Spiritual and Perpetual Revolution for Democracy: 
The Public Philosophy of Maruyama Masao and His 
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1. What Allowed Japan to Import Democracy “Successfully”?

The Bush administration declared that the United States would establish democracy in Iraq by overthrowing the government of Saddam Hussein. It has been proven that they could not succeed in establishing democracy there although they militarily conquered Iraq. Some of the Bush administration and neo-conservative writers had harkened back to the success story of establishing democracy in postwar Japan and that, as in Japan, the U.S.A. could succeed in establishing democracy in Iraq. I protested against the war and the Japanese government’s support for it. I think that—in contrast to Japan—democracy cannot be established in Iraq successfully because the situation there is so different from that in Japan in 1945.

There are so many differences between Japan in 1945 and Iraq in 2003 that it is impossible to go into details. But to name only one of the most important differences, there was a certain democratic or parliamentary tradition in prewar Japan while such a tradition has been very weak in Iraq. Democracy cannot be imported by military conquest alone. Its successful import requires the existence of internal democratic ideas and movements. Maruyama Masao (1914–1996) and his mentor Nanbara Shigeru (1889–1974) played leading roles in implanting democratic ideas in postwar Japan.

Some people, including those surrounding President Bush, seem to believe that Japan succeeded in importing democracy because the U.S.A. through rule by the GHQ led by General MacArthur gave Japan democratic institutions including a new Constitution. American administration of Japan after World War II is to be valued highly, but their reforms were accepted by the Japanese people because many
Japanese sincerely regretted their past and were eager to introduce democracy. Prewar Japan was dominated by militarists, and invaded China and other Asian countries, and attacked the United States. But the Japanese people repented their past. In contrast, the U.S.A. invaded Iraq without legitimate reasons and without the approval of the United Nations. As a result, many people in Iraq do not regret their past, and they are not really eager to introduce democracy. After the war many Japanese criticized Shintō for its prewar role as a national religion (State Shintō), while many Iraqis are not only devout followers of the various branches of Islam but use them as a political instrument. The Japanese tried to introduce democracy in earnest to replace this state religion, while many Iraqis resist American occupation, relying instead upon Islam.

2. The Public Philosophy of Nanbara and Maruyama

After the defeat in the war there was a mental and spiritual vacuum due to the collapse of prewar ultra-nationalism based upon State Shintō. The prewar political regime was dismissed and the GHQ ordered postwar governments to establish a new democratic system. However, such a system might have been overthrown had not the spirit of democracy been established amongst the Japanese people. According to Maruyama Masao, a renowned Japanese political theorist in that era, there are three dimensions in democracy: ideas, institutions, and movements. The implication is that the import of democratic institutions such as elections, parliaments, and a constitution is important but insufficient unless democratic ideas and movements are firmly rooted.

After the downfall of nationalism and militarism, communists and socialists gained strength. They were of dominant influence especially in academic and intellectual circles. They basically focused on economic systems such as capitalism, feudalism, and imperialism interpreted as a phase of capitalist development. On the other hand, they did not necessarily pay special attention to politics and culture, because these spheres were considered to be regulated by the economic system: superstructures are regulated by substructures in Marxist terminology. Some even thought little of democracy, because
democratic instruments such as parliaments were regarded as instruments of capitalist rule. As a result, their discussions hardly inspired a democratic spirit and ideas.

Against the background of such an atmosphere, the endeavors of Maruyama Masao and his mentor Nanbara Shigeru during the initial phase of postwar democracy ought to be highly regarded. Maruyama’s importance has been relatively widely acknowledged, while Nanbara’s role has frequently been neglected. His significance was illuminated only a few years ago in a symposium on Nanbara. Therefore I would like to emphasize this point; I am speaking of “the postwar public philosophy of Nanbara and Maruyama” for underlining the importance of not only Maruyama but also Nanbara.

Nanbara was a disciple of the famous Christian independent thinker Uchimura Kanzō (1861–1930), and studied the philosophy of Kant and Fichte. He criticized Nazism and Japanese nationalism between the lines in his *State and Religion* (1942). His original idealistic public philosophy crystallized into *A Preface to Public Philosophy* (1971) in his later years. He became a pioneer of communitarian political philosophy when he pushed forward the idea of “communitarian democracy” and “communitarian socialism.” He also emphasized the value of peace and raised the ideas of “world community,” “world republic,” and “world federation.”

Nanbara concentrated on academic study and was described as a “philosopher within a cave” in the prewar era. This attitude saved him from being ousted from Tōkyō Imperial University because of accusations of ultra-nationalists. After the war he played a more public role when he was elected as president of the University of Tōkyō. (This reminds us of Fichte’s “Reden an die deutsche Nation” when Germany was occupied by Napoleon’s army. As most prewar authorities had collapsed and people were in a muddle, his addresses as university president attracted public attention to a degree inconceivable today.)

