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Making Democracy Real

Japan is fundamentally Confucian; democracy is on top.
 – Chief of a local neighborhood association, 2006¹

There are layers in Japan. The top layer is modern/Western. Below that is Confucian. Below that is Buddhism and then Animism. All of these things are still living in the heart of the Japanese. . . . In the US, there is basically no history, a very short history. So the idea of town meetings etc. came from the beginning. But in Japan there are thousands of years of history before democracy. Democracy is placed on top of these other values.
 – Japanese academic and civic activist, 2006²

Contemporary Japanese democracy is not merely a pale reflection of American and Western European liberal democratic traditions. It is a rich political system with a long history that is the product of a collective response by both state and society aimed at addressing pressing social and political problems, resulting in the mutual transformation of state and societal institutions, values, and practices. Contemporary perspectives on democratization are rooted in Western European and American historical experiences. Since these countries were the first to build democracies, it is quite reasonable for our concepts of democracy and the way that we expect democratic formation to occur to be influenced by these early democracies. However, this Euro-American perspective is no longer adequate. Politics on nearly every continent, representing a multitude of religious and ethnic communities, have now experimented with democratization, and many have successfully democratized. Unfortunately, our theoretical models

¹ Interview 170.
² Interview 202.

have not kept up with this profound transformation in the global political landscape.

This book takes the state-in-society approach (Migdal 2001; Migdal et al. 1994) to politics and refines it to develop a new theoretical approach for studying democratization. A state-in-society approach offers a more holistic and accurate way of explaining the complex state–society transformations inherent in democratization, especially those found in non-Western countries. Additionally, this book develops a “tipping-point” model of generational change, which focuses more precisely on one mechanism that enables the development of a new political system, explicating the role that generational change plays in the dissemination of democratic values and practices and creating opportunities for the revision of political institutions as democracies mature. This chapter focuses on the state-in-society approach to democratization, including a short primer on Confucian political values for readers less familiar with that political philosophical tradition. The following chapter explains the tipping point model of generational change as well as supplies some cross-national data supporting the model. The remainder of the book draws on the theoretical and analytical foundations of these first two chapters as it examines Japanese democratization.

When a polity sets out to create a new democratic form of government, it begins with lofty ideas drawn from a multitude of political resources both foreign and domestic. Political leaders then take some of those ideas and create a set of institutional structures that are intended to embody them. Finally, political leaders and citizens begin to put those ideas into practice in their everyday politics. At this point, the momentum of political change reverses course – instead of flowing from the top to the bottom, it shifts and moves from the bottom to the top. After some time in the new political institutional structure, the practices of citizens, their civic leaders, and those in high politics will transform the original set of ideas to make them more compatible with the dynamic situation on the ground. Newer democratic ideas will be modified to accommodate deeply held political beliefs that predated the introduction of democracy. Traditional ideas will be modified to accommodate newer democratic ways of thinking and doing. Eventually, civic and political leaders will seek to modify the institutional structure to better reflect the political practices and ideas that have become prevalent in society. With the creation of a new institutional structure, the process begins anew.

Every step of this process is contested, sometimes peacefully, sometimes violently. With a multitude of political values to choose from, leaders battle

each other about which ones will be institutionalized and what form those institutions will take. Citizens and elites chafe as new institutional structures restrict and restructure old ways of doing things. Their resistance and their innovation to overcome aspects that they do not like take multiple forms, many of which are incompatible with one another. Societal groups compete for influence as they attempt to spread political practices consistent with their emerging value system. Savvy political entrepreneurs make the most of opportunities created by accidents and serendipitous occasions and promote their own visions of the future. Some of them succeed in having those visions take root in the popular consciousness; most fail. Both the content of policies and the process through which they come about have unintended consequences that may not even become apparent until decades later. The process is messy, painful, inspiring, and long.

