

Embracing Defeat. Japan in the Wake of World War Two

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Japan's experience of defeat and occupation at the end of the Second World War has most commonly been examined from the point of view of the conquerors. It has rarely been tackled as a Japanese experience. But, in this massively researched and beautifully illustrated book, John Dower attempts to understand the hopes, visions and dreams (as well as the hopelessness and exhaustion) of the defeated Japanese as they sought to remake their identity and values in the aftermath of war. He probes a kaleidoscopic array of Japanese responses and their contradictions: guilt and giddy liberation, selective forgetting, iconoclasm, new hopes and old disillusion. And he places them against the background of an American Occupation which was at once high-minded and visionary, arrogant and imperialist.

Dower tackles this theme through twin narratives. The first is a dense socio-cultural history, focused on the first two years of the Occupation. The second is a detailed reconstruction of the initial phase of constitutional and political 'reform from above', paying particular attention to the rehabilitation of the emperor, the genesis of the new constitution, and the Tokyo war crimes trials.

Other authors might have treated these themes quite separately, but Dower intertwines them. This creates certain structural problems for the book. But, more importantly, it highlights how certain issues were central to both spheres. Debates on the allocation of responsibility for the past, and the nature of current and future Japanese identity, were central to both arenas. And both had to be fought out and resolved in the context of a shifting and ambiguous context of Occupation realpolitik. Dower handles these complex themes skillfully. Firstly, as a narrator, he holds a vast canvas together. Secondly as an observer, he maintains a deep sympathy for his subjects while still preserving an appropriately sharp and critical moral sense as he navigates some muddy waters.

Dower's 'cultural history' begins with the anguish of physically and materially 'shattered lives' at war's end.

The shock, devastation, exhaustion and despair are unremittingly chronicled. The depth of loss and confusion which the Japanese people experienced is vividly conveyed, notably in Dower's accounts of the huge scale of social displacement and missing persons, and the long-drawn out period of 'food-wretchedness'.

Against this background of economic and social misery, however, Dower is also concerned to locate the transformative effects of defeat. Even in the pits of despair, people were reshaping their future identity and discovering new aspirations. Dower tackles this at three levels.

Firstly, he investigates the 'subcultures of defeat'. The world of prostitution under the Occupation, for example was simultaneously an arena of sexual exploitation and a channel for the growth of interracial affection and the undermining of old racial stereotypes. It was a symbol of national shame and a conduit for new American values of luxury, hedonism, and materialism that were eagerly embraced. Likewise, the black markets were both explosions of entrepreneurial energy and a site for violent criminal gangs. And a new urban demimonde channeled nihilism and hardship into lifestyles of deliberate decadence and a flourishing milieu of pulp literatures which posed forceful challenges to traditional social and sexual roles. Dower has dug deeply to reveal 'the bittersweet ambiance of life on the margins in a defeated land'.

Secondly, Dower explores 'bridges of language', the shifting imagery and idiom of a nation in transition. He shows that some of the language of the old regime was simply emptied of its old content and refilled with new meanings like so many suitcases. But the plasticity of language also created ambiguities. Mostly, Dower stresses that linguistic bridges were transformative and forward looking, ways of escaping from the past. But darker colours could linger on. Words and phrases necessarily carried past resonances too, and possibilities of moving on coexisted with temptations of crossing back.

Thirdly, Dower considers the 'virtuoso turnabout' of the Japanese intelligentsia in embracing democratization. Before and during the war, the Japanese state had bullied or seduced intellectuals into support or conformity with a remarkable degree of success. Almost no significant intellectual opposition remained. The sudden conversion of the intelligentsia after the war could, therefore, be seen as hypocrisy. But, Dower draws a more complex picture. On the one hand there were continuities with the past: the new ideas drew on earlier currents of thought that had flourished in the 1920s. On the other hand, there were real breaks. Repentance and remorse have to be taken seriously. It may, for instance, have driven the remarkable transformation of Japan's teachers from the 'drill sergeants of emperor system orthodoxy' to fervent guardians of the new democracy. But it may also help to explain the rather uncritical embrace of fairly wooden sorts of Marxism in certain sectors of university life which emerged from this time.

All of this is stimulating and finely done. But some gaps and difficulties remain. Firstly, Dower's picture is probably too narrowly focused on life in the cities, and in particular Tokyo. The countryside and the peasantry are almost wholly absent from this picture and, most likely, a quite different story would require to be told there. Similarly, the world of industrial workers is somewhat lightly touched on. Dower's is a picture of urban culture, entered from the margins. As such it is deeply suggestive, but much uncharted territory remains to be explored.

