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Johann P. Arnason

Where's the Beef, Mr. Arnason?

A Critical Review of :

Social Theory And Japanese Experience

— *The Dual Civilization* —

Kegan Paul International, London, 1997

Thomas Böttiger

Looking at the enormous price of the book, I indeed expected a voluminous work about social theories being applied to Japan, i.e. insights and explanations of Japanese phenomena or social dimensions from the viewpoint of “a leading sociological theorist” (as it states in the inside cover). In other words: more than five hundred pages full of elaborate social theory. To put it bluntly: This book is hard reading for anyone not too familiar with social theory or — worse — the English language.

The author, Johann P. Arnason, was born in Iceland and teaches currently at La-Trobe University, Australia. He has several PhD's, reads more than half a dozen languages, and is regarded as one of the most well-versed sociologists dealing with Japan. His sociological background can be somewhat centered around the German Frankfurt School, to which internationally renowned social theorists like Jürgen Habermas, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horckheimer have contributed. The author has co-edited “Japanese Encounters with Postmodernity” (with Sugimoto Yoshio) and thereby proves to be a profound expert of Japanese social issues, although — as he admits — he does “not read Japanese, and the work on this project has certainly made [him] more aware of the language barrier.” (xi)

This apparent flaw — in the eyes of scholars of Japanese studies at least — is not necessarily a disadvantage, because it opens up new approaches to the issue of “Japan” from the outside of the mostly literature-orientated methods of Japanology.

The advantage thus is his vast methodological resource, since the majority of books written in English and dealing with aspects of the Japanese society or culture make little or no use of the European social theory due to language problems (especially German and English speaking sociologists writing on Japan are rare).

The main focus of this book is hence an “interest in learning from Japan” and thereby contributing to the problems of social theory facing the “idea of modernity.” (xiv-xv) The author tries to handle the problem by combining two currents of sociological thought which explain the Japanese way to modernity either as a long-term process (for example Eisenstadt and his “axial breakthrough”) or as a continuous undercurrent of traditional, i.e. historical remnants (mostly the US-American approach, that is H. Ooms, E. Ikegami, Th. De Bary et al.). These two ways he labels “culturalist and historicist.” (xv)

The task of the author is now to link both approaches in “a tentative critical synthesis” (xv) and show their meaningfulness regarding the interaction of power and “state-building” in Japan. This is a difficult task, surely everybody admits, because it boils down to the heroic attempt of rewriting Japanese political history over the last 1400 years. In this aspect, the title of the book is somewhat misleading, because the focus of the book lies on “processes of state formation and their social ramifications [...]”, since “cultural images and interpretations of power play a formative role in political and social change [...].” Here the Frankfurt school of thought pops up and the whole issue of Japanese power-politics is at stake. The author clearly favors the “seminal work” of Norbert Elias on “The Civilizing Process,” which explains the transition of European court society (using the French example) into a pre-modern state through the intricate process of “internalization” of social rules. Although there is much doubt about the possible generalization of this explanation, since there exist great differences among the European aristocratic systems (French, English, German), this work has definitely had a stimulating effect on the various interpretations of “civilizing processes.” The “internalization” (“Verinnerlichung”) of social norms as a predisposition to modern-age state-building stands in contrast to the more socio-economical viewpoint of the development of modern (capitalist) systems as ventured by the rather post-Marxist ideas of “World Systems Theory” (I. Wallerstein), which Arnason dismisses due to the same notion of over-generalization. So the main theme of his book is the never ending conflict of constructing something like a state on foundations that were not always suitable. — And this makes it necessary to reach so far back into the past. And it lets the reader suffer due to the consequent problem of handling common denominators that could be handy in describing the Nara-state as well as the Meiji-nationalism. In finding one-fits-all descriptions, the author has definitely spend much care and thought. The main subject of the book (as we would expect from the title) had to disappear somehow into second rank.

But let us follow the author's narrow and winding path between verification and speculation. (And a winding path it is indeed, especially for non-native speakers.) Regarding history as a continuous process where traditions are constantly (re-)invented and discarded, bifurcations are only discernible from a temporally distanced location, and there is nothing like a wholesale "leap" in cultural or social "progress" (the word in itself already implies the evolutionary model of history as a way from "A" to "B", where "B" is better than "A"), the author has natural difficulties in establishing something like a "beginning." But nevertheless, since the formation of state building forces are the obvious focus, it seems quite plausible to start where historical records and Western history has set the beginning for Japanese state formation: the seventh century and the invention of the figure "emperor" as the political and religious center. Arnason links this process to the aspect of an "axial breakthrough" (Eisenstadt): "The emergence of imperial formations cannot be explained in terms of the functional or evolutionary logic of social structures; rather, they are created by power elites which draw on cultural visions for the formulation and implementation of their strategies." (62) This certainly brings one main methodical obstacle to the fore: that is combining a rather person-orientated (or elitist) view with the more self-unfolding processes that are the consequences. Out of this basic difficulty the consecutive traps spring open automatically: A centralizing process of state formation in the beginning of the Heian Period is followed by "a long drawn-out process" which resulted in the decentralization of power in the thirteenth century by the twin-structure of a shōgunal office in Kamakura and Muromachi and the religiously affiliated court in Heian. This already is the "secondary state formation" of the medieval military-political rulers, which had to rely on existing social and political structures because of their weakness or incapability of abolishing the court. At this point, the line of argument slowly leaves the line of Weberian thought which Arnason had been trying to remodel earlier. Although the gross misunderstanding of Weber regarding Asia and particularly Japan is common knowledge, in terms of political processes his ghost still lingers in Europe, but has to be completely restructured when dealing with Japan: "In brief, it would seem that the emerging post-Weberian approach is less concerned with direct connections between cultural patterns and economic innovation than with the broader and more complex configurations of culture and power." (22) Relying on Weber in explaining political and social "configurations" in Japan thus could be of interest in itself, but certainly leads to further complication and distraction in this work.

