

THE ROOTS OF AN IDEA; PART THREE. THE CONVERGENCE OF EXPERIENCE

One way to look at the book I finally called 'The Savage Wars of Peace', which has turned out to be the first of a four-part attempt to understand how the modern world came into being, is to see three major life experiences coming together. Let me take them in the reverse order of chronology as this will put them in a more interesting perspective.

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We first visited Japan in 1990 and then for a second trip in August 1993. This second trip clearly consolidated my interest in trying to undertake a serious comparison of England and Japan. Since this is the under-pinning of *Savage Wars*, it is clear that this event is crucial to understanding what happened. As well as the shock of Japan and the many conversations which we had with Toshiko and Kenichi, the visit was important from a data/bibliographical point of view because we were beginning to get a better sense of what was interesting. So I managed in a few weeks to gather together a very extensive set of materials on Japan, without which my book would have been impossible, or at least extremely difficult to write. In particular, we bought quite a lot of books in Tokyo, and also I ransacked the University of Hokkaido library. This was particularly interesting because it contained a number of the older accounts which would have disappeared from the open shelves of the libraries in England. I can't quite make out whether it was at this point that I discovered one of the major influences on my work, Edward Morse and particularly his **Japan Day by Day**, but it is probably so.

What happened was that this trip acted as a kind of second layer of the sandwich started by the previous one. Over the whole period from summer 1990 my mind was bubbling with the comparisons of things English and Japan and trying to make sense of them. I wrote various pieces - on Individualism, Tocqueville in Japan, perhaps the piece on Norman Jacobs, as well as very long drafts on all sorts of things - c.150,000 words or so all on the computer.

At the same time, from a standing start of no knowledge, I tried to build up, with Sarah, a decent working library. In fact, by December 1993, we had a library of about 400 Japanese books, an investment of over £5,000, as well as all the numerous xeroxes of key articles which I had made in Japan on the 1993 trip. I was beginning to index them into my database and trying to sort them out in my mind. In terms of my book, all this activity was essential. It constituted a wave of new, jumbled, exciting and totally confusing data which I was trying to assimilate. In one way, **The Savage Wars**, can be seen as an attempt to take just a part of this wave and examine it in detail, just as I had earlier done with my articles on law, individualism etc. etc. The richness and speed of arrival of the Japanese data - by way of books, xeroxes, experiences in Hokkaido, Tokyo, Ise, Nikko, Kyoto and elsewhere, and a deep conversation with Kenichi and Toshiko at a really fundamental level, all this was an enormously powerful influences. In a sense the **momentum** of these discoveries and interests cannot be over-started. My book is an attempt to absorb part of the impact of Japan. It is, hopefully, full of the surprise of the other, confined to a particular sub-aspect.

And in all this, the figures of various travellers, Griffis, Bird and above all Morse, need to be emphasized. I expect I shall come back to Edward Morse, but it will be obvious that my book could not/would not have been written without him. It was his trained eye which noted so many of those minute details of Japanese material culture which provide

the clues I needed to solve the problem in my book. He was a trained observer in the Agasiz and hence Holmsian/Poe, tradition - he fitted perfectly into the model of the cultural detective. Through his eyes one could pick up the clues, see beneath the surface of Japanese life. And the world one saw there then illuminated, in a mirror, the hitherto somewhat prosaic and hence incomprehensible world of early modern England. Our debt to him extended not just to particular observations, but to a **way** of looking and our understanding of him took a practical form in the building of the 'Morse House' - based on his book on **Japanese Homes**. My book is in many ways dependent on him - an extension of his insights - not least his realization of the importance of latrines!

Thus I have identified one tremendously strong intellectual and emotional **current** which was flowing through the years 1990 to 1993 and which the book is merely one expression of, namely trying to understand a civilization as unusual and complex as Japan, and to see how it compares to England and elsewhere. This is one central theme of my book, and it can only be understood in the context of the two **visits** of 1990 and 1993, the conversations with Kenichi and Toshiko, the collecting of books and xeroxes on Japan, the growing interest in all things Japanese. As always I learn most from observing/following Sarah, whose Quaker temperament and aesthetic senses were even more attracted to Japanese art and literature than were mine. I found Japan immensely intriguing **intellectually**. Sarah found it attractive on all levels and together we built up a good working knowledge of the place and people from constant discussion, reading and adventures together. Thus by December 1993 the flow of interest was at its peak. I had tried to write various pieces on various aspects of England and Japan - kinship, law, individualism etc. - and they were exciting. I thought I would turn my attention to another **limited** aspect of the comparison, **demography**. But on this occasion, instead of being cut off, as one usually is, by the path/seam running out, I found that the subject expanded in my mind. But before showing how and what happened, let me turn to a second thread - Nepal.

