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Simon Avenell ^a

^a National University of Singapore

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Japan and the global revival of the 'civil society' idea: contemporaneity and the retreat of criticality

SIMON AVENELL

Abstract: This article examines the pioneering role of Japanese intellectuals in the contemporary (post-1945) global revival of civil society. Although often overlooked or discounted in recent scholarship, Japanese intellectuals were among the first contemporary theorists worldwide to re-conceptualize civil society as a remedy for two of the central problematics of the post-World War II era: the theoretical and practical crisis in Marxism, on the one hand, and the anomie of advanced capitalist development, on the other hand. The article argues that any comprehensive global history of contemporary civil society must consider the insights of these Japanese thinkers alongside those of their Continental and North American counterparts. More critically, the article also suggests that Japanese civil society thought merits attention because it vividly exposes the dearth of criticality and excess of celebration in the idea's recent resurgence. The result in Japan (and elsewhere) has been an ironic and troubling retreat of criticality coupled with a naïve faith in the therapeutic capacity of civil society.

Keywords: political thought, civil society, contemporary Japanese history

A late twentieth-century crisis in actually existing socialism propelled the idea of civil society from intellectual obscurity to the center of debates about democracy and politics in the contemporary world. In the 1970s and 1980s dissidents in the then-Soviet satellite states of Poland and Czechoslovakia re-invoked the civil society idea in their collective struggles against communist regimes and the bloody, misguided, and ultimately tragic experiment with state socialism. Around the same time, anti-state activists in Latin America also rallied around the civil society idea as they challenged brutal and corrupt dictatorships so endemic in the political life of that region. For activists in both areas civil society represented everything communism and/or dictatorship had not: popular rule, pluralistic politics, the right to free association and public dissent, and, most important of all, an ideal

of genuine human autonomy from the state. Although such lofty ideals were ultimately dampened by the vagaries of the free market and the gridlock of liberal democracy, the high profile of these 'civil society' movements – coupled with the spectacular implosion of communism in Europe – helped lay the foundations of a now-mainstream narrative in which the contemporary revival of civil society began in East Central Europe and Latin America, and spread thereafter to the liberal democracies of the West where proponents revitalized this old European idea as the solution to social deterioration, community lost, and the democratic deficits of late capitalist societies.¹ Significant to note, in this narrative, only much later did the civil society idea make its way to the 'late-developing' regions of Asia and Africa.

Although accurate in broad strokes, it is a narrative that obscures what has been a far more complex and fascinating rebirth of the civil society idea worldwide. As theorist John Keane (1998, pp. 12–13) has pointed out, the contemporary revival of civil society – at least, conceptually – did not originate in Europe or Latin America. It began a world away on the outer reaches of East Asia, in Japan. Furthermore, this revival started much earlier than has been generally assumed: in 1950s Japan and, to an extent, even during the 1940s in that country.² Revived by revisionist Marxist thinkers and liberal political theorists, this Japanese discourse on civil society continued unabated throughout the 1970s and 1980s at which time it merged with (and was, in some ways, *submerged* within) other prominent theorizations by Jürgen Habermas, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, Michael Walzer, Ernest Gellner, and Keane himself.

Yet, despite being a forerunner with an unquestionably sophisticated debate under way by the 1960s, this Japanese discourse has been largely written out of most discussions on the contemporary global revival of civil society. Even Keane (1998, p. 14) concludes that the Japanese discourse lacked 'influence' and was ultimately 'undermined by its deep dependence on the Gramscian approach'. Keane's critique certainly applies to one prominent group of civil society scholars in Japan, but it also tends to discount what has been a far more nuanced and productive debate in the country. In fact, the Japanese debate demonstrates that the re-emergence of the civil society idea in the post World War II era is better understood as a contemporaneous event, comprising nations and thinkers far beyond Europe and the Americas. The Japanese discourse deserves special attention in this global conjuncture not merely because it represents the 'Asian' element but, more important, because Japanese theorists were among the first contemporary thinkers to propose civil society as a solution to two of the fundamental *problématiques* of the post-World War II era: the theoretical and practical crisis in Marxism, on the one hand, and the anomie of advanced capitalism, on the other hand. Indeed, I argue that the history of the contemporary global revival of civil society will not be complete and, indeed, cannot be considered a *global* history, until the Japanese contribution has been correctly recognized, analyzed, and positioned therein.

The contemporary history of civil society thought in Japan attests to both the interconnectedness and innovativeness of political ideas in the country. Japanese theorists not only echoed but in many cases *anticipated* contemporary ideas on civil society worldwide because they too inhabited a contemporaneous world-historical moment and were reacting to the same intellectual concerns born of that global conjuncture.³ As Mary Kaldor puts it, ‘the reinvention of “civil society” in the 1970s and 1980s ... had something to do with the global context – the social, political and economic transformations that were taking place in different parts of the world and that came to the surface after 1989’ (2003, p. 1). As with committed Marxists elsewhere, Japanese intellectuals had to deal (albeit as concerned spectators) with the brutality and bankruptcy of socialism in practice: the abortive Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the failure of communist revisionism in East Central Europe, the Brezhnev Doctrine’s assault on national self-determination, the excesses of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Stalinist dictatorship in North Korea, and the exhilaration and disappointments of 1968 in Poland and Czechoslovakia. These disconcerting realities – combined with their own rethinking of Marxism – stimulated Japanese intellectuals such as Uchida Yoshihiko and Hirata Kiyooki, similarly to East Central European activists and dissidents such as Adam Michnik, Václav Havel, Zygmunt Bauman, and Bronisław Geremek, to reinsert (or attempt to reinsert) a positive vision of civil society into Marxism in the 1950s and 1960s. The civil society idea appealed to them because they too were part of that world-historical moment when the Marxist project began to look untenable or, at the very least, in need of substantial revision.

Similarly, at around the same time that German intellectual Jürgen Habermas began to warn of the ‘colonization’ of the ‘life-world’ by the ‘economic-administrative complex’ and called for a recreation of civil society and the ‘discursive public sphere’ (1971 [1968], pp. 62–122, 1989 [1962], p. 27, 1981, 33), as Hannah Arendt (1967 [1951]) and William Kornhauser (1960) plumbed the origins of totalitarianism in atomized mass societies, and as Herbert Marcuse (1964) lamented the rise of ‘one-dimensional man’, Japanese intellectuals such as Matsushita Keiichi began to rethink the ethos of democratic citizenship under conditions of mass society and planned for the reconstruction of civil society through popular political participation and local democratization.

Observed from this global perspective, it becomes clear that the idea of civil society became a positive, aspirational concept for some Japanese intellectuals for essentially the same reasons it appealed to revivalists elsewhere: a viscerally felt dissatisfaction with actually existing socialism and socialist theory, a growing concern about the impact of late capitalism on liberal democracy, political consciousness, and identity, and a repugnance for the totalizing proclivities of modern political and economic institutions. National histories certainly mattered in the rekindling of the civil society idea but, by situating Japan in this wider context and identifying cross-national commonalities, a window is opened to a number of

fascinating global-historical conjunctures in which Japan was a productive player in the late twentieth century.

Accordingly, I have three aims in this article: first, to trace the development of civil society discourse in post-World War II Japan; second, to show the embeddedness and contemporaneity of this debate in the global discourse and the formative role of Japanese intellectuals; third, to identify aspects of the Japanese experience that offer lessons for civil society advocates elsewhere. For contextualization, I look briefly at the background and characteristics of contemporary civil society theory worldwide, especially the reaction to communism and the critique of late capitalism. Next, I analyze three iterations of civil society thought in post-war Japan: the Civil Society School of Marxism, the thought of liberal political theorist Matsushita Keiichi, and, finally, recent iterations drawing on Gramscian and Habermasian concepts of civil society and the public sphere. Each iteration supports my argument about the contemporaneity and innovativeness of Japanese civil society thought. Finally, in the conclusion, I think through some of the dilemmas of the civil society idea for Japan and developed nations more generally. I argue that the de-Marxianization of the civil society idea in Japan, while necessary for theoretical progress, resulted – quite ironically – in a rather one-dimensional, normative, and largely uncritical discourse on civil society in the country, primarily because theorists failed to balance their enthusiastic lionization of civil society with any robust critique of the idea itself.

