

**FROM FUKUZAWA TO BLAUT:  
ON THE ORIGINS OF JAPANESE EUROCENTRISM**

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**Fukuzawa and Eurocentric History**

Modern history has brought grand debates over the nature and interaction of civilizations across the globe – civilizations that are increasingly tied closer and closer to one another through social, political, and economic structures. The longstanding and apparently prevailing dominance of European civilization – “The West” – has spawned a vast wealth of academic discourse on the reasons contributing to, and justifications for, Western dominance, including the merits of the deep ideological principles of its societies. Such discourse then, by virtue of its meaning both for intellectuals and common people everywhere, has a profound and enduring effect on the development of relations on individual and international levels.

Without a doubt, those who “write” history feel a heavy burden of moral responsibility. The question to be asked is this: Do historians feel a moral obligation to redeem the past? Or, is the burden some slight acknowledgment of the gradual but grave consequences of written history to which all historians are accountable? If, indeed, historians can be granted even a modicum of intellectual credit, Eurocentric history, now widely charged as polemical, self-aggrandizing, and false, has been championed under the banner of world history by scholars who recognize the implications of what they have written. How valid is the claim that Eurocentrism’s grievous influence has reached far beyond history departments to construct the very foundations of racism and color the world with social and cultural pariahs? Regardless of the impossibility of a quantitative answer, such a question warrants earnest investigation.

Eurocentric discourse, while customarily and understandably self-perpetuating, may be found – seldom as it is – among sophisticated and influential intellectuals of cultures originally foreign to the European mold. Perhaps the most outstanding of these intellectuals is the formidable Japanese scholar, Fukuzawa Yukichi, whose career during the nineteenth century provided a philosophical outlook arguably unparalleled in scope and depth among his contemporaries in Asia. His revolutionary persistence for independence from governmental interference pervaded Japanese

academic culture, and helped spur the Meiji Restoration. He urged his fellow countrymen to cast aside the shackles of old customs and practices, and sought to introduce pragmatic solutions to social issues. At the same time, he opposed the possibility of a pan-Asian movement that would tie Japan down with traditional ways. He saw, instead, the prospects of a civilized Japan linked to the Western world.

This essay relates Fukuzawa's earlier work with the notion of Eurocentrism and its diffusion, and interpreting within this framework Fukuzawa's spirit of independence and his ideological acceptance of the curse of imbalance. In his earlier work, Fukuzawa approaches the analysis of Japan by writing specifically for a Japanese audience. Nevertheless, his analysis is one that advances an empirical acknowledgement of the spirit of independence, from which European ideological supremacy is derived. In many ways, it is oddly enough his belief in Europe's supremacy that motivates him to write for his countrymen.

### **Blaut's Definition of Eurocentrism**

From the outset, it is necessary to define and discuss the concept of Eurocentrism. While his central thesis imposes conspicuous overtones of moral and rational objections to Eurocentric thought, J. M. Blaut's monumental work, *The Colonizer's Model of the World*, provides a useful context for understanding the term. In concise fashion, Blaut writes that Eurocentrism "is a label for all the beliefs that postulate past or present superiority of Europeans over non-Europeans," noting crucially that these beliefs are statements about empirical reality supported by the supposed facts.<sup>1</sup> While Blaut eschews refuting directly the factual arguments of European scholars, he challenges them on an indirect level. Along with other scholars, he claims that the acceptance of empirical facts in the social sciences often is unrelated to evidence.

Consequently, his conclusion is that Eurocentrism is a unique set of beliefs that constitutes the "intellectual and scholarly rationale for one of the most powerful social interests of the European elite"<sup>2</sup> with the designed purpose and upshot of "justifying and assisting Europe's colonial activities," or what Blaut calls the "colonizer's model of the world."

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<sup>1</sup> J.M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: Guilford, 1993), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

*Difficulties and Assumptions*

One difficulty we can anticipate is Blaut's failure to propose an unambiguous method of diagnosing the empirical qualities of Eurocentric beliefs. Since this essay will be looking at empirical defects in Fukuzawa's arguments, as Blaut suggests must be done, assessing the empirical qualities of Fukuzawa's ideas will be problematic, yet will offer much insight.

