

Ogyū Sorai's Civil Society (Seidan)

Olof G. LIDIN

East Asian Institute, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

(Received 30 April 1993, accepted 7 October 1993)

It was Sorai's conclusion after long studies of Chinese and Japanese history and after a 60-year long life that political disorder emanates from impoverishment. Prosperity is what makes a state live on, while impoverishment spells the downfall of a state. It was because the institutions had been beneficial in early China that impoverishment had not appeared and that the dynasties had lasted for more than 500 years. With a correct *seido* Sorai envisages that the Tokugawa state will also be prosperous and last for as long. With this in mind he wrote his memorandum, in which he described the sad situation and presented Shogun Yoshimune with numerous proposals for political and economic reforms.

The paper finally compares the institutions which Sorai envisaged to be the correct ones on the *go*-board of Japan with the institutions which developed in Europe about the same time.

Keywords: OGYŪ SORAI (1666-1728), *KEIZAIGAKU*, "POLITICAL ECONOMISM", *SEIDO*, "SYSTEM". *SEIDAN*, "POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS", IMPOVERISHMENT, *TENCHI NO DŌRI* "THE TRUTH OF HEAVEN AND EARTH", *GIRI* AND *NINJŌ*, "SOCIAL DUTIES AND HUMAN SENTIMENTS, *HŌKEN* AND *GUNKEN*, "FEUDAL POWER AND CENTRAL POWER", *RYOSHUKU NO KYOKAI*, "LIVING AS IN AN INN", *DOCHAKU*, "BEING ATTACHED TO THE SOIL".

In old age Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728) wrote his *magnum opus*, the *Seidan* (Political Discussions), in which he presented his views on the Tokugawa society, proposing a number of reforms to make it a better world to live in. In the genre of *keizaigaku* (political economism), it is one of the important works of the Kyōhō era (1716-35).

The go-board Japan

Already in the first sentence of his prologue, Sorai expresses: "Generally, ruling a country is like dividing a *go*-board into squares. When the *go*-board has not been divided into squares, one cannot play *go* no matter how skillful one is." Using the metaphor of the *go*-board, he imagines a *seido*, a system, which divides the Tokugawa rule of Japan into well defined squares. The first volume of the *Seidan* constitutes the basis, the *go*-board, on which the following three volumes are built. Sorai's vision was a reformed feudal Japan with new and correct institutions, and with the population placed in their proper and hereditary locations. However, before the reorganization could be carried out, the *go*-board had to be drawn and framed. "Afterwards one can play the game as one wishes", as he says.

In the eleven chapters of the first volume Sorai analyzes the situation in Edo and Japan and finds the situation disturbing. He begins the first chapter: "At the present time burglars break into houses everywhere; they murder and steal, they set houses on fire; in the middle of the night in deserted places they lie in wait to rob people.

Further, there are young hooligans who just for the fun of it draw their swords, frightening people and making them run for their lives. Also it is difficult to prevent children from being abandoned and garbage to be thrown in the streets."

In the second and third chapters he turns to the menials in Edo. They should be eliminated, and if not, they should be placed under strict control. In chapter four Sorai outlines restrictions on travel. Movement should be restricted and no one should be allowed to travel without a permit. Even within the city one should not move from block to block without authorization. He writes: "In every house block and mansion of the *buke*, gates should be erected to prevent movement at night, and the passage of anyone other than daimyo or people accompanied by spear-carriers should be strictly prohibited. In the part of town where the townspeople live, movement should be restricted in the same manner. In official business and also in private lives, in emergencies like sudden sickness and childbirth, doctors and midwives, for example, should be allowed to pass when they are duly escorted."

