

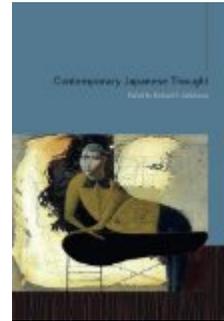
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard F. Calichman. *Contemporary Japanese Thought*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 309 pp. \$73.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13620-4; \$26.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-13621-1.

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Published on H-US-Japan (March, 2006)



Theory in Context

In his introduction, the editor of this volume, Richard F. Calichman, writes that the ideas of the non-West and theory may seem to some readers as incompatible concepts since the theoretical tradition is intuitively associated with the West. However, it should be far from surprising that Japanese thinkers, and surely those in other non-Western countries, have long been attempting to gain a theoretical understanding of their social, cultural, historical, or political situations. This collection of essays by contemporary Japanese thinkers is important for making accessible to Western audiences not only the existence but the richness of the theoretical debates taking place within a non-Western society.

As Calichman concedes, this collection makes no claim to be the definitive text on contemporary thought in Japan for any such collection inevitably reflects various biases and contingencies (p. 3). Given this, Calichman claims that at least two principles give some integrity to the editorial choices; these are the principle of practice, which holds that theory should influence concrete practices; and the principle of gender, reflecting the significance of gender issues in contemporary societies as well as the aim to integrate feminist discourse into theoretical debates in Japan (p. 3). Although the essays represent a range of disciplines from political thought, literary theory, philosophy, history, gender studies, and cultural studies, these essays are thus very much written with the context of contemporary Japanese society and their practical implications in mind. So in reading *Contemporary*

Japanese Thought, one should not expect a particularly Japanese style of abstract philosophical argumentation, but rather a kind of theorizing that is very much in context; one which engages in conversation with the historical and social issues of contemporary Japan and attempts to understand theoretically and to give meaning to these conditions.

What is particular about the Japanese context that characterizes these essays and much of contemporary Japanese theory in general? Despite the breadth of approaches, two underlying themes become apparent throughout these essays, namely Japan's relation to the West, and Japan's relation with regard to the rest of Asia. These two themes are interrelated, and finding Japan's own place in relation to both, as well as overcoming a dichotomous understanding of the two, has been a major project for social theory in Japan. Kang Sangjung takes up these themes in his essays, which explain Japan's colonization of Asia in terms a dichotomous relationship which sees Japan as Asia and the other as the West. In the process of Japan's colonial aggression, it was expected that the dialogue with history could take place, and indeed necessarily had to take place, only between Japan and the West (p. 92). In this process, Japan turns increasingly inwards as it grows to seek its national identity by distancing itself from the other that is the West, while the rest of Asia is silenced. In his essay "Overcoming Modernity," Karatani Kojin also takes up Japan's struggle with Western modernity. Karatani describes how the partic-

ipants of the famous “Overcoming Modernity” symposium in 1942 interpreted the issue as one of overcoming Western modernity (p. 105). However, as Karatani argues, political or economic liberalism was not sufficiently developed at that point in Japan to be overcome in the first place. Where no modern society actually existed, overcoming modernity specifically referred to the aesthetic or cultural and literary realms (p. 109). Thus, to overcome modernity was to reappraise aesthetically a Japanese spirituality and culture vis-à-vis Western technology (p. 114). His next essay, Soseki’s diversity also explores the struggle with modernity represented by the West through examining Soseki’s *Kokoro*. According to Karatani, the genre to which *Kokoro* belongs is prior to the modern novel’s narrative form (p. 121). The work takes up a historical theme, where the character feels left behind in a changing world while nevertheless succumbing to it. Karatani interprets this theme to overlap with Soseki’s own resistance towards the impetus towards the novel-centered form of literature, and the exclusion of other literary possibilities (pp. 127-128).

While a binary interpretation of Japan vis-à-vis the West as modernity seems to have become a major theoretical framework in Japanese thought, this dichotomous framework gives rise to various problems. The first is that seeing the other exclusively in terms of the West crucially excludes Japan’s neighboring East Asian countries such as China, Korea and Taiwan. The essays of Takahashi Tetsuya and Ukai Satoshi critique this silencing of Asia which serves to cover up or obscure Japan’s imperialist and nationalist past by addressing recent issues such as the rise of neo-nationalism and the Hinomaru and Kimigayo legislation.

The second problem is that grouping together the West and modernity while opposing Japan in relation to them essentializes Japan in distinctly anti-modern terms. Perhaps the effect of this phenomenon is felt particularly intensely by Japanese feminism. In various occasions, Ueno Chizuko has pointed out that the women’s liberation movement in Japan was not an application of Western feminism to the Japanese context, but something that arose indigenously in Japan. Yet, because of the dichotomous understanding between the West as modernity vis-à-vis Japan, feminist discourse is inevitably seen as Western. Ueno calls this phenomenon the trap of reverse Orientalism. Employing Edward Said’s famous theory of Orientalism, Ueno argues that in a scheme where the Orient in relation to the Occident is seen in terms of a binary opposition between female and male, Oriental women are in a double bind when they struggle against their own men: They face the frustrating alter-

native of either being blamed by Oriental men as agents of Western colonialists or being forced to join the struggle against Western colonialists to build the world envisioned by their men (p. 232). From a post-modern perspective, Ehara Yumiko also problematizes the Western modernity/pre-modern Japan dichotomy in the influential thought of Maruyama Masao. Ehara argues that Maruyama’s idealization of Western universalism in relation to Japan functions to homogenize and essentialize Japanese society. Within this solid social pattern, there is no room for lending a voice to women’s particular experiences (p. 67). Both Ueno’s and Ehara’s standpoint is that we need to refuse these constructed binaries for women to be able to define their futures on their own terms. Other fascinating themes included in the feminism essays are the structure of easing in anti-feminist discourse (Ehara) and the mother-dominated character of Japanese society which reinforces patriarchy (Ueno).

Japanese feminism is particularly intriguing because of the ways in which a non-Western social context gives rise to various themes and problems that Western feminism does not face. For example, the critique of modern universalism and the public/private split in second-wave feminism in the West, if applied to a Japanese context, could easily result in the reification of an essentialized, anti-modern Japan (p. 62). In these ways, feminist discourses in Japan illuminate the ways in which social contexts shape and influence theory.

Stepping back from the Japanese context, Naoki Sakai’s essays address the relationship between science and human life, and the oppression of minorities which are pressing issues across contemporary societies.

The reader may be struck by the strong streak of German and French philosophy as well as post-modernism in this particular collection of essays. What may be of particular interest to a Western audience is the way in which Japanese theory has engaged in discourse with Western thought while addressing their various inconsistencies when applied to the Japanese context. This volume is valuable for opening the door to some of the pressing issues in contemporary Japan, but also for illuminating how the project of theorizing is universal while showing the relationship between theory and social contexts.

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Citation: Chikako Endo. Review of Calichman, Richard F., *Contemporary Japanese Thought*. H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

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