

Multiple Modernities: Reflections on the Japanese Experience

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MULTIPLE MODERNITIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE JAPANESE EXPERIENCE

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The following discussion will first deal with different comparative approaches to the modern phase of Japanese history, and then move on to consider the underlying conceptions and criteria of modernity; it will finish with some tentative directions for further comparative analysis. It should be noted that the three successive strategies of comparison, summarized below, are neither mutually exclusive nor limited to the historical conjunctures which made them seem particularly relevant. Rather, they relate to different levels of analysis and layers of historical significance, highlighted by changing circumstances; all of them have to some degree been applied throughout the long-standing debate on modern Japan, and the task of theoretical reflection is to synthesize their respective insights and rationales, not to choose between them. Similarly, the images of modernity that have served to anchor comparative perspectives can to some extent be seen as alternative models, but not as incompatible paradigms. As I will try to show, it makes more sense to speak of steps towards contextualization. An initially dominant but fundamentally inadequate conception of modernity must be overcome without losing sight of its relative truth-content. And the construction of a more complex theoretical framework is closely linked to better understanding of the specific case in question: as the idea of multiple modernities acquires clearer contours and firmer theoretical foundations, the originality of the Japanese experience becomes more visible and significant.

I

The first of the three comparative perspectives which I want to discuss has to do with Japan as an example of non-Western responses to Western expansion and domination. In that context, the Meiji transformation — together with its sequel — stands out as a particularly effective counter-project, and its exemplary results were the main focus of references to Japan during the early phase of post-war modernization theory. The most instructive comparative analyses undertaken on this basis stressed the affinities as well as the contrasts between Japan and states with a much longer record of direct contact with Western powers. Both Russian and Turkish trajectories of modernization were extensively com-

pared to the Japanese one and used to illustrate general patterns as well as possible variations.¹ The same line of argument could even be extended to Germany, inasmuch as that country's relationship to more advanced western and northwestern neighbours prefigured later patterns of unequal development on a global scale. But modernizing latecomers within or on the margins of the Western world are not the only relevant cases. The Japanese achievement, although undeniably outstanding in the Asian and African world, could be compared to the much less impressive efforts of a few other countries which also escaped colonization. Earlier accounts of Thailand and its exceptional record in the South-east Asian context tended to overdraw parallels with Japan; as more recent critical reappraisals have shown, Thailand was in fact too dependent on Western powers to be regarded as a case of autonomous development.² In a more idiosyncratic vein, Anthony Giddens has compared Japanese and Ethiopian responses to the Western challenge.³ Finally, the analysis of the Japanese modernizing process can throw some light on developments in major Asian countries whose road to modernity was more affected by foreign domination. Their modernizing strategies were — to a more or less significant and lasting extent — influenced by the Japanese precedent and thus conducive to indirect Westernization through emulation of the state that had gained unique prestige by pioneering an innovative method of matching Western power.

As for the specific themes and issues that may be tackled from this comparative angle, the contrasts and parallels drawn between Japan, Russia and Turkey are probably most revealing. In all three cases, the need to import and/or imitate Western ways of rationalizing the pursuit of power appears as a catalyst of more far-reaching changes; the first steps of strategic modernization lead to unintended consequences and unexpected pressures for more radical moves, but the ability to cope with this expanding horizon of change varies significantly from case to case. In general terms, however, the state can be seen as the central actor of both the initial modernizing turn and the subsequent transformative phase. The fundamental similarity of state-centred modernizing processes does not exclude major divergences. In that regard, some distinctive aspects of the Japanese experience can serve to exemplify broader issues. The sustained dynamism and autonomy of the Japanese modernizing process since 1868 are all the more remarkable in view of the fact that it had been preceded by a long phase of strategic with-

1 Cf. especially C. Black et al. (eds.), *The Modernization of Japan and Russia*, New York, 1976.

R. E. Ward and D. Rustow (eds.), *Political Modernization in Japan and Turkey*, Princeton, 1964.

2 Cf. B. Anderson, "Studies of the Thai state: The state of Thai studies", in E. B. Ayal (ed.), *The Study of Thailand*, Ohio University, 1978, pp.193-247.

