“By the People, for the People: People’s Art Debates and the Rise of the Proletariat, 1916–1918”

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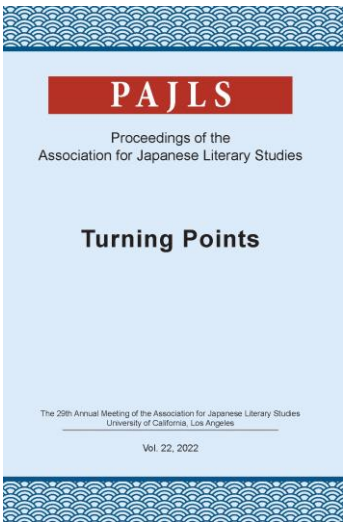

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BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE: PEOPLE'S ART DEBATES AND THE RISE OF THE PROLETARIAT, 1916–1918

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In 1922, in "Sengen hitotsu" Arishima Takeo famously proclaimed that "no matter how important a scholar, thinker, social activist or leader someone might be, if they think that they can contribute anything to the working class, they clearly must be arrogant."[2] Accordingly, someone born into the bourgeoisie, no matter the firmness of their intentions, ultimately cannot be the main flag-bearer of social revolution: only the working class, by virtue of first-hand experience of its own condition, holds the reins to its destiny. This dramatic statement is regarded an important turning point, not only for Arishima's own life, but also for the developing discourse that was later called Proletarian literature, revealing the impossible predicament conscious intellectuals found themselves in at the dawn of the age of the Proletariat: their inability to ultimately escape the existential antagonism of being the educated minority in relation to the working majority.[3] A mirror image of Arishima's "despair," however, is the intense expectation that he placed on the capability of the working class to be in possession of its own fate.

People's art debates (*minshū geijutsu ron*) can be defined as debates that prepared the emergence of such a vision. The discussion took place between the years 1916 and 1918 and concerned the interpretations and implications of the phrase *minshū geijutsu*. This period coincides with the First World War and the October Revolution; domestically, it follows the political crisis of 1912–1913, the expansion of industrial capitalism and the urban proletariat; heightened awareness of social and economic disparities leading to a series of popular uprisings culminating in rice riots. All of these factors provided grounds for robust discussions on the true meaning and application of democracy. In 1916, also the year of Yoshino

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[2] Arishima Takeo, "Sengen hitotsu," *Kaizō* 4, no. 1 (Jan. 1922), 55–60. It has been pointed out, however, that Arishima's views on intellectuals' relationship to the proletariat were in process of self-editing as the debate went on post publication of "Sengen hitotsu"; see Kimura Masaki, *Kakumeiteki chishikijin no gunzō* (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2022).

[3] This point was especially stressed by post-war critics such as Hirano Ken and Honda Shūgo.

Sakuzō's proclamation of *minponshugi*, the notion of constituent power of the People was looming over the Taishō cultural sphere; politics, journalism, arts and education, and the publishing industry were not exempt from the imperative of facing the issue of their respective responsibilities in the face of the propertyless majority. Visions of what this majority exactly *was* competed with each other, as did different forces competing for the authority granted by its representation. The debates over People's art were therefore a response of (primarily) literary critic circles to that historical moment: vigorous discussion produced around ninety articles constructing various visions of the People, as well as contemplating the position of intellectuals in relation to this newly re-defined subject.[4]

This paper will examine the interaction between Honma Hisao (1886–1981), English literature scholar and critic from the *Waseda bungaku* coterie, whose essay "Minshū geijutsu no igi oyobi kachi"[5] (The significance and value of People's art) set off the debate in August 1916, and Yasunari Sadao (1884–1924), a socialist-oriented critic who was the first to object to Honma's proposal. This exchange encapsulates the two inter-related central issues developed through the course of the debate: how can the People be defined and what is the role or responsibility of an intellectual in a democratic society.