In chapter five he describes how the census registers should be perfected and how the population should be shifted between suitable and unsuitable places. The population of Edo had to be decreased, and the city itself reorganized. He found it wrong that no boundary line existed between the city and the countryside. He writes: "Because the borderline was not originally marked, no one knows how far Edo stretches or where the country begins. Moreover, people continue to build houses to their hearts' content and therefore the city goes on expanding year by year. There is no one responsible for giving permission, and neither the commissioners (*bugyō*) nor the high officials (*goyakunin*) pay any attention to it. Therefore, in no time we have come to have one house after another from Senju in the north to Shinagawa in the south. This is indeed an error due to ignorance of the old law. At a time when there is no border between city and country, the farmers turn more and more to commerce and the country is impoverished. . . It is a serious matter when farmers turn to commerce and this has been condemned by the authorities from earliest times." He says further, "When the population of each of the sixty-odd provinces has been estimated, the next step would be to examine the population of Edo and the eight provinces around Edo and compare this population with the grain produced in the same eight provinces; then, on the basis of the people who can live on the amount of foodstuffs produced in one year in these eight provinces, the correct population figure of Edo could be determined".

The control within each square should be total. Sorai writes: "Everything should be known in a block down to the minutest family secret", but as the situation was, "even though something is known in its minutest detail, no attention is paid to it. . . Nothing is controlled, and law and order have ceased to exist." This situation would be changed under the new *seido*. State and society were to form a seamless whole and the totalitarian control was not to allow the smallest social secret. Sorai continues: "An investigation should be made to determine who are landlords and who are tenants. The landlords should be treated as land-holding peasants and the tenants as tenant peasants. All of them should be attached to a block, not only they themselves but also their children and grandchildren from generation to generation.

Furthermore, the tenants should not be allowed to change dwellings freely.”

The leniency of the times is lamented. Harsh old-fashioned morality should be restored. Sorai writes: “Even though punishment by beheading is not in accordance with the law, it brings order to the districts and prefectures. In the feudal age of today when the *buke* holds power, to behead in accordance with early rules is the proper thing... In the old days they did not dismiss any criminal cases. They searched for the criminals and, when they were caught, killed them with their own hands. That was the way of the *buke*...The *buke* have indeed become soft, and foolish to boot... and the apprehending and killing on sight has in our time become such a rare thing that it is almost unheard of.”

In chapter six Sorai deals again with the regulation and control of travel, and in chapter seven with *rōnin*, priests, and monks; they should not be allowed to roam about freely; temples and shrines should also be under strict control. In chapter eight he discusses a difficult subject—the various groups of outcasts, which included the *eta*, *hinin*, beggars, courtesans, actors, and others. It was Sorai's view that they should be placed in their respective squares of the *seido*. In chapters nine and ten Sorai approaches the heart of the matter—the *buke* class. He wants the *buke* to be removed from Edo in order to live a life of simplicity in the countryside, and he wants the system of alternate service in Edo (*sankin kōtai*) to be reduced, without, however, having the system eliminated.

Impoverishment

Having drawn the squares of the *go*-board, Sorai concentrates in the following volumes two and three on how to eliminate the *impoverishment* of the ruling samurai class. In a philosophical preamble of the second volume he states that impoverishment is the root of all social evil. It is what makes a rule last for a long or short time, and it signals that a dynasty has come to its end whether in China or in Japan. The ruler should rule in a way so that impoverishment takes a long time to occur. He should make the country prosperous, seeing to it that “clothing and food are sufficient”, and he quotes Confucius who said that “people are first enriched and then instructed”.

The reforms Sorai envisages always have the ruling class, the samurai, in view. If the situation is alleviated for those above, from the Shogun down to the lowest samurai, the situation would also be bettered for the population as a whole. Impoverishment indicates that something has gone wrong in the eternal system, established by the early Sages in China. The Tokugawa order deviated seriously from the eternal model. The “illiterate” Hideyoshi had altered the model, and the “literate” Ieyasu, who had known better, had done nothing about it; he had not had time for it. Efforts had to be made to return to the eternal *seido*, that is, the Sages' Way, the first principle of which was that all people, high and low, should be attached to the land, the *dochaku* principle. Everyone should have a place where he belonged. Then regulations could follow about clothes, housing, utensils, etc., in order to suppress luxury, and the impoverishment of both high and low would come to an end. The general levelling of the Tokugawa society was a sin in Sorai's view,

and it disturbed him when people did not know who was above and who was below. With *dochaku* as the basis of the *seido*, class distinctions would be clear.

