

## *Japanese Marxism, the University of Tokyo, and China*

Tomoo Marukawa

The task given to me from Professor Sonoda was to introduce the intellectual history of University of Tokyo and combine that with China studies. That is quite a difficult task for me. I studied Marxist economics here in the University of Tokyo, and that is how I came in touch with the intellectual tradition of the University. After graduation, I worked with an institute where I started to study China. I did not study China in this University. For me, University of Tokyo and China is two different topics. So I had a hard time combining the two. But anyway, I would like to mainly focus on the intellectual history of the University of Tokyo in Marxism, because the main thing I learned here was Marxist economics.

### **Introduction of Marxism to Japan**

First, let me start from how Marxism came to Japan. It was introduced in the beginning of the 20th century. The first group of socialists gathered, and the Socialist Democratic Party was established in 1901. But the Party was banned on the day of its establishment, because there was a law called the public safety and police law and nine years later, many of them got executed.

The Russian Revolution took place in 1917, and the USSR was established in 1922. Marxism again came into Japan, and from the 1920s onwards, it was quite widely accepted by intellectuals mainly in economics and political science, the social sciences. Russian Communists instigated the establishment of the Japanese Communist Party. In 1922, the Party was established by a small group of intellectuals. And, of course, the police again got worried about the Party. The Party was once dissolved in 1924 but reestablished in 1926. And apart from the Communist Party, Japan also had socialist parties. They were the Japanese Worker-Farmer Party and Socialist Mass Party. I don't know so much about the difference between the two, so I just call them the socialists. There were two groups of Marxists, the Communists and the Socialists.

### **The Debate on Japanese Capitalism**

The focus of my talk today is the debate on Japanese capitalism, which took place from around 1925 until 1937. It ended in 1937, which was the year of the beginning of Sino-Japanese War. The police suppressed the Communists and Socialists alike. They either got imprisoned or converted. The focus of this debate is where to place Japan in the Marxist model of societal development stages. According to Marxism, societies develop from feudalism to capitalism, and then to socialism. And between these systems, there should be jumps. In the transition from feudalism to capitalism, for

example, there will be a bourgeois democratic revolution.

Examples of bourgeois democratic revolution are the French Revolution and the American independence. From capitalism to socialism, there should be another jump, which is the socialist revolution. And the focus of the debate was, “Was Japan in the 1920s or 30s at the last stage of feudalism, or at the stage of capitalism?” The debate got very hot because it relates to the strategies of socialist and communist parties. If Japan was at the last stage of feudalism, then we must fight for democracy, not for socialism. But if Japan is a full-fledged capitalist society, then we should fight for socialism. The strategic outcome is completely different depending on how to diagnose the current status of Japan. The Japanese Communist Party insisted that Japan was at the final stage of feudalism, while the socialists party maintained that Japan had already entered the stage of capitalism. The USSR supported the Japanese Communist Party.

The debate was fought between two factions. One is called *Koza* faction 講座派. *Koza* means “lectures.” Another is *Rono* faction 労農派. *Rono* was the title of a magazine and it literally means workers and farmers. *Koza* faction is supported by the Japanese Communist Party. In fact its main figure was also a leading member of the Party. The *Rono* faction was connected with the socialist parties.

The focus of the debate was on the rural society. The *Koza* faction points out that the peasants are very poor because they are extracted high rent by landowners. The peasants should be liberalized from the burden of rents. Such reform should come first and after such revolutionary change, we can think about moving towards socialism. While in the case of *Rono* faction, they say that Japan has already entered the stage of capitalism with the Meiji Restoration, so it's already more than 50 years. And they insisted, therefore, we can move directly to socialism.

### **Hirano Yoshitaro**

I would like to mainly talk about four scholars that joined the debate. The first one is this person, Hirano Yoshitaro 平野義太郎.



