

# Taking Japan Seriously: American Political and Economic Studies on Japan, 1984-1993\*

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Japanese political and economic affairs became a part of mainstream intellectual and political discourse in the United States during the 1980s. Today, American intellectuals and policy makers seriously discuss the character of Japanese-style capitalism, how Japan is governed, and whether there are lessons to be learned from Japanese business practices and modes of technology management. Although much of the influential writing in the United States on contemporary Japanese political and economic affairs has been by journalists or academics without formal training on Japan, Japan specialists have laid the groundwork for these broader public debates and have participated in them. Indeed, to a surprising, and sometimes disconcerting, extent, most American political and economic studies of the past decade have been "policy-relevant," revolving around a limited number of undeniably critical questions concerning the nature of Japanese capitalism, who governs Japan, how policies are made, and the political implications of how conflicts are managed and Japanese social order maintained.

Mainstream economists have begun to come to grips with "the Japan issue" and to recommend policies that go well beyond the neo-classical faith in the theory of comparative advantage and free trade. At the same time, American political and political-economic research on Japan has become more explicitly comparativist, addressing questions of theoretical and practical concern well beyond Japan and the United States. Indeed, the importance of Japan's experience as an advanced industrial democracy has attracted the serious attention of some leading American Europeanists (Katzenstein *et al*, 1991, 1993). American legal specialists and historians of Japan as well have begun to produce insightful and influential studies of contemporary Japanese political and social life. And Japan's leading role in East Asia, the world's most dynamic region of economic growth, and its emerging global roles have become major objects of research and speculation.

## **Japanese Capitalism, Who Governs, and Policy Making**

Chalmers Johnson's *MITI and the Japanese Miracle* (1982) set the intellectual agenda for much of the political and economic research of the past decade. His arguments on the character of Japanese capitalism, industrial policy, and how Japan is governed and his empirical research bridging the prewar-postwar divide have had a enormous impact on

subsequent American scholarship and indeed, public discourse. Johnson's concept of the "developmental state" — a strong, smart and activist state deeply involved in guiding economic growth — is built on ideas concerning the imperatives for state action in late developing societies and on his painstaking historical research on the accumulated experience of state efforts to direct private enterprise between the late 1920s and 1975. The upshot of the analysis is an interpretation of Japanese governance in the postwar era focused on bureaucratic leadership. No academic study of Japanese capitalism or policy making since then could afford to ignore Johnson's arguments and evidence, even when they disagreed with some of his conclusions.

Moreover, Johnson's study was a distinct break with most previous American scholarship that tended to emphasize discontinuity between prewar and postwar Japan. Johnson, more in the spirit of most Japanese researchers, argued fundamental continuities — o institutions, personnel and accumulated wisdom on economic management — bridging the war years. Earlier, Kurt Steiner (1965), in the area of local government, and Haruhiro Fukui (1971), in party organization, had produced excellent studies emphasizing continuities, while Kenneth Pyle wrote an outstanding analysis of "followership" as a shaping force on Japanese thinking and practice in the twentieth century. Now a new generation of scholars, many of them historians, like Andrew Gordon (1986) and Sheldon Garon, have begun to put postwar Japan into historical context. Gordon, for example, has analyzed the century long process of conflict and compromise among business managers, civil bureaucrats and blue collar workers in which they created and several times reshaped Japan's industrial relations practices. Political scientists, like Richard Samuels (1987) in the area of energy markets and policy and James White (1988) in social protest have also shed new light on contemporary issues through solid historical research. Although these studies are not derivative of Johnson's, they are part of the deepening historical consciousness evident in American studies of contemporary Japan.

Johnson's concept of official bureaucracy directing the real business of the Japanese state undoubtedly remains the predominant view in the United States. John Campbell (1992), in an important study of how policies change in Japan focused on the nation's response to the "aging society," supports the view of a creative bureaucracy capable of anticipating social needs and leading social groups. Academics, however, are highly divided on the issue — although in an era of transitional coalition governments even the skeptics (including this writer) would admit that official bureaucracy's hand has been strengthened. Johnson's view is largely supported by Daniel Okimoto (1989), particularly when it comes to the nurturing of a powerful manufacturing sector under MITI's judicious guidance. Okimoto, however, observes that a range of industrial sectors (agriculture, coal, lumber, silk etc.) overseen by other ministries have not fared as well. His answer to why and in which sectors the Japanese state seems to be able to nurture internationally competitive industries relates to a broader institutional context — namely, relations among the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the bureaucracy, and industry. He identifies several configurations of tightly woven political and economic interests that make Japan both an "inclusivistic" polity and successful economy.