Sorai next laments that a market economy has developed, and that profit has become the prime motivation. Money and extravagance rule, while traditional good customs (*fūzoku*) have vanished. The new *seido* has to come from above to put things back in good vertical order. Money and market economy should be reduced if not entirely eliminated, and "if then the merchants go bankrupt, good riddance".

Edo had become a "free and easy" city for the merchants and the townspeople, while the samurai lived an "unfree" life in the same city. The Shogun himself was in dire straits. State finances had deteriorated since Genroku times "in conjunction with the changing habits of the world", and economic crisis was imminent at the time that the *Seidan* was written. Sorai finds it ludicrous that the Shogun shall have to use money to buy what he needs. It is in accordance with the "nature of reason" (*dōri no tōzen*) that the feudal lords should present him with what is produced in their provinces. So it had been in China, and so it ought to be in Tokugawa Japan.

Next, the daimyo are impoverished because "they have to spend every second year in Edo." "Most daimyo have to practise economy and it happens that they are unable to pay the rice stipends to their house retainers." Their impoverishment is also due to the fact that they have to live up to styles, considered proper to their social station. Their hands are "laden with stones" as they rival each other and customs have turned into extravagance. Sorai also proposes that the daimyo shall return to the simplicity of rural life, using things produced within their domains, and never buying things with money. Their retinues should be reduced. However, a *seido* need to come from the Shogun himself, setting the standards, in order to break the habits which the daimyo have developed as they try to outdo each other. The same holds true for the *hatamoto* class. They should be placed on their estates (*chigyō-shō*), that is, be removed from their "living as in an inn" at Edo and at the same time be relieved of their poverty. They should take up residence among the peasants, who, improvident and stupid, need the samurai to lead and instruct them.

Sorai sees three specific causes for the current impoverishment. (1) The rising prices of all commodities; (2) the scarcity of money; and (3) the lack of credit. The prices had doubled twenty times over a 50-60-year period. Sorai was about 60 when he wrote the *Seidan*, and he himself had experienced this inflation. He finds it the duty of the authorities to reduce the prices. The "root" problem is that the *buke* class is not attached to the soil. As soon as they are, they can decide the price of rice and all other prices would follow. The merchants would no longer be the winners.

Sorai's answer to the scarcity of money is that copper money should be issued on a large scale. Unnecessary Buddha images and bells should be melted down and be made into copper specie. If images and bells were made into money and helped to alleviate the impoverishment of the world, "it would be consonant with the boundless benevolence and compassion of the Buddha". Money should moreover be allowed to move freely, and interest rates should be fixed by law.

The seido

If the *seido* were set up in accordance with Sorai's proposals, there would immediately be distinctions between the classes with regard to food, clothing, and housing, close to the principles of the ancient Way. Ranks and titles would also be streamlined under the new *kunkai* grading system, independent of the Imperial *ritsuryō* system. Sorai says: "Truly, in everything it is desirable that the *kuge* and the *buke* be separated." The *kunkai* grading system would give the Shogun freedom in promoting and demoting people. The hereditary succession to positions should at the same time be eased to allow talented people to enter official service. A large number of new offices in the likeness of the ancient system should be established, so that many able but unemployed *hatamoto* and lower samurai, and even commoners, could aspire for service in the government. This required a wider bureaucracy and the strengthening of most offices with more personnel. There were, however, also shogunal posts which he found superfluous. The most important principle was that all officials should be selected according to ability. The perennial quest for a Confucian meritocracy! As it was, all higher administrative posts were monopolized by the upper samurai class on a hereditary basis, and learning was officially promoted to train only those with the right to rule. In this sad situation Sorai could not see a "single talented man among the officials". "Rewards and punishments" should be one of the ways to achieve reform and purify administration, and *bun* and *bu*, civil and military ability, should differentiate civil officers and military officers (*bunkan* and *bukan*).

