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# Japan's Road to Political Paralysis: A Democratic Hope Mislaid

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I met Masao Maruyama just once in my life, but the circumstances were exceptionally fortunate; and the impression left by the meeting remains indelible—as vivid now as it was over eighteen years ago. The occasion itself was an afternoon and evening in a handsome house in a Tokyo suburb, with the light fading over its elegant garden, in the company of two couples, the husband of one a long-time colleague and friend of Maruyama's in the Law Faculty at Todai, and the husband of the other, a somewhat younger man, a Todai pupil of each a quarter of a century earlier, and a close friend of my own, from a decade beforehand, on the other side of the world. The conversation, exclusively of course for my benefit, was wholly in English, and the occasion as a whole was very much a kindness to me (though not one of which at the time I fully took in the scale). It was my first visit to Japan; and I was full of the excitement of it, a month or so on in the trip, and thrilled to be in such warm and relaxed company. We did not talk about politics at all, as I remember—it seems culpably feckless in retrospect for me at least to have failed to do so, though it was a far from momentous or dynamic period in Japan's post war political history at the time. And perhaps more oddly, given that all four of the males were historians of political theory by profession, we barely mentioned academic concerns or activities. Instead we ate deliciously, and drank moderately, and talked of travel and literature and music, and what it is like for an ignorant foreigner to come to Japan for the first time, and what particularly they should try to carry away with them. It was a very happy occasion for me; and the memory of it is every bit as happy now as it was then (even if I do feel a bit abashed not to have made more intelligent and less self-indulgent use of it).

When I think about it now (at the time I didn't really think about it—I just enjoyed it) what strikes me is how remarkable it was for two such very distinguished and serious men to be prepared to devote so much of their time (and in one instance of his wife's time too) to doing what must have been very much a favor to a younger friend, and to lavish so much warmth and energy on the not especially rewarding object of that friend's personal kindness. I find it very hard to imagine an occasion with the same structure taking place in Britain; and, although it's a trifle graceless to say so here on this occasion, I find it fairly difficult to imagine one with quite the same structure taking place even in the United States. It was, I now see on reflection, an extremely Japanese occasion, and one that casts an altogether more flattering light on that deep, strange, enormously idiosyncratic society and culture than most travelers' tales contrive to capture. When I remember it now, though, what strikes me is quite different—not a matter of very possibly misinterpreted judgment, or exaggerated and precarious inference, but of still vividly present experience. What I remember is Maruyama's face and intonation as he spoke, the quicksilver glitter and motility of his conversation, the speed and grace of his gestures, the brightness of his smiles, the gaiety and momentum of his stories and vignettes. It was clear that every one else in the house felt great affection for him and keenly admired him. It was also clear that, like me, each of them for the time was just enjoying immensely the pleasure of being with him. That sort of radiant charm you meet perhaps two or three times in a long life; and I doubt if I've ever seen it matched, and am certain that I've never seen it surpassed. I'm sure that it must have been one of the keys to the extraordinary position that he occupied in Japan in the years following the war, and confident too, as at least a renegade historian of ideas myself, that the direct impact of the personality in this way is beyond the technical resources of any historian to capture (let alone any social scientist) (1). I cannot tell for myself how far that intense charm shines through his writing in Japanese. But it is clear enough that, insofar as it does, it certainly fails to carry to his anglophone translators. To grasp why he held such an extraordinary position in the public mind of Japan in those years is not a task for me–very much one I must leave to Andrew Barshay. But I hope I have conveyed what a keen personal pleasure it is to have the chance to speak in Maruyama's honor, and why I draw a modicum of courage from the sense that I have seen for myself how he might have won such a position, even if I cannot begin to explain just why he did. Very briefly, and quite long ago, I have been under the spell myself, even if I could not begin to fathom how it was cast so widely three and half decades earlier still.

Japan, since the crucial intervention of General MacArthur, has been a representative democracy (Dower 2000). In those early postwar years, Maruyama was, as Andrew Barshay admirably put it, the "preeminent imaginer of democracy in postwar Japan" (Barshay 1992: 365-66). The democracy that he imagined was very different from the democracy that in fact ensued. But the latter, for all its evident and stolid distance from Maruyama's hopes and ideals, proved to suit many of Japan's population exceedingly well for at least twenty-five of the intervening years—from perhaps the early 1960s up to the penultimate phase of the bubble economy. It took Japan from postwar ruin and devastation, and very high levels of anxiety and confusion diffused virtually throughout the population (Dower 2000), through an extraordinary passage of economic growth, up to a point at which the peculiarities of Japan, both as a state form and as a society, were seriously canvassed as cosmopolitan models of developmental prowess—uniquely effective mechanisms for the pursuit of wealth and power (Johnson 1982; Dore 1987).

