

An Outline of a Theory of Civilization by Fukuzawa Yukichi. Translated by David A. Dilworth and G. Cameron Hurst III. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. Pp. xxvii+278.

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Among the 19th century's nonmetropolitan societies, only Japan quickly imitated the economic development, military organization, and imperialism of the Western powers. That imitation owed much to the writings of Fukuzawa Yukichi, for unlike many of the social thinkers we have read in this series, Fukuzawa was not primarily a university professor, politician, or literary figure—although he was active in all of those fields—but primarily a popular writer, so successful that he was one of the 500 wealthiest residents of Tokyo in 1890.

Of Fukuzawa's dozens of works, three have attracted notice outside Japan. The first is *An Encouragement of Learning* (1872–76), a collection of pamphlets making the case for modern education and culture. The second is "Leave Asia," a controversial editorial of 1885 arguing that Japan must reject old (i.e., Asian) ways and customs and that since neither China nor Korea had done so, Japan should not wait for them as if to make common cause against the West, but must treat them as did the Westerners. (Many have found this evident imperialism perplexing, because Fukuzawa had earlier encouraged Korean nationalism and indeed had fostered a failed liberal coup in Korea in 1884.)

Fukuzawa's third well-known work, which we read here, was published between these two others. Aimed at the older generation, *Outline of a Theory of Civilization* (1875) presented the implications of Western culture in a tone that mixed the rigorous and the conversational. Although not as popular as *Encouragement*, *Outline* sold well and has been regarded by many as Fukuzawa's greatest work.

When Fukuzawa Yukichi was born in Osaka in 1835, Japan was still organized in feudal domains of varying sizes and power. Its overlord was the shogun, the current descendant of the clan whose progenitor Tokugawa Ieyasu had emerged victorious from the unification wars of the late 16th century. Although the shogun's regime (*bakufu*) had loosened its grip over two centuries of peace, Japanese feudal society remained sharply divided into the two classes of samurai and commoners. Despite the irrelevance of soldiers during the long peace, samurai were nonetheless paid soldier stipends (in rice), which for the upper tier were large enough to permit a life of culture, politics, and idleness. Lower-tier samurai could not

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survive without side employment or paid work in domain business affairs, which their superiors thought beneath their dignity.

Fukuzawa's father was a lower-tier samurai who ran his domain's Osaka rice warehouse—a businessman, negotiator, and accountant. He died shortly after Fukuzawa's birth, and the family returned to the domain town of Nakatsu, where Fukuzawa grew up in poverty. A lucky chance and some help from his brother took him in 1854 to Nagasaki, where he began learning Dutch and reading Western works. Fleeing domain politics, he soon moved to Osaka, where he entered the best local school specializing in Western knowledge. In 1858 he took over direction of the similar school founded in the *bakufu* capital by his own domain. He also began the study of English.

As a result of this study, in 1860 Fukuzawa contrived to be a *bakufu* translator on an official mission to the United States, a role he repeated in 1862 (London) and 1867 (United States). On both later trips he bought large quantities of Western books, which he translated and published in Japanese on his return. This was a daring practice, given the period's many assassinations of westernizers and *bakufu* officials. (Fukuzawa stayed inside after dark for 15 years.) There was also danger from the *bakufu* itself, which in 1863 executed a minor official who had expressed in a private letter his hope that great leadership might come to Japan. But the risky translation services and his immensely popular book *Conditions in the West* brought Fukuzawa wealth. In 1868 (the year the *bakufu* was overthrown and the imperial government was "restored") he was secure enough to begin his own school, which would eventually (1890) become Keio University. Duly instructed in Western classical economics, the school's graduates connected Fukuzawa to the emerging Japanese business community. Fukuzawa himself cofounded a general importing business in this period.

Throughout the 1870s he continued writing and publishing, on topics ranging from accounting to physics to military science—sometimes translating directly, sometimes writing on his own. *Encouragement* and *Outline* came in this decade, the high point of Fukuzawa's so-called enlightenment period. He was also active in civil society, founding in the 1870s the *Mita* debating society and then in 1880 the similar but larger *Kojunsha*. His successful publishing operations, his importing business, and his former students brought contacts with Mitsui and Mitsubishi among the emerging Japanese commercial giants, and his writings about economics led to a connection with Finance Minister Okuma Shigenobu. All this enabled Fukuzawa to help found the Yokohama Specie Bank (1880), which would eventually become Japan's international bank.