Social mobility

In the middle of chapter twelve of Volume three Sorai expresses the philosophy on which his *keizaigaku* thought is based. It begins with a belief in Heaven and Earth, and in the light of this cosmic faith he states his thought concerning man's world. There is an absolute truth, *tenchi no dōri*, (Truth of Heaven and Earth), which is synonymous with *shizen no dōri*, (Truth of Nature), and *ri no shizen*, (Nature of Principle). What these terms express is a belief in an otherworldly "cosmic truth" or a "a lasting principle of the natural order", as McEwan puts it. There exists an eternal truth, rooted in Heaven and Earth, which had taken shape in the social institutions of early China. The *tenchi no dōri* is mentioned also in Sorai's *Taiheisaku* but not so clearly explained as in the *Seidan*. This *tenchi no dōri* functions as an eternal cycle in nature and society, called the *ten'un no junkan*, the (Cycle of Heavenly Destiny) in the *Taiheisaku*. There is a flux and rotation with regard to all things, just as seasons circulate during the year. Sorai traces this principle to the Book of Changes, the *I Ching*, and he finds it universally and eternally valid.

In this world, however, man strives against this eternal principle of the Way. It lies deep in human nature (*ninjō*) not to accept that one is mortal. Man's sentiments are, however, one thing and the eternal laws of Heaven and Earth are another. The Way of the Sages shows due respect to human *ninjō* sentiments, but it also presents *giri* restraints to people man free and the rule easy. The hereditary principle of the

Tokugawa world was in opposition to the Way when it posited that a family line should live on from generation to generation without being broken. The result was that people of ability disappeared as the natural flow of talent from below did not take place, and there was no social mobility. An age of disorder must therefore automatically occur, whereby men of ability would push their way up from below and overthrow the dynasty (in China) and the regime (in Japan). The Sages saw a wheel of social mobility as part of the Heavenly Way, and ossified society, frozen in hereditary family lineages, meant not only that the Way of Heaven and Earth did not function, but also that the age of rule was nearing its end. As Sorai puts it: "When those below who have ability are advanced and promoted, the will of those above is diffused among those below like the descending spirit of Heaven . . . When this is the case, the upper and the lower are undivided and united in a way similar to the harmonious combination of Heaven and Earth. This results in good government and in universal increase in wealth similar to the growth which takes place in spring and summer."

Volume four is, finally, a long panorama of proposals for reforms which Sorai wishes to see implemented within a perfect *seido*. They are presented in 55 mostly short chapters, and from a modern point of view, they are generally conservative in nature, all within the Confucian spectrum of thought, and all reflecting feudal Tokugawa times. For all of them it can be said that Sorai wished for a better and more strictly organized Tokugawa state, an all-embracing normative socio-political order, in which all had their definite places and standards within the straitjacket of a *go-board seido*.

Sorai's swan song was a monumental treatise within *keizaigaku*. The *Seidan* was not the first in this genre, and he had himself worked on the same subject earlier in the *Taiheisaku*, a work of about 25 pages. It is the *Seidan*, however, that is the long and comprehensive work which deals with all the facts that Sorai had on his mind and which he wanted to bring to the attention of the Shogun. While it is a detailed call for reforms, the *Taiheisaku* can be described as an earlier summary of the same.