Richard Samuels (1987), in a study highly informed by comparative research on energy markets and policies in the West as well as Japan, argues, instead, that the private sector has an upper hand in policy making. He notes that the developmental state need not be a supremely strong or smart one and that what actually transpires in Japan is negotiations and compromise between state agencies that would prefer control and a private sector that would prefer autonomy. The upshot is a "politics of reciprocal consent" that normally leads to market-conforming mechanisms of state intervention, not by design but out of necessity. In this view industrial policies are effective where the private sector has tamed and balanced MITI's interventionist inclinations and government serves as a "guarantor."

Marie Anchordoguy's (1989) solid study of the Japanese computer industry is supportive of Samuels' conclusions. Much of her analysis focuses on the Japan Electronic Computer Company (JECC), a private firm established with the assistance of MITI to help the best performing computer makers rent their hardware at low cost. Anchordoguy sees JECC not as a product of MITI wisdom or of the strategy of member firms but rather as the product of conflict between the desire of officials to control the process of growth of the computer industry and that of private industry to establish an industry free of government control. The result was the nurturing of an industry that drew sustenance from both market forces and policy guidance.

American legal specialists on Japan have added their voices to this debate but are not of one mind. In his *Law and Social Change in Contemporary Japan*, Frank Upham (1987) assumes a bureaucratic dominance perspective, arguing that legal rules and institutions are manipulated by the bureaucracy "to create and maintain a framework within which social conflict and change occur in Japan" (p. 3). While the bureaucracy cannot forestall protest or social change, it can control the situation through informal procedures that pre-empt the need for litigation, which the Japanese elite seeks to avoid since its use would mean surrendering ultimate control and Japanese social stability to the universal application of law. When organized groups clash in areas as diverse as pollution, social equality, discriminatory employment practices, or industrial policy, government bureaucracy, in Upham's view, attempts to reconstruct a consensus and to maintain control over policy formulation and implementation. John Haley (1991), by contrast, sees bureaucracy as far less powerful. He argues that its reliance on administrative guidance is evidence of weakness, not strength. The weakness of authorities to coerce through law forces them into negotiations with the private sector, which in turn generates consensus. Hence, Japan's mode of governance tends to be consensual and power-diffusing. If Upham's formulation is supportive of Johnson's, Haley's lends additional credence to Samuels'.

Kent Calder (1989) provides some of the most convincing evidence that the question of "who governs" in Japan cannot simply be answered by "official bureaucracy." The picture of bureaucratic efficiency painted by Johnson, or even Okimoto, in economic policy is replicated in none of Calder's detailed case studies of the postwar evolution of agriculture, regional development, small business, welfare, land use and defense policies. He concludes: "A

detailed analysis of Japanese domestic policy innovation and implementation over the past two generations does not, in short, support an interpretation of domestic policy formation primarily in long-run strategic terms" (pp. 465-466). Instead, Calder's analysis focuses on the central role of politicians as they seek to appease and compensate constituencies whenever they perceive themselves in trouble. While Johnson never denied that politicians play this role, he did not perceive it as central to the business of the Japanese state and the stability of the political system, except as a "safety-valve." To Gerald Curtis (1988) as well, Japan's extraordinary stability has been the product not of bureaucratic power but rather of the remarkable capacity of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party for flexibility and change. Curtis puts LDP politicians at the center of a dynamic process of policy and political change, showing how they responded to an increasingly pluralistic society by using the policy leverage of incumbency to perpetuate themselves in power.

