

Historical Trajectories
Progress and Degeneration in Modern Japanese History

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The poor and the sick block the development of society...If such people did not exist...we could further the progress of society and increase the welfare of humanity. But because of these people, progress is obstructed. Takagi Kanehiro, 1916

It is impossible to improve the mind or the body's physical constitution of those [transformed by degeneration] through mere social reform... I believe that unless those with marked indications of degeneration are subjected to castration, despite their opposition if necessary, to prevent the breeding of their unhealthy descendants, it will in no way be possible to bring about the ideal society. Matsu no Satobito, 1915

Since 1995, the Japan Kanji Proficiency Society has conducted an annual poll to select a single written character that best encompasses or thematizes the events of the year. Some years back the character for progress (進) was proposed. For 2009, among the proposed characters was “sui” (衰), meaning “decline,” “decay,” or “degeneration.” This was the suggestion of Tokyo city mayor Ishihara Shintarō, a conservative and outspoken politician who has long lamented the “moral degeneration” that has plagued Japanese society since the loss of its morally unifying “divine symbol.” He clarified the meaning he wanted to capture with this character by supplying other terms in which it appears: *suibō* (衰亡), *suitai* (衰退), and *suijyaku* (衰弱), variously conveying decline, degeneration, and enfeeblement.¹ Ishihara's selection should

1. “Building character with new approach” *The Asahi Shimbun*, 12 December 2009. On his

remind us that how we conceptualize time is never neutral; “degeneration,” for example, and its counterpart “progress” are representations that always imply some value position, some kind of politicality. In this article, I historicize ideologies of progress and degeneration in Japan’s Meiji (1868–1912) and Taishō (1912–1926) periods in order to consider their politicality and material impact on the society of those days.

Japan’s early Meiji period was guided by a narrative of civilizational progress that situated Japanese society on a historical trajectory, tracing out a movement through stages of “civilization” (a term as problematic as progress): barbarism, semi-civilization, and higher civilization. Progress here indicated a certain evaluative orientation, a movement away from the now devalued “barbarism and superstition of the past” toward a “better” future of wealth, prosperity, and national power. The successful continuation along this path depended upon a population that remained well ordered and economically productive. While this narrative of progress was never fully hegemonic and always contested, it did attain a high degree of legitimacy. Yet by the turn of the century, as Japan underwent its industrial revolution and with increased urbanization, poverty, crime, and social protests, a thorough and increasingly intense critique of this narrative began to emerge. The story of a linear, upward climb toward civilization became increasingly problematic while warnings of a downward decline back into barbarism became more frequent. An unqualified faith in progress could no longer be sustained. It was in this context that a new discourse on degeneration began to dominate the intellectual landscape of Japan.

If we reject the claim that “progress” and “degeneration” were neutral descriptions of historical change, then in what sense were they political? What normative or epistemological standpoint did they represent? In what ways did they function to sustain or strengthen a given standpoint and what were the material consequences for thought and action associated with alternative positions? These questions are important because,

notion of moral degeneration, see Ishihara Shintarō, “Nippon no dōgi,” *Jiyū* (April 1974). In this article, translations are my own unless indicated otherwise. I am grateful to Katsuya Hirano and Eddy Dufourmont for reading a draft of this article and offering helpful suggestions for improving it and to the Japan Foundation for funding the research that led to this article.

ultimately, they can help us to think through the politicality of our own historical trajectories today.

In this essay, I suggest that the late Meiji fear of degeneration was grounded in the same desire to sustain economic productivity and social order as the earlier faith in progress. While late Meiji critics of material progress pointed to the “unjust distribution of wealth” in society and called for its redistribution, degeneration discourse functioned to silence such critiques and their demands for social reform by situating the cause of social problems in the degenerate body rather than in unjust social arrangements. Moreover, this new conception of historical decline necessitated new ideological and concrete material strategies for maintaining social order, unity, and economic productivity, among which was eugenics. The serious consideration of eugenics-based social policies and legislation began at this time, though actual eugenics legislation was not enacted until 1940. Here I read this emerging eugenics discourse as an argument for regulating the degenerate and economically unproductive segments of the population so as to prevent them from passing on their degenerate traits to future generations. Thus, both trajectories of “progress” and “degeneration” were political, that is, both functioned to promote unity and productivity, to marginalize and suppress society’s unproductive elements, and to redirect attention away from social contradictions that emerged with Japan’s pursuit of economic wealth and power.

Material Progress in Early Meiji

The idea of the “progress of civilization” informed much of the intellectual effort of the early Meiji period. Fukuzawa Yukichi, a leading proponent of “civilization and enlightenment” outlined this narrative as a teleological progression from barbarism to civilization through the gradual acquisition of knowledge and virtue. In Fukuzawa’s well-known framework, Japan ranked among the world’s “semi-civilized countries” (*hankai no koku*). Africa and Australia, having not yet acquired even the rudiments of civilization, he classified as “barbaric countries” (*yaban no koku*). Only the countries of Europe, together with the United States,

qualified as “fully civilized countries” (*bunmei koku*).² This early Meiji narrative of civilizational progress promised a gradual movement toward a more comprehensive knowledge of the social and natural worlds (and hence, greater control over society and the forces of nature). It thus laid claim to a future world (or a future Japan) less hampered by disease, hunger, poverty, and war.

The promise of civilizational progress is evident as well in the works of economist and historian Taguchi Ukichi. Taguchi was well aware of the confrontations and struggles in the international arena, but envisioned a future beyond such conflict. “If kings and presidents of the world jointly confer and organize a united government, the kings of each country would function as the nobility of England’s upper house, or like the peers in our country today. As for politics, the united government would be entrusted with all duties. The nations of the world would be forbidden to maintain armies...today’s countries of the world, by engaging in free trade with one another, would be able to realize a relationship promoting the welfare of the people.”³ The connection he drew between free trade and the welfare of the people is important because his conception of progress was rooted in economic development.

In his analysis of Taguchi’s *Brief History of Japanese Civilization* (*Nihon kaika shoshi*), historian Kudō Eiichi suggests that Taguchi understood history and historical progress as driven by humanity’s desire to survive. Indeed, Taguchi stated in this work:

From the beginning, human instinct has functioned to protect life and avoid death. The fulfilment of this desire to protect life and avoid death meant that one must have clothing, food, and shelter. Once clothing, food, and shelter had been acquired, however, simply protecting against the cold and hunger was no longer enough. The desire for something soft for the skin, sweet for the mouth, and tightly shut against wind and rain arose. To fulfil these desires, people had to exercise their mental powers. For this reason, when the conditions of the economy (*kazai*) progress, the interior (*naibu*) of the human mind

2. Fukuzawa Yukichi, *Bunmei ron no gairyaku* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2004), 25–26, 61.

3. Taguchi Ukichi, “Kuni o tatsuru no atai wa ikubakuzo?” *Kokumin no tomo* 1 (1887), 174.

progresses as well.⁴

Here, for Taguchi, intellectual progress is tied to economic progress. His vision of progress was fundamentally one of economic production and wealth accumulation driven by material desire and needs. But if this account of a universal human condition were true, why did Western countries exhibit levels of economic development so much higher than Japan?