Secondly, Dower is most sensitive to the new, and to breaks with the past. The continuities are often underplayed, and the weight of the past still sitting on the shoulders of those reme traditional Japanese family, enable young industrial workers to delay marriage, and feed into crime control systems. It was seen as a 'breakwater' against lust, disorder and disease. As such it was assimilated to an almost asexual tradition of family piety and national loyalty. Licensed prostitutes were seen as filial daughters who became prostitutes for 'legitimate' reasons to support their families and fulfil national needs. During the War, this system flowed seamlessly into the 'comfort women' system for servicing the Japanese soldiery.⁴

In contrast, throughout the interwar period, the independent prostitute was repressed and criminalised. From the late 1920s, independent prostitution became the prime target of both the Home Ministry and the police, and the abolitionist movement. The independent prostitute was seen as a symbol of modernist and romantic relations between the sexes, pursuing individual gain or pleasure. Intense suppression was targeted at the

cafes and dance-halls of the Ginza, directly at the 'waitresses' and by association with the 'modern girl' (moga) society.

The Recreation and Amusement Association was therefore an attempt to carry forward a long-standing system into a new context. Its collapse and the emergence of the independent panpan therefore marked the collapse of a deeply-rooted tradition of social management, and the explosive assertion of an intensely suppressed current of 'deviant' behaviour. In consequence, in the case of prostitution, the 'subculture of defeat' probably carried even deeper and more charged significance than Dower allows. While many histories have demonstrated the remarkable continuities of Japanese bureaucratic administration through the Occupation, here at least was one quite decisive reversal.

There are other areas too where Dower does not seem to have paid adequate attention to the pre-history of the 'moments' that he focuses on. For example, Dower describes the flourishing 'blue-sky' black markets that flourished in the postwar crisis. But the sense that one carries away from the account is that this exercise of rapacious free marketeering was a new and shocking phenomenon for the Japanese. In some senses it was. But this ignores the history of wartime black markets. Despite the fact that Japanese governments had attempted to set up the most minute and totalitarian system of food-control during the war, the rigidities, unreality, and bureaucratic incapacity of the system meant that the Japanese war economy had come to depend massively on de facto tolerated black markets in the later years of the war. These markets provided far higher percentages of overall individual consumption than in any other major combatant nation.⁵ What were the links between wartime and postwar black markets? What were the continuities in crime and bureaucratic tolerance? Were the postwar blue-sky markets as much of a shock to the Japanese people as Dower suggests?

More generally, Dower's focus on new and emergent ideas and patterns of thought means that he does not spend much time pursuing the hidden undercurrents of the old. Thus, ultranationalist ideas and social thought had not disappeared altogether, and were soon to re-emerge, often in powerful ways, but Dower does not discuss them. It is probably too much to ask that Dower give detailed attention to these currents too, but again, a wider contextualization of changing ideas against these continuities would serve to provide a more balanced picture.

Dower's parallel 'political history' concentrates on the first two years of Occupation and does not stray far into the 'reverse course' that followed. Dower powerfully captures the early period of MacArthur's regime. MacArthur ran a neo-colonial state, coloured with supremacism and paternalism, yet also significantly loaded with idealism and a spirit of democratic reform. It propagated freedom of speech while of the defeated Confederacy, subjected to Yankee interlopers and groping for a new identity (pp. 527-8). As Dower summarises it, no-one grieved over the defeat, but neither did they face its responsibility head on. In these crucial early years, Japan had been sold short by the politicians in the process of remaking its identity, and this was to reverberate in the coming 'soft counterrevolution' in Japanese society that was shortly to accompany the 'reverse course'.

Dower's fine book significantly broadens the scope of studies of Occupied Japan and the impact of war on Japanese society, and it will deservedly attract a wide audience.

NOTES:

1. Quoted in Ben-Ami Shillony, *Politics and culture in wartime Japan* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981) p. 115
2. This text has been published. Watanabe Kiyoshi, *Kudakareta Kami (Shattered God)* [Tokyo, Asahi Sansho, 1983]

3. Sheldon Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds. The state in everyday life* (Princeton UP, 1997)
4. Dower also suggests that the wartime 'comfort women' were exclusively non-Japanese women, mainly Koreans. (pp. 124, 465, 470) In fact, thousands of Japanese licensed prostitutes were also shipped off to serve the army overseas. See, George Hicks, *The Comfort Women. Japan's brutal regime of enforced prostitution in the Second World War* (New York, Norton, 1994)
5. T. R. Havens, *Valley of darkness: the Japanese people and World War Two* (NY. Norton, 1978); Anke Scherer, 'Drawbacks to controls on food distribution: food shortages, the black market and economic crime' in Erich Pauer ed., *Japan's War Economy* (Routledge, 1999)
6. Stephen S. Large, *Emperor Hirohito and Showa Japan. A political biography* (Routledge, 1992); Ben-Ami Shillony, *Politics and culture in wartime Japan* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981)
7. David Bergamini, *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy* (London, Heineman, 1971); Edward Behr, *Hirohito. Behind the myth* (New York, Vintage Books, 1990)
8. T. Fujitani, *Splendid monarchy. Power and pageantry in modern Japan* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998)

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