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I likened the Japanese interest to a strong current or tide, sweeping in on my mind. At a deeper and different level, Nepal has had the same effect. It was only in 1986 that we returned for the first time after 16 years absence. Since then we have been back almost every year for between one and three months. Not all of the time has been easy, physically or emotionally, and it has taken some precious 15 months or so of prime time out of the last 9 years. I have **written** very little directly about this material - a short pamphlet with I.B. Gurung, some of the notes and appendices to Pignede, a couple of articles, a long review of Dor Bahadur Bista's book.¹ There have also been numerous films. But I think the on-going Nepalese experience acts as an equally powerful current, mixing and sweeping against the Nepalese and hence creating tensions and contradictions and puzzles which I am trying to resolve in my writing. It does this in such deep caverns, measureless to man, that is difficult to understand what is going on. But two areas immediately strike me as important.

One is the emotional involvement with our family in Thak, the closest I will ever get to knowing what it must have been like to live amidst the insecurities, physical hardships, but compensating warmth of a pre-industrial society. We can, at least at second-hand, **feel** what a 'normal' Malthusian world would have been like. In the context of this book, where the central motif is the miraculous escape from such a world, without having **experienced** it, if only vicariously, it would have been impossible to write the book. Parts of the English/Japanese past would have been literally **invisible** because one had no experience of them - a point made by Collingwood about Roman religion, but even more the case with the material/demographic world. Most historians, however hard they try, cannot **begin** to comprehend what was important.

¹ See refs. to this material

The experience has profoundly influenced the way one looks at almost everything and in particular strips away a coating of cotton wool from the historical accounts. To take just a few simple examples. It would have been impossible to appreciate the importance of human labour without the experience of back-breaking work in Thak. Or the importance of fertilizers and what is done with human faeces without that experiences. Or the importance of flies. A thousand questions would not have sprung to one's mind and hence the book would have followed in the jaded and unsuccessful track of so much social history. The Thak **experience** has thus enriched us immensely, though at considerable cost - not in time and money, but above all in the dangers of involvement and the pains of loss.

A second way in which it has been essential, which is of course linked to the above, can best be described as the **back-drop** effect. England and Japan are both, in their own ways, extremely 'peculiar'. Thak and Nepal are much more the **norm**. The difficulty is that now the 'peculiar' has become the normal - and hence invisible. To recover and see the air around us, it needs to be seen **against** something. The contrast of England and Japan partly serves this function - in so far as there are major differences. But very often the two cultures **overlap** so much that the tension of difference is lost. It is at this point that Nepal acts as a kind of dark background, to make the foreground cases shine out. It is something like this...

- a) Only England (fig) **hardly** invisible to the English
- b) England and Japan (fig - in common, invisible difference, visible)
- c) The three cases (fig - both cases **visible** against the backdrop of the normal state of things, i.e. Nepal)

Thus looked down from our mountain village, which in many respects represents the position of most human beings for the last 12,000 years since the development of tribalism, **both** England and Japan are peculiar, but in different ways. This increase in comprehension is a central feature of the book. Although in many chapters the evidence it taken from larger societies, for example famines in India, China etc. the basic schemata can be derived from our **felt** experiences in Nepal. In essence it is a comparison of the life and expectations and pressures on a Premkumari and an English child, or as between a village like Thak and a village like Earls Colne, or between the whole of Nepal and the whole of Japan/England.

The Nepalese case shows the deep difficulties facing people trying to escape from 'illth', a concept I played with half-way through writing the book. The natural **tendencies** towards, 'illth', towards all those processes of agricultural, technological, political and other involution which Malthus and many others have chartered are very visible in Nepal. Dor Bista has seized on a few of them, but our experience in Thak have shown many others.

