

Book Review

Amino Yoshihiko, *Nihon ron no shiza : rettō no shakai to kokka (A New Standpoint on Nihon-ron : Society and the State on the Archipelago)*. Shogakkukan, 1990.

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The attraction of Yoshihiko Amino's historical research lies in his fresh presentation of antithesis, by which his sharp perceptions are brought to the fore. One could even imagine the mild mannered Amino, in his younger days, naively taking on a champion opponent in sand lot sumo, and simply pushing him out of the ring.

Recently, his term "unfarmers", a wonderful word that is the hallmark of "Amino history", has come to be used almost exclusively as a symbol of his brand of antithesis. Of course, this terminology would also include farmers as opposed to "mountainers" or "oceaners"; "stay putters" as opposed to "wanderers"; people who are tightly bound to individual plots of land as opposed to those who live communistically without such ties; and any number of other such contrasts. He continues on, however, essentially molding the existence of the "unfarmers" into a powerful field of antithesis, as opposed to the monistic rice growing "normal people". For example, Amino pays careful attention to the distinction between the agriculture of the wet paddy and the agriculture of the dry or burned over field. And just beyond the horizon, the figures of lawless but good-hearted itinerants, coming and going between mountain and field, fairly swarm off the page. The freshness of his presentation is almost mesmerizing.

It is only natural, then, that Amino's attention to "mountainers" should be accompanied by an inquisitive concern for the "oceaners" as well. The gallant exploits of the men who, during the transition from antiquity to the middle ages, went to sea on merchant vessels and pirate ships, draw our view outwards. The power of conception represented here is like a huge mirror reflecting the waves crashing on the shores of the small static islands of the Japanese archipelago.

But, of course, when Amino's power of conception is turned away from the movement of the outer world towards inner workings of those small islands, we soon see the discovery of an authoritarianism pregnant with antagonistic tension. This is apparent in the contraposition of the power of the Kyoto emperors with that of the ambitious military regime of the Kanto bakufu. In the process of his analysis of the power struggles that continued from Kamakura through the period of the Nanboku Dynasties and on into Muromachi, Amino untiringly perseveres in his presentation of the independent nature of the political block in the East, and the importance of the aspirations for statehood contained therein. If this were music, the ringing echo of the first violin part could be heard in the continuous confrontation of East and

West. An accompaniment would be also be recognized in recollection of the histories of the Ainu culture of Hokkaido and of the Ryukyu culture of Okinawa, and an intermezzo would come in the form of the overlapping influence of Northeast Asia from the Korean Peninsula to the vastness of China, all of which would come together in a unified whole. Or, to use a different metaphor, international centrifugal force would power interlocal centripetal force, thereby setting the course of historical documentation.

In this way, Yoshihiko Amino proceeds to attack one by one the ideas which have hitherto permeated debate concerning Japanese society: "mono-raciality", "the unified State", "monistic rice agriculture", and "island Japan". In their place, he proposes both a multi-dimensional approach to the Japanese people and culture, and a decentralized theory of power and the State. In so doing, he seeks to construct a new position from which to view Nihon-ron. The keenness of Amino's thought is condensed in a passage from the very beginning of the book, which I shall quote here at some length. In order to portray Amino's intentions accurately, I have purposely minimized abridgement of the following passage:

It seems to me that we have been using the term "Japanese race" too carelessly. Of course, there is no denying that there are citizens of the country of Japan. But in speaking of the "Japanese race", there is the problem of draping the same blanket of thought over all of the citizens of Japan. And upon further consideration, one must also admit that the very existence of the "Japanese race", a grouping that is generally taken on faith to be a self-evident, might also be subject to question.

The "Japanese race" has long been said to exhibit a degree of homogeneity seldom seen among other peoples...

However, stepping back to take a better look, one sees that the flip side of the "homogeneity" coin is "closedness", and one must soon come to the realization that this attribute is accompanied by tendencies to exert pressure against other peoples and to ignore the minority peoples within. The insensitivity seen in the forced fingerprinting of foreign nationals, and attitudes towards the Ainu, the Uiruta, and the Okinawan minorities, can be seen as results of forced "homogeneity" and closedness.

By recognizing reality and looking into the shadows of the "homogeneity" of the "Japanese race", we can recognize this view for what it is: a false consciousness-an ideology; the problem of how deeply this "received wisdom" is rooted in the Japanese psyche, then, comes up to meet us...

