

Japan: Locked in the Discourse of National Uniqueness?

Die Bevölkerung ist besser als ihre
Politik und ihre Wortführer.

Jürgen Habermas

In 1987, a Japanese politician said the following at a private meeting of his party: »The position of the Tenno (Emperor) is like that of the sun shining at the zenith of the heavens. ... We can therefore confidently follow our worldly pursuits, sometimes do things which are not so nice and quarrel with one another; the luminous sun rests above everything. The earthly world is our party. The LDP [Liberal Democratic Party] takes on the worldly business. We have a dual-world system.«¹ This unguarded comment, unsurprising given the circumstances under which it was made, comes from the mouth of former prime minister Nakasone who in many respects defined Japan's neo-conservative cultural strategy.

In what follows, I wish to spend some time discussing a Japanese tradition of discourse into which the above quote can be seamlessly integrated. This relates to a specifically Japanese version of ethnocentricity. Then I will touch on two important problems which will accompany us into the 21st century. The first problem is the difficulty which many Japanese have in coming to terms with the past. The second I would like to describe as »the missing dialogue between the organs of power and the public«. For although a large section of the public is in favor of an open and fair acknowledgement of the shameful actions of the past, such voices find almost no echo among politicians. After all, the Japanese are not monolithic island inhabitants who have closed ranks against pressure from outside and who have closed their eyes to the past.

Self-assertion Discourses

Some readers may have been shocked by the quote at the beginning. The world's press also reported that Nakasone visited the Yasukuni shrine in his official capacity as prime minister on 15 August

1985, the anniversary of Japan's surrender, to honor the fallen soldiers of the Greater Japanese Empire. But those sentenced by the Tokyo military tribunal as war criminals are also honored in this shrine. Nakasone has repeatedly tried to relativize what he calls the »philosophy and view of history of the Tokyo military tribunal«.²

Such adventures also make clear that his policy was conceived in accordance with the well-known patterns which he shared at the time with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Economic modernization cum down-scaling of the social safety net. In other words, less state presence in the economic and social sector and more of it on the level of political symbolism and in the military field. Internally a reduction of the state, externally greater splendor and power of the state.

It is relatively easy to see the ideological interpretation which underlay this policy: by mobilizing tradition and culture he wanted to counter the danger of drifting apart of a society which dynamically developed in an economic boom. Here he referred back very *selectively* to the subtle aesthetic tradition of such arts as the tea ceremony, flower arranging or Zen Buddhist gardens but also to samurai virtues such as self-discipline, steadfastness, sense of harmony, and above all loyalty and devotion. They also include mutual consideration and empathy, which the Japanese allegedly practice in their every day lives.

From the perspective of this experienced politician, all these things characterize the uniqueness

1. A summary of this speech, which quotes the above sentences among others, can be found in the newspaper *Asahi* of 30 August 1987.

2. Nakasone had to give up the idea of a second visit to the Yasukuni shrine on the day of surrender because of the massive protests from neighboring countries. Since that time no other prime minister has dared to make such a visit although many of them, with the exception of the Socialist Murayama, would have liked to do so.

of Japanese culture. The »specifically Japanese« arts and the qualities bred in this way had been the decisive reason for the rise of Japan in the 19th century and were also the decisive condition for the economic success, admired abroad too, which the Japanese had achieved after their military defeat at the end of the Second World War. Here I may add as an aside, that LDP parliamentarians also give Mr. Nakasone a nickname meaning essentially: »Someone who walks on the prison wall without falling in«. This is a reference to the large amount of corruption that has never been uncovered. These circles may well consider the allegedly traditional virtue of mutual consideration as something important.

This political idea, which, after all, has found widespread support, reveals a mentality that crosses party lines and social groupings in Japan. For here we encounter the tradition of discourse which can be traced back to the origins of our modernization and which remains effective today having passed through various stages and changes determined by contemporary events, through all the massacres and atrocities committed during the war. It is a tradition of discourse that ensures that not just Mr. Nakasone but conservative cultural apologists of all hues see the special nature of Japanese culture in its fine aesthetics and in the classical virtues and believe that here they have found the key for an explanation of Japan's success. Abroad, too, the image of a centuries-old tradition of aesthetic refinement and of a harmonious orientation which is somehow connected with this is maintained. And no diplomat would dispute positive images of his country even if he felt inwardly that they no longer correspond to any reality.

