

The American Revolution as a Topic of Study in Japan

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Recently Fulbright lecturer at the University of Tokyo and at International Christian University, Tokyo, and also visiting professor at Waseda University, I taught when at first in those famous Tokyo universities much as I am accustomed to teach at my home university in Illinois. However, I soon came to teach my Japanese students very differently, and this essay exhibits the differences between my experiences teaching them and my teaching in the United States.

Here is my main point. Japanese students of American studies construct Japanese identities, not American identities, and Japanese split along generational lines.

In Tokyo, I taught about the American Revolution and about the writing of the U.S. Constitution, material that was once the chief prop either for liberal views of American history or for whig ones. Liberalism is a word that I take from British scholar Benedict Anderson and that describes the notion that American and British parliamentary democracy was normative and ought eventually to be adopted by all countries. Herbert Butterfield's *The Whig Interpretation of History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), a book first published in 1931, made a similar criticism, using the word whig instead of liberal. By whatever name, whigs or liberals believed that parliamentary democracy was America's great gift to Asia in general and to Japan after World War II in particular. Studies of the American Revolution and the U.S. Constitution are important, on the liberal view, because the Revolution is a model for the development of parliamentary democracy, and the U.S. Constitution is the great example of it.

Liberalism is dead. Whiggery is dead. Whether Japanese or American, whether old or young, most scholars of American history now reject both whig and liberal views. The question is, what will replace whig and liberal interpretations?

Views must change, of course, to post whig and post liberal models. I gave my Japanese students the currently most fashionable American post liberal and post whig views of the American Revolution. Here is a brief summary. The origin of the Revolution was to be found partly in seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century British republican or commonwealth ideology, I told the students. Republicanism was the notion of ancient and early modern European theorists that there are three kinds of government, monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, and the best government mixes all three and balances them one against another. Such a mixed and balanced government will endure longer than any of the three types of government (monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy) in their pure forms.

For anyone interested in following up this material about post whig and post liberal views of the American Revolution and of republican or commonwealth ideology, I especially

recommend three pieces of scholarship: Glenn Burgess, *The Politics of the Ancient Constitution: an Introduction to English Political Thought 1603-1642* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992); Steve Pincus, "Neither Machiavellian Moment nor Possessive Individualism: Commercial Society and the Defenders of the English Commonwealth," *American Historical Review* 103, 3 (June 1998), pp. 677-704; and Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History* 79 (June, 1992), 11-38. This scholarship, which is both American and British, signals an end to that American notion that our American history is not only national but also universal and normative. Whigs and liberals shared it in common. They both believed that British and American historical examples established universal patterns and that those patterns were fundamentally progressive and logical. We have given up the claim of universality. Rodgers and Pincus both displace British and American political institutions from their previous universal context and make them instead specific and merely national institutions. That is the American post whig and post liberal viewpoint that I taught my Japanese students. By the way, I am finding the phrase whig and liberal cumbersome and from now on will use merely the single world liberal to denote both.

In no way does this argument lessen the value and importance of parliamentary democracy, but it makes the development of parliamentary democracy part of national, not universal history. British and American institutions rose at particular times, for the specific reasons set out by republican scholarship, and the histories of other parliamentary democracies would also be specific, not connected to universal patterns of development. At the end of this essay, I will argue that a move to post liberal views in no way lessens the importance of colonial American history and of the American Revolution as topics of study.

Meanwhile, what of Japan? Japanese scholars, I found, are constructing their own post liberal viewpoints, not borrowing them from America. The American studies field in Japan is therefore fragmented. Liberalism has declined in Japan as in America, but no single new common viewpoint has yet emerged either in Japan or in America to replace it. I believe that the post liberal viewpoint outlined above, the one that I taught my Japanese students, is now the most fashionable that has emerged in America, but my students and my colleagues taught me their views in return. Here are the post liberal viewpoints that have emerged in Japan, at least as I learned them at the three famous Tokyo universities where I was a visitor.

For one thing, there is a generation gap. Senior Japanese colleagues, women and men my own age, are often still liberal even while they yet construct a post liberal viewpoint and criticize American liberalism. While they said that American liberalism was faulty, their criticism of America retains liberal ideals as moral standards by which to judge the faults. The U.S. citizens of Japanese ethnicity who were interned in the United States during World War II provide a case by which many senior Japanese construct post liberal views of America. America did not hold to its own liberal agenda, by this view. While not always praising America, then, and while their criticism of America is only one among several Japanese post liberal positions, Japanese men and women my own age often based criticism of American liberalism on claims that America is or was faulty by its own liberal standards. America has been racist or sexist

or corrupt or whatever. American society has excluded and exploited people, but it ought not to have done so by the standards proper to American society. Such was the post liberal point of view often held by senior Japanese scholars, in my experience.

John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: Norton, 1999) was published to much acclaim while I was in Tokyo. In my estimation, this book, although by an American scholar, faithfully reflects this viewpoint of many senior Japanese scholars. Dower alternately praises the results of the U.S. occupation of Japan and yet scolds Americans for their failure to uphold their own liberal standards. His account makes American occupiers racist and condescending even while they nevertheless preached sermons about equality and democracy, sermons with which Dower has little quarrel.