This book is about how democracy is made real. It is about how the ideas of democracy are transformed into the practice of democracy, how the practice of democracy transforms the ideas of democracy, and how both practices and ideas shape and are shaped by institutions. Political ideas, institutions, and practices are historically and geographically situated; they are a function of the time and place where they are created and recreated, and they are in constant motion. As one of the earliest non-Western, nonwhite, non-Christian countries to adopt a democratic constitution, Japan offers an excellent opportunity for a theory-building case study to explore this process of democratization and uncover some of the important factors that empower a polity to democratize.

BUILDING DEMOCRACY

While acknowledging that democracy is an “essentially contested concept” (Gallie 1951), perhaps the most commonly used definition of democracy comes from Abraham Lincoln, who defined it as “government of the people, by the people, for the people.”³ Thus, for a country to be democratic, its leaders must be drawn from among its citizens. The public must select those leaders through some kind of free and fair electoral process. And, the government must be held accountable to the people.

One of the core arguments of this book is that while Lincoln’s general concept of democracy must hold for a country to be considered

³ Full text of the Gettysburg Address can be found online at <http://history.eserver.org/gettysburg-address.txt> (accessed 10/27/2010). For more discussion of the different and competing definitions of democracy see Bell (2006), Collier and Levitsky (1997), Ketcham (2006), Schaffer (1998), Tilly (2007), and Zakaria (1997).

democratic, the local manifestations of that concept are specific to time and place and are dynamic. Who are the people? Do they include women? Ethnic minorities? Gays? Foreigners? A polity's answers to those questions change over time and place. The political battles over who is included in that category of "the people" are fundamental to the struggle for and about democracy; they are ongoing and never ending. Exactly what it means for the government to be "of," "by," and "for" the people is equally contested and a polity's answers to those questions also change over time. Although it is possible to come up with a standard, idealized, abstract definition of democracy, as I have done in employing Lincoln's, one of the fundamental projects of this book is to demonstrate that the idea of democracy and its practice are highly specific to local context.

Lincoln's definition of democracy draws attention to the two "sides" involved in governance: the government and the people. Theories of democracy have generally focused on one side or the other. Theories that are rooted in "the people" are particularly concerned with the values held by the citizens, often tracing their intellectual roots to Alexis DeTocqueville's famous observation of early-nineteenth-century America as recorded in *Democracy in America*. In his section on political associations DeTocqueville discusses how children are taught from infancy to be self-reliant, to form private groups to solve collective problems, and to be suspicious of governmental authority. The importance of additional democratic values such as equality and freedom are discussed at length in many of the other sections of his book in political, economic, as well as social contexts.⁴

Picking up on DeTocqueville's emphasis on the importance of education in the formation of democratic values, John Dewey and other early-twentieth-century American pragmatists developed concrete systems of education that would promote democratic values around the world. Indeed, for Dewey, a primary goal of education was to inculcate these values among the citizenry so that they had the "habits of mind and character" that would enable democracy to flourish.⁵

⁴ Full text available online at http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/toc_indx.html (accessed 10/27/2010).

⁵ Dewey's volume that most directly addresses this question is *Democracy and Education* (1916). Full text available online at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Democracy_and_Education (accessed 10/27/2010). Dewey spent several years living in Asia and has been highly influential in the development of political thought throughout the region. For a fascinating account of how his ideas influenced (and are influencing) Confucians, see Hall and Ames (2003).