What I mean here by a tradition of discourse is the tradition of »Nihonjinron«, which can be defined as thinking about the Japanese or about Japanese culture, discussing and holding forth about the question of who the Japanese are, what constitutes their specific Japanese culture; a discussion about identity, if you like.³

A brief note on the history: in view of the challenge of the West and the resulting opening of the country, disputes broke out as early as the 1870s about the cultural, spiritual and moral orientation of the country which was modernizing at tremendous speed. The discussion was internally explosive. On the one hand, there was unbridled

modernization and passionate pleas to take over a western lifestyle. The slogans were: »Destroy the remains of feudal society«, »A curse on hierarchy«. On the other hand, there was the attempt to rehabilitate the traditional rules, standards and values against the influence of western egoism which from a conservative point of view exercised nothing but a demoralizing and destabilizing effect. Those who oriented themselves by the West pleaded for individualism but also for the very strict Victorian moral codes which governed Europe at the time, especially as concerns sexual prudery. The Western rules of behaviour of the time were much more rigid than the rules which were actually practised among broad sections of the population in Japan. Paradoxically, the bourgeois prudery established in Europe fitted wonderfully with Confucian moral concepts. And the traditionalists by no means wanted to turn back the wheel of history. They wanted to push ahead at full speed with industrialization, expansion of production capacity, modernization of infrastructure and, not least, the construction of a modern administrative apparatus. However, they wanted to reinstall tradition, build up a sacred power centre with a reshaped imperial system and to this end partly continue habits and customs from the ancient Edo period and partly take them over from the West in a way which would preserve what they understood as the old Japan. The patriarchal system which dominated in the West at the time was indeed very suitable for that. Hegel's philosophy of state, the conservative version of which we can read in his »Philosophy of Law«, provides the basis for the Meiji constitution which had Lorenz von Stein as its godfather. In working out the wording of the constitution, the traditionalists – with the assistance of the above-named theoretician of post-Hegelian society – copied much from Prussia and Austria. The fronts were therefore highly complex and very unclear. Here it is important that the West should not be understood as the West in its present form. Westerners sometimes make the mistake of ignoring the extent to which western society, too, has changed.

3. A historical stocktaking of this discourse about Japanese culture is set out in the commendable and clear account by Hiroshi Minami: Hiroshi Minami, *Nihonjinron*, Tokyo (Iwanami Publishers) 1994.

Fundamentally, this intellectual constellation was not so different from the position of the Russian intelligentsia at the end of the 19th century. On the one hand adaptation to the thrust of modernization with forced orientation at »western« views of life, on the other hand the desperate attempt of self-assertion, insistence on ancient aristocratic traditions, emphasis on home-grown Slavic culture and the expanse of the Russian soil – and all kinds of shades in between these two positions.

Neither is this constellation fundamentally very different from the situation in Germany in the late 18th century where bourgeois philosophers and poets tried to assert themselves spiritually and culturally against the French-speaking nobility, here also in all kinds of shades of opinion ranging from complete rejection to many forms of compromise. In Germany this discussion culminated in the famous »Addresses to the German Nation« by Fichte, which thus inaugurated the modern form of self-assertion which we meet everywhere outside Europe today.

In our Japanese case, »ethnocentricity open to the world« has crystallized out over the course of time, to use a formulation by Jürgen Habermas in comments he made about Japan.⁴ Habermas did not explain in greater detail what he meant with the term. But I would interpret it historically in the following way: a strong state with permanent military expansion and the construction of the industrial infrastructure required for this, authoritarian forms of rule with all kinds of repression and censorship of any attempt at free thought, and global trade with simultaneous capital accumulation for insane armament. After 1945 it manifested itself in the guise of permanent economic expansion cum institutionalization of democracy cum ever more outward-oriented trade policy designed to promote affluence at home.

The arguments in the identity discussion (Nihonjinron) have accordingly changed considerably. That means that the strong belief in one's own uniqueness is hardly shaken but the content of that belief has turned out to be subject to change.