However, in order to overcome the oppressiveness and closedness of the traditionally unquestioned "theory of the Japanese race", to clarify the real foundation that allegedly makes the Japanese race a "race", that is, their position in human society, and to begin to discover the "mission" destined for them by history to work for the preservation of humanity and the establishment of peace, it is necessary to carefully restudy the views that have long supported the received wisdom. (pp. 23-4)

What Amino is trying to say is clear enough. His alternative view is aimed directly at the ideology of the "homogeneity of the Japanese race" with the intention of exposing the oppressiveness and closedness of the theory of the "Japanese race". And somewhere in the background is the high-flying flag of "mission" "to work for for the preservation of humanity and the establishment of peace" that has been "destined for them by history".

It seems as if it is for the very purpose of achieving this "mission" that Amino's brand of history was created. And I support his daring and charged proposals, if only because I think that one of the fundamental purposes of the discipline of history is to encourage speculation and rumination on established views and frameworks.

Even so, however, does viewing the received wisdom concerning theories of Japanese race as "oppressive" and "closed" necessarily lead to their wholesale condemnation as "a false consciousness-an ideology"? It is here that we run into the zealous determination of Amino's method of antithesis. That is, he seems here to be antagonistically placing his own particular version of truth opposite the "false consciousness" of ideological theories of "Japanese race".

Objectively speaking, though, Amino's position could also be interpreted as an ideology in itself; "the theory of Japanese race" versus this other ideology-although not necessarily a false consciousness. It would seem, then, that the historian Yoshihiko Amino has chosen to step forth into a philosophical debate, as evidenced by the passage quoted above in which he takes it upon himself to introduce his concept of "mission". Alternatively, this could be a naive two dimensional view of the world, in which "the preservation of humanity" and "the establishment of peace" constitute a "mission" or *true consciousness* on the one hand, and are squared off against the traditional "theory of Japanese race" or *false consciousness* on the other. Let us refrain from a hasty judgement at this point, however, and proceed a bit further.

The highlights of the book are without doubt chapters two, three, and four; "Some Aspects of Wandering and Fixed Abodes", "Travellers of the Middle Ages", and "Medieval Public Performance and its Characteristics" respectively. It is here that the most attractive themes of Amino history are expounded upon one after another. In contrast to the settled farmers, the less civilized itinerants and public performers fairly exude life. These are the people Amino says live in the asylum of "unconnectedness and borderlessness". It seems as if figures formerly frozen inside old books in some dusty warehouse are magically brought to life in a pulsating kaleidoscope right before our eyes.

At times, of course, the use of the source material is a bit bland, and one cannot help wishing for more structural context that might be provided by additional combination of source information. But certainly no one can fault the depth of material or the exciting way in which the characters are made to come alive.

And if Amino's tenacious capacity for locating historical material is surprising, his enthusiasm and creativity in using secondary sources is also unusual. It is this diligence that allows such a commanding and all-inclusive view of the the middle ages and the resulting liveliness of Amino's history. Piles of factual information and

what might be called an organically flexible narrative go hand in hand to provide extremely successful elucidation of previously concealed details of the medieval period.

One of the best known areas of Amino's view of the middle ages is his positioning of the period of the Nanboku Dynasties in the 14th century as an epoch-making divide in Japan's history. Events before this period are referred to as "early middle ages", with subsequent events labeled "later middle ages", and it is during the period of shift between these eras that the fortunes of the itinerants and performers are portrayed as having undergone drastic change.

It might be appropriate at this point to note that, the view of historical periods as gradual and continuous often only serves to muddy the image of history as a flowing integral whole. The method of cutting into history at a critical point, however, distinctly illumines the mutations and the ebb and flow of events in a clear-cut historical context. It was once popular to see the 10th and 11th centuries as a turning point prefacing the collapse of law and order. There was also a theory that the period of Onin upheaval in the 15th century brought about a complete change in Japanese lifestyles. These studies demonstrated the ineffectiveness, or even futility, of mincing historical periods into small bits. Thus, Amino has chosen to deal with this by slicing neatly through the 14th century period of the Nanboku Dynasties. He uses the resulting cross-section both to minutely examine the inner workings of the medieval archipelago and to take a broad view of "Japan" within the context of East Asia.

