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Keynote Address : The Methodology of the Comparative Study of Civilization

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Keynote Address: The Methodology of the Comparative Study of Civilization

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1. THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CIVILIZATION: CONCEPT AND METHOD

Objective of the symposium

This is the fourth symposium on the study of civilization. The first one was devoted to the comprehensive study of modern Japan. It was an attempt to define characteristics of modern Japanese life and society from the viewpoint of the comparative study of civilization. Since it was the first symposium, discussions were mostly concerned with basic questions about the comparative study of civilization—for instance, what is the comparative study of civilization, and how culture differs from civilization. [UMESAO, BEFU & KREINER 1984]

The second symposium focused its attention on the subject of “urbanization”. A method of comparison for the comparative study of civilization was discussed from a theoretical point of view [UMESAO, SMITH II, MORIYA & OGAWA 1986]. The subject of the third symposium, held last March (1983), was the “comparative study of civilization: government institutions”. The concept of convergence and divergence in civilization was examined.

Customarily, I deliver a keynote lecture at the opening of each symposium. In accordance with this practice, I would now like to raise a few questions concerning

the current subject, "economic institutions". The following is what I expect from this symposium.

In the past, numerous studies were conducted to grasp the condition of the world in view of the history of civilization. All doctrines on this matter, having been mostly formulated in Europe, seem to have lacked sufficient knowledge of East Asia. Among East Asian countries, scholars have made some references to China, but extremely few to Japan. From the viewpoint of the comparative study of civilization though, the conditions of China differ greatly from those of Japan. Take Max Weber, for example, he is held in high repute for his scholarship. Yet his knowledge of Japan is, to us, quite deficient.

Fortunately, however, the study of Japan has become increasingly popular in many countries. The world's most active Japanologists have been invited to this symposium. I believe their rich and accurate knowledge of Japan will help develop a new perspective in social science. To diffuse ample knowledge about various East Asian civilizations, especially about Japan, will surely help us review the general theories of social science established by Max Weber and others. The series of symposia on the subject of the comparative study of civilization which we organized in recent years was meant to accomplish this. Needless to say, a few discussions would not be enough for this purpose. Yet a tenacious effort to continue discussions on this issue might eventually lead us to a new perspective with regard to the historical structure of world civilization.

Comparative study of civilization: economic institutions

For this symposium, the "comparative study of civilization: economic institutions" was chosen as the main subject.

An economic institution is not an economic phenomenon itself. It should be defined as the system which operates the economy, or the social structure related to the economy. A general view of the history of various civilizations shows that each age produced different economic phenomena. In this context, the following questions are inevitable: What institutions produced and controlled those phenomena? How is government—the State, for instance—related to economic institutions? The previous symposium was concerned with government institutions. The relation between government and economic institutions is of vital interest to us.

There are also some questions to raise about the organizations which play a major role in economic activities. Today, the representative of such organizations seems to be private enterprise. The questions are: What principles guide these organizations? How far does the so-called logic of capital penetrate their operation? To what extent do various conventional and cultural values restrict or influence them. Furthermore, the social structure which supports the activities of economic organizations should be also examined. Hopefully, discussion of the issues will evolve in various directions and include consideration of the specific system which controls the distribution of information or knowledge of business activities.

Parallel phenomena in history

Taking an extended view of the history of human civilization, we find that similar phenomena have developed in various fields of human activities in various parts of the world. It is widely known that parallel phenomena have often appeared in the history of different civilizations. In fact, a number of comparative studies of civilizations have been made to prove this. Too detailed a comparison, however, naturally tends to result in mere revelation of differences. Emphasizing differences only renders the comparison of civilizations meaningless.

In the comparative study of civilization, corresponding historical phenomena evidenced in more than two different civilizations are defined as parallel but not completely identical phenomena.

For example, corresponding phenomena in different civilizations may be referred to with similar terms. The person who acts socially as the ruler of a tiny island in the South Seas may be appropriately called a King. Different as he may appear to be from his European counterparts, the title suggests some commonality. Possible miscomprehension notwithstanding, to call those phenomena by the same name, though not identical in a strict sense, is permissible in social science. Otherwise, the entire sphere of social science would become meaningless.

