

BOOK REVIEWS

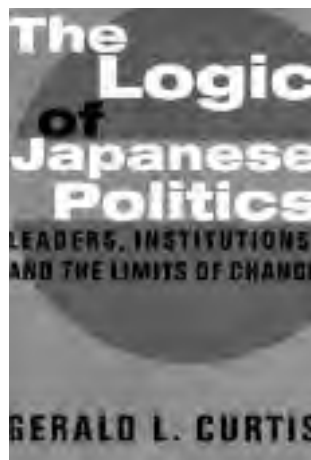
The Logic of Japanese Politics

Leaders, Institutions, and the Limits of Change

By Gerald Curtis

NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1999
303 PAGES

The 1990s were a trying decade for Japanese politicians and the public. It was a trying decade for scholars of Japanese politics, too. They struggled to come to grips with changes that had seemingly undone four decades of political stability, and with it the certainties that framed the teaching and research on the subject. Standing at a remove of five years from the 1994 electoral reforms that mark a watershed in postwar Japanese politics, Gerald Curtis's book is a welcome overview of what has changed in the government and what has not. His prognosis of future developments in policy and politics, incremental change that may fail to address structural problems in the economy and government, rings true to any scholar who has recently visited Japan.



a highly readable book.

This book is many things. On one level, it is a defense of what has come to be called derisively the "area studies" approach to Japanese politics. This work is therefore part of an ongoing debate within the discipline of political science and the subfield of Japanese political studies about the proper way to study political institutions and behavior. There is no modeling, little in the way of overt interest in theory building. It is, in short, Curtis's book is a rejoinder to non-Marxian structuralism, rational choice/public choice, and culturalist arguments about Japanese uniqueness. The former he finds overly deterministic, the second too simplistic when it is not tautological. As for the third, and he is in good company,¹ the author convincingly demonstrates that there is nothing inherently unique about the conduct of Japanese politics in the 1990s (certainly not in the kind of electoral system the government adopted in 1994). Leaders act in particular ways because they want to effect certain policies within a set of environmental opportunities and constraints. Coalition government in Japan follows much the same logic as coalition government in Europe. Educators who fight the stereotypes about "Japanese culture" will find the author's tone refreshing.

For Curtis, a fine-grained examination of the interactions between political leaders and the institutions they inhabit reveals that political leaders matter. Their environments do not determine the choices they make. Neither are they as single-mindedly rational in the narrow sense that rational choice theorists tend to assume. Politicians make strategic mistakes, or (in the case of coalition formation in 1993) do nothing until circumstances force them to. Policies are made according to calculations that depend upon how parties and their leaders perceive very different pressures, not all of them electoral. In any case, similar events across time have divergent outcomes because key actors differ. Politics has too many contingencies for rational choice or culturalist generalizations to encompass.

The book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of recent Japanese politics. In particular, Curtis demonstrates how the realignment of the 1990s (my term, not his) has changed institutional arrangements in the government and political parties. Coalition government after 1993 necessitated a new style of policy making in which previously dormant institutions in the parties and Diet became crucial, and in which others became irrelevant. In these discussions one gets a sense of how politics in the last decade fits into the longer span of postwar development.

Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace



Alfred Bloom

**NEWLY REPRINTED AND AVAILABLE
ONCE AGAIN FOR CLASSROOM USE!**

Association for Asian Studies, Inc., 1021 East Huron Street
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104
Phone: 734-665-2490; Fax: 734-665-3801
Email: bookorder@asianst.org

The book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of recent Japanese politics. In particular, Curtis demonstrates how the realignment of the 1990s (my term, not his) has changed institutional arrangements in the government and political parties.

As a textbook, *The Logic of Japanese Politics* is not a comprehensive survey of Japanese politics, such as Richardson and Flanagan's dated but excellent *Politics in Japan*,² or Curtis's own *The Japanese Way of Politics*.³ The focus in this volume is almost exclusively on political elites, especially party leaders. The voters get mention, but political movements outside the Diet are hardly even peripheral. For those who prefer to teach more broadly about Japanese politics, or who find that their students require a general overview of postwar politics, using a text such as J. A. A. Stockwin's *Governing Japan*⁴ in conjunction with the book under review here is worth considering.

This book is accessible to a wide audience. Undergraduates will like Curtis's grasp of the details of political events; he has interviewed all of the key political players of the last decade, while instructors will find that enduring issues of political science are addressed. Curtis's treatment of political reform in 1994, for example, could provide an excellent starting point for a comparative discussion of the real-world impacts of changing electoral rules. The book is a must-read for graduate students, and academics will find much useful synthesis and insight. ■

NOTES

1. See, for example, Stephen Reed, *Making Common Sense of Japan*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993.
2. Bradley Richardson and Scott Flanagan, *Politics in Japan*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, and Co., 1984.
3. Gerald Curtis, *The Japanese Way of Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
4. J. A. A. Stockwin, *Governing Japan: Divided Politics in a Major Economy*, 3rd ed. London: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

DAVID M. POTTER received his Ph.D. at the University of California in Santa Barbara. He is an Associate Professor at Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan and teaches courses in Political Science and International Studies including Politics of Japan, Introduction to Comparative Politics, and International Political Economy.

Japan's Minorities

The Illusion of Homogeneity

Michael Weiner, editor

NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, 1997
272 PAGES

This is an important collection of essays that examines, as the subtitle promises, Japan's illusion of homogeneity. It does so by balanced and thorough examinations of Japan's minorities, as promised in the title. It appears at a time when minority issues in Japan have (finally) gained increased coverage: in the Korean experience in wartime, highlighted in the fifty-year celebrations and the public statements of former comfort women; in the increased visibility of immigrant populations; in the continuing legal and public battles in Okinawa, in a few examples. The chapters are both broad and deep, providing historical overviews and contemporary statistical context. They discuss the Ainu, Burakumin, resident Koreans, the Chinese community, Okinawans, and Nikkeijin (second and third generation ethnic Japanese born outside of Japan). These chapters are bracketed by essays that question the conceptual and theoretical issues raised by the discussions. They complement each other to yield a volume that will be effective in a range of teaching situations.

The stated goals of this volume are three, and these goals are realized nicely. One, "to critically evaluate both the historical construction and contemporary manifestation of a 'racialized' Japanese identity"; two, to provide historical analysis of the creation and rise of the minority populations within Japan; and three, to discuss the contemporary minority experience in Japan. Commenting on the need for this volume, Weiner points up the "substantial literature which covers the economic, political and institutional aspects" of Japan's history. Until these essays, there was little thorough introduction to the changing situation for these minority groups. The volume's essays ostensibly focus on the formative years in these groups' histories, between 1868 and 1945. Nonetheless, when the essayists move on to discuss the contemporary situation of these groups we have a discussion that incorporates the most recent events and the contemporary situation (xii).

The plethora of numbers and sometimes textbook presentation would be nothing but dry if such information was available elsewhere in English; because it is not, they serve as the only thorough presentation of these topics. This is one of the volume's great strengths; it is both introductory while substantive. It fills a void in contemporary studies of Japan. This also increases its pedagogic value. The chapters alone or