

The Politics of the Meiji Restoration: Rational Choice and Beyond

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Political science has thus far failed to incorporate history in the analysis of contemporary political events and phenomenon. In this paper, I offer a preliminary framework to theorize how the preceding experience shapes the current political context, using the Meiji Restoration as a vehicle for illustration. Along the way, I argue that the failure to incorporate history appropriately into political analysis originates from the very nature of the actor oriented approach which has long dominated the field. Its most recent and formidable incarnations are rational choice theories which treat actors as ontological givens. Critics have already urged us to problematize actors and endogenize their beliefs and preferences, but rethinking the Meiji Restoration leads me to conclude that these theories are useless in understanding this major political event because it is difficult to define who the most relevant actors are before we can even begin to think about (their) belief systems and/or preference orderings.

1. Introduction

How does the past affect the present? Ever since the days of Homer or Sima Qian, historians, poets, and novelists around the world have developed appealing talents to narrate the sequence of events in human life. Philosophers ponder time, anthropologists discuss culture, and social-psychologists analyze trauma and socialization, all in attempt to understand how the human experience in the past, either individually or collectively, influ-

ences the ways things unfold in the present day. Despite these efforts in other intellectual traditions, the discipline of political science has thus far failed miserably to theorize how history be incorporated in the analysis of contemporary political events and phenomenon. Telling a story about the French Revolution, American War of Independence or Japan's Meiji Restoration, for example, quickly reminds us that it is impossible to make sense of these major political events without sorting out the sequence of numerous incidents that ultimately led to the revolutionary outcomes. Each sequence is not simply chronological but also causal in that a previous happening critically affected the way things developed in later times. Certainly, we all know that "history matters". We do not know,

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however, *how history matters under what different circumstances.*

In this paper, I seek to offer some preliminary framework with which to think about how the preceding experience shapes the current political context. I pursue this task using the case of the Meiji Restoration as a vehicle for illustration. The Meiji Restoration, of course, was a revolution that ousted the preexisting feudal polity and established a modern sovereign state in Japan in the late nineteenth century. The story of the Meiji Restoration has been told numerous times and in countless ways, but regardless of the different emphases and nuances placed by the earlier writings, what is generally true is that any narrative of the Meiji Restoration involves the identification of the sequence of various important incidents that led to the final regime transition in 1868. The purpose of this paper is not to reconstruct this chronology, but to elucidate a set of patterns in which one incident was connected to the next. That is, I seek, in this paper, to discern a “system of logic” that constitutes our sense of chronology itself, and thus our understanding of the historical influence on present political process.

Along the way, I argue in this paper that the failure thus far to incorporate history appropriately into political analysis originates from the very nature of the actor oriented approach which has dominated the field of political science over the last several decades. Its most recent, and perhaps most formidable, incarnations are rational choice theories that treat actors as ontological givens. Critics of rational choice have urged the need to problematize actors and endogenize their beliefs and

preferences, but I believe that the problem of rational choice, and of the actor oriented approach more generally, lies elsewhere. Rethinking the Meiji Restoration leads me to conclude that the actor oriented approach, as it currently stands, is useless in understanding this major political event because it is difficult to define who the most relevant actors are in this revolutionary process before we can even begin to think about (their) belief systems or preference orderings. Are we, for example, to observe the behavior, and thus to “problematize” the interests, of individual heroes, such as Yoshida Shoin, Sakamoto Ryoma and Katsu Kaishu? Or, are we to observe and problematize the behavior and interests of key “Han(s)” (feudal units), like Satsuma and Choshu, which led the rebellious force against Tokugawa? Should we, more microanalytically, focus on factions and internal politics within Satsuma and Choshu, as well as within Tokugawa government? Or should we rather proceed by treating the coalition of Satsuma and Choshu as a unitary actor bonded by the same purpose of overthrowing Tokugawa? We cannot set aside this perplexing “level of analysis” problem, because it is precisely the changing identities of key actors from one level of collectivity to another that connects various parts of our narrative of the Meiji Restoration. In other words, the identification of who the most relevant actors are occupies an integral part of our sense of chronology of this major political event. Obviously, then, we need to develop a theory with which to explore what constitutes an actor under changing political circumstances.