3 A. Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence*, Cambridge, 1985, pp.473-4.

drawal and minimized contact with the Western world, which in turn had followed a brief but by no means insignificant first encounter. By contrast, the Russian and Turkish trajectories were characterized by more continuity of contact with the West but less continuity of the collective identity and the imaginary frame of reference that lent cultural meaning to the strategies of response. Furthermore, the Japanese pattern of ideological orientation — a particularly radical but adaptable version of nationalism, going far beyond the Western model which antedated it — can be contrasted with the Turkish retreat from imperial and religious universalism towards a more unconditionally Westernizing nationalism, as well as with the Russian invention of a universal counter-paradigm of modernity to challenge the West in global terms. Finally, the specific characteristics of Japanese modernity cannot be analyzed without posing the question of their traditional preconditions, more visibly important — and more explicitly invoked — in Japan than in the West. The Japanese case thus becomes a starting-point for relativizing the contrast between tradition and modernity, and for rethinking a distinction grounded in Western experiences (and reinforced by one-sided readings of the latter). This line of argument would seem to represent the most radical use that can be made of our first comparative perspective.

The second one has so far been less in evidence among modernization theorists. It is mainly advocated by comparative historians, and their principal reasons relate to developments during the Meiji epoch, seen as comparable to changes unfolding in advanced Western societies at the same time.⁴ In this view, the historical conjuncture of the 1850s and 1860s may have put Japan in a position akin to other countries threatened by Western expansion, but the exceptionally rapid reorientation of Japanese global strategy made the sequel more similar to innovations within the Western core. The trends and policies in question have to do with the socio-cultural ramifications of state-building, and the Japanese pattern can be compared to other ascendant powers; in this context, Germany is seen as a core state aspiring to hegemony, rather than an internal periphery of the West, but parallels can also be drawn with Britain, France and the United States. What these key players of the global state system have in common is a multi-faceted agenda of national integration, mobilization and accumulation. If there were some distinctively Japanese ways of pursuing these goals, they can be explained in terms of specific constraints as well as inventive approaches to the problems of advanced modernity. From the former point of view, it seems particularly significant that Japan had to carry out an industrial revolution in conjunction with the restructuring of state and society (this con-

⁴ For a succinct introductory discussion of these issues, cf. Akira Iriye, "Japan's drive to great power status", in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol.5: *The Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, 1985, pp.473-4.

stellation is reminiscent of rapidly advancing latecomers within the Western region but the linkage of capitalist accumulation and bureaucratic state-building was probably more methodical and effective than anywhere else). And the simultaneous turn to imperial expansion, inseparable from the broader economic and political transformation, took place in a more exceptional context: contrary to the global reach of Western colonial empires, Japanese colonialism had to operate within a region of which it had previously been a marginal part. As for the other differentiating factor (innovations based on specific historical resources and experiences), the most obvious case in point is the emergence of a particularly inclusive and pervasive version of nationalism, backed up by reconstructed traditions and translatable into strategies of state control.⁵

Another very important offshoot of this second comparative perspective should be noted. If the Meiji transformation entailed changes of essentially the same kind as those undergone by hegemonic Western states, the question of endogenous sources and preconditions must be posed. Growing interest in the Tokugawa antecedents of Meiji Japan has led to better understanding of the early modern epoch as a distinctive historical phase. The mid-nineteenth-century return of Western powers to the region thus seems to have precipitated a transition whose outcome reflected more internal trends: from a country developing independently of the West and inventing original solutions to some of the same problems, Japan was transformed into an exceptionally receptive but also uniquely autonomous borrower of Western techniques and institutions. Historical analyses of the early modern background have opened up a particularly interesting field of comparative studies. Some of the most interesting work in this area has been done on early modern Japan and France, but A. Macfarlane has recently — in a somewhat overdone fashion — tried to construct long-term parallels between English and Japanese history.⁶ In any case, the question of similarities and differences between early modern Japanese and Western lines of development is open to further research. And it is obviously one of the main starting-points for a more general debate on trends in the whole Eurasian region.⁷ The theoretical issue, more or less fully articulated, is of prime importance: it is being suggested that we can speak of modern or proto-modern patterns, as well as of processes with modernizing implications and outcomes, in regions beyond the reach of significant Western impact and epochs prior to the decisive breakthrough of Western

5 Cf. particularly M. Maruyama, *Thought and Behaviour in Japanese Politics*, 2ed., London, 1963.

6 Cf. particularly J. L. McLain et al. (eds.), *Edo and Paris: Urban Life and the State in the Early Modern Era*, Ithaca, 1994; and A. Macfarlane, "Japan' in an English mirror", *Modern Asian Studies* 31:4 (1997), pp.763-806.

