (Yoshino 1997; Dale 1986) and racial and linguistic theories, but in the form of its evolution as a modern state. When compared with the other modernizing states of Europe and North America, with the possible exception of Germany and Italy, modernity was subsumed by fascism and modernization subordinated to nationalism. The result was that the psychological structures of nationalism became the dominant feature of the Japanese collective psyche, and in the rare cases where the private lives of its citizens were not invaded by the state, a severe form of compartmentalization took place: inside/outside, public/private, the real face/the public face; categories that still dominate and are constantly reproduced in many instances of Japanese sociology and anthropology, and in foreign anthropologies of Japan, without in most cases any serious empirical investigation of their validity and often drawing on the misleading and outmoded conceptual vocabulary of Ruth Benedict's wartime study *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (e.g. Hendry 1987, Chap. 3; Bachnik and Quinn 1994).

The fundamental problem as seen by Maruyama is the absence of what he terms *shिताisei*, which might be best translated as "autonomy" or "independence of spirit," and the "failure" of modernity, or the inability to yet achieve it, which lies not in any lack of economic progress (hardly the case in Japan), but in the failure to transform the self in such a way as to internalize morality and act independently on the basis of that morality, and not to be swayed by external structures and imposed norms of behavior. The central problem is not that of overcoming modernity, but rather that Japan has not yet achieved it (Koschmann 1984). The issue here again is not the existence of apparently modern social and political institutions (parliament, universities, courts, schools, hospitals, etc.), but that their internal functioning does not yet approach true *shिताisei*. The critique is thus not so much of institutions as such, but of the failure to bridge the gap between the religious and philosophical underpinnings of Japanese culture and the expression of the values embodied in those dimensions in practice: in actual social and political behavior. There are indeed three very practical implications of this position: that genuine democracy in Japan depends on the possession and exercise of such autonomy; that most Japanese are still very unclear about the country's role in an increasingly globalized world (and the lack of an independent foreign policy is often seen as evidence for this); and that without enhancing this sense of autonomy, what happened in the 1930s and 1940s could happen again, since the basic underlying psychology has never been adequately addressed or transformed.

While never positioning himself as such, Maruyama might be seen as Japan's leading post-war critical theorist. Steeped in Marxism, he also had an extensive knowledge of Western political theory and of theories of nationalism. While certainly his position can be subject to criticism—for example, his rather excessive downplaying of the role of nature in Japanese culture, on the grounds that it can easily lead to a kind of nature romanticism, which leads to even less clarity about the boundaries of the self, this being in his view the basis of the nativist nationalism against which he was struggling—he nevertheless represents an outstanding Japanese example of the critical intellectual willing to confront the problems of his own culture and history, drawing on both Western theory and a deep knowledge of his own society. What he also succeeded in placing at the center of Japanese intellectual discourse was the issue of modernity, a discourse in which two main strands can be detected.

The first of these is represented by Japanese attempts to assimilate and interpret in the local context Marxism (Hoston 1986), non-Marxist forms of socialism and anarchism (Duus and Scheiner 1998), and pacifist forms of Asian quasi-socialism—Gandhi in particular having a substantial following in Japan (not surprisingly as he represented a non-Western variety of socialism (Rao 1970), and forms of Christian socialism. This strand represents the attempt to indigenize the foreign, but with mixed success. Marxism has had considerable intellectual (although less political) success, and Christianity much less as a specifically religious force (attracting very few converts), but with considerable indirect impact as was suggested earlier on education, social work, medical care and, as a result of the background of many of the early generation of American Protestant missionaries, on agriculture. In the Meiji (1868–1912) and Taisho periods (1912–1926), Christian socialism was a not insignificant force, but much of its potential was suppressed by the rise of fascism in the 1930s and dissipated by the ideological and sectarian struggles of its different denominational communities.

The other strand was that of the rejection of the West and of culturalist attempts to define the uniqueness of Japan, its “destiny” in relation to the rest of (under-developed) Asia, and the conception of a form of modernity quite different from that of the materialist and universalist ideology of the West (Najita and Harootunian 1998). The continuing tension between the two strands can be seen in the controversies that still constantly occur in Japanese society—over school history textbooks, the issue of Japanese

war guilt and the question of Japan ever becoming a “normal” nation again in the light of its history, its prospects for becoming a real democracy and its uncertain relationship to the rest of the world (Kato 1997; Barshay 1998). Japanese critical theory reflects the pre-occupations of these two strands—one drawing directly or indirectly on Marxism or non-Marxist forms of socialism and struggling with their application to the particular historical and sociological characteristics of Japan, the other rooted in conceptions of tradition, rural ethnography, religion and philosophy thought to be indigenous to Japan. How these work out in practice we will now discuss.