Without this intellectual and emotional experience, therefore, the dynamic of the book would have been missing. The sense of the **narrowness** of the exit, as Gellner would put it, would have not been obvious. Nor would I have known what it was like **not** to have found an exit. For those of us who can both live in pre-exit and post-exit worlds, the contrasts are so enormous - merely in monetary terms something of a ratio of 100:1, that it would indeed be a dull-brained person who was not intrigued and puzzled about how certain societies **did** escape.

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The third current, which again it is difficult for me to analyse because it has been with me for a very long time and has, so to speak, become fully internalized, is my love for and interest in my own country, England. The contributing factors are easy enough to

enumerate, but more difficult to evaluate. One can start with the kinship system, that tension between a mild yearning for a wider set of emotional ties (which I romantically link to my Celtic side) and my actual, very atomized and nucleated Protestant and English family life - in England. Secondly, there is the influence of my mother - a wanderer, questioner, seeker and meditator. A person whose own quest has obviously affected mine in many ways and with whom, over the years, I have shared many ideas. Thirdly, there is my very English education. Through the various pre-prep schools, the Dragon, Sedbergh, Oxford and then Cambridge, I have been exposed to that public-school - varsity sequence which very powerfully moulds character. It moulds thoughts, emotions, styles of living, logical processes and everything. Above all it glues one deeply to one's country. In some ways, as a Cambridge don and product of the system, I am quintessentially English - with the right accent, connections and imbued with very many characteristics - reticence, tolerance, balance, toughness, irony, inhibitions, loneliness, individualism, heartiness etc. etc.

This powerful, almost Jesuitical, up-bringing has combined with a deep love and interest in things English. From my time in Dorset, through a deep love for the Lake District and Wordsworth and the Yorkshire hills, through Oxbridge and its charms, now to our exquisite house and garden in Lode, I have soaked in a great deal of English culture - humour, aesthetics, political organization etc. I have added to this implicit and informal indoctrination quite explicitly by teaching, studying and writing a great deal about the English - and hence myself. This can be seen easily enough in my library - where a very large section consists of literary texts about England. Not just formal English social/legal/political history which, of course, is one of my formal academic areas of expertise, but in the even larger number of 'sources' - autobiographies, dairies, letters, travellers accounts, 'classics' from Bartholomeus Anglicus through Defoe and others, down to modern poetry and novels. The 'Englishness of the English' has been one of my major themes both in writing - from witchcraft and Josselin onwards, and also in living and researching. In **living**, one is consciously explaining, whether on Faculty Boards, in pubs, in watching cricket, or wherever, what it is to be 'English'. In research, my two most intensive periods of research have been into the nitty-gritty of English villages, Kirkby Lonsdale and Earls Colne. This was yet another way to try to get **inside** the English system and to see how it works.

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Thus when I came to December 1993 and the decision to start a new piece of work, there were, largely below the surface and unknown to me, three (and no doubt more) strong tides flowing and clashing and needing to find some sort of resolution. There was the vast, new, exciting and confusing set of data from Japan needing to be ordered and understood, the accumulation of three years hard work. There was all the emotional and intellectual impetus of our visits to Nepal which I had not been able to write about directly because, in many ways, in itself, it was both too close and too **normal**. Finally, there was years of work on English culture and society and the English - a continuing task of understanding this strange nation of which I was a member, yet a world which I was so closely bound up with that I could not see it. Nepal and Japan, and to a certain extent the Nagas and my childhood in Assam turned me into a partial stranger. 'Savage Wars' is just one part of the attempt to be both a native and a stranger, in these three differing cultures - to understand each apart and together, through the solution of a particular puzzle which then developed into a larger set of volumes which have now been published.

What I had by now was a new set of issues in a wider context. I had long known of the peculiarity of England, but had now found another island (Japan) which was intriguing in its similarities and its differences. It had a similar population curve, it had surprisingly low fertility and mortality. It also seemed to have escaped from the 'crisis' surprisingly early, and to have somehow separated economy and kinship. My review

hinted at a few of the areas where it might be worth looking for explanations for these peculiarities - in nutrition, sanitation, agricultural technology, kinship structures. My mind was obviously becoming intrigued by the old problems again, but now the circulatory and insularity caused by having only one proper example (England) was rejuvenated by the Japanese case. Instead of the old contrast of England vs. The Rest, I was moving toward a much more interesting triadic structure of England, Japan, The Rest. This was the position at the start of the Michaelmas Term 1993.

