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Maruyama Masao and Liberalism in Japan¹

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As Carl Schmitt has pointed out, an outstanding characteristic of the modern European State lies in its being ein neutraler Staat. That is to say, the State adopts a neutral position on internal values, such as the problem of what truth and justice are; it leaves the choice and judgment of all values of this sort to special social groups (for instance, to the Church) or to the conscience of the individual. ... Questions of thought, belief, and morality were deemed to be private matters and, as such, were guaranteed their subjective, 'internal' quality; meanwhile, state power was steadily absorbed into an 'external' legal system, which was of a technical nature.

In post-Restoration Japan, however, when the country was being rebuilt as a modern State, there was never any effort to recognize these technical and neutral aspects of national sovereignty. In consequence Japanese nationalism strove consistently to base its control on internal values rather than on authority deriving from external laws.

The 'people's right' approach, represented by early liberals of this kind, was from the beginning connected with theories about 'national rights'; and it was inevitable that it should in due course be submerged by them. Thus in the struggle for liberalism the question of the individual's conscience never became a significant factor in defining his freedom. Whereas in the West national power after the Reformation was based on formal, external sovereignty, the Japanese State never came to the point of drawing a distinction between the external and internal spheres and recognizing that its authority was valid only for the former.

Accordingly, until the day in 1946 when the divinity of the Emperor was formally denied in an Imperial Rescript, there was in principle no basis in

Japan for freedom of belief. Since the nation includes in its 'national polity' all the internal values of truth, morality, and beauty, neither scholarship nor art could exist apart from these national values.²

Maruyama Masao (1914–96) was without doubt an eminent liberal. But being liberal in Japan, a country in which liberalism is not deeply rooted in culture, is different from being so in Europe or America. Maruyama never tries to formulate, as John Rawls does, his own theory of liberalism. Rather, he prefers, as an intellectual historian, to analyse and describe the movement of ideas in the past and to show his own thought through dialogue with past thinkers. However, with the major exception of Fukuzawa Yukichi, Maruyama rarely chooses liberal thinkers for examination in his study of Japanese thought. As the reference to Carl Schmitt in the lead quotation suggests, he owes much of his understanding of liberalism to its enemies. In these respects, one might find some similarities or parallels between Maruyama and Isaiah Berlin, who, himself committed to Enlightenment ideas, profoundly investigated the meaning and significance of the anti-Enlightenment and even drew a charming portrait of Joseph de Maistre.

Maruyama is not a simple and complacent liberal. He is keenly aware of the weak points of Western liberalism, which were tragically revealed in the political experiences of humankind in the twentieth century. Among his contemporary liberals in the West, he shows greater sympathy with those who are self-critical of the liberal tradition, like Harold J. Laski or Reinhold Niebuhr. Thus, not only does he criticize the tradition of his own country, he also shows in his own way how to survive the world crisis of the twentieth century as a liberal.

Maruyama's liberal thinking is remarkable for his sharp critique of the illiberal tradition in his own country, which unconsciously curbs the minds of the people, including many self-proclaimed liberals. Liberalism (*jiyūshugi*) and related words conveying its central concerns were introduced into Japanese political vocabulary in the nineteenth century. Classical texts of European liberalism were translated (*On Liberty* in 1873 and the first volume of *Democracy in America* in 1881) and widely read amid the political enthusiasm aroused by the Popular Rights Movement. The first political party in Japan born from the movement was named the Liberal Party (*jiyūtō*), although a national parliament was not in existence at the time.

Under the Constitution of 1889, however, liberalism as a political force was consistently marginalized in Japanese politics. In spite of a certain progress of constitutional democracy and party politics during the Taishō era (1912–26), liberal tendencies declined in the following decades of militarism and

hyper-nationalism. The persecution (in 1935) of Minobe Tatsukichi, an authoritative Tokyo Imperial University professor emeritus of constitutional theory and member of the House of Peers, whose liberal interpretation of the Meiji Constitution had once been accepted as a standard by the government, tragically showed the vulnerability of liberalism in pre-war Japan.

Thus, under the military government and the heavy pressure of ultra-nationalism, liberalism was virtually dead in Japan when the Second World War began. No liberals criticized the basic values of the Emperor System, and liberal social theories did not provide a plausible analysis of its political and ideological structure. Only Marxists attempted a thoroughgoing critical analysis of the regime, at the price of suffering ruthless oppression.