In keeping with the general intellectual trend of rising awareness of social issues (*shakai mondai*), in the mid-1910s the authority of Naturalism was challenged by emerging idealist writers represented by the Shirakaba group. Authors previously associated with Naturalism distanced themselves from the genre, and critics such as Shimamura Hōgetsu (1871–

[4] Notable contributors to the debate included Katō Kazuo, Ōsugi Sakae, Ikuta Chōkō, Eguchi Kan, Kawaji Ryūkō, Yasunari Sadao, and others; *Waseda bungaku* ran a dedicated special issue in February 1917 and *Shinchō* in June 1918. Some of the articles can be found in the following collections: *Gendai nihon bungaku kōza: kanshō to kenkyū* vol. 9, ed. by Itō Sei et al. (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1962); *Nihon kindai bungaku taikei* vol. 58, ed. by Tanaka Yasutaka et. al. (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1972); and *Kindai bungaku hyōron taikei* vol. 5, ed. by Endō Tasuku and Sofue Shōji (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1972). Among the notable commentaries on the debate from this period are Senuma Shigeki's "Minshū geijutsu ron no zengo," *Bungaku* 18, no. 7 (1950), 14–24; Hirano Ken's "Daiyon kaikyū no bungaku no jidai," *Bungaku* 18, no. 1 (1950), 17–30; Fujidō Masaaki's "Minshū geijitsu ron kara tanemaku hito made," *Kokubungaku: kaishaku to kanshō* 24, no. 1 (1959): 111–122; and Moriyama Shigeo's "Minshū geijutsu ron," *Nihon bungaku* 12, no. 7 (July 1963), 505–520; and his subsequent book *Jikkō to geijutsu: Taishō anākizumu to bungaku* (Tokyo: Noa shobō, 1969).

[5] Honma Hisao, "Minshū geijutsu no igi oyobi kachi," *Waseda bungaku* (August 1916), 2–13.

1918) were actively looking to reflect on the shortcomings of their movement. Honma Hisao was a student of Hōgetsu's and a critic firmly situated in the *Waseda bungaku* Naturalist circles, as well as a loyal adept of Tsubouchi Shōyō, with whom he shared intellectual tendencies and an interest in traditional performing arts.[6] At the time of the debate, Honma too was seeking to overcome what he experienced as a moral crisis of Naturalism, which led him to write on a variety of topics ranging from Oscar Wilde's aestheticism to the problems of women's social standing. But most significantly, during this period he became one of the keenest translators of the Swedish feminist thinker Ellen Key (1849–1926), and by the end of 1916 published his third translated volume of Key's *The Younger Generation*, titled *Kitarubeki jidai no tame ni* (Hokubunkan, July 1916).[7] Given the fact that Honma's "Minshū geijutsu no igi oyobi kachi" was intended to argue for the relevance of Key's arguments for the arts, the essay is better understood as a part of Honma's promotional effort. However, as theater historian Soda Hidehiko (1995) convincingly argued, at the same time the essay was situated within the framework of public or citizen's (*kōshūgeki* or *shimingeki*) plays, ideas on which had been developed by younger critics in the Waseda theater circles such as Shimamura Tamizō (1888–1970), as well as Shōyō's project of re-conceptualizing theater as an educational institution (*kyōka kikan*) suitable to transform society at large. Relating these ideas to Ellen Key's proposition for "recreational leisure" necessitated a certain degree of transformation, since Key's text had arguably very limited relation to aesthetic problems. This led to Honma producing a series of misrepresentations that Soda referred to as a "warped mirror."[8]

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[6] A detailed discussion of Honma's biography and intellectual foundations during this period is given in Hirata Yōko, *Honma Hisao Taishō jidai no yōroppa bunka inyū* (Tokyo: Waseda daigaku shuppanbu, 2012).

[7] In 1971, looking back on the time of the debate, Honma recalled that discovering the works of Ellen Key was akin to finding light in the dim grayness of Weltschmerz [*sekaiku*] of Meiji naturalism, a breath of fresh air that he, like many others at the time, was desperately looking for: "What I titled as "Thorough significance of decadent tendencies and naturalism," a rather long article that I contributed to an issue of *Waseda bungaku* in Meiji 44, is this gray world and my desire to find some new light inside it, in other words, my feelings of suffering and yearning, intermixed. It was at that very moment that I happened to come across Ellen Key"; Honma Hisao and Ōkubo Norio, "'Minshū geijutsu ronsō' no koro," *Nihon kindai bungaku*, no. 14 (May 1971), 99.