The global discourse on civil society: Marxist crisis and capitalist discontent

Though variously conceptualized (and re-conceptualized), the discourse on civil society can be profitably located in two overarching post-World War II *problématiques*: the crisis of Marxism (theoretically and in actually-existing socialism/communism) and the anomie of advanced capitalism. Consider first the connection between the civil society idea and the demise of communist regimes in East Central Europe. The civil society idea did not re-emerge by accident in this region in the 1970s and 1980s but was born of a number of hard-learned lessons among anti-state activists and dissidents. The first of these was a pragmatic reading of the political situation: so long as the Soviet authorities kept watch over countries of the Warsaw Pact, revolutionary or reformist movements would not be possible. The historical lessons were unequivocal: East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia in 1968 demonstrated that Soviet overlordship meant ‘violent repression of any serious transformative movement generated from “below” the system, from the people’ (Reidy 1992, pp. 168–169). As Polish dissident Adam Michnik put it, ‘after 1968 one could no longer count on the existence of a democratic tendency in the ruling bodies of the Party’ (1976, p. 269). So the constant threat of Soviet intervention – later formalized in the Brezhnev Doctrine of 1968 – not only ruled out revolutionary strategies but also

tended to short-circuit genuine attempts at reform by national communist parties (as in Czechoslovakia) and taught activists that pursuing power *within* the state was probably futile. Consequently, these individuals began to search for another strategy.

Such institutional roadblocks to reform, in fact, ignited an even deeper questioning among dissidents about the viability of communism itself, and this also fed into their rediscovery of the civil society idea. There is a fascinating tension in dissidents' writings of the late 1970s and 1980s: commitment to a worldview in which the Marxist project would – indeed *must* – succeed, on the one hand, coupled with an honest recognition that Marxism had simply not worked in practice. Polish historian, dissident, and later politician in the post-Communist era Bronislaw Geremek summed up the position of his contemporaries neatly, concluding that socialism ‘never brought about the weakening of the state, but on the contrary . . . strengthened it and enormously extended its control over economic and social life In communist countries, the “withering away” of the state lingered on as a rhetorical trope, but was never a serious practical possibility’ (1992, p. 5). Adam Michnik was even more scathing in his criticism, saying that ‘in Poland today the Marxist-Leninist doctrine is nothing but an empty shell, its gestures nothing but an official rite. It no longer provokes controversies, no longer excites emotions. It is thus incapable of being the source of tensions, incapable of dividing or ruling’ (1976, p. 275). For émigré sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, East Central European socialism ‘proved beyond reasonable doubt’ that ‘proletarian-dominated socialist society’ was a ‘noble but idle dream’, ‘a smokescreen used to hide a bureaucratic conspiracy’ (1981, p. 53).

So, two significant background factors stimulating the rediscovery of civil society in East Central Europe are identifiable: the solidification of the authoritarian communist state and the visceral disjuncture activists and dissidents felt between Marxism in theory and in practice. Important to note, East Central European dissidents were not alone in their disconcertion: a world away in Japan, civil society Marxist Hirata Kiyooki also lamented the events in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. He too articulated a fierce criticism of authoritarian communism as an elaborate form of ‘state socialism without civil society’ and far worse than German Nazism (Hirata 1994, p. 3). Significantly, he began to search for an alternative theory of civil society *within* socialism even before Polish dissident Adam Michnik – arguably the first to re-invoke the civil society idea in the contemporary era (Kaldor 2003, p. 55).

What then of the content of the civil society idea in East Central Europe? It can be summed up in any number of keywords floating around in the 1970s and 1980s: anti-politics, non-political politics, living in truth, new evolutionism, structural reform, parallel *polis*, and self-limiting revolution. As Kaldor (2003, p. 55) notes, civil society proponents stressed self-organization, autonomy, solidarity, and non-violence. They were not strategizing (indeed *could* not strategize) about capturing state power, so instead imagined civil society as a ‘counter power’

beyond the state yet interested in limiting the reach of that state (Kaldor 2003, p. 56). Geremek, for instance, noted how civil society was based on the 'conviction that society . . . retained the power to organize itself independently as long as it eschewed anything overtly "political" and stuck to "nonpolitical politics"' (1992, p. 3). Nowhere was this position articulated more clearly than in Adam Michnik's program for incremental structural reform – what he famously called the 'new evolutionism'. In his path-breaking 1976 tract of the same name, Michnik concluded that 'revolutionary programs and conspiratorial activities' would 'only help the police to fan hysteria and facilitate provocation'. Required instead was 'an unceasing struggle for reforms', which would 'extend civil liberties and guarantee a respect for human rights' (Michnik 1976, p. 273). To borrow from David Reidy, this was at base then a 'self-limiting revolution' aimed at the construction of a 'free-zone within existing state-supported megastructures' (1992, p. 169).

On a more abstract and philosophical level, these dissidents saw civil society as the only realistic means to realize individual 'potential and humanity' given the political realities. They wanted to 're-inject into the Marxist story the features of civil society highlighted by early liberal thinkers which Marx and his early followers tended to overlook' – features such as the notion of a 'coherent human subject', 'subjective human interests', the right to free association and contract, the 'right to acquire and dispose of private property', privacy, individual equality, and 'an open and robust public discourse' (Reidy 1992, pp. 170–171). And, to relate all of this back to Japan: almost every Japanese thinker who picked up the civil society idea charted a similar intellectual trajectory: a dissatisfaction with Marxism precipitating a largely uncritical rediscovery of the liberal tradition of European civil society thought. But Japanese theorists, as I explain below, got there first and evidence suggests they may have mythologized civil society with even greater naïve optimism than their European counterparts.

The other contemporary stream of civil society discourse – within which the East Central Europe discourse can in certain respects be located – unfolded on a more theoretical level among European and North American intellectuals (and Japanese thinkers), especially from the 1960s. It grew out of a number of streams of critical theory all of which addressed the supposed pathologies of advanced capitalist societies – pathologies such as totalitarianism, invasive technocracy and impersonal forms of social management, hyper-commercialization, and consumerism. William Kornhauser and Hannah Arendt, for instance, studied the phenomenon of mass society, which Kornhauser described as a situation in which individuals were related 'only by way of their relation to a common authority, especially the state' (1960, p. 32). In her classic *The origins of totalitarianism*, Arendt spoke of a 'highly atomized society' marked by individual 'isolation' and a 'lack of normal social relationships' (1967 [1951], p. 317). As Sheri Berman notes, for mass society theorists, civil society – though often an unexplored, silent

third element – represented ‘a crucial antidote to the political viruses to which mass society was vulnerable’ (1997, p. 563). Kornhauser is a case in point: although he did not directly discuss civil society in his 1960 classic *The politics of mass society*, the book’s epitaph leaves no doubt about his preferred ideal Other. Drawn from Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* the epitaph reads, ‘If men are to remain civilized or become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased’ (Kornhauser 1960, p. 6). In short, only through participation in voluntary associations – that is, proactive associationalism – could the pathological tendencies of mass society be kept at bay.

As I discuss below, Japanese theorists of mass society such as Matsushita Keiichi shared much with Kornhauser and Arendt, but they went a step further by explicitly connecting the mass society problematic to a theory of political participation, civic activism, and, ultimately, civil society. Interestingly, this connection would happen only much later in Western political theory (albeit in a more high-profile way) in the ideas of the so-called neo-Tocquevillians such as Robert Putnam who has argued that ‘civil associations contribute to the effectiveness and stability of democratic government’ (1993, p. 89).