For Taguchi, the disparity between the West and Japan in terms of knowledge, skills, and the material trappings of civilization was a troubling problem. The disparity, he argued, stemmed from two different forms of civilization: a civilization of the nobility (*kizoku kaika*) in Japan and a civilization of the people (*minshu kaika*) in the West. Because Japan's civilization of the nobility benefitted society's elites with little or no intellectual effort on their part, civilization stagnated. By contrast, the West's form of civilization encouraged the pursuit of wealth, the acquisition of goods, and intellectual pursuits tied to the production of new goods. Taguchi's conceptions of civilization and progress, then, are tied to the encouragement of productivity and consumption, to the accumulation of wealth, and the promise of a future of greater abundance for all.⁵

This early Meiji narrative of material progress described a gradual movement through history toward higher levels of wealth, power, and productivity. Indeed, the popular slogan of this time "wealthy nation, strong army" (*fukoku kyōhei*) captured the desire for progress in this sense. Meanwhile, Inoue Tetsujirō, invoking the proverb, "The tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" provided an apt illustration of the "new ethics" of productivity of early Meiji. "To be indulgent and idle..." Inoue asserted in his *New Theory of Ethics* (*Rinri shinsetsu*, 1883), "is the detestable feature of humanity."⁶ Those who

4. Taguchi Ukichi, *Nihon kaika shoshi* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1981), 181–82. For Kudō's statement, see in the same book "Rekishika toshite no Taguchi Ukichi," 262–63.

5. For additional discussion of Taguchi's conceptions of history, see Kenneth Pyle, *The New Generation in Meiji Japan: Problems of Cultural Identity, 1885–1895* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 87–90.

6. Inoue Tetsujirō, "Rinri shinsetsu," in *Meiji bunka zenshū*, Vol. 23: *Shisō hen* (Tokyo:

risked idleness, according to the value position inherent in this notion of progress, jeopardized their own survival. “In this age of the struggle for survival as civilization expands,” one Meiji period commentator noted, “so does the struggle. Those who live in this society must progress with progress. One day spent in idleness is a day behind. Once behind the progress of society, a person cannot catch up, but remains a weakling in the struggle for survival. In other words, he is not a man like other men.”⁷ Idleness here is associated with weakness and a de-humanized state. And yet those who “fell behind” had to contend with poverty, grim working and living conditions, unequal access to medical care, narrowly restricted political participation, and so forth. But such social disparities could be deemphasized as temporary conditions that would be overcome with the advancement of progress and the dissemination of civilization. Thus, Japan’s future and the telos of this narrative was “civilization” together with the wealth, knowledge, and power it would bring. Yet, barbarism and superstition lay in Japan’s past and lingered in its present.

The notion of a barbaric past was a necessary means to imagine the future, and the present as well. Fukuzawa represented Japan’s current semi-civilized status (which of course implied a semi-barbaric status) as an illness. Appealing to “common sense,” he hoped to convince Japan’s population to abandon outmoded customs inconsistent with the new civilized knowledge. “Imagine someone with a house in which there are many who are ill,” he wrote in 1870, “and he rejects the use of medicines saying that having a house full of sick people is simply the custom of his household. Do we call such a person intelligent?”⁸ Here, Fukuzawa sought to depict the utter absurdity of alternatives to civilizational progress. And as this passage and those above suggest, such alternatives—for Fukuzawa and others aligned with progress—defied common sense and could only stand for ignorance, illness, idleness, weakness, and barba-

Nihon Hyōronsha, 1967), 424–25.

7. This passage appears in Carol Gluck’s *Japan’s Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 209. The original is from a document titled *Saikin chōsa shūshoku no tebiki*, 3.

8. Fukuzawa Yukichi, “Nikushoku no setsu,” in *Meiji bungaku zenshū*, vol. 8: *Fukuzawa Yukichi shū*, ed. Tomita Masafumi (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1966), 334–35.

rism. For Fukuzawa and Taguchi, if the “absurd” alternatives to progress could be silenced, if Japan could move beyond the thought and practices of its past, and provided it was able to maintain its independence and survival amidst the more “civilized” nations that encroached upon it, it would move forward and upward to a “better” and more civilized future.

The Critique of Material Progress

Of course, this narrative of material progress was never without its critics. But many who opposed progress in one sense upheld it in another.⁹ That is, various conceptions of progress emerged out of different intellectual positions. Buddhist apologists protested the categorization of their beliefs and practices as superstition inconsistent with progressive civilization even as they began to refashion Buddhism as a modern religion that followed its own progressive teleology.¹⁰ Baba Tatsui, Ueki Emori, Nakae Chōmin, and others associated with the popular rights movement of the 1870s and 1880s spoke of an evolutionary progression toward governmental systems that would guarantee the rights of citizens. Christian apologists like Niijima Jō, Kozaki Hiromichi, and Uemura Masahisa sought to reconcile the new and powerful vision of evolution with creationism, arguing that evolutionary progress merely explained God’s plan for the development of the world since the time of creation; it neither accounted for nor negated the possibility of creation itself. And the well-known theorist of popular rights Nakae Chōmin, in

9. If any came close to a serious questioning of the notion of progress itself, it was perhaps the writers of *gesaku* (the literature of play) who, through biting satire, ridiculed the policies and putatively universal values of civilization and progress, often in defense of practices and norms they claimed were culturally specific to Japan. See Richard Reitan, *Making a Moral Society: Ethics and the State in Meiji Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2010), 16–20. Also see G. B. Sansom, *The Western World and Japan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 385. Sansom draws upon Tokyo city municipal records to show that the government pressed *gesaku* writers to contribute, through their literary work, to the project of civilizational progress.

10. See, for example, James Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and Its Persecution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 175.

his *Discourse by Three Drunkards on Government* (*Sansuijin keirin mondō*) problematized civilizational progress (though he never fully transcended the notion) by showing that behind the promise of a world governed by democratic ideals and peace lay a reality of military aggression and an international system governed by the law of the survival of the fittest.¹¹ Underlying each of these views was a progressive, teleological conception of historical change, yet they remained at the margins of intellectual discourse because they were not fundamentally in accord with the discourse on material progress and productivity espoused by those like Fukuzawa and Taguchi. But by mid-Meiji, and in the midst of Japan's industrial revolution, critiques of material progress grew more numerous and intense. They expressed the outrage of the exploited and offered suggestions for how "progress" might be alternatively conceived.