There is a great difference between French and Japanese feudalism. Nevertheless, compared to a society without a feudal system, the French feudal society corresponds with the Japanese one to a great extent; *roi* corresponds to the Japanese term for *tennō* (emperor), *chevalier*, to *bushi* (warrior) and *seigneur*, to *ryōshu* (lord). To discover the functional and institutional correspondence between the French and Japanese societies should facilitate mutual understanding between them. In this sense, it is possible to say that Western European countries and Japan greatly resemble each other. This suggests that a similar correspondence may also exist between them in terms of economic phenomena. In fact, similarities are apparent in various phenomena, including the development of stocks and the emergence of financial capital.

The concept of correspondence can also be explained by employing a biological example. Mankind and other mammals are greatly different from each other in appearance. Yet, comparative anatomy proves that we have remarkably corresponding internal organs. Such correspondence is quite understandable since we belong to the same evolutionary genealogy. What if man is compared with completely different genealogical creatures, such as crustaceans—a crab, for instance? In spite of an entirely different appearance and arrangement of internal organs, the crab and man have something in common; both have similar organs for ingestion and for movement. We call the organs a mouth and legs, respectively, to facilitate our understanding of the crab. We may call any organ a stomach so long as its function is similar to that of a human stomach.

The same logic is applicable to social science as well.

2. VARIOUS PROBLEMS CONCERNING ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS

State and economy

Economic institutions form the system which manage the economy, or the social structure related to economic phenomena, as was stated in the previous section. Some points concerning this are important enough to be considered from the viewpoint of the study of civilization.

One of primary importance is the relationship between the State and the economy. The previous symposium focused on government as its main subject. This symposium, on the other hand, is intended to throw light upon the relationship between the government and economic institutions—in other words, the relationship between the State and economy. One of the most important problems for the study of civilization is to clarify how they are related to each other.

In the previous symposium, the State was naturally regarded as the institutions of government. How would it be described from the viewpoint of economic activities? What system of the State determines the condition of economic activities in the history of civilization?

Some functions of the State have been closely related to the economy. Various economic functions, including coinage and the issuance of coins, establishment of weights and measures, and tax collection, have been practiced by the State since antiquity. The State is the institutions of government and in a sense, that of the economy as well.

Yet it does not necessarily mean that discrepancies never exist between the State and the economy. The economy is indispensable to the State, whereas the economy does not always depend upon the State. In the history of civilization, there are many instances of economic activities performed outside the boundary of the State. The principal example is the economic activities of emigrants from various countries such as China, India, Greece, Lebanon and Syria, who are collectively called *Kyōmin*, according to the meanings of Chinese letters. Another example includes entrepreneurial activities organized in order to serve the convenience of foreign capital—those of comprador capital in modern China, for instance. They may be also regarded in a way, as economic activities outside the boundary of the State. Present-day multinational enterprises should be, perhaps, also referred to in this context. The above typical examples suggest that the relation between the State and economy has, understandably, never been simple.

Then, how could the State be characterized when most economic activities of the nation were conducted within its sphere? More review is required with regard to economic activities outside the boundary of the State, in order to analyse this problem.

The economic activities of *kyōmin* or emigrants

Emigrants are defined as a group of individuals settled away from home in foreign countries. The most influential in the modern world, in terms of both

population and economy, are the emigrant Chinese and Indians.

Both groups have expanded relatively rapidly in recent years. The number of emigrant Chinese, particularly those called the South Seas emigrant Chinese, who settled throughout South-east Asia, began to increase dramatically in the later years of the Ch'ing dynasty. Emigrant Indians, on the other hand, emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They advanced throughout the world as the British expanded their sugar, coffee, rubber and tea plantations.

The Chinese and Indians, once they were settled in the foreign lands with a fair prospect of making a living, used home-village and kinship ties to call on friends and relatives to further develop their foreign economic activities. Eventually, they succeeded in playing an economically important role in the societies where they emigrated.

Specifically because of this fact, emigrants are to be noted in the comparative study of civilization concerning economic institutions. What is important is that they now play a significant role in the economies of the societies where they emigrated. Why away from home, but not at home?

The sudden increase in the number of South Seas emigrant Chinese in the late Ch'ing period is generally attributed to the political instability that existed in China at that particular time; it prompted many Chinese to emigrate. Similarly, the number of emigrant Indians increased in the early nineteenth century when their nation was in the midst of political turmoil leading to the fall of the Mogul Empire. The homelands of many emigrants, such as China and India, experienced in modern times a dramatic deterioration of the strength of their governments.

Emigrant Greeks, Lebanese and Syrians of the Mediterranean countries have backgrounds similar to the Chinese and Indians. It can be said that those countries from which a mass of people emigrated in modern times were affected with weak government. Presumably, people who considered their government's situation desperate, emigrated and could not help but rely upon privately-conducted economic activities in the foreign lands where they emigrated.