7 Cf. the contributions in *Modern Asian Studies* 31:3 (1997), edited and introduced by V. Lieberman.

expansion. This claim has far-reaching consequences for the whole problematic of Westernization and modernization, but the contributions of comparative history have yet to be fully integrated into the mainstream of theoretical debates.

The third approach I want to discuss is less developed than the other two; but as I will try to show, it can be linked to very fruitful theoretical ideas. With the rise of new developmental centres in East Asia (first Korea and Taiwan, then parts of mainland China), the modern Japanese achievement — although unequalled — came to be seen as less unique and more comparable with other projects drawing on a shared regional background. This trend was reinforced by growing awareness of the specific patterns of East Asian history and the regional responses to Western hegemony. To interpret the Japanese experience in this context is to pose two interrelated questions: how significant is the common East Asian heritage for the overall regional configuration of modernity, and how to account for the features which set the Japanese trajectory apart from the rest of the region? These developments are too recent for alternative positions to have taken clear shape, but we can at least distinguish two very different lines of argument. On the one hand, the manifest resurgence of the whole region has led many observers to stress the most familiar and official part of its heritage. The notion of a “Confucian region” has thus gained some currency; a representative work written before the demise of Communism made the claim that Confucian ideology was to East Asia what liberalism was to the West and socialism to the Soviet bloc.⁸ Although things seem decidedly less clear-cut in the post-Communist world, the idea of a specific Confucian connection between tradition and modernity in East Asia has not disappeared, and there is no reason to doubt that Confucian patterns of thought and models of behaviour were in many ways relevant to the recent and contemporary history of the region; here I only want to indicate the main difficulties with a strong version of the thesis. First, the case for a Confucian economic ethic involved in late twentieth-century capitalist development cannot be made without a complementary account of traditional inaction. If there is a developmentalist side to the Confucian ethic, it must be one that could be effectively neutralized for a long time by contextual factors (or countervailing tendencies internal to the same tradition). Second, the East Asian tradition was not simply or unequivocally Confucian; rather, the Confucian strand (always marked by internal diversity) was a crucial but never exclusive component of a more complex tradition, adapting to other currents and redefining itself in the process, but striving with notable success to impose an orthodox self-image which obscured the underlying plurality. Third, historical research has cast doubt on earlier

8 G. Rozman et al. (eds.), *The East Asian Region: Confucian Heritage and its Modern Adaptation*, Princeton, 1991.

assumptions about the homogeneity of the region, especially on the construct of a uniformly Neo-Confucian early modern phase, and drawn attention to the varying destinies of Confucian doctrines in China, Korea and Japan. In particular, it seems that the misconception of Tokugawa Japan as dominated by Neo-Confucian orthodoxy and integrated into a Neo-Confucian regional culture has been effectively demolished. Finally, claims on behalf of the Confucian legacy must also come to grips with the difficult task of establishing and explaining its survival throughout modern upheavals in both continental and insular parts of the region. The defeat of the Taiping rebellion in China is arguably as important for the subsequent history of East Asia as the success of the Meiji Restoration in Japan.⁹ And the revolutionary phase — or intermezzo — of twentieth-century Chinese history can hardly be treated as a temporary deviation from Confucian patterns. The comparative study of revolutionary crises and ruptures in the region is still in an early stage.