A particularly outspoken mid-Meiji critic of material progress was the poet and essayist Kitamura Tōkoku. In his writings, Kitamura called attention to the human degeneration and poverty he saw in Japan, and "the diseases of the modern age." In an 1891 article titled "In Hopes of Progress in Charity-based Projects," he wrote:

On the surface, Meiji civilization manifests truly immeasurable progress, but do the majority of the people enjoy it?... Even when a mother is ill and in bed, her son cannot remain at home and care for her; he must go out and work, but even so he is unable to earn enough money to buy her medicine. Together they wait for death... Although society seems outwardly splendid and gradually approaches grandeur, on the other hand we see conditions of gradual deterioration, weakness due to illness, and destitution... Nothing, however, is more disastrous to a country than having its poor despised more and more while the rich become more and more arrogant and extravagant.¹²

While Kitamura's critique of progress functioned by poignantly describ-

11. Nakae Chōmin, *Sansuijin keirin mondō* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2005).

12. Kitamura Tōkoku, "Jizen-jigyō no shimpo o nozomu," in *Tōkoku zenshū*, v. 2, ed. Katsumoto Seiichirō (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1960), 342–43. This translation appears in Irokawa Daikichi, *The Culture of the Meiji Period*, trans. Marius B. Jansen (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 241.

ing the unevenness of wealth distribution, others began to conceptualize progress not as the increase in overall wealth but as wealth's equal distribution.

Shibue Tamotsu, for example, a writer and translator for the Hakubunkan publishing house, configured progress as a movement toward greater and greater levels of social equality.¹³ But the current unbalanced distribution of land in Japan, Shibue argued, impeded this progressive movement. Land, he concluded, “must be jointly owned” because private land ownership resulted in “the enslavement of labor society.”¹⁴ Here, Shibue drew upon the arguments of American economist Henry George, whose works, translated into Japanese in the early 1890s, were well known in Japan.¹⁵ In his *Progress and Poverty* (1880), George argued, “The laws of the universe do not deny the natural aspirations of the human heart; that the progress of society might be, and, if it is to continue, must be, toward equality, not toward inequality...” Elsewhere in the same work he linked private land ownership to slavery, stating, “investigation shows that private property in land always has, and always must, as development proceeds, lead to the enslavement of the labouring class...”¹⁶ In *Social Problems*, translated into Japanese in 1892, George wrote, “With all our progress in the arts which produce

13. For a brief biographical sketch of Shibue, see Marvin Marcus, *Paragons of the Ordinary: The Biographical Literature of Mori Ōgai* (Honolulu, School of Hawaiian, Asian, & Pacific Studies, 1993), 123–27.

14. Shibue Tamotsu, *Shakaigaku* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1894), 23–25.

15. George's *Social Problems* and *The Land Question* appeared in Japanese translation in 1892. His *Progress and Poverty*, though not translated, was also familiar to Japanese intellectuals, as is clear from Shibue's text. See Henry George, *Shakai mondai*, trans. Eguchi Sansei (Tokyo: Jiyūsha, 1892) and Henry George, *Tochi mondai*, trans. Tsunoda Gōichirō (Tokyo: Uchida Rokakuho, 1892). As these and other translations show, Japan was in no way isolated from broad international discourses on progress and degeneration. Educators, scientists, philosophers, and others in Japan were quite well-informed and well-read when it came to Euro-American debates on these issues. Many of the better-known (and some of the lesser-known) works on progress and degeneration in Europe and America quickly appeared in Japanese translation soon after their initial publication. Accordingly, I do not limit my sources to those written by Japanese. I consider the translations of George, Nordau, Giddings, Ribot, and others as primary (though reformulated) contributions to discourses on progress and degeneration within Japan that in certain cases played a different role than in Europe.

16. Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, n.d.), 235, 4.

wealth, we have made no progress in securing its equitable distribution.”¹⁷ But a simple redistribution of wealth would not resolve the problem such that the drive for material progress could resume; progress and poverty were too closely intertwined. For George, social problems were not merely a reflection of a wrong turn on the path of progress, not something that could have been or might yet be averted, but rather something integral to the process of progress itself. “[M]aterial progress does not merely fail to relieve poverty,” George maintained, upholding a basic Marxian assertion, “it actually produces it.”¹⁸

Equally important to progress, according to Shibue, was the development of higher levels of social cooperation. “With regard to the human body, if the mouth requires food but the hand refuses to help, if the eyes see danger and seek to flee but the feet advance toward the danger, if the teeth chew the food and send it to the stomach but the stomach will not digest it...this brings about the death of the body.” It is the same with society when the government does not protect the people, he stated. Society’s growth will be impeded and society itself may ultimately perish (*metsubō*).¹⁹ Here too, Shibue was drawing upon and developing a point George had made in *Progress and Poverty*: “Society is an organism, not a machine. It can only live by the individual life of its parts. And in the free and natural development of all the parts will be secured the harmony of the whole.” George also wrote, “the economic harmonies prove the truth perceived by the Stoic Emperor—‘We are made for co-operation—like feet, like hands, like eyebrows, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth.’”²⁰ Thus, while material progress was critically assessed, progress in terms of increasing levels of social equality and social cooperation was upheld. A lack of movement toward the ideal of

17. Henry George, *Social Problems* (London: Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1916), 8. Cf. its Japanese translation: George, *Shakai mondai*, trans. Eguchi Sansei (Tokyo: Jiyūsha, 1892), 17.

18. Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*, 12. Also see Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848–1918* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 219. On the idea of poverty as the source of wealth in Marx’s thought, see Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 63.

19. Shibue, *Shakaigaku*, 89.

20. George, *Progress and Poverty*, 228, 235.

social justice resulted in slavery and the impeded development or even death of a given society.

The socialist thinker Kōtoku Shūsui captured well the stark oppositions and inequalities of the civilized society that Kitamura, Shibue and George criticized. Writing in 1903, Kōtoku stated, “On the one hand, present day civilization has progressed to remarkable levels of brilliance and beauty; but concomitant with this is the darkness of poverty and crime...Day by day, the anguish, the starvation of the people of the world quickens; month by month it grows more acute.”²¹ Each advance in civilization was tempered by the unevenness of its distribution. “The need for manpower has been diminished but not the need for labor. The production of wealth has increased, but not the essentials of human livelihood. One must still endure the cruelties of labor, only to suffer the poverty of an insufficient livelihood. There are many schools being founded, but people are not free to get an education in them...Great progress has been made in the medical arts, but people are not free to enjoy adequate medical care.”²² Kōtoku proposed socialism as a means to overcome the failings of material progress.

His opponents depicted socialism as antithetical to “progress.” In 1907, for example, The Social Policy Association, engaged in debates surrounding a factory bill that was finally passed into law by the Diet in 1911, stated:

We oppose socialism because contriving to destroy the present economic system and to eliminate capitalists would be detrimental to the nation’s progress. We advocate the preservation of the present system of private ownership and the prevention, within that framework, of friction between social classes by relying on individuals’ actions and the nation’s authority.²³

21. Kōtoku Shūsui, “Shakaishugi shinzui,” in *Nihon no meicho*, vol. 44: *Kōtoku Shūsui* (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1970), 202–203. This translation is from Kōtoku Shūsui, *The Essence of Socialism*, trans. Sharon Sievers (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1969), 137.

22. Kōtoku, “Shakaishugi shinzui,” 201; Sievers, *Essence of Socialism*, 134–35.

23. Hiroshi Hazama, *The History of Labour Management in Japan*, trans., Mari Sako and Eri Sako (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 37. Also on this issue see Sheldon Garon, *The State and Labor in Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 35.