Hirano Yoshitaro (1897-1980)

He was one of the main figures in the *Koza* faction. He studied law at the

University of Tokyo. After graduation he worked for the department as a research assistant first, and then after two years he became an associate professor. He went to Europe in 1927 and met Karl Wittfogel. Through Wittfogel's influence, Hirano became a Marxist. After returning to the University of Tokyo he restarted teaching civil law. But after lecturing some months, he got prosecuted for donating 200 yen to the Japanese Communist Party. 200 yen is not today's 200 yen. 90 years ago, 200 yen should be like 1 million yen today. This is quite a big sum as a donation. He was forced to resign the University of Tokyo and he was imprisoned for half a year. After his release, he became very active as a Marxist theorist. He was one of the main editors of *The Lectures on the Development of Japanese Capitalism* 『日本資本主義発達史講座』. The title of the book series explains why the faction was called *Koza* or Lecture faction. And he published *The Mechanism of Japanese Capitalist Society* 『日本資本主義社会の機構』 in 1934, which was one of the most important works of this faction.

In *The Mechanism*, Hirano wrote that Japan under the Edo regime was forced to open its economy. American vessels came to Japan and pressured to open its ports or otherwise they would attack. This triggered a change in the regime and the Meiji Restoration started. Japan was reluctantly on the track towards capitalism. Hirano says that Japanese society was not ready for capitalism but it was forced to enter the capitalist stage. The process that prepares the condition for capitalism is called as “original accumulation” in Marxism. It is a process of dissolving the rural societies into two parts. One is the capitalists and landowners, and the other part is the workers. Japan did not really begin the process of original accumulation when it was forced to get on the track towards capitalism. When the Meiji Restoration took place, 78% of Japanese workforce were rural farmers. The average acreage of peasants' plots was very small, 0.87 hectares, which was only 1/10 of that in Germany. There was no source of government revenue other than taxing the agriculture. 80% of Japanese government's tax revenue in early Meiji period came from land tax. The government was in desperate need for tax revenue for pushing forward its industrial and military development to cope with the pressure of Western imperialism. Consequently, the land tax became very heavy. It was as heavy as the tributes that farmers needed to submit during the previous feudal era. In 1873, there was a reform in land tax. That reform tipped the balance of power in rural societies in favor of landowners. Before then, taxes (tributes) were paid by the farmers, but from 1873, the landowners became responsible for tax payment. Therefore, the landowners imposed high rents, which included tax, to the peasants.

Hirano shows that the distribution of income between the government or the previous samurai class, and the landowner and tenants. The landowners' share has increased from 28% during the Edo period to 38% in 1877, while the farmers share declined from 35 to 32%. The small farmers were impoverished by the heavy tax and price hikes in agriculture inputs. Some of them have fallen to the status of tenant farmers. Some of them quit farming and went to the cities. And the poor peasants had to

make their living by not only agriculture but also engaging in sericulture—raising cocoons—and sent their daughters to sweatshops. Daughters of peasant families worked in textile workshops with long working hours. Hirano says that the working hour would be as long as 15 hours a day. The workers' freedom was constrained by restrictive labor contracts. Hirano says that the low-income structure of peasants was inherited from the previous feudal society. He says that Japan was a half feudal society and because the tax and rent burden in agriculture was so heavy, capitalist agriculture like that in United States and United Kingdom could not develop in Japan. And upon such half-feudal economic substructure stood the upper structure, which was also half feudal in his view. The political upper structure is characterized as “absolutism by the Emperor.” However, as *The Mechanism* was published in 1934, he had to erase the word “Emperor,” because openly criticizing the Emperor's authority constituted a crime at that time.

And besides writing a lot about Japan, he was also interested in China through his friendship with Karl Wittfogel. Wittfogel was a famous scholar on Chinese economy. Hirano translated Wittfogel's *China's Economy and Society* which was originally published in German. Wittfogel argued that in China the management of water was very important. The water was provided by huge rivers like Yangtze River and Yellow River. To manage them, a lot of manpower and a strong political power were needed. Upon such agricultural basis, a strong state was constructed. Wittfogel called such state as an Asiatic despotism. The emperor had great power, and it was supported by a well-developed bureaucracy. Hirano was inspired by Wittfogel's idea, and he thought that same thing applies even to Japan. He wrote an article entitled “Two ways of studying China” in 1934. And he argued that the economic basis of China's state system is still a feudal society and above that substructure Asiatic despotism stood as an upper structure.