2. Toward a Theory of Actor Identification

The modern discipline of political science has thus far failed to theorize the incorporation of history into the analysis of contemporary political events and phenomenon. The rational choice paradigm, which dominates the most recent thinking of political science, is in fact a theoretical orientation that defies the dynamic and evolutionary perspective key to such theorization.

To show how rational choice fails in theorizing history, take the recent example from Avner Greif's celebrated analysis of the institutional evolution of late medieval Genoa (Greif 1998). His narrative is set up as follows. First he documents how the inter-clan rivalry within Genoa was managed for the period of 1099–1162 through mutual deterrence. For the next thirty years, Genoa was plagued by a continuing civil war because, according to Greif, one of the key conditions for the managed peace, the external threat of the Holy Roman Empire, had disappeared and each clan's incentives to expand its influence increased. In 1194, Genoa introduced a new political system, called "podesteria," at the center of which was a "podesta" or a "non-Genoese hired by the city to be its military leader, judge, and administrator for a relatively short period of time." (Greif 1988, p. 25). We are told that, in essence, this institutional innovation altered the equilibrium strategies of major clans and induced stable inter-clan cooperation. Greif's "podesteria game" with spec-

ified payoffs (see Greif 1998, esp. p. 51) indicates that, if certain conditions were met, the system of podesteria could (and indeed did) serve as a self-enforcing political institution that sustained Genoa's prosperity. More specifically, this system worked if the podesta did not collude with the challenging clan and if, in the case of an aggression, the other clan had sufficient incentives to fight along with podesta.

The problem that I find with Greif's analysis is not the pay-off structure of this podesteria game (i.e., the induced preference of each actor as specified in this game) which of course is the key to his explanation of the system's self-enforcing mechanism and thus Genoa's stability and prosperity. What I find more problematic is Greif's comparative static mode of analysis in which various stages of Genoa's political evolution are treated in a segmented fashion. In particular, what is missing in Greif's account is the explanation of how "podesta" became accepted as a key actor parallel with the powerful clans in the city. Greif's original narrative on Genoa begins with the clans as the central actors. Before introducing his podesteria game, Greif writes:

Before turning to this theoretical and historical analysis, however, its path-dependent nature should be emphasized. The analysis takes as given the existence of clans, their importance as political decisionmakers, and the strategies they followed in maintaining relations among themselves; namely that each clan would challenge the other if the appropriate opportunity arose. In other words, the starting point of the analysis builds on rather

than replaces existing rules and strategies. Hence it takes as given the constraints imposed by Genoa's history on the set of possible alternatives in the political game. Indeed, as discussed subsequently, this position is appropriate, since historically the podesteria system seems to have built on the existing clan structure in a manner that perpetuated its importance. (Greif 1998, p. 47).

Nevertheless, the setup of his podesteria game does not reflect "path-dependency," as Greif claims, because the podesta is treated not only as a resultant equilibrium institution but also as an independent player in the game side by side with the two major clans. In this sense, it is not clear how Greif can claim that he "takes as given the constraints imposed by Genoa's history on the set of possible alternatives." The original introduction of podesta was, as Greif himself documents, a process exogenous to the tradition of Genoa's history. What must be of interest, then, is how it was possible for this foreign invention to be incorporated into Genoa's political life. Greif fails to explore this issue because his historical narrative takes a form of comparative static analyses. Such a treatment reveals little about the process through which the podesta evolved as an independent actor.

Truly dynamic and evolutionary theorization of political process must start with a system of specification that enables us to identify who the main actors are, i.e. actors analytically constitutive of the observed political game. Rational-choice political scientists are as guilty as traditional historians for not having developed

such a theory. As a result, they, like Greif above, tend to move from one (level of) entity to the next, conveniently and idiosyncratically depending upon their specific analytical focus, only to "assume" who the relevant actors are.