Nanbara called for a “spiritual revolution,” a “human revolution,” and the “revolution of Japanese spirit,” for the “creation of a new Japanese culture” and the “construction of a moralistic state.” His appeal for a human revolution was aimed at establishing the “value of truth” and the “value of character.” He thought that such a human revolution should be the basis of a “political revolution” represented by democratic reforms. Obviously this concept of revolution is
somewhat different from the one propagated by communists or socialists.

Nanbara contributed to an extent to various reforms such as the fundamental law of education and the enactment of the new Constitution. It is well-known that he confronted Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru over the issue of the peace treaty, because Nanbara advocated an overall peace as opposed to the governmental idea for a separate peace. Nanbara thus embodied the idealistic spirit in postwar era.

3. An Overview of Maruyama’s Works: Three Periods

Nanbara’s ideas influenced Maruyama to some extent. Maruyama was impressed by socialism and was at first dubious of Nanbara’s political philosophy based on neo-Kantian philosophy and Christianity. However, Maruyama observed that most Japanese Hegelians had turned to nationalism and had intellectually supported the war, and he came to value Kantian philosophy and Christianity because most thinkers based upon these intellectual streams had not compromised.

Maruyama’s works can be classified into three periods: 1) early period from prewar times until immediately after the war, 2) middle period from the late 1950s to the late 1960s, 3) late period from 1970s until his death (1996).

Maruyama’s early works were motivated by the resistance or criticism against Japanese Fascism or “ultra-nationalism” which led Japan to the terrible World War II. His first major academic work on Japanese political thought in the Tokugawa era (1603 [1615]–1868) was *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan* (1952, Engl. ed. Princeton 1974). In this work he analyses the development of the modern way of political thinking from within Japanese Neo-Confucianism in the feudal period by presenting the dichotomy of “nature” and “artificiality.” He was supported by the “trans-academic motivation” that there was a clue to modernity within Japan in spite of the domination of the premodern political system centered on the Emperor in prewar Japan. Maruyama became well-known to the general public through the publication of “Theory and Psychology of Ultra-Nationalism” (1946; Engl. translation in *Maruyama, Masao: Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics*, London and Oxford
1964, exp. ed. 1969). The distinction between “Fascism from below” such as Nazism and “Fascism from above” such as Japanese militarism was presented here. These articles provided a fresh and impressive explanation of Japanese Fascism, in particular its cultural and psychological mechanisms. They are characterized as a “theory on mental (spiritual) structure” in Japan in contrast to prevailing Marxist economic approaches in those days. Maruyama supported actively the reform of the premodern aspects. He emphasized the establishment of political freedom in the private sphere as opposed to the intervention of “public” government or state under the dichotomy of public and private. Thus, he became the representative liberal intellectual, and he has been regarded as a typical Westernizer, modernist and progressive. These images were formed from his works in this early period, but they are still dominant today in discussions concerning Maruyama.

The line between the early and the middle period is not distinct, but it seems to me that Maruyama shifted his emphasis slightly in the late 1950s when he paid attention to the increasing symptoms of mass society under conditions of rapid economic development in postwar Japan. Although he maintained his so-called modernist or progressive position, he came to be conscious of the negative aspects of the modern age more than before and moved towards a republican direction in emphasizing the importance of political participation of the citizens. He proposed the paradoxical idea of political participation based on a nonpolitical perspective, namely, some cultural cultivation in the private sphere: public (political) on and for the private (nonpolitical). He condensed the idea into the impressive slogan “radical democracy with radical spiritual aristocratism.” Accordingly, he stressed the importance of voluntary associations, and in presenting the idea of “democracy as a perpetual revolution,” he participated energetically in political discussions such as those on the United States–Japan Security Treaty in 1960.

Maruyama retired from the University of Tōkyō in 1971 after the campus dispute in 1968. This turned out to be the beginning of his late period. A representative article for this period is “Ancient Strata Of the Consciousness of History” (1972). The article extracted the “ancient stratum” concerning the sense of history by focusing upon Japanese myths in the Kojiki (Records of Ancient Affairs). Maruyama argued that there is an unchanging cultural pattern called “ancient stratum” or basso ostinato, which causes the transformation of imported
thoughts like Buddhism, Confucianism and Western ideas, in the same way. Maruyama’s fundamental criticism of Japanese culture was still retained and even deepened by this idea, but he admitted a change of his perspective: he was impressed by the similarity in opening Japan to foreign influences (as in, for example, the Meiji period and in the postwar period), and changed his framework from a dichotomy of premodern/modern to closed Japan/open Japan. Although this new thesis was criticized by some former followers for various reasons (e.g. as an outlook of a theory accepting Japanese cultural destiny) in my view, this is a form of civilizational approach reminiscent of the great works of Max Weber and S. N. Eisenstadt. I think that this can be regarded as the summit of Maruyama’s theoretical insight. He can be described as a cultural reformer or even a cultural revolutionary rather than a cultural determinist in turning the unconscious inclination to the conscious self-recognition through a scholarly presentation of the ancient layer.