In the early 1880s, Fukuzawa briefly considered the possibility of running a government-sponsored newspaper, but his patron Okuma fell from power and the possibility closed. Fukuzawa then founded his own daily

newspaper, *Jiji shinpo*; his later books would all be collections of its editorial material. After the failure of his attempt to propagate liberal ideas in Korea, he became more explicitly nationalistic and more openly hostile to China and Korea, the latter of which was on its way to Japanese protectorate status (and eventual annexation) by the time of Fukuzawa's death at 66 in 1901.

An Outline of a Theory of Civilization is not, as its title might suggest, a treatise for experts. It envisions a general audience, as did the books on which it draws heavily—François Guizot's *General History of Civilization in Europe* (1829; Fukuzawa had read the 1842 English translation) and Henry Thomas Buckle's *History of Civilization in England* (1857, 1861), which had been at the height of its immense popularity when Fukuzawa was in London. But while Guizot and Buckle could presume extensive general knowledge in their audience (many of Buckle's pages have more footnotes than text), Fukuzawa could not. Thus, where Buckle has scholarly machinery, Fukuzawa has homely metaphors and everyday examples. Where Guizot is urbane and learned, Fukuzawa is brusque and commonsensical. Indeed, the book's drastic simplifications suggest real weakness until one recalls that it was written less than 10 years after the imperial restoration and less than 20 after the Western powers first forced themselves on a reluctant Japan.

The 10 chapters of *Outline* fall into three implicit sections. In the first section, Fukuzawa lays out the stage theory of social progress then common in Western sources. He posits three stages, which in the English translation are labeled "primitive," "semicivilized," and "civilized." The passing years would transform these into Third, Second, and First World or periphery, semiperiphery, and core, just as later two-stage writers would speak of less developed and more developed countries or Global South and Global North. As these labels all suggest, the many avatars of the 18th century's theory of progress embody substantive positions that differ profoundly in whether they believe the stages to be naturally induced or artificially imposed and whether they found them just or unjust.

Fukuzawa too conceals a particular position under the seemingly general label of "civilization." This concealment is first evident in the many incidental metaphors for civilization, which is at one point a stage on which institutions, learning, and commerce are actors, at another an ocean into which institutions flow, and at a third a warehouse containing everything useful for society, even if bought at the price of evil. (In "Leaving Asia," Fukuzawa would compare civilization to the measles because it spread rapidly!) Fukuzawa's indeterminate meaning for "civilization" is also implicit in his appropriation and judgment of Western culture. Throughout, one hears the great ideals of the Western liberals Fukuzawa had read: enlightenment, impartial justice, exercise of liberty, overall public good.

But while Fukuzawa's argument mentions such things, it does not by any means proceed from libertarian first principles. Similarly, Fukuzawa makes occasional admiring remarks about the West; the American Civil War, he tells us, started with "admirable concerns" over the "evil custom of slavery." But such admiration is always undercut. The Civil War soldiers degenerated into "a pack of devils fighting one another in the fields of Paradise" (p. 56). As for the Americans of the 1870s, "Their men spend their lives in the feverish pursuit of money. The only function of their women is feverishly to propagate dollar hunters" (p. 57).

When Fukuzawa finally turns to explicit theory, he gives a theory not of civilization, but of the nation, defining what will become a core term in Japanese social thought: *kokutai* or "national polity." A nation is, first and foremost, a race of people with a consistent set of institutions, a strong we-feeling, and a desire for independence. It is not necessarily a government, as the German case makes clear (Fukuzawa passes over the proclamation of the German empire in 1871.) Moreover, that Fukuzawa uses China and British India to exemplify loss of national polity shows in turn that of the four basic constituents of the nation (race, institutions, we-feeling, and independence) the most important for Fukuzawa is independence.

Two structures organize these constituents of the nation. The first is political legitimation, by which Fukuzawa means a government not ruling by force, although it may have taken its original position by force. (He is agnostic about the forms of government, seeing both good and bad in monarchy, democracy, and republicanism.) The second is a lineage of rulers. Fukuzawa's discussion of lineage is cautious, no doubt because of the danger of assassination. He makes much of the unbroken line of the Japanese imperial house, but also argues that loyalty to that house is best shown by strengthening the national polity. Again, the core matter is independence. Fukuzawa repeatedly notes that Japan has never been dependent, and that the combination of unbroken national polity with an unbroken imperial line makes her "unique among the nations of the world" (p. 42).

