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Shinzo Abe's Civic Nationalism

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There's an old saw among nationalism scholars, and it goes like this: "I'm a patriot, you're a nationalist, but (you and I can agree that) he's a racist." There's a lot to learn from these few words about the politics of nationalism, and especially the politics of misunderstanding and misrepresenting the nationalism of others. We tend to see our own nationalism as a good thing, that of our closest allies as acceptable but risky, and that of third parties as dangerous in the extreme.

I was reminded of this tendency during Shinzo Abe's first term as prime minister. The U.S. media in particular was filled with charges, claims and innuendos that Abe was something between a risky nationalist and a dangerous racist—all with little to no evidence, of course. It was just another instance of poorly informed rhetoric in the service of a political agenda. In general, Americans tend to see nationalism in Japan only through the exceptional lens of Imperial Japan's military actions, particularly during and after the attack on Pearl Harbor. That is, when we hear of Japanese "nationalism," what often is implied is the peculiar form of "statism" (*kokkashugi*) that dominated politics and culture during wartime Japan even though—as Maruyama Masao emphasized—*kokkashugi* is not really a form of nationalism at all.¹ All concern about accurately grasping what nationalism really is pushed aside, the only question of interest often seems to be only whether Japan is "returning" to the "nationalism" [statism] of the wartime.

Because of these misunderstandings and biases, many today are probably mystified—or worse, horrified—by the tremendous public support for Abe and his LDP in the last election. Does this mean that the Japanese people are becoming "nationalistic" (ie., militaristic or statist)? How could they reelect such a horrible nationalist? Well, since the peace-loving postwar Japanese couldn't possibly really like a nationalist, this must have been a protest vote, which will be corrected in the next election of the House of Councilors (HC) this summer. The Japanese people must have voted for Abe in spite of, not because of, his nationalism. Such are the machinations many go through to square the 2012 election results with their misconception of Abe and his relationship to nationalism.

Perhaps the LDP will not win the upcoming HC election later this year. Or maybe they will. I do not intend to prophesy about future elections but to argue that if we do not understand the fundamentals of Japanese nationalism, and particularly the important role Abe is playing in democratizing Japanese nationalism, we will continue to misapprehend the basic political dynamics that are unfolding in Japan today.

The first and most important thing to understand about Japanese nationalism is that there are two words for nationalism in the Japanese lexicon (and *kokkashugi* [statism] is not one of them): *minzokushugi* and *kokuminshugi*. When a person speaking or thinking in Japanese makes reference to "nationalism," he must choose which of these two terms to employ. And that choice makes a difference. Each form of nationalism,

¹ Maruyama, Chapter 1 "Introduction: The Nation and Nationalism," *Studies in The Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, trans. Mikiso Hane, (Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 324

minzokushugi or *kokuminshugi*, has its own political and cultural history in modern Japan, as I have documented elsewhere.² Simply put, the former is best understood as “ethnic nationalism” and the latter as “civic nationalism.” And it is a mistake to assume that only the political right is nationalistic. Separate studies by Gayle and Takekawa have demonstrated that the left (eg., Marxists, *Asahi* newspaper) remains quite strongly attached to nationalism, but of the ethnic variety, whereas more conservative intellectuals and media outlets (eg. *Yomiuri* newspaper) are more inclined toward civic nationalism.³

Ethnic nationalism has appealed to the left in postwar Japan for many reasons, most importantly that it provides a socio-cultural identity that need not find expression in laws and political institutions (here we can intuit the reason some ethnic nationalists were dismayed by the Diet passing the Act on the National Flag and Anthem in 1999). But ethnic nationalism has also been positioned as “Asian nationalism” at least since the 1955 Bandung Conference; in contrast, civic nationalism has from its very beginning in modern Japan and throughout East Asia been seen as the favorite of pro-Western governments, Christian minorities and intellectuals thought to be tainted by Western ways of thinking. Recently, historians in Japan and the West have recognized that ethnic nationalism was given a boost by the effects of Japan’s loss of its multiethnic empire after World War II. The first decades after 1945 were a heyday of ethnic nationalism in Japan, and only in the last few decades have we seen the tables turned and civic nationalism rise to the fore.

Shinzo Abe is one of the leaders in this current renaissance of civic nationalism in Japan. But few in the West appear to know this, perhaps because few of them actually have read his 2006 book in Japanese, *Toward a Beautiful Country* (republished largely intact as *Toward a New Country* this year). At the heart of the book is “Chapter 3: What is Nationalism?” Sports provide the key metaphor for Abe in explaining nationalism that is democratic and nationalism that is not. He speaks of his fascination as a young boy watching the parades for the Tokyo Olympics, but this pride clearly comes from how athletes would represent Japan—not from their blood but from what they would do as competitors in the games. He writes with pride also about how naturalized Japanese like Alessandro “Alex” Santos fought for Japan in World Cup soccer games. “Alex” and his fellow Brazilian-Japanese “Ramos” are embraced for what they are: fellow Japanese compatriots, men made Japanese by law, not by blood or ethnicity. And finally, Abe directly rejects ethnic nationalism by pointing to the example of Australian Gold Medalist, Cathy Freeman, whose Australian national identity coexists with her aboriginal identity. “Nationalism,” Abe concludes, “can be translated in various ways, but if we dare to render it as ethnic nationalism (*minzokushugi*), then Cathy Freeman would not be able to carry both banners (Australian and Aboriginal) without being ripped apart within by this nationalism.”⁴ Throughout the book, Abe consistently renders the Japanese nation as *kokumin* (civic nation) not as *minzoku* (ethnic nation), a distinction made not only conceptually but also through his description of how democratic nationalism functions in practice.

Those who wish to know what concrete difference Abe’s civic nationalism might make in particular policy issues are well-advised to read Abe’s book. But to appreciate how this renaissance of civic nationalism is deeply linked to the policies Abe seeks to establish, one merely needs to read the concluding lines from *Toward a New Country*:

Thus, when we line up all the issues that Japan faces, not just the North Korean kidnapping issue, but even the territorial questions, the U.S.-Japan relationship or even economic issues like the TPP, I believe they all come from the same root. Is this not the price we have had to pay for enjoying economic prosperity while

² Kevin M Doak, *A History of Nationalism in Modern Japan: Placing the People* (Brill, 2007); Japanese translation, *Ōgoe de utae, ‘Kimigayo’ o* (PHP, 2009).

³ Curtis Anderson Gayle, *Marxist History and Postwar Japanese Nationalism* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Shun’ichi Takekawa, . “Forging Nationalism from Pacificism and Internationalism: A Study of *Asahi* and *Yomiuri*’s New Year’s Day Editorials, 1953-2005.” *Social Science Japan Journal* vol. 10, no. 1 (April 2007).

⁴ Abe Shinzō, *Atarashii kuni e* (Bungei Shunju, 2013), p. 102.

kicking these problems down the road, without a clear consciousness that the life and treasure of the Japanese civic nation (Nihon kokumin) and the territory of Japan are to be protected by the Japanese government's own hands? Truly, "escape from the postwar regime" is still the most important theme for Japan, just as it was five years earlier when I was the prime minister.

During the last general election, the LDP raised the slogan, "Take Back Japan." This did not mean only to take back Japan from the Democratic Party government. I'll go so far as to say that we are in a battle to take back the country of Japan from postwar history by the hands of the Japanese people (Nihon kokumin).⁵

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⁵ Abe, *Atarashii kuni e*, p. 254.