Turning to the narrative of the Meiji Restoration, one would quickly learn the importance of a dynamic and evolutionary perspective which is now missing in the dominant literature of political science. The Meiji Restoration is a story difficult to narrate without specifying who the most relevant actors are in the ceaselessly changing political environment. Surely, at the very end of this revolutionary process, the regime transition was brought about by those feudal units (Hans) which rebelled against the pre-existing Tokugawa government. The coalition of these units was led by Choshu and Satsuma, members of which, after the revolution, constituted a large part of the newly established Meiji government. In the earlier stages of the revolutionary process, however, only a minority group of lower samurai class within Choshu and Satsuma (and elsewhere) envisioned such an ultimate regime transition. For each Choshu and Satsuma, in its entirety, to become an anti-Tokugawa force, a long, bitter and costly learning process was necessary, involving severe internal conflicts and even limited warfare with Western nations. Furthermore, Choshu and Satsuma were previously arch rivals, and it required a tremendous effort to coordinate their actions and to establish an anti-Tokugawa coalition. It should also be mentioned that, while Choshu and Satsuma were certainly the leaders, the coalition

was joined by other significant numbers of Han(s) to make up a military campaign, called Kangun, against Tokugawa. In other words, the identity of key actors in the Meiji Restoration shifted over time from a handful of enlightened individual samurai to Choshu and Satsuma, to their anti-Tokugawa coalition, and even to the Meiji government representing a unified Japan. Obviously, the narrative of the Meiji Restoration would be meaningless, if it took a comparative static mode and insisted, for example, that only Han is the appropriate level of analysis.

The two existing perspectives that might be of help in developing a theory of actor identification are “the logic of collective action” championed by Olson (1965) and the literature on collective identity pioneered by Laitin (1998). Neither of these existing theories, however, directly deals with our problem of actor identification in a dynamic and evolutionary political process. Olson’s main contribution was that individual participation to a group occurs only under a set of conditions, such as the small size of the group to be formed and the accompanying of selective incentives with the original organizational purpose. The questions raised in the context of the Meiji Restoration, however, are not whether individuals participate in collective activities, but rather how and why the level of relevant collectivities shifted over time. Further, Olson’s “size principle” suggests, if anything, a difficulty of organizing a larger collective entity. As briefly noted above, the narrative of the Meiji Restoration involves a vector contrary to this hypothesis in that the size of the relevant and identifiable actor rather expanded

over time, from individuals to a minority group, to a mainstream faction in selective Han(s), and ultimately to the unified anti-Tokugawa force.

Laitin’s notion of collective identity as socially constructed provides a more promising start than Olson (Laitin 1998; Fearon and Laitin 2000). In essence, Laitin argues that the boundaries of linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and other socially-related identities are the product of rational individuals’ incentives to overcome coordination problems. His example, taken from the experiences of former Soviet republics, of adopting a particular language from potentially multiple choices points to a kind of “bandwagon” process in which, after a certain “tipping point,” individual incentives to go along with the seemingly insurmountable trend increase exponentially. Similarly, Gruber (2000) shows that such a “going along” process can be decisive in forming a newly identifiable entity in various political contexts, such as in the establishment of European Union and the birth of the federalist structure of the United States. Despite their preoccupation with the concept of rationality, Laitin and Gruber deviate nontrivially from the conventional rational-choice framework in that they both emphasize the dynamic and evolutionary nature of the observed political process. In such a process, as they suggest, the point of status quo, and thus individual preference, change over time. In the usual comparative static setup, the changes of status quo points or the changes of preference orderings are treated simply as exogenous. What Laitin and Gruber get at is that these changes are endogenous to the dynamic and evolutionary nature of the

political process itself.

Unfortunately, however, neither Laitin nor Gruber specifies the exact mechanism under which a “tipping point” is formed and “going along” process starts to operate. It would be wrong to think simplistically that the decisive criteria is “50% plus 1” and that, for example, linguistic assimilation begins to speed up only after more than half of the relevant population begin to speak a particular language. As our daily experiences (such as the proliferation of cell phone users in big cities or the spread of internet users around the world) tell us, the bandwagon of human activities can begin to take place much earlier before reaching the purely numerical majority. Moreover, socially constructed identities can survive without necessarily achieving an overwhelming majority status. Perhaps, Laitin’s example of linguistic assimilation is an extreme case where the process of bandwagon nearly exhausts the relevant population.