Conclusions

It was Sorai's conclusion, after extensive studies of Chinese and Japanese history and after a 60-year long life, that political disorder emanates from *impoverishment*. Prosperity is what makes a dynasty or state live on, while impoverishment spells its downfall. It was because the institutions in the early ages of Hsia, Shang/Yin, and Chou had been beneficial that impoverishment had not appeared over a very long time. For this reason each of the three dynasties had lasted for more than 500 years. In all later ages, both in China and Japan, the institutions had not been equally beneficial, and therefore the dynasties and ages had not lasted as long. For one example, the Tang dynasty had lasted for 300 years, and, lo and behold, the Heian age, which had copied the Tang institutions in its *ritsuryō* system, had also lasted for 300 years. Thereafter, Kamakura collapsed after 100 years, and the house of Muromachi fell into great disorder after 100 years. In both cases, the period of rule was greatly reduced because the rulers were uneducated and did not know how to

follow the examples of the Early Kings of the Three Dynasties. Impoverishment had led to disorder and disorder had led to the overturn of the state.

As can be seen, Sorai's society, not least his civil society, was the feudal Confucian society. It had its roots in ancient China, and had only been modified by inevitable historical change in later dynastic eras. His ideal society had existed during the Three Early Dynasties, the true feudal (*hōken*) eras, and later *gunken* (central power), periods had been deviations from the eternal model, as inspired by Heaven and created by Sage Kings.

Tokugawa was a feudal (*hōken*) society, but when mirroring it in the early Chinese truth, Sorai was forced to conclude that it reflected the ancient model badly. Later rulers had been illiterate, that is, they had not known the ancient truth, and therefore they had initiated political institutions which were far from the ancient ideal. What had been at first slight deviations had widened into a gulf that was about to be unbridgeable. As a last desperate effort late in life Sorai turned to the Shogun himself with a *keizai* memorandum in which he pointed out the circumstances and offered advice on how to cope with the situation. If his proposals had been realized, however, it would have meant that the already rigid central controls would have become even more complex and restrictive, and the bureaucratic apparatus more pervasive.

Alas, Sorai harked back to a society, characterized by self-sufficiency, long gone, to which there was no return. In his Confucian orthodoxy he did not recognize nor accept the new society that had grown forth since at least Muromachi times in which trade and a market economy had become increasingly prevalent. Commodity production had led to a national market economy in Tokugawa, stretching across *han* borders and along the whole range of the islands. Rapid growth in commercial activity had produced a money economy, which was beyond the comprehension of a Confucian scholar, and a new civil society had grown forth which was not to the liking of an orthodox Confucian thinker. This commercialization had changed old values and created equalizing forces which played havoc with official hierarchical thought. Sorai could not accept the levelling of society that had occurred as a result. The old social harmony was destroyed as an unhealthy individualism "with everyone for himself" developed. He shows throughout the *Seidan* that he is not happy with this development, and his proposals evince that, with his classical Confucian attachments, he had never understood what happened in his own time in the economic and social world. He wanted a tightening up of the Tokugawa society in the light of ancient values, and a System, a *Seido*, which, *in fine*, aimed at reinstating an idealized agrarian society.

It should be remembered that when Sorai uses harsh words, criticizing the shogunal government and the sad conditions in the country, his loyalty to the existing order is never brought into question. The Tokugawa shoguns are for him the true rulers of the *tenka*, and he never questions their right to rule. The Imperial house is accepted as such, but Sorai wants it to be clearly separated from the *bakufu*, which he expresses in volume three. Sorai sees where the *de facto* power is located, and he is nothing but the humble servant of this *de facto* power, that is, the

Tokugawa house. The *Seidan* is also written in support of the Tokugawa rule. By pointing out what was wrong, in the light of the ancient Sages, he only wished to strengthen the Tokugawa rule in order to make it last the sagely 500 years.

One can say that Sorai nursed a double loyalty. He was loyal to the Tokugawa house, but he was above all loyal to the ancient Sages in early China, who had understood the *ri* of statecraft and established the Way for all ages and all lands. This was not the Way of the Taoists, nor the Way of the Buddhists, nor the Way of the Neo-Confucianists. It was a worldly Way, created by the Sage Kings, consisting of the political, economic, and social institutions for the peaceful and prosperous rule of the world. It was a social Way for the good of the people, and the criterion for what was good was whether the institutions were beneficial and did not lead to impoverishment.