In view of the difficulties faced by advocates of historical or civilizational continuity, some authors seem inclined to take the opposite tack and stress the transformative dynamism that has been so much more characteristic of the East Asian world than of other regions reacting to Western hegemony. From this point of view, modern Japan — from 1868 onwards — can be seen as a pioneering innovator which brought irreversible change to other parts of the region.¹⁰ Japanese rule in Korea destroyed the traditional order and paved the way (unintentionally and unevenly) for more independent development. Similarly, Japanese colonization of an outlying Chinese province (Taiwan) and the creation of a client state in a much more peripheral region (Manchuria) had far-reaching consequences for the course of Chinese history. Most importantly, there are good reasons to doubt that a Communist revolution would have taken place in China, had it not been for the shattering impact of Japanese imperialism on the half-consolidated nationalist regime. If we add to these considerations the point that a Japanese institutional invention — the capitalist developmental state — has (in different ways at different historical junctures) played the role of precedent and model on a regional scale, there seems to be a strong case for interpreting modern East Asian history in terms of a Japanese “big bang” and multiple but comparable repercussions throughout neighbouring countries.

But this does not dispose of the questions raised (however one-sidedly) by defenders of the Confucian thesis. Japan’s road to modernity, including the radical

9 This point is made by M. Geyer and Ch. Bright in “Global violence and nationalizing wars in Eurasia and America: The geopolitics of war in the mid-nineteenth century”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38:4 (1996), pp.619-57.

10 Cf. B. Cumings, “The origins and development of the Northeast Asian political economy”, *International Organization* 38:1 (1984), pp.1-40.

turn taken in the second half of the nineteenth century, has a prehistory which cannot be understood without reference to the regional context and Japanese ways of relating to it. Analogously, the role of long-term trends and durable legacies in the responses to the Japanese bid for empire calls for closer examination. In brief, the problem of the relationship between civilizational background and contemporary change remains on the agenda.

II

Let us now turn to the second problematic mentioned at the beginning: the underlying interpretations of modernity that inform and orient comparative study. It seems easy to identify the interpretive premises of the first approach. If the modernizing processes and strategies exemplified by the Japanese case are, first and foremost, marked by more or less effective learning from Western precedents (mainly in the domains of wealth and power), and more or less far-reaching effects of the applied lessons, the general idea of modernization can be defined in cognitivist and technological terms: it refers to the sum total of the socio-cultural effects of the growth and diffusion of applicable knowledge. This view is explicitly stated in some seminal works on modernization theory and implicitly presupposed in others. The most obviously relevant applications of knowledge have to do with the most visibly effective instruments of power; derivative strategies of modernization — i.e. those constructed in response to and in defence against pioneering projects — are therefore likely to begin with military, administrative and industrial innovations. But the ramifications of strategic learning extend to all areas of social life.

It is hardly necessary to underline the particular relevance of this conception to the Japanese case. Japanese modernization — including its self-critical accompaniments — is to an unusually high degree centred on strategic learning processes. This orientation was already characteristic of the emerging Meiji state, committed to “seeking knowledge throughout the world” for self-strengthening purposes. A more thoroughgoing version of the same strategy was advocated by those who wanted to push the appropriation of Western knowledge beyond the limits of power-centred pragmatism; the notion of *bunmei kaika* (civilization and enlightenment) served to define the goal of uncompromising modernization. Learning from Western experience in order to contest Western ascendancy was no less central to later phases of Japan’s transformation; it seems clear that the capitalist developmental state matured on the basis of lessons drawn from the interwar breakdown of Western capitalism as well as from the totalitarian responses to it. At the same time, the critical idea of uncompleted enlightenment crystal-

lized into a more explicitly negative diagnosis of the dominant trend. This is a key theme in Maruyama Masao's seminal essay on "thought in Japan": modern Japan may have excelled in borrowing ideas and techniques from the West, but it has yet to assimilate a more structured and cumulative model of the growth of knowledge.¹¹ Last but not least, the role of Marxism in modern Japanese thought and culture should be seen in this light. If Japanese Marxism was both the most original offshoot of the Marxist tradition outside Europe and the most representative oppositional ideology inside Japan (the latter fact has perhaps been more widely understood than the former), both aspects are obviously related to its claim to represent a systematic and definitive self-knowledge of modernity.

