

REVIEW

Herman OOMS, *Tokugawa Ideology: Early Constructs, 1570-1680*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985. xvi + 349pp. \$49.00 (foreign), \$37.50 (US).

As eras go the Tokugawa has often seemed a neat package, ready-made for museums and textbooks: something of a set-piece that commenced in 1600 with Sekigahara as the battle to end the battling and then given shape by subsequent decisions to close Japan off from the rest of the world and adopt Neo-Confucianism as a made-to-order basis for social and intellectual life. The tale of the Tokugawa can be made to continue with fascinating details such as the four-class system, *sankin kōtai*, the bush-beating to find Christians, Deshima as the sole window on the world, internal stresses during the bakumatsu phase, external provocation by an American commodore, and then the restoration and the end of the era. Depending on the perspective of the narrator, the Tokugawa as a whole can either be cited as a classic example of feudalism or else something often called "early modern." When it comes to final summations, one can either stress the epoch's controls and controlledness so as to give it the label of the world's first totalitarian state or else its artistic gems—kabuki, Genroku culture, Saikaku, Ryōkan, etc.—to portray it, in spite of its "hot-house" setting, as a new golden age in Japan and reminiscent of the Heian period.

Lately, however, the Tokugawa has been shown to be much less tidy than was thought and some of the newest, most provocative work on this has been done by scholars in the West. Ronald B. Toby's *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* has shown that the isolationism engendered by the *sakoku* policy was far less perfect than had been long thought. Now Herman Ooms, with lavish documentation and sophisticated arguments, has turned much of the Tokugawa's tidiness—at least its intellectual dimension—into a shambles.

If taken as seriously as it deserves to be taken, this work will bring to the test not only many common hypotheses about the Tokugawa but also the way in which we habitually divide and apportion out the segments and texts of Japanese history to different disciplines. For instance, it is fairly common to conceive of pre-Tokugawa texts as "religious" and of most writings after approximately 1600 as somehow suddenly secular and belonging to

intellectual rather than religious history. Whole curriculums are built around this principle of division. Even great scholars of the past built this as a presupposition into their research. Ooms does not cite the following by Muraoka Tsunetsugu but it is the kind of notion that, at least on one level, his book overturns:

Two principal characteristics of Tokugawa culture distinguish it from Medieval culture. First, Tokugawa culture was liberated from the special possessors of culture, the priests and nobles; and at the same time it was freed of their traditionalism. Second, Tokugawa culture was secular—it had extricated itself from mystical and Buddhist other-worldly tendencies (Muraoka 1964, p. 97).

One of the major contributions of this book is that it shows that notions such as the above were not coincidental but rather the result of certain obfuscations engendered by the writers Ooms has studied. Moreover, these coincided with the tendency of modern researchers to tell the Tokugawa story as one giant step in the direction of ourselves and our own secularized modernity. The comfortable fit between the encoded message and the values of modern readers was so neat that it also needed to be suspect.

It would be impossible here to recapitulate Ooms's arguments and documentation—or to reduce to summary the portraits he gives of the thinking of figures such as Hayashi Razan, Fujiwara Seika, Suzuki Shōsan, and Yamazaki Ansai. One of his major contentions is that, contrary to what has often been assumed, Tokugawa thought was not a story of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism pure and simple. Nor was it secular; he insists that "the writings of the new schoolmen were suffused with traditional religious and metaphysical elements" (p. 193). Moreover, Tokugawa rulers, and most especially Ieyasu, were skilfull creators and manipulators of ritual. Especially noteworthy is this book's account of how the building and ritual use of Nikkō, approximately as far from Edo as Ise is from Kyoto, was intended to displace the old emperor-Kyoto-Ise axis and fashion a new one out of shogun-Edo-Nikkō. This was, Ooms claims, an attempt to "deconstruct the past" and signify in a visual, ritual way that the center of Japan's ideological space had been moved. The idea seems to have been that the Tōshō shrine would, like Ise, be rebuilt every twenty years and even "outshine" the older ritual center. The Tokugawa shoguns

were masterful in their knowledge and use of symbols. They were also extremely clever in letting the new schoolmen—not just Neo-Confucian but also Buddhist, Shinto, or whatever—scramble over one another in providing intellectual props for the power they had themselves managed to grab by military muscle. Ooms challenges the notion—perhaps itself a clever fiction made by the Hayashis—that a perspicacious shogun turned to Hayashi Razan for a blueprint for society and was given the secular, Neo-Confucian package in return.