While desperate self-assertion predominated up to the end of the War, supreme self-confidence, bordering almost on arrogance, can be felt in today's matadors of the discourses about Japan. Economic success undoubtedly plays a decisive

role in this respect. While previously a romantic-subversive withdrawal into aesthetic inwardness, into the ancient beautiful Japan, was frequently evident – which was turned into aggression again in the last years of the War – the traditional refined arts are used by our current cultural apologists as the historical background for the precision engineering of our optical and electrical equipment. While earlier the tremendous gap in relation to the West was admitted in terms of wealth and standard of living, the belief now is that the West has been overtaken. While in earlier periods the Japanese spirit was wheeled out against the »materialist« West, it is precisely this tradition which is now said to have created the favorable conditions for the introduction of a materialist civilization.⁵ All these self-images are based on a conviction which a large majority of Japanese share without a second thought. This is that the Japanese still have a much more intimate relationship with nature than westerners.

The intensity and popularity of such self-affirmation and self-assertion discourses is evidenced by the large number of articles and books, literally filling shelves, which have been written. According to a survey (which is slightly out of date), the proud number of 698 titles have been written in relation to this identity debate in the 33 years from 1945 to 1978, some of them selling millions of copies.⁶ And individual aspects of the argument have penetrated down to the minutiae of life, into the capillaries of day-to-day living, as it were. They are so popular and widespread that one might well say that they have entered the flesh and blood of the Japanese. This can be likened perhaps to Germany where cultural figures such as the pro-

4. I refer to an article by Jürgen Habermas on his first visit to Japan. A translation into Japanese is printed in the newspaper *Mainichi* of 2 December 1981.

5. On the complicated structure of the argument see: Kenichi Mishima, *Schmerzen der Modernisierung als Auslöser kultureller Selbstbehauptung – Zur geistigen Auseinandersetzung Japans mit dem Westen*. (Painful Modernisation as the Trigger for Cultural Self-Assertion: On the Intellectual Debate between Japan and the West) In: *Überwindung der Moderne? Japan am Ende des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts*. Published by Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner, Frankfurt am Main 1996.

6. Harumi Befu, *Nihonbunkaron* (Discourse on Japanese Culture), Tokyo (Shiso no kagaku-sha) 1997.

verbal »deutsche Michel«, a plain, honest, if somewhat simple fellow, or the idea of unquestioning loyalty inherent in the term »Nibelungentreue« have imbued certain traditions. I am willing to wager that a foreigner asking about the defining characteristic of Japanese culture would be referred by at least every third Japanese to its connection and closeness to nature, although any objective assessment would have to admit that in the last five decades an incalculable amount of nature has been systematically and thoroughly destroyed in the course of rapid economic growth.

A symptom of the ideological planning of the former prime minister, quoted at the beginning, is his initiative for the foundation of a research institute on which the relevant internet homepage says: »...the thought and values of the Japanese people were largely misunderstood by the international community, and lack of understanding of Japanese culture led to needless friction between nations. In such a climate, there was a growing recognition of the need to improve international understanding of Japanese culture, as well as the strong need to promote and encourage Japanese studies researchers around the world.« The state research institute, which was established in 1987 and calls itself the »International Research Center for Japanese Studies« (popularly »Nichibunken«), marks the hitherto almost obscene climax of such Nihonjinron. It is nothing but an institute of cultural navel gazing where self-assertion discourses are organized for the purpose of self-satisfaction. Perhaps it is all a belated repetition of what happened in Germany with the foundation of the Germanic National Museum in Nuremberg in 1852. The Institute is situated in the western suburbs of – where else – Kyoto. Its establishment gave the long history of the search for the self and the specific form of »ethnocentricity open to the world« an institutional frame. One can well speak of fundamentalism here. For according to Anthony Giddens, fundamentalism starts where traditions are defended in the traditional way. If a man claims to be entitled to a certain behavior or a certain privilege on the grounds of the fact that he is a man this would constitute fundamentalism in everyday life.⁷ Correspondingly, one could find in the discourses of cultural apologists an element of fundamentalism which by far exceeds »ethnocentrism open to the world«.

Favorite aged colleagues of the prime minister such as Tadao Umesao, Hiroshi Umehara and Hayao Kawai were involved in its foundation. Interestingly, all three of them received the decisive phase of their training during the war and have always been based in Kyoto. Kyoto has always been a hotbed of essentialist apologists for Japanese culture, so-called, who of course chose to ignore the bloodbath which the imperial army started in Nanking for example. The mentality in Tokyo, however, is basically little different.