[8] A detailed account of the democratic ideas in the Taishō period is given in Soda Hidehiko, *Minshū gekijō: mō hitotsu no taishō demokurashī* (Tokyo: Zōzansha, 1995). In English, People's art debates in theater criticism and practice are also treated in Hoyt Long, *On Uneven Ground* (Redwood City: Stanford University

On the other hand, Yasunari Sadao was involved in such pioneering Proletarian organizations as Heiminsha and the anarcho-syndicalist Kindai shisōsha, remaining active through the so-called "winter period" of the Japanese socialist movement. Most notably, Yasunari left his mark on the "eradication of libertine literature" (*yūtō bungaku bokumetsu ronsō*, 1916) and traditionalism (*dentōshugi ronsō*, 1917) debates, where he brought forth a perspective distinctively oppositional to the intellectualist trends characteristic of the Taishō zeitgeist, and of which his opponent, Honma Hisao, was clearly representative. Yasunari, posthumously called "the first proletarian critic,"[9] was a member of Sakai Toshihiko's first socialist "literary agency" Baibunsha,[10] and pioneered an understanding of writing in terms of labor and its products as items subject to a kind of market ethic. A frequently overlooked theme underlying Yasunari's positions in the above-mentioned debates is his application of business ethics to the *quality* of writing and the resulting set of writers' rights and responsibilities, stemming from his awareness of writing as a trade, combined with an unyielding trust in the emerging proletarian readership.[11] Owing partly to his great intellectual curiosity, and partly to the need to support himself while struggling with drug addiction, throughout the twenty years of his writing life Yasunari left behind a scattered assortment of literary and commercial writing and translations, but not one monograph. Yasunari Sadao's work as a whole can, however, be remembered as including a varied collection of original contributions: he was the first critic to introduce Maurice Leblanc's gentleman thief Arsène Lupin, the first to translate Frederick Taylor's theories on scientific management, the first to criticize Sōseki's deification, and also the first, especially around the early

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Press, 2011), chapter six.

[9] Tsuchida Kyōson, "Saisho no musansha hyōronka," *Jitsugyō no sekai* (September 1924), 101.

[10] Baibunsha, an agency offering versatile writing-related services, was conceived by Sakai Toshihiko (1871–1933) after the High Treason Incident in order to help fellow socialists to earn a living by commercial writing while not giving up on their convictions during the "winter years" (1911–1915?) of stringent censorship of anything related to socialism and anarchism. A detailed account of Baibunsha's activities can be found in Kuroiwa Hisako, *Pan to pen: shakaishugisha Sakai Toshihiko to 'Baibunsha' no tatakai* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2010).

[11] Apart from providing translation proofreading services, Yasunari Sadao dedicated a lot of time to arguing for translators' accountability toward their readers and to promoting the respectability of translation as a trade itself. In 1914, Honma's sloppy translation of Yrjö Hirn's *The Origins of Art: A Psychological and Social Inquiry* (1900) became the origin of conflict between the two. For Yasunari's views on the translator's responsibility, see for example Yasunari Sadao, "Seizon to goyaku," *Kindai shisō* 2, no. 3 (Dec. 1913), 12–17.

years of Taishō, to revolt mercilessly against what he deemed a manifestation of "bureaucratic spirit" (*kanryōteki seishin*), or intellectuals assuming authority over the masses by virtue of their institutional affiliation, positioning themselves as benevolent while blind to their pursuit of their own class interests.[12]

For their respective arguments, both Yasunari Sadao and Honma Hisao chose to define the People in terms of class. Honma loosely defined *minshū* as *heimin*, further specifying it as "all the common people, plain folk that belong to the below-middle working class"); vagueness, presumably, coming from the need to reconcile Key's object of interest, the Swedish industrial proletariat, and Honma's own understanding of democracy in the sphere of the arts as a cultural lowest common denominator for all the non-ruling (*hiyokuatsu*) classes, with an emphasis on the most unfortunate. As I will address later, such a definition was prevalent but not shared by all; however, in the case of the Honma-Yasunari polemic, it was the positionality of the critic that became a point of contestation. So, in my discussion of the initial article which catalyzed the debate and confronted Honma and Yasunari, I would like to draw attention to one particular aspect: how, through attempting to define art for the People, Honma sketches the portrait of an ideal intellectual: in this case, in the way he represents the image of Ellen Key.

