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The Eternal Continuity of Japanese Politics: an Historical Analysis based on three Concepts

di FEDERICO LORENZO RAMAIOLI¹

Abstract – *In Japanese recent history, the fragmentation of the political spectrum appears as something structural of its national system. Nevertheless, beyond the exteriority of political factions and currents, a sense of eternal continuity on crucial issues seems to permeate Japanese politics and even Japanese law. This ideal continuity, also rooted in the tension between tradition and innovation characterizing the land of the Rising Sun, can be analyzed from multiple viewpoints. In this article, I will examine it according to three concepts: the role of the imperial institution, the concept of kokutai and the maintenance in power of the ruling class in time of political crisis.*

Introduction

When thinking about Japan, it is hard not to think about a country that had successfully conjugated, in the course of the centuries, tradition and innovation, antiquity and modernity, in an inspiring and unique fashion that actually came to define its very image. The reverence toward tradition, in particular, can be considered as a characterizing feature of Japanese society, outlining both an ethic and an esthetic, so visible as a never-changing trait of the country's way of conceiving the world and society. Japanese spiritual syncretism greatly contributed to shape a collective identity based on concepts such the Confucian ancestors' cult, the Buddhist sense of impermanence and the idea of a creative force permeating nature and reality. All of these cultural influxes built a cultural and intellectual milieu in which the idea of continuity

¹ The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any Italian institution or agency.

could not but play a preeminent role in conceiving social dynamics and relations.

In the political and legal fields as well, the idea of continuity is something deeply rooted in the Japanese *Weltanschauung*. In spite of the changes and ruptures that have taken place in the land of the Rising Sun, modifying the concrete ways of exercising power and of delivering justice, it is possible to detect a more profound sense of continuity that, more or less consciously, creates a *fil rouge* between different times and different political governances. It is a cultural and spiritual heritage that permeates the Japanese way of thinking and that, in the course of history, has been manifested in different ways and in multiple circumstances. Japan is indeed a country in which every political analysis must be properly contextualized from a cultural and historical point of view, to be harmoniously located in its native theoretical framework and to avoid intellectual biases. To understand Japanese political dynamics in our contemporaneity, it is therefore necessary to priorly examine its sense of ideal and uninterrupted continuity, that flows through the centuries and lasts up to these days, analyzing some recurring trends and evident parallelisms. This is even truer with regard to the recent past, in the timespan between the Meiji Restoration (1868) and the adoption of the democratic constitution (1947), after the defeat in the World War II, a period that greatly contributed to define the present attitude of modern Japan toward law and politics.

In this article, I will examine the ideal continuity of Japanese political and legal system with particular reference to this crucial period and based on three aspects: the role of the imperial institution, the peculiar idea of *kokutai*, and the maintenance in power of the ruling class in times of political and social changes. Each one of these dimensions is functional in understanding a sense of continuity, that will ultimately help grasping some usually undetected or underrated recurring themes and schemes in Japanese law and politics.

The role of the imperial institution

Japan is the world's most ancient monarchy, with its 2.600 years long tradition of imperial government, whose origin is however

suspended between legend and history. While the first emperors are undoubtedly to be considered mythological heroes of Japanese folklore, bridging heaven and earth, the historical figures of the existing rulers draw nevertheless a long-lasting history of monarchical system, like in no other country in the world. This is not only true with reference to the institution *per se*, but also and even the more if we consider that in Japan the imperial line of succession has ideally never been broken since the mythical foundation of the country. This is also a point in which legend and history meet, but in spite of the lack of reliability as for the first centuries of the country's history, it highlights the essentiality and the importance of the unicity of the ruling dynasty. It establishes a narrative, in which the imperial institution with its unbroken and uninterrupted succession to the Chrysanthemum Throne represents a guarantee of stability for the nation as a whole.

In the context of the dimension of continuity of Japanese politics, the role of the imperial institution can be examined according to multiple viewpoints, with special reference to the emperor's cult, the Confucian legacy and the political role of the sovereigns.

As for the first point, it is preliminary necessary to observe that the cult of the emperor acquired a central dimension in the political system of Japan only in relatively recent times, especially after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when it was developed and assimilated to the framework of State *shintō*². It was in those years, after the fall of the Tokugawa *bakufu*, that the Meiji oligarchs stressed the necessity of revering the emperor to foster their political narrative aimed at restoring the centrality of the imperial court in the person of young Mutsuhito. Although not a religious cult, this reverence for the emperor can be undoubtedly considered as spiritual and cultural at the same time, in that it strengthens the bond between the people and the ruler, highlighting at the same time the divine origin of the reigning family. The very word *tennō*, commonly translated as "emperor", literally means "heavenly ruler", establishing a first connection between heaven

² On this, see S. Shimazono, *State Shintō and Emperor Veneration*, in B.A. Shillony (ed.), *The Emperors of Modern Japan*, Leiden, 2008, pp. 53-79. On the peculiar conception of the emperor's divinity, see B.A. Shillony, *Emperor and Religion in Twentieth-Century Japan*, in *Collected Writings of Ben-Ami Shillony*, London-New York, 2005, pp. 37-39.