For our purposes of developing a theory of actor identity, the specification of at what point an identifiable collectivity emerges is crucial. While incomplete at best, I submit as a hypothesis that a certain group A becomes an identifiable collectivity, i.e. an “actor” for our analytical purposes, if and only if there is another contemporaneous group B that opposes A in its principle of existence. The reason why I believe that such a competitive configuration is necessary is as follows. Obviously, the formation of an identity with any collective entity is a human cognitive process that takes place in each individual mind. As with any cognitive creations, we must think that not all (once) formed

identities survive over time. Even widely shared identities at one point in time might be temporary fads and wane in their influence. The survival of collective identities, then, must involve a process of internalization. The more individuals internalize their collective identity, the more likely that that identity emerges as a consequential one. Precisely because of its cognitive nature, internalization of a particular collective identity can be interpreted as a psychological response to an external pressure that would otherwise undermine the legitimacy of that identity. Hence, as hypothesized above, individuals are more likely to internalize their identities when they are confronted with a strong counter-identity.

The narrative of the Meiji Restoration is filled with examples that support this hypothesis. For instance, the formation of “Joi-ha,” or the group associated with the idea of “expelling barbarian” cannot be explained without the Tokugawa government’s policy that accommodated Western demand for international trade. Clearly, the formation of Joi-ha as an identifiable collective entity was in response to the formation of “Kaikoku-ha,” or the group supportive of the government policy. Further, because the discord between Joi-ha and Kaikoku-ha took place in each Han, as well as within Tokugawa government, both groups became recognized as solidified collectivities that cut across existing feudal boundaries. It is precisely this trans-border nature of their evolutions that enables us to treat Joi-ha as an analytically important actor in our narrative. To be sure, the idea of expelling barbarian had developed in the early part of the

nineteenth century, long before 1853 when U.S. Commodore Perry actually arrived and demanded that Japan abandon its isolationist policy.¹ But, in the earlier times, the concept of “Joi” remained simply as an idea and was not a label widely used to characterize the identity of an individual samurai. “Joi-ha” as a politically consequential collectivity emerged only after the Tokugawa government deliberated the issue of whether or not to open limited ports for international trade and eventually decided to do so though reluctantly.

Likewise, the formation of an identifiable group called “Tobaku-ha,” or those aimed openly for the destruction of the Tokugawa government, was a response to the formation of Tokugawa loyalists, “Sabaku-ha.” The fortune of “Tobaku-ha” took a long and complex course of evolution. Many narratives of the Meiji Restoration suggest that the metamorphosis of many Joi-ha members into Tobaku-ha was the critical development that accelerated the revolutionary process. Of course, it was not easy for Tobaku-minded individuals to get organized because, as one would expect, the Tokugawa government embarked upon a series of assault against them and try hard to isolate their activities in various parts of Japan. But it was precisely this suppression that gave a unity to these radicals and helped them form a collective identity beyond their feudal origins. Generally, radical samurai were prosecuted, assassinated, and/or politically overthrown in most Han(s), but Choshu, where the leadership approved radical reform plans, began to attract these Tobaku-ha samurai from outside. Choshu thus became the base for the activ-

ities of this group. The turning point of Tobaku-ha, of course, was when Satsuma, another powerful Han, agreed secretly to join forces with Choshu in future rebellion against Tokugawa. Satsuma had consistently supported the Tokugawa government, but after loosing its war with Great Britain and thus was forced to accept the Western military superiority, it became of the view that the continuation of the Tokugawa regime would only undermine the security and independence of Japan.² The rest of the process leading to the 1868 regime transition was a history of the political and military confrontations between the coalition of Tobaku-ha led by Satsuma and Choshu and the Tokugawa government.

To repeat, our ability to narrate any major political event relies on our ability to discern who the most relevant actors are. Often, with no explicit explanations, our narrative shifts its level of analysis, some times focusing on an individual hero, some times on small political units, and other times on the coalition of the existing units. In the case of the Meiji Restoration, such a shift constitutes a major part of our narrative because the chronology of the revolution was such that a minority group with radical ideas gradually evolved into a political force significant enough to overthrow the preexisting government. What enables us to treat each level of entity as an analytically salient actor at a different point in time is, as argued above, the fact that the identity of each entity was pitted against counter-identity which threatened its principle of existence. Individual heroes were threatened precisely because their thoughts and behavior stood out against

the political mainstream. Political factions and coalitions were formed in response to the formation of opposing groups. It was only in these competitive settings that an entity becomes an “actor” analytically constitutive of the observed political game.