Ooms's book is packed not only with heretofore overlooked data but also an array of new, provocative hypotheses that are certain to elicit vigorous responses and reactions both in Japanese and Western scholarship dealing with Japan. Most interesting and most controversial, I suspect, will be his decision to pay close attention not only to what was said in the era under consideration but also to what was *not* said. Ooms borrows and makes heavy use of Jürgen Habermas's principle that the historian must look especially for the things about which the sources have tried to be silent. For Habermas and also for Ooms these silences must be made to speak because it is only then that we can detect the ruses through which earlier writers constructed their "ideologies." Needless to say, once that methodological decision has been made, almost everything gets turned on its pivot and the tale of the Tokugawa becomes a very different story indeed.

It will probably be precisely on this point that Ooms's recasting of the Tokugawa will be most closely scrutinized. Silences are, as Ooms himself partially admits in the final pages of his study, hard-to-handle "documents." I will, however, leave that problem to one side and register my own reservation about this unusually important work in terms of a problem which Ooms seems not to have solved and also not yet adequately addressed. It has to do with his use of Habermas without recognizing or admitting that a decided commitment to modernity and its superior "enlightenment" is part and parcel of Habermas's theory. Consequently some notion of "the modern" itself lurks in the shadows and silences of *Tokugawa Ideology* and becomes an unrecognized criterion in both the explicit and implicit value-judgments made in it.

The reason why Ooms himself may have wished to conceal this particular problem can also, I would suggest, be discovered. It lies in the nasty way it would seem to contradict his stated aim of disengaging Tokugawa studies from the various agendas dictated

to-date by all the different species of modernization theory. Citing Maruyama Masao, Robert N. Bellah and others as instances of "misplaced wholeness," Ooms writes the following early on in his book as a way of charting a new course:

If the historian uses present-day concepts such as modernization or scientific rationality to explicate the texts to his readers, he cannot help but lose the significance the texts had in their own time (p. 11).

For much of the way Ooms follows this principle with his own practice. One of his major moves in making the Tokugawa less tidy is by shifting the pendulum away from mid-Tokugawa and especially the bakumatsu—often elsewhere read as key stepping-stones to the Meiji and to us!—and toward the earliest part of the epoch and even to what came before it. He rightly calls his book "early constructs" and quite confidently marches across the 1600 date-line into earlier materials for his study. Much of the book deals with the late Muromachi and some of the roots of Tokugawa discourse are traced back to the Kamakura period, showing along the way that Ooms knows pre-Tokugawa materials well. In all of this shift of focus Ooms presents us with a study that *seems* at long last to have broken once-and-for-all with the modernization problematic and the kinds of questions it fomented and reinforced for so long.

But the problem for Ooms is that Habermas, whose method of analysis he wishes to follow, is very much a partisan of the "modern" and the need to ground oneself in the enhanced rationality it purportedly provides. Anthony Giddens writes of Habermas that he "wants to offer a vindication of enlightenment and modernity when for many these have become effectively discredited" (Bernstein 1985, p. 98). It is evident that for Habermas to relinquish the modern—and especially to follow someone such as Jean-François Lyotard into the "post-modern"—would be to jettison the liberal and ethical vision of social change that, in his view at least, the modern era has uniquely provided. Thus he vehemently rejects an incipient neo-conservatism he detects in the positions of those heralding the arrival of the post-modern.