Of course, senior people have a variety of views, and, although the generation gap divides people, opinions are not determined solely by age. Criticism of America for failure to adhere to its own liberal standards is not the only senior Japanese post liberal viewpoint. Other Japanese scholars of American studies participate in an even larger shift in viewpoint by scholars, both Japanese and American, on Japanese history. I think especially of Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000); Sheldon Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Patrick Smith, *Japan: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Pantheon, 1997). These books summarize recent revisionist views about Japan just before and just after World War II. Writing in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 5093 (10 November 2000), historian Carol Gluck recently reviewed the new viewpoints, especially the Bix book. What I have called the death of liberalism, Gluck calls the end of "the American-Japanese post-war storyline."

Here is where the Japanese split along generational lines. While the American-Japanese post-war storyline is gone, only older people regret its absence. By contrast, the young Japanese students in my classes do not even much notice, let alone lament, its passing. They hasten to construct a different post liberalism. Little concerned with academic controversy about past policy failures, whether American or Japanese, they are powerfully attracted to current American popular culture. They say that American things are cool.

A taste of this youth culture can be found in a remarkable novel, *Idoru*, by William Gibson (New York: Putnam Audio, 1996). Purportedly set in the near future, the novel in fact mirrors the current Japanese students in my classes. Young people in the novel are devoted to computers, sometimes to such an extent that they are unable to distinguish between computer simulations and real life, and that is the point upon which the plot of *Idoru* revolves. Popular music is utterly pervasive in the novel, and America and Japan are connected tightly by instantaneous communication through computers and mobile phones. This music, these methods of communication, and this global American popular culture are all much more powerful for young people than for older scholars.

When young students access a world of international popular culture, I think they use it to construct both post liberal identities and also truly Japanese identities, although not the ones of older Japanese. Young students use their study of America, even my course on the

American Revolution, to construct economic status as well as Japanese identity.

Japan remains mired in economic recession, and the young feel that the burden on them is especially acute in this regard. Even upper class and upper middle class young Japanese, such as the students in my classes, feel some misgiving about the economic future. Please allow me to make three points in regard to young Japanese students and their economic futures.

First, while older Japanese also constructed Japanese identities by their study of America, they made a devil's bargain similar to the ones faced by characters in kabuki plays. The bargain was this: Japan purchased global power by sacrificing Japanese identity. In writing about this, I have been influenced by a brand new book, out for only a few days, James I. Matray, *Japan's Emergence as a Global Power* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001). Japan's expert methods of manufacturing made it wealthy in the 1970s and 1980s, and this wealth made Japan a global power. My point is that, given the bargain, individual Japanese obtained élite Japanese status by studying the world beyond Japan, and especially by studying America. After World War II, study of America created both identity and rank or status for students who were then young. Since, implicitly, they were prepared to give up as much Japanese identity as the bargain required, but since they also did not know how much they would have to give up, they felt anxiety about the loss. Their rank and status were solid in Japan, despite their being purchased at the price of a diminution in the Japanese component of Japanese identity, and that rank and status are often still on display where senior university academics gather even now, but they have little to do with the rank and status to which young people now aspire in contemporary Japan.

Second, contemporary young people do not make a devil's bargain by studying America. Japan is already a global power, and young students do not remember when it was not. Most do not even remember the bubble times before 1992 when irrational exuberance inflated the value of Japanese assets, especially land prices. As Japanese young people look forward, they presume an enormous level of wealth and comfort, what Matray calls global power, but these presumptions do make young people feel guilty. Instead, the presumption of wealth makes their own economic outlook seem bleak. They worry instead about the loss of the bubble, but the loss of Japanese identity does not much trouble them.

Third, the new technology has created a new bargain, not a devil's bargain but one that is, as we say in America, a win-win situation. The technology shown in *Idoru* has transformed not only popular culture but also manufacturing methods and economic transactions. Japan cannot now go back to the world of twenty years ago. It must go forward, and the young think that excellence in these new technologies will be the substance of renewed Japanese global power. The young reaffirm Japan's current identity, its place as a global power, when they master new technology. Mastery of the new technology also situates these students firmly in Japanese society. When they absorb American popular culture, it is a badge or indicator of this mastery, and they feel no threat from it to their Japanese identities. Instead, young people feel secure when they see that new technology will secure their place in Japan and Japan's place in

the world.

Having already said that the shift to a post liberal viewpoint does not in any way lessen the importance of democracy, let me add now that the shift should in no way lessen the value of early American history in Japan's American study programs. There are two reasons for this. First, if the growth of parliamentary democracy is, as I taught my students, not an inevitable development but instead a part of national history, then the role of America in the history of Japanese democracy is all that much more important. The connection to America was an intrinsic part of the development of parliamentary democracy in Japan. Second, because most young Japanese are enthralled by American popular culture, students in American studies programs should remind their peers of the need to view that present American culture in light of the American past. Although few now claim that America provides normative standards that other countries must follow, American history provides the background necessary to understand the role of American popular culture in the current process of globalization. Japanese would resent an American who tried to understand Japanese popular culture only in terms of the present. Everyone knows how great is the importance of the Edo period, for instance, to a correct understanding of current Japanese comic books. Colonial and Revolutionary history are America's Edo period, and anyone who seeks a real understanding whether of American democracy or of American popular culture must master them.

I would like to conclude by saying that I think Japan will be fine. Of course, Japanese people continue to regret the loss of the bubble, but Japan has many great strengths, especially the energy, good characters, and skills of its young people such as those I taught in my classes, and Japan will build a basis for prosperity in the new century.