

YUKICHI FUKUZAWA AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN WORLD

This study of Fukuzawa was originally written as an integral part of the book which has been separately published as **The Riddle of the Modern World**. The section on Fukuzawa came after a detailed account of the ideas of Montesquieu, Smith and Tocqueville. It is not possible to understand the particular angle I have taken in the following chapters without being aware of the conclusions of those studies. For those readers who have not seen that work, I here include part of the concluding chapter, in order to set the scene for the study of Fukuzawa.¹

Montesquieu, Adam Smith and Montesquieu were united in their specification of what the central problem of history is. They agree that human beings are creative, inventive, curious, often motivated by strong drives to better their position. In appropriate conditions they will tend to increase their manipulation of the natural world so that their standard of living rapidly improves. They have the potential for cumulative or non-linear growth in their ability to produce resources. Indeed, for short periods in their histories, many regions or civilizations have seen such a growth.

On the other hand, experience showed them that the majority of such periods of growth came to an end quickly and that long periods of stasis or even decline were the norm. Growth was exceptional, stasis was the usual condition. Thus there must be a set of very powerful, negative, forces which crush man's natural abilities and desires. Their concern was to specify these constraints or traps and to show how they had operated and sometimes been avoided for limited periods.

They were well aware that as the potential for rapid growth became greater, through higher levels of knowledge and technology, so likewise the negative pressures grew at an equal or greater pace. As each form of civilization succeeded the previous one it faced new and more significant problems. This can be seen if we look at the extremes. To move from hunter-gatherer to tribal societies required a relatively minor shift - domestication of plants and animals. The checks on this were relatively light, though starting at a subsistence level with practically no technological support, the transition was immensely difficult. The push was weak, and the counter-push was also quite weak. The two were well enough balanced to prevent any change in most of the world for over five hundred generations of human existence. In Australia, over three hundred generations of hunter-gathering never led to anything different before the arrival of white colonists.

At the other extreme, if one took a great Empire like China, it was possible to see how both the potentials for transformation and the negative pressures were huge, and again just about balanced each

¹ Taken from **Riddle**, pp.269-276. Those who have read **Riddle** recently may wish to skip the rest of this chapter.

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other. The technological, intellectual, cultural and social sophistication of China by the fourteenth century was immense, far ahead of Europe. It had developed a knowledge of almost all the techniques necessary for industrialization, it had a very sophisticated and literate ruling group; it was peaceful and orderly. People were generally hard-working and profit oriented. Yet four hundred years later, apart from the undoubted success in feeding a much larger population, it had made no noticeable technological, scientific or social 'progress' and was now 'falling behind' Europe.

Nearer at home, the greatness of the Roman Empire, heir to all of Greek science and with its own developed organizational technologies, had collapsed, and more recently the promise of the Hapsburg Empire, of Renaissance Italy and southern Germany or even **ancien régime** France, had faded away or reached a plateau.

The potential of all these civilizations for rapid cumulative transformation was immense. Millions of hard-working, ambitious, inventive citizens surrounded by a wealth of practical, reliable, knowledge of how to manipulate the natural world to their own uses should have gained in opulence from generation to generation. The fact that they did not do so shows the strength of the negative pressures.

Much of their thought is concerned with these negative pressures and how, occasionally, they were overcome. Their central understanding was that as productive technologies grew in power, they were more than counterbalanced by predatory tendencies, which began to halt productive growth. Within these predatory tendencies they included not only obvious external predation, warfare and raiding of others, which often checked a civilization, but equally important, internal predation, that is to say the predation of priests, lords, kings, and even over-powerful merchant guilds. This internal predation usually took the form of increasingly sharp stratification - castes and estates - and increasingly absolutist religion and government and hence the destruction of personal liberty of action and thought.