The significance of Maruyama Masao and his work in Japanese intellectual history is to be understood against this background of the poor record of liberals and the comparatively strong performance of Marxists in pre-war Japan. Born into a family of liberal journalists and studying at the law faculty of Tokyo Imperial University, he inherited the best of pre-war liberalism. Starting his academic career in the critical years of the 1930s, however, he was heavily influenced by Marxist analysis. His first major scholarly work, written around 1940 and published in book form after the war, was a meticulous analysis of the political thought of the Tokugawa period (1603–1867) which became a reference for all subsequent studies of the subject.³ Methodologically, it followed in the footsteps of the Marxian critique of ideology in its intent to explain the development of social and political thought in connection with changing social structures, but it also revealed Maruyama's distance from orthodox Marxism in that he neither reduced the meaning of ideology to its social function nor considered any set of ideas a mere reflection of the social and economic interests of the social classes which embraced them. His methodological guides were Max Weber, Karl Mannheim and Franz Borkenau, among others.

Maruyama's reading of Tokugawa political thought was motivated by a covert intention to protest against the dominant ideology of the time. Japano-centrism, Confucianism and National Learning (a movement to revive the study of Japanese history and literature) were ideological weapons against modernity, that is to say, Western democracy and liberalism, in sharp contrast to Maruyama's reinterpretation. He explored the intellectual origins of Japanese modernization in the dissolution of the Neo-Confucian mode of thought, and found in the rise of National Learning the basis for the growth of basic ideas of modern thinking: the emancipation of the natural desires of human beings from moralistic restraints. His treatment of the two heroes of his story (Ogyū Sorai and Motoori Norinaga)

was particularly striking. In the conventional reading, the former was notorious for his cult of China and therefore a *bête noire* for all Japano-centric historians, while the latter was applauded for his rejection of Chinese influence and for his reconstruction of the myth of ancient Japan, and therefore celebrated as a godfather of Japanese nationalism. In striking contrast, Maruyama considered Sorai's thoroughgoing critique of Neo-Confucianism as epoch-making, underlining his clear distinction between ethics and politics, the private and the public. He compared this discovery of politics, as distinct from ethics, to the political science of Machiavelli. As for Norinaga, Maruyama focused on his sharp criticism of Confucian moralism and his encouragement of emancipating natural desires and aesthetic feelings, totally ignoring his chauvinism.

After 1945, the terrible consequences of the war and defeat urged Maruyama to reconsider the whole process of Japanese modernization and to explain why the Japanese people were driven in the end to a catastrophic war. His first substantial post-war writing, 'The Theory and Psychology of Ultra-Nationalism', a short but brilliant essay published in May 1946, was an answer to this question and had an extraordinary resonance among the reading public. The essay concentrates on the ideological structure of ultra-nationalism and brings to light the psychological process through which it controls the minds of the people. In the rapid process of nation-building, the Meiji State not only constructed centralized institutions of government and administration but also invented an ideological device which effectively controlled the people and moulded everybody into a loyal subject of the emperor. As suggested in the lead quotation, Maruyama's central argument is that, in Japan, national sovereignty monopolized both spiritual authority and political power, and that, consequently, government authorities did not limit themselves to externally controlling people's behaviour by law but invaded their inner life and regulated their minds. This is exactly the philosophical premise that liberals should have categorically rejected and challenged.

However, thought control under the Emperor System was different from that of totalitarian states like Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia. No systematic ideologies were imposed, nor were concentration camps built for dissenters. Nevertheless, governmental control of the people was effective and conformity in opinion was easily assured, for the government could rule people through a mental attitude deeply rooted in Japanese culture. Quoting from Fukuzawa Yukichi, Maruyama identifies this attitude as a product of 'the imbalance of power' which prevails in human relations in Japanese society. In the hierarchical structure of society, everybody has superiors and inferiors. In each small unit of superior-inferior relations, everybody suffers from an arbitrary exercise of power from above,

and at the same time exercises arbitrary power below, thus compensating for his or her own sufferings. Maruyama calls this 'the transfer of oppression' and finds its extreme pathology in the notorious eruption of violence during the war: drill sergeants' bullying of new soldiers, which was a common practice, and the cruel treatment of POWs. This is an acute analysis of the psychological process which many Japanese people knew well through their sad experiences during the war. But Maruyama asserts that this transfer of oppression is not only a product of war or limited to military life. It is embedded in every corner of society, for the Meiji State inherited 'the imbalance of power' from feudal Japan and systematically incorporated it into the hierarchical structure of national order under the emperor. The painful incidents frequently provoked in wartime were only the intensified pathology of a constitutional disease.

