

Book review

The State of Civil Society in Japan. Edited by Frank J. Schwartz and Susan J. Pharr. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 392 pp.

This book intends to contribute to two aims: to enrich the concept of civil society through the case of Japan and to shed a new light on Japanese studies from the point of view of civil society. While these are very stimulating approaches, they are too controversial to accept without reservation.

First, this work stretches the concept of civil society. One of editors explains that “civil society consists of sustained, organized social activity that occurs in groups that are formed outside the state, the market, and the family.” (p. xiii. By the way, their exclusion of family from civil society deserves attention, though they do not give this issue extensive consideration.) This includes not only traditional grass-roots level, voluntary, or horizontally organized associations, but also interest groups and vertically structured organizations, which are not necessarily autonomous or independent of the state or which the state helps to establish. As examples of the former, this volume considers NPOs (ch. 5), consumer activism (ch. 10), mass media and the Internet (ch. 11), and NGOs (ch. 14). Chapters on administrative partners in social welfare (ch. 7), agriculture and small business (ch. 8), and unions (ch. 9) show the latter. This formulation departs from the classic image of civil society, which typically includes only the former and regards interest groups as part of the market and “semiofficial associations” (p. 50) or “parastatal organizations” (p. 118) as the state itself. Criticizing the previous scholars, the authors argue that civil society is different from, but cannot be isolated from, both the state and the market. They pay particular attention to the role of the state to form, control and manage civil society. Through leverage of incorporation and tax policies, the state encourages those aspects of civil society of which it approves and discourages the others. In my opinion, inclusion of an extension of the state into civil society and an emphasis on the role of the government reflect the current state of American political science, and this work accelerates that tendency in the field of Japanese studies in the U.S.

Second, this anthology reviews the current state of Japan from the new angle of civil society. Most of the authors discern that Japanese civil society has been built up from above and that civic associations have been thwarted by the strong and interventionist government. On the other hand, they do not fail to add that, since the 1990's, grassroots movements have burgeoned. Spontaneous volunteer work after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995 and the NPO Act of 1998 are indications of this. Even those readers who are unfamiliar with Japan can easily understand the latest situation of the country. Surprisingly, once you read through all chapters, you will be able to grasp the entire range of conditions in Japan. The book under review is exceptional in that it includes chapters on political thought (ch. 3), religion (ch. 6), prosecutors (ch. 12), and mentality (ch. 13), which are rarely found in just one volume (not only in works about Japan, but in those about other

countries as well). It also contains historical descriptions (especially ch. 2) since 1868 and very recent events (the 1990s).

I should point out, however, that these two merits can be limitations, too. First, what kind of new perspective does their stretched idea of civil society bring to us? I am afraid their definition of civil society is broad enough to encompass almost any modern society. The other editor asks “what *is* civil society?” But I incline to turn the question around: what is *not* civil society? It is true that business plays a (societal or political) role outside the market. But, if we allow business to be part of civil society, then what cannot be other than the state itself? Or, if we regard organizations that the state even sponsors, funds, and staffs not as the state, but as civil society, why should we establish the concept of *civil* society besides just society that is neither the state nor the market? In addition, this broad cover hides the two distinctive types of associations. Voluntary associations and state-sponsored organizations interact with the state and the market in different ways. How can we derive any meaningful insight through this combined analytical lens? In fact, many contributors smuggle this distinction through back door. Then, in the first place, why do they collapse these two contrastive groups into one? I am afraid this enlarged version is too comprehensive to be relevant.

Second, do we really get a new view of Japan? It seems that the authors of the present work equate civil society with “associational life” or intermediate groups. Actually, chapter 4 just counts the number of institutions, establishments and groups. How different are the papers in this volume from the traditional studies of groups? What kind of new findings and insights are added to the accumulation of the classic research upon which these chapters heavily rely? (And sometimes, the contributors themselves are the authors of these preceding works.)

In conclusion, however, there is no denying that this collection of excellent pieces helps us understand both civil society and Japan deeply. I am sure that it will be a common reference in this field.

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