To summarize, in "Minshū geijutsu no igi oyobi kachi," Honma first establishes the condition of the working class the way Ellen Key sees it: afflicted by excessive labor, alienation, physical and mental exhaustion, all of which lead to indulging in vulgar and unproductive entertainment. And as Key and Romain Rolland (who was another significant figure summoned to authorize Honma's thesis) argued that "the immediate future of humanity" wholly depends on the state of the working class, he urges his readers to consider how the arts can assist in improving these awful circumstances. Here is where the necessity of People's art comes in: art must first and foremost be accessible to the laymen; it has to be a viable option that can replace the mindless, "vague and boorish habits" that are bound to bring about societal decay; in other words, People's art is exactly the "recreative culture" (*kōshinteki shūyō*) called for by Key in *The younger generation*.

In "Minshū geijutsu no igi oyobi kachi," Honma introduces Key as someone who is "such an ardent lover of life that she is sometimes called

[12] These points are better articulated in Yasunari Sadao, "Kakkei toshite no bungaku," *Yūben* (April 10, 1917), 486–499, and Yasuanari Sadao, "Honma Hisao kun oyobi hoka no shokun o kōgeki suru riyū," *Shinchō* (Dec. 1915), 112–117.

'an apostle of life';[13] and above all the loving grace of her tender motherly heart is dedicated to the workers and the unfortunate in society," someone who "more than anyone else feels the misery and ugliness of the social life that the working class is exposed to in contemporary society, and deeper than anyone else does she pity them." Dubbed as a "teacher of the soul," Key's life-affirming thought, compassionate yet authoritative, appealed to the sentiments of liberal intelligentsia (including such remarkable figures as Hiratsuka Raichō and Yamada Waka[14]), endowing them with trust in education and cultivation (*kyōyō*) of the individual as the ultimate path towards the common prosperity of all classes.

Thus, rather than being defined through aesthetic terms, Honma's People's art is defined through social relations, and as an instrument of cultural policy. As we shall see, this will constitute the main point of criticism for Yasunari Sadao. While Honma's definition of "People" is one that almost exclusively highlights the working class—the object upon which enlightenment is cast—Sadao raises pertinent questions about the source of authority of the enlightening subject.

Yasunari Sadao's objection came in *Yomiuri shinbun* several weeks later, in an article titled "Kimi wa kizoku ka heimin ka? Honma Hisao kun ni tou" (Are you a nobleman or are you a commoner? A question for Honma Hisao).[15] Noting Honma's relentless emphasis on Key's motherly

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[13] "Apostle of life" was a common way Ellen Key was referred to at that time and illustrates her image as a "mother of society." For example, Havelock Ellis prefaces her 1912 biography as: "Ellen Key has sometimes been called the modern St. Brigitta. That famous saint of the North came out of Sweden six hundred years ago to write her book of Revelations and to attempt the moral reformation of her age. To-day, with a similar spontaneous energy, a similar self-inspired vocation, Ellen Key comes to us out of Sweden to preach a moral reformation of a somewhat different kind. Her message has not been the outcome of historical study or of sociological investigation. Notwithstanding the wide and miscellaneous culture which circumstance and an eagerly receptive brain enabled her to acquire, her temperamental activities have throughout been of a rich and impulsive rather than of a scientific and methodical character;" see Louise Nyström-Hamilton, *Ellen Key: her life and her work*, trans. A.E.B Fries (London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1913).