It should be noted that the emigrants perform a certain economic role in the countries which received them. What conditions in the receiving countries made it possible for them to realize this? There may have been some common conditions among those countries. In South-east Asia, emigrant Chinese and Indians are said to play principal roles in the economic activities of Thailand and Burma, respectively. In West Africa, Lebanese and Syrians are conspicuous. Generally speaking, emigrants are noticeably active in Asia and Africa.

The situation common to those countries seems to be their lack of a middle class. The societies were composed of a limited number of wealthy individuals, and a majority of serfs and petty farmers, without a middle class. The emigrants, who had grown important through economic activities, filled the void as the newly-established middle class. This appears to be the principal explanation to the question mentioned earlier: Why away from home, but not at home?

The significance of stable government

So far various conditions surrounding the emigrants have been discussed. They appear to point, though vaguely, to a certain relation between government and economic institutions. The emigrants who carried on economic activities beyond the boundary of the State, had extremely weakened governments in their home countries, at least in modern times. Conversely, in order for the State to function effectively as an economic system it would be correct to say that it requires a powerful government. Consider a colony, for instance, in terms of this question of emigrants. Though possibly regarded as an economic system, by nature, colonies differ greatly from the system of emigrants. With a strong State behind it, the colony could depend on the State's military force; it was ready to move in whenever trouble arose in the colony. The situation was different in the case of emigrants.

In their early stage, European colonies in Asia existed only occasionally, for instance, in Malacca and other places. Extensive colonization began with the British dominion of India in the nineteenth century. Afterwards, needless to say, the European Powers conquered Asian and African countries one after another. This is the so-called colonization by modern imperialism, which was supported by powerful States. It goes without saying that the European Powers were later joined by Japan.

Thus, China, India and the Mediterranean countries who provided great numbers of emigrants may be called emigration-oriented nations, whereas the European Powers and Japan, with strong States behind them, colonization-oriented nations.

The discussion so far seems to suggest that the relation between the State and the economic institutions in modern times depends greatly upon the existence of stable government.

The middle classes and their capital

I have already noted that the common feature of the emigrant-receiving societies was their failure to develop a native middle class. The emigrants, through their economic activities, came to constitute the middle class in countries where the wealthy ruling classes formed the minority and the serfs and petty farmers, the majority. It would be correct to say that the emigrants became the middle class while engaging in commerce and farm-management, and functioning as an intermediary between the two classes.

Moreover, the formation of a middle class in these societies led to the development of indigenous capital. In fact, the activities of the emigrant Chinese, Indians and others in different societies provided the capital indigenous to each of the societies. What are the characteristics of such capital, then?

There are roughly two points to mention in connection with this question. One is the fact that the emigrants send part of the capital they earn in the foreign land back home, even though it is indigenous capital. Perhaps their reliance upon

the organization of their village communities and families at home made it difficult for them to sever their ties with their homelands. Even now, a considerable amount of money is said to be sent home. This practice, however, tends to destabilize the condition of capital development by emigrants in the societies where they are settled.

The unstable performance of their capital in the societies where they settled inevitably creates the second point: much of their capital can be characterized as commercial or financial capital. Without a strong political power or stable government backing their economic activities, emigrants would naturally seek safety; therefore, they concentrate their capital investment only in areas where short-term profits can be expected. Accordingly, they are reluctant to invest in areas which require a long-term prospect, like enterprises for the promotion of new industry. It is true the capital accumulated by the emigrants in various societies constitutes capital indigenous to those societies, but only partially. Because of the regular transfer of funds to their home and little investment made in enterprises holding long-term prospects, their capital falls short of the qualification to be, in a genuine sense, indigenous to the societies they settled in.

It is therefore quite evident that a long-term and stable government is needed for the development of indigenous capital and long-term investment in industrial capital as well as in commercial capital. These considerations apparently indicate that an enduring and stable government is indispensable for the healthy performance of natural economic institutions.

Western Europe and Japan

Western Europe and Japan seem to have much in common with respect to economic institutions. The common element suggested by what has been discussed so far is that both have had powerful and stable governing systems since the early stage of modern times, and backed by these governments, their economic institutions have functioned in harmony with the administrative mechanisms of their states. It can be said that they have been colonization-oriented nations according to the aforementioned classification.

