CHAPTER FOUR

SHAKAI

This chapter explores the permeations on Japanese collective consciousness of a concept and reality that we now recognize as “society” (shakai). Even more so than with the previous chapter, some explanation may be warranted as to why the concept of society figures so prominently in an intellectual history of nationalism. This is especially the case when many historians of Japan, particularly since the end of World War II, write as though “society” were not merely an entirely different matter than nationalism but even a prophylactic against the infectious spread of nationalism. Society—and building on that concept, socialism—is supposed to provide an alternative to the hierarchical, oppressive ideology which they associate with “nationalism”: the more of one, the less of the other, or so we are told. In most cases, this argument is not so much wrong as it is ambiguous, or at least under-articulated. To conclude that “society” and “the nation” are at loggerheads depends greatly on how both concepts of society and nation are conceived and understood. Usually, the claim that society and nation are at odds rests on an implicit understanding of “nation” as interchangeable with the state (kokka) and society as a rather undifferentiated mass of “the people” conceived in opposition to the state. When understood in these terms, the argument about “state versus society” has more than a certain ring of veracity to it. But at the same time, to the extent that “society” refers to the Japanese people as a whole, it is deeply entrenched in the appeal of nationalism as an ideology that upholds the people as the sole legitimate subject of politics. Consequently, while society may be mobilized at times against the state, it may also act in parallel with the nation (e.g., “the nation against the state”) to the point that society and nation can become all but indistinguishable. For that reason, at the very least, a sustained look at the manner in which society was represented and mobilized in modern Japanese history is necessary when delineating the contours of nationalism and its effort to place the people in modern political arrangements.
Before turning to the historical details of how society (shakai) came to be conceived in modern Japan, it is useful to get a broader view of the relationship of society and the nation as a generic problem of modernity. Most social theorists agree that society is a distinctively modern phenomenon and one that is reproduced in the modernity of sociology, the discipline that takes society as its object of study. Anthony Giddens is no exception, and his analysis of the relationship of society and nation is good place to start:

Authors who regard sociology as the study of ‘societies’ have in mind the societies associated with modernity. Now, understood in this way, ‘societies’ are plainly nation-states. Yet, although a sociologist speaking of a particular society might casually employ instead the terms ‘nation,’ or ‘country,’ the character of the nation-state is rarely directly theorized. In explicating the nature of modern societies, we have to capture the specific characteristics of the nation-state—a type of social community which contrasts in a radical way with pre-modern states.1

Because Giddens’s primary concern is not with the nation per se, but with what he calls a “post-modernity” that evokes new, more globalized arrangements of power, his failure to distinguish the particular features of nation-states from nations and states need not detain us here. Rather, what is important is his indication of how sociologists often refer to the nation as a functional equivalent of society, and how this national society is distinct from earlier kinds of societies. Giddens accepts the interchangeability of society and nation (even if he generalizes all nations as “nation-states”), arguing that “modern societies (nation-states), in some respects at any rate, have a clearly defined boundedness.”2 This emphasis on “boundedness” gives Giddens the opening to correlate nation with state, and thus to equate modern societies with this bounded “nation-state.”

But even for specialists in political theory who generally recognize a distinction between nation and state, society is often both new to the modern era and deeply enmeshed in the logic of the nation. Ernest Gellner is perhaps the most influential theorist in this regard, having proposed his famous theorem that nations are the products of a shift from agrarian to industrial society. In contrast to Giddens, Gellner’s theory is not so much a spatially determined one as an internal, procedural one: nations result from internal changes (educational,  

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2 Giddens, 14.