### CULTURE AND CRITICISM IN JAPANESE SOCIAL THEORY

Japanese social thought and philosophy therefore reflect a continuing tension between those drawing on mostly Western sources of inspiration, and in particular Marxism, and those advocating a culturalist solution. An example of the former is the philosopher Mutai Risaku, who promotes an approach that is multi-disciplinary and brings philosophy into dialogue with the social sciences as well as to some extent with the natural sciences, and which has given rise to a largely positivist and empirical version of social criticism embodied in the journal *Kagaku no shiso* (The Science of Thought). A contemporary example of the latter is the literary critic and writer Kamei Katsuichiro, who recommends a return to the sources of Japanese tradition as the inspiration for a continuing critique of modernity, and in doing so has created an interesting form of indigenous Japanese cultural studies. Interestingly, in practice the two broad tendencies often get mixed—a synthesizing tendency characteristic of many aspects of Japanese culture.

The social critic and writer Hasegawa Nyozeikan, for example, while an advocate of systemic reforms necessary in his view to return post-war Japan to a viable and respected place in the community of nations, is also the author of a well-known volume on Japanese tradition (Hasegawa 1982). Likewise, the more creative exponents or developers of Marxist thought such as the philosopher Hiromatsu Wataru manage to take a rather distinctively Japanese approach to Marx himself, arguing in his numerous books for a non-dualistic, anti-Cartesian and non-economistic worldview that places the individual and the construction of systems of meaning back in the heart of the Marxist project, as signaled in the titles

of two of his major works that would read in translation as *Being and Meaning* and *The Intersubjective Structure of the World*. The philosopher Yamawaki Naoshi assesses what he sees as being Hiromatsu's genuinely original contribution in the following terms:

If one were to characterize the core of Hiromatsu's philosophy in a nutshell, one could say that on a fundamental level he criticized modern world views, whether idealistic or materialistic, which were caught in the dualistic grid of subject and object. Hiromatsu rejected the Leninist-type of materialistic theory which sees in the object the mere product or reflection of matter. Instead he developed a new theory which recognized the object as the intersubjectively constituted world of relations. In the background of this kind of thinking one can detect the strong influence of constitutionalism derived from phenomenology and neo-Kantianism, as well as the relationalistic epistemology of E. Cassirer. Up to the end, however, Hiromatsu did attempt to place his intellectual effort in the center of the Marxist tradition in that he considered the world of relations not as an a priori trans-historical world, but as an a posteriori socio-historical world which stands in constant need of reform or even revolution. (Yamawaki 1997: 272–273)

At the basis of a great deal of Japanese philosophy is this underlying idea of non-dualism, an idea which appears not only in philosophy and religion, but also in Japanese anthropology and the communalistic ideology that underpins many intentional communities in Japan, and even, some would say, society as a whole.

A very good example of this is to be found in the work of the poet and literary and social critic Yoshimoto Takaaki and his innovative theory of the role of fantasy in human thought and behavior (Yoshimoto 1978). Yoshimoto, who is critical of both Marxism and Maruyama Masao, argues that the role of social thought is “to articulate the very concrete realities of the masses in their humble everyday life.” In contrast to Maruyama, he maintains that only in the sphere of fantasy can true personal autonomy (*jiritsu*) be possible. Human behavior in his theory manifests three forms of fantasy: individual, dual and collective. Of these, he privileges the second, since individual fantasy can lead simply to narcissism, and the collective, embodied in conceptions of the state, to alienation, while the dual promotes contexts such as that of the couple or the family where the individual can find genuine fulfillment (Blocker and Starling 2001: 163).