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On Saturday 30th October, with the term well under way, I wrote in my diary. *'Another cold grey day after a busy week. Have now given something like half of my year's lectures - and quite enjoyed giving them, especially as there have been very high attendance - even increasing in certain cases. Continue to feel a wonderful sense of freedom from anxiety at not being the Head of Department. My room in King's - or rather the outer one which I share with Keith Hopkins - has now been finished and looks lovely with carpet, furniture and nice paintings. Am gradually getting all my books in place with a view to getting down to writing at the end of next week - which is my last full week of 4 lectures. Spent today starting to gather material for an article comparing English and Japanese population patterns - curiously similar in form and central feature - i.e not crisis type. Greatly looking forward to chance of writing again. Have returned to reading **The Road to Xanadu**. The world its usual grim self - esp. horrors through sub-Sahara Africa. Picked apples and Sarah had a bonfire.'*

I made a note of where I had got to, summarizing the five pages of the **Cambridge Review** article as follows:-

Cambs. Review 5pp.

1. *Link of industrialization to homeostatic pattern...*
2. *Almost exactly similar **shape**.*
3. *Wealth not invested in **people**.*
4. *Mechanics of achieving - low pressure regions, birth and death rates.*
5. *Mortality rates - low.*
6. *Reasons for...epidemic disease*
low mortality - perennial mortality low.
7. *How **birth-rates achieved**? - marriage in West*
- infanticide and abortion in Japan
8. ***Result** - completed family size - low : adoption easy.*
9. *Can one '**afford**' children? - similar attitude in Japan*
deliberate attempt to match labour and market
(servants and wage labour)

I then wrote out a plan for the proposed article, as follows:-

Causes and Consequences 30.10.93

Population patterns in comparative perspective: England and Japan.

1. *The 'normal' pattern of ancien regime populations - 'high pressure regions' - from Malthus to Wrigley/McKeown.*

2. *The two exceptional cases - England and Japan*

i. *Peculiar morbidity/mortality - absence of /crises'*

ii. *Peculiar fertility pattern - lower than maximum fertility*

economically determined

fertility

iii. *Peculiar shape of outcome -*

3. *The causes in the two cases...*

i. *Mortality}*

} deeper causes

ii. *Fertility} proximate causes*

} kinship & economy

iii. *Shape}*

} islandhood

political system

4. *Some consequences - a cause of the economic revolution in both countries?*

- broke the Malthusian framework

- a vital clue to what is now happening in the

world...i.e. the DMP situation is broken...

I noted that my 'Sources' for this would be my previous writings, including the **Culture of Capitalism** – 'Modes of reproduction', the **Cambridge History of Japan** review, what was in my database, and work by Hayami, Taueber and Dore.

The following day I noted, '*Spent morning starting to work on the article on population and think about the book comparing England and Japan. Feel excited at the prospect of making a start on working soon. Sarah listing my books - the computer says I have 5,152 at present - allowing for a few missing, quite a large library.*' The following Wednesday 3rd November, I wrote a short, five page sketch of the article as I saw it then. This summarized Malthus and Boserup's theories and saw virtue in both. In both Japan and England I noted an unusually good relationship between population and resources, but the mechanisms were different. In England it was delayed marriage which was important, in Japan birth control. I contrasted these two cases with the classic demographic transition model. The whole piece is about the relation between economics and **fertility**. It re-iterates ideas that I had developed in lectures, in my Malinowski lecture and article on 'Modes of Reproduction' and my book on marriage. It really said no more than what I had said elsewhere, but had one added element in that it brought Japan into the argument to show that there was an **alternative** strategy to break out of the Malthusian trap of rising fertility. It is thus a refinement of my older arguments, but nothing really new.

Even the puzzles about the odd mortality patterns in England and Japan were not mentioned. I obviously did not have time to finish the subject for in a short note about thoughts I had during the next week I noted '*A few thoughts re similarities and differences - absence of checks - epidemics - wars - famine - disease. Why disease absent? - the toilet theory.*' The rest of the term was swallowed up in lecturing, many meetings, teaching. On 7th November I was thinking of working towards books on **Encounters** with theorists, **Institutions** of Capitalism, **Values** of Capitalism;

Communities, Methodology of comparison, computers, **Ancestors/Autobiography** of our family.' Thus 6 volumes to take me through the 50s.