Politics, as opposed to efficiency, equity, or bureaucratic planning, has been posited as the principal (independent) explanatory variable for a variety of governmental policies by both political scientists and economists. (Pempel, 1987; Fukui, 1987 and Reed, 1993). Frances McCall Rosenbluth (1989), for example, in a study of Japanese financial liberalization found political variables as the driving force. She and Mark Ramseyer (1993), in a study reminiscent of Curtis' conclusions, treat state bureaucracy as agents of the LDP, who use control over the government to reward supporters and induce bureaucrats to help their constituents. Economist Thomas Cargill and Michael Hutchison (1991) investigate the "political business cycle" — the extent to which the conduct of monetary policy in Japan is shaped by the political process.

## **Conflict Resolution and Social Order**

American social scientists in the past decade expressed strong skepticism of the "harmony model" that until recently had permeated much of Western Japanology. The opening volley began with a 1984 book by Apter and Sawa, investigating the protracted conflict over the construction of Narita International Airport, in which they conclude that Japan lacks "effective due process," exhibits an "inadequacy of consultative mechanisms outside elite circles" and demonstrates a "failure of local government to represent local interests" (p. 4). A somewhat different perspective is evident in a superb volume on *Conflict in Japan* edited by Ellis Krauss, Patrician Steinhoff and Thomas Rohlen (1984). The separate chapters document abundant incidence of conflict at the personal, interpersonal and structural levels in Japanese society and politics, while not denying that a prevailing belief among Japanese in the need to preserve harmony exercised significant force for conflict resolution. Political scientists Ellis Krauss, John Campbell and Michael Donnelly analyze how role norms and decision mechanisms for handling conflict have evolved within the National Diet, conflict resolution in public bureaucracies and conflict management in the rice market, respectively.

Susan Pharr in *Losing Face: Status Politics in Japan* (1990) focuses specifically on status

protests by young women office workers, burakumin, and young turks within the LDP. Such protests would appear to be particularly hard to mobilize, sustain and legitimize since they run counter to broadly held values and require unusual self assertion. Pharr focuses on how political culture and government actions discourage open conflict and defuse protest. In contrast to the West, for example, the Japanese elite believes that conflict serves no useful social or political function and, hence, should be averted, coopted or contained within institutionalized channels. Privatizing conflicts is also a strategy for keeping government itself manageable. Japan, in her view, is characterized by a high degree of government freedom of action, by highly stable and orderly management of social change and by a polity that is neither repressive nor overloaded by popular demands. Although her analysis is generally supportive of an elitist conception of governance, it is moderated by the view that the elite are themselves restrained by a culture that requires paternalistic behavior from them.

The studies by Upham and Haley noted above also address issue of conflict management and social order. Upham focuses on ways in which Japan's rulers use law as a means to contain or mediate group conflict. He analyzes government interaction with organized groups of people with inconsistent interests, such as pollution victims struggling with polluting firms or minorities demanding social equality from the majority. In these and other cases, he sees the governing elites striving to avoid litigation and attempting to reconstruct consensus — even if it means significant breaks with past policies — in a manner that will assure their control over policy formulation and implementation. Haley shows how Japan's rulers have been able to implant and use Western law and yet uphold most non-Western power relationships — particularly the policing functions of the group. Like Upham, he believes that the difficulty of using law effectively leaves the discontented only the choice of mediation or conciliation in most cases. Law, however, provides standards and draws attention to abuses. In Haley's view, Japanese law, like a *tokonoma*, may be functionally useless but essential for defining a space and ordering of human activity within it. In his exhaustive study of freedom of expression in Japan, Lawrence Beer similarly suggests that the legitimating role of law as *tatema* cannot be discounted.

This writer has analyzed how diverse mechanisms, from the local equalization tax (*chiho kofuzai*) to well distributed quality education, rural by-employment, and nationalization of local government policy initiatives, have helped postwar Japan create a relatively egalitarian and stable social order, characterized by a “bottoming-up” dynamics that minimizes extreme deprivation and provides economic opportunities and social benefits across regions and social class (MacDougall, “Local Government,” in Ishida and Krauss, 1989). In this view, postwar Japan as a “bottom-up society” fosters social order without the oppressiveness of authoritarianism. Reed (1986) and Samuels (1983) similarly have revealed significant policy initiative at the local governmental level that contribute to social progress in ways that clearly contrast with the Apter-Sawa formulation.

