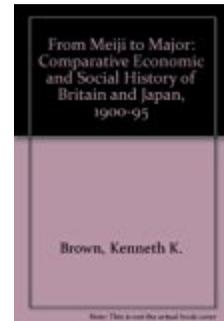


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Kenneth Brown.** *Britain and Japan: A Comparative Economic and Social History since 1900.* Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1998. xi + 269 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7190-5291-0; \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-5290-3.

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For reasons of geography and history, Britain and Japan seem natural subjects for comparison. British and Japanese observers alike have long been fascinated by the many parallels (and the even more numerous divergences) in the histories of these two island nations, both monarchies and sometime imperial powers, one the prototype of an industrial society, the other a model “late developer.” In *Britain and Japan: A Comparative Economic and Social History since 1900*, Kenneth Brown focuses on one important aspect of this comparison, the relative economic performances of the two nations and, more specifically, the “economic role reversal which occurred between Japan and Britain over the course of the twentieth century” (p. 4). In 1900, the date which Brown somewhat arbitrarily selects as a starting point, Britain was the world’s dominant colonial, financial and naval power, as well as a center of industrial production and technological innovation, while Japan was a mere upstart, a precocious and aspiring—but still unthreatening—economic competitor in East Asia. As Brown notes, however, “since the beginning of the twentieth century and more markedly since the 1950s the economic destinies of the two nations have followed different trajectories” (p. 4). Although Britain has enjoyed healthy growth rates and rising standards of living over the past 100 years, it has been progressively eclipsed by Japan as an economic superpower and an international model. Indeed, Britain’s accomplishments have paled in comparison to Japan’s meteoric rise: while Japan has emerged as the outstanding economic “success story” of the twentieth century, Great Britain’s relatively modest performance has been discouraging and confounding. Brown seeks to anatomize this dynamic and his study concentrates on the complex processes of “relative decline and growth”

(p. 7) that have characterized the disparate economic experiences of Britain and Japan.

Although Brown’s primary interest is in matters economic, he roots his analysis in a broad social, political and cultural context. Aiming “to devise an appropriate analytical framework to avoid both a merely impressionistic portrait and the slide into parallel history which so often masquerades as comparison” (p. 7), Brown adopts a sociological model used by A.H. Halsey in his 1972 survey, *Trends in British Society since 1900*. Emphasizing the role of institutional structures, Brown organizes his material around four major categories of analysis: “production or the economy; reproduction or social structure; power and authority or the system by which government is appointed, laws made, and order maintained; and ritual and communication which asserts and maintains values, thus providing the basis of communal cohesion and identity” (p. 7). Brown overlays this analytical framework on an essentially chronological arrangement of chapters: Chapters One-Four treat the period from 1900 to 1945, 5-7 the decades from 1945 to 1995. Individual chapters are divided into sections covering production (agriculture, industry, economic growth, business organization, etc.) and reproduction (demographic change, standards of living, social structure, etc.), while Chapters Four and Seven are devoted to issues of “power and ritual” (politics, religion, etc.) in the pre- and post-World War II eras respectively. With analyses of the British and Japanese cases interwoven through each of the chapters, Brown adeptly foregrounds the comparative nature of his study. Brown’s treatment of his two national subjects is also nicely balanced: although his descriptions of British society and politics are often richer in detail than the corresponding sections on Japan, equal attention is given to

the British and Japanese sides in the text.

Brown reveals that the economic trajectories of twentieth-century Japan and Britain have been less divergent than many observers have assumed. Moreover, although both nations have followed distinctive courses of social and political development, Brown identifies a number of shared trends and tendencies. Throughout the book, Brown stresses the similarities—many intuitive, some rather surprising—between the British and Japanese experiences. For example, Brown details the ambiguous role of the state in both British and Japanese industrial development, the common challenges of (and responses to) depression, wartime mobilization, and postwar reconstruction, and the comparable consequences of economic “maturity.” Echoing a number of other scholars, Brown argues adamantly against sweeping generalizations about British economic “decline” or “decay” over the past century. Demonstrating the great economic strides made by both Britain and Japan during the twentieth century—above all, perhaps, in improving standards of living—Brown maintains that Japan’s statistically superior results should not obscure or negate the considerable accomplishments of the British economy.