and earth³, not without Confucian reminiscences. According to Japanese cosmogony, in the foundation's myth the first emperor, Jinmu *tennō*, is a descendant of solar deity Amaterasu-ō-mi-kami, inscribing at an ideal level the ruling dynasty into a legendary and divine ancestry⁴. This ascendancy is more than an ennobling factor like in the case of Western encomiastic literature, but is actually functional to shape a political awareness, in which the Japanese rulers, and the Japanese people for extension, are considered to be different from all other people. It is a sort of manifest destiny, in which the uninterrupted lineage of Amaterasu reigns because of a sort of fatalistic providence, granting political continuity to the Throne and because of the Throne: while other reigns and rulers change and fall, Japan stably stays through the centuries, from the ancient times of the *kami* to the industrial era. The implications in terms both of domestic and foreign politics are evident, and this is especially true after the Meiji Restoration, with the progressive expansion of Japan's sphere of influence in Asia. With the advent of the militarist era and with the degeneration of the Pacific war, the emperor's cult becomes the more and the more emphasized, becoming a central cultural force in the theorization of a "new order" in the Asian continent⁵, and for the establishment of a "co-prosperity sphere" in the region⁶. With the defeat and the US occupation, a reconsideration of the imperial cult happened to be necessary, with the so-called "humanity

³ Replicating «the rule of the *kami*, the Emperor stands between the worlds of shadow and light and extends his own authority into every corner of the realm» (J.E. Ketelaar [1990], *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan. Buddhism and Its Persecution*, Princeton, 1993, p. 62).

⁴ The chronicles of the first emperors and their divine ancestry are recalled in the *Kojiki* and in the *Nihonshoki*. For a general overview on Japanese mythology, on which literature is extensive, see J.S. Brownlee, *Political Thought in Japanese Historical Writing. From Kojiki (712) to Tokushi Yoron (1712)*, Waterloo (CA), 1991, pp. 8-32.

⁵ The idea of a "new order" in Asia comes from Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro's proclamation in 1937. On this, J.B. Crowley, *A New Asian Order. Some Notes on Prewar Japanese Nationalism*, in S.S. Large (ed.), *Shōwa Japan. Political, Economic and Social History – 1926-1989*, vol. I, London-New York, 1998, pp. 149-150.

⁶ On this peculiar idea, in an historical perspective, see J.A. Yellen, *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War*, Ithaca-London, 2019.

declaration” (*Ningen-sengen*) issued by Hirohito on January 1st, 1946, whose meaning was however far less radical than what has been believed in the West. Indeed, and having regard to the actual text of the rescript, emperor Hirohito never spoke about a change in the conception of the imperial institution, but on the contrary highlighted once again a line of continuity with the innovations of the Meiji era⁷. This is made possible by the deep difference in the concept of divinity in the West and in Japan, where the idea of *kami* is far from representing a god in the Western sense. If the emperor is a manifest *kami* (*akitsumikami*), it doesn’t mean that he has to be considered as an incarnated god, but more as a sacred person in his official role, thus with a possibility of minimizing every possible change even after the war⁸.

The Confucian legacy, still a cultural influence in Japanese syncretic society, contributes in making the imperial institution a sort of guarantor of the eternal continuity of Japanese political system. Confucius firstly introduced in China the fundamental concept of the mandate of heaven (*tiānmìng*), according to which only a heavenly legitimized sovereign could effectively rule the Middle Kingdom in prosperity and peace⁹. This philosophy came to influence also the Japanese political discourse, however in a hybridized form and with an essential transformation. In Japan, the son of Heaven (*tenshi*) did rule because of his belonging to an unbroken line of emperors. As a consequence, in this conception Heaven does not bestow its favor on a single ruler as in the Chinese case, thus potentially fostering rebellion and alternation of dynasties as in the theorization of Mencius¹⁰, but on a reigning family. Contrarily to what happened in the Chinese narrative, the heavenly favor is not perceived in omens or in the people’s approval, but is absorbed by the divine origin of the Yamato dynasty,

⁷ In this sense, J.W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat. Japan in the Wake of World War II*, New York, 1999, pp. 314- 317.

⁸ Cfr. T. Suzuki, *The Rhetoric of Emperor Hirohito. Continuity and Rupture in Japan’s Dramas of Modernity*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2017, pp. 126 ff.

⁹ Cfr. D.A. Pankenier, *The Cosmo-Political Background of Heaven’s Mandate*, “Early China”, vol. XX, 1995, p. 166.

¹⁰ On Mencius’ position, see A.T. Nuyen, *The ‘Mandate of Heaven’: Mencius and the Divine Command Theory of Political Legitimacy*, “Philosophy East and West”, vol. LXIII, n. 2, April 2013, pp. 113-126.

which acquired the legitimacy from the *kami* and reigns because of it. Therefore, a Confucian principle that in China was actually introduced to legitimize a rebellion¹¹, whose consequence are still visible today with reference to a culture-specific idea of revolution¹², in Japan was transformed to strengthen the uninterrupted continuity of the ruling dynasty¹³. Moreover, the Confucian reverence for the ancestors cannot but establish a powerful bond not only between past and present emperors, but also between the imperial household and the Japanese people. It is not by chance, from this point of view, that Japanese society had already been described in the Meiji period as multiple households under the imperial family¹⁴. Although with the introduction of Western nuclear family in the place of the traditional *ie* the family-like socials and political relations have sensibly changed, Confucian ideals are still present in Japanese society, contributing to stabilize its political and social systems starting from the imperial institution as its immutable cornerstone.

