

# Cutting History Off At The Pass

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Not long after the coup d'état of 1868 that overthrew the Tokugawa Shogunate and established the Meiji regime, something peculiar, but also symptomatic, occurred (*Re-Inventing Japan: Time, Space, Nation*, 1998) in Japan. The fine Australian historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki describes it in the following manner. Taking cues from the political culture of Imperial China, the Tokugawa viewed the world spatially, along a horizontal axis, in terms of a series of rings centred on Kyoto-Edo, with each ring marked by increasing physical distance as well as degrees of cultural difference from the core. Accordingly, in the Japanese state's immediate periphery, the 'hairy Ainu,' of Siberian stock, who had been steadily pushed out of Honshu to the chilly northern island of Hokkaido, were forbidden to dress Japanese, live in Japanese-style houses, adopt Japanese customs and religion, and use the Japanese language. In the case of the Ryukyu islands on Japan's southern periphery, whose ruler was long a tributary of both Peking and Kyoto, the annual tributary mission was instructed to dress as exotically as possible — strange hats and Chinese-style clothes with gaudy pinks, reds, yellows and sky-blues. After 1868, however, the nationalist Meiji oligarchy came to think of these peripheral peoples along a temporal, vertical axis, such that the Ainu and the Ryukyans came to be regarded as backward, isolated residues of an original Japanese people. Hence a radically new policy, whereby these residues were compelled to dress, act, dwell and speak like their advanced 'relatives' at the centre. A new form of time was emerging in Japan, no longer marked discontinuously reign by reign, but by a

vast, homo-geneous, empty historicity. "Backwardness" appeared alongside, and half-occluding, "differentness". State policy, in ideological name at least, was to rush these residuals of antiquity forward, across millennia, with the help of the nationalist time-machine, so that they would catch up, in a few decades, with their headlong-developing siblings.

The dramatic policy face-about in Japan was singular only in its particular theatrics. Late nineteenth and twentieth century nationalisms all over the world, whether already married to states or still bachelors, were very busy with comparable reconceptualizations, turning scorned, alien, peripheral social groups into "backward siblings", who needed to be time-warped into the happy presenthood and futurehood of their "advanced seniors". One should remember that this transformation started long before Social Darwinism came on the scene. It is superbly depicted by San Martín's famous emancipatory-genocidal proclamation of 1821 that "henceforth the indios shall not be called Indians or natives; they are children and citizens of Peru and shall be known as Peruvians" — like everyone else in the new republic of Peru. An impressive fast-forward from the time of Pizarro.

Nonetheless, the time-machines I have been mentioning had their spatial aspects, which became more important as Social Darwinism, often pumped up with the steroids of missionary Christianities, spread in the age of high imperialism. One conscious motive behind the fast-forward movement was the fear that "backward siblings". if they stayed "backward" or became too visible, could be read by the outside world dominated by Europe as contaminating the claimed contemporary modernity of peripheral nations as a whole, and thus push these nations into the position of being backward in the eyes of the UK, France, Germany, the US, and so on. When, in *Noli Me Tangere*, Elias describes his fleeing the authorities into the Cordillera, he speaks of the inhabitants as *tribus infieles é independientes*, "backward" from the angle of the Catholic religion, but at least independent, which the *indios* like himself are not. (Rizal, 250) Isabelo de los Reyes warmly described himself as "a brother of the forest

peoples, the Aetas, the Igorots, and the Tinguians". (de los Reyes, Introduction) But Filomeno Aguilar has beautifully shown the anger and shame of the ilustrados in Spain when G-stringed Cordillerans were exhibited publicly as a component of the colony's population. (Aguilar, 605-637)

Feeding into all this acceleration was what I have called early globalization. One could argue that this deep change was announced by the steamship, which for more than a century was far the largest, most expensive, mobile piece of industrial machinery — whose ascent demanded the colossal engineering projects of the Suez and the Panama canals. The steamship was the basic mechanism for the transportation of the physical signs of advanced modernity to the peripheries: locomotives, mining equipment, motorcars, typewriters, floating docks, electricity generators, machine-guns, and so forth. Yet these monuments of modernity were still typically imperialist exports and colonial imports, and their arrival was independent of the will of local colonized populations. I believe, however, that true globalization's arrival came with the invention and diffusion of the telegraph, accompanied by the massive construction of under-ocean cables around the world, which made possible the transmission of messages across the planet in a matter of minutes - faster than the speed of the early world-wide web in fact. This was the first time in history that communications overwhelmingly outsped, thousands of times over, human movement itself. Time was thus becoming more and more empty and homogeneous. The shock of this new technology is still dimly, dustily visible in the antique naming of London's *Daily Telegraph* and Holland's *De Telegraaf*.

In the case of the late nineteenth century Philippines, which Isabelo de los Reyes mournfully described as "this remote colony on which the light of civilization only dimly and fitfully gleams" (Reyes, 19), the key date was 1870, when the Captain-General sent his first telegram to Madrid. But the message flashed not through the wiring of the imperial Spanish state, but rather through that of an interlocking set of privately-owned, non-Spanish corporations. The telegraph was something unlike locomotives, railway carriages and machine-guns, for it could be