Comparative static analysis, dominant in the current literature of political science, is useless in revealing the important moments of history in which certain entities become analytically salient actor in the political process. To put it differently, such a mode of analysis avoids exploring the formation and existence of actors themselves. It is ironic that the so-called actor oriented approach, at least as it currently stands, fails to address the very question of what constitutes an actor. By segmenting different phases of the process analytically, the actor oriented approach is missing out a dynamic and evolutionary nature of political process in which the past critically influences the course of events in present and future times.

3. Multiplicity of the Past-Present Connection

Apart from the problem of the absence of specification regarding who the most relevant actors are, the actor oriented approach faces more general problems in linking the past and present in a causal and chronological sequence of events. Faced with the limitations of the rational-choice perspective, in particular, some critics, especially so-called “historical institutionalists,” have highlighted such concepts as “path dependence” and “unintended consequences” to address the impor-

tance of historical effects in political life. In my view, however, their own theory and conceptual tools are so unsophisticated that the message of historical institutionalists amounts to nothing more than “history matters.” In order to explore more systematically the dynamic and evolutionary nature of political process, we must go beyond this simple message to clarify different kinds of historical effects.

I submit that the ways in which the past is connected to the present (and future) take various forms. Certainly, as historical institutionalists would emphasize, the concept of path dependence and that of unintended consequences each represents an important manner in which a previous happening can affect the course of events in later points in time. These, however, are not the only ways in which the past influences the subsequent political development.

More specifically, there are at least four different ways in which history can contextualize the present and future environment. First, a past incident can leave an enduring and positive legacy which constrains the later development of human activities. “Path dependence” is a concept that captures this type of the past-present connection whereby calculations, decisions, and behavioral outcomes made previously outlive the original setting. Naturally, historical narrative dealing with this type of connection emphasizes the continuity in the sequence of events. Second, a past incident can leave an enduring but negative legacy on human interactions. “Trauma” and “learning” are concepts that capture this type of connection. Unlike path dependence, the concepts of trauma and learning

TABLE 1: TYPOLOGY of HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS

Type of Legacy	Key Concepts	Narrative	Examples
Positive	Path dependence	Continuous	Satsuma's support of Tokugawa government
Negative	Trauma/learning	Continuous	Satsuma's change to Tobaku-ha
Unintended	Unintended consequence	Discontinuous	Tokugawa's consultation with Daimyos
Absent	New ideas/interest	Discontinuous	Satsuma-Choshu coalition

lead us to expect that the calculations, decisions and behavioral outcomes made in the past period are treated as a liability and as something not to be repeated in the present period. Historical narrative dealing with this type of connection also emphasizes the continuity in the chronology of events, but the direction of causality presumed therein is obviously opposite from the case of path dependence. Third, a past incident can leave a legacy neither positive or negative, but still in a constraining manner in a direction no rational actor would have originally expected. "Unintended consequence" is a concept that captures this type of the connection between the past and present. Unlike path dependence or trauma and learning, historical narrative dealing with the case of unintended consequence emphasizes the discontinuity in the chronology of events. Finally, history can develop in such a way that a past incident, which otherwise should have left some legacy, leaves no legacy at all because some exogenous force completely obliterates its effect. Such a force can be a product of "idea" or "norm" suddenly introduced from the out-

side world, or newly-emerged dominating interests. As with the case of unintended consequence, historical narrative dealing with this pattern also emphasizes the discontinuous flow of chronology. Table 1 summarizes these variations of historical connections.

In narrating the process of the Meiji Restoration, one encounters numerous incidents that fall under each of the four categories specified above. The elaboration of some of these cases might highlight the mechanism under which varying patterns of historical effects take place.

3.1 Path Dependence

The narrative of the Meiji Restoration usually begins with the arrival of U.S. Commodore Perry and his Navy expedition to Japan in 1853. Perry demonstrated his superior military power and demanded that Japan abandon its long-standing isolationist policy and open its ports for international trade. Perry's arrival was shocking even for entire Japan. It was an incident that should have moved the status quo points for all political actors and they should have redefined their preference

orderings accordingly. Nevertheless, some actors' calculations and decisions made prior to Perry's arrival were carried over to the post 1853 period and constrained the set of possible alternatives in their subsequent political interactions.