More recent theorists are able to take advantage of advanced statistical methods and large cross-national surveys to test relationships between individual values and democratic outcomes. In his contribution to modernization theory, which posited a linear path from economic to democratic development, Seymour Lipset (1959) argued that education was the greatest predictor of democratic development. Subsequently, Almond and Verba's *Civic Culture* (1963) used the cases of five democracies (United States, Britain, Germany, Italy, and Mexico) to argue that democracies are promoted by a "civic culture" in which citizens are active and have high levels of interpersonal trust. Once again, education is found to play an important role in the transmission of this pro-democratic culture. Ronald Inglehart (1988, 1997) has also supported these findings with extensive statistical analyses based on the large World Values Survey database now spanning nearly three decades from 1980. Inglehart and others using his surveys have found strong correlations between certain values such as tolerance, interpersonal trust, and norms of equality with the endurance of political democracy.⁶

A second group of scholars concentrates more on the state in their analyses of democratization. In fact, most contemporary scholars studying the democratization process focus their efforts not on individual citizen values but rather on governmental institutions. Within this group of scholars there is one subset that is part of the "rational choice" school that examines political behavior as the collective outcome of rational choices of individual actors seeking to maximize their preferences. These rational actors, whether they are leaders or citizens, make choices within the constraints of their institutional environments. As a result, democratization is viewed as primarily a function of the institutions that structure the choices available to different political actors.

Margaret Levi (1988) has studied early democratizers from this perspective. She has argued that the democratic franchise expanded in Europe and the United States as a direct result of the desire of nondemocratic rulers to stay in power and increase their revenue. Rulers had to concede greater political power (parliamentary power and broader suffrage) to obtain citizen compliance with military drafts and cooperation with higher tax collection. Many other scholars who emphasize the importance of state institutions on the development of democracy focus their examinations on electoral systems as the fundamental institutional guarantor of representative government. Joseph Schumpeter (1942) has put forward a minimalist

⁶ Inglehart (1988, 1997).

definition of democracy as a political institutional arrangement in which leaders are selected by competitive elections.⁷ Others have examined how relatively slight modifications of the electoral system can result in significant variations in governance structures. For example, Arend Lijphart (1997) has found that countries with majoritarian (winner-take-all) electoral systems have tended to have much stronger executive branches, a two-party structure, and a contentious decision-making process that favored the majority. Countries with a proportional representation electoral system have tended to have weaker executive branches, a multiparty structure, and a consensual decision-making structure that favored minority rights.

A third group of scholars does not focus their inquiry directly on the state or society, but rather on the amorphous political and civic space between the two, civil society. Although this literature usually claims its roots in DeTocqueville's study of associations, the most recent upsurge was touched off by Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work* (1993), which argued that social capital and civic culture were the keys to making democracy work. His study of Italy found that, in spite of very similar electoral and governmental institutions, democracy worked much better (higher rates of public participation, less governmental corruption, etc.) in the north than in the south, because the former had a more democratic civic culture and higher levels of social capital than the south.

Although she takes a more state-oriented perspective, Theda Skocpol (2003) has also examined how the practices – what people are actually doing on the ground rather than merely formal institutions – of civil society have affected the quality of democracy in the United States. In particular, a shift from old-style, chapter-based federations, in which members gathered face-to-face in regular meetings, to new-style advocacy organizations, where people largely participate by sending in a check and reading a newsletter, has “diminished” political participation in the United States. Some critics have pointed out that a strong civil society does not always have a positive effect on democratic development.⁸ Thus, in addition to the design of governmental institutions and citizen values, civil society's influence on democratic development has become a rich area of research for scholars of developing countries.⁹

⁷ For an excellent account of the analytical and theoretical benefits of utilizing this minimalist definition, see Przeworski (1999).

⁸ Berman (1997) shows how a strong civil society in Weimar Germany contributed to rather than inhibited the rise of Nazism. For a more comprehensive study of civil society's influence on democratization in multiple countries, see Bermeo and Nord (2000).

⁹ See, for example, Cohen and Arato (1992), Diamond (1994), Evans (1997), McCormick et al. (1992), Norton (1995, 1996), Salamon (1999), and Toprak (1996).

One of the reasons why Japan offers such a marvelous opportunity for a theory-building case study is that these three theoretical perspectives have very different things to say about Japanese democratization. Indeed, the picture that they paint is so diverse, it is very similar to the famous allegory of the blind men who are touching different parts of an elephant and cannot recognize that they all have their hands on the same animal because what they feel is so different.