Possibly because Fukuzawa is Japanese, and is writing for a Japanese audience, it may be that he is automatically disqualified from being Eurocentric, since he is "non-European" in a traditional, ethnic sense. However, in Fukuzawa's case, a Eurocentric approach would not be obviated merely because he is writing for the betterment of his native land. It is likely that his intention is not to assist Europe's colonial pursuits; nevertheless, if he advocates beliefs and empirical facts that postulate Europe's superiority he is, regardless of intention, justifying in no insignificant degree Blaut's upshot of Eurocentrism.

Notice that Fukuzawa's principles must supersede his ethnicity in the consideration of a Eurocentric belief. To affirm this further, observe that Japan is, as Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen write, "physically and culturally rooted in what used to be considered the extreme East."<sup>3</sup> It should be implicit then, that if Fukuzawa really is Eurocentric, Blaut's notion of the "colonizer's model of the world" must be able to transcend geographic and cultural boundaries, assuming universal applicability where the prerequisite is ideological conformity, the potential of which is inherent in everyone.

*Diffusionism Introduced*

Blaut's interpretation of diffusionism is also useful in fostering an understanding of Eurocentrism, and how Fukuzawa can be understood in these terms. On the subject of cultural change, Blaut notes that change can be a product of an invention within the community, that is, it can be independently achieved. Otherwise, Blaut observes, a change will be the result of an idea that enters into the community, the idea having originated elsewhere. The second process is known as diffusion. Blaut makes two comments: Diffusionists believe that most humans are imitators, not inventors, and diffusionists are elitists who mostly claim that "only certain

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<sup>3</sup> Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen, *Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), p. 51.

select communities are inventive” and that there are “permanent centers of invention and innovation.”<sup>4</sup>

### Japan in Context

For Fukuzawa, Japan exists within the context of Europe. He believes that Japan must look abroad for solutions to domestic problems of stagnation, and he laments its compulsion to do so. He writes that the “trend today is to compare things in our country with those of foreign countries,”<sup>5</sup> with the aim of gleaning knowledge that might nudge Japan in the right direction. In comparison with the West, Fukuzawa is vehement in admonishing the Japanese, and in still harsher and bolder language, the Chinese and Koreans for their uncultured and barbaric ways. His work is littered with such remarks. He ruminates that the Japanese “seem to lack the kind of motivation that ought to be standard equipment in human nature. We have sunk to the depths of stagnation.”<sup>6</sup>

Fukuzawa contemplates Japan’s suffering, blaming the 250 years of Tokugawa rule in which “there were so few people in this country who accomplished any great [work]” on the lack of independent spirit.<sup>7</sup> He writes, “A spirit of independence has never existed in even the slightest degree [in Japan].”<sup>8</sup> Of the Chinese and Koreans, Fukuzawa is unrestrained: Both “will be wiped out from the world with their lands divided among the civilized nations.”<sup>9</sup> For Fukuzawa, it is akin to “a righteous man living in a neighborhood of a town known for foolishness, lawlessness, atrocity, and heartlessness.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Fukuzawa is intent on following “the manner of the Westerners in knowing how to treat” the Chinese and Koreans.<sup>11</sup> Conceivably, Fukuzawa is referring to the Opium Wars between China and Britain, and China’s capitulation in 1843 with the Treaty of Nanjing.

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<sup>4</sup> Blaut, *The Colonizer’s Model of the World*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Fukuzawa Yukichi, “Japanese Enlightenment and Saying Good-Bye to Asia,” *Japan, A Documentary History 2* (1997), p. 347.

<sup>6</sup> Fukuzawa Yukichi, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization* (Tokyo: Sophia University Press, 1973), p. 160.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>9</sup> Fukuzawa, “Japanese Enlightenment,” p. 352.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

*Diffusionism and the Spirit of Independence*

In Fukuzawa's earlier work, he articulates his belief that the essence of his country, and that of the rest of Asia, lacks the "spirit of independence among men"<sup>12</sup> and consequently suffers in terms of progress. In the West, this spirit is prevalent, contends Fukuzawa, and fosters independent invention. He laments that, although Japan has embarked on a journey of outward restoration, the Japanese people have not developed the ability, characteristic of Western societies, for independent progress and innovation.<sup>13</sup> He is illustrating that the development he is witnessing in Japan is the result of European diffusion.