Here, friction was to be prevented because it obstructed production. For Kōtoku, however, such a solution as the one proposed above was unworkable because neither the actions of individuals nor the authority of the state could adequately address the social problems of the day while at the same time maintaining the “present system of private ownership.” For those unable to compete in “civilized society” (*ima no iwayuru bunmei shakai*) Kōtoku concluded, “there are long hours of work; there is anguish, unemployment, and finally, death by starvation. For those who would avoid starving to death, there remains only corruption and crime; men turn to thievery, and women to prostitution.”²⁴ Thus for Kōtoku, social problems, even crime and prostitution, were to be explained by economic conditions generated by the pursuit of material progress (not by a degenerate heredity, an argument examined below).²⁵

A little over a decade later, economist Kawakami Hajime, following a similar line of critique as Kōtoku, recorded his objections to progress as the pursuit of ever-higher levels of wealth and industrial output in a collection of articles serialized in the *Osaka Asahi Shinbun* in 1916. He began this critique, titled *A Tale of Poverty* (*Binbō monogatari*), by calling attention to the surprising scope of poverty not in Japan but in Europe. “England, America, Germany, France, and other European countries—all have remarkable wealth and yet their people are incredibly poor.”²⁶ Such widespread poverty even in the countries of the West, the so-called leaders of world civilization, demanded a critical reexamination of the idea of civilizational progress.

Kawakami rejected the Malthusian assertion that Japan’s population growth outpaced food production and that poverty and hunger, therefore, were the natural and inevitable results. New technology and new

24. Kōtoku, “Shakaishugi shinzui,” 202; Sievers, *Essence of Socialism*, 136–37.

25. Kōtoku’s list of the shortcomings of progress and civilization parallels that of Marx (Ch. 10: “The Working-Day” in *Capital*), and Kōtoku lists Marx’s *Capital* as one of his sources for this present work on socialism.

26. Kawakami Hajime, *Binbō monogatari* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2009), 13–14. For an extended discussion of Kawakami and this text, see Gail Lee Bernstein, *Japanese Marxist: A Portrait of Kawakami Hajime, 1879–1946* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, 1976), 87–98.

machines produced more than enough to feed all. The problem of poverty could be effectively addressed, Kawakami argued, but only through radical government-initiated policies to restructure the economy (moving it toward the production of daily necessities rather than luxury items) and to redistribute wealth.²⁷

But the problem of poverty was also a moral one: the selfish pursuit of self-interest produced and was now widening the gap between rich and poor. In short, economic progress had to be grounded, ultimately, not in output or wealth but in morality. “While some economists are inclined to take the progress of material civilization—the increase of wealth—as the sole gauge of civilization, I believe that the true meaning of civilizational progress lies only in as many people as possible coming to know the Way.”²⁸ The term “Way” referred to a moral path commonly associated with Confucian thought (and Kawakami himself included references to Mencius and Confucius in his introduction to *A Tale of Poverty*) but here in the context of Kawakami’s critique of material progress it conveyed a prioritization of care for others over the pursuit of wealth.

Thus Kawakami shared with Kitamura, Shibue, George, and Kōtoku a critical view of material progress as a viable trajectory toward the alleviation of poverty and other social contradictions. Their critique, though spanning two and a half decades and reflecting their own respective presuppositions and aims, was one response to growing social contradictions that could no longer be ignored or masked by a faith in material progress. But as this critique grew more assertive, it was met by an alternative ideological position that sought to represent social problems not as socially generated but as hereditarily transmitted.

Degeneration

A discourse on biological and social degeneration emerged as a response or counter-critique to the critique of material progress. For

27. Kawakami, *Binbō monogatari*. See 94–96 on Malthus; 114 & 148 regarding economic restructuring; 90 & 114 regarding the redistribution of wealth.

28. Kawakami, *Binbō monogatari*, 5. See 134 regarding economic progress and morality.

theorists of degeneration, Japan's social problems were too severe to ignore, but this did not mean that they agreed with those like Kōtoku, George, Kitamura, and Shibue on the diagnosis of these problems. Nor did they share with these critics of material progress a common prescription for their resolution. While critics of progress viewed strikes, riots and other social disruptions as a reasonable and unsurprising result of unjust social conditions and therefore called for economic restructuring and a redistribution of wealth, proponents of biological degeneration located the problem in the bodies and minds of those causing the disturbances. Biological degeneration, they maintained, was a hereditary physiological condition that affected not only the individual but society as a whole. Unless it could be checked, Japanese society would crumble. Politically, degeneration discourse functioned to silence (never entirely successfully) the critique of the narrative of material progress and its emphasis on economic productivity.

The extent, violence, and intensity of the various early twentieth-century social disruptions meant that “progress” could no longer be unproblematically presupposed. While few were prepared to abandon the notion of progress altogether, the threat of various “social problems” (*shakai mondai*) began to loom large in public discourse. Matsu no Satobito, a commentator on recent scientific research and its implications for Japanese society, for example, found Japan's poverty troubling, less for its potential to generate sympathy for the impoverished than for its potential to generate social conflict. He observed that even though Japan's wealth had grown, individual desires went unchecked. As a result, “the gap between rich and poor increasingly invites fierce class struggles, the struggle for survival is daily reaching new levels of barbarity, and crime and suicide rates increase steadily along with the advance of civilization.”²⁹ Ōhara Shōichi, an advocate of “social reformism” or the gradual reform of society rather than the abrupt and destructive reform he associated with socialism, expressed a similar perspective: “Together with recent developments and progress in such areas as commerce, industry, and politics, we must recognize that the emergence of

29. Matsu no Satobito, *Saikin jinsei no kagaku teki kenkyū* (Tokyo: Bokuminsha, 1915), 1–2. “Matsu no Satobito” (松の里人) is probably a pseudonym, although I have not been able to determine the author's real name.

many complex so-called social problems one after the other has placed society in a situation from which it truly cannot escape.” For Ōhara, overcoming these social problems was a matter of extreme urgency; at stake were “the life of the state and the fate of the nation”³⁰

Of course crime, poverty, and suicide were not the only concerns. Various other social disruptions—the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 and the Hibiya Riots in the aftermath of this war, the Red Flag Incident of 1908, the High Treason Incident of 1911, the Movement to Protect the Constitution in 1913—demanded explanation. If progress was a natural law intuited from evolution and Social Darwinism, if the march of civilization foretold ever higher levels of wealth, productivity, and the knowledge with which to order society and control nature itself, why then was Japanese society plagued by riots and war, uprisings, strikes, treasonous plots, crime, and poverty?