[14] Hirose Reiko has pointed out the difference between Raichō's and Honma's appropriation of Key's ideas, noting that while Raichō was inspired by Key's statements on love and equality in marriage, Honma was most interested in the eugenicist undercurrents of Key's thought, seeing that as the heart of her work on love and marriage; see Hirose Reiko, "Hiratsuka Raichō no shisō keisei: Eren Kei shisō no juyō o meguru Honma Hisao to no chigai," *Jendā shigaku*, no. 2 (2006), 35–47. Hirata (2012) also discusses Honma's Taishō period work on Key at length, focusing on Honma's active interest in problems of women's social standing.

[15] Yasunari Sadao, "Kimi wa kizoku ka heimin ka? Honma Hisao kun ni tou," *Yomiuri shinbun,* August 17–19, 1916.

guidance, and critiquing his embrace of the bourgeois intellectual savior role, Yasunari passionately asks Honma to clarify his own position in the debate: "From what sort of social standing were you no longer able to ignore the cries of Key and Rolland? As one on the side of the noblemen? Or on the side of the commoners?"[16]

Yasunari points out that Honma's article makes no mention of Key's or Rolland's opinions regarding the reasons for such a horrendous state of affairs, while the workers of the present day are, according to Yasunari, already in the process of awakening to the root causes, and are growing to despise such "fraudulent philosophy, trickster morality." Here we can see the construction of the proletariat as an active self-rescuing subject similar to the one later evoked by Arishima. Yasunari then points out the second issue with Honma's version of People's art, namely, his juxtaposition of the People's art (universal and popular, exemplified—through Rolland's thesis—by amateur plays, films, and yearly festivals) to the so-called "high art" (inaccessible and requiring specialized knowledge). In an obviously satirical fashion Yasunari invites Honma to change all "them" [references to the working classes] into "us" in order to see his proposal from the first-person perspective of the "People" he talks about:

> We are placed in a cage by the name "class," and our political freedom, social activities, our rights to education, everything is restricted… And now we are allocated something called "People's art," and even the development of our taste is subject to restriction… We too have the abilities needed to understand high art. To tell us be content with People's art only is to create another class in the art world. If you seek to "do away with the classes" through "cultivation," rather than giving us "People's arts," abolish the social classes first.[17]

By inviting the critic to merge with the masses, Yasunari rejected the institutionalization of public taste, and the authority granted by it. By repeatedly satirizing Honma's blatant self-identification with Key's "loving grace and tenderly heart," he appears sensitive most of all to how Honma used Key's motherly image to implicitly establish the source of his own authority as an intellectual as something that, just like a mother's intentions, is not subject to questioning. This preference of top-down enlightenment later in the People's art debate emerged as a relatively

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

prevalent position, as many participants asserted that the "People" in question was a class not yet developed enough to lead their own way even in the realm of aesthetics, and therefore in need of guidance: of educational art. Creating, curating and critiquing this educational art in their eyes was the mission of intellectuals, and through this mission they should be granted access to participating in shaping civil society in a way that politicians could not, thus securing their position in the political process.

The contributions to the debate, of course, did not only come from the position of *kyōyōshugi* enlightenment. *Minshū geijutsu*, in fact, came to be defined as different things depending on the proponent. For example, naturalist novelist Nakamura Seiko (1884–1974) saw potential for People's art in literary publications that allowed diverse amateur contributions by readers; anarchist Ōsugi Sakae, merging Romain Rolland's argument in *The People's Theater* with his own philosophy that incorporated social and artistic movements, defined People much in the fashion of the revolutionary proletariat, or "the emerging class," and People's art therefore as its "inevitable expression;"[18] the so-called People's poets (*minshūshi ha*) such as Katō Kazuo (1887–1951), Fukuda Masao (1893–1952), and Shiratori Seigo (1890–1973), in turn, suggested that the quality of being "of the People" was something universal, and available to the enlightened prophets of the new society irrespective of their social class.[19] In short, a myriad of definitions were produced, and all of them were predicated on previously formed ideas upon which now the term *minshū geijutsu* was being imposed, in order to compete with each other for the lucrative title of representing the "People." Central to the point of contestation for Yasunari was Honma's own positionality as an intellectual. This remained a potent question for decades: from Arishima's declaration to the post-war debates on subjectivity and beyond.[20]

The People's art debate has been referred to as a milestone in the history of literary criticism, specifically as the first time in the Taishō cultural sphere that the notion of People as an artistic subject was proposed so clearly. Specifically, it is sometimes said to have laid the ideological foundations for the Proletarian literary movement that sprung up in the

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[18] Ōsugi Sakae "Atarashiki shakai no tame no atarashiki geijutsu," *Waseda bungaku* (October 1917), 232–251.