Even more importantly, the question can be analyzed from the point of view of the political prerogatives of the sovereign, the field that has apparently undergone the most relevant changes in the last century. During the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), the role of the emperor was purely ceremonial and deprived of actual political power in favor of the *shōgun*. In spite of his being confined in the Kyōto imperial court in a time when the political interests were rapidly moving to Edo (now Tōkyō), the *tennō* was still the cultural and spiritual capstone of the social and political

¹¹ The legitimation of the rebel Zhou dynasty against the Shang. On this, M.J. Puett, *To Become a God. Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-divinization in Early China*, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 54-60.

¹² In Chinese, the very term revolution is translated with *gémìng*, which literally means “mandate changing”, clearly referring to the ancestral idea of the mandate of Heaven. This point, undoubtedly rich of implications, falls however outside of the scope of this article.

¹³ Cfr. H.G. Blocker - C.L. Starling, *Japanese Philosophy*, Albany, 2001, pp. 20, 66; E.J. Perry [2002], *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven. Social Protest and State Power in China*, London-New York, 2015, p. ix.

¹⁴ On this, the position of preeminent constitutionalist Hozumi Yatsuka is particularly relevant. On this, see R.H. Minear, *Japanese Tradition and Western Law. Emperor, State, and Law in the Thought of Hozumi Yatsuka*, Cambridge, 1970, pp. 56-83.

system, providing legitimation to the *shōgun* with his tacit presence. With the outbreak of the Boshin war in 1868, the Tokugawa regime was overthrown, and the Meiji Restoration¹⁵ provided for a new expansion of the imperial political prerogatives. Emperor Meiji inaugurated a period of industrial, military and political development, eventually turning Japan into a modern power and gaining a position of hegemony in the region. However, even in this case the emperor was not to be regarded as an autocratic ruler, but as the center and focus of a complex system of power ruled by a professional oligarchy¹⁶. If on the one hand the role of the sovereign changed with the Restoration, on the other hand it proceeded also along a line of relevant continuity, that is to say the maintenance of a position of spiritual primacy derived also by a hieratic detachment from concrete political affairs. The Meiji constitution, adopted in 1889, was indeed explicit in establishing as a founding principle of the legal and political system the one according to which the empire was to be ruled over by a line of emperors «unbroken for ages eternal»¹⁷. It enshrined the mystical ideal of the uninterrupted imperial family more than the actual role of the ruler as an individual. Even with the militarist era, the political spectrum considerably shifted to more marked ultra-nationalistic positions, and the cult of the Yamato dynasty was even more emphasized, but the actual role of the emperor was once again maintained stably within its conceptual boundaries. With the advent of the US occupation, General Douglas MacArthur created his own personal government with non-secondary reminiscences of a shogunate, establishing a close relationship with emperor Hirohito to legitimize his rule, as the Tokugawa had

¹⁵ On this period, the fundamental volume is W.G. Beasley, *The Meiji Restoration*, Stanford, 1972.

¹⁶ As Titus suggests, in Meiji Japan «the political centrality of the imperial institution was created *for*, not *by*, the emperor and imperial family, and the emperor's role from 1889 to 1945 was managed *for* him, not *by* him» (D.A. Titus, *The Making of the 'Symbol Emperor System' in Postwar Japan*, "Modern Asian Studies", vol. XIV, n. 4, October 1980, p. 530).

¹⁷ «The Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal» (Constitution of the empire of Japan, 1889, art. 1).

done¹⁸. On the request of MacArthur's Supreme Command of the Allied Powers (SCAP), the imperial institution was then reformed in order to preserve it, and to avoid more traumatic fractures that were advocated by the Soviet Union¹⁹. According to the 1947 constitution, which outlined the new system in its first chapter, the emperor was defined as «the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people»²⁰, deprived of any effective political power²¹. As evident, the figure of the *tennō* was somehow redefined as it was during the Edo period, with almost the same function although serving a democratic political system²². Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to consider the role of the emperor as a mere symbolic sovereign as in some European monarchies, given the deeply different cultural and historical context. As pointed out by then Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru after the adoption of the new constitution, from a cultural perspective the role of the emperor and its perception by the people was not changed²³, and in some respects could not be changed, because it was his political

¹⁸ In this sense, W. De Lange, *A History of Japanese Journalism. Japan's Press Club as the Last Obstacle to a Mature Press*, Richmond, 1998, p. 165. The definition of MacArthur as a foreign *shōgun* is also present in R. Harvey, *American Shōgun. General MacArthur, Emperor Hirohito and the Drama of Modern Japan*, New York, 2006.

¹⁹ On this point, see H. Borton, *Spanning Japan's Modern Century. The Memoirs of Hugh Borton*, Lanham, 2002, p. 175. Cf. also Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, cit., p. 363.

²⁰ «The emperor shall be the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power» (Constitution of Japan, 1947, art. 1).

²¹ «The emperor shall perform only such acts in matters of state as are provided for in this Constitution and he shall not have powers related to government» (Constitution of Japan, 1947, art. 4, par. 1).

²² On this, amongst extensive volumes, see Titus, *op. cit.*, pp 529-578; H.P. Bix, *Inventing the 'Symbol Monarchy' in Japan, 1945-52*, "Journal of Japanese Studies", vol. XXI, n. 2, Summer 1995, pp. 319-363.