The price of the effective control attained through the transfer of oppression is a complete disappearance of the sense of personal responsibility for the exercise of power, for, in this system everybody rules others in the same way as they are ruled, thus becoming unconscious of ruling others. In other words, not only oppression but responsibility could be transferred to others. The legitimacy of an order to one's inferior consists not in the nature of the order, but in the superior position of those who order, as authorized by the emperor, the ultimate source of all values, moral as well as political. In this hierarchical and bureaucratic structure, in which everybody is the prisoner of his or her position, no one could stand on their own feet – not even the highest officials. Maruyama quotes a speech by Tōjō Hideki, the wartime prime minister, saying, humiliatingly, that he was personally nothing but a pebble by the roadside, which only shone in the aureole of His Majesty. Even the emperor is a prisoner of the mythical tradition of his Imperial Ancestors, far from an absolute king or a totalitarian ruler.

This is the central point of Maruyama's acute analysis of the psychological basis for Japanese militarism, fully developed in his careful study of the documents of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, 'Thought and Behavior Patterns of Japan's Wartime Leaders.' In striking contrast to the German war criminals judged by the Nuremberg Tribunal, he argues, none of the military leaders of Japan summoned to the Tokyo Tribunal recognized their personal responsibility for what they had done. Unanimously, they said, first, that they had only confirmed faits accomplis, which could not have been changed anyway, and, second, that they had had no competence as government officials to do otherwise. Underneath these high officials' apology was a confession of their inability to control their subordinates. Indeed, in many cases, they were, in fact, mere robots manipulated by their subordinates. The two lines of argument of their self-vindication, submission to

faits accomplis and refuge in one's limited authority, were not merely a pretext for clearing themselves of the charge of war crimes, but a natural consequence of the mental attitude cultivated in a social structure in which no one took responsibility. Maruyama calls it 'the system of irresponsibilities' and explains it as frequently found in the degenerative phase of authoritarian and bureaucratic states. However, Maruyama's sharp analysis of the absence of responsible leadership in military Japan touches upon something intrinsic to the nature of Japanese society itself, which occasionally reveals its pathology even in our present state of democracy. Indeed, the reactions of the government to the nuclear plant disaster of Fukushima were so confused and irresponsible that they reminded some people of Maruyama's bitter critique of the system of irresponsibilities.

Intellectual emancipation after the war encouraged Maruyama to find the forgotten potential of liberalism in Japan. Particularly attracted to the spread of political ideas in the early Meiji era, Maruyama drew a bright picture of the intellectual scene at the time. He emphasized the healthy aspect of early Meiji nationalism, which had included abundant liberal elements, in contrast to later ultra-nationalism. The most noteworthy of his writings of this sort is his study of Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901, liberal author and publisher influential during the Meiji Restoration). Fukuzawa became his favourite maître à penser, to whom he never ceased to pay respect. Fukuzawa is to Maruyama what Tocqueville is to Raymond Aron.

Maruyama also wrote several illuminating essays on European liberals, from John Locke to contemporaries like Harold J. Laski and Bertrand Russell. His short but suggestive article on Locke's political theory, entitled 'John Locke and Modern Political Principles', was pioneering. Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* had never previously been translated into Japanese and rarely discussed in pre-war Japan. Why was this classical text of European liberalism neglected? Maruyama quotes a passage from Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* discussing Locke's thoroughgoing critique of Robert Filmer. The latter's patriarchalism, Russell says, is so ridiculous that no one would take it seriously in the civilized world of the twentieth century except in Japan, where the governing principle is very similar to Filmer's theory of paternal power. Maruyama, quoting this passage, suggested that with the collapse of the Emperor System, Japanese people could for the first time grasp the full meaning of Locke's political theory. He became a prime mover of Locke studies in Japan, which would later grow remarkably.⁴ French intellectuals had a long tradition of public debate, while their Japanese counterparts were specialists who provided their expert knowledge and skill to the state. Only in exceptionally rare periods