While Arendt and Kornhauser sought the roots of totalitarianism and the demise of civility in the massive aggregation of mass society, another group of intellectuals focused on the role of institutions in short-circuiting the operations of an autonomous, pluralistic public sphere. The most high-profile figure here is Jürgen Habermas who not only articulated a scathing critique of the ‘economic-administrative complex’ but also presented a model for the rehabilitation of the public sphere and civil society. Habermas’ critique revolves around what he sees as the decline or ‘structural transformation’ of the public sphere defined as the ‘sphere of private people come together as a public . . . to engage themselves in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publically relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor’ (1989 [1962], p. 27). Drawing on the Frankfurt School notion of the ‘administered society’, Habermas has described the growth of a modern ‘technocratic model’ in which the ‘exercise of power’ has ‘been structurally transformed by the objective exigencies of new technologies and strategies’ (1971 [1968], p. 62). In this system the elected politician ‘becomes the mere agent of a scientific intelligentsia, which, in concrete circumstances, elaborates the objective implications and requirements of available techniques and resources as well as of optimal strategies and rules of control[The state] becomes instead the organ of thoroughly rational administration’ (1971 [1968], p. 64). What results for Habermas is a kind of mass pacification: ‘the new politics of state interventionism requires a depoliticization of the mass of the population. To the extent that practical questions are eliminated, the public realm loses its political function’ (1971 [1968], pp. 103–104). It is in contradistinction to this administered society that Habermas conceptualizes civil society:

what is meant by 'civil society' today, in contrast to its usage in the Marxist tradition, no longer includes the economy. . . . Rather, its institutional core comprises those nongovernmental and noneconomic connections and voluntary associations that anchor the communication structures of the public sphere in the society component of the life-world. Civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how social problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres. These 'discursive designs' have an egalitarian, open form of organization that mirrors essential features of the kind of communication around which they crystallize and to which they lend continuity and permanence.

(Habermas 1996, pp. 366–367)

Habermas' definition of civil society, of course, owes much to theorizations on new social movements and the so-called new politics born of the movements of the 1960s.⁴ He speaks of 'sub-institutional, extra-parliamentary forms of protest' (1981, pp. 33–34) such as the anti-nuclear and environmental movement, the peace movement, the alternative movement, minorities, youth sects, religious fundamentalism, and the women's movement. Comprised of the 'new middle class', youth, and the highly educated, these mobilizations within civil society 'defend' or 'reinstate' 'endangered life styles'. Similar to the notion of 'self-limiting revolution' among East Central European dissidents, these movements, says Habermas, 'do not seek to conquer new territory' but want to resist the supposed colonization of the life-world by the 'formal, organized spheres of action' (1981, pp. 33–34).

Habermas' ideas can be situated in the broader critique of advanced capitalism articulated by Western intellectuals as diverse as Arendt, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Kornhauser. Together with the ideas of East Central European dissidents, they have helped define the contemporary discourse on civil society, drawing the idea out of classical liberal thought and re-presenting it (quite seamlessly) as a kind of panacea to pressing political, social, and economic dilemmas of the present. Old idea that it is, from the 1970s civil society was re-invoked as a novel solution to the dilemmas faced by both socialist and capitalist nations. It is this wholly affirmative and redemptive aspect that gives the civil society idea its contemporary allure and, arguably, inoculates it against any substantive critique. But the crucial and often undervalued or ignored detail, of course, is that this narrative of civil society's contemporary revival has been presented primarily as a European and North American one when its spatial coordinates have been far

broadly. The contemporary civil society idea did not radiate outward from Europe or, even more broadly, the West. It was a spontaneous global phenomenon that unfolded also in Japan in successive iterations from the 1950s.

The Civil Society School of Japanese Marxism

Activists and dissidents in 1970s East Central Europe turned to civil society when earlier strategies of direct opposition and party reformism had failed. The constant threat of Soviet intervention in domestic politics meant that their imagination of civil society evolved *within* the framework of communist rule – hence the appearance of ideas such as ‘apolitical politics’ or ‘self-limiting revolution’. If the communist order could not be replaced then civil society might provide an alternative for structural reform from below, in a sense, bringing the people back into politics softly. Coupled with this, it appears that Adam Michnik and other dissidents did not give up on socialism as their ‘ism’ of choice, only its manifestation as state socialism (Arato 1981, p. 47, Bauman 1981, p. 54, Michnik 1981, p. 77). But such commitment aside, the historical fact is that their attempts to re-inject civil society into state socialism contributed directly to the demise of the socialist project altogether. They did not realize this at the time, of course, nor did they know that their actions were part of a wider global revival of the civil society idea begun some years before. During the 1950s and 1960s some Japanese Marxists had initiated a similar revisionist project – albeit a conceptual one – aimed at rescuing the civil society idea from Marxist historicism and repositioning it as a *positive* and *aspirational* concept.

I emphasize *positive* and *aspirational* for good reason. Until the emergence of the Civil Society School of Marxism in postwar Japan, *shimin shakai* (civil society) was understood primarily as a translation of the Hegelian-Marxian *die bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, or bourgeois (capitalist) society. For Marxists, civil society was a necessary but transitory stage from feudalism to socialism. Analysis conducted by the mainstream Lectures Faction of Japanese Marxism (the Kōza-ha) focused on the underdevelopment of civil society in Japan and the strategies necessary for its attainment and eventual transcendence. For the Kōza-ha, the lack of a civil society was indeed a problem, but civil society *per se* was never the prize. In fact, as Kevin Doak (1997, p. 291) notes, for many critics of the bureaucratic state on both the left and the right, the term *shimin shakai* had an urbane (not to mention foreign) resonance very much at odds with the ‘progressive, broad-based sense of national identity’ they envisaged for Japan. There were exceptions in the prewar years, of course. In the 1930s, for instance, Kōza-ha Marxist Hani Gorō spoke affirmatively of citizens (*shimin*) in the free cities of Renaissance Europe and, in their wartime and early postwar studies of Adam Smith, national productivity, and labor economics, Okōchi Kazuo and Takashima Zen’ya also positively conceptualized civil society.⁵ But, to borrow from Andrew Barshay, the intellectual history of civil society in Japan as a ‘self-conscious’ and ‘self-aware’

history correctly 'belongs to the postwar era' (2003, p. 65). Indeed, it was only under the new postwar constitutional regime that the establishment of a truly autonomous civil society became possible.

Two individuals tower above all others in this postwar imagination of civil society in Japan: the Marxist economists/economic historians Uchida Yoshihiko (1913–1989) and Hirata Kiyoaki (1922–1995). They were the two key intellectual architects of the Civil Society School of Japanese Marxism. Uchida's significant interventions on the topic began in the early 1950s while his colleague Hirata's began in the late 1960s. The two were important because they said something Japanese Marxists had never said before: that civil society was not a transitory historical phase but an ideal pan-historical social formation based on ethical, egalitarian human relations and economic processes anchored in prudent, sincere commercial intercourse and fair exchange for the fruits of human labor. Though related, civil society and capitalism, they argued, could be meaningfully separated, allowing the former to become a critical and ethical yardstick for evaluating the latter and, hence, a concept at the very core of Marxian ethics. Furthermore, both thinkers juxtaposed civil society against the state: for Uchida this was the absolutist and semi-feudal pre-1945 Japanese state, while for Hirata it was primarily the authoritarian communist regimes of the Soviet Bloc. Both thus saw civil society as a progressive vehicle to extricate the grip of the state on society, and for the creation of equitable relations among autonomous, ethical individuals. Both also optimistically believed that this recreation of civil society could happen *within* Marxism.

But, as with later civil society advocates in East Central Europe, their championing of individual subjectivity actually pointed to a new theory and politics of civil society and individualism beyond orthodox Marxism. Indeed, from a global-historical perspective, Uchida's and Hirata's ideas are emblematic of how the contemporary discourse on civil society emerged, in part, on an indistinct yet troubling sense among leftist intellectuals in numerous countries that Marxism in theory and practice tended to short change individual autonomy and self-realization more than it satisfied some ideal collective good.

But why civil society? Although Uchida and Hirata shared a common and unique (among Japanese Marxists) affinity for civil society, their routes to the concept differed. Put somewhat schematically, I think Uchida's thought was more deeply anchored in the intellectual-historical traditions of Kōza-ha Marxism in modern Japan – orthodoxy with a generous helping of heresy – while Hirata's thought combined Marxian hermeneutics with a critique of actually existing socialism and, hence, a bolder disjuncture from indigenous intellectual traditions.⁶ Common, of course, was their commitment to inject a positive concept of civil society into Marxism so as to rehabilitate the essential (and obscured) element of individuality. In terms of global history, I think this combination of Marxist revisionism with an uncritical faith in civil society connects their ideas most directly to the contemporary discourse worldwide.