²³ «Legally speaking, sovereign power has passed from the emperor to the people. But we have only to look back on the history of our country to know that our emperors have never been identified with autocratic power. People have always rallied to them to resist tyranny. Whatever the vicissitudes of legal phraseology, the conception that we Japanese have of our emperors has never changed» S. Yoshida [1961], *Yoshida Shigeru. Last Meiji Man* (already published with the title *The Yoshida Memoirs. The Story of Japan in Crisis*), trans. Yoshida Kenichi, Hiroshi Nara, ed. Hiroshi Nara, Lanham, 2007, p. 119.

detachment to actually expand his role beyond the literalist approach of the law²⁴. Even today, the emperor's role is far from being confined within legal provisions, assuming a cultural relevance that contributes to make him a stabilizing factor in Japanese politics, granting it its characterizing dimension of continuity.

The idea of *kokutai*

Another concept contributing to draw a line of continuity in Japanese politics is the ethereal idea of *kokutai*. *Kokutai* is an almost untranslatable concept, literally meaning the “national structure”, or less literally but more appropriately the “national essence”²⁵. It is not to be confused with the form of government or with the concrete shapes the exercise of power assumes in a determined historical phase, referred to as *seitai* according to Baron Katō Hiroyuki in 1874. While the *seitai* changes with times and circumstances, as it did with the fall of the shogunate and with the Meiji Restoration, the *kokutai* is immutable and eternal²⁶. It is more like a spiritual and cultural essence permeating the national history and the national conscience, something deeply rooted with the Yamato culture and of ancient Chinese derivation. Once again, the idea of *kokutai* is inextricably interconnected with the belief in the unbroken lineage of Japanese emperors, defining a unique structure of the State and a unique

²⁴ Yoshida expressed this position in a private letter to his father-in-law, Count Makino Nobuaki. On this, see Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, cit., p. 390. Cfr. K.J. Ruoff, Symbol Monarchy, in S. Buckley (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Japanese Culture*, London, 2002, p. 490.

²⁵ In literature, this idea has been variously translated, with terms including “national polity”, “national essence” or “national structure”. While each definition and translation may grasp an aspect of this multifaceted concept, there is actually no one that can properly describe it in its completeness. Therefore, I will maintain here the original Japanese term.

²⁶ See H. Katō, *Kokutai Shinron*, Tōkyō, 1874, ch. 7. On this distinction, see J. Adeney Thomas, *Reconfiguring Modernity. Concepts of Nature in Japanese Political Ideology*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, 2001, p. 97; J.K. Fisher, *The Meirokusha and the Building of a Strong and Prosperous Nation*, in H. Wray - H. Conroy (eds), *Japan Examined. Perspectives on Modern Japanese History*, Honolulu, 1983, p. 86.

way of conceiving it, beyond the actual attributions of powers and political prerogatives²⁷.

The concept of *kokutai* remained quite undefined until relatively recent times, with its first important theorization dating back to 1825 with Aizawa Seishisai of the Mito school, in a period of great intellectual ferment²⁸. With the Meiji Restoration, with theorists like the already mentioned Katō and Fukuzawa Yukichi²⁹, the concept was better defined and enriched by a renewed political and juridical significance, although a punctual and univocal definition was something rather difficult to provide. The political relevance of the *kokutai* relies in its relation with the emperor and with the legal system, an issue greatly explored and developed during the Meiji era. Jurists like Hozumi Yatsuka, followed by Sasaki Sōichi, linked the idea of *kokutai* with the opening of the Meiji constitution, anchoring it to the legal and political enshrinement of an unbroken dynasty of ruling emperors. In this new cultural and legal orthodoxy, emperor, people and State became one, in a relationship absorbed by an all-encompassing vision granting Japan, from this perspective, a unique place amongst world powers. The idea of an immutable and immaterial *kokutai*, which could easily overcome both historical contingencies and political divergences, served therefore as a theoretical basis to provide continuity and stability to a political spectrum that had been chronically fragmented since the Restoration. Indeed, it is within this framework that every possible tension had to be

²⁷ On the evolution of the idea of *kokutai*, see J.S. Brownlee, *Four Stages of the Japanese Kokutai (National Essence)*, in M. Nakamura (ed.), *Japan in the Global Age. Cultural, Historical and Political Issues on Asia, Environment, Households and International Communication*, Vancouver, 2001, pp. 15 ff.; J. Valderrama López, *Beyond Words: the "Kokutai" and its Background*, "Revista Historia Moderna I Contemporània", n. 4, Barcelona, 2006, pp. 125-136. For a juridical analysis, see F.L. Ramaoli, *Unbroken for Ages Eternal. The Concept of Kokutai in Japanese Constitutionalism*, "Journal of Comparative Law", vol. XV, n. 1, 2020, pp. 1-14. See also my volume: F.L. Ramaoli, *Dal mito del cielo alla legge dello Stato. Kokutai e ordinamento giuridico in Giappone*, Turin, 2022.

²⁸ See S. Aizawa [1825], *Shinron*, in *Nihon Shisō Taikēi*, vol. LIII, Tōkyō 1973, pp. 50-159; for an English translation, B.T. Wakabayashi [1986], *Anti-foreignism and Western Learning in Early-modern Japan. The New Theses of 1825*, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 147-280. For a comment on Aizawa's position, *ibi*, pp. 100-146.

²⁹ See Y. Fukuzawa [1875], *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, trans. David A. Dilworth, G. Cameron Hurst III, New York, 2009.

ideally brought back to unity, based on the unquestionable and unalterable eternal essence of Japan, guaranteed by the continuity of the Yamato family line. To summarize the various positions regarding the *kokutai*, the imperial Ministry of Education commissioned and published in 1937 the *Kokutai no Hongi*, the fundamental cultural and political manifesto of the militarist regime, in which the proper contextualization of the “Japanese essence” plays the most relevant role in outlining a national polity³⁰.