The behavior of Satsuma from 1853 to 1863 represents an example of path dependence, or the pattern in which the legacy from the past imposes an enduring and positive constraint on the subsequent course of development. Initially, Satsuma opposed the opening of Japan's ports, and tried hard to persuade the Tokugawa government to delay any decisions on the question of commercial treaties with U.S. and other Western nations. This behavior is puzzling because Satsuma, located at the southern tip of the Kyushu Island, was most concerned with the need to build a naval defense. Satsuma's leaders recognized the superiority of Western military and scientific technology. If Satsuma leaders correctly recognized Western superiority, why did they not rather prefer an open trading and friendly relations with Western nations so as to increase Satsuma's own security? The reason why Satsuma did not outright urge Tokugawa to pursue international trade lied in Satsuma's long-standing status as a secret trading partner of China through Ryukyu Islands (Ishii 2000, p. 15). The opening of ports, under the direct control of Tokugawa government, meant the formalization of Tokugawa's monopolistic position over international trade. It was expected that such a new arrangement would revoke the privileged revenue that Satsuma had enjoyed for many years, and the new arrangement indeed hurt Satsuma causing

some severe fiscal difficulties. This episode illustrates that the leaders of Satsuma were constrained by the positive experience of the previous era, even though it was quite obvious that such a favorable status quo position was no longer possible to hold onto.

In retrospect, Satsuma should have entirely redefined its interest vis-à-vis the Tokugawa government immediately after the opening of Japan's ports became imminent. Satsuma would have perhaps been better served if it joined the force calling for expelling barbarian and leaned toward the destruction of the Tokugawa government much earlier than it actually did. Nevertheless, throughout the period from 1853 to 1863, Satsuma rather played a key role in defending the survival of the Tokugawa regime. What changed this path-dependent position ultimately was a traumatic incident that occurred in 1862-63 and left a negative which historical legacy on Satsuma's subsequent behavior, as explained below.

3.2 Trauma and Learning

In September, 1862, a decade after Perry's arrival and four years after the commercial treaties came into effect, an English merchant named Richardson was brutally murdered on the road connecting Kanagawa and Kawasaki by a group of armed Satsuma samurai. Richardson, together with three other Westerners, was riding a horse when they encountered a train of daimyo retainers belonging to Shimazu Hisamitsu, the father of the Prince of Satsuma. They followed the custom of standing aside to let the train pass, but they were suddenly attacked by those who car-

ried sharp-edged heavy swords. Richardson was killed immediately, and the other two male foreigners were severely wounded. This incident, known as “Namamugi (Richardson) incident” became a major turning point in the revolutionary process.

Namamugi incident was not the first incident of its kind. Yet, this incident was fundamentally different from any of the previous murders of foreigners because for the first time it involved a Han as a formal party to the case. Satsuma evaded, if not rejected, the Tokugawa government’s order to hand over the murderers for prosecution. Because no apology was made by anyone in Japan, the British subsequently intensified their diplomatic pressure and demanded reparations from both the Tokugawa government and the Prince of Satsuma. Although the Tokugawa government decided to pay the amount requested in full, Satsuma still refused to pay its part. In August 1863, the British fleet appeared in Kagoshima Bay and bombarded the city of Kagoshima for retaliation. The city was completely destroyed and many civilian lives were lost. Two months later, Satsuma finally paid the requested amount and settled the incident with Britain.

Satsuma, until this point, was in firm support of the Tokugawa government, although it only reluctantly accepted the government open-trade policy. Satsuma’s alliance with Tokugawa reflected its strategy of trying to bridge the growing gulf between Tokugawa and the Imperial Court in Kyoto. Satsuma’s rival, Choshu, was gaining a trust and influence among imperial circles, by infusing radical ideas to the Emperor’s entourage. Satsuma dif-

ferentiated itself from Choshu by taking a position of balancer between Tokugawa and Kyoto. Leaders in Satsuma believed that such a strategy would be most effective in expanding its own political influence.