In itself, this was certainly a triumph through democracy; but it is not necessary to espouse all of Maruyama's initial hopes to doubt that it was altogether a triumph for democracy. And many of the greatest enthusiasts for the growth pathway itself, and for the widespread popular prosperity that resulted from it, clearly attributed each not to the democratic character of the political medium through which either was achieved, but instead to the steady and effective distancing of key economic choices and continuing sites of economic power and privilege from the fitful and immediate whims of the demos itself (Johnson 1982). The mechanism for securing that distance was not a formal constitutional separation of powers or a hegemonic ideology of anti-utilitarian public service or personal asceticism. It was not a tightly integrated and authoritarian party of government, firmly earning the right to rule by repeated electoral victories against a range of less plausibly representative contenders. Instead it was an immense series of more than somewhat opaque and heavily context-dependent bargains within the ranks of an elaborately factionalized single national party, and still more, a confident and corporately well insulated public bureaucracy, with a long pedigree behind it, and a striking continuing comparative advantage, by contrast with other would-be sites of political agency in Japan, over the cognitive resources required for effective policy making (Curtis 2000; Johnson 1982).

Today, almost a decade since the boom came to its humiliating end, many of these structures look very different. There is no guarantee that the gap in

semblances is any more accurate an index of the realities that underlie them than the mood of the bubble's closing years proved to be. But there is today, by common consent, a very low level of popular confidence in the efficacy of Japanese career politicians or public bureaucrats as a whole, a distinctly lower respect for the probity at least of the latter, and severe and far from unreasonable misgivings among a great many as to what the future holds for Japan's rapidly aging population. It is not hard to see why this should now be so; but it is far harder to explain why it has become so. Just why should the process of political adjustment to Japan's precipitously reduced circumstances have taken quite so long? How can we judge who exactly is to blame for its having done so, let alone see which political agencies or social forces in Japan at present plausibly possess the power to carry that adjustment to a clear and steadily effective outcome? Paralysis may seem too strong a term, or too loose a metaphor to be at all instructive. But I think it is clear by now that it is at least a reasonable assessment; and there is little doubt that the site of the paralysis, if paralysis it is, is in politics itself.

By now that paralysis clearly involves not merely the loan registers of the country's banks, their often far from creditworthy debtors and hapless shareholders, but also at a bare minimum the career politicians of the LDP, and at least intermittently of most of the other parties of any scale and continuity, as well as the leading public officials of a number of key ministries, above all the Ministry of Finance. However undemocratic some aspects of it may always have been (and very much remain), since Japan today is in a straightforward sense a representative democracy, this lengthy and unexhilarating debacle has certainly been a collective failure through democracy; and to that degree, if no other, it must have been (and very much still is) a failure of and for democracy.

I wish to ask who exactly is to blame for this predicament, who is responsible for which aspects of it, why exactly it has come about, and what exactly its having done so through formally democratic institutions, and quite largely through legally valid procedures, and in sites which are in no way insulated or authoritarian, can show us about democracy today. Our answer to the last question is likely to depend heavily on how we ourselves see democracy in the first place. Do we see it from the outside, as a complex of interconnected institutions, or do we try to see it in effect from within, as a vaguely specified format through which we or others can hope to act collectively for the better? In a justly

celebrated article Thomas Nagel once asked his readers (or perhaps in the first place it was his listeners): "What is it like to be a bat?" (Nagel 1979 )—a question plainly not expecting a humanly audible answer. Students of politics today divide fiercely over the question of whether it is epistemically indispensable (or indeed even coherently possible) to see democracy the second way, or whether the first, the view from the outside, is the only clear perspective inherently available. For them the question "What is it like to be a democrat?" must either be irrelevant, facetious, or terminally confused. Professor Maruyama himself was an enormously fastidious, and by contemporary California standards in some ways an extravagantly politically incorrect intellectual. But he was also, famously, an imaginative and eloquent champion of democracy in extremely dark times, and sometimes pretty dark places, and not merely the deepest intellectual historian of Japan in his generation (or even epoch), but also a profound student and grateful beneficiary of the great German philosophical tradition that still offers the deepest modern intellectual exploration of the human force and meaning both of idealist and of materialist philosophy. From these diverse, centrifugal, and potentially, as we all know now, very far from democratic sources, and in some tension with prominent aspects of his own sensibility and perhaps even intelligence, he drew a powerful commitment to democracy as a political cause and a political aspiration. To hold these loyalties together he needed to conceive democracy, and did in fact conceive it, energetically from both viewpoints: you could say, as a political scientist, and as a democrat, a passionate, active and courageous participant. Of course, to conceive democracy from either viewpoint is no guarantee of seeing it accurately, and to try to see it from both, and then make sense of what one sees, is a punishing endeavor.

If you accept provisionally that it is illuminating to think of Japan at present as politically paralyzed (a verdict I shall defend in a moment), it will certainly follow that its paralysis has been a failure of and for democracy as Maruyama imagined it in the decade following the war. But it will not be immediately clear who or what is to blame for that failure. Is it the demos as a whole, the adult population of Japan at the polls along the way, or watching politics more or less desultorily from a prudent distance? Is it the democrats among them, its confused or timid partisans, the indolent, cowardly, or selfish citizens who might have participated so much more, or to such strikingly better effect, if only they had mustered the nerve, or wit, or decency to do so? Is it the torpid or pusillanimous