Uchida Yoshihiko initiated the postwar discourse on civil society in the 1950s so I begin with his ideas. His rehabilitation of civil society in Marxism combined three distinctive intellectual streams: Kōza-ha Marxism, elements of postwar modernization theory, and the economic rationalism of Adam Smith and Japanese Smithian thought. In keeping with the Kōza-ha's conclusions about Japanese backwardness and incomplete modernity, Uchida (1988a [1953], p. 88) argued that, unlike England where capitalism emerged as a complete denial of feudalism, Japan had followed Prussian-style development in which capitalism retained a feudalistic base. Whereas English society had been completely infused by the law of value based on fair exchange (*ichibutsu ikka*, literally 'one product, one price') and, hence, became a truly civil society, in Japan, Germany, and other Prussian-style societies, capitalistic acquisition emerged absent this law (Uchida 1988a [1953], p. 88). For Uchida, the upshot was that Japan was undoubtedly a *capitalist* society but, lacking an ethical framework for fair economic exchange, by no means a *civil* society. Matsumoto sums up Uchida's Kōza-ha perspective best: while the Japanese had achieved 'remarkable success in modernizing their country through assimilating Western technologies and institutions', they had 'failed . . . to create a truly modern society founded on the free and equal competition and collaboration among independent citizens' (2001, p. 65). Very much a product of this Marxian tradition, Uchida could thus depict Japanese capitalism as a variety sans civil society. Of course, this conclusion hardly explains Uchida's unorthodox repositioning of civil society as an ideal, pan-historical social formation. After all, though most Japanese Marxists felt that Japan never had a civil society, it remained for them no more than a transit point, not a historical or moral destination.

The important catalyst in Uchida's case, of course, was his deep concern with individual subjectivity, traceable most directly to two influences: postwar Japanese modernization theory and Smithian economic rationalism. As Abiko Shigeo (1998, p. 52) notes, in terms of the 'intellectual magnetic field' of influence on Uchida, the Japanese modernizationists, Maruyama Masao and Ōtsuka Hisao, loom large, although neither proactively used the term *civil society* and Maruyama even intentionally avoided it. Nevertheless, Uchida's own ideas on civil society were deeply colored by many aspects of their thought. In fact, Uchida (1988b [1959], pp. 127–128) even categorized Maruyama, Ōtsuka, and others as Civil Society Youth (Shimin Shakai Seinen) to stress their theoretical break with the Marxists and their commitment to forms of individual autonomy. For Uchida it was not only the content of these intellectuals' ideas but also their ethical, learned, and urbane individualism that qualified them as civil society youth.

Maruyama Masao's preferred unit of analysis, of course, was not civil society; it was the nation (*kokumin*). He wanted to explain the psychological underpinnings for wartime ultra-nationalism in Japan which fostered state dependency and civic self-*irresponsibility* and, in order to overcome this, to formulate an ethos for healthy (i.e. democratic) postwar nationalism built on individual autonomy. But

within this framework of the nation, Maruyama – a close colleague of Uchida – clearly appreciated the democratic benefits of healthy independent associationism and a robust public sphere.⁷ After reading Tocqueville, from the mid to late 1950s, for instance, Maruyama (1996, p. 275) identified intermediate forces (*chūkan seiryoku*) as an effective resistance to forms of absolutism, fascism, and totalitarianism.⁸ He lauded the famous Meirokusha group of the Meiji period as an exemplar of political critique emanating from beyond the sphere of politics (Maruyama 1996, p. 83, Tsuzuki 2003, p. 73). Around the time of the US–Japan security treaty crisis in 1959–1960, Maruyama (1996, p. 38) confidently declared that democracy depended on the 'political interest of non-political citizens' or, in contemporary civil society parlance, political activism by individuals and groups not seeking power within the state. Uchida shared none of Maruyama's faith in the nation, of course, but Maruyama's ideas on democratic ethos and action made it possible for him to superimpose a psychological problematic onto the class-based conclusions of the Kōza-ha.

Ōtsuka Hisao, another high-profile modernization theorist of the early postwar years, offered Uchida what Maruyama did not: a theoretical discourse on the link between pure economic activity and modern consciousness. A passionate Weberian, Ōtsuka lionized early capitalist society and the so-called independent producing stratum (*dokuritsu seisanshasō*) of the British Industrial Revolution. Their economic activity, he argued, produced a rationalization of the human mind and, in turn, a 'modern type of human' (*kindaiteki ningen ruikei*) (Ōtsuka 1964a, 1964b). For Ōtsuka (1964b, pp. 99–106), this strongly self-reliant 'Robinson Crusoe type of human' (*Robinson Kurūsō no ningen ruikei*) occupied the center stage of modernity with his thrift, meticulousness, secular asceticism, and capacity to create the world. Ōtsuka thus offered Uchida a vision of civil society in which ethical, self-assured, modern individuals engaged in pure and equitable economic exchange. Maruyama's message was similar, of course, but Ōtsuka helped Uchida by shifting the discourse on ethos and action away from politics to the domain of microeconomic activity.

The final and, in many ways, decisive influence on Uchida's conceptualization of civil society was the thought of Adam Smith. Drawing on Smithian economic rationalism, Uchida posited not socialism or modernity but civil society as the solution for his country – an intellectual operation dissidents and intellectuals in other countries would perform only much later. Surveying the intellectual history of modern Japan, Uchida concluded that, while the country did indeed possess a tradition of liberal thought, it had been expressed primarily in literary (psychological) and Rousseauian (political) terms and lacked an economic aspect. Japanese liberal thinkers, he concluded, concentrated on political questions of rights and duties as well as more esoteric matters of the modern ego (*kindaiteki jiga*) but neglected bourgeois rationalist thought like that of Adam Smith (Uchida 1988b, pp. 67–68). This he understood as a consequence of the Japanese state which became so immediately powerful after the 1868 revolution that there was really

no time for liberal thought to fully mature before having to coexist with socialism which came to dominate economic thought (Uchida 1988b [1967], pp. 300–301). Beginning in the 1940s and stretching into the postwar era, however, Uchida identified the seeds of change in the ideas of Ōtsuka Hisao, Ōkōchi Kazuo, Takashima Zen'ya, and, though he did not say as much, himself (Uchida 1988b, pp. 44–45, 68–69, 301). Ōkōchi and Takashima, in particular, were committed Smithians and hence, in one way or another, had stressed the link between economic activity and the development of the ethical human being. Takashima, for example, concluded from Smith that human sympathy or empathy (*dōkan*) grew not only from an innate sense of benevolence or justice but also in the process of economic interactions with others. In other words, it was in one's own self-interest to be prudent in business dealings and, by its very nature, prudence demanded that one recognize (i.e. empathize with) the situation of others (Takashima 1998, pp. 105, 107). Ōkōchi Kazuo came to the same conclusion in the 1940s, arguing that Smithian empathy was not about ethicizing the altruistic instinct but, conversely, a procedure for ethicizing the principle of self-interest in civil society.⁹

In the work of Smith, Ōkōchi, and Takashima, then, Uchida identified a non-literary, non-psychological, economic basis for liberal thought in Japan through which he could idealize the civil society idea by contrasting it with capitalism where fair exchange yielded to alienation and exploitation. Similar to East Central European dissidents, Uchida's refashioning of the civil society idea marked a profound revision of the orthodox Marxist position – what might be characterized as the de-Marxianization, de-historicization, and de-Westernization of the idea.¹⁰ The important point, of course, is that Uchida's theoretical refashioning does not seem to have included any rigorous assessment of civil society itself. On the contrary, through an intriguing fusion of Marxist and liberal utopianism, Uchida concluded that the contradictions of capitalism would precipitate a socialist revolution which, in turn, would open the way for a truly civil society – a triumphant marriage of Marx and Smith, as it were.