For example, Umesao, the former director of the National Museum for Ethnology, writes in the introduction of a collection of his lectures (including five lectures at the Collège de France) that he had simply been attempting the »self-assertion of Japanese civilisation«.⁸ One of his main messages ties in to the pre-war discussion to the extent that he emphasizes the homology of western European and Japanese history. The feudal Japanese Middle Ages were followed by the Edo period which, in his view of history, must be compared to the period of Absolutism in Europe. And the Tokugawa regime had been toppled by the Meiji reforms which were nothing more than a pendant of the bourgeois revolution in western Europe. As far as the conditions for modernization in Japan are concerned, they had not lagged behind Europe on the eve of the industrial revolution. This is backed up by, amongst other things, the evidence of flourishing trade with its complex system of bookkeeping and transactions, the prospering urban middle classes with their love of art, excellent craftsmen and the highest level of literacy by world standards even at that time. The only difference was that the mistaken policy of isolation of the country had resulted in the Japanese failing to link up with world standards. Otherwise the Japanese would have been fighting with the English and the French for colonial dominance in south and south-east Asia as early as the 17th and 18th centuries, which – and here the true face of

7. Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right. The Future of Radical Politics*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 6 and 4.

8. Tadao Umesao, *Nihon towa nanika, (What is Japan?)*, Tokyo (NHK-Publishers) 1986, p. 18. The account given in the following sections is a summary of the lectures contained in this book which were delivered by Umesao at the Collège de France.

such self-assertion discourse emerges – had been made up for with a delay of a couple of hundred years in the Second World War.

Umesao here implies that the Europeans are firmly convinced that the course of European history has hitherto represented the world standard. According to Umesao, they consider that only European civilisation is worth replicating. That is why he is so keen to prove a similar development in Japanese history. He is clearly convinced that he can shake the blinkered Eurocentric attitudes of the Europeans, which most certainly exist, with his homology thesis. Justified criticism of a certain self-image of the hegemonic West is transformed into an overestimation of one's own – a typical reaction which repeatedly occurs at the genesis of the self-assertion discourse.

According to Umesao, Japanese society is characterised not only by inner homogeneity, but also by equality which has seldom been achieved in world history.⁹ Umesao is even bold enough to insist that Japan had realised what socialism as it really existed had tried in vain to implement, namely equality of all citizens and true democracy.¹⁰ He is not, however, talking about the great thrust towards equality which also took place in the West, above all after 1945. Instead, the collective loyalty within the Japanese state bureaucracy is emphasised which was working selflessly towards creating such an egalitarian society. Perhaps Umesao has made »the essence of Japanese culture« – an expression he likes to use – his own to such an extent that due to certain virtues and aesthetics he has been able totally to ignore the elitism and corruption of his friends in the Ministry, the sacrifices which had to be made for modernization, the high price which had to be paid for industrialization, the conflicts which occur daily, the breaks and tensions within society and the way in which they are swept under the carpet. He is clearly not prepared to deal with such questions.

Similar discourses of self-aggrandisement which gloss over events can be found with various emphases in the other matadors such as Hayao Kawai and Takeshi Umehara, to name but two as representative of the mighty horde of apologists. Kawai, current director of the above-named International Research Center, studied the psychoanalytic interpretation of mythology with Carl

Gustav Jung in Zurich and is attempting to bring out the structure of the Japanese self or ego in contrast to that of the Europeans with the Jungian method of the analysis of mythology. The exercise comes out with the well-known theses of the undefined contours of the Japanese ego, the almost seamless meshing of self and others, a feeling penetration of the essence of nature, etc.

Kawai believes that he has rediscovered these mental figurations in our ancient mythology.¹¹ Kawai also implicitly sets up the thesis of the universality of his own culture by repeatedly suggesting the things which were »really« needed as a solid foundation for the co-existence of people in accordance with the mental figuration which the Japanese already recount in their mythology and have since then continuously developed and differentiated further. The poor Europeans, in contrast, had done nothing more than to construct the strong, modern Cartesian ego, thus deconstructing the actual element of human interaction. The consequences were appalling social pathologies in the West. Now these pathological waves would start lapping at our shores unless we armed ourselves morally against them in the spirit of this tradition. This, then, is the tenor of his analysis of mythology, which he has developed in many variations, for an »understanding of the essence« of Japanese culture. The question which arises here is what, which methodological basis, entitles one to draw conclusions about the »essential characteristics« of present-day Japanese culture from the »foundations« of the ancient mythologies?

Another colleague from this group, the psychoanalyst Bin Kimura, who has studied in Heidelberg and speaks excellent German, says something like the following:¹² The Japanese willingness to compromise, so often criticised by the European elite, the constant manoeuvring, the postponement of problems, the tactic of conflict avoidance,

9. loc. cit., p. 59 ff.