For some, the answer lay in a re-investigation (rather than a dismissal) of the “law” of evolution. Ōhara Shōichi, in a study of social problems in Japan, proclaimed, “evolution is a law of nature and there is nothing that is not governed by it.” But he sought to qualify the notion of evolution as unimpeded progress. “Though the terms *shinka* and *shimpo* are at times used as synonyms,” he explained, “this is a great error.” “Things both progress (*shimpo*) and degenerate (*taika*), this is the condition of evolution (*shinka*).”³¹ Biologist Thomas Huxley, whose works were widely read in Japan, held the same position. “It is an error,” he stated, “to imagine that evolution signifies a constant tendency to increased perfection... Retrogression is as practicable as progressive metamorphosis.”³² These statements suggest that in some cases Darwinian evolution and a conception of linear progress were so fused together that the idea of evolution as encompassing degeneration as well was not yet at the center of intellectual debate.³³ This is not to suggest that no

30. Ōhara Shōichi, *Shakai mondai* (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1902), preface, 1.

31. Ōhara, *Shakai mondai*, 162–63.

32. This citation, from Thomas Huxley, “Social Diseases and Worse Remedies” appears in Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 221. Also see Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 112.

33. On this point, see Peter J. Bowler, *The Invention of Progress: The Victorians and the Past* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 196. Bowler notes the effectiveness with which “Darwin’s theory had been incorporated into progressionism.” My point here is that the

conception of historical decline existed in early Meiji. Educator and scholar Katō Hiroyuki, for example, in the early 1880s called attention to the threat to Japan's survival inherent in the theory of Social Darwinism. For him it was clear that the survival of "inferior races" was in no way guaranteed. And Fukuzawa's works too touched on the idea of historical decline, after all the very notion of progress went hand in hand with exhortations not to "fall behind." But such early Meiji conceptions of historical decline differed from the degeneration discourse of late Meiji. With the former, the possibility of decline was a matter of historical forces, e.g. the military and economic power of the stronger and more "civilized" states of the West, while for the latter, decline stemmed from natural biological forces.³⁴ Throughout the remaining years of Meiji and into Taishō, works heralding biological and social degeneration continued to appear.

Kiryū Masatsugu's *Critique of Contemporary Society* (*Gendai bunmei no hiban*, 1907), a translation of *Degeneration* by German sociologist, journalist, and literary critic Max Nordau, contributed to fears of social degeneration.³⁵ Daniel Pick, in his study of degeneration in Europe, has shown how widely disseminated and internalized this notion was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of Nordau's *Degeneration* (originally published in German as *Entartung* in 1892 and translated into English in 1895), Pick writes, "Nordau argued that madness, suicide, crime and pathological literature symptomatised modern times. 'We stand now in the midst of a severe mental epidemic,' Nordau proclaimed, 'of a sort of black death of degeneration and hysteria...'"³⁶ Ōhara

effort to link evolution and biological degeneration in Japan marks a shift in the discourse on evolutionary progress.

34. See Katō Hiroyuki, "Jinken shinsetsu," in *Nihon no meicho*, vol. 34: *Nishi Amane and Katō Hiroyuki*, ed. Uete Michiari (Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha, 1972), 452. Moreover, the terms "taika" and "suitai" (degeneration) began to appear with increasing frequency in the context of human and social degeneration only from the mid-Meiji, that is, from the 1890s. Earliest usage tends to be in scientific writings, such as the 1889 translation of lectures by evolutionary biologist August Weismann as *Banbutsu taika shinsetsu*, trans. Ishikawa Chiyomatsu (Yokosuka: Ogawadō, 1889).

35. Max Nordau, *Gendai bunmei no hiban*, trans. Kiryū Masatsugu (Tokyo: Ryūbunkan, 1907). Kiryū's translation included only the four chapters of Book 1, titled "Fin-de-siècle": 1. The Dusk of the Nations; 2. The Symptoms; 3. Diagnosis; 4. Etiology.

36. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 24. Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln, NE & London:

Shōichi drew much the same conclusion five years earlier. Just as there are a great many examples of degeneration in the plant and animal world, Ōhara argued in 1902, this is true in the human realm as well. “Suicide, insanity, crime, pauperism (*pōperizumu*) [i.e. the idleness of the poor], violence, and so on—all are examples of human degeneration.”

Ōhara used the example of parasitism in plants to similarly categorize human degeneration. The parasitic plant in nature, he stated, “lacks the strength to maintain itself and so must always live off the life of other plants.”³⁷ This condition equally applied to the degenerate in human society. It is unclear whether Ōhara was familiar with or perhaps drawing upon Francis Galton’s similar assertions of human parasitism, though Galton’s theories of eugenics were indeed known in Japan by the early 1880s. Galton posited a “contrariety of ideals between...those of the animals that have to work hard for their food and the sedentary parasites that cling to their bodies and suck their blood...”³⁸ This image of the parasite is prevalent in late nineteenth century discussions on degeneration. Galton, for example, included a passage from Charles Booth in his *Essays in Eugenics*, that stated, “Their [the lowermost class in society] life is the life of savages...They render no useful service, they create no wealth: more often they destroy it.”³⁹ The British evolutionary biologist Edwin Ray Lankester, whose work was translated into Japanese in 1897, also made use of the parasite metaphor to warn of human degeneration, as did Japanese biologist Ishikawa Chiyomatsu.⁴⁰ Thus, thinkers in the West and in Japan characterized degeneracy as parasitism. In short, the degenerate member of society was the unproductive member.

University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 537.

37. Ōhara, *Shakai mondai*, 167–68, for his “examples of degeneration,” 168.

38. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 198. Concerning the introduction of Galton’s thought to Japan, see this article’s discussion (below) on eugenics.

39. Charles Booth, *Labour and Life of the People of London*, vol. 1 (London: Williams & Norgate, 1891), 38. See also Francis Galton, *Essays in Eugenics* (London: The Eugenics Education Society, 1909), 19–20.

40. Edwin Ray Lankester, *Jitsuyō dōbutsu*, trans. Ōmori Senzō (Tokyo: Matsueidō, 1897), 45–6. Also see Bowler, *The Invention of Progress*, 155–57, 195–96; Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 173; and Ishikawa Chiyomatsu, *Shinkaronteki dōbutsugaku* (Tokyo: Kōdōkan, 1908), Chapter 6: “Parasitism and Degeneration,” 189–204.

This same perspective is illustrated in the writings of Takagi Kanehiro, a naval physician trained in London who established in 1881 a medical training school called the “Seikai kōshūjo.” Takagi described “illness” as a “defect” inhibiting an individual’s development and “poverty” as “oftentimes the result of an individual not working enough.” “The poor and the sick,” he stated, “block the development of society” because they impose a burden on others. “The sick we must try to heal; the poor we must provide for materially. If such people did not exist, we could carry out joint projects with the materials that are today spent on the sick and poor. We could further the progress of society and increase the welfare of humanity. But because of these people, progress is obstructed.”⁴¹ For Takagi, then, the poor and the sick were not merely unproductive themselves, but drained the economic resources of society as a whole.