Moreover, neither the European countries nor Japan have accepted a mass of emigrants. This is because, as their histories show, both had a wealthy, urban middle class as early as the Medieval Age. Hanse Towns and the free cities represented by Sakai were founded in Western Europe and Japan, respectively, at that time. There, citizens engaged in commercial activities and realized self-government of their towns. Anyway, there is no doubt that those countries had had a wealthy, urban middle class established in their societies before modern times. Accordingly, there was no room to accept emigrants in any great number, when mass emigration from the mediterranean countries, India and China occurred in modern times.

In addition to an urban middle class formed in medieval times, the West and Japan saw the emergence of small-to-medium, rural capitalists in the early modern period. In the case of Japan, it was small-to-medium landlords and brewers who

accumulated capital. Their capital was invested in the cultivation of farmland and the promotion of industry in East Japan. A similar situation probably existed in Western Europe as well. The free entrepreneurial spirit seems to have nurtured a number of industrial capitalists in various fields. From the eighteenth through the nineteenth century, handicraft manufacturing prospered in many places, until it culminated in the Industrial Revolution.

Incidentally, some family names of Western Europeans are taken from names of occupations; Smith, or Schmidt in German, Taylor, or Sartre in French, which means tailor. Cook, or Cuisinier in French, and Carpenter are among them. The prosperity of the handicraft manufacturing in the early modern period may be reflected in the creation of those family names.

During the Edo period, Japan enjoyed a long-sustained, stable political environment. This environment facilitated frequent movement and exchange of people. Their enhanced interest in change and novelty, contributed to the rapid spread of knowledge and information to every corner of the society. The common people, such as farmers, merchants and artisans, traveled. They participated in famous pilgrimages to the Grand Shrine of Ise. It is possible that some farmers happened to see, on their way back from Ise, rice fields which seemingly promised good crops. Perhaps they asked for seeds to take home. In this way, a good-quality rice species is said to have spread throughout the country at an astonishing speed. Travel was also commonplace in Western Europe. There, it was the common people who made pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

3. ECONOMIC INSTITUTIONS OF MODERN JAPAN

Enterprises to promote industry in the early modern age

As I mentioned in the introduction to this keynote lecture, this symposium on the comparative study of civilization is expected to create a new perspective in social science theory by introducing accurate and detailed knowledge of Japan.

For that purpose, accurate and detailed knowledge of Japanese economic institutions is required. Fortunately, many specialists in this field are present at this meeting. Preceding to their discussion on the matter, I should like to present some views and hypotheses with regard to these questions: How should the economic institutions of our country be understood from the viewpoint of the comparative study of civilization? What approaches are possible in discussing our economic institutions from the viewpoint of the comparative study of civilization?

Of course, I am not a specialist in economics or economic history. The views I am going to present are only tentative reasonings from the viewpoint of the comparative study of civilization. The question of primary interest in this respect is to what extent instances drawn from the economic institutions of our country are universally applicable to those of other countries. The answer to this question is the principle concern of this symposium. The specialists who have gathered here are invited to investigate this matter and discuss it further.

As has already been mentioned, in the rural areas—in East Japan in particular, brewers, etc., accumulated capital as early as the eighteenth century, and invested it in farmland development and enterprises which would promote industry in their own rural areas. Free investment realized by the Meiji Restoration made it possible to invest such local capital in various industries, including spinning, railroads and ship-building. It resulted in a simultaneous emergence of those industries throughout Japan. It is, probably, correct to say that the various local capital accumulated during the Edo period contributed to the Industrial Revolution in the Meiji period.

Financial capital in the Edo period was large, urban capital. It was often made available to many *daimyō* by *daimyō* loans in the later Edo period. Most financial capital, however, was lost during the Meiji Restoration, only a few merchants succeeded in converting it into industrial capital. From the late Edo period to the early Meiji period, many entrepreneurs emerged in regional areas. I attribute this, hypothetically, to the financial difficulties of *han*, or local governments, after the eighteenth century. At that time, with the firm establishment of the *bakuhan* system of rule, a monetary economy prevailed. Still based on taxes imposed on farmers, *han* finances gradually deteriorated.

Urban, financial capital emerged at that time to make loans to *han*. These were the *daimyō* loans I mentioned earlier. Taxes collected from the farmers were mortgaged for these loans. In other words, *han* in financial difficulty borrowed money from urban financiers by mortgaging the taxes paid by farmers.

Evidently, *han* finances could not be enhanced through this practice. Therefore, each *han* chose similar measures to rebuild their finances, namely, the promotion of industry. A great number of the so-called regional industries of today were founded then for that purpose. Rapeseed-oil refining, weaving, ceramics, salt and paper manufacturing, and pharmacy are among these.