10. loc. cit., p. 65.

11. What follows is based above all on: Hayao Kawai et al., *Nihonshinwa no shiso* (Basic Concepts of Japanese Mythology), Kyoto (Minerva Publishers) 1996.

12. This is based on Bin Kimura's book *Hito to hito tonon aida. Seishinbyourigakuteki Nihonron* (Human Interrelationships – On Japanese Culture from a Psychotherapeutic Perspective), Tokyo (Kohbundo Publishers) 1972.

etc. actually corresponded more closely to the human reality which has been lost in rational Europe. Kimura even speaks of »something with the character of blood relationship« that »historically« as »vital potency«, as a »way of life«, has made for the cohesion of the Japanese people and been the carrier of their Japanese identity.¹³ In the Japanese context such language is not directly the language of a master race, as German readers would perhaps be inclined to think. Nonetheless, the question arises of why today this language, which immediately brings up bad memories, is still being used.

Umesao and Umehara are even proud of the fact that a ceramic pot newly excavated in one of the ancient settlement ruins somewhere on the coast has turned out in scientific tests carried out with radioactive dating to be the oldest piece of ceramic ware to have been excavated anywhere in the world. This finding allows Umesao to reach the conclusion that the Japanese were from the start – don't laugh – a high-tech oriented nation.¹⁴ Quoted professors are all scientists who are known in Japan and taken seriously, some of whose work also exists in western languages. That Director Kawai is much celebrated as someone who has contributed to an understanding of Japanese culture and was recently made an honorary citizen of the city of Kyoto supports the contention that these discourses satisfy certain needs in the general public.

Any study of the theses presented above quickly becomes boring. They are of unassailable stupidity. But there is one important point here: we encounter similar cultural self-assertion everywhere in our region of Asia, including the misuse of cultural arguments for the purpose of hiding social evils. All too often the suppression of the supporters of human rights is justified on cultural grounds. A certain role is played here of course by resistance against the universalism of the stronger, against the arrogance and high-handed manner of the West. But it is ambiguous – on the one hand it has the function to uncover the Western fusion of power politics and universalism, on the other it can easily function as a cloak of invisibility for shortcomings or simply bring collective emotions to the boil.

If we want to reflect on the future of Asia, we must ask ourselves also in respect of Japan how we are to cope with this ethnocentricity, how we can

strip the instrumentalization of culture of its power. For at present the constellation does not look favorable. On the one hand there are discourses justifying own shortcomings in the name of culture, on the other hand there is the unholy alliance of universal values legitimately put forward by the West and the actual economic and political power possessed by the West.

Difficulties in Handling the Past

Against this cultural and discursive background of »ethnocentricity open to the world« it is not difficult to see why the Japanese, no, the official Japan, has such difficulty in coming to terms with its own past.

Post-war Japan is not only the legal successor of the Greater Japanese Empire but it is also a kind of metamorphosis and continuation of pre-war Japan. These initial conditions create a situation which is completely different from the position of post-war Germany whose start is characterized by a radical break with the previous state governed by injustice. The Japanese constitution which is currently in force was adopted, at least formally, in the old imperial parliament. Post-war Japan with its parliamentary democracy thus arose by shedding its skin, as it were, but keeping a redefined monarchy as its state system. Despite all the breaks with the old imperial warmongering state, despite all new beginnings, something like the core, the quintessence or the most important integral parts of the old Japan remained unaffected by all this from the perspective of those classes which played a leading role in supporting the state. Accordingly, the political elite did not change either, and the oversized, always interventionist and extensive bureaucracy remained untouched. In Germany, too, old structures initially retained their power. But the new characteristics of the state with its new values proved more effective in the long run. With us, the consequences of this false start remain serious.

One of the serious consequences for instance concerns the so-called »former Japanese«. That requires explanation. On the eve of the coming

13. Kimura, loc.cit., p. 18.

14. Umesao, loc.cit., p. 160.

into force of the new constitution, that is on 2 May 1947 (the constitution came into force on 3 May 1947) the final imperial decree was issued according to which Japanese citizenship continued to be formally guaranteed to the owners of Japanese passports who were of Korean and Chinese extraction living in Japan but they were accorded the legal status of foreigners. It is difficult today to reconcile these two components. These Koreans and Chinese were de facto deprived of their civil rights literally overnight. And in 1952, once again on the eve of the coming into force of the peace treaty which Japan concluded with the majority of its wartime enemies in San Francisco, they were deprived of their Japanese citizenship.