But assertions of biological and social degeneration did not imply a complete loss of faith in progress, suggesting that the ultimate goal was to contain degeneration and its attendant social discord so as to allow progress (read as production) to continue. Ōhara, for example, continued to ponder the question of progress. In an effort to answer his own question, “What is progress?” he constructed a definition with elements supplied by American sociologist Franklin Henry Giddings and French poet and philosopher Jean-Marie Guyau’s definitions of progress.⁴² Ōhara stated: “Viewed subjectively, progress is the development of spiritual life, objectively it is the increase in communication, the doubling of association, gradual progress in material welfare, the propagation of the population, and the evolution of rational activities.”⁴³ Progress, Ōhara continued, is always in accord with the increase of human “well-being”. Following British moral and social philosopher John S. Mackenzie’s discussion of this term, Ōhara listed three condi-

41. Takagi Kanehiro, *Shinshin shūyō* (Tokyo: Kobundō, 1916), 30–31.

42. Ōhara, *Shakai mondai*, 164–65. For Giddings definition of progress, see Franklin Henry Giddings, *The Principles of Sociology: An Analysis of the Phenomena of Association and of Social Organization* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1898), 359, where he states, “Objectively viewed, progress is an increasing intercourse, a multiplication of relationships, an advance in material well-being, a growth of population, and an evolution of rational conduct...Subjectively, progress is the expansion of the consciousness of kind.”

43 Ōhara, *Shakai mondai*, 165.

tions necessary for human well-being and hence for progress as well: “(1) economic wealth and abundance; (2) the gradual advance of the social structure and of social benefit; and (3) the development of human individuality.”⁴⁴ Though Ōhara defined progress in terms of human well-being and social benefit, well-being and social benefit themselves are here so intertwined with wealth accumulation that “progress” in this sense cannot be seen as consistent with the well-being Kōtoku, George and others called for.

While Ōhara drew upon Giddings and Guyau in formulating his understanding of progress, these thinkers also had much to say about degeneration. Guyau, in his *Éducation et hérédité: étude sociologique*, called for a restructuring of physical education in France to stave off “the physical degeneration of the race.” Such steps were necessary because, he warned, “Heredity will, if we do not take care, eventually bring on progressive degeneration...”⁴⁵ Giddings works, however, were more widely known in Japan at this time than Guyau’s. His *Principles of Sociology* and *Elements of Sociology* both appeared in Japanese translation (in 1900 and 1906, respectively). Giddings drew a close causal connection between the degenerate individual and the gradual degeneration of the social whole. “Degeneration in the population,” Giddings argued, “is inevitably followed by degeneration in both the social composition and the social constitution.”⁴⁶ Thus certain aspects of Guyau’s and Giddings’s works supported the claims of theorists of biological degeneration. But the work of translators was selective, not only in terms of the works they choose for translation, but in how they translated them.

Motoda Sakunoshin’s translation of Giddings’s *Elements of Sociology* is a case in point. His translation is complete except for a section on

44. Ōhara, *Shakai mondai*, 165-66. And see John Stuart Mackenzie, *An Introduction to Social Philosophy* (Glasgow 1890 and New York: 1895), 297. Ōhara probably gets this information on Mackenzie from Giddings, *The Principles of Sociology*, 356.

45. Jean Marie Guyau, *Éducation et hérédité: étude sociologique* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1889), 154. Cf. J. M. Guyau, *Iden ka kyōiku ka*, trans. Inage Sofū (Ryūbunkan tosho, 1918). Guyau’s *L’Art au point de vue sociologique* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1889) was also translated into Japanese. See J.M. Guyau, *Shakaigaku yori mitaru geijutsu*, trans. Ōnishi Yoshinori (Tokyo: Uchida Rokakuho, 1914).

46. Giddings, *Principles of Sociology*, 349-50.

democracy. He retained, for example, Giddings' definition of civilization ("that intercourse, both varied and organized, which develops great civic peoples, ever increasing in wealth and in population, and ever growing more democratic in mind."⁴⁷) but omits an entire chapter in which Giddings discusses democracy. "Democracy as a form of the state is popular sovereignty," Giddings wrote in this chapter. "It is a popular distribution of formal political power."⁴⁸ It may be that government censors found this passage on the popular distribution of political power too volatile for publication. Indeed, Motoda's translation would have been subject to government censorship in accordance with the Publication Laws of 1887 and 1893 (*Shuppan jōrei*) which targeted books and journals dealing with, among other things, "academic topics" (Article 2) and stipulated that "books that disturb stability and order" can be prohibited at the discretion of the government (Article 19). Moreover, this law specifically mentioned translations, indicating, "translators will be regarded as authors," and therefore subject to the same restrictions (Article 14).⁴⁹ In short, the above suggests that a discussion of civilization as the development of "ever increasing wealth" was acceptable (and consistent with the goals of the state) but a sharing of political power was not.

An important issue in discussions of progress and degeneration was biological heredity. Heredity was a key point of difference between those arguing for biological degeneration and those critiquing material progress. We saw above, for example, how Shibue foretold the possible death of the social organism. But this was not an assertion of biological degeneration. It was rather the assertion that the body (individual or social) must be cared for properly. Cooperation and equality must be maintained and where lacking they must be sought after. Nevertheless, his views were colored by the discourse on degeneration and decline. This is clearer in the writings of Henry George, from which Shibue drew.

47. Giddings, *The Elements of Sociology: A Textbook for Colleges and Schools* (Norwood, MA: Norwood Press and The Macmillan Company, 1898), 288. For the Japanese version, see Giddings, *Shakaigaku*, trans. Motoda Sakunoshin (Tokyo, Keiseisha, 1906), 395.

48. Giddings, *The Elements of Sociology*, 314.

49. See *Genron shuppan jōrei chūshaku* (Tokyo: Hakubunsha, 1888) The *Shuppan jōrei* is available on-line at <http://www.cc.matsuyama-u.ac.jp/~tamura/syuppanhou.htm#o19>.

George wrote, “The civilized world is trembling on the verge of a great movement. Either it must be a leap upward, which will open the way to advances yet undreamed of, or it must be a plunge downward, which will carry us back toward barbarism.” He maintained that society provided “indications” that it was “actually turning back again towards barbarism.” But for George, if society declined into barbarism (which he defined in terms of social injustice), it was not due to natural laws of heredity but rather to “evils arising from the unjust and unequal distribution.” Such evils, George maintained, “are not imposed by natural laws...they spring solely from social maladjustments...”⁵⁰ Social problems, therefore, were not a matter of hereditary degeneration and could be addressed through social policies.

Thus the meaning of degeneration could not be fixed by those who sought to link it to biology. If degenerate traits were indeed hereditary, then the regulation of the degenerate body might appear to be the natural and necessary course. But if such “degenerate” characteristics were social, then social policies might be able to redress the conditions responsible. As suggestions, critics of material progress put forward a closer examination of poverty and suffering, a redistribution of land and wealth, a wide-scale improvement in working conditions, an effort to meet the demands of those who went on strike, and in some cases, the reconfiguration or even abolition of the capitalist system itself. Proponents of biological degeneration, however, were in no way prepared to consider such a solution.