Similarly, although in my view overvalued by some Western commentators who know of few other figures in Japanese philosophy, the leaders of



the so-called Kyoto School—Nishida Kitaro and Nishitani Keiji in particular—while compromised by their accommodation to pre-war and wartime fascist thinking, nevertheless stand out as critics of the West’s universalist claims, of the dualism of much post-Cartesian philosophy, of the separation of religion and philosophy, and of modernism and in particular its privileging of rationality over other possible forms of knowing. It is against this background that we can make sense of why post-structuralism, particularly in its French incarnations, produced so much excitement in Japan. What we see are two broad positions that have been taken on this movement by Japanese intellectuals. The first is that postmodernism, while hailed as a major breakthrough in Europe, simply reflects and reproduces aspects of Japanese culture that are very old: that Japan is indeed the original postmodern society and has long been so (Miyoshi and Harootunian 1989). The other is that postmodernism, whatever its geographical origins, is deeply subversive of established institutional and intellectual orders in that it is radically socially-constructivist, argues against any fixed points of authoritative interpretations, opposes the logocentricity of most formal philosophy and stands against the domination of rationality/reason as the sole basis of explanation (see e.g. Yamaguchi Masao 1975).

As such, postmodernism, as assimilated into the Japanese intellectual field, has been able to be refashioned as a weapon to turn against the West by critiquing its universalist and hegemonic pretensions, and also as a kind of internal methodology for resisting the more culturalist forms of Japanese philosophy and social thought that are based on an ahistorical and essentialist image of Japanese culture, and on the suppression of internal differences and countervoices that existed even during the idealized past. As Jean-Marie Makang has argued for the concerns of contemporary African philosophy, but in terms that could equally well apply to Japan, for philosophy to remain critical it cannot strip its subjects of their historicity, dynamism or variations, or attempt to mine ethnology in the pursuit of an archaism that illegitimately promotes its uniqueness (Makang 1997).

### EMANCIPATORY PROJECTS AND JAPANESE SOCIETY

So there is clearly no one form of “Japanese” emancipator theory (or indeed of practice, which range from left-wing politics, through social activities of some of the New Religions and on to communal, environmental and civil society movements of many kinds). If they have anything in common, it is perhaps their distrust of reason as the fundamental or only

basis of social action, their recognition of the limits of knowledge itself, and their transcending of the endemic methodological individualism of so much Western sociology and social theory. The Japanese projects stand in contrast with that of Habermas and his assumptions about the universality of the so-called Enlightenment project and the primacy of reason amongst the human faculties.

There are a number of factors that explain this divergence of Japanese and German viewpoints (despite the close cultural dialogue between the two societies going back to the time of the Meiji Restoration and the formulation of Japan's first modern constitution). If Japan represents an example of what some have called the aestheticization of life, it might also be argued that this process went just as far in the German Romantic movement and its social expression in Nietzschean, Wagnerian and nativist aspects of German fascism. But other sources can also be found in the differing conceptions of human rights held in Japan and in Europe, and in the economic basis of social life, notably the different forms of capitalism that have emerged globally in the post-war period. In the first case, while some voices have argued for the possibility of a discourse of "Asian Values" as the basis for promoting some form of cultural and political difference or uniqueness (a model tried not only in Japan, but also in Singapore: see Clammer 1993), critics of this position, while rightly attacking its essentialism, have in practice simply fallen back on recommending a basically Western form of liberal democracy as the best model for maintaining human rights while accommodating the stresses of communitarian tensions in post-colonial and often very multi-cultural societies (Inoue 1999).

What this response tends to overlook is that notions of rights are themselves cultural and are rooted in the particular social ethics generated in particular societies, often out of an intersection between their religious and political histories (Cowan et al. 2001). Debate has occurred, for example, in the Buddhist community internationally as to the possibility of there being human rights at all in Buddhist social thought, given the decentered nature of the self and the impermanent and interdependent nature of all phenomena in the Buddhist worldview (Keown et al. 1998). In the specific context of Japan, the historian T.C. Smith has argued that the social and economic history of modernizing Japan suggests that the Japanese concepts of rights is not one of demands for abstract justice, but rather of benevolence: that which is mostly sought is not the eradication of differences, but the correct recognition of those differences and the ascription to each social role of the correct and legitimate status and

respect due to that role (Smith 1989). As Japan industrialized it certainly developed a sophisticated form of capitalism, but one that is distinctive and operates with different conceptions of internal order, responsibility and is based on a very distinctive sociology, which differentiates it from, say, German, British or North American varieties (Sakakibara 1993; Kenrick 1990).

