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Japan Studies Under Attack: How Rational Choice Theory is Undermining America's Understanding of the World

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While one should not be cavalier about comparing the tragic AIDS epidemic to other social circumstances, the current state of American universities fits well the model of this disease. Like the AIDS virus that kills off white blood cells leaving a person vulnerable to deadly infection, increasingly popular rational choice theory is spreading in American universities and inflicting great damage. By denying the relevance of historical and cultural factors in understanding a nation's behavior, rational choice theorists are undermining Japan studies as well as other area studies programs and are making the U.S. vulnerable to foreign policy driven by ignorance and arrogance.

Like any relatively new disease, even AIDS, significant spread occurs before someone rings the warning bell, notifies the media, and informs the broader public of the dangers at hand. In this case, one of America's most noted authorities on Japan and China, Chalmers Johnson, has blown the whistle on this trend. Johnson, author of the single most important work on the Japanese state bureaucracy, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle*, taught for thirty years in the University of California system, the majority of that time at UC Berkeley serving as Chairman of both the Department of Political Science and the China Studies Program. Johnson left Berkeley to help create the School of International Relations and Pacific Studies at the University of California at San Diego, a new venture that promised to become Americas best funded and most relevant Asia studies center.

Unfortunately, Johnson's efforts to train a new cadre of American specialists on Japan, Korea and China have been successfully thwarted by the schools characterization and rejection of area studies as anachronistic and its fostering of a cesspool of rational choice ideologues. The incident that spurred Johnson to begin writing and faxing scores of letters around the nation and to author with E.B. Keehn the accompanying article, "The Whippers and the Whipped: Rational Choice and Asian Studies," is not as important as the response he got from academics around the nation. But to recount the story briefly, UC San Diego's School of International Relations and Pacific Studies sought to replace the recently retired Chalmers Johnson not with one of America's rising Japan studies stars, someone with language skill, knowledge of Japanese society, history and culture; a scholar having something novel and important to both teach students and on which to do further research. Rather, the school made an incestuous employment offer to one of its own UC San Diego graduate students, a person with no significant publications and whose main research

interest has been rice price supports by the LDP in the 1930s. None of this man's interviewing committee members thought to challenge him on the fact that the now beleaguered LDP did not come into being until 1955.

Nonetheless, the ornament that attracted those trying to hire him was his facility with the praxis of economic modeling and rational choice theory applied to Japan. While the dean of the School of International Relations and Pacific Studies attempted to characterize Johnson's blistering attack on the school's agenda as that of a disgruntled, wayward academic, Johnson received passionate, empathetic letters from scores of scholars around the nation, both within and beyond the field of Japanese studies, about the corruption of their own social science programs by rational choice dogmatists. At hand today is an academic civil war as fierce behind the scenes at Harvard University as on the surface at UC San Diego. At stake are the relevance of culture in our understanding of international affairs and the propagation of the dangerous ethnocentric notion that the West has beaten the rest, to paraphrase Francis Fukuyama's argument that the success of Western liberal capitalism has brought the world to America's feet.

The rise of rational choice in America correlates with the dismantling of the Soviet empire and the discrediting of Marxist/Leninism. The threat the Soviet Union posed to American interests following World War II motivated private foundations and the federal government to invest massively in Soviet studies. Russian language programs proliferated throughout the nation. Studies in Russian history and literature as well as in Soviet strategic thinking, international behavior and arms control became necessary ornaments at all major American universities. But complementing this national infrastructure of Soviet area studies was the emergence of another school of thought, that of game theoretic and other quantitative models to explain international affairs in the Cold War context. While the U.S. and Soviet Union competed in the world's biggest arms race, each eventually holding a nuclear knife to the other's throat, analysis that did not depend on knowing the Russian language, that did not require an understanding of Russian history and culture, that did not demand awareness of Soviet government and Communist Party institutional structures began to take hold. Like the pivotal George Kennan article, "Containment and Foreign Policy," that helped trigger America's sense of the Soviet threat and investment in Soviet studies, Thomas Schelling's 1960 work *The Strategy of Conflict* began the binding of economic analysis to political behavior and scored one of the first moves against traditional area studies.