The bitter experience of the limited war with the British fleet, however, gave a critical lesson to Satsuma. It reminded Satsuma of the Western superiority in military technology and how formidable the challenge that Japan was facing in the rapidly changing international environment. Satsuma, until then, adhered to the idea of constructing an effective government accommodating the roles of both Tokugawa and the Imperial Court, but such an idea was becoming increasingly unrealistic and unattractive. Satsuma henceforth became of the view that the presence of Tokugawa was only a hindrance to Japan’s independence and security, now that it became evident that Western nations were prepared to use force.

As argued above, it was possible for Satsuma’s political preference to have changed much earlier, perhaps during the mid 1850s, if it had not been for the positive (path dependent) legacy carried over from the previous years. What broke this legacy was a traumatic and bitter lesson learned from the Namamugi incident and the subsequent military engagement with the West. Satsuma, from that point on, leaned toward more neutral position vis-à-vis the Tokugawa government. Clearly, these incidents left a long-lasting, negative impact on Satsuma’s behavior.

3.3 Unintended Consequences

When Perry arrived and demanded that Japan abandon its isolationist policy, the Tokugawa government decided to delay its response. Perry was told to return for full diplomatic discussion in the following year. During the next month, Tokugawa made an unprecedented decision to ask other daimyo leaders (feudal lords) for advice on the matter of whether to open ports for international trade. Tokugawa also informed the Imperial Court in Kyoto of the nature of Perry's request. In retrospect, these moves were detrimental to the fate of the Tokugawa regime, because they entailed inviting other actors to play more prominent roles in political matters.

More specifically, the behavior of the Tokugawa government after Perry's arrival had two crucial consequences. First, for the first time since its establishment in the early 17th century, the Tokugawa regime provided with daimyos a formal opportunity to give opinions on the governmental affairs. Hence, for the first time, the notion of "public opinion" was taken seriously in the ongoing political debates. Second, the government decision to ask for comments made explicit the hitherto latent cleavage between the Joi-ha and Kaikoku-ha, or those for and against the opening of Japanese ports. This cleavage was formalized and became visible because daimyos' comments were sent in writings and assembled for a systematic review. Clearly, there was no consensus, which the government had hoped existed among daimyos. It was this action on the part of Tokugawa government that made Joi-ha and Kaikoku-ha self-identifiable,

and thus politically consequential, collective entities.

Indeed, after this point, powerful daimyos, most notably Satsuma, began frequently intervening in the governmental policy making process. The Emperor in Kyoto, too, made his presence and political will well-known, especially a year later when he rejected Tokugawa's petition for the imperial approval of the treaty with the United States. This was a major embarrassment for the Tokugawa government. There is no question that Tokugawa's behavior after Perry's arrival had an effect of undermining its own legitimacy and authority, thus facilitating its ultimate collapse in 1868.

This episode is an excellent example of "unintended consequence" of the past incident contextualizing the future course of events. The important point to emphasize is that Tokugawa was not necessarily acting irrationally at that time, knowing that its decision to ask for other daimyos' comments or for Emperor's approval would have a consequence detrimental to its own survival. It is only with the benefit of hindsight that the government's decision had such a negative consequence.³ Obviously, Tokugawa had no intention of undermining its legitimacy and authority when it decided to have consultations with other political actors on the matter of Perry's request. In fact, it is quite possible to interpret Tokugawa's behavior as rational because, if Tokugawa had accepted Perry's demand on its face value and with no hesitations, it might have sent the message that the government was weak, rather provoking anti-Tokugawa feeling across Japan. With regard to

Kyoto's reaction, Tokugawa of course had no expectation that the Emperor would disagree with the government decision to conclude a treaty with the United States. Otherwise, the Tokugawa government would not have asked for the imperial approval in the first place.

History, as is the case with this example, often unfolds itself with unintended consequences, leaving a constraint in a direction no rational actor would have originally expected. The absence of "intention" in the original action, of course, does not mean the absence of causal force in that action. It would be impossible to narrate the Meiji Restoration without mentioning Perry's arrival. It would be equally impossible to make sense of the Meiji Restoration without discussing Tokugawa's reaction to Perry's request and its unintended consequences.