These studies have given serious attention to the question of how Japan, if it is not as consensual as we once thought, then deals with dissent and conflict. They have also begun to

deal with questions of how Japan maintains social order and political stability, but it has largely been left to other (non-American) scholars and political analysts to assess the costs, as well as the benefits, of the passion of the nation's elite for social order. Moreover, relatively few of the writings of American political scientists adequately prepared the observer of the Japanese political scene for the massive transformation of the political system that was to begin with the LDP's resounding defeat in the upper house election in 1989 and the end of one party rule in 1993. The closest perhaps was Ronald Hrebener's 1986 edited volume on the Japanese political party system and Gerald Curtis' book noted earlier, which while focusing on the perpetuation of LDP rule stressed the enormous changes that it was undergoing. Still, only a single article by this writer filled the glaring gap in the English literature on political corruption and scandal in Japan (MacDougall, 1988), while other areas such as Socialist politics and the politics of organized labor today remain largely unaddressed by American writers. With the publication of the collaborative Japanese-American study, *The Japanese Voter* (Flanagan, 1991), it became possible to make more direct cross-national comparisons of Japanese voting behavior; but the rapidity of change in political orientations at the mass level, especially, single issue voting and the impact of media coverage, was not adequately captured in English language publications.

### **Economists and the "Japan Issue"**

The interest of mainstream American economists in "the Japan issue" could be seen in a variety of conferences and publications coming out of the National Bureau for Economic Research. In one publication from the NBER, editor Paul Krugman, a prominent MIT (now Stanford University) trade specialist, in fact, identifies "the Japan issue" as "the central economic issue [for] not just the general public, but policy makers and academics as well" (Krugman, 1991, p. 1). This was not because he believed that the size of the trade or investment imbalance between the U.S. and Japan was particularly large or important, but rather because it had become "a symbol of America's shortcomings [and] of the disappointing failure of our economy to deliver what we hoped it would" (p. 1).

The "old orthodoxy" among American economists is one that accepts the persuasiveness of the theory of comparative advantage and the necessity for the United States to pursue a free trade strategy within the GATT framework, not least of all because of a perceived inability of the nation to formulate successful strategic trade policies (See, for example, Anne O. Krueger, "Free Trade is the Best Policy," in Lawrence and Shultze, 1990). In the 1970s, this perspective received powerful support from the analyses of prominent American specialists on the Japanese economy who concluded that Japan's economic growth was due to "business investment demand, private savings, and industrious and skilled labor operating in a market-oriented environment of relative prices" (Patrick and Rosovsky, 1976, p. 47). The Japanese government's role, in this view, has been largely that of providing a supportive environment, especially through "small government" and a stable climate for economic

activity. This view continues to be supported vigorously by Gary Saxonhouse, whose econometric analyses suggest that Japan's comparative advantage in capital and human resources allows it to excel in the manufacture of technology-intensive products, while its poor endowments in energy and natural resources and geographic location mean that manufactured products will be a lower percentage of its imports than is the case for other industrial nations. (See, for example, Saxonhouse in Inoguchi and Okimoto, 1988.) In other words, Japan has been playing by well recognized rules of the game and is not particularly advantaged by government intervention in the market or peculiar business practices.

Such arguments have been forcefully criticized by Edward Lincoln (1990 and 1993), who argues that Japan's relatively low level of manufactured imports are a function of its distinctly lower level of intraindustry trade compared to other industrialized nations and are accounted for by the nation's "general bias against imports" rooted in an "intellectual belief in creating a comparative advantage for domestic manufacturing that has permeated most of academic, government, business and (in a more amorphous way) consumer thinking and behavior" (1990, p. 93). In a more recent formulation of his views, Lincoln (1993) expresses optimism that this bias is diminishing as Japanese firms internationalize, but he continues to advocate American pressure to speed the process.