Studying Western history, Fukuzawa is impressed by the inventions in the West that are the result of this spirit. Fukuzawa points to James Watt's invention of the steam engine and the railway as the brainchild of Robert and John Stevens. "To utilize these outstanding techniques and inventions, these individuals often formed private associations"<sup>14</sup> through which individual innovation could be nurtured. Fukuzawa looks to private ownership as a mechanism fostering the Western spirit so elusive to Japan. In this sense, he propounds the European model of political organization, denouncing the over-dominance of government in preference for entrepreneurial values.

Presumably having understood the structure of European society, Fukuzawa realizes that the answer to Japan's problems rests in independent innovation – or the spirit of independence – which may be fostered through a capitalist-based political system.<sup>15</sup> The realization of this institutional transformation, writes Fukuzawa, is "the task of present-day politicians" and, since he is "only diagnosing the situation," Fukuzawa declines in addressing the process by which his observations could be implemented.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Fukuzawa is referring to the Meiji Restoration.

<sup>14</sup> Fukuzawa, "Japanese Enlightenment," p. 349.

<sup>15</sup> Fukuzawa points explicitly to a European "middle-class," a product of the capitalist system, from which innovation flows. He writes that the "civilization of a country must not be initiated by the government above, nor can it be born of people of low estate. It is the middle class that can nurture a civilization, showing the masses a way to follow," in Fukuzawa, "Japanese Enlightenment," p. 349.

<sup>16</sup> Fukuzawa, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, p. 160.

It is important to note that speculation only is possible on whether or not Fukuzawa is a diffusionist according to Blaut's description. Blaut writes:

If we accept the quite fundamental assumption that all human groups are truly human in their thinking apparatuses, and therefore broadly similar in their ability to invent and innovate...we would expect inventions to occur everywhere across the human landscape.<sup>17</sup>

Possibly Fukuzawa believes that there should be select and permanent centers of invention and innovation, in which case Japan must realize its latent potential as one of them. In that case, Fukuzawa is a diffusionist. Or else, Fukuzawa rejects the notion that only select and permanent centers of invention and innovation exist, and that it is possible for Japan to develop a previously nonexistent spirit and join the Western ranks. Whether Europe is merely one source or the source, Fukuzawa does believe that manifestations of the spirit of independence do diffuse from Europe. As Fukuzawa dramatically puts it, this diffusion is "the onslaught of Western civilization."<sup>18</sup> Clearly, Fukuzawa is writing for his fellow Japanese, attempting to force recognition of the desperate need to develop a spirit of independence. He beckons to his countrymen and his fellow intellectuals not to be swallowed up in tides of Western ideas, but to "float with them in the same ocean of civilization."<sup>19</sup>

#### *The Curse of Imbalance*

However improper it seems to assess Eurocentric tendencies in Fukuzawa's early writing in anachronistic terms with definitions only later derived, the problems these definitions bring about seem punishment enough. In the most obvious case, that Fukuzawa's argument can be verified as empirical is at the least questionable, thus making uncertain the applicability of Blaut's definition of Eurocentrism. It seems then, that an attempt must be made to assess to what extent Fukuzawa's argument is empirical in conception. Fukuzawa's critical description of the spirit of

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<sup>17</sup> Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World*, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Fukuzawa, "Japanese Enlightenment," p. 351.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

independence and the conclusions that he draws from it need to be substantiated by a valid model or theory in which to frame the examples. Fukuzawa attempts such a model in *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, and it is necessary to evaluate its merits in determining if indeed his conclusions are based on an empirical process.

Fukuzawa begins by offering what he calls, “the curse of imbalance.”<sup>20</sup> By this he means an imbalance of power – an imbalance that may provoke the powerful into succumbing to despotic and ill intentions. It is a “curse” because Fukuzawa regards it as an inevitable trait of human nature, and he surmises, “there is nothing that can be done about it.”<sup>21</sup> He observes that this imbalance is found not only in Japan, but also throughout the world, asserting that the imbalance as well as the urge of despotism extends to “all sectors of human society, from the greatest to the smallest.”<sup>22</sup>

From here, Fukuzawa explains that, unpleasant as it is, the inequities of the imbalance are less important than, and should be subordinated to, the spirit of independence: “But even with such social injustice there is still a pervading spirit of individuality and nothing hinders the expansion of the human spirit.”<sup>23</sup> Only when this independent and innovative spirit is fostered should efforts be made to deal with the side effects, the burden of which Fukuzawa places on the government.<sup>24</sup> His acceptance of the imbalance of power as inevitable and subordinate to the spirit of independence indicates that, while his ideological beliefs have support, there is no concrete theory that explains the principles underlying his assertion.