The process within agrarian societies was a circular one. As productive technology produced greater surpluses, these almost automatically increased predation by increasing temptations. Success created envy and smaller states or cities were destroyed by neighbours. Even huge civilizations such as China or India or eastern Europe were devastated by predating Mongols. A perpetual levelling took place. Likewise the growing wealth led to the temptation to expand and conquer and the centre was finally ruined by the burden of imperial dreams, as had happened in Rome, the Hapsburgs or Louis XIV's France. Almost automatically surpluses generated aggressive behaviour. And such militaristic activities directly led to the twin forms of internal predation - higher taxes, rents and social stratification, and increasingly absolutist power and political predation.

This was the central trap, supplemented powerfully by the Malthusian tendency for rapid increases in population to outstrip all growth in production and hence to add famine and disease to war and internal predation as checks on sustained growth. This was the agrarian trap, and every great civilization up to the seventeenth century had finally become entangled in it and either collapsed or, like China and Japan, become immobile.

The riddle to which these three thinkers addressed themselves was how one escaped this apparently

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inevitable fate. During their lifetimes they speculated on the growing realization that against all the apparent predictions and laws, an escape to something else was indeed happening.

All three looked at the process from the edges of the system, though not nearly as far away as Fukuzawa. From France or Scotland they increasingly focused on a new world which seemed to be emerging first in England and then in America. The natural tendency towards cumulative growth inherent in man's intelligence and nature had always previously been checked by the iron laws of population and predation, which had finally crushed productive increases. This was the first contradiction. Something was happening, and towards the time that Tocqueville wrote, had clearly happened, in England and America, which showed that the iron laws were not laws at all, but just powerful tendencies which could, apparently, be avoided. The difficulty of avoiding them was immense, as the history of all previous civilizations showed, yet a set of peculiar balances might be achieved for long enough to do so. How these mechanisms occurred and worked was the riddle which they sought to answer.

There seems to be a consensus among all our informants that an answer to the riddle must lie in the balance of forces. They were all aware that a structural solution, that is to say one which focused on the **relations** between the parts, rather than the parts themselves, was necessary. The key to the mystery lay in the difference between the normal tendency, which was towards a certain set of interlocked and rigid institutions, and the exceptions, where the parts remained independent, antagonistic even, and hence flexible.

Putting this more explicitly, they suggested that the normal tendency was as follows. In tribal societies, almost everything was encompassed within kinship - political power, religion, economy were all embedded within this. Hence economic or political developments were severely constrained. To change one element was to attack them all. The development of civilization depended, to a certain extent, on the weakening of kinship (status) and the growth of the power of other institutions - the economy and technology, the political structure (State systems) and religion (universalistic religions of the book). This was the huge leap and it allowed a freeing of energies and growth in all forms of production.

Yet there seemed a powerful tendency in agrarian civilizations for the structure to solidify again, this time into a new form of overlapping and dominating structure usually based on an alliance of priests and rulers. As productive wealth increased, the tools of power, both military and ideological, increased proportionately. The history of almost all civilizations, or periods within ancient civilizations such as China, was for a period of anarchy and confusion, where productivity was low but flexibility high, to settle down into higher productivity, but declining flexibility. A clear example of this lay, they thought, in the history of western Europe, as most of the continent moved from a lightly populated, technologically backward, but mobile, flexible and highly contractual feudal world which covered the continent from the sixth to twelfth centuries, into increasingly rigidified, status-based, politically and religiously absolutist civilizations from the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries.

They argued that as part of the swing from production to predation, there was increasing domination of all life by an increasingly closed world of politico-religious power which had crushed kinship, or suborned it to its use (as in China) and tried to maximize short-term, and even immediate benefit (as in

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war) from the productive labours in the economy. As the gaps, tensions and balance between institutions were closed, the space for technological and productive growth was increasingly reduced. Indeed, any advance in the wealth of producers - whether craftsmen and manufacturers, or merchants, or even peasants - was a distinct threat, as well as an opportunity for predation, and hence quickly crushed. Likewise any growth in intellectual production outside the central circle of power was potentially undermining and quickly put down as heresy.