Hisamatsu Yoshinori, for example, in a critique of communism, stated, “If we try to realize a communal lifestyle for humanity, we will fall back to the uncivilized era of ancient times. Humanity will become an organism devoid of family, property, and the individual.” Such a world, he maintained, could only be a “chaotic society, without laborers, without capital, without government...” Food, clothing, land, houses, “even our wives and our children” would be jointly owned. Thus, for Hisamatsu, calling for social reform on these lines became an absurdity, an unviable option. To be sure, such hyperbolic representations served to

50. George, *Progress and Poverty*. See 385 regarding the leap upward; 379 for George’s “indications,” and 386 for social maladjustments.

delegitimize the object of Hisamatsu's critique. Yet, they also reflect the limits of his ideological position. If social problems signaled historical degeneration, the "proper" counter measure was to check the decline, not to spur it on by actively seeking a "chaotic" world devoid of capital, property, and labor. In other words, for Hisamatsu, communism as an alternative to late Meiji Japanese society lay outside the realm of common sense.⁵¹

To ground degeneration in biology rather than in "social evils" reflected a different diagnosis and assessment of the problem. A biologically informed conception of degeneration did not simply mean that Japan would now face greater levels of social turmoil: strikes, riots, and the violence that attended such social disruptions. Degeneration, for those who embraced its full implications, foretold the eventual dissolution of the Japanese folk. This was not a crisis to be resolved through a mere redistribution of wealth. It required a different solution.

Eugenics: Regulating the Degenerate Body

The immediate degeneration of society was not inevitable; many believed the integrity of the Japanese folk might yet be reinforced for a time.⁵² The desire to hold the degenerative process in check prompted various calls for regulating the degenerate body. Tanaka Katsunojō's 1899 translation of French psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot's *Heredity: A Psychological Study of its Phenomena, Laws, Causes, and Consequences* (*Shinsei iden ron*) lent authority to the contention that degeneration was a matter of genetic transmission. In this work, Ribot discussed connections between heredity (both physical and mental) and social atavism, the idea that societies can regress to earlier (barbaric) stages. "In our day," he wrote, "paternal affection, with the assistance of medical science...makes more and more certain the future of children, by saving the lives of countless weak, deformed, or otherwise ill-consti-

51. Hisamatsu Yoshinori, *Shakaigaku mondō* (Tokyo: Bungaku dōshikai, 1903), 15–16.

52. According to Nordau, "humanity had not yet reached the term of its evolution... Humanity is not yet senile...it can still recover itself." See Nordau, *Degeneration*, 540, and Bowler, *The Invention of Progress*, 197–98.

tuted creatures that would surely have died in a savage race, or in our own a century ago...The descendants go on degenerating, and the result for the community is debasement, and finally, the disappearance of certain groups.”⁵³ Ribot’s text, as this passage shows, also carried a clear though unstated suggestion for degeneration’s regulation.

Those in Japan familiar with Ribot’s arguments and with theories of biological degeneration generally desperately hoped to prevent the eventuality Ribot predicted. Matsu no Satobito proposed marriage laws as a means to this end. “The degeneration and decline (*taika suitai*) of the national body (*kokumin zentai*),” he stated, “is no different from alarming and contagious diseases. Those who are unhealthy in body or mind, therefore, should be forbidden to marry.”⁵⁴ But Matsu proposed even stronger measures. “The assertion of eugenicists that we strictly enforce the castration of the insane, idiots, the mentally ill, and so forth so as to prevent the breeding of their unhealthy descendents is a position of which we approve.” In fact, he described the implementation of such policies as “a matter of great urgency.” He stated that socialists ought to be the allies of eugenicists (he used the term *jinsbu kaizen gakusha*) as both sought to improve society. But they are at odds because for eugenicists, “poor houses, orphanages, labor insurance, and so forth protect those unfit to survive and would allow their many unfit descendents to breed and multiply. This, they say, is not a welcomed result from the standpoint of the improvement of the race.”⁵⁵ In contrast to this “pragmatic” standpoint, according to Matsu, socialists’ views of the ideal society were unrealistic and unrealizable.

If the society that socialists desire is realized, it will be possible, in their view, for everyone to be equal and to lead a good life. Thus, it is quite obvious to them that even those today seen as evil and those thought to be degenerate will exhibit features of equality, mildness, and health. In this way, once the social organization has been reformed and with

53. Théodule Ribot, *Heredity: A Psychological Study of its Phenomena, Laws, Causes, and Consequences* (London: 1875), 304. T. Ribot, *Shinsei iden ron*, trans. Tanaka Katsunojo (Tokyo: Kinkodō, 1899), and See Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 41.

54. Matsu no Satobito, *Saikin jinsei no kagaku teki kenkyū*, 273–74.

55. Matsu no Satobito, *Saikin jinsei no kagaku teki kenkyū*, 237–38.

the just distribution of wealth, even without making a fuss about the discipline of eugenics, all humanity will naturally become excellent and healthy.

But such idealistic social remedies, Matsu maintained, do not address the degenerate body. Once degeneration transforms the body's physical constitution, it cannot be returned to its original state, not by science and certainly not by mere social reforms.

For a person under such circumstances, it is physically impossible to return to their original state either by making the distribution of wealth just or by reforming the organization of society. However we look at it, I believe that unless those with marked indications of degeneration are subjected to castration, despite their opposition if necessary, to prevent the breeding of their unhealthy descendents, it will in no way be possible to bring about the ideal society.⁵⁶

For Matsu, then, because the problems of Japanese society were a matter of biological degeneration rather than social maladjustments, eugenics rather than social reform was the appropriate treatment.

Moral philosopher Yoshida Seiichi was also familiar with such views. In his *New Cultivation of National Morality* (*Kokumin dōtoku no shin shūyō*, 1914), he discussed arguments for prohibiting the less fit from marrying and/or reproducing, surveyed the work of Francis Galton, considered the problem of degeneration, and explained the new discipline emerging at this time in England, the United States, and elsewhere called *yūseigaku* (eugenics). But he made clear his “strong opposition” to these developments. This new discipline did not merely deal with “cats, dogs and horses,” he stated, and “as a method aimed at human beings, I cannot agree with it.” Eugenics, he argued, aimed not merely to produce superior offspring through unions of superior men and women, but also sought to prohibit from marriage and reproduction, through legislation and punishment, all those deemed inferior: those weak in body, those with debilitating physical or mental illnesses,

56. Matsu no Satobito, *Saikin jinsei no kagaku teki kenkyū*, 235–37.

even those defective in morality. Despite the recent attention to degeneration and eugenics, Yoshida maintained, “the issue that must be addressed first of all is social justice.” “The result of the rapid economic changes since the nineteenth century is a wide disparity between the poor and the wealthy; the distribution of wealth is extremely unjust.” He also called attention to the hardships of the laboring classes—long working hours, little pay, dangerous conditions—which, he noted, included large numbers of women and children.⁵⁷

Others, however, adopted a more favorable view of the new possibilities posed by eugenics research. Hiratsuka Raichō, for example, one of the founders of the Blue Stocking Society and active in the “New Woman” movement of the early Taishō period, called for legislation prohibiting marriage and procreation for those deemed degenerate. In her study of “sexology and social control in modern Japan” Sabine Frühstück calls attention to Raichō’s position in the early Taishō debates on birth control and the population problem. Frühstück writes: “Inviting the state’s interference in reproductive matters, Hiratsuka wrote that the “poor and ignorant lower classes” had no sense of responsibility and thus gave birth to countless children who would in turn also be poor and ignorant and, in the worst cases, spread “criminal seeds” (*zaiaku no shushi*).”⁵⁸