In short, this first interpretive model — let us call it the cognitivist conception of modernization — is eminently applicable to the Japanese experience. If we want to determine its limits in that regard, a brief glance at basic conceptual problems may be useful. The first point to note is that the idea of modernity which we have been discussing is by no means incapable of further development and differentiation. In particular, it can be argued that it contains *in nuce* a notion of reflexive modernization, and that the latter concept is therefore neither as new nor as challenging as some contemporary authors have argued. If the overall modernizing process is analyzed as a dynamic configuration of intended and unintended effects of cognitive progress, it seems logical to assume that there will be historical conjunctures characterized by attempts to update the cognitive program of modernity in response to cumulative dynamics of unintended consequences (both aspects, the confrontation with endogenous but unexpected problems and the articulation of significantly altered but still modern projects, have been stressed by theorists of reflexive modernization). In that sense, the concept is clearly applicable to nineteenth-century Western states and societies: new ideologies of modernity took shape against the background of conflict-laden and disintegrative modernizing processes. And the same thing is doubly true for Japan. The strategies of modernization after 1868 were based on observation of the troubles encountered by Western models and anticipation of the specific problems likely to be caused by the transfer of the latter to the Japanese context. It can thus be argued that Japanese modernization entered its reflexive phase in 1868. Needless to say, no value-judgment is implied. The concept, as used here, does not have the connotations of a higher, more complete or more liberating type of modernization.

There is, furthermore, no unbridgeable gap between the claims of the cognitivist conception and the language of systems theory. A suitably diversified

11 Cf. M. Maruyama, *Denken in Japan*, Frankfurt / M, 1988.

notion of cognitive growth can be translated into systemic models. The well-known Parsonian model can be read in this way: here we cannot go into detail, but it may be suggested that the idea of adaptive upgrading (the main criterion of evolutionary progress) applies not only to the economic dimension, but also to other subsystems, inasmuch as their structures and functions are adapted to the rules and tasks inherent in the overall systemic pattern. The organizational codes of mutually complementary subsystems are, in a sense, objectified and programming patterns of knowledge whose application leads to improved performance. Systemic logic shapes the course of social change and evolution in a way fundamentally analogous to the effects of cognitive progress. It is in keeping with this background affinity that Parsons' account of Japanese modernization arrives at much the same conclusions as those who work with more straightforward cognitivist models: the Japanese record of learning from the West (the latter being taken to represent the "main pattern" of modernity) is unequalled, but the results so far are notably one-sided, and a comparable effort will be needed to create a balanced modern society.¹² Whether later developments in systems theory (especially the work of Niklas Luhmann) have led to a more radical break with the ideas discussed above is — for present purposes — an open question, and in any case, the absence of any significant references to Japan makes them less relevant to our theme.

I have referred to the core premise of the first comparative approach as an image or interpretation of modernity; but it is a self-relativizing image in the sense that modernization — *qua* cognitive progress of a more or less linear kind — becomes primary, and modernity can only be defined as a condition which gives free rein or minimizes obstacles to the modernizing process. By the same token, this frame of reference excludes the notion of multiple modernities. There is nothing in the cognitivist conception that would allow us to talk about significantly different durable configurations of modernity. That idea only makes sense if we can distinguish several components of the modern constellation, as well as different ways of relating them to each other, with more or less significant effects on their internal logics and constitutions. And such assumptions can, in turn, only be sustained if differences due to historical contexts are integrated into the paradigm: the historicity of modernity is irreducible to general models and theories. Multiple modernities are, by definition, historically conditioned, shaped and circumscribed modernities.

As I will try to show, this pluralistic conception of modernity can be linked to the second of our comparative perspectives. The connection is less straight-

12 T. Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies*, Englewood Cliffs, 1971, pp.134-7.

forward than the first one, but the distinctive features noted by historians may point to theoretical issues familiar from other contexts. More specifically, the developments associated with state-building after 1868 add up to a comprehensive pattern of institutional and ideological formation which sets Japan apart from other societies in a similarly advanced phase of modernization. As S.N. Eisenstadt stresses in his recent work on Japanese civilization, the analysis of Japanese modernity should begin with the construction of the Meiji state, its relationship to the various social actors and arenas of the modernizing process, and the tensions subsequently generated by the very success of the interventionist “school-master state.”¹³ For our purpose, it seems convenient to begin with the relationship between *state and economy*. If it is analyzed in terms of a gradual but not linear growth of the developmental state (including phases of experimentation, retreat and malfunctioning), it raises important questions about boundaries and interconnections between social spheres. The institutions of capitalism and the bureaucratic state are mutually integrated in a peculiar way, and this arrangement is not simply superimposed on a standard pattern of differentiation; rather, the interconnections affect the internal constitution of each side in fundamental ways. The obvious originality of Japanese practices in this area has led some observers to question the very validity of Western-style concepts of state and capitalism; but as indicated above, the most promising line of interpretation — exemplified by the work of Chalmers Johnson — presents Japanese economic development as a reinvention of capitalism, actively assisted and oriented by the bureaucratic state.

