



Keynote Speech

“Benign” Nationalism in the History of Post-War Japan

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Can we write a history of postwar Japan? For me, now approaching the age of seventy, it is not an abstract academic question, but a kind of personal concern. Most of my life, I have actually lived through that time as a concerned witness, and witnessed—what exactly does this word mean? I watched events on the TV, read about them in the newspaper, observed them on the street, or, in very rare cases, participated in the events.—actually what happened. But my personal memories do not constitute a history. I do not have any interest in writing a so-called “self-history”. My life history belongs to my sphere of privacy and I do not have the least intention to share it with the public, nor, I am sure, would the public be interested in it.

History, whatever its precise definition might be, must be an objective narrative, explanation and analysis of what actually happened, based on the objective evidence and scientific logic. As far as the reconstruction of “facts” is concerned, it must be neutral to any value or ethical judgment.

Recently serious questions have been raised against such premises of “objectivity”, especially by those advocates of “post-modernism” who claim that whole historical narratives are “discourses” basically constrained by the writer’s viewpoints or prejudices. Post-modernist historians have also emphasized subjective, conceptual and cultural contents of history rather than “objective” facts, tendencies or even “laws” of history which the previous historians of many generations have tried to establish. Recently there has

been heated discussion between pre-post-modern historians and post-modernists about whether “really objective” history is possible or not. I do not think it necessary to go into details of such discussions.

I would like to emphasize that there should be distinction between history as *Wissenschaft* and *histoire* as story or distinction between historical narratives and historical novels, in the sense that the former must be written according to the established rules of objective analysis of evidence, documents etc. and rigorous logic of casual explanation. Such rules themselves are often criticized as based on a special (Western) tradition of prejudices. Of course, there are not or cannot be any strict precise formulations of such “rules of objectivity”, and those can be changed in the long process of development of historical studies. We may agree, however, that there is a consensus among scholars of history that there are such rules and what they imply.

How to objectify events is important in the process of writing contemporary history. Objectification implies to make events belong to the past: to fix events as they actually happened, and to describe and understand them as they really occurred. This process of writing history puts a historian in the position of an observer, that is, a place detached from the actual events. He or she (she or he) may be or should be keenly interested and even emotionally involved in what have happened, but his or her participation into them is strictly forbidden.

Such may sound too obvious a remark, but its implication is not so simple. Historical events happened at a specific time, in a specific place, in a specific way, and not in any other way. However the occurrence seems to be haphazard, it could not have happened otherwise. The historian, of course, can judge it as haphazard, and think it might have well happened otherwise, but “counter factual” or “virtual” history belongs to historical fiction, but is not a legitimate history, since if we can allow such a statement as “After A happened instead of B which actually happened, C may well have happened” into consideration, we can further think that “instead of A, X might well have happened, then Y might have followed···” “After C, instead of B happened, E,

instead of actual event D, might have followed...”. There would be no limit to such speculation, and there is little if any objective evidence to support such speculation.

But if counterfactual argument is forbidden, there is difficulty in the discussion of causality and value/ethical judgment, since “A was the cause of B” means that not only “B happened after A happened,” but also if A had not happened B would not have happened”; “some behavior of specific person or people in some specific situation was ethically (or otherwise) wrong” means not only that their results were deplorable, but also that the person or people could have behaved differently and deplorable results might have been avoided. Here it should be noted the discussions of causality and ethical responsibility are closely interrelated, since one may be accused of responsibility for some event only when one’s behavior can be regarded as its cause.

This aspect of the “objective” history causes difficulty especially in the writing of “contemporary history” when the participants of the events are still alive, and their memory is highly charged with emotion. Can we really clear the influence of such personal viewpoints from contemporary historical narratives? Or, one could even ask whether it is really desirable to disregard them? To be a little provocative, I would answer to these questions in the affirmative. Historians are not the judges or jury members, nor poets or novelists. Historians’ role is to provide the public ‘history’ with evidence on which people can make judgments, but the judgments themselves are not within the realm of history.

Objective facts have also included the subjective side. History is not only the narrative of how people behaved and what happened to them, but also that of how people thought and felt, again based on objective analysis of evidence where people’s thoughts and feelings are expressed or manifested.

Here I am not restrictively concerned or even mainly concerned with history of thoughts explicitly expounded by the authors, but more with history of thoughts manifested through behaviour and action of people. In that sense,

I am very much interested in the nationalism of post-war Japan.