DIVERGENT PERSPECTIVES ON JAPANESE DEMOCRATIZATION

Theories of democratization have widely divergent perspectives on the development of democracy in Japan – from some perspectives it is a “most likely” case for democratic success, while for others it seems “least likely,” even impossible. In 1947, when its current constitution was adopted, it had many of the factors that have been found to support new democracies, enjoying especially high levels of education and (prior to the devastation of the war) economic development. The country also did not face many of the conditions that have been found to undermine democratization efforts, such as ethnic heterogeneity, insecure borders, and a history of colonialism.¹⁰ Thus, from a structural or contextual perspective, democracy in Japan was a likely, almost inevitable development.

Scholars who place primacy on state institutions also have a highly positive outlook toward Japanese democracy. Indeed, their story is the one most commonly told about Japanese democratization. The vastly oversimplified version goes like this: Japan lost the war in 1945. The United States gave it a democratic constitution. Japan became a democracy.

A more nuanced and historically accurate narrative begins in the nineteenth century and discusses local democracy initiatives where communities experimented with a variety of constitutions and democratic-style politics for resolving common problems. It talks about the shock effect of Commodore Perry’s arrival in the Black Ships in 1853 and the subsequent Meiji Restoration, in which a group of men banded together to restore the emperor (Meiji) to the throne and wrest power from the Shoguns. These oligarchs, along with the emperor, seeking to resist and compete with European powers, copied many aspects of their governance structures and developed the Meiji Constitution, which was promulgated in 1889.

¹⁰ For a good review of the democratization literature, see Geddes (1999).

A brief period of liberalization termed the “Taishō Democracy” occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, but it was soon repressed under rising militarization, which ultimately led to war in the Pacific. After Japan was defeated, the Allied forces, led by the Americans, wrote a new constitution for Japan that was accepted by the Diet and came into force in 1947. Japan has been a democracy ever since.

In both the short and long version of this narrative, democracy in Japan was a top-down event in which elites, either native or foreign, drafted legal documents based on Western models and established them in Japan. Indeed, many scholars, both sympathetic and critical, have characterized Japan as a “top-down democracy.”¹¹ From this institutionalist perspective, Japanese democracy was accomplished through the establishment of a new set of democratic political institutions that mimicked Western models; the process was relatively quick and the results highly successful.

Japanese democratization looks very, very different from the perspective of theories that put their emphasis more on citizen values and indigenous cultural practices. This perspective was common among the members of the Supreme Command of Allied Powers (SCAP) who were designing the document that would become the Japanese constitution. This small group of men and one woman were embarking on a highly ambitious project to create one of the first nonwhite, non-Western, non-Christian democracies. Although they were hopeful, they were also highly skeptical of their own efforts and thought the project to be merely a dream that was unlikely to succeed. As Joseph Grew, Undersecretary of State and former U.S. Ambassador to Tokyo, phrased it at the time, “from the long range point of view the best we can hope for in Japan is the development of a constitutional monarchy, experience having shown that democracy in Japan would never work.”¹²

From this vantage point, democracy in Japan was unlikely to succeed, and indeed many scholars who adopt this values perspective on democracy call into question whether even contemporary Japan is a “real” democracy. In nearly all cross-national studies of “democratic values” Japan trails the other advanced democracies because its citizens have a set of values that are often characterized as “illiberal” and “undemocratic”: Japanese remain skeptical of individual freedom, have a strong preference for social order, favor an interventionist rather than a limited government, show a reluctance

¹¹ Curtis (1988), Johnson (1995), Pempel (1982), Pyle (1992), and Yamamoto (1999).