Resulting from this historical positioning is the presentation of the early middle ages as free and unordered, as opposed to the later middle ages, which are found to be much more restrictive. From a multidimensional itinerant lifestyle towards a one dimensional binding to a particular plot of land; from bands of wanderers living freely in largely lawless regions towards organized, controlled, and fenced in people arranged in a class structure; from being "strangers" shielded by privilege and disorder towards the fate of becoming "outcasts", looked down upon, discriminated against, and avoided. In short, the cross-sectional view of the period of the Nanboku Dynasties reveals a retreat or fall from the bright world of "freedom" to a darker one of "subordination".

To illustrate this theme, Amino draws upon a cast of symbolic characters who are, surprisingly, made up of rather undistinguished minor itinerants. For example, actresses, dancers, several varieties of prostitutes, cormorant fishers, and traders represent the women, while smiths, woodworkers, medicine and candy sellers, traveling Chinese, malt and wine merchants, salt dealers, minstrels, and gamblers provide an image of the men. Each character adds color and texture to the resulting freshly painted picture of the times. Even so, surely Amino does not intend to portray these characters as influencing history in a significant way. Yet, he so vividly describes these characters, as if he wanted the reader to think, at first, that this was his sole aim; in fact, this not his primary purpose. Instead, he uses the characters as vehicle from which to view the pronounced changes which are taking place during the period. At the same time, however, Amino slips in a viewpoint in which the protagonists of the

day, who should have been toyed with by the age in which they lived, were actually nullifying, at least in the early middle ages, the control mechanism of the invisible hand. The reader may at times have the illusion that, in the bright world of the “early middle ages”, these uninfluential minor characters are true heroes in the sense that they represent the spirit of the times to come. Here we must beware of the skillful use of unseemingly rhetoric in Amino history.

And, precisely because of this, we are given a close-up picture, as in the ending of a medieval tragic drama, of the way in which the protagonists of the early middle ages were usurped and quickly lost their glamour. The clearer this focus, the more gloriously framed the stage of the “early middle ages” becomes, and the brighter the lights that shine on the drama. Amino’s view of the middle ages certainly put this illumination effect to good use.

As these character types progress from the early middle ages to the later middle ages, we see them go from being “liberated” to being “oppressed”; and the process of the fall, from being “free itinerants” to becoming itinerants without rights, becomes clearer. We might say that, by contrasting the later middle ages with the early middle ages, he attempts to demonstrate the historical necessity-or contingency-of social organization. Or, conversely, that in contrast to the State control that marked the “later middle ages”, the resistance against oppressive mechanisms by the unconnected, borderless “early middle ages” was hypothesized as a kind of golden age of social organization.

Either way, it is clear that, here again, Amino is quietly putting to work his method of antithesis. By freely throwing in multi-faceted characters in his rendering of the medieval historical landscape, he is able to create a fresh set of contrasts of light and dark.

Amino’s historical “standpoint”, then, is nicely summed up in the following passage:

In the periods of Kamakura and the Nanboku Dynasties, the itinerants, far from being constrained within a disapproving society, enjoyed a freedom bordering on the uninhibited, and had control over their own lives. They had the power to resist the settled patterns of agricultural order, even becoming a threat at times, but maintaining a strong attractiveness at others, which pulled at the people within the established order.

I find it difficult to think, then, that these itinerants and wanderers were, at this time, “shunned” by the State administrative order, placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy as “the lowly”, and then “discriminated against”.

..... The itinerants had a certain “special privilege” guaranteed by the State and society, and they operated under their own codes of order and organization. They were hardly locked into “lowly” status. The view that they were always “outcasts”, separate and omitted from the rest of society can be said, as indicated previously, to stem from looking at these people through the eyes of authors like Masafusa [Masafusa Oe, author of *Yujoki (Diary of a Prostitute)*, *Kairuishiki (Diary of a Puppeteer)*, and other works-present author’s note].

This view is strongly related to the prejudicial tendency, based on the influence of the modern state, to decide that the strong apparatus of state must have existed from ancient times and, on the other hand, to the underestimation of the State's powers of opportunistic guile which sought to pull the nomads into its own sphere of control. (pp. 157-8)

It is strongly asserted here that in the Kamakura and Nanboku periods, the itinerants were free of control and had the power to secure for themselves from the settled farmers the broad spaces required for their way of life; like schools of fish swimming unrestrained in their "free areas". This is the "certain 'special privilege' guaranteed by the State and society" allowing the itinerants to live "under their own codes of order and organization". That the authority of the emperor was the lynchpin of this "special privilege" is another well-known Amino assertion.