To get a handle on Uchida's wholly unorthodox position it is necessary to recognize the way he disaggregated capitalism into civil society on the one hand and actually existing capitalism on the other, explaining the former (positively) in terms of Smithian economic rationalism and the latter (negatively) in terms of orthodox Marxism. Among class-based societies throughout history, Uchida explained in his 1953 classic, *Keizaigaku no seitan* (*The birth of economics*), only under pure capitalism were laborers both the embodiment and the full legal owners of their commodity (i.e. labor). For this reason, capitalism – at least in its abstract, ideal form – represented an evolution from a more or less constrained society to a free civil society (*jiyū na shimin shakai*) – a society of citizens (*shimin no shakai*). What made this civil society unique were its guiding principles: the equality of all citizens before the law, the freedom of all persons to dispose of their own property through economic activity and respect for the individual through recognition of exclusive individual dominion over private property (Uchida 1988a,

p. 181). As Uchida explained in the early 1960s, what made civil society qualitatively different from actually existing capitalism (especially Japanese capitalism) was not capitalistic acquisition itself since this happened in both social formations. In a civil society, however, acquisition proceeded on the basis of fair exchange (*ichibutsu ikka*) and earnings were based on ability (*nōryoku*), whereas in actually existing capitalism connections and status prevailed (Uchida 1988b, p. 78). Disaggregating capitalism, then, made it possible for Uchida to re-employ civil society as an abstract, pan-historical yardstick by which to critique actually existing capitalism – in a sense extracting civil society from Marxist historicism, substituting it for the pure communist utopia, and all the while maintaining a Marxian critique of capitalism (Uchida 1988b, p. 84). Uchida's creative theorizations here certainly allowed him to advocate civil society while remaining personally committed to proletarian revolution. But, similarly to later dissidents in East Central Europe, by re-conceptualizing civil society beyond the depreciatory Marxist vision of a space shot through with contradictions, Uchida was also unwittingly contributing to the uncritical resurrection and glorification of the civil society idea – not to mention the destruction of orthodox Marxism.

Uchida's colleague, Hirata Kiyoaki, intervened similarly but, as I noted earlier, his discovery of civil society in the 1960s owed less to the mainstream Marxist critique of Japanese backwardness than it did to his hermeneutical project to uncover a positive individualism in Marxist theory, and to his growing disapprobation for actually existing socialist regimes. In his influential and controversial 1969 work, *Shimin shakai to shakaishugi* (*Civil society and socialism*), Hirata lashed out at fellow Marxists, complaining that only in the 'world of Marxist-Leninist jargon' did *civil society* mean *capitalist society*. Theorists in this 'vulgar world', he argued, overlooked Marx's real intent; they failed see civil society as a social formation in which citizens mutually engaged in commerce as free and equal legal subjects (Hirata 1969, p. 79). As a corrective, Hirata embarked on a hermeneutical re-discovery of civil society in Marxism, so as to 'recover (*kaifuku*) that which had been lost' and 'take a first step toward reviving (*saisei*) a proper understanding of society and history in Marx' (Hirata 1969, p. 51). Or, put simply, through analysis of the original texts, Hirata hoped to prove that Marxism contained a positive perspective on civil society.

As with Uchida, Hirata (1969, pp. 53, 56, 81) understood civil society not as a historical moment before capitalism but as an ideal social formation based on 'civic commerce' (*shiminteki kōtsū*) among 'equal owners of property' who shared a 'common civic relationship' (*dōshimin kankei*). This civic commerce (*shiminteki kōtsū*) encompassed not only the material exchange of commodities but also – and importantly – a spiritual commerce (*seishinteki kōtsū*) in which individuals mutually recognized others as autonomous human beings (*jiritsuteki na ningen toshite*), much like Adam Ferguson's 'fellow feeling' or Maruyama Masao's 'sense of other' (*tasha kankaku*) (Hirata 1969, p. 81). As Hirata (1969, p. 57) explained, egalitarian economic activity in civil society was as much about self-realization

or ‘self acquisition of the individual’ (*kotai no jiko kakutoku*) as it was about the acquisition of material things. Indeed, Hirata (1969, p. 146) openly lamented that no such positive concept of individuation had developed in Asian thought where the individual was either tightly bonded to an asphyxiating community or derided as the selfish pursuer of individual profit. The individual of civil society for Hirata, however, was somewhere in between – and all the better for it.

Needless to say, Hirata’s lionization of civic freedom and individuality reads more like a tract from classical liberalism than a manifesto for class struggle. Some later critics (Watanabe 2009, pp. 57, 59) have even accused him of harboring a ‘concealed ideology’ or ‘fantasy’ (*yume*) of individualism and a vision of ‘individual liberty bereft of solidarity’ (*rentai nuki no kotaiteki jiyū*). True, no doubt, especially when viewed through a doctrinaire Marxist lens. But, like Uchida, for all his commitment to individualism, Hirata endeavored to stay faithful to Marx, preferring theoretical modification to apostatical revolt. The results were mixed, at best.

According to Hirata, modernization in Marx was a dual process, involving a struggle between feudal and civic modes of production on the one hand and a simultaneous mutation (*tenpen*) of civil society into capitalism on the other. Due to the vagaries of the modern market, capital ownership tended to concentrate in the hands of a few while the majority was rendered into a proletarian class, alienated from its productive output. Hirata (1969, pp. 59, 70, 109) explained this alienation as a mutation from the individual ownership (*kotaiteki shoyū*) of an open civil society to the private ownership (*shiteki shoyū*) of exclusivist capitalist society. Hirata’s important modification of Marx was that capitalism, because of private ownership, represented a debased or corrupted manifestation of the ideal state of civil society. So unlike Marx, or even Hegel, for Hirata civil society never existed as a historical moment because, at the point of feudalism’s expiry, capitalistic logic intervened. Or, as Hirata explained, ‘the actual social formation’ unfolded as ‘an incessant transmutation of civil society, the primary social formation, into capitalist society, the secondary social formation’ (1969, p. 52).

Hirata’s disaggregation of civil society and capitalism mirrored Uchida, especially his vision of a historical dénouement wherein civil society and communism became one. Following orthodox Marxism, Hirata accepted that capitalism would produce communism as its own self-denial. But, not only would this process result in the ‘reconstruction of community’ destroyed by modernity, significantly it would make individual ownership ‘real’ (*shinjitsuka*) by ‘unifying’ (*tōitsu*) it with collective ownership (Hirata 1969, p. 70). The stage of communism would be one at which the elements of civil society were ‘completely sublimated’ (*subete yōki shiteiru*) (Hirata 1969, p. 72). It is important to grasp Hirata’s point here because, in the context of orthodox Marxism, his utopian conclusions were both theoretically heretical and logically problematic. Hirata, like Uchida and East Central European dissidents, lifted civil society from history and attributed it a

pan-historical import. But he went further, positing that the collectivist communist society of the future would also be a civil society of individual owners. Needless to say, not only was a marriage between civil society and communism theoretical heresy, logically it was and is a very difficult reality to comprehend. After all, the balance between individual and collective rights is a key ideological cleavage between liberalism and communism, and one that Hirata never adequately addressed. Theoretical and logical inconsistencies aside, however, through an idiosyncratic rereading of Marx, Hirata managed to detach the civil society idea from orthodox Marxist historicism, anchoring it in a vision of liberated human subjectivity and the idyllic 'communist' civil society of the future.

But, unlike Uchida who saw civil society remedying Japanese backwardness, for Hirata, civil society represented a 'revolutionary' solution to the totalitarian proclivities of actually existing socialism. In this sense – and even more than Uchida – Hirata shared a direct affinity with later civil society dissidents in East Central Europe. After witnessing the optimism of the Prague Spring and its devastation in the Soviet invasion of August 1968, Hirata began to eulogize the individualism which had undergirded the abortive reformism of Czechoslovakian communists. He noted how the official code of conduct of the Czech communists presented socialism as both a process of proletarian liberation and *also* an opportunity for the complete development of individuality (*kotaisei o kanzen ni hakki suru ōkina kanōsei*) (Hirata 1969, p. 295). It was a one-dimensional class-based reading of history, he argued, that obscured the fundamental essence of socialism as a rehabilitation (*fukken*) of individuality. Czech party reformism for Hirata (1969, pp. 295–296) was no less than a historical attempt to 'recombine' (*seiketsugō*) 'civic freedom' (*shiminteki jiyū*) with socialism, becoming a reaffirmation of human dignity and human character. At the very core of such reformism, Hirata (1969, p. 296) asserted, was an issue of world historical import: namely, the brutal hegemony of state-led communism and the tragic estrangement of civil society from socialism. Like Uchida, Hirata envisaged the solution in terms of a rehabilitation of civil society within socialism but, with the perspective of hindsight, it is obvious Hirata – albeit unconsciously and unintentionally – was doing far more than this. By reviving the civil society idea through an unorthodox classical-liberal rereading of Marx, both Uchida and Hirata became part of an assault on Marxism *from within* that would result in a theoretical and practical crisis on the left of global dimensions in the 1970s and 1980s. The great irony, of course, was that this assault on Marxism unfolded through a largely uncritical glorification of civil society – the initial critique paradoxically precipitated the later retreat of criticality.