¹² Quoted in Dower (1999, pp. 217–218).

to engage in public protest, etc.¹³ In cross-national studies, Japan is usually found at the very bottom of the advanced democracies and often mixed in with countries that are not considered democracies at all. This is true for “democratic” values as well as “democracy-promoting” values such as Inglehart and Wezel’s (2003) “self-expression” variable that is used to predict democratic outcomes. Thus, from the perspective of citizen values, it is not only highly unlikely that Japan would become a democracy but it becomes somewhat questionable whether even contemporary Japan should “count” as a democracy.

A similar conclusion is reached when one surveys the literature on civil society in Japan. Although the exceptions to this perspective are growing,¹⁴ for the most part scholars both inside and outside the country had concluded that Japan’s civil society was enormously lacking. It is not only lacking the kind of advocacy organizations that are thought to be the key to the pro-democratic effects of a robust civil society, but it has considerable institutional constraints against the proliferation of those types of organizations.¹⁵

Why does the literature on democratization come up with such very different pictures of Japanese democracy? I suggest that the foundations of all three theoretical perspectives on democratization – state institutions, citizen values, and civil society – are rooted in Euro-American philosophical and historical experiences and therefore are unlikely to be able to explain fully how democracies have come about in non-Western countries. Nor can they clearly account for the types of democracies that have formed in those societies because those governing systems represent an amalgamation of liberal democratic and indigenous political traditions.

It is precisely because conventional explanations do not fit Japan that makes it such a useful case for developing a new theory about democratization. The Japanese experience not only offers the chance to generate new ways to think about democracy, but it also offers a chance to find some answers to enduring questions related to the interaction among the theories presented. How do state institutions transform citizen values? How do new citizen values change governmental institutions? What is the role of civil society in these processes? What effect do exogenous factors such as economic growth have on these interactions? These are long-standing issues in comparative politics that reach beyond the democratization

¹³ Program, International Social Survey (1999).

¹⁴ Haddad (2007), Reimann (2009), Shipper (2008), and Takao (2007).

¹⁵ Osborne (2003), Pekkanen (2006), Schwartz and Pharr (2003), and Yamamoto (1998).

literature. Examining democratization in Japan and theorizing about how the process has and is working in that country may reveal a new perspective on democratization and offer insight into classic questions about state society–civil society political interactions.

STATE-IN-SOCIETY APPROACH TO DEMOCRATIZATION

This book uses the state-in-society approach formulated by Joel Migdal (2001; Migdal et al. 1994) to develop a new theoretical approach to the study of democratization. The state-in-society approach was first developed to help explain politics in the developing world. Frustrated by a discipline that often assumes a unitary and coherent state actor and focuses almost exclusively on formal institutional relationships, all of which are problematic assumptions when examining developing countries, Migdal developed the state-in-society approach to the study of politics. The key assumption of this approach is that states emerge from and are part of the societies in which they are situated. Thus, while states include “the image of a coherent, controlling organization in a territory, which is a representation of the people bounded by that territory,” the “actual practice of its multiple parts” may or may not be consistent with that image (Migdal 2001).¹⁶

The state-in-society approach began as an effort to understand the politics of undemocratic and developing countries, and has thus far been applied only to examine politics in those contexts.¹⁷ Indeed, neither “democracy” nor “democratization” is even indexed in his book *State in Society* (2001), where Migdal offers the most developed version of his theoretical approach. Although it was not its original purpose, the state-in-society approach has many elements that can, once further developed, be very helpful in explaining the apparent paradoxes revealed in explanations of Japanese democracy. This book uses Migdal’s state-in-society approach as the basis for a new theoretical approach to democratization. This approach, I argue, is better suited for explaining the process of democratization, especially those found in non-Western contexts, than other theoretical approaches currently available.

The state-in-society approach conceptualizes the state as embedded in rather than independent from its society. In this way it is similar to Sven

¹⁶ Migdal (2001, p. 16).

¹⁷ See Migdal et al. (1994) for an edited volume where contributors use this approach; single-authored books that use the approach include Moustafa (2009) and Smith (2007).