A broader overview of the relationship between *state and society* throws further light on the pattern of integration or differentiation. Here we can draw on arguments developed by Murakami Yasusuke, without necessarily accepting their entire theoretical framework.¹⁴ A closer look at the Japanese case helps to establish the nation-state as the main modern agency of integration (and as the historical reality behind the idealizing constructs of mainstream Western sociology); the main reason why Japanese experience can thus serve as a basic corrective to Western theory is that it constitutes an exceptionally clear-cut case of a nation-state extending its scope of activity without taking the trans-national ideological turn which has been typical of other ambitious state-centred projects. As Eisenstadt has emphasized, the Meiji state pursued the twin goals of control and mobilization in a way comparable to Western regimes of revolutionary origin, and this remains true of its successors. At the same time, this twofold strategy of en-

13 Cf. S. N. Eisenstadt, *Japanese Civilization: A Comparative View*, Chicago, 1996, pp.23-49.

14 Cf. Murakami Yasusuke, “Modernization in terms of integration: The case of Japan”, in S. N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *Patterns of Modernity, vol.2: Beyond the West*, London, 1987 pp.65-88.

hanced integration was combined with an imported model of modern society which reflected Western standards and visions of differentiation. In the course of the modernizing process, these two aspects interacted in complex and changing ways, including strategic adjustment on both sides (e.g. the retreat from early Meiji ideas of the unity of state and religion as well as a comprehensive state control over the economy) and attempts to upgrade the integrative framework, so as to make it more resistant to the side-effects of its own success. And it seems a plausible claim that growing tensions between them played a key role in the incomplete (and soon to be reversed) changes which set Taishō Japan apart from the much longer and more formative Meiji period.

The discussion of integrative and differentiating factors, central to any analysis of modernity, would be inconclusive without some comments on the cultural dimension, i.e. the self-interpretation and self-affirmation of differentiated spheres as well as the interpretive and legitimizing aspects of the integrative forces. In this context, the distinctively Japanese relationship between *state and nation* is of particular importance. It is generally agreed that the modern Japanese construction of national identity and the ideological projects built on that basis differed from European counterparts in significant ways. Maruyama Masao's seminal analysis of Japanese nationalism contains insights which have yet to be fully assimilated by Western theorists, but his specific accents and his choice of the term "ultra-nationalism" reflect a somewhat one-sided — albeit understandable — concern with the militarist phase that had come to an end in 1945. A more balanced approach would have to do justice to the exceptional totalizing capacity as well as the adaptability of Japanese nationalism; it should also account for both affinities and differences between modern nationalism and traditional Japanese patterns of collective identity. As for the latter, S.N. Eisenstadt and B. Giesen have proposed the term "principled primordiality."¹⁵ More specifically, a model of order borrowed from a more advanced civilization (China) was used to consolidate and transfigure an ethnic particularism which thus became more resistant to universalist alternatives. The transition to modern nationalism, triggered by the threat from Western nation-states, was a complex process which opened up various and in part contrasting possibilities.¹⁶ During the Meiji period, a high-powered conception of national identity and integration took shape and was imposed against other currents; its continuing dominance was to some extent obscured by the more visible liberalizing trends of the Taishō interlude, but the subsequent militarist turn brought nationalism back to prominence and led critical

15 Cf. S. N. Eisenstadt and B. Giesen, "The construction of collective identity", *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 36 (1995), pp.72-102.

16 Cf. C. Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths*, Princeton, 1985.

observers to conflate the underlying pattern with its most extreme manifestations. A comprehensive interpretive history of modern Japanese nationalism — which no Western scholar has so far attempted to write — would need to account for reorientations before and after militarist rule without losing sight of long-term constants.