But this fear seems to blind Habermas to the importance of what Lyotard and others have been saying about the inappropriate Grand Narratives that were so much a part of the way most

moderns viewed the world. Comte and Marx are classic examples but some notion of past ages as trapped in myth and mystification and our own as more enlightened and rational was almost always a central tenet in the way in which modern thinkers depicted the gap between themselves and the past. Fairly often some kind of quantum jump out of religion and belief-systems and into the secular and the rational was also part of the grand narratives that moderns believed to be true. For many of his critics one of the major faults of Habermas is his stubborn retention of this *belief* about the modern and its subtle influence on all his theories.

Ooms has one eye wide open to this problem implicit in the way the older metanarratives construed the difference between a less-than-rational medieval epoch and a rational modernity—exactly the kind of thing expressed in the paragraph from Muraoka Tsunetsugu cited above. The distance he has moved our studies is evident if that quotation with its black-and-white contrast between a "liberated," "extricated," and "secular" Tokugawa versus a "mystical" and "other-worldly" Medieval culture is juxtaposed with the following by Ooms:

The Tokugawa period, including its first decades, is often characterized as marked by rationalism and a progressive rationalization under the impetus of Neo-Confucianism. It is evident that such a picture seriously distorts Tokugawa reality. . . . In other words, the dichotomy between rationality and arationality is inappropriate for understanding early Tokugawa Japan (p. 151).

If I read him correctly Ooms seems to be saying that much of the modernization problematic and the historiography it produced about Japan was a hall of mirrors. Although I would not go so far as to call this book an exercise in post-modern historiography, it manifests a clear break—at least on the overt level—with most histories that were done in the modernist mode. At least it tries to part company to this extent with the pre-rational/rational contrast that was often built into the meta-histories of modernism.

But then one must ask: How does Habermas fit into such a program? The answer I would suggest is that he fits quite awkwardly—so awkwardly in fact that one wonders whether Ooms has not tried to maintain a certain "silence" here about the degree to which Habermas is very much tied to the old grand narratives

about modernity and rationality, as noted by Lyotard (1984). For instance on page 65 he quotes but also passes over as if unproblematic for himself Habermas's notion that within history at some point the mythological mode of discourse gets displaced by more reasoned and rational discourse.

In addition Ooms seems to share with Habermas the supposition that it is somehow possible to get free of all cosmologies and mythologies and into some kind of language that is so self-critical about metaphor that it is virtually free of it. This leads him at times to make what I would deem the correct move—but for the wrong reasons. For instance, concerning the *Tōshōgū goikun* or text known as "Ieyasu's Testament" he rightly detects in it all kinds of Confucian, Shinto, and Buddhist terminology and also rightly notes that we need to discard the view of it as "proof of a gradual progress of secular, rational thought" (p. 68). He then, however, says that that text is "theological" because it is still "uncritically metaphorical"—basing this on Derrida's definition of a theologian as someone who "rests satisfied with metaphors." Implicit in this is the altogether unprovable belief that it is possible to arrive at some kind of fully rational language that lies above and beyond all need for metaphor. The presupposition that one might somehow be able to escape the net of metaphorical language informs a good number of the critical judgments Ooms passes on the writers he studies—most especially in the latter half of his book.

This is where I think he has been led astray by Habermas. It has led him, like Habermas, into what Lyotard has called the "metanarrative of emancipation." The problem is not that emancipation is unreal or not worth searching and fighting for—although some post-modernists may have gone to that conclusion. Rather it is that emancipation is real and recognizable enough to be able to do without the grand old metanarratives of modernity. It also is something that can be encouraged and forged by the concerned—without the need for some kind of belief in the possibility of getting a language "freed" of metaphor. After Wittgenstein it has gotten difficult to see the quest for a metaphor-free language as anything other than a metaphor coined by moderns to try to explain to themselves what becoming modern was all about. The point is that the enterprise failed—and now we can see it as a piece of recent history. The problem with all the grand narratives of how we—and also the Japanese as included within an even

greater "we"—got to be modern is that they themselves rested ultimately on subtly operative metaphors. Many of these were metaphors about rationality. The Cartesian one of the mind as a mirror was, as Richard Rorty has demonstrated, a classic instance.