Sadly in 1936, he was arrested on the charge of violating the Public Security Law again, and during his detention he declared that he had abandoned Marxism. In those days many Marxists were enticed to declare “conversion” from Marxism to militarism during detention. He got released, and he joined a research group on rural societies in northern China. He made an interesting research trip in China, mainly at the suburbs of Beijing. There are interesting stories about that, but I don't plan to go into much detail of that story. And from 1941, he got more involved in Japanese militarism. He wrote books on “the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere” every year. That period should be considered the most embarrassing period for Hirano.

After the end of the war, he returned to Marxism. In 1946, he published a new version of *The Mechanism of Japanese Capitalist Society*. In post-World War II Japan, the Allied Powers that occupied Japan conducted a major reform in rural society. The landowners were forced to sell their lands to the peasants at low prices. The tenant farmers became small and independent farmers that had ownership of their land. That structure created in postwar Japan remains basically unchanged until today. Besides this,

the Constitution, civil law, and the political structure were changed under occupation. In this new edition, Hirano writes that the success of postwar reforms proved that his analyses in the 1934 book were correct.

In 1949, Hirano published a book entitled “China's Great Revolution.” The book was published in November 1949, only one month after Mao Zetong declared the inauguration of the People’s Republic of China. Hirano depicted China as an Asiatic despotism, and a half feudal, half colonized society. Of course, he was talking about China before the People's Republic.

### **Inomata Tsunao**

I would like to introduce another interesting person, who is Inomata Tsunao 猪俣津南雄.



Inomata Tsunao (1889-1942)

I think, he represents the best part of the other faction, which is the *Rono* 劳農 faction. He has a quite interesting career. He was born in a poor family, so he had to start working after finishing middle school. He worked first as a teacher at an elementary school and then he went to military service. And after working for several years, a rich person helped him study at Waseda University. He entered Waseda and the professors found him very intelligent. Another rich man supported him to go to the United States to study. He studied agricultural economics at Wisconsin University and earned PhD. He studied at Chicago University and Columbia University, too. The interesting part is that, as soon as he arrived at the United States, he fell in love with a Polish-Jewish woman. They married and his wife taught him Marxism. So, he became a Marxist in the United States, and came back to Japan via Moscow. It is rumored that he went to Moscow to discuss with the Russian communists about establishing the Japanese Communist Party, and indeed, after coming back to Japan he and the other members established the Japanese Communist Party. He started working at Waseda as a professor. He was arrested and imprisoned on the charge of joining the Communist Party. After being released, he didn't join the Communist Party and he couldn't return to Waseda. He spent the rest of his life as a freelance writer, and he wrote a lot of books. He joined the *Rono* faction and the socialist party, but very soon he was expelled from

both organizations.

Inomata published *An Introduction to Rural Problems* 『農村問題入門』 in 1937. It talks a lot about Japanese agricultural history. But I don't want to go into that detail. I will only focus on his views on the on the current—I mean, the 1920s and 30s—situation of Japanese rural society. He shares Hirano's views that the Japanese peasants are suffering from small lands, high rents, and low productivity, which did not change so much from the feudal period. But at the same time, he says that Japan after the Meiji Restoration is no longer feudalism. A feudalistic system has an extra-economic enforcement mechanism that ties peasants to their land. But since the Meiji period peasants are no longer personally subjective to landlords. Before then, in feudalism, peasants could not leave the land. They could not quit agriculture and work in other occupations. Since Meiji, they have the right to quit agriculture or sell their land if they have the ownership. That's not feudalism, he says. Although the land tax and rent were heavy, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the society was under feudalism.