did they form an intellectual community of free and independent individuals, engaging in public debate on politics and society. The post-war period was one of the rare epochs of this kind, comparable to the early Meiji era, and the focus of public debate at the time was naturally the recent past of the country, the war and defeat. Why did Japan, after successfully building the first modern state in Asia, invade China and enter a catastrophic war? Post-war intellectuals shared a sense of moral responsibility and repentance for having done nothing effective to stop the war. It was this shared moral consciousness, according to Maruyama, that drove many intellectuals to join the movement against rearmament and military alliance with the United States. He later invented the phrase of 'the community of remorse' to label the intellectuals united in that shared conscience.

The Heiwamondai Danwakai ('Peace Problems Discussion Group'), in which Maruyama played a leading role, was an example. Started in 1948 as a learned society for studying peace problems in response to a UNESCO statement on peace, it gathered a wide variety of intellectuals and scholars, from conservative 'old liberals' to academic Marxists. With the progress of the Cold War, and especially after the outbreak of the Korean War, it was inevitably forced to address the hot political issues of the time, the conditions for the peace treaty and rearmament. Critically examining the government's policies on these issues – early independence through a partial peace treaty, rearmament and military alliance with the United States – the group proposed alternative policies consistent with the new constitution: a comprehensive peace treaty, neutralism and pacifism. Naturally, the proposal invited criticism. Maruyama replied, as a leading theoretician of the group, by laying down the theoretical foundations for the proposed policies of pacifism and neutrality.

In response to criticism of his views, Maruyama responded with two essays, 'A Letter to a Liberal' and 'Pitfalls of Realism'. In the first, he criticized the ideological reductionism and essentialist thinking of self-proclaimed liberals in Japan. Identifying himself as a liberal, he argued that ideological preference does not automatically determine the position to take on particular issues. In Japanese politics at the time, Maruyama argued, leftist ideology and radicalism were not a real danger. On the contrary, liberal democracy was undermined by the government's oppressive legislation against leftists. Thus, considering the political situation, Maruyama sided with the opposition. Even in the United States, he said, referring to McCarthyism, the ideals of liberal democracy were threatened from within rather than from the outside.⁵

In response to the 'realist' critique of pacifism and neutralism, Maruyama emphasized the plasticity of reality and its subjective nature. Self-proclaimed

realists took one aspect of reality for the objective and unchangeable whole. They received a reality as a *fait accompli* and had no intention of changing it. In other words, Maruyama found in these Cold War realists the same mental attitude as that of the wartime military leaders whom he had criticized. Maruyama's own approach to reality is fully shown in the draft he wrote for a statement of Heiwamondai Danwakai, 'On Peace for the Third Time'. This is an ambitious tract, aimed at providing pacifism with theoretical foundations based on realism. Clarifying the multiple meanings of the phrase 'confrontation between two worlds', a cliché at the time, Maruyama distinguished three different phases of confrontation: the ideological confrontation of liberal democracy versus communism; political and military confrontation between two enemy camps, the Western versus the Eastern; and finally, superpower confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Examining them in detail, he argued that, in any one of the three phases, confrontation was neither absolute nor unchangeable, and that on both sides there were always attempts to avoid confrontation and to reduce antagonism. Particularly noteworthy is that Maruyama recognized the possibility of splits in both camps. Considering the historical tradition of Chinese civilization, Communist China would not be long controlled from Moscow. Europe would not forever be dependent on the United States. Both blocs were not monolithic in reality, but comprised diverse elements which might eventually dissolve the confrontation between two worlds. Thus, amid the high tensions of the Cold War, Maruyama perceived the world of pluralism and diversity to come and explored conditions for peaceful coexistence in the future. Maruyama's careful study of the 'reality' of the Cold War, which anticipated the multi-polarized world to come, was more farsighted than most 'realist' analyses at the time. It was an exemplary liberal critique of Cold War liberalism.

Maruyama was not, of course, uncritical of communism and Marxism. A thoroughgoing critique of Marxist thinking is shown in 'A Critique of De-Stalinization', the longest chapter in *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics*. In the editor's preface to the book, Ivan Morris defined the author as 'an independent member of the left', and never uttered the word 'liberal' to describe him. Today, more than a half-century after its publication, liberals in the West would have little hesitation in describing Maruyama as a liberal.