Matsushita Keiichi: restoring civil society from mass society

While Uchida's and Hirata's ideas on and idealization of civil society anticipated and resonated with those of anti-communist dissidents in East Central Europe, it

was the political theorist and scholar of John Locke, Matsushita Keiichi (1929–), who from the 1950s outlined a liberal theory of civil society and a critique of advanced capitalism comparable to the theorizations of Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, and William Kornhauser. In terms of sheer intellectual stature, of course, Maruyama Masao comes to mind first as the giant of liberal thought in postwar Japan. Maruyama's ideas on civic ethos and political participation, for instance, clearly resonate with Habermas' concept of the public sphere. But, unlike his German contemporary, Maruyama never articulated a positive theory of civil society, directing his attention to the nation and nationalism instead. Or, put differently, I suggest that, although Maruyama was a civil society thinker, to the extent he avoided the term, he was not a civil society theorist. For the latter, it is necessary to consider Maruyama's student Matsushita, who not only developed the civil society idea in political theory but also extended it into the realms of public administration and civic political participation – going much further than even Western theorists.

Before discussing Matsushita's theorizations, recall again the ideas of his global contemporaries such as Habermas, Arendt, and Kornhauser. For the latter two, the rise of mass society destroyed civil society and associationalism, opening the way for individual alienation and social pathologies like fascism. Habermas saw a similar degeneration – or 'structural transformation' – of the public sphere caused by an intentional de-politicization of the populace by technocrats and a corporate colonization of daily life. Habermas has portrayed civil society as a stronghold from which to recover the original aspirations of the Enlightenment and put the project of modernity back on track.

The similarities between Habermas and Matsushita are striking, especially the way both saw (and continue to see) the economic and political transformations of modernity crippling the development of civil society. Similar to Habermas – and *contra* Uchida and Hirata – from his earliest writings on the idea in the 1950s, Matsushita conceptualized civil society as an actual historical formation which, after two negative 'structural transformations', collapsed.¹¹ Drawing heavily on John Locke, in the late 1950s Matsushita (1994, p. 28, 1959, 90) defined civil society as the stage of early capitalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries based on 'relations of pure commodity exchange' among 'small independent producers' who consented to a social contract subjugating their natural human desires.

The civil society stage did not last long, however, according to Matsushita. The formation of a proletarian class in the ensuing phase of industrial capitalism marked the 'first denial' or 'bankruptcy' of civil society for Matsushita (1994, p. 29) because it implicitly undermined the principle of the free, equal, and independent individual in civil society. Matsushita (1994, p. 29) could only agree with Marx's depiction of the proletariat as a class representing a 'complete loss of humanity' and, hence, opposed to an embourgeoised civil society. In the late 1950s, Matsushita was quite sympathetic to the socialist project, but, rather than

trying to fashion a positive vision of civil society within Marxism as Uchida and Hirata had, as a fervent liberal he argued that Marxism should, in fact, be reconceptualized as a subcomponent of the more universal theory of liberalism. As he explained in 1959, the 'categorical structure' of socialism actually inherited the problem of 'state' versus 'individual' of liberal political theory. Only the terms had been changed, with the 'state' becoming the 'bourgeois state' and the 'individual' becoming the 'proletarian individual' (Matsushita 1959, p. 418). Matsushita (1959, p. 419) even claimed to have identified a concept of civil society in the *Communist manifesto*, citing Marx and Engels' claim therein that 'in the place of the old bourgeois society with its class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the *free* development of *each* is the condition for the *free* development of *all*'. In short, Marxism was all about provoking a qualitative transformation from bourgeois civil society to proletarian civil society and, in this sense, represented no more than a theory of liberalism calibrated to the demands of industrial capitalism (Matsushita 1959, p. 419).

But herein lay the deficiency of Marxism for Matsushita. The rise of monopoly capitalism in the twentieth century produced a major structural transformation in which the working class was gradually replaced by the anesthetized masses of a mass society – what Matsushita saw as the second denial of civil society. With the rise of new technologies, the mass media, mass production, and mass consumption, Matsushita argued that the majority of the population was proletarianized and a new middle mass created. The technocratic state, in concert with corporate elites, worked to pacify these masses through the establishment of welfare policies and formal yet ineffectual mechanisms for political involvement such as universal suffrage. As a result, individuals lost their sense of horizontal solidarity and their right to resist. As atomized and alienated humans they were 'adapted', 'made passive', and reincorporated into the embrace of the state by technocrats who cultivated a consciousness of mass nationalism and a sense of subjectivity – actually a *pseudo-subjectivity* – within the state (Matsushita 1994, p. 40). Not only was the rise of this mass society a denial of civil society for Matsushita then, it also signaled the bankruptcy of orthodox Marxist theory which had wrongly predicted that the contradictions of capitalism would precipitate a socialist revolution. Quite the contrary: monopoly capitalism seemed to numb any popular sense of inequity.

What then of the solution? Matsushita believed that, although proletarian consciousness had failed, civic consciousness would not. Inspired by the massive civic protests of the late 1950s and early 1960s in Japan, he concluded that a new associationalism and a rediscovery of civic freedom promised a way out of mass society into a truly civil society. Unlike Arendt and Kornhauser, Matsushita did not see mass society as a social-psychological pathology born from political apathy, individual irrationality, or consumerist hedonism. On the contrary, like Habermas, he saw such phenomena as the outcome of a structural transformation engineered from above by technocrats and capitalists.¹² Rather than imported ideologies of revolution, it would be the responsibility of the masses themselves

to foment a revolutionary ideology from below by reviving their ‘forgotten right of resistance’ (Matsushita 1969, pp. 186, 191). To this end, Matsushita (1994, p. 59) imagined ‘independent’ or ‘free’ associations (*jishu shūdan*, *jīyūna shūdan*, *asoshieishon*) as the important training grounds for civic freedom and political activism, functioning as ‘kernels of resistance against the establishment’. In as much as they empowered citizens to resist modern alienation, Matsushita believed such associations inherited the values of an earlier civil society opposed to the state. They were for him a contemporary manifestation of a civil society built around spontaneous individual associationalism (Matsushita 1969, p. 218).

Uchida and Hirata, as I have shown, turned to civil society out of a frustration – shared with East Central European dissidents – toward Marxist theory and state socialism. Matsushita, however, envisaged the regeneration of civil society as a process of overcoming the alienation and atomization of mass society and revitalizing civic consciousness and spontaneous associationalism. In this sense, he shares a close affinity with Habermas and others who have similarly eulogized civil society as a stronghold from which to defend the ‘lifeworld’ from the ravages of advanced capitalism. Nevertheless, although Matsushita was not a Marxist, he shares at least two similarities with Uchida and Hirata. First, Matsushita’s theorizing on civil society from the 1950s put him at the very forefront of the contemporary revival of the idea worldwide. Second, the celebratory and uncritical tone of his theorizing similarly implicated him in what I characterize as the retreat of criticality *vis-à-vis* the civil society idea.

The Gramscian revolution

The third, contemporary iteration of Japanese civil society discourse coincides with the full flowering of the civil society idea worldwide beginning around the late 1980s. In fact, ‘full flowering’ is probably too neat a characterization, since the discourse of late often seems more like an overwhelming cacophony of postulations and declarations than any structured unfolding. Frustrated with the noise, theorist Frank Trentmann has even complained that civil society is ‘everywhere’ these days, ‘so much so, that, like a gas, it is difficult to grasp’ (2000, p. 5). Mindful of this theoretical diversity, however, it is possible to identify some broad discursive trends of which the Japanese discourse has been a constitutive part.

In an important 1993 article, Krishan Kumar (1993, p. 389) pointed to the influence of Gramscian thought on recent imaginations of civil society, especially the strong belief among some reconstructed Marxists and New Left progressives that expanding civil society (narrowly defined as anti-state and anti-market movements) and making the state smaller and less powerful will mean greater freedom for all.¹³ Contrary to recent invocations of his ideas, of course, Gramsci was more interested in how the state actually establishes its hegemony over society not through coercion but by forging consent through engagement with various institutions and groups in civil society. Although Gramsci recognized the

possibilities for challenging state hegemony from within civil society, he did not see it as inherently opposed to the state as some recent Gramscian civil society proponents imply. Indeed, as Buttigieg notes, Gramsci's seminal *Prison notebooks* contains detailed descriptions of how civil society can 'sustain and reinforce the hegemonic State' (2005, p. 44). Nevertheless, the so-called Gramscian-incarnation of contemporary civil society theory (widespread, I would add) has focused less on the mechanism of state hegemony formation through civil society and more on the idea of civil society as a resolutely progressive space for grassroots movements to defend freedom and democracy from the state and the market.