That the book might have been better titled *Outline of a Theory of National Strength* becomes clearer as the second section unfolds. Although in the first section Fukuzawa has traced civilization to inward spirit rather than such outward forms as clothing, weapons, and institutions, here he emphasizes Buckle's argument that intellect (meaning for Fukuzawa natural science, engineering, social science, and other applied forms of knowledge) is more important to progress than morality (meaning religion, ethical systems, and the like). He repeats and elaborates Buckle's contention that since the standards of human action change perpetually while moral systems change very little, morals cannot be the source of progress. Rather, since only intellectual doctrines change substantially, they must be the source of progress.

As this summary makes clear, both Buckle and Fukuzawa confused change with progress. That change of knowledge is inevitably progressive is a mere assumption—precisely the assumption that Japanese conservatives disputed. Moreover, both men had their history profoundly wrong. The notion that “morality” is constant while knowledge is changing could be sustained only definitionally, by allocating all changing cultural understanding of social life to the realm of intellect, as a “technology” of society. Thus, jurisprudence, as a form of understanding and governing human affairs, is “intellect,” while religious practice is “morality.”

In the second section Fukuzawa makes even less use of the vocabulary of individualism. Like Durkheim after him, he notes the constancy of national suicide statistics (which come to him from Adolphe Quetelet via Buckle). He downplays great-man history. He argues that the national spirit is found by averaging individuals’ spirits—an almost statistical notion. But for Fukuzawa more important—in fact more or less identical with this national spirit—is the “trend of the times.” The great men succeed because they are in tune with the trend of the times, and conversely even a gifted man cannot succeed unless he is in tune with the trend of the times. This position rapidly veers toward the idea that success must necessarily signify agreement between man and moment, a view that Fukuzawa had already ridiculed in its Chinese version as the theory of the mandate of heaven and that was identified as profoundly conservative in the West (cf., Alexander Pope’s dictum “Whatever is, is right.”)

But even this “national average” trend of the times quickly disappears. By the fifth chapter, Fukuzawa is arguing that “what we mean by national or public opinion is, in reality, the views of the intelligent minority among the middle and upper classes; the ignorant majority simply follow behind like sheep and never dare to give free rein to their ignorance” (p. 83). It is unclear whether this passage describes a current but temporary empirical reality or a valued terminal state of affairs. Indeed, by later in this chapter, Fukuzawa has moved to the position that men like himself—educated lower samurai interested in westernization and beating the West at its own game—are the ones in tune with the times (by which we infer that he means in tune not with the average of Japanese opinion but with the “reality” of Western dominance). And even public opinion he views from the top down: “This process [of opinion formation] is like a certain number of soldiers forming a regiment, a number of regiments forming a battalion, and a number of battalions constituting a great army” (pp. 93–94).

The book’s second section also underscores Fukuzawa’s belief that virtue and morality are private, individual matters, and thus mostly irrelevant to national strength. In this he is following the Western liberal tradition, which had gratefully consigned religion to private life after a century and a half of religious war. (Indeed, Fukuzawa regards Protes-

tantism as an advanced religion precisely because it is private. Guizot, it should be noted, was a devout Protestant.) To be sure, in chapter 7 Fukuzawa paints a glorious future in which private virtue will expand into the public world and government itself will become unnecessary because of pure virtue. But in the long meantime, the only place for morality is the family (p. 154). Money spent on the poor is wasted, a mere consoling of the private conscience that will lead the poor to expect a dole rather than to work hard. Not surprisingly, Fukuzawa also accepts the 19th-century liberal belief that most men are lazy and dishonest and that success in government comes by mastery of this weak nature: "By investigating the nature and functions of mankind, they [the Western governments] finally gain insight into its laws and according to its nature and functions they devise methods to channel it" (p. 160). Surprisingly, Fukuzawa hardly mentions education as an example of such Western social control, although both he and Guizot were immensely influential in the education systems of their respective countries.