4. The Reality of Postwar Democracy: Political Clientelism and Syncretism

The efforts of Nanbara and Maruyama have been fruitful to some extent. Japan has managed to maintain its democratic institutions until now.

After the war the United States tried to make Japan a pacifist state and introduced the famous Article 9 into the new Constitution in cooperation with the Japanese Prime Minister Shidehara Kijurō. However, the US drastically changed their policy after the beginning of the Cold War and wanted Japan to be a military power, because they expected that Japan would faithfully support them against communist countries. Accordingly, the ruling conservative party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), formed the self-defense forces and have since continuously attempted to strengthen these military forces. As this has been criticized as contradictory to the Peace Constitution, in order to legitimize this strengthening, in the basic program of the party the purpose is formulated that the LDP is working toward the amendment of the Japanese Constitution. It attacked the Constitution arguing that it was forcibly imposed by the U.S.A.
However, various people including Nanbara and Maruyama opposed the attempts of the conservative governments, and the government of Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke faced serious opposition when it tried to revise the United States–Japan Security Treaty. Kishi resigned after the enactment of the new treaty (1960). His successor, Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato was his grandson and adopted the ideals of Kishi. LDP governments changed their focus after the turmoil and basically tried to develop the Japanese economy rather than to change the Japanese Constitution. As a result, Japan has kept its Constitution, which established democracy and the foreign policy principle of “no war.”

On the other hand, the reality of Japanese politics cannot be described as an ideal democracy. Under the surface of democratic institutions, there are traditional patterns of politics. The core of the conservative party’s rule has been based on the traditional system of interpersonal relationships: this can be described as a patron–client relationship or, simply, as clientelism. Factions within the conservative party can be regarded as patron–client relations, and support groups (kōenkai) in the constituency for individual politicians are also based on these relationships. Clientelism also plays a central role in the close relationship between politicians and bureaucrats, and also in that between politicians and interest groups such as those for business interests.

Thus, the fundament of Japanese postwar democracy could be regarded as clientelistic interpersonal relationships. The interpersonal relationships were, in the terminology of Maruyama’s days, pre-modern or feudalistic. While the façade of Japanese democracy is modern and democratic, the substance is still pre-modern and feudalistic or patrimonial. Such a democracy can be described as “clientelistic democracy,” “pre-modern democracy,” or “feudalistic or patrimonial democracy.” The Koizumi administration was supported by a majority of the people because it promised to reform these structures of politics and economy in Japan.

Consequently, postwar democracy in Japan was neither purely democratic nor purely non-democratic. There were at least democratic institutions like elections and parliaments, but democratic ideas and movements did not dominate Japan because of the clientelistic or patrimonial elements.

This kind of phenomenon could be called syncretism: for example, the religious coexistence of Shintoism and Buddhism is termed
“religious syncretism.” Thus, the symbiosis of the democratic system and non-democratic politics could be called “political syncretism.”

Syncretism can be regarded as one of the most important features of Japan from a civilization point of view. Syncretism is a dynamic phenomenon, and was formed and dissolved several times. According to Maruyama, there were several such cycles in the history of ideas in Japan, cycles of an infl ow of foreign universal ideas and an uplift of the “ancient stratum.” Syncretism starts with an influx of universal ideas, leading to coexistence of the universal ideas and traditional Japanese ideas that lasts for some period, and is finally disintegrated by an attack of some kind of nationalism.

In the early days, there was a religious and political system peculiar to Japan, which can be classified as a type of chiefdom. Then, beginning in the sixth century, Buddhism was imported from India via China and Korea, and Confucianism and the system of centralized government were imported from China. Facing these universal civilizations from India and China, the Japanese original culture flourished in the Heian period (794–1185). This is the first cycle.

During the Kamakura period (1185–1382) Buddhist universal ideas developed and were Japanized (Zen and Jōdo-shin sect). This could be regarded as a phenomenon parallel to the Protestant Reformation in Europe. On the other hand, the Japanese feudal system developed during the Kamakura-Shōgunate: this could be paralleled with European feudalism. The origin of the patron-client system can be found in the relation between lord and vassal. In contrast, the Muromachi period (1392–1573) was not particularly characterized by features of universal culture. This could be called the second cycle, though this cycle is not as distinct as the first: there were indigenous universal ideas and indigenous feudal institutions.