In a sense we can see the development as a tendency towards centralization and inequality, of concentric rings of power and status, in which all countervailing forces or relatively independent centres of production of artifacts or ideas were crushed. Uniformity, homogeneity, a rigid and level landscape emanating from the centre, where all forms of activity were again made interdependent, as in the Confucian parallel between religious, political and kinship loyalties, this was the growing tendency. The weight of the fruit of increased production increasingly brought down the tree. Or, to use a mechanical analogy, a negative feed-back loop was in operation.

That this was a natural tendency was not surprising. All were agreed that alongside sexual and intellectual drives, the desire to dominate and exert power over others was a basic human instinct. Indeed, much of human progress had arisen from the energy which this desire prompted. But the desire was ultimately selfish. Each individual would try to maximize his or her own power, and perhaps that of his small co-ordered group, whether family or caste. With this powerful aim, and with increased wealth and technologies of domination, predation founded on an alliance of the rulers and the thinkers, kings and priests, subjecting the rest (the workers and 'producers') to increasing pressure, was an obvious strategy.

Indeed it was a strategy which could even, plausibly, be argued to be in the general interest. In a world where three quarters of the Eur-Asian continent was subject to periodic devastation from the wandering tribes of central Asia, or more locally from neighbouring powerful states, it made sense to put a great deal of productive wealth into predation and counter-predation. The philosophy of Machiavelli epitomizes this world where offence was the best form of defence, where those who aspired to virtue, peace, equality and liberty, were soon devastated. Even Christianity, founded on a gospel of turning the other cheek, witnessed the Crusades, the Inquisition and the final defeat of the Islamic threat at Lepanto.

Yet desperate though the ravages of war could be, there were recognizably equal dangers in too much peace. This again was best shown by the history of China and Japan. Long centuries of peace, in both civilizations, when military expenditure was relatively small and there was fairly light taxation, and even a powerful control of disorder, led only to the stagnation of technology and economy. Of course this could partly be explained by the Malthusian tendency towards rapidly increased population. Or it could be explained by the encouragement of stratification and labour rather than capital and technologically intensive agriculture partly caused by the peculiarities of rice cultivation. In a sense these countries were a warning of the dangers of too much success. The climate and agriculture produced huge surpluses, there was little to struggle against, and the system rigidified. It was a phenomenon which Montesquieu and Smith also noticed in contrasting the early fertility and abundance of Mediterranean Europe, with the need to struggle and produce in the Protestant north.

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All 'advances' are costly to someone - for example the labour-saving technologies which were the foundation of the industrial revolution were made at the short-term expense of millions of workers. The move to the new sources of agricultural (horses, wind-mills, water-mills) or military (long-bows, guns), or ideological (printing) power were all equally a threat to vested interests. Most civilizations were inhibited by such interests, or partially incorporated them as a new means of control. They only tend to be accepted because to fail to do so would mean that the competition from elsewhere would crush one - a sort of intellectual, technological and cultural arms race.

As they pointed out, this appeared to be the great difference between Europe and China or Japan. The plurality of small states in Europe, autonomous but linked by a common history, religion and elite language, almost incessantly at war and when not at war, in fierce cultural and social competition was the ideal context for rapid productive and ideological evolution. There was enough in common for ideas and inventions to travel swiftly, there was enough variation for separate centres of innovation to cross-fertilize. Europe was, to use Gerry Martin's phrase, a large system comprising a network of 'bounded but leaky', autonomous yet competing, states, and it had been so for about a thousand years before the industrial revolution. The tendency to form a vast homogeneous Empire, the dream of Charles V, Louis XIV, Napoleon or Hitler, was never realized. The political and actual geography and the level of communications, military and ideological technology made it impossible. Huge diversities of religion, kinship systems, culture, farming practices and craft production, continued to exist and were encouraged by large geographical and climatic differences over a small area.

