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CHAPTER ONE

Japan and Neoliberal Culturalism

Reto Hofmann

The shift to the right in the global economic and political landscape in the 1980s changed the relationship between the various strands of neoliberal thought, including in the Japanese contingent. At the heart of the problem was the question of how to reconcile the spread of globalist policies, which were taking root everywhere, with the rise of neoconservative nationalism. Japanese members of the Neoliberal Thought Collective (NTC) were particularly sensitive to this debate.\(^1\)

Japan’s stellar rise in the world’s economic firmament—its industries expanding globally with increasingly deregulated domestic and international markets—engendered a return to a muscular nationalism to explain Japanese success. At once committed to neoliberal “globalism” and to the nation, the core members of the Japanese NTC—Kiuchi Nobutane (1899–1993) and Nishiyama Chiaki (1924–2017)—launched an effort to update the theory and organization of the movement, producing a distinctive neoliberal self-critique. Countering the mathematical, rational models produced by Western, and especially US, thinkers as overly universalizing, they called on neoliberalism to integrate national peculiarity as a central element to stabilize capitalism.\(^2\)

The result of the Japanese critique was what could be called “neoliberal culturalism.” This notion elevated national culture as a fix for the shortcomings of globalism and was premised on the conviction that Japan had proven uniquely able to accommodate growth and social harmony. Rooted in prewar nationalism, it regained vigor as Japan
entered two decades of high growth (from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s), peaking in the 1980s “theories about the Japanese” known as nihonjinron. The Japanese NTC embraced assumptions about Japanese peculiarity that were shared more widely, but they stood out for abstracting these theories and projecting them onto the global neoliberal movement. Their response, therefore, cannot be reduced to simple parochialism. It was, rather, an answer from the Right to the disembedding effects of laissez-faire markets that threatened liberalism itself. Japan, they argued, had found a solution to reconcile capitalism and community.

Neoliberal culturalism emerged in a large and diverse discursive space made up of academics, public intellectuals, businessmen, and bankers, as well as bureaucrats. This chapter will focus on the roles played by Kiuchi Nobutane and Nishiyama Chiaki, because they were most directly involved in manufacturing culturalist arguments and spreading them in the wider NTC, both at home and abroad. Kiuchi, ex-banker, bureaucrat, and publicist, enjoyed a vast social network among the Japanese establishment. Nishiyama was Japan’s Chicago Boy. Having studied under Friedrich Hayek at the University of Chicago (PhD, 1956), he returned to Japan, where he promoted neoliberal economics in academia, especially at Rikkyo University, and beyond. He maintained a close personal friendship with Hayek and would become the president of the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) in the 1980s. Despite being outsiders to the mainstream in the bureaucracy, society, and academia, Kiuchi and Nishiyama possessed the social capital and determination to form a tightly knit movement that embarked on neoliberalism’s “long march” in Japan and attempted to reform the Mont Pelerin Society.

NATION AND NEOLIBERALISM

The Japanese were not the first to stress the link between culture and neoliberalism, but they went further than others in making the nation