As industrial enterprises became more and more important in *han* finance, *han* administrators even appointed individuals from the merchant class to offices in charge of *han* finance. In the nineteenth century government officials in charge of finance seem to have assumed leadership in many *han* administrations.

Under the *bakuhan* system of rule, a single *han* was a rather compact unit of administration. Compactness apparently helped when an effort was made to rebuild finances and promote industries. It seems as if all *han* had been competing with each other for better management of *han* finance and industrial enterprises. It is fair to assume that this competition nourished development of industrial capital and entrepreneurs in later years. The fact which supports this assumption is that the *bakuhan* system of rule in the Edo period provided a stable political environment over a long period of time.

Organizational principle of business

Japanese society today is genuinely a business society. Thousands of enterprises, big and small, are in operation competing with each other. These enter-

prises, however, seem to be not so much management organizations purely in pursuit of profits, as apparatus which enable employees to earn their living. The pursuit of profits is universally believed to be the primary objective of any enterprise. Yet it is only partially true in Japanese enterprises. For instance, managers find it extremely difficult to maintain a profits-come-first attitude when to do so might invite friction with society. The employees and their families' lives are the most serious matter of concern when Japanese enterprises face a managerial crisis. This proves that in Japan the first priority for management is the stability of the lives of the employees and their families. Accordingly, it is difficult for them to have their company go bankrupt or merge with another.

The organizational principle of Japanese enterprises is often described as group-oriented. In my view, it is not always appropriate to characterize it this way. Rather, it would be more realistic to describe it as organization-oriented; for the organization itself takes precedence over anything else. A group-oriented principle, on the other hand, guides people so that they act as a group. The logic of the group is given priority. The organizational principle of Japanese enterprises is different from this. According to this principle of being organization-oriented, first priority is the organization, and its members are willing to make every effort towards the survival and prosperity of the organization. Guided by this principle, for instance, members of a company try to retain the old company name even after a merger. Moreover, the Japanese in general are always conscious of belonging to some organization or another.

Such a concept of industrial organization, I believe, owes its origin to the relationship between the *han* and its retainers under the *bakuhan* system of rule. *Han* were basically an administrative apparatus whose principal purpose was to support retainers. The retainers' sense of loyalty to their *han* can be considered as the prototype of the present sense of loyalty to organizations. The *han* logic nourished in the Edo period seems to still exist in today's business world.

Function-based system and personality-based system

From the viewpoint of the comparative study of civilization, there are, as already noted, many common features between European countries and Japan. Yet there are differences, too. One big difference is said to lie in the relation between the individual and his occupation. West European society is often regarded as function-oriented. This may be traced back to the guild system, such as the Meister system which is believed to still exist in German society today. These Western European systems give priority to function. The basic difference between Western European and Japanese labour unions may be attributed to this situation.

Meanwhile, in Japanese society, the organization-oriented principle works as mentioned before. In the Japanese enterprise it is common practice to promote employees from one category to another within the organization. If employed by a railway company, for example, even a would-be president must start work as a conductor. Japanese society is not in principle, function-oriented. It is guided by

what might be called a personality-based system. Apparently, a functional group is hard to develop in Japan.

Japanese society has a unique system evaluating an individual abilities. Competition is avoided, as much as possible, even in the sphere of economy. Consider the wage system, for instance. It is generally based on seniority. One's wage is not determined by one's function or ability at a certain moment. It is based upon an evaluation of one's total personality, including one's work and lifestyle throughout one's whole life.

As for personal life, economic activities—work, in particular—is always of the greatest importance in evaluating someone's total personality. In that sense, a purely economic act could never exist in Japanese society on the personal or business level. It seems that competition in terms of pure economic action is undertaken more in the sphere of consumption.

The above statement may hold true with regards to feminism in Japan; increased participation of women in public affairs may be restricted by the social structure and history. In the function-oriented society, a person can work, regardless of sex, depending upon his or her ability, and be rewarded. In our country, however, the public evaluation of a person is always based upon his or her total personality, rather than ability or function. This will, probably, make it more difficult for Japanese women to realize increased participation in public affairs, than it is for European or American women.

The reasoning thus developed appears to be inevitably concluded by the following hypothesis: modern European society has its origins in the guild system, whereas modern Japanese society has its origins in the *han* system. The validity of this hypothesis, though, must be established. I request the participants here to discuss and consider this hypothesis.

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