

# On Hirota Masaki ‘Structures of Discrimination in Modern Japan’\*

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### 1. Rethinking of modernity

Hirota Masaki (1934–2018) is one of the leading scholars of people’s history (民衆史), school that emerged in 1960s and 1970s in Japan, under the influence of Marxism but with a radically new perspective about 17th–19th centuries common people as a political subject. His article ‘Structures of Discrimination in Modern Japan’ is a commentary put to a collection of materials about the various types of discrimination in modern Japan, a volume of a series for intellectual history of modern Japan, published in 1990.<sup>1</sup> It argues that the discrimination in modern Japan was created not by imperfect modernization but by modernity itself, while having continuity from the early modern period. Discrimination against the poor, prostitutes, prisoners and so on was practiced through ‘confinement’ of the people by ‘avoidance’ and ‘the gaze’ of racism (「異類」), public health (「不潔」) and morality (「不徳」), with reference to the Emperor system as a ‘transcendent authority’ rebuilt with the aim ‘to coordinate ... the independent and spontaneous energies of all members of society.’ This is a perspective for a ‘total history’ of discrimination suggested by Hirota, as a purpose of the book as a whole. The concepts like ‘confinement’ and ‘the gaze’ seem to refer to Foucault, but it is not clearly mentioned at least in the article.<sup>2</sup>

Understanding the discrimination in modern society as a residuum of feudal relations has been broadly shared in modern history which has a progressist view. For example, in Italian history, the gap between South and North of the peninsula had been generally recognized as a ‘backwardness’ of southern

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<sup>1</sup> Hirota Masaki, ‘Nihon Kindai Shakai no Sabetsu Kôzô’ in *Sabetsu no Shosô, Nihon Kindai Shisô Taikei* vol.22, edited by Hirota Masaki [Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1990], pp.435–516 (ひろたまさき「日本近代社会の差別構造」『日本近代思想体系22 差別の諸相』岩波書店、1990年、435–516ページ). The article was preliminarily translated by Cornell Graduate Seminar 1993 (Micheal Bourdaghs, Lewis Harrington, Yumi Morishige, Joseph Murphy, Glenn Sullivan) edited by Brett de Bary and Naoki Sakai (unpublished).

<sup>2</sup> He mentions to Foucault only once on the page 478.



Italy resulted from persistent feudal relations and delay of modernization and industrialization by the 1980s. This kind of view was gradually changing since the 90s, when it came to be argued that the agenda of nation-state building itself made the South as the inappropriate Other of the nation. We can see the historians in Italy, in Japan and in other places, were coping with the same issue of rethinking of modernity at that time.

## 2. Gender and sexuality

Although pointing out that the discrimination against women 'pervaded the social fabric,' Hirota took up only prostitutes in the book because it would be included in the other volumes of the series. In that sense he did not fully face the issue of gender and sexuality in this article. But I think it is very important that he spoke to the prostitution and the government's policy of 'regulation and a closing off the body,' *Kakoikomi* (「囲い込み」) of the prostitutes, considering the structure of modernity causing exclusion.

The notion of the confinement of female body reminds me the argument of Italian and American feminist scholar Silvia Federici,<sup>3</sup> who found that Marx failed to figure out the importance of exploitation of women in capitalism naturalizing the sphere of reproduction in the Wage for Housework Movement in the 1970s. Her main work *Caliban and the Witch*,<sup>4</sup> published in 2004, demonstrates the exploitation of women and appropriation of their bodies by capital are essential for the development of capitalism.

Federici paid attention to the phenomenon of witch-hunting, reached at its peak in the 16th and 17th centuries, going along with 'enclosure (囲い込み)' of the communal lands. Referring to Marx, who uses the term 'primitive accumulation' as 'the historical process upon which the development of capitalist relations was premised' (*Caliban*, 12), Federici included in the process 'the development of a new sexual division of labor subjugating women's labor and women's reproductive function to the reproduction of the work-force,' which is absent in Marx (*ibid.*).

In witch-hunting women who were old and incapable of reproduction or were seen dissolute were executed and killed as witches. The knowledge of abortion and contraception was regarded as witchcraft. It also accompanied the disciplining of women, which divided women into mothers and prostitutes—both were put under control of the state, spokesman of capital: the former by medicalization of reproduction and demographic policy, the latter by licensing of prostitution. She regards witch-hunting as the war to deprive women of autonomy in the sexuality and reproduction and to make the women 'a machine for the production of new workers.' This another primitive accumulation has moved forward through the 'enclosure' of female body, so that misogyny dwells at the core of modern capitalism. Considering gender inequality in the Covid-19 crisis, the structure keeps obviously functioning.

## 3. Establishing of modern capitalism through discrimination

Hirota talks little about capitalism in this article. Saying that 'since "bummei kaika" ideology

<sup>3</sup> Silvia Federici (1942–) is a feminist activist and a political theorist. In 1972, she co-founded the International Feminist Collective, which launched the campaign Wages for Housework internationally. She is professor emerita at Hofstra University, previously worked as a teacher in Nigeria for many years, and co-founded the Committee for Academic Freedom for Africa.

<sup>4</sup> Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* [New York: Autonomedia, 2004] (シルヴィア・フェデリーチ、小田原琳・後藤あゆみ訳『キャリバンと魔女—資本主義に抗する女性の身体』以文社、2017年).

was, more than anything else, an affirmation of the “naturalness” of human desire, and human happiness was seen as the product of rational effort to fulfill this desire,’ he treated the issue of economy, but only in terms of changing of attitude to the poor, in other words, as an aspect of cultural change. Above all, as his reference to the prison system shows, Hirota uses the term *Kakoikomi* (「囲い込み」) in the sense of exclusion or segregation, not ‘enclosure’, an act of possessing. But still, when he says that the prisoners were often exploited as prison labor, or that *Yūkaku* (「遊郭」, red-light district of modern era) were the zone of ‘confinement’ controlled by the police by means of licensing, it would suggest that the ‘confinement’ system is a structure not for extinguishing the victims of discrimination, but for maintaining them from necessity, while making them invisible.

It was arguably only in the Meiji era that Japanese women obtained the conditions for social activity and ventured the first step towards sexual equality; at the same time, it was only in the Meiji era that the direct control of prostitutes by the authorities begun, and the existence of such prostitutes spread not only to the remotest corners of the nation, but also to various area abroad. With few exceptions, most men, and many women, took the existence of these prostitutes for granted, and also led daily lives taking the existence of house-maids (i.e. wives) for granted. Such discrimination against women ... seems that it would have had the power to fundamentally define the consciousnesses, sensitivities, and styles of ‘discrimination’ by people living in the Japanese islands ... against other human beings.<sup>5</sup>

Such a recognition of Hirota is resonated with Federici’s argument. He perceives the invention of gender hierarchy and the discrimination based on gender and sexuality at the core of modernity. The question addressed by them are certainly still valid.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from the preliminary translation.

