

Ritualizing the Nation through railway building:

Defining the modern state, democracy and citizenship in modern Japan (1885-1936)

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1. Aims

Employing neo-institutional and historical-sociological approaches, this paper employs the concept of ritualization in helping us to learn the institutionalization of citizenship, representation and democratization in Japan through the case of railway building. This paper argues that election became now a new political ritual and the issue of local railway building became a national agenda, through which local interest and national interest could be redefined and mediated, giving birth to a new democratic polity and the ideas of citizenship that localities were now legitimate participants in the nation.

2. Data and Methods

This paper analyzes how the localities wrote proposals or petitioned to different authorities and how the politicians gained power by highlighting the issue of local railway building in the diet. These practices could be considered as some sorts of “methodological accounts” to ritualize and institutionalize the new democratic polity.

3. Results

Ritualizing did not only further actualize the belief towards railway but the democratic values of representation and political participation were also expressed through and manifested in these practices. In other words, when ones asked for a railway, it was quite similar to consider it as a political ritual which expressed the wish to participate in the nation-state. One might not necessarily lay tracks, but the very act of asking for it by the localities and the making of promise to build it by the politicians had already made the symbolic significance of railway very real and the democratic polity tangible for commoners.

4. Conclusion

The paper argues that railway did not modernize Japan and politicians were not helping localities because of given “political and economic interest.” Yet railway building (and the asking for it) was indeed a political ritual that institutionalizes the ideas of citizenship and representation in modern Japan.