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<sup>20</sup> Fukuzawa, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, p. 135.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>24</sup> Fukuzawa writes, “But since the treatment of this disease [of imbalance] is the task of present-day politicians, I do not intend to discuss it here.” Fukuzawa appears truly to be concerned with an unequal distribution of wealth, especially within the Western-style capitalist system he is proposing, possibly because of the practical obstacles and problems such inequities will raise, and he devotes no insignificant attention in discussing the dilemma. In Fukuzawa, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, p. 160.

**Fukuzawa vis-à-vis European Counterparts**

Also significant in Fukuzawa's framework is his understanding that "members of the ruling class must have both physical and intellectual powers and a certain amount of wealth."<sup>25</sup> He acknowledges that those who rule must always be the powerful. In this sense, Fukuzawa is describing precisely the necessary qualities of Blaut's upshot of Eurocentrism.

As a qualification, there is one important distinction between Fukuzawa's views and those of traditional Eurocentrists: Fukuzawa believes, because the "curse of imbalance" leads to ill intent, the powerful "must always take stock of themselves."<sup>26</sup> The traditional Eurocentrists surely acknowledge Fukuzawa's "curse of imbalance," but they reject the notion of self-reservation completely, according to Blaut. Indeed, it is entirely the intention of Eurocentric thought, as Blaut suggests, to provide the opportunity to exploit an imbalance of power, wicked in design and wicked in practice. That is, Fukuzawa is yet to be disabused of grandiose dreams in which the powerful and wealthy may be benevolent rulers.

Fukuzawa looks to the West as cultivating groups of private citizens who champion the spirit of independence and, though growing in power, are restrained either by the government or by self-reservation in submitting to ill temptations: "In England, France, and other countries in the modern world, the people of the middle class progressively amassed wealth; with it they also elevated their own moral conduct."<sup>27</sup> Again Fukuzawa's naivety is apparent in this respect: "Now, even in the West not everyone is equal in terms of wealth or prestige." This is hardly an admission worthy of such a complex intellectual, especially considering that his life paralleled the Industrial Revolution in Europe, which exacerbated inequality to an extreme, as conceded by scholars everywhere, including Fukuzawa's counterparts in Europe.<sup>28</sup> In exploring the multitude of associated issues the significance lies not in the fact that Fukuzawa's conception of the proper organization of society resembles that of Europe's ruling elite, or even that of America's; it is, rather, that the same organizing principle appeals to elites everywhere.

All of this, then, deals with Fukuzawa's earlier ideological inner

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 160.



workings and illustrates that his ideological beliefs are reinforced only by his immediate observations. In his earlier work, he categorically elaborates on points of Western superiority, and persuasive though they are, offers a concrete model or theory that in many respects does not provide the authority with which to frame his examples. In addition, he propounds at least the fundamental aspects of European ideology, though it can be said that he diverges in respect to certain details.

What can be done? As Blaut suggests, there are many implications of enduring historical inaccuracies. His upshot of Eurocentrism is a damning charge not only against traditional historical literature, but also much of contemporary scholarship. At the same time, intellectual movements such as Eurocentrism are often reversed piecemeal, and only then with devoted effort. This paper should be considered part of that effort in offering some basic understanding of the origins of Eurocentric thought with regard to Japan.

Finally, a few words on the development of history: It seems that world history not only describes the human past, but also prophesies its future – one that has been and continues to be determined by the West. If historians feel a moral obligation to redeem the past so much so that they have internalized an approach akin to the one adopted by Eurocentrists, they will continue to disregard the grievous moral position of their status, and Blaut is but one warning of the perilous result of this tendency. If, on the other hand, historians do indeed feel the gravity of their position, they can choose not to overlook this moral discomfort and, instead, to help realize a world safer for us all.