[19] An overview of the minshūshi-ha group, including differences regarding conceptualizing the People can be found in Katsuhara Haruki, ed., *"Nihon shijin" to taishō shi: 'kōgo kyōdōtai' no tanjō* (Tokyo: Shinwasha, 2006).

[20] Continuity of the debates has also been pointed out in Simone Müller, *Zerrissenes Bewusstsein: Der Intellektuellendiskurs im modernen Japan* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 157.

early 1920s.[21] This must come as no surprise, as here the People—the demos of democracy, or in some definitions quite straightforwardly the Proletariat—were discussed as both a principal political actor and creative force, and the debate itself showcased the conscious efforts of people in various artistic spheres to engage with this subject.

However, as we have seen, defining "the People" was not something that only interested the emerging socialist writers. Delegating the debates on the meaning of art for this new agent strictly to the historical niche of "bourgeois literary pre-history" of Proletarian literature cannot account for the urgency and vigor that these debates displayed at the time. Moreover, appeals to "the People," or attributing a certain aesthetic or ideological value to the quality of being "of the People" or "for the People" also persisted in the years following the debate: for example, in Tsubouchi Shōyō's "failed" campaign for pageant plays or the extremely successful Mingei movement.

Movements like Mingei (*minshū kōgei*) also relied on the established value of the ambiguously defined "People's" art rather than something particularly national.[22] Although not rid of ethnic essentializing, there is a sense of something especially pure and inherently artistic about the utilitarian creations rooted in daily life, both uniquely local but also universally valuable at the same time, not of Japanese *citizens* per se, but of the "common folk" not yet fully integrated into the modern state, and thus, whose natural access to the innate beauty and pleasure of labor was not yet severed by the vices of modern society.

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[21] For example, Senuma (1950), Shea (1964), Moriyama (1969).

[22] At the time of the People's art debate Yanagi Muneyoshi did not yet arrive at the positive understanding of "minshū" as a creative subject and did not participate in the debate. However, the Mingei movement, as far as being partly informed by William Morris' Arts and crafts, and *minshū geijutsu ron* are not without a link, since Honma Hisao also derived the phrase "minshū geijutsu" from Morris's "The art of the people" (*Hopes and fears for art*, 1882). Yet, as argued in Hirata (2012), Honma only started seriously studying Morris's social thought after the debate unfolded, and his reference at this time was not yet based upon nuanced understanding of the subject. According to Nakami Mari's analysis, Yanagi started using the word "minshū" as it was enshrined in the ideology of Mingei only starting from 1921, and his approach to the concept did not develop much further past establishing the "People" as an unconsciously-virtuous mass with limited access to pro-active subjectivity (*shutaisei*), as his utmost interest lay rather in the question of national (*minzoku*) aesthetic character and its promotion towards international prosperity; see Nakami Mari, "Minshū geijutsu ron no taitō to Mingei undō no seikaku" in *Yanagi Muneyoshi: jidai to shisō* (Tokyo daigaku shuppankai, 2003), 135–157.

Such a vision of People as "folk"—the nameless auteur of what we call folk art and the subject of ethnographical inquiries—is only one possible definition, and one that prevailed only later, namely in the first two decades of the Shōwa period. Visions of the People that were summoned by the democratic Taishō milieu of the roaring mid 1910s were more diverse and enfranchised; I argue that *minshū* here emerged as a figure that shouldered both the complex aspirations and the anxieties for the future that intellectuals and artists felt in this transitory period.

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