Economists have also begun to focus on investment as a source of trade imbalances, particularly because of the growing importance of intracompany trade. Dennis Encarnation (1992), for example, has argued that the low level of American majority-owned investment in Japan limits American exports to the Japanese market. Pointing out that American firms have been successful outside of Japan, he rejects the idea that U.S. firms have been losing competitiveness *per se*. What is needed, in his view, is a strategic investment policy involving majority American ownership in Japan and mandatory binding arbitration on specific trade disputes. Other American economists have been more willing than earlier to advocate American industrial policies for high technology industries, the setting of numerical targets for American imports to Japan, or some form of "managed trade" (Lawrence and Shultze).

The message of Chalmers Johnson, former U.S. government officials like Clyde Prestowitz and journalists like James Fallows has been that Japan is structured differently than Western political economies and follows policies and practices that create intractable trade problems for the US and other trading partners. Although the *honne* of much of this so-called "revisionist" writing on U.S.-Japan economic frictions is the use of the Japanese example, or mirror-image, to induce US business and government to reflect on American problems, more and more American academics as well as government officials seem convinced that Japanese institutions, practices and policies will have to change rapidly to diffuse bilateral trade frictions. Lincoln's formulation of the problems appears quite moderate when compared to the high posture rhetoric of Fallows, whose expressions like "playing by different rules" suggests considerable unfairness in Japanese behavior.

Whereas American economists a decade ago tended to explain Japan's position in the international political economy by a limited number of unique institutional factors, like a

skewed factor endowment, high savings rate, or fixity of labor demand among large firms, more recently they have begun to stress the peculiarities of Japanese-style capitalism, particularly after the fall of the communist states focused attention on differences among the advanced industrial nations. Michael Gerlach (1992), for example, focusing on *keiretsu*, uses the term "alliance capitalism" to describe Japanese patterns of corporate ownership and finance. He argues that these patterns — firms organized through corporate share holding, bank borrowing, dispatched directors and trade in intermediate goods — are far more pervasive and persistent over time than previously thought. Cargill and Royama (1991) contrast a Japanese financial system designed to support industrialization and economic growth with an American system that places high priority on mortgage and consumer credit. Both systems, they argue, have undergone extensive deregulation, the former catalyzed by the real sector and the latter by the monetary sector.

Such analyses do not necessarily suggest an inevitable clash between the Japanese-style market economy and Western forms but rather raise the question of how these forms might be meshed so as to stabilize the international economic system. Although they may not yet be a majority, an increased number of American economists also seem to believe that significant changes will have to be made in Japanese economic structure, practices and policies. Meanwhile "revisionists" use Japan as a foil, or mirror-image, to stimulate American public authorities and industry to take a more activist role in stimulating U.S. industrial development and trade policies.

Finally, both academics and American public authorities have shown serious interest in Japanese modes of technology innovation and management. Michael Cusumano's 1991 study of Japan's "software factories," for example, shows how Japanese computer firms have been able to boost productivity, reliability and quality by routinizing tasks, controlling work flows, standardizing designs and procedures, and building incentives to maximize the reuse of parts of software in other products. Michael Smitka's study of sub-contracting in the auto industry investigates what many believe to be an important organizational basis for Japanese technological innovation. And, from the early 1990s, the U.S. government has begun to fund a number of U.S.-Japan Technology Management Centers at major educational institutions around the country to promote an American understanding of technological innovation in Japan.

### Notes

- \* This writer was asked to present a brief summary of American political and economic studies on Japan during the past decade. This presented several difficulties. The first was in deciding on what basis to classify a work as "American" scholarship. I have included those scholars who have built their professional careers in the United States, whatever their nationality might be. This, I think, is in keeping with the nature of American scholarship. The reader should be aware, as well, that one of the noteworthy developments of the past decade has been the substantial development of European, especially British, scholarship in Japanese political and economic studies. The second difficulty was

the task of handling economic studies, since I am not a trained economist, have not followed a significant part of the literature in this field and, from my base in Japan, do not have easy access to much of it. Hence, I have relied largely on materials at the Stanford Japan Center, especially those close on my primary concerns in Japanese politics and political economy. The third difficulty derived from time and space limitations, which have made it impossible to include the considerable amount of important writing on Japanese foreign relations in this report. Also, the focus has been on books, rather than periodical literature because the former are more readily available to the writer. A number of important new works were also not located in time to be included in the report.

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