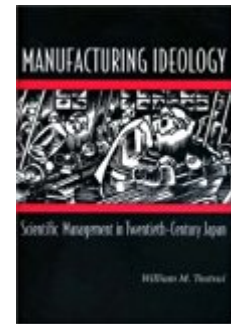


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William M. Tsutsui. *Manufacturing Ideology: Scientific Management in Twentieth-Century Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. ix + 279 pp. \$30.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-07456-6; \$47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-05808-5.

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There has been much written over the past thirty years, in both academic and popular presses, about the post-World War II Japanese “economic miracle.” Most stress the importance of paternalism and communitarianism in Japan that make it “unique” in the developed world. In his book *Manufacturing Ideology: Scientific Management in Twentieth-Century Japan*, William M. Tsutsui systematically refutes this thesis, and instead proposes that much of Japan’s economic success can be traced to their implementation of the same Scientific Management model used in the United States and Europe.

For example, Tsutsui argues that paternalism and the “Japanese Spirit” is rooted in nascent Japanese business ideologies at the turn of the twentieth century, implemented as a rhetorical device to minimize the harshness of Taylorism. This business strategy was not unique to Japan; the United States was engaging in this same practice, at the same time, by combining personnel management and scientific management. What did make Japan’s approach to rationalization unique was the active part that government played in reducing competition, realizing economies of scale, and lowering societal-level costs.

With time (and the crash of the American stock market in 1929), the Japanese were less concerned with emulating the United States, and instead, began to rewrite business history by stressing the Japanese origins of scientific management. During World War II, Japan propagated the rhetoric of Japanese exceptionalism and proceeded to inject “Japanese character” into management thought. Rather than designing novel management practices, they portrayed scientific management as indige-

nous to Japan.

During the war, managers were preoccupied with extracting higher productivity and efficiency from employees. They continued to appeal to worker spirituality coupled with an obligation to country over company. Experts knew that they could not compete with the sophisticated means of production in the Occident, but they did believe that they could win the war with the superior spirit of the Japanese. Spiritual guidance, which entailed the use of small-group social psychology, would unlock the devotion to work, further intertwining the Japanese spirit and efficiency. This revised Taylorism, as the essence of Japanese-style management, was the most important outcome of the wartime boom; but the best way to achieve this still eluded the Japanese.

During the Occupation, the professional managerial class were expected to devise a reformed capitalist order. Managers stressed the importance of jobs, workers, and the state over profit. Firms were considered communities comprised of capital, management and labor, where each member of this triad would benefit from company profits, have a voice in corporate administration, and replace stockholders. This focus on harmonizing relationships between labor and capital had roots in the pre-war days.

As the agents of reconstruction, managers needed workers to cooperate in the reduction of costs. By focusing on productivity, this allowed the Japanese to circumvent class antagonisms, as the United States had done, by focusing instead on the dichotomy of waste versus abundance. Productivity was marketed as *seisansei* to business, labor, and the public, in an effort to make it appear Japanese, despite its similarities to revised Taylorism, Sci-

entific Management, and the efficiency movement.

The Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) also proposed a “new rationalization” whose goals, methods and rhetoric were similar to early pre-war efforts at rationalization. Like their Depression-era efforts, the post-war rationalization movement cloaked mass lay-offs in compassionate rhetoric. MITI provided firms with financial assistance, information, and technical guidance to help them become globally competitive, while the Import-Export Bank and the Japan Development Bank funneled funds to large private-sector producers. In addition, because foreign technology was inexpensive, firms could select those technologies that had the most promising practical applications.

Laborers were implicitly guaranteed job security and many felt that they belonged to the organization. Because incomes were rising, workers were more tolerant of factory mechanization and various changes in management norms. In devising a wage structure, companies combined seniority to appease workers while still controlling wages by incorporating an ability-based component.

Despite this influx of capital, Japanese businesses were unable to apply Fordism to their companies because they could not afford a full assembly-line. Instead, they incorporated what the West later termed “Lean Production,” because it allowed them to cut inventories and boost productivity. Lean production had its roots in Taylorism and scientific management, where rigid obedience was required of workers, despite the rhetoric of the distinctive fusion of rationalization and humanity. In addition, quality control circles, also stressed as a distinctively Japanese post-war innovation, were a refinement of revised Taylorism, with its reliance on standardization and worker obedience.

Because Japanese and American management philosophy is rooted in Scientific Management, Tsutsui claims that any differences between the two countries is merely superficial. Therefore, despite popular conjecture, the Japanese are not offering a novel organizational paradigm. Rather, the West and Japan have been speaking the same language over the years; a language situated in Taylorism.

Tsutsui’s book is an important addition to the literature on Japanese manufacturing practices because he is not arguing for the superiority of “post-Fordist” techniques, nor is he illuminating the hidden exploitation of such systems. Instead, he illustrates how Scientific Management influenced their system, so we must reassess the belief that familialism, groupism, *wa*, and exceptionalism undergird modern Japanese managerial ideology. Therefore, scientific management in twentieth-century Japan must be viewed as both a formidable ideological structure as well as a concrete shop-floor methodology. By reframing this argument, Tsutsui casts considerable doubt on the assertion that culture is the defining variable in Japanese business models.

This book is well-researched, highly readable, and should be of interest to anyone who studies Japanese management. Tsutsui does a commendable job of debunking much of the mythology that surrounds “Japanese-style” management. By tracing the inception of Taylorism in Japan to 1911, he then demonstrates how it “spread further, remained relevant longer, and penetrated deeper in twentieth century Japan than previously acknowledged” (p. 236). Because of his meticulous research, Tsutsui is convincing in his call for a reappraisal of the accepted dichotomy between Fordism versus post-Fordism, and Western versus Eastern organizational practices.

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