The underlying premise of these varieties of critical social theory in Japan is that they attempt to move beyond the old categories of “modernization,” “Westernization” and so forth that have hitherto structured social science debates. Neither capitalism nor modernity need be seen as unitary phenomena, and so the political choices equally are not necessarily between some form of Marxism and Western liberal democracy. All this signals the significance of Japan to the wider social science community: a society with hierarchy but little class; capitalist, yet managing that economy on highly communitarian principles; saturated with media, but yet maintaining the value of intimate and long-lasting social ties; highly urbanized and crowded, but with very little crime; modern in so many respects, but yet encouraging respect for tradition (Clammer 1995; Arnason 1997). It is also a society in which Buddhism takes on a role that needs to be as fully appreciated as that of Christianity and Judaism in the West in the formation of conceptions of the self and the individual, of law and rights, of the structuring of social relationships and in philosophies of history. The significance of the Kyoto School lies in large part in its struggle to create a dialogue between Western and Japanese (and specifically Buddhist) philosophy, not simply as an academic discourse, but as a critical means of struggling with questions of modernity and the shaping of conceptions of self, of historicity and of nihilism.

For if notions of “emptiness” (the interdependence of all phenomena in the universe), and of impermanence are given central place, a radically different epistemology than that informing Western critical theory begins to emerge. In his discussion of Nishitani Keiji’s debate with modernity, Dale Wright suggests (Wright 1995) that at the heart of Nishitani’s project are the themes of, firstly, the establishment of the non-autonomous “background” or “field” of the self. This implies its dependence on and arising from a complex interplay of phenomena over which it actually has little or no control (rather than a Maruyama-like conception of an autonomous self). And secondly, the transformation of the “nihilistic emptiness” of modernity and postmodernity, as interpreted in the West under the influence of Nietzsche, into a “relational emptiness” in which fullness of being

is not achieved by subtraction from the world around the self (the autonomous/individualistic model) but by immersion in it. This has parallels with the notion of the “ecological self” emerging in the West from Buddhist-inspired strands of Deep Ecology (Macy 1990). Potentially the political implications of this are immense, since it suggests neither a Marxist nor Liberal model, but a new form of communitarianism, and one in which rights are extended to nature as well as to other humans: a holism in the fullest sense.

### GLOBALIZATION, CRITICAL THEORY AND RELIGION

The critical intellectual or the intellectual activist are certainly not unknown categories in Asia. Oppositional thinking is a well-developed tradition of considerable antiquity in China, India, Korea, Vietnam and elsewhere, and the history of Asia has been punctuated with peasant uprisings, millennial movements, utopian experiments, the emergence of new religions and, of course, revolutions. While Orientalist visions of Asia may have portrayed this vast area as socially conservative, culturally tradition-bound and politically repressive, the reality is one of boundless diversity, a huge body of “social theory” often disguised as literature, religious writing, quasi-philosophical discourse (e.g. Confucianism), or appearing in genres that fit uneasily into Western intellectual categories, such as Taoism or much of the literature of Zen Buddhism, for example. The critical impulse is not lacking, but, as we have seen in the Japanese case, is often expressed in cultural terms and/or religious discourse. To take one instance: one of the major reform theorists of early Japan was the monk Nichiren (1222–1282), whose iconoclastic writings and teachings not only led to his own exile, but have subsequently given rise to whole schools of Buddhist practice, much of it socially engaged, including two of Japan’s biggest “New Religions”—Soka Gakkai and Rissho-koseikai).

Furthermore, critique is not in itself the end point for most Asian social theory, since in many cases it gives rise to actual social movements, often reflecting visions of a new society arising out of the initial critical move. One of the few scholars to have actually bothered to contrast and juxtapose Western and non-Western critical thought, Fred Dallmayr, has indeed noted that critical thought flourishes in Asia, Africa and Latin America. As he puts it,

Derrida’s call for a critical kind of theorizing or philosophizing—one opposed to the hegemonic ‘positivism’ (in technological, military and economic

domains)—obviously is not restricted to the confines of Europe but has a ‘cosmopolitan intent’ ... As it happens, his summons today finds echoes or resonance in many parts of the world, from Asia to Africa and Latin America. Actually, given the intrusive and oppressive effects of the reigning ‘positivism’ in most non-Western societies critical theorizing tends to be widespread and at a premium precisely in those parts of the world. (Dallmayr 2005: 122–123)

His own brief survey, concentrating mainly on Indian thought, cites only the Kyoto school philosophers as a prime example of Japanese critical theory on the grounds that “from the angle of nihilation, Buddhist thought can have no truck with totalizing modes of domination (with Derrida’s ‘technical-economic-military positivism’) given the Kyoto School’s emphasis on the centrality of Zen Buddhist notions of ‘nothingness’ and *sunyata* or ‘emptiness’” (Dallmayr 2005: 129). As we have seen, the range is actually much larger, and in conclusion would like to try to draw some broad implications from the specific Japanese case.