During the Cold War, the titans of Soviet studies who read and spoke Russian; who could distinguish between Sokolovskii, Andropov, Arbatov, and Gromyko; who understood the weighting of institutions comprising the Soviet state, coexisted in their own detente with game theorists and numbers-crunchers. Over time, especially during the long and relatively undramatic Brezhnev years when the only things that seemed to change each year were the number, throw weight and accuracy of Soviet ICBMs, econometricians began to edge out those who could read *Pravda*. Mutual assured destruction did not require an understanding of either society by the other, just the realization that tripping the thermonuclear wire would result in the total annihilation of both societies.

Kennedy's whiz kids, people such as Robert McNamara, became the first to employ econometric methods to address both domestic and international problems. And the absorption of rational actor explanations of politics by universities was accomplished via Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision*, an important work assigned to nearly every freshman political science student in the U.S. The book attempts to explain the Kennedy-Khrushchev showdown during the Cuban missile crisis from three perspectives: rational choice, organizational theory, and governmental politics. Although Allison prefers the bureaucratic politics explanation and leaves the definitive explanation open, the rational actor model is the most compelling. The simplicity and parsimony of reducing complex organizations and nations to unitary rational actors that always seek to optimize their circumstances has become the sexiest analytic method in departments of political science today. Studies in organization theory, institutional structures, and general comparative politics are disappearing from the academic scene while rational choice is gaining greater prominence and prevalence.

Despite Boris Yeltsin's dramatic tenure, the dissolution of the Soviet empire has translated into reduced funding of Soviet studies centers. Those committed to researching Russian political behavior through original sources and in the Russian language are far worse off than those with econometric skills. The high priests of nuclear deterrence strategy, the wizards of arms control, who are the forefathers and partners of modern rational choice theorists simply hop from one topic to the next. To them, all threats appear the same; all leaders, voters, consumers, producers, generals and bureaucrats behave similarly around the world. Rational choice posits that utility optimization is culture and value blind. And if provided the same options and constraints, Rwandans, Bolivians, Japanese, and North Koreans would behave the same as Americans; they would be indiscernible from each other. The worst result of the Cold War's end and the rise of American triumphalism is this assumption that all people of other nations are converging in lifestyle and world view with the triumphal West. As we ponder the steps the U.S. should take with North Korea and its potential nuclear bomb program or consider other crises in the making, rational choice theorists are negating complexity and cultural pattern and shaping reality to fit neat equations. Public policy in such an environment is sure to be riddled with missteps, miscalculations, inconsistencies, and eventual tragedy for all parties.

America has largely depended on Japan to fund language and Japan studies programs at U.S. universities. The Japan Foundation, the Center for Global Partnership, the U.S.-Japan Foundation and Sasakawa Peace Foundation are the leading funders of such educational programs in America. Thus far, U.S. funded Japan-related projects are led by the U.S.-Japan Friendship Commission, the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Trust and the Pew Charitable Trusts. But the scale of funding for Japan studies as compared to the former levels of funds pumped into Soviet studies is minuscule. The trigger for greater U.S. funding for Japanese studies will be its assessment of Japan as one of the more important global threats to U.S. interests. Although most policy makers publicly state that the U.S.-Japan alliance is in strong shape, others speculate that current economic stresses and shifting security priorities are eroding that relationship. Sharp Corporation's refusal to build flat panel displays to specifications requested by the Department of Defense resulted in the U.S. government setting aside half a billion dollars to build a domestic industry in

flat panel production. If Ichiro Ozawa, the strong man behind Japanese politics today, achieves half of what he is attempting, Japan will cast off its Article 9, No-War Clause of the Japanese Constitution and emerge as a normal nation with a normal military. Japan's emergence as a mature country with a probable permanent seat one day on the U.N. Security Council will compel it to formulate a foreign policy driven by its own national interests, which will certainly diverge more seriously than already is the case from the national interests of the United States. And an annual trade imbalance of more than \$60 billion in Japan's favor makes it increasingly risky for U.S. politicians to justify a one-way security guarantee of Japan.

