THE EMPEROR AND THE LEFT IN INTERWAR JAPAN

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Introduction

When we contemplate the nature of the relationship between the left and the emperor between the two world wars in Japan, logic suggests that this is a simple matter. Surely the left, comprised of communists and socialists, would implacably be opposed to the imperial institution, its ideology and its institutionalization in the form of the Emperor System. According to Marxist-Leninist theory, the overthrow of the monarchy was an essential precursor to the advent of socialist revolution. Indeed, an absolutist monarchy (as opposed to a constitutional monarchy) was an obstacle to the intermediate stage of bourgeois-democratic revolution. Accordingly, the abolition of the Emperor System was a stated priority for Japan’s first communist party that was formed in 1922.¹

Historians present the experience of the left during this period principally as a time of oppression of the left for ‘thought crimes’ against the emperor, and of imprisonment and coercion leading to recantation and apostasy (tenkō) in the early 1930s. And yet, it was not so simple. When addressing the interwar period in Japan, intriguing problems disturb the tidiness of this logic. One of these problems involves understanding the theoretical and emotional twists and turns that led to Japan’s version of national socialism, whereby socialism and the emperor were theoretically reconciled.² A second problem is the stark and acrimonious differentiation that arose between two core streams of intellectual activists on the left during this period.

The so-called Kōza (Lecture) and Rōnō (Labor-Farmer) schools of Japanese Marxism differed in fundamental ways on the direction


revolutionary strategy should take in Japan. This debate arose because each school read differently the nature of Japan’s modern socio-economic development, and the contemporary reality in Japan. The theoretical and tactical consequences of this interpretative split were profound: was Japan ready for a bourgeois-democratic revolution, or a socialist revolution? Was the 1868 Meiji Restoration a bourgeois-democratic revolution, or was it an example of ‘incomplete modernity’? Who was the immediate enemy of the proletariat: the emperor or the bourgeoisie? What was the substance of Japan’s imperialism and fascism, if pre-modernity was part of the equation?

Addressing these issues involved a forensic theoretical examination of the development of Japanese capitalism and its social consequences during and following the Meiji era. The Kōza theorists argued that the emperor was a significant component of the feudal, authoritarian entities that oppressed Japan’s proletariat, and performed a significant negative ideological role that continued to prevent a bourgeois-democratic revolution in the 1920s and 1930s. This theoretical conclusion attracted brutal attention from the Thought Police, invited swift repression and censorship, and ultimately forced the appearance of compliance upon Kōza Marxists. The Rōnō school theorists on the other hand regarded the emperor as incidental to the thrust of capitalist development in modern Japan post-1868, and apparently extended this judgment to the ideological dimension of the Emperor System.

As a result of this theoretical split, the Rōnō group left the Japan Communist Party (JCP) in 1927, and soon thereafter began to describe themselves as ‘non-communist party Marxists.’ Consequently, the Rōnō Marxists were left in relative peace by the authorities until much later than their Kōza counterparts (until the late 1930s), a fact that continued to poison relations amongst the left in postwar Japan as Kōza-type leftists brooded upon and reproached their fellow leftists for these disparate interwar fates. Some have even blamed the interwar Rōnō group for deliberately altering their attitude toward the emperor in order to remove themselves from the line of fire and switch the attention of the authorities toward the Kōza group in an act of shameless self-preservation. Uchida Jōkichi and Nakano Jirō are typically harsh in

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