Several key elements stand out amidst the diversity of Japanese critical thought, so only a small sample has been surveyed here. The first of these is the critical dialogue with the West and the selective assimilation of Western philosophical ideas. Some would argue that Japan is the only major non-Western society to have successfully assimilated and reproduced advanced capitalism (without being colonized), while nevertheless retaining the integrity of much of its indigenous culture, and has in fact reshaped capitalism in its own cultural terms. It has certainly been the case that intellectual dialogue with the West has been one of the major engines of Japanese theoretical creativity: rejecting, selectively assimilating or transforming ideas that were originally of foreign origin.

The second is the place of politics in Japanese and perhaps more generally Asian thought, especially those forms influenced by Confucianism. Again as Dallmayr rightly suggests:

[Hannah] Arendt’s complaint about the blurring of domains might also have been addressed to the East Asian context ... Asian culture (on the whole) has resisted the neat division or demarcation of domains, preferring to see human and social life instead as a complex web of relationships, as a holistic fabric of elements held together by some kind of inner balance. This difference is particularly important with regard to politics or the ‘public sphere’. Although acknowledging its function, Asian culture has never assigned to politics the commanding height over society that was allocated to it in the Western tradition (even when its supremacy was subordinated to the still more commanding heights of philosophy and theology. (Dallmayr 2004: 161)

What this suggests is the larger theoretical and sociological point that maps of reality can be drawn differently in different cultural spaces, something not perhaps fully recognized in Western social thought, with its preoccupation with disciplinary boundaries and its zealotry in drawing sharp boundaries between “serious” intellectual work and “the literary,” a distinction that finds no real place in the Japanese intellectual universe.

The third is the issue of not only retaining culture as a major component of a critical vision and thereby resisting the positivism that Derrida (rather belatedly from a Japanese perspective) denounces, but also of understanding the essential nature of society itself in cultural as well as in political and economic terms, the hegemony of the latter in particular needing to be strongly resisted. Cultural politics is thus at the center of much of the Japanese critical enterprise, since future society is not seen as a dictatorship of the proletariat or an economy of collective ownership, but primarily as a cultural space in which the pursuit of cultural activities defines the good life in a kind of post-political society in which politics and economics are the servants of that larger libertarian vision, not its masters.

The final factor is the role of religion. While directly religious impulses have played only a small part in the formation of Western critical theory (whatever the underlying influence of Judaism on Marxism and to some extent on Christianity), in the Japanese case religion has been very much a formative factor. Shinto is the inspiration for much of the indigenous social thought and certainly for Japanese forms of utopianism, and Buddhism for philosophical reflection, social and environmental activism, and as the basis for forms of social theory based on very different premises from their Western counterparts (Loy 2003; Jones 2003; Clammer 2009). In its activist forms, Japanese Buddhism has been converging with what has now become known as “Engaged Buddhism,” and in developing new forms of social practice has necessarily been forced to theorize that activism (Stone 2003).

In his call for a “global public sphere,” Fred Dallmayr approvingly cites Ulrich Beck’s call for a “critical theory with a cosmopolitan intent” (Dallmayr 2005: 131), and himself implies that in the contemporary world situation in which religious fundamentalism, ecological crisis, rising militarism and the negative effects of globalization promoted by rapacious and profit-hungry corporations, critical theory itself needs to be informed by the positive dimensions of a spiritually based cosmopolitanism. The more creative forms of Japanese social theory demonstrate how such a project might be pursued

in a way that leads not to Western intellectual hegemony, but to genuine dialogue between civilizations, which preserves the cultural differences that are as essential to the social health of the planet as biodiversity is to its ecological health. Many forms of social theory can flourish together, and their encouragement can only lead to the enrichment and variety of the social sciences, and to the possibility of new and creative answers appearing that address the current common crisis engulfing the planet.

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