When “Japanese nationalism” is discussed, it is usually understood to mean, right-wing, emperor-centric, chauvinistic, and bellicose tendencies which were dominant during the war period, but had been prevailing since Meiji era. And it is also understood to characterize what is exactly opposite to democracy and pacifism of post-war Japan. Sometimes it is also argued that even after the war Japan has not been sufficiently purged of such nationalism, or there is a danger of its survival. In such discussion, it is implied that nationalism in Japan is an evil spirit itself, and democratic and peaceful Japan must completely get rid of it. If explicitly expressed in such statement, it is obviously wrong. There have been, are still and will be popular feelings towards national consciousness in Japan: attachment to “Japaneseness”, loyalty to the state of Japan, desire to have pride of being Japanese, fondness of Japanese culture and life-style and love of native-land. Those characterize basic features of modern nationalism. The existence of those phenomena is so obvious that it is often taken for granted, and its significance is overlooked. Nor it is meaningless to condemn such nationalism and to try to eliminate it.

That Japanese people's identity is centered at being Japanese is simply an objective fact, free of any moral or value judgments. Japan as a nation has been established through long history. Recently, it is sometimes discussed that the history of Japan as a nation is not as long as was once believed (say 2000 years) but still it is long enough. The nation-formation process has been strong at least from Edo period, when most important elements of Japanese culture were born, national money formed, the concept of the national policy apart from the specific power of the ruler was recognized, and national tradition was partly discovered and partly invented. So called Meiji Restoration only purified and strengthened the tendency to nation-building of the factors which unified and integrated the nation. The hardships endured by the Japanese people during and immediately after the war only consolidated the unity of the Japanese nation. Without its former colonial possessions and subject peoples, Japan is a more homogenous nation. Therefore it is only natural that the Japanese people have a strong sense of nationality and a kind of nationalism is prevailing.

But such a statement would certainly cause misunderstandings and invoke criticisms. Therefore it is necessary to clarify several points of issue.

1. *Tenno*-regime and Japanese nationalism

Japanese nationalism has been understood in association with *Tenno-sei*, which is the authoritarian state-nation centered at the person and the sovereignty of the emperor. But the relation between the historical *Tenno-sei*—the *Tenno*-dynasty with associated institutions—and the emerging Japanese nation has been very complicated and delicate. Even after Meiji period it was not always straightforward. The people who established modern state of Meiji Japan, including most of the vassals of Tokugawa, were ardent nationalists, but were not, again including many who tried to bring down the Tokugawa government, necessarily loyal to the person of the emperor. They used the *Tenno-sei* as an instrument for consolidation of Japanese nation.

It should be pointed out that the interest of *Tenno-sei* were not identical with those of Japanese people as a nation and could sometimes collide against it. Such discrepancy surfaced when at the end of the War, Japanese surrender was delayed due to the last desperate endeavor to save “*Kokutai*” (that is the position of *Tenno-sei* in Japan) causing unnecessary deaths of hundreds of thousands of Japanese soldiers and citizens. The case is not very much different from the situation in modern Europe, where the monarch was usually the center of nationalistic loyalty, but also often accused, especially after defeat of a major war, of betraying national interest and was forced to abdicate, to go into exile, or was even executed. Similar accusation could have been made to the Showa-emperor.

Nationalism, as attachment and loyalty to the ethnic identity, as patriotism, as loyalty to specific polity such as monarch or dynasty, are loosely connected but basically three different things. Such distinction exists also in modern Japan, although often obscure and sometimes deliberately confessed especially by the right.

2. Economic nationalism after the war

Japanese economy was devastated by the war and the defeat. The basic socio-economic structure was shattered. Looking back, it seemed that unanimous agreement must have existed among Japanese to cooperate in the economic reconstruction of Japan. There were different opinions and conflicts about how and in what way Japanese economy, or more generally social structure, should be reconstructed and further developed, but it was always taken for granted that what mattered was the economy of the Japanese people, for the Japanese people and by the Japanese people. Politicians, bureaucrats, business men, scholars and technocrats all cooperated in economic development, and succeeded in bringing about a quick recovery and then the very rapid growth of Japanese national economy.

3. Leftist nationalism

Japanese leftists (communists and left-socialists) were anti-American during most of the post-war period. They often talked about American imperialism exploiting Japan and advocated liberation of Japanese nation from America. It was of course natural under the cold war and such "anti-imperialistic nationalism" was encouraged by the USSR or Communist China as a tool against the US in the world-wide conflict. But Japanese communists and other leftists were really more of nationalists than revolutionary (as were in many other countries); when the USSR or Chinese Communist Party pressed the Japanese Communist Party to take direct military actions against the US forces, Japanese Communist Party leaders thought it detrimental to Japanese national interests and broke off the relation. In fact, some of the writings of communist scholars carried the very strong flavor of nationalism, often nearly chauvinism.

4. Sports nationalism

Recently, sports events, such as the Olympic games or the World football cup have become more and more important in concretizing the "imagined community" (B. Anderson) of many nations. Japan is not exceptional in this world trend.

Conclusion

One can refer to several aspects of nationalism of post-war Japan. Though, it is necessary to observe and analyze it without too hasty value judgments. It seems to be most interesting to compare it with nationalism in other Asian nations, and to see what they have in common and where they have difference.