Although they had been second-class Japanese until 1945 – as Japanese citizens they had more duties than rights, for example they had to perform military service – they nevertheless enjoyed restricted rights of participation in political life and a minimum of protection by the state. They could, for example, study at Japanese universities. They were entitled to a pension as former soldiers.

With these two decrees, they suddenly became a minority which no longer had Japanese citizenship. At best, they were considered as foreigners with an open-ended residence permit. New regulations for example made the hurdles for their children to go to university more complicated and higher. The right to a pension disappeared completely if they had returned home. These Koreans included many who were taken for forced labor during the war years. There are still some 700,000 citizens of Korean descent living in Japan with open-ended residence permits but without any rights of political participation.

There are still more serious problems. One example is those Koreans who as forced laborers experienced the explosion of the atom bomb in Hiroshima on that 6 August 1945 and have since suffered from the consequences of being exposed to radioactivity. It took much too long for the sufferers, who had in the meantime returned home to Korea, to be issued with a document certifying them as having been injured by the atom bomb and thus entitling them to free treatment or treatment at reduced cost in Japan. The second and third generations too have problems. Graduates from Korean schools in Japan do not, for instance, have any right to take part in the university en-

trance examinations (the current trend is for an improvement of this situation). Until one year ago, high schools for Koreans living in Japan could not participate with their baseball teams in the national competition for the All Nippon High School Baseball Championship because they did not possess the status of a school recognized by the Ministry of Culture. In other words, a clever policy of exclusion was practised everywhere.

There is by now sufficient information in the West, too, about the failure to accept responsibility for the Nanking massacre and for the Koreans that were forced to work as »comfort women« at the time. The state is currently not willing to accept liability for these criminal acts. I cannot deal here with individual aspects of the debate and with a minor, but nevertheless important, change towards a more positive attitude which the government camp, signals from time to time. On the massacre of Nanking I refer to the international debate which started up again in the spring of 1999 about the granting of translation rights to a Japanese publisher. The book concerned is called »The Rape of Nanking« and is written by an American of Chinese descent, Iris Chang. Her parents experienced all of it. Half a million copies of the book have already been sold in the USA (as of June 1999). Curiously, a Japanese publisher did not make use of the right once he had acquired it, probably out of fear of possible right-wing demonstrative pressure to which he would then be subject.

Here I must refer to an important mindset component which has led to a certain hardening of attitudes in relation to Japan's past. This is the enormous resentment of the Japanese establishment towards the classic colonial powers. According to often expressed opinions, many Japanese, above all those belonging to the elite, see much worse brutality and cruelty in the colonial past of the western powers than was committed by the Japanese invasion. From this perspective, the West is guilty of the destruction of whole areas and of genocide on indigenous peoples on continents such as Africa and Australia.

It is certainly true that the European colonial masters of the 19th century were not particularly nice to the indigenous peoples. An example often quoted in Japan is the Opium War (1840–42). People like to remember that it was

only the news of the catastrophic defeat of China by the British which alarmed the samurai of the shogunate and made them aware of the necessity of collective national defense. Since then, there has been deep-seated mistrust of the West among the ruling class.

In other words, many Japanese in leading positions in the state are angry about the self-opinionated West because from their view it is not willing to discuss its own past. But they themselves are far less willing to admit that their actions in the east Asian region have left the same kind of rancor among neighboring nations as the Japanese frequently felt and still feel towards the West. Mr. Nakasone has repeatedly indicated that he distances himself from the Tokyo military tribunal view of history, as he describes it. Sometimes he also refers to the Pacific Ocean view of history, by which he means the Americans, and that he is waiting for the day when the Japanese war will be seen differently by subsequent historians instead of only from the view propagated by the victorious powers. For many Japanese – this was the result of this kind of apologism – he represented the first attempt by a non-European culture to relativize the dominance of the West. The wish for self-justification by pointing to the errors of others is clearly evident here. But the attempt to offset one's own atrocities against the colonial crimes of the West would be incomprehensible to the victims and victimized nations of Japanese aggression. They have a much longer memory than those who wish to engage in such offsetting.