The beginning of third cycle is marked by an infl ow and development of universal ideas and movements, which was not limited politics. Christianity was imported into feudal Japan by the Spaniards and Portuguese in the 16th century; and at the same time elements of Japanese culture like the tea ceremony and linked verse (renga) were developed. The Jōdo-Shin sect grew to be a social and political movement and stirred up riots against feudal lords, thus generating independent areas from feudal rule for some time.

Maruyama regards these developments as being highly important; if those cultural progresses had continued and those cultural movements had built up an independent influence on political power,
Japanese politics would have taken another route. However, the political powers repressed the cultural independent developments, and succeeded in controlling the cultural forces. Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), a powerful military leader, destroyed the main temple (Ishiyama Honganji) of the Jōdo-shin sect, and crushed the riots; Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598), a unifier following Nobunaga, and Tokugawa Shōgunate, prohibited Christianity; Hideyoshi also ordered the master of tea ceremony (Sen no Rikyū, 1522–1591) to commit suicide.

This was the diverging point in Japanese history. Culture has been subordinate to politics since then, and it has been relatively rare in Japan that political power was severely criticized from a cultural point of view. In Maruyama’s view, this is a serious weakness in Japan, and it is one of the hindrances to establishing democratic ideas and movements.

The Tokugawa Shōgunate closed the country, and universal ideas became relatively weak during the Edo period (= Tokugawa period, 1603–1868). The warriors were urged to follow Confucianism, but it was relatively rare in Japan that Confucianists directly influenced politics, whereas studying Confucianism was required for officials in China or Korea. Moreover, Japanese Confucianism was modified during the Edo period according to the “ancient stratum,” and the study of Japanese classical culture increased. This is the third cycle.

The fourth cycle began with the “enlightenment for civilization,” namely, the import of Western civilization, in the Meiji era (1868–1912). Japan opened the country and started to introduce Western civilization. As a result, Japan succeeded in realizing the slogan “Enriching the country, and strengthening the armies” to some extent. Then, nationalistic ideas and political movements began to flourish, and Japan began to confront the advanced countries such as the U.S.A., Great Britain, and France. Finally, ultra-nationalism and militarism dominated the country, and military governments waged the war with the Axis countries of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy against the Allied Powers.

Thus, postwar democracy was the beginning of the fifth cycle. Intellectuals characterized as representatives of postwar enlightenment, including Maruyama Masao, repented Japan’s war policy and did their best to introduce democratic ideas and institutions. As has been mentioned, their efforts have been fruitful to some extent, but not completely. In reality, the core of the political structure was and still is political clientelism, frequently associated with political corruption.
Moreover, the intellectual current has changed since the 1980s, after the dramatic economic development, and right-wing thoughts and neo-nationalism have increased strongly. This dangerous change has affected real politics, and recent governments such as the Koizumi cabinet openly executed right-wing policies: they sent Self-Defense Forces to Iraq, submitted the law against co-conspiracy, and proposed a revision of the fundamental law of education.

Nanbara had been responsible for the enactment of this fundamental law, and he was one of the most influential advocates of the peace Constitution. These recent acts are obviously in opposition to his efforts. This move towards the right wing in Japanese politics reminds us of the nightmare of military politics in prewar Japan. Just as prewar Japanese militarism can be regarded as the closing of the fourth cycle, the recent turn could indicate the danger of being in the later stages of the fifth cycle.

5. Conclusion: Perpetual Spiritual Revolution for Perpetual Democracy

Until his death, Maruyama continued to hope for the transformation of Japanese culture from “nature” to “artificiality,” in other words, from “become” to “make”. Although there is some difference between Nanbara’s political philosophy and Maruyama’s political theory, Maruyama’s zeal for reforming Japanese culture can be considered to have taken on Nanbara’s appeal for a spiritual revolution to some extent. Both focused on the human dimension as the basis of politics.

Maruyama acknowledged the fact that we cannot reach a perfect democracy. Although democratic institutions can be imported, the idea of democracy contains a certain contradiction: the identity between governing and governed persons. Since the governing persons are necessarily a minority, they cannot be the equal of the others. Therefore, democracy cannot become perfect, and democratic movements perpetually continue.

Likewise, although Japan imported democratic institutions from abroad after World War II, we should continue to call for a spiritual revolution because it is surely impossible to form an ideal citizen. But to get closer to this ideal it is necessary to call for “perpetual spiritual
revolution,” whether the revolution is Nanbara’s “human revolution” or the transformation of a Japanese *basso ostinato* in Maruyama’s terminology.

The public philosophy of Nanbara and Maruyama criticizes the way of thinking as it is revived in the neo-nationalist tendencies of today. They called for a spiritual revolution towards truth (Nanbara) or individual subjectivity and independence (Maruyama). Now that their diagnosis of Japanese politics and culture could be applied once more, their prescription, namely, an appeal for the spiritual revolution for democracy, should be revived, too.