In fact, however, the descendents of these medieval itinerants were eventually subjugated by the State, expelled from the society of the settled farmers, placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and discriminated against as lowly. From deep within the melody of the first violin, there wells up the melody from the second violin; in place of the carefully depicted image of the itinerants of the early middle ages, there now appears an antithesis in the form of the silhouette of the oppressed itinerants. In contrast to the vivid portrayal of the original development of the "free areas", what eventually happens to these free areas resembles a sudden switch to a minor scale, changing the mood to one of gloom. This gloomy view is then trained upon Japan's "State" and "race". The lines are drawn here for history as antithesis to confront its chosen target and prepare itself for a possible *aufheben*. It would even be fair to say that antithesis as a historical method begins to approach antithesis as a philosophical method. But how does Amino intend to link these two in this book? And just how far does he intend to pursue his concept? These are the questions that must be considered in the final analysis.

Amino's thinking about this confrontation can be guessed from the arrangement of the preface, entitled "<Nippon>-The Designation of a Country", where he asks the rhetorical questions "What is 'Japan'?" and "Who are the 'Japanese'?". To demonstrate that the content and breadth of these questions are not self-evident, he refers to a number of previous theories and explanations.

He arrives at a very natural conclusion: that "Japan" is completely a "product of history".

Thus, we must discard without hesitation the historical framework, widely used even now, that presupposes that "in the beginning were the Japanese". Not only is this presupposition erroneous, but I believe that its adoption has led to a very mistaken view of Japan itself. At the risk of being repetitive, just as there could be no emperor before the position "Emperor" was established, there could be neither Japan nor Japanese prior to the adoption of "Nippon" as the name of the nation. If we are to rely on the findings of modern scholars of ancient history, "Emperor Yūryaku", and even "Emperor Tenji" cannot be said to have existed as such. It follows then that the Jōmon people and the Yayoi people,

even the "Wajin" tomb builders and Shōtoku Taishi himself, were certainly not "Japanese", and Yama Taikoku was not Japan. The designation "Nippon", while inseparably connected with the title of the Emperor, established itself in the small region around Kyoto and expanded to most of Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu, allowing the formation of a legal State. It was this precursor State that, through clash and confrontation with society(ies) and localities on the archipelago, has continued on into the present.

Clarifying the as yet poorly understood process by which the lives of all who have lived on the archipelago have molded and, with unbiased eyes, attaining a new vision of history that is acceptable to all Japanese is the project that awaits us. When we have fundamentally completed this project, we will be able, with the support of all Japanese, to reconsider "Japan" ["Nippon"-"Sun Base"] as a name for our country. We may decide, with unlimited thanks to the sun, to continue using the same name. But it would not be at all unthinkable for us to decide to rid ourselves of a name stained with dishonor and blood in favor of a new name for our country. In the case of the latter, I believe that this would be the time that we also came to the calm decision to discontinue the title "Emperor".

It is from the position of making the foregoing prediction that one must take up Japan studies. (pp. 16-17)

I believe that Amino's judgement on this matter is completely justified; nothing could be more foolish than to doubt the fact that "Japan" and the "Japanese" are the "products of history". And, secondly, because I want to lend an ear to the cautious proposal that Amino makes in the preceding passage. He offers two choices concerning the "name for our country" (that is, the State): we can, "with unlimited thanks to the sun", continue as is, or alternatively, discard that "name stained with dishonor and blood" in favor of a completely new name. Either way, he says, the choice is ours.

As regards Amino's personal preference, it is obvious at a glance that he leans strongly towards the latter. This can be readily seen in his conclusion that, were we to decide to throw away the old name and adopt a new one, it would be at this time that we would be enabled to see off the position of "Emperor".

As we have seen, Amino indicates his intentions from the outset in the introduction to the book. He sticks to the kernel of his chosen theme throughout, leading very consistently to its reemergence in the final chapter of the book, where its outlines are made more clear. In the end it can be perceived as a kind of shrill manifesto.