Clearly the population piece was still thought of as a minor one. On 13th November the Diary records, *'Another tiring week, but lectures went well I think and feel less stressed than previously.'* On 20th November I gave a talk comparing the English and Japanese family systems at a British Academy **Conversazione**, for which I had prepared during the week. On the 27th *'another busy week with only a **little** of my own work done, enjoyed lecturing etc. and still have that wonderful sense of **relief** at not being responsible for the department...now I really feel free. So can concentrate of thought...Am reading **Silk and Straw**, a portrait of Japanese life.'* The next day I was *'wondering whether to produce a book about **methodology**, i.e. describe actually **how** one works and why one works. Would be exciting.* [This is a curious foreshadowing of what I am now doing, in August 1995. A.M.] I continue, *'Now into the last week of term and then WRITING!...Will try to get a couple of books drafted out.'*

The following Saturday 4th December, the term was over. I noted satisfaction with lectures completed and that *'I even managed to do a **little** writing and some reading. The absence of anxiety over Departmental matters was the really good thing. A good meeting with Gerry...we had a really good discussion as usual. We are really on the same wave-length and enjoy our discussions greatly. Sarah also very supportive...Now down to writing!'* In fact, the next day I spent reading Weber's **Methodology of the Social Sciences** (again), 'excellent stuff' and *'Thought about re-organizing my time and space organization to give me more time for research.'*

In fact, the next ten days were spent at meetings at the ESRC and elsewhere, and much of the rest of the time was spent working on a long 'article' comparing the history of English and Japanese law, which, like many other topics interested me as much as demography. Thus on 18th December I noted, *'Spent morning finishing another draft of my piece on 'Law and Customs in Japan. It is now about 16,000 words long and I feel it has some interesting ideas in it. Enjoyed writing it and feel the muse is with me!'*

On 8th December my **Thoughts** book recorded and outlined what I thought I would be doing once term was over and the piece on law was done. 'had noted that my lectures on population were stale and should be discontinued after 18 years. I noted that *'I am now more of less free of teaching for the next year and am thinking of plans. During term re-wrote the **Jacobs** piece and read further round the **Cambridge History of Japan** and the topic of population.'* I then noted that *'I have a scheme to try to write several works **in tandem** and it is difficult to say which will get published first. The volumes may, of course, change entirely, but for purposes of record they are at present.'* I then listed eight possible works - **Encounters** (Maine, Gellner, Dumont et al), two volumes on the **Institutions** and **Values** of capitalism in Japan and England. The **Micro-development of modernity**, Thak and England. The **Autobiography of Empire** (my ancestors); **Methods** - explorations in the enriching of questions and data; **Futures** - the future of capitalism; **Robert Chambers** (with my mother).

I then noted that *'Those with which I shall start are **Encounters, Institutions and Methods**. The **Methods** book is a sort of autobiography over the period 21-51...taking stock.'* I noted that *'Anyway, we shall see what emerges, probably something entirely different!'* I had no premonition of what it would be. All I knew was that things were in

place. In a tiny summary of what I have described in previous pages, I concluded. *'At least some of the **outer** disturbances/data collection has been achieved. Thanks to Sarah I have an excellent working library and peaceful place to work. I also have, thanks to Penny, a very rich 'Topics' database. So if I can keep multi-media at bay, I should be able to get down to things. And Gerry has agreed to read things as appropriate. So, here goes...'*

The following day (19th) was a Sunday with Inge, Astrid and Kate, celebrating my birthday. On Monday 20th December, my 52nd birthday, it continued, *'Have started to (re-)write the piece on population in England and Japan. Nice to be writing again and hope to have a draft by the new year. Again many odd similarities as between England and Japan.'* I clearly envisaged this as a short article - somewhat like the articles on work, kinship, law which I had already written and which would fit into the wider book on comparative institutions. I had not envisaged anything bigger.

What then happened is very similar to the experience I described at the start of **Individualism** *'This is a book that wrote itself...I intended to write two short articles and then to move on. The articles were written, but I became gripped and intrigued by what I was finding.'*² The same thing happened, but in a different way and more protracted and complex way - in this book. As I noted in my diary after a birthday **korma** and pleasant birthday, *'Feel moderately hopeful about writing something useful in my 52nd year.'*

(4500)

²Individualism, p.1