During the years of the US occupation, the concept was associated with the defeated autocratic regime, and was therefore repelled by the occupants, also banning the publication of the *Kokutai no Hongi*. Correctly, MacArthur’s headquarters understood that the *kokutai* was not embodied into a piece of positive legislation, but actually went beyond it, as far as being considered as a comprehensive way of conceiving the notion of imperial sovereignty³¹. The abrogation of the Meiji constitution and the enactment of the 1947 fundamental charter, with the changes in the legislative discipline regarding the emperor, led various politicians and academics to ask themselves whether the *kokutai* had actually survived. If the intention of the occupants was undoubtedly that of erasing from the national conscience this ideal, which had come to be furtherly radicalized in the years of the war, its very ethereal and immaterial dimension made it rather difficult to overcome. Some eminent figures of the Japanese intellectual élite of the time, like the already mentioned professor Sasaki and like Minobe Tatsukichi, maintained that the new constitutional system based on a symbolic emperor actually had cancelled the idea of *kokutai*. On the contrary, others like philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō claimed that a new constitutional framework could easily

³⁰ Ministry of Education of Imperial Japan (ed.), *Kokutai no Hongi*, Tōkyō, 1937. For an English translation, R.K. Hall (ed.), *Kokutai No Hongi. Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan*, trans. John Owen Gauntlett, Cambridge, 1949. For the one and only Italian edition, see F.L. Ramaioli (ed.), *Kokutai no Hongi. L'essenza del Giappone*, Rome, 2021.

³¹ «Kokutai – national polity – means, to the Japanese, the unity of people and Emperor in a family relationship that is immutable and indestructible. The doctrine is not to be found expressed in its entirety in any document. It is not a concept of law though it might be considered one of sovereignty» SCAP, *Political Reorientation of Japan, September 1945 to September 1948*, vol. I, Washington DC, 1949, p. 93.

change the form of government in its exteriority (*seitai*) but not the immutable essence of the *kokutai*, which preexisted from the concrete organization of State powers³². From this perspective, if the *kokutai* existed when ancient Japan did not have any constitution, then it could clearly survive to the abrogation of the Meiji charter. This position is particularly interesting, in that it takes into account the Japanese history as a whole, conceiving the *kokutai* as something predating Meiji society and its theorization. It also happened to be shared by the Yoshida government then in power, by the evocative words of Minister of State Kanamori Tokujirō, according to whom «the water flows, the river stays»³³. Prime Minister Yoshida himself continued to mention the idea of *kokutai* also after the end of the occupation³⁴, confirming that it could be evidently considered as an element of continuity between both the autocratic and the democratic Japanese experiences, in spite of the relevant changes in terms of form of government and attribution of powers.

As it has been argued in literature, notwithstanding the disappearance of the term *kokutai* from the public discourse, its traces remained still visible in Japanese society in the following decades³⁵. Even today, it is still possible to consider it as a long-lasting ideal shaping a national self-awareness that goes beyond both positive legislation and historical periods, or, as it had been defined, the «quintessence of Japanese particularity»³⁶. Notwithstanding an evident change in the political lexicon regarding this concept,

³² On the various position about the possible maintenance of the *kokutai* or on its destruction or alteration following the enactment of the new constitution, see P.J. Herzog, *Political Theories in the Japanese Constitution*, "Monumenta Nipponica", vol. VII, n. 1/2, Tōkyō, 1951, pp. 1-23; Id., *Japan's Pseudo Democracy*, London-New York, 1993, p. 19.

³³ Cit. in Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, cit., p. 389.

³⁴ In his official interpretation of the new constitution, during the years of the occupation Yoshida had already maintained the *kokutai* as the base of the State's life, without any possibility of abrogation or alteration. After the occupation, he continued using the term during Akihito's proclamation as Crown Prince in 1952. Cfr. J.W. Dower, *Empire and Aftermath. Yoshida Shigeru and the Japanese Experience, 1878-1954*, Cambridge, 1988, p. 324; N. Inose - H. Sato [1995], *Persona. A Biography of Yukio Mishima*, Berkeley, 2012, p. 117.

³⁵ In this sense, R.A. Miller, *Japan's Modern Myth*, New York, 1982, p. 95.

³⁶ R.N. Bellah, *Japan's Cultural Identity: Some Reflections on the Work of Watsuji Tetsuro*, "The Journal of Asian Studies", vol. XXIV, n. 4, August 1965, p. 576.

the *kokutai*, extensively considered as a national character deeply inscribed into the Japanese conscience and mentality, cannot be considered as something abrogated by a change in the legislation. As mentioned above, for instance, the consideration the Japanese people has of their emperor never really changed, and is something that goes far beyond the specific prerogatives the constitution grants to the *tennō*. The invisible and immutable *kokutai* permeates this *forma mentis*, serving a stabilizing function that should not be confused with politics and law in their exterior dimensions. On the contrary, it is an element of tacit continuity, adaptive and malleable, which contributes to maintain a cultural homogeneity and stability also in the political field, and in spite of long-lasting divergences about particular problematics and questions.