3.4 Ideas

What overthrew the Tokugawa government in the end was a military force, called Kangun, led by Choshu and Satsuma, which made a triumphant march from Kyoto to Edo (Tokyo) in 1868. The birth of the political and military coalition between these two powerful Han(s) was certainly a phenomenon in which the past history did not impose a significant constraining influence. Choshu and Satsuma, as mentioned above, were arch rivals, each struggling to expand its own political clout within the declining Tokugawa regime, as well as in Kyoto, among reform minded samurai and elsewhere. Satsuma, indeed, constituted a major part of the Tokugawa's military campaign that "punished" Choshu as late as 1864. Therefore, if there

had been the effect of legacy from the past, constraining either Choshu or Satsuma, the coalition would not have been realized and the Meiji Restoration would not have been achieved.

How then was the Choshu-Satsuma alliance established? For this, the narrative of the Meiji Restoration usually turns to a set of factors for explanation. First, both Choshu and Satsuma had been witnessing for some time the decline of Tokugawa's authority as well as governing capabilities, especially in dealing with the foreign pressures. Second, they both recognized that various attempts to strengthen Tokugawa's power base, including the promotion of radically oppressive leader Ii Naosuke and the desperate search of political compromise with Kyoto, failed miserably. Third, the sense of crisis widely shared since the arrival of Perry began to convert itself into a sense of nationalism among enlightened individuals, like Sakamoto Ryoma and Nakaoka Shintaro, who made seemingly tireless efforts to coordinate the meeting between top leaders of Satsuma and Choshu, even at the risk of their own lives. Finally, these efforts paid off, and they were successful in drawing up a plan of joint action which was signed by the leaders of both Hans. There was an implicit anticipation, of course, that if the revolution was successful, those members of Satsuma and Choshu would occupy the most central positions in the new political regime.

The establishment of an alliance between Choshu and Satsuma was beyond the imagination of most observers at that point, precisely because these two Hans had been political and military enemies for

some time. But, the fact that it was achieved suggests that history, rather paradoxically, can unfold itself without leaving significant legacy. It is possible that the sequence of events proceed in such a manner that some exogenous force completely obliterates the effect from the past and sets an entirely new course in the following political development. In the case of the Meiji Restoration, the exogenous force was a product of complex set of elements, including the newly emerging sense of nationalism, the anticipation of a completely new political and social structure, and the hope of obtaining power and influence in the coming years.

4. Conclusions

Modern political science inquiries often take the form of the “actor oriented approach.” Unlike those previous macroscopic theories that focused on political culture (Almond and Verba), structural-functions (Parsons), or political system (Easton), the actor oriented approach takes the individual actors as the basic units of analysis and of explanations. In the case of rational choice theories, the most recent and powerful variants of the actor oriented approach, actors are treated as ontological givens and their preference and belief systems are assumed, rather than explained.

The actor oriented approach, as it currently stands, is useless in theorizing a dynamic and evolutionary nature of political process. Accordingly, it is useless in explaining major political events, like revolutions, in which the sequence of various

incidents constitute a chronological and causal chain. In this paper, I have tried to compensate the shortcomings of the existing actor oriented approach in two ways. First, I have explored the conditions under which an actor becomes “actor” constitutive of the observed political game for analytical purposes. Second, I have developed a typology of ways in which the past incident affects (or does not affect) the present course of development. To be sure, the frameworks that I have presented here are preliminary, but the examples drawn from the narrative of the Meiji Restoration seem to suggest that they can be perhaps modified and improved for further sophistication.

None of the criticisms raised in the foregoing discussion, of the actor oriented approach generally and the rational choice perspective in particular, is meant to suggest that these approaches should be abandoned entirely. Quite the opposite, I believe that the presently dominant rational choice paradigm has made a gigantic leap-forward toward a rigorous and scientific inquiry of political matters. Unfortunately, however, as it currently stands, the rational choice inquiry falls short of providing a dynamic and evolutionary perspective necessary for the analysis of great historical events. All we need is another gigantic leap-forward which would bridge the gap between the positive research exemplified by the rational choice thinking and more traditional type of studies on political histories.

Notes

1 For the origins of these thoughts, see Beasley (1972) esp. pp. 82-83.

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2 Satsuma's decision was born out of an incident called Namamugi Jiken. See Kohno (2001).

3 Unintended consequences, of course, can turn out to be positive in hindsight.

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