In the present context, it is the integrative logic of nationalism and its interaction with the modernizing dynamic of differentiation that should be underlined; let us note a few points which fit the emerging picture of a distinctive pattern of modernity. First, the strong and sweeping claims on behalf of the national collectivity made it more difficult for universalist ideologies (liberal or socialist, secular as well as religious) to articulate and impose their principles; Western forms of ideological differentiation could thus only develop to a limited extent. Second, the systematic reference to the national collective as a legitimizing and mobilizing authority set limits to the self-articulation of social spheres and forces, with the result that Japanese patterns of institutional formation and social stratification differ substantially from the Western ones; neither functional nor normative rationalizations of claims to autonomy could play the same role (S.N. Eisenstadt has developed this analysis in much greater detail). Finally, the imaginary paradigm of the national community served not only to reinforce core political institutions, but at the same time to devalue or de-legitimize the more mundane and divisive aspects of political life. A major counterweight to the unfolding differentiation of the political sphere was thus built into Japanese political culture. And it could function in two complementary ways: On the one hand, ethnic nationalism became an expression of protest against the authoritarian practices of the modernizing bureaucratic state, and of the wish for a more harmonious relationship between state and society.¹⁷ On the other hand, the vision of national unity beyond political division and conflict lent effective support to strategies of totalitarian integration. It is probably true that Western scholars have tended to underestimate the first aspect; but it is also true that the anti-statist version of nationalism was to a very significant degree absorbed or neutralized by official ultra-nationalism.

These considerations should suffice to show that the Japanese case cannot be subsumed under a uniform pattern of advanced modernity. It remains to clarify the implications of the third perspective for the problematic of plural modernity. As noted above, the results of recent work on the regional background are less conclusive than those of better-established approaches; but it can at least be said that the question of the East Asian civilizational legacy and its formative

17 Cf. K. Doak, "Ethnic nationalism in Japan", *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 1996.

impact on modern history has been put on the agenda, even if we have at the same time become more conscious of the pitfalls and short-circuits to be avoided when tackling this theme. On a more general theoretical level, it is the problem of civilizational frameworks of modernity — or, in cautious terms, the role of civilizational factors in the diversification of modernity — that we have to confront. This is not the place for detailed conceptual analysis; suffice it to say that we are using the concept of civilization in a sense outlined most convincingly by Durkheim and Mauss. In their language, the term refers to large-scale and long-term units of social analysis; civilizations transcend societies both in space and time. Although the comparative study of civilizational complexes must begin with different clusters of cultural features (capable of diffusion and more or less open to modification within a civilizational area), the arguments adumbrated by Durkheim and Mauss also suggests that cultural definitions of power (reflected in political structures) are of particular importance. In brief, interrelated patterns of culture and power can be seen as the core constituents of civilizational identity, and the following remarks should be read in that sense.

Before going on to consider the relevance of civilizational theory to the analysis of Japanese modernity, it seems advisable to note some basic caveats and qualifications that follow from the above discussion — especially with regard to the problematic of the East Asian region, but also in the light of more general points made about conceptions of modernity. To begin with a very elementary observation: as the difficulties of the Confucian model show, civilizational frameworks should not be identified with orthodox, representative or programmatic ideologies. Clusters of collective representations (or imaginary significations, to use the more specific concept proposed by Castoriadis) are by definition central to civilizational analysis, but their capacity to crystallize into ideologies and claim the status of orthodoxy should be treated as a variable, dependent on intrinsic as well as contextual factors. Comparative studies have shown that some civilizational patterns are more conducive to the formation of orthodoxy than others, and some orthodoxies are more exclusive than others (or more capable of containing dissent and heterodoxy). Within one civilizational complex, some societies may differ from others in both degree and kind, as regards the construction of orthodoxy; here the contrasts between China, Korea and Japan seem particularly interesting. Another lesson to be learnt from the East Asian case concerns the question of inbuilt transformative capacity (or predisposition to social change). This should also be treated as a key variable, and civilizational patterns can differ not only in respect of their ability to develop it, but also in the sense that the potential for change may be more or less dependent on activation by external factors. Historical research has disposed of the idea that East Asian