Although Brown convincingly dismisses presumptions of British decline, he runs into problems when tackling the crucial comparative question of his study: Why, by that hallowed yardstick of national achievement, the aggregate economic growth rate, has Japan’s performance so far exceeded Britain’s, especially in the decades since World War II? Brown surveys most of the major scholarly theories of Japanese success and British listlessness—Japan’s developmental state, the failures of corporate finance, industrial organization and entrepreneurship in Britain, differences in labor relations systems, and so forth—and he concludes, very sensibly, that none of these grand hypotheses is entirely adequate. But rather than simply leaving matters there—viewing the experiences of Britain and Japan as grounded in specific historical contexts and representing the outcomes of a complex interplay of economic, social and political factors—Brown ultimately descends to weak, ahistorical and time-worn culturalist interpretations.

Stressing the role of social consensus in the pursuit of economic growth, Brown observes that “the priorities of economic policy in postwar Britain were never so unanimous as those of Japan” (p. 232). At the root of this difference, Brown argues, lay a distinctive British “social ethic” which “valued liberty far more than egalitarianism” (p. 232) and reflected a “deeply embedded

individualist trait in the British psyche” (p. 18). At the same time, “traditional” patterns of behavior in Japan—groupism, a propensity for thrift, and “cooperative working” (p. 200) among them—formed an accommodating social foundation for rapid economic growth. In his final paragraph, Brown states that “Postwar Japan may have embraced Western consumerism while some of its social institutions and practices also increasingly resembled those of the West. Always, however, fundamental Japanese values remained strong, imposing their own shape and demands ... Therein, perhaps, lay the secret of Japan’s progress” (p. 251). Such a conclusion, a retreat to a soft culturalist essentialism, only serves to undermine Brown’s ambitious comparative project.

Despite Brown’s fine writing style, clear organization and generally thorough research, a number of more minor problems also detract from his study. Brown, a professor at the Queen’s University of Belfast and an expert on the British toy industry and English labor history, apparently does not read Japanese, which limits his access to Japanese scholarship and leads to some annoying errors in transliteration and usage. The current emperor, for instance, is identified as “Akahito” (rather than Akihito) and personal name order is inconsistent (thus Suzuki Bunji is also referred to as Bunji Suzuki). Brown’s coverage of the English-language literature on Japan is commendable for a non-specialist, but a number of standard sources on Japanese economic and social history (and especially works by U.S. scholars) are unaccountably missing from his bibliography. Brown describes Japan’s “bubble economy” of the 1980s only in passing, and his discussion of the ongoing recession of the 1990s is brief and overly rosy. A number of tables are provided in the text, but a statistical appendix providing basic figures for comparison (population, GNP, etc.) would be helpful.

Brown’s *Britain and Japan* is the latest addition to a genre that has flourished in the 1990s, survey histories of Japan written by British scholars, usually without formal training in Japanese studies or the Japanese language, supported in their research by generous grants from the Japanese government. Although many of these works have been woefully lacking—decades behind in the historiography, superficial or derivative—Brown’s study rises above most of the limitations of this genre. Indeed, despite its various flaws, *Britain and Japan* is a strong example of synthetic and comparative history that should prove accessible (and valuable) to specialists in both British and Japanese studies. But while this volume is clearly intended to be an undergraduate textbook, its

suitability for classroom use outside of Britain is, unfortunately, far from obvious. Despite the current dearth of readable, up-to-date surveys of Japanese economic history, Brown's book, with its comparative focus and its idiosyncratic chronological coverage, is unlikely to fit comfortably on very many course syllabi, at least in American universities.

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