But we should recall that eugenics, at least in some form, emerged in the early Meiji period as well as a potential means to further Japan’s progress along the path of civilization. Sumiko Otsubo has noted that Fukuzawa Yukichi, “as early as 1881, two years before Francis Galton coined the term ‘eugenics,’” was already aware of Galton’s theories of heredity and inherited mental traits.⁵⁹ Fukuzawa wrote the preface to *The Improvement of the Japanese Race* (*Nihon jinshu kairyōron*), a work

57. Yoshida Seiichi, *Kokumin dōtoku no shin shūyō* (Tokyo: Kyōiku shinchō kenkyūkai, 1914), 148–56, 160–63.

58. See Hiratsuka Raichō, “Hinno no kahi o ronzu,” in *Hiratsuka Raichō chosakushū*, v. 2, ed. Hiratsuka Raichō chosakushū henshū iinkai (Tokyo: Ōtsuki shoten, 1983), 336–37. This passage is cited in Sabine Frühstück, *Colonizing Sex: Sexology and Social Control in Modern Japan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 124.

59. Sumiko Otsubo, “The Female Body and Eugenic Thought in Meiji Japan,” in *Building a Modern Japan: Science, Technology, and Medicine in the Meiji Era and Beyond*, ed. Morris Low (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 63.

written in 1884 by his disciple Takahashi Yoshio. In a discussion on natural and artificial selection, Takahashi called for the mixing of the blood lines of the Japanese “with people of different races from whatever countries” and emphasized the “good results” of *zakkon*, which he glossed in katakana as “inter-marriage.”⁶⁰ Thus, even in the 1880s some notion of eugenics existed in Japan. But eugenics as a scientific and academic discipline came to receive much broader attention within the discourse on hereditary degeneration that emerged during the late Meiji and early Taishō periods. For some at this time, eugenics appeared as a potential science for the eradication of those deemed responsible for society’s decline, those less able or less willing to produce and contribute to the project of wealth accumulation and progress.

Conclusion

The narrative of material progress that shaped the early Meiji intellectual landscape—an ideology that posited a historical trajectory leading from barbarism to civilization, from ignorance, poverty, and weakness to knowledge, wealth and power—directed attention away from poverty and other social contradictions toward an idealized vision of Japan’s future. But the heightened visibility and intensity of social problems, such as widespread poverty, undermined faith in this kind of progress and gave rise to a sophisticated body of critique calling for a redistribution of wealth. By the late Meiji period, this narrative of progress was largely displaced by a discourse on degeneration. Though heralding social decline, this discourse nevertheless functioned to silence critiques of material progress and their demand for social reform. By locating the source of social problems in the degenerate body rather

60. Takahashi Yoshio, *Nihon jinshu kairyōron* (Tokyo: Ishikawa Hanjirō, 1884), 99–100. Frühstück notes Takahashi’s call for “mass weddings between “whites” and “yellows” (*hakkō* or *shiroki zakkonron*.” See Frühstück, *Colonizing Sex*, 20. Also see Otsubo, “The Female Body and Eugenic Thought,” 63–64. For additional late Meiji/early Taishō studies of eugenics, see Unno Kōtoku, *Nihon jinshu kaizō ron* (Tokyo: Fusanbō, 1910); Sawada Junjirō, *Minshu kaizen mohan fūfu* (Tokyo: Keiseisha, 1911); Ujihara Sukezō, *Minzoku eiseigaku* (Tokyo: Nankōdō, 1914).

than in social maladjustments, calls for the redistribution of wealth could be dismissed as misunderstandings of actual conditions and the degenerate body's threat to the productivity of future generations could be contained. Although eugenics legislation in Japan did not appear until the establishment of the National Eugenics Law in 1940, this late Meiji/early Taishō narrative on degeneration served as an impetus to initial demands for such laws.⁶¹

Inasmuch as these historical trajectories were not simple descriptions of the “truth” of historical change but political ideologies, one of my aims in this article has been to think about what these narratives did, that is, about their praxis or performativity. Certainly, theorists of both narratives put forward critiques of social conditions they sought to change: the narrative of progress critiqued the ignorance and uncivilized “backwardness” of early Meiji’s “foolish masses” (*gumin*), their knowledge, and their values. The narrative of degeneration targeted those who, through strikes, uprisings, and written expression, sought to undermine the narrative of material progress. Both narratives, moreover, helped to legitimize the regulation and suppression of their opponents through education, legislation, and coercion. Eugenics provides but one, though perhaps the most poignant, example of the concrete, material consequences of these ideologies. Finally, through the idealized or dystopian ends they imagined, both reveal the limitations of the thinkable of their times.

We can elaborate on this last point by noting the clear parallel between the idealized vision of civilized progress and utopia, and between the telos of degeneration and dystopia. In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Frederic Jameson writes “the more surely a given Utopia asserts its radical difference from what currently is, to that very degree it becomes, not merely unrealizable but, what is worse, unimaginable.”⁶² That both the telos of material progress and of degeneration in modern Japan were imaginable suggests, of course, that they were not absolutely other. Both theorists of progress and of degeneration in Japan constructed—through

61. Nevertheless, eugenics legislation was submitted to the Diet repeatedly from 1934. See Otsubo, “The Female Body and Eugenic Thought,” 75.

62. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York & London: Verso, 2007), xv.

the concepts, values, beliefs, and knowledge of their own times—reformulated versions of their own societies. In other words, these narratives sought either to acquire more of what already existed or to retain what it seemed to be losing: wealth, power, productivity, social order. Their failure to envision radically different worlds reveals the limits of thought: an inability to conceive of a future society except as an extension of their own time or an inability to see the politicality of their own historical trajectories. Critiques of material progress—those, for example, calling for a world devoid of property—perhaps went further to envision radical otherness. This is why value positions or belief systems antithetical to the early Meiji pursuit of progress or to late Meiji/early Taishō efforts to contain degeneration’s threat to productivity could only be regarded as absurdities.

Historicizing and gauging the epistemological limits of trajectories of history in the past may help us to critically assess our own conceptions of historical change and their potential for oppression. If we can dispense, first of all, with questions of whether or not we are, “in truth,” progressing or degenerating,⁶³ perhaps we can begin to ask other questions. Is the representation of our own time as “progressive” or “degenerate” something more than merely an expression of the dominance or displacement of the values “we” seek to uphold? Are such representations part of a strategy—perhaps similar to that of late Meiji though to be sure inflected by our own historical concerns and context—for masking injustice or for deflecting a critique?

63. Some recent scholarship adopts such a critical view of progress. See, for example, Arnold Burgen et al., eds., *The Idea of Progress* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997); Bowler, *The Invention of Progress*; Gunther S. Stent, *Paradoxes of Progress* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Co., 1978). Stent retains the concept of progress but seeks to probe its limits.