

## Escaping from the ghetto:

How we might move from a preoccupation with Japan to living in the present

鎖国学からの脱出—日本学から現在学へ

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When I heard the title for this year's symposium, I was both anxious and intrigued. I was anxious for two reasons. First, although I am currently the Chair of the Japan Research Centre at SOAS and I convene the MA in Japanese Studies, I do not think of myself as someone who does Japanese Studies. And I am not sure I can do something called Japanology. I do history. I think history is a useful way to think about how the world got to be the way it is. (History may be the only thing we have with which to think about the world.) And I sometimes find Japan useful to think with. Given this, the answer to the question posed by the symposium also seems simple to me. Japanese Studies belongs to anyone who finds it useful to study Japan.

But the question also identifies an interesting problem, because it also suggests we need to think about who owns Japanese Studies. When we ask who owns Japanese Studies, we're saying that studying Japan has a value. In other words, Japanese Studies is an asset. At the moment, however, it's clear that the value of the asset is in decline. This is not necessarily so among students, many of whom are crazy about manga, anime and video games and for whom Japan is the promised land. But it is clear that Japan is no longer of too much interest outside Japan for the people with real money to invest (governments, foundations, etc): popular culture alone is not enough to attract the kind of funding that those who study Japan have grown used to. So we are faced by the problem of how to restore the value of the brand.

In other words, if we want to make studying Japan useful to as many people as possible, we have to think about how we study Japan now and how we might do it differently. In order to do this quickly today, I therefore want to do three things. First, I want to provide a brief historical account of why we have something called Japanese Studies. Second, I want to provide a contemporary diagnosis of the problem with Japanese Studies as we practise it nowadays. And third, I want to suggest a prescription for how we might want to do

study Japan in the future.

Until quite recently, historically speaking, nobody really studied Japan. It would have been surprising if they had. After all, it was only in the 19th century or so that the nation-state, which is the basic premise for the study of Japan or indeed any other country, came into existence. Of course, people did study things that happened in Japan and texts that were produced in Japan before this. In the late 18th century, Motoori Norinaga and others became anxious about their inability to distinguish what was indigenous to the archipelago from what had come from elsewhere. In the late 19th, Shigeno Yasutsugu and others began to establish the new discipline of national history. Both of these projects, however, were somewhat antiquarian. They were not really interested in understanding Japan as a whole, or contemporary Japan, but rather in identifying an indigenous foundation on which claims for national distinction might be based. Similarly, the earliest Western accounts of Japan, by Arnoldus Montanus, building in large part on Jesuit sources in the 17th century, and Engelbert Kaempfer, relying to a greater extent on his own observations in the 18th, were also more interested in Japan as an ethnographic, even natural historical specimen, rather than as a historical actor in its own right.

Even when the nation-state did become the object of historical analysis in the West, at the end of the 19th century, Japan was peripheral to most European and American accounts of the word and its history. People in Europe and America began to write about Japan almost as soon as the treaties were signed and the ports opened in the 1850s and 60s, but they too tended to focus their interest on the long-distant past. In the first half of the twentieth century, the study of Japan was confined to a small minority of Westerners, governed for the most part by the philological preoccupations that had long governed European understanding of the Orient. Things were different in Japan itself, of course, where the study of Japan was central,

but divided up among the emerging disciplinary departments. Disciplinary distinctions were exacerbated, for example in the case of my own discipline of history, by the assumption that Japanese history (as national history 国史), could and should be studied apart from regional (東洋史) and global (世界史) history, the latter usually thought to be the same thing as the history of Western civilization.

It was, as we know, only in the postwar period that the conditions emerged for the emergence of Japanese Studies as a distinct academic practice. As noted above, scholars elsewhere and earlier, above all Japan itself, had long studied and continued to study Japan, but the study of Japan as a historical and contemporary whole was perhaps a postwar innovation. Geopolitics—the cataclysm of World War II and the imminent threat of the Cold War—demanded that the West undertake the study of far-away people and places. These were now understood to operate according to deep-rooted logics, which were not necessarily the same as those governing the West and which therefore could provide the West with either a strategic threat or the resources with which to build a strategic advantage. In the US, therefore, which has dominated the postwar evolution of area studies and which still dominates the economy of higher education, Japan became one of a number of places that now moved under the academic microscope.

But Japan, together with Korea and China, was odd. Whereas other parts of the world were for the most part studied in the first instance as regions—Africa, the Near and Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia—East Asia tended to dissolve into its constituent countries. In East Asia, that is, the area was the nation-state. Japan was worse than that, however. Where China (and North Korea) could be compared to other communist regimes, where South Korea could be compared to other postcolonial developing countries (and subsequently seen as one example of a bureaucratic, authoritarian industrializing regime), Japan was thought to be unique. It was the only non-Western country to have successfully built up industry and empire at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was deviant in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup>. And it produced an economic miracle in the 50s and 60s—by definition something that was *sui generis* and therefore incomparable. Japan, in other words, was exceptional and could only be studied on its own terms.