One of these configurations is the constant and more or less effective involvement in power politics which can at least partly be held responsible for the "Sengoku Jidai", which started with differences in the center of political power and soon cumulated in a common struggle for survival that left only the most ruthless warlords alive. For this aspect, Arnason relies on the works of Ikegami Eiko (E. Ikegami. *The Taming of the*

Samurai. Princeton 1995) where she in turn tries to apply the already mentioned “civilizing process” of “internalization.” Hence the strong emphasis on the work of Norbert Elias. But the weakness of his work, namely the narrow foundation of his work on the French aristocracy, proves to be equally unconvincing for the explanation of the “containment” politics of the Tokugawa rulers that eventually emerged out of this “decomposition” of the Japanese state system. (At this point, the basic referential book of Herman Ooms (H. Ooms. Tokugawa Ideology. Princeton 1985), is exploited down to the bottom line.)

The notion of “state” in this context is solely defined as the central authority’s ability to exercise power. But only from the seventeenth century onwards can we talk of more or less unified state politics and the overall social agreement on “who rules”, since a uniform exercise of power is dependent on the ability of the ‘ruling center’ to be acknowledged as such. Hence the process is justly defined by Arnason as “centralization,” i.e. centripetal tendencies of the Tokugawa trying to overcome the more centrifugal forces of the over 250 daimyô and the slowly but steadily increasing economic recovery of the rural society. “The consolidation of the Tokugawa rule led, in the first instance, to more systematic politics of economic control and mobilization with a nationwide scope; but this part of the new political project was [...] conducive to more autonomous economic development on a much larger scale than in the sixteenth century.” (303/304)

But why reach so far back in history? The founding of a pre-modern state in Japan in the sixteenth century by the three “unifiers” Oda, Toyotomi and Tokugawa is common ground in social theory since the ground-breaking works of Maruyama Masao. Arnason connects this process of “pre-modern state formation”, implying the “unprecedented increase in the order-building as well as the transformative potential of culture” (63), to the “secondary state formation” by the thirteenth century Kamakura Shogunate. This “secondary state formation” had to draw on existing power structures that had been established in the Heian Period and thereby live on a *modus vivendi* and a split of political power between the imperial court and the military rulers. To explain the beginning of this dual structure the author reaches further back to seventh century Japan as “primary state formation”, where a Chinese model of government was somehow mixed with indigenous requirements. This seems at best provocative and rather demonstrates the ambiguity of ubiquitous social denominators than posing a convincing argument, because identifying seventh century Japan as “primary state formation” clearly omits the question of what in turn the rulers at that time had to get along with. The author cannot but trace lines further and further back, and thereby applies roughly the same methods as the “Nihonki”: pure speculation.

—Of course, ironically speaking, looking at history from a later point, ‘somehow’ all processes seem to have taken shape as projects. A group of people ‘somehow’ got

together and decided on 'somehow' changing things. And then — somehow — this developed into 'something' on its own due to unforeseeable influences and still lingering common social attitudes. However complex the author tries to describe all the "buts" and "alsos," the discrepancy between history as a "non-intentional" process (Elias) and the more elitist perspective remains unsolved. The effort of linking two main social theories ("culturalist and historicist") and two cultural modes (Western approach and "Japanese experience") together only makes sense if the author himself throws his academic weight into the sparring. Reading too many concessions to all sides, the reader is utterly confused.

On the contrary, trying to link the modern era (Meiji) to this plot shows the difficulties even more clearly. Also due to the elaborate work already done in this field, the author finds it increasingly difficult to combine forces: "The most plausible approach to the history of the developmental state [Arnason defines Meiji-Japan as such, using the term of Chalmers Johnson (C. Johnson. *MITI and the Japanese Miracle*. Stanford 1982)] is one which emphasizes the interplay of culture, rationality, power and situation: Cultural orientations are reflected in the responses to conditions which call for innovative strategies as well as in the power structures which grow out of such situations, but transformations of power relations — internal and external — and consequent reorientations of strategy can also lead to changes in the functioning and composition of cultural factors." (391) This is a common tautology, but not sufficient to construct the nationalist phase in prewar politics out of centuries of post-feudalism (if we simply define feudalism as a system which turns land into power) and a centralizing undercurrent in the Japanese state making since Shôtoku Taishi. — Especially if we compare this to the much acknowledged book by Carol Gluck (*C. Gluck. Japan's Modern Myths*. Princeton 1985)

By combining all the different approaches which are in themselves necessarily insufficient (and never aim to be comprehensive) to explain the Japanese way of state-building, Mr. Arnason gets somewhat lost in finding a path between different theories regarding Japan and their temporary setting. Personally, I missed the theoretical background of the French thought (Foucault, Braudel, *Annales*) of the interpenetration of power and society as well as some more clearly spelled out personal views. On the other hand, his strength is the discussion of social theories (especially chapter 8), but the impression remains that Japan is just a case study for his vast bibliographical work on these last two decades' theories and to prove he has read them all. So the beef is certainly not his "Japanese experience," but rather the self-imposed theoretical struggle among sociologists. Or to put it in simple words (E.O. Reischauer, quoted by C. Steenstrup): This book is "over-researched and under-written."