Our biggest concern is not so much the formation of the State, but rather the history of society on the archipelago long before that; a society of people who, by way of sea travel, had close relations with other societies in the region and who, in one chapter of anthropology, developed the various areas of the archipelago in variety of ways; a society of people who formed not only the designation of a country or State called Japan, but also formed other States or other bodies of political control, and who were stimulated and affected by them (or

who resisted them and continued to maintain tense relations), and who developed a wide variety of lifestyles. It is our concern to look into every nook and cranny of this history, to define relations with nature on the archipelago, and to make clear the idiosyncrasies of the society that resulted from this history. There is no doubt that there is a richness of thought and logic that is hidden beyond the confines of "Japan" or even "the State". In this modern age when the fundamental relations between man and nature are being questioned, answers urgently require that we take upon ourselves the foregoing concern. I believe that this is the real job of Japan studies. (p. 376)

Here, Amino extends the fact that the national name "Japan" is a "product of history" to finally propose the pursuit of thought and logic that go beyond the State known as "Japan", and predicts that this can be accomplished by shedding historical light on the political and economic lives of the people who have lived on the archipelago. The reality of Amino history is revealed, then, in the form of a manifesto.

I cannot help but be impressed by the enthusiasm which supports Amino's transformation of his history of the middle ages and of the itinerants into a concern or quest for thinking and logic to overcome "the State". And I am moved by his ability to discover this concern, as stated in the introduction and closing chapter, in his history of "mountainers", "oceaners", artists, and other medieval itinerants.

Despite my respect and sympathy, however, I cannot say that I completely understand his argument. This is because the theme (or group of themes) presented here are not logically/philosophically followed up within the framework of the book. That is, there seems to be a large logical/philosophical gap between the central part dealing with the medieval itinerants on the one hand, and the concerns and themes stated in the introduction and conclusion on the other. Amino's minutely detailed history of the middle ages and its itinerants does have a certain potential for overcoming the state, but it is not in itself a logic or system of thought that goes beyond "the State".

To summarize, Amino's work started with an historical exposition of the situation of the "unfarmers". His focus was to prove historically that these itinerants, in contrast to the settled agriculturalists, were able to live as they pleased in the unconnected, borderless "free areas". Thus, he found that the period of the "early middle ages" gave birth to a sparkling historical "paradigm". Then, by working and stretching this "paradigm", he sought both to closely examine the medieval period and to step back for a broader look at the entire image of Japanese history.

But, as previously noted, this historical "paradigm" remains at heart a concept extracted by the antithetical method. Just as Amino placed the itinerants and settled agriculturalists opposite one another, so he also placed the bright early middle ages in opposition with the gloomy later middle ages. It is certainly true that this antithetical method is effective in awakening one to the historical possibilities of the age. When the "paradigm" of the early middle ages is placed opposite the amorphous Japanese State, the same effect is illusory. Not only that, but one is forced to wonder if the large theme of surpassing the State can actually be pursued simply

through contrast. It seems a virtually impossible feat. I think that this is where Amino's method of antithesis starts to run into serious difficulties.

For example, according to Amino, during the early middle ages the Emperor held title to all unowned mountains, fields, rivers, seas, and transportation routes. The itinerants at this time, being subjects of the "holy" Emperor, had official recognition to wander to and from place to place (e. g. p. 192). It must be noted, however, that this well known first thesis of Amino's conflicts and overlaps with a second thesis: that the Japanese State is beleaguered by the autocratic nature of the emperorship. Between this countervailance and tension is hidden a tremendous abyss that cannot be crossed in a single leap. Perhaps it is within the deep fissure between these two theses that the dark and mysterious forces of the State are concealed. Here also may be contained the vast energy required to traverse beyond.

It seems to me, then, that the instruments required to coax out this mysterious magic and vast energy are not contained within Amino's "early middle ages". I cannot see that the antithetical "paradigm" of the "early middle ages" is sufficient to successfully challenge the huge thesis of "the State". In order to acquire the philosophical instruments necessary to take his historical "paradigm" beyond "the State", it may be necessary for Yoshihiko Amino to transform himself from a historian to a thinker or philosopher. Only then, I believe, will the gap between the central part of the book (medieval history) and the themes and concerns proclaimed in the introduction and conclusion (the theory of the State) be bridged both logically and philosophically.