But this, of course, was wrong. Japan is not

unique, except inasmuch as any country, region, city, neighborhood, family or individual is unique. More precisely, any nation may be marked off from other nations by reason of language, experience, borders etc; most nations (and many cities, individuals etc) do tell themselves stories to convince themselves of their own uniqueness (something to which people in postwar Japan seem to have been particularly prone); but emphasizing such distinction makes it difficult to account for how the place in question got to be the way it is. To take, for example, Japan as the unit of analysis often means that anything that happened on the archipelago is immediately classified as Japanese, while anything that happened beyond the boundary is relegated to the sphere of foreign relations and so subordinate to domestic concerns. In other words, assuming that there is such a thing as Japan and that one's job as a student or scholar is to explain it tends to fix the border, which has fluctuated markedly over time, to slight the diversity that can be found on the archipelago and to downplay the importance of the connections linking the peoples on the archipelago to communities elsewhere. It also tends to mean telling stories that are only of interest to other people who happen to be interested in 'Japan'.

Regardless of the disutility of the fiction that Japan is somehow special and the assumption that it can therefore be studied on its own terms, this remains the founding belief and pre-history of Japanese Studies as it exists today. The situation is exacerbated by the way in which Japanese Studies has been institutionalized in Europe, where the earlier tradition of Japanology remains dominant, assuming not only a distinct object of study but also a *logos* in the object. In the United States, things aren't too bad. People sometimes meet up as area specialists, though usually in Centres for East Asian Studies. But they receive their training in disciplinary departments: anthropology, art history, history, political science et al. The one exception tends to be Departments of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, whose centre of gravity tends to be literature, sometimes thought. In most of Europe, however, Japanese Studies is ghettoized. People train and spend their careers in Departments of Japanese Studies, talking to other people who study Japan. In terms of our accounts of Japan, this tends to reinforce the tendency to remove the country from comparative frameworks, regional and global accounts of how the world got to be the way it is. In terms of institutions, this tends to confine the study of Japan to a minority of

institutions: in the UK it is only possible to study Japan at 20% of the country's universities. It also tends to ghettoize Japanese Studies within the institution itself: mainstream departments continue to focus on the history and experience of the West; the rest, including Japan, is something studied elsewhere. But essentialism and ghettoization, I'd suggest, are two sides of a coin of declining value.

So what is to be done? Here it might be useful to simplify things by thinking a bit about the gates (門) within which we carry out our studies, which demarcate the privileged enclosure of scholarship (大学の門) and which, at least in East Asian languages, define the questions that lie at the heart of scholarship itself (学問). There are perhaps two options. The first is to close the gate and maintain the ghetto within which I think Japanese Studies now finds itself. This is comfortable but probably unsustainable. Even ghettos require some maintenance of their infrastructure, the provision of resources for which in turn demands some kind of traffic with the outside world. As suggested above, however, it is not clear that the outside world is willing to participate in an exchange from which it gets so little in return. The second is to open the gate: to place oneself in the present and Japan in the world. This might be a little uncomfortable at first. We might discover that Japan is neither as special or important as we thought it was. But it might become more interesting.

If this is right, if the only real way forward is to open the gate, then how should we go about doing it? There's no good recipe for such a prescription, but one starting-point might be to be a bit more honest with ourselves about what we do when we study Japan—or indeed anything else. It seems to me that all of us, all of the time, are doing at least three things simultaneously. First, we approach our subject in a particular way: as economists, historians, political scientists and sociologists, as specialists in art, language, literature, music. These are our disciplines, the basic training for our scholarship (学問). They have trained us how to ask questions: to apply theory to data in a particular way, to use data to modify our general accounts of the ways of the world and how it got to be that way.

Second, we base our investigation on a degree of familiarity with a particular field (専門). In my case this is modern Japan. In the old days, it was possible to pose as an authority in such a field, with a degree of mastery over the subject. These days, given the outpouring of publication in any field, this is impossible. We should still know enough to know when a statement about a particular place and time is simply wrong. But we should also acknowledge that knowing something about a field (専門) is not the same thing as knowing how to ask questions (学問). Japanese Studies is not scholarship, in other words. 日本学は学問ではない。

Finally, at any time, we are usually engaged in a particular research project, which provides us with an object of analysis and provokes us to find data with which to analyze that object. This data may or may not conform to the boundaries of the field, but also usually challenges us to step beyond the comfort zone of the discipline. At the moment, for example, I am beginning a small project on the history of Japanese golf. It turns out that I am going to have to look at data from at least Hawaii and South-East Asia, in addition to Japan, and that the most useful discipline for thinking about Japanese golf is predictably not history but sports sociology.

In other words, if we're honest with ourselves, we cannot just do Japanese Studies and assume that all is well with the world. We are or should be engaged in multiple conversations: in my case at the moment, with other historians, with other people who study 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan and with other people who study sport, leisure and the rise of the urban middle classes. It is precisely the differences between these various conversations, the productive tension to which they give rise, which makes studying something worthwhile. Without it, the study of Japan becomes the patient, grey accumulation of more facts and figures about the islands and people who happen to be known as Japanese. If we open the gate and stop pretending that Japanese Studies can be self-sufficient, then our work on Japan may regain some of its value for anyone who happens to find it useful. If we don't, I'm afraid we will only be talking to ourselves.

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