

Bernier, Bernard (1988) *Capitalisme, société et culture au Japon*. Montréal/Cergy-Pontoise, Presses de l'Université de Montréal/Publications orientalistes de France, 456 p.

Graham E. Johnson

Volume 34, numéro 91, 1990

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/022099ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/022099ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département de géographie de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0007-9766 (imprimé)

1708-8968 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Johnson, G. E. (1990). Compte rendu de [Bernier, Bernard (1988) *Capitalisme, société et culture au Japon*. Montréal/Cergy-Pontoise, Presses de l'Université de Montréal/Publications orientalistes de France, 456 p.] *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 34(91), 122–123. <https://doi.org/10.7202/022099ar>

dates mentionnées. Nous regrettons également le caractère lacunaire, par rapport au texte, du glossaire et de l'index des noms figurant à la fin du livre.

Précisons pour conclure, et sans aucune intention d'adoucir les critiques ci-dessus, que ce premier tome sur l'histoire du Japon (il y en aura deux autres) est un ouvrage d'une richesse exemplaire.

Dario LOPRENO
Département de géographie
Université de Genève



BERNIER, Bernard (1988) *Capitalisme, société et culture au Japon*. Montréal/Cergy-Pontoise, Presses de l'Université de Montréal/Publications orientalistes de France, 456 p.

An understanding of Japan, its economy, society and culture, is strategic in the contemporary world. In a world system in which capitalism is the major force, Japan remains a curiosity. A densely populated set of islands off the coast of East Asia, with few resources, Japan is the dominant force in the global economy. It is not merely dominant but remains as the only major force in the global economy whose cultural roots are other than those whose origins can be traced to (western) Europe. There is no protestant ethic to explain the emergence of a capitalist economic system from the moment in 1853 when Matthew Perry negotiated a treaty with representatives of the *shogun* to open Japanese ports to American shipping. By 1919, Japan had entered the first rank of world capitalist nations. It had firmly turned its back on its agrarian past and had, in Bernier's words, "passed the point of no return". In this remarkable and admirable book, Bernier attempts to provide a comprehensive account of the meaning and significance of the process of social transformation between 1853 and 1919.

The study is remarkable for several reasons. One is that it is a pioneering effort in francophone scholarship on Japan. A second is that it is an extraordinarily competent synthesis of a great deal of diverse and often contentious scholarship. The third is that it is a clearly written work of social history by a well-trained social anthropologist with an eye for analytical connections that comes from a deep understanding of social and cultural processes. Finally, it challenges some entrenched notions about Japan's late nineteenth century capitalist transformation in a precise and straightforward manner without dogma.

The study covers an enormous amount of ground. At its core is the nature of the Meiji restoration and the creation of a distinctive economic and political system after 1868 allowing Japan unquestionably to become one of the "World Powers" by the Versailles Conference, which

marks the end of one stage of the processes set in motion by Peary's visit in 1853. In order to answer some central questions about the course and significance of the final years of the Tokugawa period and the new course that is charted throughout the Meiji, the volume delves deeply into Japanese history.

One key issue is the nature of the traditional agrarian society of Japan. The first part of the study, therefore, is a detailed account of Japanese feudalism. An opening chapter briefly discusses Medieval Japan, the origins of the Imperial system after the sixth century and the system of military administration from the eleventh century until it was overwhelmed by the Tokugawa victory at Sekigahara in 1600. Succeeding chapters discuss the political system of the Shogunate, based upon a particular form of rural society in which a status group of warriors was able to tap the surplus of fiefdoms granted to them. The growth of market forces, the Edo merchants, and the growth of philosophical and ideological forces round out the account of Tokugawa society before 1853. A final chapter assesses the impact of Peary's efforts to "open up" Japan to new forces and the fall of the Tokugawa.

The second part deals with the Meiji period. It describes the new Japanese state of 1868 and indicates the major economic and political trends up to 1919. It includes a discussion of the development of an industrial system (with its social horrors) and the growth of an industrial proletariat. There is an account of the creation of a centralized and autocratic state (especially after 1889), details of the traumas of rural development and a provocative discussion of the growth of Japanese imperialism up to 1919. The seeds of later developments are clearly and unambiguously sown in Meiji only to grow and flower in Showa, which ends only in 1989.

A final chapter effectively summarizes the arguments of the study and indicates some important conclusions. There are two major issues raised. One asks if Tokugawa can be termed feudal. The answer is a positive one. The manner in which it is answered challenges the reluctance of American "modernization" theorists to see Tokugawa Japan as "truly" feudal. It is not merely a question of definition but goes to the heart of the theoretical issue of whether Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century was "ready" for capitalism, requiring only Peary's push. The study suggests that a response to Western imperialism gave rise to a major capitalist restructuring of Japanese society and the creation of a state, in which selected aspects of the Japanese tradition were consciously incorporated. The political and economic form was, nonetheless, new. The process parallels, in a remarkable way, that of Bismark's Germany.

Not all specialists of Japanese society will fully agree with Bernier's analysis. The skill in which he interweaves complex issues, however, will be applauded. The clarity with which the arguments are made will make the volume accessible to those who do not regularly read French and who find the metaphors of French academic writing sometimes daunting. The volume is the first of three. A second will analyze the growth of Fascism and Militarism which ends in the twin disasters of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The third volume will bring developments up to the contemporary period. They are eagerly awaited.

Graham E. JOHNSON
Department of Anthropology and Sociology
University of British Columbia