Particularly prevalent in these recent 'activist'-inspired (Kaldor 2003, p. 8) theorizations is a triangulated concept in which civil society counterbalances and resists both the state and the market. Jürgen Habermas' vision of grassroots groups resisting the colonization of daily life by technocracies and corporations is among the more high-profile examples of this position. But this activist vision of civil society also finds voice, for example, in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's neo-Gramscian call for a 'new left-wing hegemonic project' structured around not class but a 'chain of equivalence' (2001, p. xviii) among subordinated groups. It also appears in a more mannered, less contentious form, in theories on the new social movements advocated by scholars such as Clause Offe (1987).

Not all recent advocates imagine the state-civil-society-market nexus in contentious terms, of course. Cohen and Arato (1992, p. 493), Ehrenberg (1999, pp. 235, 238–239) and Diamond (1999, p. 221), for example, see both tension and reciprocity and, in this sense, come closer to Gramsci's original concept of civil society. As Ehrenberg explains, 'it is not enough to say civil society serves democracy only if it sustains political opposition, for there are too many examples of state-supported associations that have served plurality, facilitated voluntary activity, and encouraged equality' (1999, pp. 238–239). British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1998, pp. 79, 165) similarly identifies civil society as an integral aspect of so-called third way politics. Simply opposing the state and market is a mistake, he says; required instead is cooperative relations between state and civil society, coupled with community revitalization, a dynamic third sector, and protection of localities. The so-called neo-Tocquevillians or neo-communitarians echo this imagination of civil society as a creative as opposed to contentious or destructive space.¹⁴ In the neo-Tocquevillian civil society, active participation in civic associations and local community becomes the crucial element for revitalizing advanced societies ravaged by contemporary mass culture, consumerism, and narrow interest-based politics. As Berman explains, 'contemporary neo-Tocquevillians praise associational life for its effects on the way individuals relate to each other and their society; in particular, they see participation in civil society organizations as producing the patterns of individual behavior and social interaction necessary for healthy democratic governance' (1997, p. 564).

So where do Japanese civil society thinkers fit in to this now-crowded theoretical landscape? Similarly to in Europe and North America, I think we can identify strong Gramscian and neo-communitarian strains of civil society thought in Japan from the late 1980s, certainly due to intensive intellectual import by Japanese scholars but also a product of indigenous intellectual developments. Hirata Kiyooki once again led the way – both in Japan and globally – by focusing attention away from orthodox Marxism and on to the Gramscian vision of civil society. This was an important personal intellectual transformation for Hirata: recall how in the 1960s he had argued that civil society *did* not and *could* not actually exist because it was always transmuted into something else. With the infusion of Gramsci, however, civil society became something more concrete for him during the 1980s, a progressive stronghold from which to defend the individual from the state and capitalism. In a fittingly titled 1987 volume, *Gendai shimin shakai no senkai* (*The revolution of contemporary civil society*), Hirata (1987, p. 8) explained that, for Gramsci, civil society was not merely an ‘aggregation’ of materialistic economic relationships (i.e. the Smithian view), but a space for ‘social production’ and ‘daily life relations’ and hence in a ‘tense relationship’ with the ‘legal-political superstructure’. He argued that the rise of ‘non-parliamentary’ forms of corporatism (i.e. processes of state hegemony formation) in developed nations demanded the construction of a civil society based on resistance and renewal. Similarly to Habermas and New Social Movement (NSM) theorists, Hirata said that movements in this civil society would be *pluriclassiste*, transnational, and beyond or outside the traditional sites of production. He pointed to ‘spatial vitalization movements’ (*kūkan kasseika undō*) in civil society such as environmental movements, women’s liberation, and consumer cooperatives as concrete attempts both to halt the ‘reification’ (commodification) of daily life and to resist the incorporation of various social, cooperative, and public functions into state functions (Hirata 1987, pp. 25–26). In hindsight, Hirata’s discovery of Gramsci makes sense and appears almost inevitable because this neo-Marxist theory provided him and many other dedicated Marxists worldwide with a soft landing pad when the socialist project disintegrated and their ethical and conceptual worlds fell apart.

Sakamoto Yoshikazu, political scientist and stalwart of progressive politics in postwar Japan, is highly representative of this post-1980s Gramscian strain of civil society discourse in Japan which builds on the ideas of Hirata and other neo-Marxists.¹⁵ Sakamoto argues that, with the collapse of the bipolar Cold War framework, we have moved into an ‘age of relativization’ (*sōtaika no jidai*) or ‘multipolarizing historical change’ (1997, p. 37). In this new age, he says, the powerful spheres of the market and state will be relativized by the growing power of civil society. Processes of administration and commodification will be kept in check by a civil society based on the ‘humanization’ of social relations and historical processes (Sakamoto 1997, p. 42). Echoing Habermas, Hirata, and other ‘activist’ civil society theorists, Sakamoto flatly rejects any attempt to treat civil society as

an analytical concept, arguing that it is a space for 'active citizens' who 'construct and support human relations and a society based on human dignity and mutual recognition of equal rights' (1997, p. 43). Sakamoto's (1997, pp. 44, 46) concept is resolutely normative: he excludes not only 'bad' movements (fundamentalist, racist, fascist, nationalist) but also movements with any affinity toward the state or market. Indeed, he asserts that civil society is (and must be) against the state and market and that, in order to be legitimately part of civil society, movements must maintain a tense and oppositional relationship with these institutions. So, as much as Sakamoto welcomes the relativization of a post-Cold War world, he remains committed to a rigid and rather doctrinaire understanding of civil society that eschews a more nuanced, 'postmodern' conceptualization of it as 'an arena of pluralism and contestation, a source of incivility as well as civility' (Kaldor 2003, p. 9, Sakamoto 1997, p. 52). In this sense, he also contributes to the retreat of criticality *vis-à-vis* the idea.

Yamaoka Yoshinori, city planning specialist, longtime supporter of civic activism, and prominent advocate of regulatory reforms in the 1990s, presents a more complex vision of the new civil society (*atarashii shimin shakai*) in Japan, incorporating neoliberal, neo-communitarian, and nationalistic elements. He sees Japan's new civil society in the context of two separate – but not necessarily unrelated – processes: a national crisis in the 1990s and a longer, global-historical transformation beginning in the latter twentieth century. Nationally and most directly, Yamaoka (1998, p. 3) describes Japan's new civil society as a response to the 'anxiety' and 'confusion' of the 1990s precipitated by economic recession, political tumult, bureaucratic corruption, and the degradation of corporate ethics. In this context, new civil society has emerged as the historical vehicle by which Japan will shed its hierarchical, bureaucratic past to become a fully 'mature society' (*seijuku shakai*) (Yamaoka 1998, p. 4). On a global-historical level, Yamaoka sees Japan's new civil society as part of a non-Western remedy to the evils of 'modern civil society' (*kindai shimin shakai*) – a social formation which he says was born in the civic revolutions of the West, consolidated in the modern nation-state, fully realized in the industrial revolution, fortified by colonialism, and responsible for the 'usurpation of half the globe' (1998, p. 4). Conversely, the new (good? better?) civil society rejects 'Western civic principles' (which he clearly sees as a kind of pseudo-universal facade for Western domination) for a culturally embedded civic consciousness imbued with the principle of mutual respect for difference (Yamaoka 1998, p. 4). Citizens of these new civil societies of the world will naturally look outwards, 'to the globe', producing 'open societies' that combine into a 'global civil society' of self-responsible, empathetic citizens (Yamaoka 1998, p. 5).