societies stagnated before the nineteenth-century encounter with the expanding West, but it still seems possible to speak of particularly effective structures and strategies of containment. As for the changes that did take place in the aftermath of Western intrusion, the East Asian record of radical change is surely unsurpassed by any other region. This is most obviously true about Japan; as for China, the story of its protracted revolutionary crisis is a familiar one, but some doubts remain about its meaning. A prominent authority on the subject has argued that the Chinese experience reflects an underlying resistance to radical change: it took a whole series of upheavals and convulsions to make Chinese society ripe for revolution.¹⁸ But if we consider the whole trajectory since the mid-nineteenth century and the variety of successive or competing projects (from the Taiping rebellion to the rival twentieth-century strategies of imperial reconstruction), a rather different diagnosis seems to suggest itself: the long-drawn-out collapse of the old order released a broad spectrum of forces aspiring to radical change. And in a very different setting, the rapid transformations — in incompatible directions — that have taken place in independent but divided Korea point to similar conclusions.

The problem of social change and its civilizational preconditions is closely related to another issue: the varying openness to and ability to cope with intercivilizational encounters. The latter term, coined by Benjamin Nelson, refers to episodes of particularly formative — very often one-sided — interaction between civilizations. This is one of the more important but less developed themes of civilizational theory; a persistent tendency to over-emphasize civilizational closure has led some of the most prominent authors in the field to neglect the other side of the picture. Here we must limit ourselves to a few observations regarding East Asia and the particular position of Japan within the regional context. The first thing to be noted is a long early phase of relative isolation: the formation of the East Asian civilizational complex, centred on China, was a more self-contained process than other comparable developments in the Eurasian world. In the later history of the region, phases of heightened receptivity alternate with inward turns and active isolationism. East Asia became the most important outlet for the expansion of the only non-monotheistic universal religion (Buddhism). But during the epoch of global Western expansion, East Asian states had reverted to cultural closure and political detachment; this is all the more striking in view of the material and cultural resources that could in principle have sustained a more activist strategy. As for later changes in the wake of direct encounters with a more powerful West, the vigour and originality of East Asian responses stand out

18 Vandermeersch, *Le nouveau monde sinisé*, Paris, 1986, pp.152-3.

in contrast to other regions. No East Asian state was colonized by the West (the idea of China having been reduced to quasi-colonial status is very misleading), but Western models were appropriated in a selective fashion and applied in a distinctive context (most strikingly in Japan and China, but the same can — *mutatis mutandis* — be said about the development of the two Koreas within the bipolar system dominated by Western rivals for hegemony). Twentieth-century East Asian history is noteworthy for the wide range of Western political projects — liberal democracy, socialism, communism, nationalism and fascism — that have been imported and /or reinvented, and sometimes radicalized beyond the original versions. Some observers might question the inclusion of liberal democracy in this list. But the postwar Japanese experience is surely a significant case, and the recurrent questions about the reality or authenticity of Japanese democracy are misleading; the point is, rather, that the institutions of liberal democracy have been adopted with important modifications, and the restrictive aspects of the latter do not add up to a systematic perversion.

In a sense, the Japanese trajectory exemplifies the regional pattern on a smaller scale but in a more intensive fashion. The history of Japan's relationship with continental East Asia (and thus also with the imported traditions that had become an integral part of the East Asian world) is reminiscent of the interplay of closure and opening which marked the interaction of the whole civilizational complex with the outside world. But in the Japanese case, the appropriation of the Chinese model led to an irreversible reconstitution and self-redefinition which Buddhism never achieved in China. Similarly, Japan can be seen as the most extreme case of the regional response to the West: the Westernizing process (self-controlled with the exception of the postwar American occupation) was more far-reaching and many-sided than elsewhere, and it could be interpreted as a definitive divorce from the Asian world; this self-image never prevailed over others, but it remained a part of ongoing debates.

III

With the above qualifications in mind, we should now turn to a more systematic discussion of civilization and modernity in the Japanese context. If the general idea of civilizational premises of Japanese modernity is accepted, there are three different ways of developing it further. The main focus can be on a shared East Asian background; on constitutive characteristics of Japan as a civilization in its own right; or on the civilizational duality inherent in the Japanese way of being involved in the East Asian civilizational complex without wholly belonging to it. These approaches are more or less clearly represented in recent literature on

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