The continuity in the ruling class

After the defeat of Axis powers, in Japan a process of «political re-orientation»³⁷ of society took place under MacArthur's SCAP. The ban on the *Kokutai no Hongi* was an example of it, as well as the enactment of the new constitution with its new discipline of the symbolic emperor and with its pacifist clause. Another example is undoubtedly represented by the Tōkyō War Crimes Trials, with the juridical critiques that has been moved in respects of being a so-called expression of victor's justice. Nevertheless, this process to demilitarize society was much more complex and controversial than the denazification of postwar Germany.

To purify Japanese politics from the influence of the defeated regime, especially before the first democratic elections to be held in the country, the SCAP inaugurated a massive purge of exponents and cooperators of the militarist and ultra-nationalist ruling élite, banning them from participating into the democratic life of postwar Japan³⁸. At the beginning, this process was

³⁷ This phraseology comes from SCAP reports: *Political Reorientation of Japan*, cit.

³⁸ On this, see H.H. Baerwald, *The Purge of Japanese Leaders Under the Occupation*, Berkeley, 1959, pp. 25 ff.; SCAP, *Political Reorientation of Japan*, cit., pp. 59 ff.

rather scrupulous, causing the ban of intellectuals and authors whose guilt was simply that of having praised certain aspects of prewar Japan. The most illustrious politician to be purged was a preeminent figure of Japanese conservatism and founder of the Liberal Party, Hatoyama Ichirō, who had served as Ministry of Education between 1931 and 1934. Hatoyama's purging prevented him from concurring in the 1946 elections, and probably from becoming Prime Minister, paving the way to the multiple premierships of his conservative rival Yoshida Shigeru, factually changing Japan's political life of those years³⁹.

However, the emergence of the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union in the context of the Cold War and in the Korean conflict rapidly changed the objectives and priorities of the occupants. The communist threat, which menaced to progressively undermine Japan's hardy recovered political stability and to win it over to the Eastern Bloc, forced the SCAP to reconsider the purging of nationalist elements, and to radically adapt its strategies to the different international scenario. Although the Japanese Communist Party did not represent a major political or cultural force in the country, its recovered status of lawfulness after decades of ban fueled its consensus, also arising criticism toward the Imperial Household, held responsible for the war, and the Allied occupants alike⁴⁰.

This new trend in the SCAP politics was inaugurated by MacArthur's direct prohibition of the general strike of February 1947 promoted by Ii Yashirō⁴¹, which was politically to target the new Yoshida administration⁴² that was backed by the US headquarters. With the confrontation between the communist forces from one side and the SCAP and the Japanese government from the other acquiring the more and the more the characteristic of a new social emergency, the occupants were forced to intervene

³⁹ Cfr. S.H. Nolte, *Liberalism in Modern Japan: Ishibashi Tanzan and His Teachers, 1905-1960*, Berkeley, 1987, pp. 320 ff.

⁴⁰ On this, see K. Henshall [1999], *A History of Japan: From Stone Age to Superpower*, Basingstoke-New York, 2012, pp. 152-154.

⁴¹ Cfr. D. MacArthur, *Reminiscences: General of the Army Douglas MacArthur*, New York, 1964, p. 353.

⁴² Cfr. C. Tsuzuki, *The Pursuit of Power in Modern Japan, 1825-1995*, Oxford, 2000, pp. 360-361; H. Kawanishi, *The Human Face of Industrial Conflict in Post-War Japan*, London, 1999, pp. 144 ff.

directly. Since March 1948, the right to strike was sensibly limited or revoked to certain categories⁴³, and the publication of *Akahata* (Red Flag), the official newspaper of the Communist Party, was suspended⁴⁴. On June 6th, 1950, MacArthur formally asked the Yoshida government to adopt all the measures deemed as necessary to ban from public offices a determined list of persons, all members of the Central Committee of the Japanese Communist Party. It is significant to observe that the SCAP directives quoted by the General, SCAPIN n. 548 and n. 550, were the same that had been used to ban nationalist politicians, with an evident continuity as for the legal and administrative instruments used, but with a radical shift in the final aim⁴⁵. This progressive action took the form of a “red purge”⁴⁶, through which the Communist Party was maintained legal as for its status, but limited in its public influence, that was considered threatening to Japan’s fragile democracy and overall stability. This “reverse course” of SCAP politics⁴⁷, as it eventually came to be known, was favorably considered and actively implemented by Prime Minister Yoshida, himself a fervent anticommunist⁴⁸, who served as a precious ally to MacArthur during this delicate phase of the occupation.

The reverse course was not limited to the ban of communist militants from Japan’s public life, but also, and more significantly, to the complete reversal of the purge initially carried out against the nationalists of the defeated regime. Since June 20th, 1951, the

⁴³ Cfr. E.K. Tipton, *Modern Japan: A Social and Political History*, London-New York, 2002, p. 258.

⁴⁴ Cf. W. Haruk, *The Korean War: An International History*, Lanham, 2014, p. 90.

⁴⁵ General Douglas MacArthur to Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, June 6th, 1950, U.S. National archives (RG331) (Available at www.ndl.go.jp).

⁴⁶ On this, see the comprehensive work of E. Takemae [1983], *Allied Occupation of Japan* (already published as *Inside GHQ: The Allied Occupation of Japan and Its Legacy*), trans. Robert Ricketts, Sebastian Swann, New York, 2002, pp. 393 ff.; see also J. Kingston, *Japan in Transformation, 1945-2010*, London-New York, 2011, pp. 13-16; Y. Nozaki, *War Memory, Nationalism and Education in Postwar Japan: The Japanese History Textbook Controversy and Ienaga Saburo's Court Challenges*, London-New York, 2008, pp. 17-18.