On the surface, Yamaoka's romantic vision shares much in common with Sakamoto and advocates of civil society as space for progressive activism and global community building. But it also contains a disturbing undercurrent: by opposing new civil society to a demonized trio of the Japanese state, capitalism, and the West, it also draws on a much longer and troubled tradition of

leftist nationalism in the country which has attributed the deterioration of ethnic community to the intrusive impact of modernity manifested most broadly in Western global hegemony and, closer to home, in the Japanese bureaucracy and the corporate sector.¹⁶ But, unlike many left nationalists of the past who, intoxicated by ideologies of ethnic liberation, rejected so-called bourgeois, Western civil society for Japan's 'world historical' mission in Asia, Yamaoka, Sakamoto, and others dress their anti-Western ethnic national assumptions in the contemporary language of a new, professionalized, global civil society. Yamaoka (1998, p. 6), for instance, sees the revitalization and strengthening of community not in a revival of the old commune but in a greater individual self-responsibility – or, as he puts it, individual aspiration (*kojin no kokorozashi*) – and a thoroughgoing professionalization and marketization of the civic sector. Supporting Yamaoka's new civil society is the non-profit organization (NPO), an incorporated (i.e. legally legitimate), financially self-sustaining, contemporary rendition of community tasked with the provision of services which the state and market cannot or will not provide. With its originality, pluralism, criticality, and humanity, the NPO for Yamaoka is an 'extremely outstanding mechanism for converting human aspirations into social energy' (1998, p. 8). Indeed, in Yamaoka's upbeat vision of a new civil society of NPOs, we arrive at the apex of a contemporary discourse in Japan in which phases of Marxist revisionism, liberalism, Gramscianism, and left nationalism have not only revived the idea but also affixed to it an almost sacred aura of virtuousness, self-reliance, and moral purpose.

Conclusion: civil society in Japan, lessons for the world?

The history of the civil society idea in postwar Japan undermines the popular narrative of a conceptual revival beginning in Europe and America in the 1970s and thereafter spreading throughout the world. On the contrary, Japanese theorists were thinking and writing about civil society from as early as the 1950s, making them pioneers (not followers) in a contemporaneous global process. Like East Central European dissidents and Western intellectuals, Japanese theorists looked to civil society for solutions to both the theoretical and practical crises in Marxism and the predicaments of advanced capitalist societies. But into these they infused a distinctive national objective. The country's recent experience with militarism and ultra-nationalism convinced them that Japan desperately needed an autonomous, self-responsible, and politically empowered citizenry, and a realm of egalitarian, modern, associational life beyond the reach of the state. It was the fusion of these global *problématiques* and national aspirations that invigorated Japanese civil society thought and made its theorists pioneers.

This history warrants telling for a number of reasons. First, as I have argued, narrating Japanese civil society thought in a contemporaneous global history not only relativizes an erstwhile Western-centric story, but it also de-particularizes Japanese thought, repositioning it in a global theoretical discussion. Or, put simply, global history becomes more truly global and national history less insular and

parochial. But it does more than this. The trajectory of civil society thought in postwar Japan graphically illustrates the risks of optimistically venerating novel strategies which promise to transcend or thoroughly resolve problems bequeathed by bankrupt ideologies of the past. At the very broadest level, civil society thought in postwar Japan has unfolded as a process of de-Marxianization, by which I mean the civil society concept has been detached from its largely pejorative status in orthodox Marxism and rearticulated – quite uncritically – as a positive, aspirational concept. In one rendition it has been rearticulated in neo-Marxian ('Gramscian') terms as an effective opponent – even enemy – of the state and market, while in another, neo-communitarian rendition it emerges not so much in opposition to the state and market but as a restorer of authentic human values and relations destroyed by these institutions.

Common in both renditions, however, is the almost complete disappearance of the earlier critique and/or suspicion of civil society, replaced now by idealized, normative visions. The so-called Gramscian vision, by opposing 'good' civil society to 'bad' state and market, fails to see (as Gramsci, in fact, did) how civil society might also act as the 'glue' or 'cement' stabilizing political or socio-economic inequalities.¹⁷ Furthermore, the focus on creating and defending an alternative 'life-world' in the Habermasian-NSM vision of civil society advocated by Sakamoto tends to shift attention away from more crucial sites of struggle such as the workplace and the formal political sphere. Because he subscribes to a rigidly normative definition, Sakamoto also fails to recognize how a civil society opposed to the state and market and committed to the creation of an alternative realm might, paradoxically, come to complement and/or supplement the neoliberal state. The same paradox is evident in the neo-communitarian rendition of civil society advocated by Yamaoka Yoshinori, but, even more worryingly, here the complementary aspect of civil society is often justified on the basis of narrow ethnic national assumptions: what has made Japan weak is a disproportionately strong state which, in the end, is really just a Japanese institutional manifestation of Western domination. Japanese neo-communitarians like Yamaoka seem completely oblivious to the ways anti-Western ethnic nationalism on the left has constantly hindered the development of a robustly autonomous civil society throughout modern Japanese history. It is no small irony then that contemporary articulations of a 'new civil society' transcending the Japanese state and market tend to replicate rather than overcome these earlier pathologies of the left.

But the unwillingness of contemporary civil society theorists in Japan to articulate a sincere and substantive critique of civil society or to even recognize that civil society warrants critique is not a uniquely *Japanese* problem. These days, the uncritical presentation of civil society as a panacea for an astounding array of social, political, and environmental issues is pervasive worldwide. And, in this connection, the Japanese experience might contain lessons for civil society advocates everywhere. After all, the history of the civil society idea in contemporary Japan is essentially one in which a revived concept was used to renovate, if not replace, a dilapidated and waning revolutionary ideology. Significantly, whether they

were revisionist Marxists, Lockean liberals, Gramscians, or neo-communitarians, contemporary civil society revivalists in Japan defined, lionized, and indeed sanctified this idea with almost no scrutiny or critique of the idea itself. Ironically, this absence of self-critique has arguably made the civil society idea all the more receptive (i.e. co-optable) to the *problématiques*, institutions, and social pathologies it is supposed to keep in check or overcome. In its contemporary rendition in Japan, in other words, celebrating civil society as a flawless solution rather than treating it as an object of dispassionate analysis has left the idea exceedingly vulnerable to neoliberal ideologies of self-reliance, parochial discourses on ethnic-national community, and naïve phobias about corporate and technocratic manipulation. Paradoxically, in an era when Japan is no longer ‘number one’ and the country seemingly has nothing left to ‘teach’, this history of the retreat of criticality may represent one of Japan’s most valuable lessons for the contemporary world.

Notes

1. See Kumar (1993, pp. 375–376), Ehrenberg (1999: x), Trentmann (2000, p. 5), Chiba (2001, p. 12), Yamaguchi (2004, p. 2) and Yoshida (2005, p. 17).
2. In English, Barshay (2003), Carver *et al.* (2000) and Keane (1998) all recognize this early postwar discourse on civil society in Japan.
3. Harootunian makes a similar case for 1920s Japan, speaking of a ‘co-eval’ modernity which involves ‘contemporaneity’ with ‘the possibility of difference’ (2000, pp. xvi–xvii).
4. On the new social movements, see Offe (1987) and Habermas (1981).
5. See Tsuzuki (1995, pp. 23–34, 2003, pp. 55–56).
6. Sugiyama (2001, p. 78) makes a similar point.
7. For the debate on civil society in Maruyama’s thought, see Hiraishi (2003, pp. 176–190) and Ishida (2005, pp. 150–181).
8. Also see Tsuzuki (2003, pp. 69–73).
9. Ōkōchi’s comment is reproduced in Tsuzuki (1995, p. 26).
10. Carver *et al.* (2000, p. 547) make a similar point.
11. Like Habermas, Matsushita (1994 [1956]: 18, 19) used the term ‘structural transformation’: *kōzō tenkan, keitai tenka*.
12. See Yamada (2004, pp. 116, 200) on this point.
13. Kumar (1993) and Berman (1997) both disagree, arguing that a weak state and strong civil society may actually be deleterious for liberal democracies.
14. See Putnam (1993, 1995), Bellah *et al.* (1995) and Ehrenberg (1999, ch. 8).
15. Shinohara (2004) is another example.
16. See Najita and Harootunian (1988).
17. Fujita (2005, p. 157) makes a similar point.

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Simon Avenell is an Associate Professor in Japanese Studies at the National University of Singapore. His interests include civil society, volunteerism, environmentalism, and political thought in contemporary Japan. Recent publications include *Making Japanese citizens: civil society and the mythology of the Shimin in postwar Japan* (University of California Press, 2010) and 'Facilitating spontaneity: the state and independent volunteering in contemporary Japan' (*Social Science Japan Journal*, 13 (1), 2010). He is currently conducting research for a monograph on environmentalism in contemporary Japan. He can be contacted at jpssaa@nus.edu.sg