

Fukuzawa, Ueki, and Kato on Civilization and Social Darwinism

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Final Essay

Civilization is like a thin layer of ice upon a deep ocean of chaos and darkness.

Werner Herzog

Ideas shape our world; they are like an invisible force always in motion, driving and directing our world toward an unknown future. Human beings have an unbridled urge to look forward in time and speculate and imagine. This ability to look into the future and have a sense of loss makes us unusually unique among other species. Just like many ideas that shaped the course of human history, Darwinism is the single greatest idea that ever came to a human being. It affected and spread in every corner of the world, loved and disgusted, embraced and rejected, but never ceased to startle our minds. Something similar was happening in Japan in the second half of the 19th century. One thinker, Fukuzawa Yukichi, proposed a theory of civilization that heavily influenced Ueki Emori's conception of Popular Rights and Kato Hiroyuki's understanding of [Social Darwinism](#).

The theory of civilization, popular rights, and social Darwinism journey towards one end, the dead end of imperialism, the so-called enlightenment, and racism. The notion of enlightenment (or the white man's burden, as Rudyard Kipling put it in his beautiful poem) and civilization is a very Western conception in its nature and appearance. For instance, at one stage, Yukichi's conception of civilization seems to lead its reader into a postmodern paradox of relativity that, in return, lets the reader lost in a sense of ambiguity. One can claim that in *An Outline of the Theory of Civilization*, Yukichi was preaching Western achievements in terms of civilization, enlightenment, and, most of all, the imitation of Western Imperialism, highly racist and inhuman in nature and self-referentially paradoxical in nature because, in an attempt to civilize, they took the most barbaric measures that human beings have ever witnessed. At one point, he states his disgust for the working class. He quotes:

"The upper class had the requisite time to cultivate virtue and knowledge while the lower class seemed solely concerned with money and sensual pleasures" (p. 222)

In *An Outline of the Theory of Civilization*, the style of the author is priggish and preachy. Yukichi was not a university professor but a popular writer and one of the 500 wealthiest families in Tokyo. He was trying to find his own words for the philosophy of enlightenment of the Western liberals, as Michael Rieger states in his column;

“As new ideas and concepts flooded into Japan following its opening to the West, many Japanese [confronted] the problem of creating their own words for them.”

In his famous editorial ‘Leave Asia,’ he directed Japan to reject its old ways of living and embrace the Western ways of living and behaving by rejecting their centuries-old customs. One can even sense an encouragement of imperialism, the like of ‘white’s man burden’ to civilize people. Also, there is a sense of puritanism and moral superiority wrapped in the idea of Darwinism and natural selection, which is shallow and misleading as he claims it to be the natural way of working in the world. Due to these propagandist endeavors, he was cherished by the Government officials. He postulates three stages of progress in human history, ‘primitive,’ ‘semi-civilized,’ and ‘civilized.’ Now, here we would face many problems regarding the nature of these stages that pretend to be a natural phenomenon while, in fact, systematically designed. It suffers from the age-old philosophical dilemmas of free will and determinism. For example, at one point, his uncertain use of the term ‘civilization’ suggests that the social institutions are like actors like agents of will, while on the other hand, at another point of the book, the metaphor is inverted and called as an ocean where institutions flow and thirdly, it is like a ‘warehouse’ that contains everything for society and it must be bought at any cost even at the expanse of evil. By the end of the book, he turns towards nationalism and national polity. Furthermore, the book starts with a song of enlightenment and ends with a Machiavellian conception of the world.

“When it comes to relations between one country and another, only two things count: in times of peace, exchange goods and compete with one another for profit; in times of war, take up arms and kill each other. To put it another way, the present world is a world of commerce and warfare.... War is the art of extending the rights of independent governments, and trade is a sign that one country radiates its light to another” (p. 234-35).

Nonetheless, the man highly praised the Western liberals and had read their works where liberty, justice, and enlightenment were the core ideas criticized by the artists of that time, including Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Zola, Hardy, and many more due to their reductive and pretentious nature. His urgent obsession with civilization and his imposed systems to achieve it are questionable due to the general scheme of our universe and its unpredictable nature. As my opening quote suggests, civilization is a thin layer, and under this layer, there is chaos and disorder inherently present from time immemorial.

As I have summarized the main postulates and the central idea of Fukuzawa Yukichi’s book, we are now in a better position to understand his influence on his contemporaries and their ideas and movements. Ueki Emori, a Japanese revolutionary democrat inspired by Fukuzawa Yukichi, attended his lectures and absorbed his ideology, which has its background in the works of the famous thinkers of the Western Enlightenment of the 18th century, which was filled with positivism and progress.