China, of course, also varied considerably geographically, and even culturally. But it spread politically over a vast area and came to hold a mass of individuals within one system of thought and organization. The geographical differences were not supported by the religious and political differences, which would have encouraged and protected competition. At first this made technological development very rapid. The economies of scale and massive demand, set China on a course which put her far ahead of Europe. But it seems as if by the fourteenth century the variability had been largely used up. Thereafter a conscious decision to shut out the undermining influences from abroad by ceasing sea or land exploration was completely the opposite of the outward expansion created by the competition of European states.

In western Europe it became obvious that external predation through voyages of discovery and conquest, incorporating new ideas and technologies and peoples, was the way to wealth, as the Venetians, Portuguese, Spaniards, Dutch and finally the British discovered. So the internal variation and competition that had stimulated the first burst of productive creativity and had allowed the explorations to be effective, was supplemented by the enormously varied information from the civilizations of America, Africa, India and Eastern Asia. European states absorbed the wealth of their conquests, wrestled with the new knowledge and adapted and evolved their hybrid solutions very quickly. China and Japan closed their frontiers, for five centuries in the case of China, three centuries in the case of Japan, and suddenly discovered that their once superior, but now antiquated technology, was no match

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for that of America and the European powers.

Thus it appeared clear that if we are to find a solution to the riddle then we must look to the relationships between political, ideological, social and economic power or, as they might have put it, the relations between liberty (political and religious), equality, and wealth. All of them saw the key to the mystery in a peculiar association between these, manifest in England, which ran against the current that had increasingly led to a growth of rigid uniformity in most civilizations.

Furthermore they knew that the solution must face and answer two further problems. The first was how to avoid the previous law that increasing wealth inevitably brought nemesis, either through internal weakening and hence predation by outsiders, or through the urge to conquer others. Put in another way, how was it possible to achieve that mysterious balance which clearly the Dutch and English had achieved by the seventeenth century where it was possible to be both virtuous (liberal, relatively egalitarian, non-absolutist), highly productive (using almost all one's energy in devising improvements in knowledge and technology) and at the same time be militarily powerful. That virtue was not just its own reward, but brought other rewards, was the amazing new fact. Look after the Kingdom of God, aspire to resource expansion, create a balanced polity and a not too uniform legal or social system, and all else would follow. This was decidedly not the experience, except for short periods, of previous civilizations. How could Holland and particularly England and America do something which had eluded the Hanseatic league, or northern Italian city states?

The second puzzle was how was it possible to overcome the contradiction between the nature of man which was based on 'private vice', and the obvious fact that increasingly complex societies have to be based on a vast amount of trust, co-operation, altruism, generosity. How, in Pope's phrase, could 'self-love and social be the same', become fused into Mandeville's 'private vice, public benefit.' All previous civilizations had seen the contradiction as leading, finally, to destructive and aggressive confrontations, or, where, as in Confucianism, self-love was banned, to apparent stagnation. European society tried to harbour and even encourage self-assertion, individual self-love, yet to temper it so that it gave strength to the whole, rather than shattering it.

Fukuzawa is an heir to their problems and approaches as we shall see. As for them, these were not just theoretical interests. Just as Montesquieu helped lay the foundations for the French and American revolutions and modern liberty, Adam Smith for the modern competitive capitalist system which has provided great wealth, and Tocqueville the world of associations and balance which lies behind modern democracy, so Fukuzawa hoped to unite all of these in his native country. In one generation rather than the three or four it had taken in the west to create 'modern' civilization, he set out to move from one world to another. His life and work is, in a sense, a concentrated version of these three thinkers. Whereas it requires the whole span from 1700 to 1850 to see the various revolutions transform western Europe, Fukuzawa, as he noted, saw the whole process occur within his single life. He lived before, during and after the great transformation in an experience which no European thinker could match. He also lived, at the start, right outside the system, and could hence feel the full strength and strangeness of its assumptions. He visited its heartland in America and England, just like Tocqueville, but his sense of shock was even greater. Furthermore he tried, even more than the other thinkers, to effect practical

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changes which would save Japan from becoming a mere colony of the increasingly powerful west. Thus he provides a fascinating, outside, view on the 'Enlightenment Project'. So who was he and what did he say and do?