⁴⁷ On the reverse course in general, consider also my article, F.L. Ramaioli, *Il nazionalismo giapponese e le politiche del 'corso inverso'*, “Nuova Storia Contemporanea”, seconda serie, n. 2, Le Lettere, Florence, August 2018, pp. 165-189.

⁴⁸ For instance, Yoshida, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

Japanese government revoked indeed the ban on 2.958 persons already purged from public life. This meant not only suspending the previous purge to leave room for a new one, but also allowing the return of already purged political, academic or administrative personnel to participate in Japan's new life and actually take back some of their former positions. If Hatoyama Ichirō could be considered the most illustrious example of purged politician, he can be also considered as the most famous rehabilitated one. After the fall of Yoshida and the end of his multiple premierships, Hatoyama not only came back to active politics, but was also elected Prime Minister between 1954 and 1956, also contributing to the creation of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) from the merging of the Liberal Party and the Democratic Party⁴⁹. In the Hatoyama cabinet, the office of Minister of Foreign Affairs was also held by Shigemitsu Mamoru, who held the same role in prewar Japan, and who signed the unconditional surrender of the empire on September 2nd, 1945, before being sentenced to seven years in prison during the Tōkyō Trial⁵⁰. Another famous case is represented by Kishi Nobosuke, who held relevant offices during the past regime and was even appointed Minister of Commerce in General Hideki Tōjō's cabinet. Kishi was then rehabilitated and elected Prime Minister between 1957 and 1960, notwithstanding his being initially imprisoned with the accusation of war crimes⁵¹. Even after MacArthur's destitution, this rehabilitation process continued until the end of the occupation, until almost all the previously purged nationalists were allowed to come back, and sometimes to play relevant roles in Japanese postwar society.

The reverse course was not something limited to the political domain, but affected also the intellectual life of the Rising Sun, with many rehabilitated figures belonging to the academic and cultural fields. Moreover, the return in power of previously

⁴⁹ On the political activity of Hatoyama, see M. Itoh, *The Hatoyama Dynasty: Japanese Political Leadership Through the Generations*, Basingstoke, 2003, pp. 75-103.

⁵⁰ See D. Kurzman, *Kishi and Japan: The Search for the Sun*, New York, 1960, pp. 258 ff.

⁵¹ On this, see S. Guthrie - Shiumiz, *Japan, the United States, and the Cold War, 1945-1960*, in M.P. Leffler - O.A. Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. I, Cambridge, 2010, p. 250.

purged politicians provided the country with a more free and pluralistic view on the imperial past of Japan, in place of the quite steady historical reconstruction that had been presented as the only possible one in the first months of the occupation. Dower, for instance, goes as far as saying that after the reverse course the memory of Japanese war crimes was consciously avoided⁵², to leave room for this new political course.

It is in this context that the maintenance in power of the same political class granted Japan a considerable stability and, most of all, a line of direct continuity with the prewar experiences, in spite of the necessary changes in the form of government. The nationalist politicians that came back to power since 1951, after the Yoshida cabinets that were in turn nationalist as for their political orientation, shaped Japanese politics for decades to come, establishing their own political classes and élites, with names that were destined to ascend in turn to the top positions of the country. For instance, it was in the Yoshida cabinets that Satō Eisaku, adoptive brother of Kishi Nobosuke and son-in-law of Matsuoka Yosuke who had signed the Tripartite Pact, rapidly gained political consideration amongst Japanese conservatives, eventually serving multiple times and Minister and as Prime Minister for three terms, in 1964, in 1967 and in 1970⁵³. Again, it was under Kishi's term that fervent patriot Nakasone Yasuhiro was appointed Minister for Science, to become in turn Prime Minister between 1982 and 1987⁵⁴. Kishi himself was grandfather of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (2006-2007, 2012-2020), and both Hatoyama and Yoshida founded political dynasties with non-secondary implications visible also in recent years, like in the cases of late Prime Ministers Hatoyama Yukio (2009-2010), grandson of Ichirō, and Asō Tarō (2008-2009), grandson of Yoshida.

This continuity is also evident in the creation of the political association *Nippon Kaigi* in 1997, after the merging of other

⁵² J.W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, cit., p. 508.

⁵³ Cfr. N. Kiishi, *Satō Eisaku (1901-1975)*, in L.G. Perez (ed.), *Japan at War: An Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara, 2013, p. 364.

⁵⁴ On Nakasone, see H.D.P. Envall, *Japanese Diplomacy: The Role of Leadership*, Albany, 2015, pp. 137-163.

nationalistic realities⁵⁵. The *Nippon Kaigi*, whose influence lasts up to the present days, has been quite successful in gathering and affiliating many high exponents of Japanese politics, including Prime Ministers like Koizumi Jun'ichirō, the already mentioned Asō and Abe, and preset-day Prime Minister Kishida Fumio. The association aims at providing an alternative version of the role of Japan in the wartime period, revisiting and valorizing the imperial legacy and, at some extent, restoring some of its features including the State *shintō* system, rearm the country and revising the pacifist constitution⁵⁶. The controversial visits of top politicians to the Yasukuni shrine to honor the war dead, including those who had been judged as war criminals, are to be also located in a spirit of ideal continuity that never ceased to exist in Japanese politics, notwithstanding the physiological differences in terms of political currents. The reverse course in the SCAP politics during the years of occupation cannot but be considered as a major cause of this *fil rouge*, which prescind from particular and personal positions, to embrace the political spectrum in a wider sense, reviving ancestral notions and concepts that, in other contexts, would have been irremediably lost.