Popular Right Movement was an active movement against the monarchy and oligarchy of the time of the Meiji government, yet it had segregation and racist undertones as it operated on the principle of

civilizing the people through Western liberal philosophies adopted by Fukuzawa and Uek. The influence was so obvious that almost everything running in this movement had its roots in Fukuzawa's writings, followed by the doctrine of Fukuzawa's enlightenment philosophy of civilization as the ultimate goal of human existence. The first principle of the Popular Rights Movement was to enlighten the subservient minds of the commoners into active and useful individuals who actually reflect their disgust for the people while they consider them foolish and ignorant. The same reflection has been seen in Fukuzawa's 'An Outline of the Theory of Civilization.'

Furthermore, the idea of the survival of the fittest was adopted by the movement, and the writings of Herbert Spencer were read among those circles and discussed in meetings. The participants were rich farmers and intellectuals of the time. The writings of Jeremy Bentham and J.S Mills were read among those circles. Hence, one can see the same inspiration Western thought had for this movement, which was first adopted by Fukuzawa and then, through his works and lectures, transformed into Ueki Emori, which made a mantra for the Popular Rights Movement. The influence is evident on many levels, first, the idea of enlightenment, second, a disgust for the masses, and third, the Western liberals as a source of inspiration for the movement. But most of all, the parallel is more evident considering the idea of the protection of an individual's liberty and happiness; the popular rights movement operated on the same principle laid by Fukuzawa in the Theory of Civilization.

Similarly, like Fukuzawa and Ueki Emori, Katō Hiroyuki was the educator and political leader of the Meiji Enlightenment. Apart from the general shifts in his political and moral thought, by the end of 1880, he began to advocate Social Darwinism, and the skeptical nature of human norms and values developed in the pre-scientific era are no more believable, and science has proved them fictitious and unreliable. The truth about human nature is biological, and through science, one can know the deep truths about human nature and behavior. Social Darwinism was regarded as a purely scientific account of human conduct back in the second half of the 19th century. One can even claim that it was social Darwinism that shaped the 1st half of the 20th century, and many claims that it was social Darwinism that led Hitler to six million Jews in order to build a pure Aryan race that operated on the principle of natural selection and the survival of the fittest. As we have already seen, Fukuzawa's theory of civilization was ambiguous in its conception of the nature of natural events; a parallel can be found in the general scheme of both thinkers. For instance, the idea of the nation as a collective spirit is parallel to Kato's social Darwinism. In other words, the three stages that were posited by Fukuzawa to reach civilization are the way how evolution operates, according to Kato. For Kato, the primitive human had to survive due to his physical fitness, while the modern human being had to survive through his mental fitness. Hence, physical evolution has stopped, or maybe it is very slow, but mental evolution is still in progress. Therefore, the survival of the fittest is a universal necessity, according to Kato, and the Japanese nation has to take into account everything that comes their way towards survival and civilization. So far, so good; now, here are some of the dire consequences that follow this radical approach, including imperialism, racism, war, and moral conundrums. Like Fukuzawa, Kato shares the same hatred towards the working class, as he states the following;

"Uneducated and ignorant masses cause trouble and threaten the elites, not because they are

mentally superior, but precisely because they are weak. They are easily seduced into temporary insurrection by unscrupulous leaders. They are never able to gain sufficient power to decisively influence events in society for a very long period.”

Kato

The influence is obvious on Kato’s conception of social Darwinism embedded in the idea of the theory of civilization by Fukuzuwa; for both thinkers, evolution, and civilization operate on the same principle of the survival of the fittest.

These ideas lead to the death and exploitation of millions of indigenous people during the course of the so called enlightenment and imperial brutalities, the Japanese imitated the Western colonial powers and colonized the Ainu Mosir, the indigenous tribes of hunters and gatherers. The three thinkers tried to generate the modern myth of evolutionary progress that the ultimate goal of human existence is to achieve modernization through personally cultivated means and processes mistaken as natural events. The 20th century would have to pay a heavy price for this kind of theory, like Social Darwinism and the Theory of Civilization, as human history witnessed a single massive violation of human rights; it fills one’s heart with sorrow to think of the blood that was spilled in order to civilize the innocent Indigenous people from all over the world. It is another skimpy attempt by human beings to control nature and its mysterious workings.

“The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to...”

Joseph Conrad

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