Japan certainly has not yet replaced the Soviet Union as the central threat to American interests and survival. But if all current vectors that are in place now persist, if Japan continues to amass staggering current accounts surpluses, targets competitive U.S. industries such as aerospace and telecommunications, gains control of critical technologies and then fails to provide access to the U.S., and appoints cabinet ministers who regularly deny that Japan bore any responsibility for the horrors of World War II, then it is conceivable that Japan may one day be perceived as America's most significant enemy. The shift away from area studies in American universities to culture-blind rational choice modeling will generate a dynamic in the U.S.-Japan relationship that can prove very dangerous. In tit-for-tat, zero-sum games with each party attempting to maximize its own outcome, problems can escalate. Eventually, only the fear of total war compels both sides not to do battle. But that kind of relationship will not lend itself to the kind of global partnership that George Bush and Bill Clinton have spoken about, nor will it promote U.S. goodwill visits by the Japanese royal family such as just witnessed recently. The complexity of U.S.-Japan relations is only going to increase and will require specialists with language ability and knowledge of Japanese society to positively manage the future of that relationship. The academic and governmental trend, however, is to negate complexity and to view U.S.-Japan affairs through the prism of neoclassical economics and rational choice.

In the recent past, the vested interests in the U.S.-Japan relationship have viewed Chalmers Johnson, Karel van Wolferen, James Fallows, Glen Fukushima, and other so-called "revisionists" skeptically. Revisionists threatened the old order of academics who remained focused on an earlier struggling and innocent Japan, trying to catch up with the West, rather than on the neo-mercantilist Japan that was challenging American dominance in world markets and quickly surpassing the U.S. in education, savings, and research and development investment. Ironically, it is the revisionists who have been America's strongest advocates of increasing awareness of Japan, its language, history as well as its political and economic structures and behavior.

But division between revisionists and chrysanthemum clubbers is no longer relevant to future U.S.-Japan relations. The battle lines today are between rational choice theorists and advocates of area studies--Japan studies in this case. The tendency today for universities to promote those skilled at econometric manipulation of reality, as in the case at UC San Diego, and to deny advancement to students with real world knowledge and comparative theoretical discipline (as recently happened to one Japanese UC San Diego graduate

student who had been a star protege of Professor Mineo Nakajima at the Tokyo Institute of Foreign Studies) promises a bleak future for those having a passionate interest in other nations. Those who are twisting and creating reality to fit rational actor models and symbolic mathematical equations are increasingly advising the federal government on international affairs. Some of these rational choice theorists are the ones calculating whether or not to make a surgical military strike in North Korea. These same people will be helping to direct the future course of U.S.-Japan relations. The absence of Japan expertise in the Clinton administration underscores the fact that this process is well underway.

Ironically, Marxist/Leninism also posited that people in all nations, workers and managers, behaved according to simple economic laws of profit and exploitation leading to unrest and revolution. The cross-cultural economic simplicity of Marx's thesis is remarkably similar to rational choice orthodoxy that all political behavior can be reduced to the economically optimizing behavior of singular rational actors. The chaos in U.S. foreign policy today, the inconsistency of America's Japan policy, reflect the wrong-headed direction away from area studies. To correct the trend, it must be made clear that those who could not read Russian but could count missiles did not win the Cold War. Otherwise, rational choice orthodoxy spreading disease-like through American universities and slowly undermining and crippling area studies programs, will blind America, cause bungled assessments of international affairs, and cause us to strike out at the wrong times and not strike at the right times. A disaster is brewing, and U.S. universities are much to blame.

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