Conclusions

Japan is a country in which the political world has always been divided and fragmented, characterized as it has always been by a rather large numbers of parties and currents. Even the Liberal Democratic Party, which has successfully secured its semi-hegemonic position, is structurally organized in multiple currents, with a range of different political stances within it. During the militarist era, which can be considered as the most autocratic period in the country's recent history, the regime was far from

⁵⁵ On the *Nippon Kaigi*, see C. Rose, *Patriotic Education in Japan*, in N. Shimazu (ed.), *Nationalisms in Japan*, London-New York, 2006, p. 139; J.E. Robertson, *Politics and Pitfalls of Japan Ethnography: Reflexivity, Responsibility, and Anthropological Ethics*, London-New York, 2009, p. 66.

⁵⁶ On this last issue, which acquires a particular relevance in Japanese politics and law because of controversial art. 9 of the postwar constitutional charter, see my article, F.L. Ramaioli, *Disarmo e riarmo nella Costituzione giapponese*, "Orientalia Parthenopea", XVI, Naples, 2016, pp. 101-134.

being structured as Europe's single party systems: on the contrary, political fragmentation was something highly recurrent even in those tormented years, with groups and factions contending for the primacy over the State. Nevertheless, a sense of ideal continuity permeates Japanese political society, constantly suspended between tradition and innovation, but in which it is always possible to identify some recurring elements and common traits.

In this article, I analyzed what I called the eternal continuity of Japanese politics based on three key concepts, which contribute to explain and contextualize it. The present analysis has been carried out without pretenses of completeness, provided that the dimension of continuity would deserve alone a dedicated monographic study both in the cultural and in the political field. However, these three points I have highlighted have to be regarded as extremely important to properly understand and to put in the right perspective a series of elements, choices and traits that are possible to observe in the country even nowadays.

The imperial institution provides a strong, stable and unitary framework within which to inscribe the particularities of Japanese politics, which acquires even the more importance the more it is actually detached from concrete politics. It is not only a symbol, as it is literally described by the constitution, and its role is not superimposable on the European monarchies. On the contrary, it embodies a line of continuity not just between present and past, but also between history and myth, establishing a narrative that cannot but pierce the veil of strict legal phraseology. The recent crowning of Emperor Naruhito, with its traditional ceremony of which some parts remain strictly private, clearly showed how the "heavenly ruler" is still to be considered not only the highest organ of the State, as it has been described after the Meiji Restoration. It is also the cultural cornerstone of the national architecture, which grants stability to a political system in which he does not take any active part. Amaterasu's regalia – the mirror, the sword and the jewel – are still handed over to the new Emperor, as a part of a ritual that bridges heaven and earth in a way that necessarily composes and unifies any possible political divergence to shape a sense of eternal continuity between ages and generations.

This sense of continuity has been mirrored by the idea of a "national essence" stemming through Japanese history, referred to

as *kokutai* in the years between the late Edo period and the end of the Second World War. In spite of its rather recent theorization, this quite complex and multifaceted concept points to an ideal dimension of eternity, in which the Rising Sun conjugates the exterior element of change, as for the practical organization of powers, with the continuity of its immutable spirit. Properly conceptualized during the Meiji era, the *kokutai* is both a product of its time and at the same time an ideal defining those years, overcoming political divisions to create a sense of unity out of a plurality. Although the references to the idea of *kokutai*, and to connected concepts like *Yamato-damashii*, progressively lessened with the occupation, their traces remain, hidden in the tension between what can change due to historical contingencies and the more profound layer of communitarian and ancestral belonging that actually defines the Japanese essence. Once again, this idea represents a ductile and flexible conception that help grasping the deep significance of an ethereal continuity in Japanese politics, which goes far beyond parties and currents.

Another reason for this may be found in recent Japanese history, with the above-mentioned SCAP policy of the reverse course. The emergence of the communist threat in the broader context of the Cold War and the rehabilitation of previously purged pre-war politicians, bureaucrats and intellectuals actually prevented a deep fracture in the political system, and on the contrary granted a sense of continuity, however in the new framework of the established Japanese democracy. Once again, this continuity should not be referred to the exterior dimension of the shapes power assumes, but it regards the immaterial soul of Japanese politics, with the accrued sensibilities of past decades and, most of all, with the nuances of all those Japanese characteristics that hardly change with the passing of time. Political families and dynasties, deeply rooted in the country's political system, significantly contributed to grant a *continuum* in some aspects that still show a relevant influence on today's policies, up to Kishida's term. SCAP's reverse course, albeit a decision motivated by peculiar contingencies, is therefore something with long term consequences, shaping a political class based on the idea of an uninterrupted political and cultural consciousness, just like uninterrupted is the Yamato family which it serves.

Now more than ever, to properly understand Japan's future, it is necessary to recall its past, to comprehend the fractures it suffered in the last two centuries, and most of all to realize that, if something changes, there is still something beyond the reach of our eyes that hardly can, and that preserves the Rising Sun from a structural instability that had affected, in the past, the majority of the world's nations on the occasions of financial, political or social crises. The eternal continuity of Japanese politics is therefore not a void simulacrum, or a formal bow to millennial traditions, but on the contrary a sense of common belonging that overcomes the differences, just like a soul resists the changes of the body in its exteriority.

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