He tried to explain why the peasants suffer so much, even though they are under capitalism. He says that it stems from the characteristics of Japanese agriculture. Compared to Europe where they grow wheat or raise cattle, Japanese agriculture is focused on rice. Rice production is a very labor-intensive task. You have to pick the weeds in the rainy season, which is quite troublesome, and the crop season is very short. You have to harvest rice within a very short period. Otherwise, typhoon will ruin the crops. In short, it's very labor-intensive. And that's why the average acreage of paddies remain small.

Because the peasants are poor, the stagnant domestic market restricted the development of industrial capitalism in Japan. Therefore, the redundant workforce in rural Japan could not be absorbed in urban industries. Because of rural overpopulation, peasants have to compete each other for having a land to cultivate. That is why the rent was so high. With the high rent, low productivity, and small plots, farmers have to increase their income by side businesses like sericulture and also by sending their daughters to sweatshops. He admits that agricultural machinery such as tractors and combines was available in the 1920s and 30s. But only a small number of big farms introduced such modern machinery. As there were plenty of cheap labor in the countryside, there was no incentive to introduce labor-saving technologies.

With high rents, the landowner class became rich. They were the people that paid considerable sums of tax, which earned them voting rights at general elections. Through political participation, they were well connected with politicians and bureaucrats. With high rents, capitalist agriculture could not develop. Capitalist agriculture is a type of agriculture that runs a big farm by buying or borrowing land, introduces labor-saving machinery, and employs many agricultural workers. Inomata says that even in Japan a large farm will be more productive than smaller ones. He seems to suggest that with a fundamental reform in land ownership—which follows a

socialist revolution— Japanese agriculture can break through its vicious cycle and enlarge the farm size, introducing large-scale farming technology using labor-saving machinery, and agricultural productivity can be increased. However, he could not express his ideas overtly, because at the time of publication, such discussion was not allowed.

### **Sakisaka Itsuro**

I would like to shortly introduce two other guys. One is Sakisaka Itsuro 向坂逸郎.



Sakisaka Itsuro (1897-1985)

He is considered to be another important figure in the *Rono* faction. The main reason I would like to introduce him is that he was also a graduate at the University of Tokyo. He went to Germany to study Marxism. After returning to Japan he became a professor at Kyushu University. He was also forced to resign because of his connections with the Marxist movement. After the war, he became a professor at the Kyushu University again, and he became a very influential figure, even politically. He was the head of the leftist faction of the Japanese Socialist Party.

His book on the debate on Japanese capitalism was *The Problems of Japanese Capitalism* 『日本資本主義の諸問題』. He had a simple idea that even though there may be varieties in production modes at the beginning of capitalism, with the development of capitalism, the various types tend to converge to a single type. He admits that Japanese agriculture was different from what we see in the United States or United Kingdom, but with the development of capitalism, it will converge to the same pattern.

That idea is based on Chapter 24 of Marx' *Capital* Volume 1. Marx says that the capitalism tends to split the society into two big parts: the capitalist class and the impoverished worker class. That is the inevitable law of capitalism. Sakisaka did not explain why Japanese agriculture looked so different from European or American agriculture. He did not explain why the acreage was so small and the rent was so high. On the contrary, Hirano and Inomata faced these problems and tried to give answers to them.

### **Uno Kozo**

Finally, I would like to introduce Kozo Uno 宇野弘蔵.



Uno Kozo (1897-1977)

I was taught Marxist economics from Professor Ito Makoto 伊藤誠. Professor Ito's mentor was Suzuki Koichiro 鈴木鴻一郎 and Suzuki was a follower of Uno. Therefore, Uno is my great grandfather in intellectual lineage. Uno studied at the Economics Department of the University of Tokyo, and he also went to Germany. He didn't really attend college there. What he did there was to read Marx' *Capital* and Lenin's *Imperialism* in his room. After coming back, he became an associate professor at Tohoku University, and after the war, he became a professor at the Institute of Social Science, and became the first director. The Institute is where I currently am working for. So, I have many reasons to admire Uno. Uno created the so-called "Uno school." There should be more than 200 scholars who seem to have some relationship with the Uno school. It should be considered the most powerful faction in Japanese Marxian economics.

