"COMMUNALISM" IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to make a contribution to comparative history at the level of interpretative concepts. The argument is that the concept of "communalism" provides a lens that is useful for the examination of Japanese history, even as the application of the concept to Japanese material discloses questions that might usefully be pursued by historians of communalism in Europe. In its original historiographical setting (Upper Germany in the late medieval and early modern periods), the concept was put forward as a way of describing how rural and urban communities developed a corporate character and were thus able to take over "state" functions on the local level, such as the making of ordinances, the administration of justice, and preservation of the peace. For purposes of comparison with Upper Germany, this essay focusses on Central Japan.

One similarity between the two regions may be seen in the way villages were formed. Both in Europe during the High Middle Ages and in Japan during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, changes in the agrarian economy and in rural settlement patterns provided the background for the appearance of village communities. In both areas the fixed peasant household was a foundation stone of the emerging village. While the concept of communalism stresses the importance for Upper Germany of the village assembly of householders, together with the village council and village court, research on Japanese villages has emphasized the importance of cultic associations and the functional division of villagers into age-group associations. Despite such internal divisions, village government in Japan also had a basis in the community as a whole. As in Upper Germany, a vigorous communal organization developed in medieval Japanese villages. It was the community that controlled the "state functions," so important to the proponents of the communalism thesis, as well as certain economic and religious functions. The corporate activity of Central Japanese villages was, in fact, even more impressive than their Upper German counterparts, for in Japan the village could also function—unlike in Germany—as a community of fighting men defending their collective interests with military means. The strong position of Japanese villages was due not least to the upper stratum of village society, which during the wars of the sixteenth century separated itself more and more from ordinary villagers and approximated the status of the warrior estate (samurai). These rural warriors also formed regional associations that transcended village boundaries. In Japan there were no parliaments or representative assemblies at the territorial level, as in Europe and especially in Upper Germany, where village communities often had a voice in such bodies. By contrast, villages in Central Japan formed the basis for regional federations entered into by the warrior upper stratum of village society and the local nobility. These associations represented, in sixteenth-century Japan, a counterpart to the state building efforts of territorial princes.

In sum, the village communities of Central Japan and of Upper Germany have a number of features in common that seem adequately to be described by the concept of communalism. By the same token, the distinctive characteristics of village life in Japan—the segmentation into age groupings, the military enterprises of the villages, and a militarized upper stratum building networks across village lines—raise questions that deserve further examination by historians of village communities in Europe.

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When comparing two different cultures, one inevitably encounters the problem of interpretive terms. It is advisable to make use of heuristic instruments or concepts, but one must simultaneously be aware that the choice or definition of a conceptual term is necessarily related to traditions of research within which the concept has been located. On the other hand, the application of a concept faces epistemological challenges. The best way to overcome such difficulties may be to construct an ideal type, a clear imaginary elaboration that defines the character of a phenomenon. The concept of “communalism” used in this essay is conceived as such an ideal type. The term has been coined with reference to documentary materials relating to “Upper Germany” in order to provide a vivid abstraction of political and social aspects of “real” late medieval and early modern communities. The study will attempt to apply this concept to “Central Japanese” history with a twofold aim. First, the concept gives one a lens for comparing villages systematically. Differences and similarities in the function and development of communities in “Central Japan” and “Upper Germany” can be isolated and presented for further discussion. Second, the concept itself is to be considered as a subject of debate. Its application to Japanese materials may raise questions and point to possibilities for further differentiation of the concept.

Just as the communalism thesis was formulated with particular reference to “Upper Germany” (south-western Germany, Switzerland, and western Austria), this essay will concentrate on “Central Japan,” the Kinai region and its surrounding provinces (Kinai kingoku). Timewise, the focus will be on what customarily has been called Japan’s (late) Middle Ages, the Muromachi (1333-1467) and the Sengoku (1467-1600) periods. For many regions of Europe, from the period of the High Middle Ages to the end of the Old Empire (1300-1800), the term “communalism” has been treated as applying to urban and rural communities. In this essay the term will be used for Europe only inso-

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1 This is emphasized in Brunner’s discussion of the concept of feudalism: see Otto Brunner, “Feudalismus: Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte,” in Otto Brunner, Neue Wege der Sozial- und Verfassungsgeschichte (Göttingen, 1968), 128-159; the background of the concept of “communalism” is discussed in Themen kommunaler Ordnung in Europa, ed. Peter Bückle (München, 1996).