A new society had grown forth in the wake of economic transformation and also due to the political organization of the country since Hideyoshi. As the entire military (*buke*) class congregated in "castle towns" (*jōkamachi*), the whole productive life came also to concentrate on these towns, especially Edo (*Gojōkamachi*), with a million inhabitants. A market capitalism and a money economy were unavoidable, and it is natural that new classes of people came forth who became influential beyond their status in a traditional Confucian society. Being rooted in ancient values, Sorai wished for a restoration of the *proper* world order, which was the world order of early China, not the *gekokujō* world of Genroku times, when artisans and especially merchants often had the leisure and money to live the good life while the ruling samurai class found themselves in dire straits. The whole *Seidan* is a plea for a return to good old values, to the agrarian society where self-sufficiency was the rule and where merchants and money were hardly necessary. To realize this, the whole samurai class should again be attached to the soil, the *dochaku* principle. Now they "lived as in an inn" (*ryōshuku no kyōkai*) (McEwan's translation) in the "castle towns" and this was in opposition to the *dochaku* principle. In the good government of the Sages the difference between living attached to the soil and not living attached to the soil equalled the difference between "Heaven and Earth, between cloud and clay" (*tenchi-undei*). When the samurai class was attached to the soil, it was also easy to set up the *seido*, the "System", as regards housing, clothes, utensils and other things, and also easy to establish clear class distinctions and to suppress luxury. Without this System, it would be impossible to get rid of the impoverishment of both high and low.

One can, accordingly, detect very little or nothing in Sorai's thought that is progressive in a modern sense and points in a new direction. It is conservative Confucian thought, paired with Legalist thought. His envisaged civil society mirrors the political atmosphere of the Yoshimune era (1716-35). Not an inkling of participatory democratic thought is to be found. Man, however, always finds his "private" sphere of life, which deludes the "public" sphere, and Sorai admits its existence, but it must not encroach on the "public" sphere. At the time of the Chūshingura revenge incident (1701-03) he did not hesitate to recommend that the involved samurai should, as a compromise, commit *seppuku*. Private manifesta-

tions, however moral, were not to be allowed. As he said in his recommendation: "If we let public considerations be hurt by private considerations, it will later be impossible to set up laws for the world." The individual could have his private interests and activities—his cultural civil society—in artistic, literary, scholarly, and religious life but should never allow them to impose on power and law. There was the elitist "private" sphere, and there was the popular "private" sphere and there was the gray zone between the two. So it had been since classical times and Sorai did not wish to see change brought about by the ever increasing commercialization and market economy. The new townsmen's culture with *kabuki* and *jōruri* theater, cheap *kōshokubon* literature and Yoshiwara red-light districts were anathema for him and signs of the decadence and the degeneration of the age. His civil society stressed cultured refinement in Chinese letters, arts, and religion, and it should be limited to culture. It did not include political activities, nor economic activities, which should take place only under the umbrella of shogunal rule and control. He says: "To bring the 'living as in an inn' (*ryoshuku no kyōkai*) to an end would be to bring buying to an end." (II: 4) Ideally barter and presents should again become the means of exchange. If money were to be used, it should be mainly copper coins while gold and silver should be stored away in the Shogun's coffers.

In an epilogue to the last volume, Sorai concludes that all he has written about in the four volumes is due to the fact, at present, laws are not sufficient or of no value as habits have been allowed to change. He emphasizes that the ruler should realize how society is developing in its totality. He repeats that the living as in an inn of the *buke* class must come to an end and that a comprehensive regulatory *seido* must be set up. All people should be settled in their definite places and clear distinction should be made between peasants and city people on the one hand and the *buke* class on the other. Then all other matters would follow suit as a matter of course. When, as a result, "both high and low become affluent, our age will be long and lasting; this is what I long for".