I like to limit my talk on Uno's remarks regarding the debate on Japanese capitalism. Uno argues that in the case of England, the polarization of rural societies, which means the polarization into landowners and landless peasants precedes the development of capitalism. The landless peasants go to the cities to make their living and become the proletariats. That process is called "original accumulation" in Marx' *Capital*.

But in late-comer capitalisms like Germany or Japan, Uno argues, capitalism come from outside. The original accumulation in rural societies had not started or only at its early stage when capitalism is imposed. The old feudal system remains there. The rural society with feudal characteristics is involved in capitalism without its own transformation.

Therefore, in late-comer capitalisms like Japan, the transformation of rural societies from the feudal production mode to capitalism will be promoted by government forces. But the process will be a slow and gradual one. That is why even at the stage of capitalism, the rural society seems to have feudal traits. Capitalism has its common tendency to foster rural transformation by eroding the feudal traits from outside. But this law will be hampered or distorted based on the condition of each



country.

And later, Uno was inspired from this debate and developed a kind of meta-theory about how to combine theory and actual analysis. He thinks that to directly apply the basic theory of capitalism like Marx' *Capital* to the case of Japan is wrong. There should be something in between. He advocated to split the Marxist analysis into three parts. The first part is the basic theory. The second part is the stage theory, which describes the stages of global capitalist development. Uno said that global capitalism had passed through the stages of mercantilism, liberalism, and imperialism. The 1920s and 30s was the era of imperialism. The actual situation of Japan should be analyzed in light of the stage theory and basic theory. The basic law of capitalism will work in Japan but it will be affected and distorted by its individual conditions.

### **Comparison**

I've introduced four scholars and let me compare their views. I think, the debate on Japanese capitalism reveals a problem of applying a universal theory to a particular country. I think in many cases you face a similar problem not only in Marxism, but also in other theories. There is a universal theory, but if you try to apply that to a particular country, like China or Japan, you always face a problem that the actual situation may not fit completely into the model. Japanese agriculture in the 1920s and 1930s sustained the low productivity, small acreage, and rural poverty in feudal society. Yet the land ownership institutions could no longer be regarded as feudal. Japan did not neatly fit into the schema of Marxism.

Sakisaka was the most optimistic. He thought that within 10 or 20 years the reality would change and it would fit into the model of capitalism. But his view was wrong. The postwar reforms revealed that without such strong enforcement under occupation, Japanese agriculture might never be able to get out of its vicious cycle.

Then, was Hirano correct? Well, Hirano was also wrong in his own way, because he tried to prove that Japan was under feudalism in vain. He and the *Koza* faction tried hard to show the existence of extra-economic enforcement. But barring the rule of the state, such extra-economic enforcement did not really exist after the Meiji Restoration.

I think Inomata had the deepest understanding of what was happening in Japanese agriculture. I think he knew the most about agriculture. But, at the same time, he had his failure in his own way because he seemed to think that only socialism can overcome the problem of Japanese rural society. However, the postwar reform had nothing to do with socialism. The drastic adjustment of the land ownership structure—which could be likened to a revolution—paved the way for Japan's postwar capitalist development.

In short, I think, strategically speaking, the *Koza* faction like Hirano was correct. Japan really needed a revolutionary reform in agriculture to push forward its

capitalist development. But, at the same time, the *Rono* faction, in particular Inomata, was correct in a theoretical sense. Japan was not a feudal society. There was a split in theoretical correctness and strategic correctness. That was a problem caused by directly applying the Marxist formula to the case of Japan. Therefore, I think, Uno's proposal was the most appropriate. His proposal is a good way to adjust Marxism to make it useful in explaining Japan's actual situation while not abandoning Marxism.

That's the end of my talk. Thank you.

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