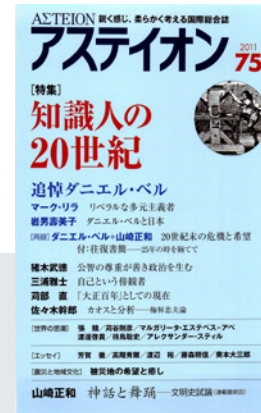


鋭く感じ、柔らかく考える

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## Intellectuals and Society One Hundred Years After the Start of the Taisho Period

by Tadashi Karube

Countries throughout East Asia have retained their own unique systems of naming eras, right through to the present day. Japan for instance still uses traditional era names alongside the Gregorian calendar, which it adopted during the latter part of the nineteenth century. So 2011 is also referred to as "Heisei 23," as it is the twenty-third year since the current emperor acceded to the throne. Obviously this doesn't mean that eras can be clearly distinguished from one another based on their respective social or cultural characteristics. According to Tadashi Karube, the current intellectual environment in Heisei 23 is definitely not specific to the Heisei period. Certain key elements have remained unchanged ever since the Taisho period (1912-1926), effectively creating a "100-year Taisho period" running all the way through to the present day. While Europe and the United States experienced a mixture of prosperity and turmoil during the period either side of World War I, what were social conditions like in Taisho-period Japan, and how was intellectual production regarded?

The Taisho period was an era of marked urbanization, against a backdrop of industrialization and Japan's declining rural population. Although this meant that society became increasingly atomized, as those living in towns and cities

severed geographical and family ties to their hometowns, the same people now had the flexibility to form relationships more freely. This was accompanied however by signs of decadence and a breakdown in morals. Karube is keen to point out clear parallels between the Taisho period and the present day in that respect. Renowned Japanese novelist Junichiro Tanizaki was acutely aware of this shift in mood during the Taisho period and captured the anxieties of urban life in Japan through his portrayals of characters lacking in common ethics. "I have done bad things throughout my life. I may have become a good man, but it was never intentional." (Passage from an Investigation, Junichiro Tanizaki)

The same journals that published Tanizaki's novels often featured articles written by Sakuzo Yoshino, one of prewar Japan's leading political scientists and father of "Taisho democracy." With the growth of the international shipping industry and telephone networks, Yoshino regarded this as a transitional period, as the era of imperialism finally made way for the age of international democracy, as evidenced by Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points," the formation of the League of Nations, trends in international cooperation, and links between diplomacy and democracy. He was keen for Japan to play an active role in this process. It may be hard to imagine in light of events in Japan during the 1930s, but Karube stresses the fact that Japan was firmly on board with globalization and the concept of international democracy at that time.

The industrialization and urbanization of Japan also led to higher levels of education. The number of universities increased from 1918 (Taisho 7) in particular as the number of men progressing into higher education also soared. This led to an increase in the so-called new middle class, including male white-collar workers and university students, as it began to envelop academic experts engaged in research. Knowledge also became increasingly specialized, resulting in a decline in more general knowledge. Or to put it another way, it was "the start of an era plagued by issues such as intellectual tunnel vision and poverty of ideas."

Unlike in Europe, most university experts and members of the new middle class in Japan had perfectly ordinary upbringings. As a result, they had mixed feelings and a persistent fear of the grass-roots masses based on their own experiences.

Their fears were underpinned by the threat of mob violence. The Hibiya incendiary incident for instance was a major riot in 1905 (Meiji 38) in protest against the terms of the peace treaty following the Russo-Japanese War. The rice riots of 1918 (Taisho 7) meanwhile stemmed from public anger over rising rice prices. It was in 1923 however, following the Great Kanto Earthquake, that "the frightening power of the mob erupted most explosively." Large numbers of vigilante groups quickly sprang up in the affected area. Misled by false rumors, they set about massacring socialists and Koreans. One obvious factor that made this issue more complicated however was that the same mobs responsible for this violence and disorder were also carrying out well-intentioned voluntary activities throughout the affected area.

These "voluntary associations," in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville, were the building blocks of democracy that Japanese intellectuals of the 1920s had been waiting for. Coupled with the introduction of western theories of political pluralism, this was regarded as an age of discovery in terms of Japanese society. Whereas society had previously been regarded as a community brought together by the shared purpose of serving the state, intellectuals of the period "discovered" and came out in support of a society that acted independently from the state. So how did Sakuzo Yoshino, a key proponent of arguments such as this, explain the duality of the Japanese masses, balancing expressions of goodwill against escalating bloodshed? He attributed violence amongst voluntary associations to public education and the ingrained principle of obedience to one's superiors, government officials and the state. This left people feeling disgruntled, which in turn made them envious of anyone who was better off socially or economically and abusive towards those beneath them.

Karube focuses closely on Yoshino's explanation. He claims that this Japanese psychological tendency, of "flattering those higher than oneself and looking down on those below, instinctively envying and resisting anyone successful whilst at the same time pushing aside the weak if they get in the way," remains unchanged to this day, continuing the notion of a 100-year Taisho period. Following the recent 3/11 earthquake however, there were fortunately no reports of mass violence such as that in the wake of the Great Kanto Earthquake. Even

so, Karube wonders whether that would have been the case had relations with Japan's neighbors been considerably more strained than they are. So what positive signs can we take from modern-day Japan within this 100-year Taisho period? Referring to an extract from one of Tanizaki's novels, what Karube is saying may be very simple on one level, but it is also loaded with serious implications. People have the ability to see through to the evil that lies in the depths of their heart and recognize it as evil. At the very least, "people are equipped with those same moral abilities regardless of what is going on around them, no matter how disordered things become or how much we lose sight of the common values about right and wrong."

--synopsis by Seiichi Hayashi