Lack of Interaction Between the Rulers and the Public

I have perhaps so far concentrated too much on the views of the Japanese establishment. But the state does not consist solely of representative public organs, of the parade of political symbols, of press conferences by government spokesmen and the show of international politicians – and not, above all, of the cultural apologists with their ethnocentric arguments. Much more important than all this bombast and these extravagances, than sedating and legitimizing bodies which many of our politicians and scientists clearly like a great deal, is the debating public, are all the circles, forums and groups of politically and socially alert

and attentive citizens. And it would be completely wrong if readers were to draw the conclusion on the basis of my remarks so far that the Japanese were so ethnocentric that they were not willing to account for their own colonial past and for their incontrovertibly proven atrocities or if they were to draw the conclusion that the public debate in Japan was dominated by nationalistic and conservative murmurings and dull emotions, perhaps rather like an east Asian Serbia. Such a conclusion would be a complete simplification. This would lead the reader into the old trap into which Europeans have repeatedly fallen, namely of perceiving the Asians or Asian nations as a dull mass, where there can be no differentiation in the landscape of debate such as can be found in Europe since the Enlightenment.

There can be no sadder and duller perception than this. A simple generalization can sometimes be more dangerous than ignorance. For there is a long and differentiated history to the discussion among the Japanese public about the subjects mentioned and the difficulties in coming to terms with the past. But despite the diversity and controversy of the debate in many media and circles of discourse, certain contours can be discerned by observers and participants: contours of a noteworthy majority of those expressing their views in public who acknowledge the guilt of the past, who try to understand the perspective of the victims and who, this is an important point, demand individual reparation from the state. This is a Japan which is open to the world, open to the world in a different sense from its willingness to export. There are at least as many groups belonging to citizens' movements and initiatives as there are say in Germany who are fighting, for example, against the disadvantages under the law of their Korean fellow citizens. Here, too, the words which Jürgen Habermas once wrote in the context of xenophobia apply: the people are better than their politicians and leaders. However, this openness towards the world has not so far become as evident as could be wished.

That is to say, there is much too little interaction between those in positions of power and the public. Those in positions of power are becoming increasingly cynical. And there comes a point when the participants in the public debate become resigned and return to their private lives. Politics

continues to be run on the basis of cronyism. And the culture-related discourses of self-assertion give it a patina of legitimacy.

There are no doubt many reasons why the »voice of the people« is not heard. One important reason can certainly be found in the cultural hegemony which the minor and major cultural apologists have, since the 1970s, continuously grabbed for themselves from left-wing intellectuals. That corresponded exactly to what Antonio Gramsci meant with his term »cultural hegemony«. Instead of building and expanding access to the big left-wing liberal publishers and newspapers, they tended to favour the smaller and newer ones, won private foundations to their side and built up a network of contacts abroad.

Within the same period a large part of the Japanese left displayed signs of increasing sclerotisation. They took no account of the transformation which the capitalist economy underwent in the reconstruction phase and remained too true to their »alarmism«, trying to conjure up crises and even revolution. All too often they flirted with Beijing and Moscow. For a long time they could not bring themselves to declare their support of the western type of democratic institutions. A negative attitude viewing democratic institutions as nothing more than instruments of dark capitalist forces was prevalent. Accordingly, an instrumental relationship to political institutions dominated in the camp of the left as was the case in the days of Marx and Engels. With hindsight, it is easy to understand why that part of the population which is »better« than »its politicians and leaders« could and can no longer feel at home in the political parties. A left-wing liberal culture which alone can serve for the interchange referred to between those in positions of power and the public did not develop. In the face of such a constellation it is a hard and certainly lengthy endeavour to act against the hegemony of cultural essentialism and even to break it up. That will be a rocky path. But one thing is certain: only when the dull consensus on Japanese culture dissolves – by robbing the tenacious self-assertion and self-satisfaction discourse of its power – will a perspective into the 21st century open for Japanese society. Until that happens, we will drag not only the weight of the 20th century, but also the negative legacy of the 19th century along with us into the next century.

Much truly depends on, first, how we come to terms with our past and, second, what kind of legal and civil framework we create for our fellow citizens from Asian nations who are living in Japan. If there is no positive development in this respect, then the outlook would be rather gloomy. And not just international Japanese studies, but world public opinion would look at us as rather strange animals. They might have to make such an animal a protected species – to protect the rest of the world from it. For the mentality which has been described can run uncontrollably amok at any time. ◀