Rorty, in fact, has written about trying to "split the difference" between Habermas and Lyotard and his arguments are, I think, deserving of attention (Bernstein 1985, pp. 161-175). He claims that one can be very much concerned with values such as freedom, justice, and even social reform without needing the large metanarratives. Thus Habermas may be right in noticing that some post-modernists are really neo-conservatives and all too eager to find reasons for calling an end to the ethical and social agenda that has been part of the modern era. But Rorty calls on Habermas to see that that agenda can exist and continue without having to find grounding in some grandiose but problematic tale about modernity and the progress of rationality. Rorty advises Habermas to move farther away from Kant and closer to the American pragmatists, a point which, interestingly, may have registered with Habermas (Bernstein 1985, p. 198).

I will suggest that Ooms's superb study would have been even better if he had shaken out of it what remains of the old modernization problematic. It gives him the most trouble when he deals with Yamazaki Ansai (1618-1682), the figure whose thought is the climax of Ooms's entire analysis. Ooms brilliantly analyzes the dilemmas, hermeneutic ploys and intellectual progeny of Ansai. Ooms is simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by Ansai and this is, I would suggest, because of an unresolved antinomy in Ooms's own method. He is caught between wanting, on the one hand, to fault Ansai for his entrapment in false etymologies and the failure to achieve a logical discourse free of mythologies and, on the other hand, the impulse to sympathize with Ansai as a writer with a method not really different in any substantial way from modern writers we all know. Sometimes Ooms gives hints that he knows that no practising hermeneutic to-date has really escaped the problem of eisegesis—now usually called "manufacturing a subtext." I add the emphasis in the following to show where Ooms has opened one post-modern eye; he is discussing Ansai's tortuous arguments:

This effort to make a text render a subtext, to voice a silent truth, should not, by itself alienate us from Ansai,

since all interpretive sciences bring into play such hermeneutics. That Ansai found precisely what he knew had to be there should offend no one who understands the success, for instance, of Marxist historians, modernization theorists, or Lévi-Straussian structuralists. Ansai proved that he had mastered the essentials of Neo-Confucian 'orthodoxy,' a respected scholarly tradition imbued with great authority, and one that made claims to universal validity. He then rediscovered it, persistently and on a wide scale, in another cultural terrain. Thus, nothing was new and everything was new—as in the best modern scholarly tradition (p. 240).

Here Ooms mocks the pretenses of the moderns as a way of dissolving the difference between Ansai and ourselves. (In this connection he draws a fascinating equivalence between Ansai's etymologizing and a three year exercise in cabalistic exegesis on the part of Saussure, "the founder of modern linguistics.")

The problem, of course, is simply that, although Ooms detects the eisegesis in other scholarly traditions of the modern epoch, he either does not see or else chooses to say nothing about the same kind of thing in Habermas and the method of exposing the "ideology" in texts and silences such as those of the Tokugawa. Marxist historians, modernization theorists, and Lévi-Straussian structuralists are all chided for having camouflaged the fact that they bent the truth to ensure the chances of discovering what they were determined to find. But Habermas gets off scot free. Naturally, to have brought Habermas into the company of the flawed would have made Ooms's rich, fascinating study into a rather different one than it now is. It would, however, have enabled him to make an even cleaner, more thorough break with modern historiography's continued dependency on discredited notions of the modern. The reasons why historians often hesitate to make that move are not difficult to guess. If in the end Ooms seems to have recoiled before quite *that* degree of methodological consistency and self-scrutiny, he has also vastly enriched our understanding of the Tokugawa and written one of the most sophisticated books in repertoire of Japan studies.

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