The closest Sorai came to participatory democracy was when he recommended in the last volume (IV: 49) that the Shogun should arrange "Old People's Feasts", in which an opportunity would be given to retired *hatamoto*, Confucian scholars, monks, townspeople, and peasants to speak freely about things in the land, when the Shogun and the high officials would be the listeners without interfering with the discussion. Closer he never came to power from below. In his time (1722) the shogunate set up a "complaints box" (*meyasubako*) in front of the *hyōjōsho* court, where people could, anonymously, voice their opinions. Sorai does not mention this "complaints box" in the *Seidan*. This was as close as the Tokugawa shogunate came to allowing public opinion to be expressed.

Comparison with the West

No drastic paradigm shift was ever in Sorai's mind. It was in Europe, first in the British tradition, that the shift was to take place, and a new political civil society with egalitarian freedoms and justice was to take shape, with power coming from below and not from above, that is, with sovereignty residing with the people and not with

the ruler. No shift can be seen from social privileges to human rights. A levelling of society was under way in Genroku Japan, but no philosopher was able to take a new look on what was happening and shape a new political philosophy—not even a Sorai. They could just deplore that the eternal paradigm was being eroded and could only recommend a return to old social values according to which high was high and low was low. A paradigm shift in social thought had to wait for Meiji times, when European thought was introduced. And true implementation of democratic thought had to wait even longer, until after 1945.

Ogyū Sorai can be taken as one example of Confucian thought as it developed within the long range of the Japanese Confucian tradition. One can choose among many others and one will find that they all were within the same spectrum and played the same melody, only with so many variations. They could be “inner” Confucians, like Itō Jinsai, who was close to Mencius, or they could be “outer” Confucians, like Ogyū Sorai, who was close to Hsün Tzu (c. 298-238 BC) and perhaps the Legalists. One looks, however, in vain among them to find anyone who breaks with the age-long fundamentalist views imported from China. When Sorai wished to see a *seido* enacted in which everyone had his place in society, from generation to generation to boot, he must be considered to belong among the conservatives of the Japanese Confucian tradition.

荻生徂徠の市民社会（政談）

オロフ・リディン

要旨： 荻生徂徠(1666-1728)は、60歳位のときに、彼の傑作—政談“Political Discussions”—を書き、この中で、徳川社会に対する彼の意見を示し、社会をより良くするための、多くの改革を提案した。経済学“Political Economy”において、これは享保時代（1716-35）の重要な書物であった。

徂徠は、〈政談〉第1巻の最初で、すでに、「総じて国の治と云は、譬へば碁盤の目を盛るが如し。目を盛ざる碁盤にては、何程の上手にても碁は打たれぬ也。」と表現している。

彼は、制度“system”を、碁盤という比喩を使ってイメージし、この制度は、徳川社会をうまく整えられた区画に分割するというものである。〈政談〉の第1巻は、この碁盤の基礎となっていて、その基礎の上に、後に続く第2、第3、第4巻が築かれている。徂徠の考え方は、新しく正しい秩序のある、新しい封建制度であった。しかし、再建がなされる前に、碁盤は描かれ枠組されなければならなかった。同じく〈政談〉第1巻の中で、「……碁は如何様にも打たるべき也。」と言っている。

貧困から、政治的無秩序が引き起こされるといふ事が、彼が中国と日本の歴史を長い間勉強し、60年間を生きた後の結論だった。富裕が、国家を存続させる一方で、貧困は国家の墮落を意味する。三代の中国では、国の秩序がしっかりしていたので、貧困は現れず、その時代は500年以上続いた。徂徠は、正しい制度があれば、徳川社会も豊かになり、永く存続すると考えている。このような考えをもって、彼はこの傑作を書き、その中で悲しむ

べき状況を描き、将軍吉宗に、多くの政治的改革と、経済的改革を提案している。

この論文では最後に、徂徠が正しいと考えた基盤の上の秩序と、同じ頃にヨーロッパで発展した秩序とを比較する。