In summary, Fukuzawa's position is in effect that of the early and middle 19th-century mainstream Western liberal writers whom he had read so carefully, combined with the long-run vision of the positivists. This interpretation becomes more certain in the final section, which compares the West and Japan. Chapter 8 summarizes Guizot's view of European history as a story of emerging liberty. Although Guizot's original had considerable hesitations and qualifications, these were somewhat ritualistic, and in Fukuzawa they disappear. In Fukuzawa, for example, the poor of the West—who were then actually in the state of profound poverty made famous by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Benjamin Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell, and many others—are idealized as at least having the sense of individuality necessary to upward mobility. As for Fukuzawa's understanding of Japanese history, it employs present usefulness as its main criterion for ideas, materials, and practices. The 250-year Tokugawa peace is said to constitute "economic tuberculosis" (p. 219), even though it had been in fact a time of agricultural advance, economic and commercial development, and cultural flowering in kabuki theater, haiku poetry, and ukiyo-e painting. In Fukuzawa's version, the samurai are responsible for such advance as did occur, and the wealthy commoners—with whom Fukuzawa's father and brother had negotiated over many years—are misers or sensualists, greedy like the Westerners. "The upper class had the requisite time to cultivate virtue and knowledge while the lower class seemed solely concerned with money and sensual pleasures" (p. 222). It is evident—and Fukuzawa had said as much before—that for him only the lower samurai have real virtue and vision.

After all this, the final chapter is no surprise. Although there is general talk about progress, and the occasional utopian remark,

When it comes to relations between one country and another only two things count: in times of peace exchange goods and compete with one another for profit; in times of war, take up arms and kill each other. To put it another way, the present world is a world of commerce and warfare. . . . War is the art of extending the rights of independent governments, and trade is a sign that one country radiates its light to another. (Pp. 234–35)

The book that began as a hymn of enlightenment ends in *realpolitik*. Fukuzawa's analysis of Japan's economic and political situation is an unsparing portrait of Western colonialism. But the conclusion he draws is that one must imitate the imperialist reality—rather than the idealistic protestations—of the West. Japan must avoid the fate of India. It must, for example, escape the imposition of indemnities by the British. (Fukuzawa mentions celebrated incidents in the early 1860s that had cost the *bakufu* millions, but ignores an event of the previous year, in which the Japanese had themselves extorted a similar indemnity from China over some shipwrecked Ryukuans massacred on Taiwan.) Fukuzawa tells us “There is only one thing, namely to establish our goal and advance toward civilization,” but concludes that “the first order of the day is to have the country of Japan and the people of Japan exist, and then and only then speak about civilization” (p. 254). In the present, that is—“civilization” means whatever produces national independence.

It is of course all too easy to read Fukuzawa in moralistic hindsight, knowing that ahead lie the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars, the takeovers of Korea, Manchuria, and eventually China, and the culminating holocaust of the Second World War. Yet one could read Guizot and Buckle the same way; 19th-century Western liberalism was itself followed by similar imperialistic squabbles and the twin nemesis of the two world wars. And the anachronism is wrong in both cases. It took much more than Guizot, Buckle, and Fukuzawa to make the horrors of the early 20th century.

More interesting are the problems of what Fukuzawa's sources themselves really meant, whether he misread them, and, indeed, whether he was really as militantly nationalistic as the reading here makes him seem. On an “enlightenment” reading, his sources were in fact devoted to positive civilization, he read them correctly, and *Outline* is a work of genuine enlightenment. Its apparent nationalism is mainly a reaction to the intense imperialistic pressure placed on Japan by the West. On an antienlightenment reading, Fukuzawa's sources were in fact ideological cover for world commercial domination, he read them correctly, and produced his own equivalent ideological cover. Its relatively naked nationalism merely signifies that he was less effective at hiding his *realpolitik* than his sources had been. On an optimistic Western reading, the Western liberals in their texts took for granted certain aspects of Western social order that were neither

stated nor explained in their texts but that were in fact necessary to its proper functioning (legal order, religious morality, etc.). Fukuzawa then read his sources literally, but as a foreigner did not know what they took for granted. He therefore produced a mere shadow of what the Western liberals had actually thought, a shadow which in turn could serve as a basis for extreme militant nationalism. On yet another reading, the price of rapid economic development in Japan was imperialist expansion on the mainland, and Fukuzawa merely provided the Meiji oligarchs with the ideology they needed. Whether he read or misread his sources is irrelevant.

One could go on. The reality is that Fukuzawa's book holds a very different mirror to the West than do those of other writers. In him the stories of liberation and dominance are inextricably mixed. His example raises the possibility that they cannot be separated.