



# What of the United States? Or Japan? New Visions of Leadership under COVID-19: How Will Leaders Engage the Libertarian Youths Sweeping over the World?

Uno Shigeki vs Watanabe Yasushi

## The True Nature of Leaders Uncovered in Crisis

—What are your views on the success stories and failures of different countries' leaders in their COVID-19 responses?

**Uno Shigeki:** When it comes to COVID-19 measures, it's said that the East Asian countries that have taken a micro approach of tracking individual behavior have been more successful than the European countries that have focused on lockdowns. However, the causal link between differences in policy and the infectious spread is complex. It's true that the exposure of political leaders has surged due to increasing social media contact by staying at home, but it's still unclear what difference it's made in terms of preventing infections.

Having said that, it's also not so that it's the same the world over. As the first stage of focusing solely on preventing the spread of the virus has ended and opposition over economic and social issues gradually intensify, the differences in countries' responses are becoming more apparent. The rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement caused disorder in the United States and there was a Cabinet reshuffle in France. It's becoming increasingly clear how leaders' responses and political systems differ from each other.

**Watanabe Yasushi:** As expressed in Tom Nichols's *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*, published in Japan in the summer of 2019, there is a growing tendency to denigrate the expertise of specialists. During the coronavirus crisis, among the democratic countries, it's generally been those with leaders who prioritize political motives and intuition over science and specialist expertise that have met the more tragic fates. Authoritarian countries have become blatant in their cover-ups as a result of trying to keep face for the sake of staying in power.

Specifically, I think U.S. President Donald Trump and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro are leading examples of failure. Unable to escape the constraints of wishing to be perceived as strong leaders, they ended up underestimating the COVID-19 threat. They are letting the disease spread because they're too fixated on economic results, and this is having the opposite effect of delaying economic recovery.



Prof. Uno Shigeki



Prof. Watanabe Yasushi

The shameful parts of a society are brought to light whenever there's a crisis that threatens people's lives and property. What has been exposed in the United States is the fact that their public health and medical insurance system is highly fragile despite boasting the latest in advanced medical technology, as well as the contradiction of an occupational environment that doesn't allow for sick leave. Trump's emphasis on ideology over science just adds insult to injury. He's made repeated blunders to an extent rare among leaders, such as initially praising Xi Jinping's response and then switching to blaming China and the WHO when the situation became more dire.

**Uno:** Thanks to a strict separation of powers and a decentralized political system of federal government and states, American politics has previously functioned somewhat despite Trump's rampage, but what we're seeing now is rather the centrifugal forces of politics. There's growing discord as the opposition between federal government and states is joined by the different directions taken by the parties as the Republicans prioritize political activities and the Democrats prioritize the pandemic response.

Amid all this, Trump has been overtly moving to be reelected as president without adopting any effective policies, for example by dissolving the pandemic response team created by the Obama administration and stating that face masks are for the weak. As a result, he's only added to the chaos, unable to make effective use of the CDC, which has been rated positively internationally.

### **Eyes on Tsai and Ardern**

**Watanabe:** One success story that comes to mind is Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. I visited Taipei in January and despite the fact that only one infected person had been found, more than half of the people in the metro were wearing face masks. I'd say it's proof that the lessons from SARS have been learned by the population as a whole. Tsai is also known for appointing people based on ability. Audrey Tang, Digital Minister Taiwan, suddenly rose to prominence as she created an ingenious face mask distribution system, prevented panic buying, and showed leadership in getting rid of the infodemic from China. I was impressed with her youthful sensibility of turning away every unfounded rumor with humor.

**Uno:** One reason for Japan's wandering off course was the vagueness of what separates the work of experts from that of politicians. We have seen frequent examples of politicians relinquishing responsibility by letting experts decide what's actually their decisions to make. The Taiwanese case has been fantastic in the sense that they skillfully made use of the ability of Tang and other experts while still clearly explaining that process.

**Watanabe:** I think Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand is another success story. I remember her calling for national unity after the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019 when she said, "They are us," and then her message this time was "Stay home, be strong, be kind." She's stimulating national empathy and good will while not hesitating to enforce a hard lockdown. Her empathy and consistency are what stood out.

I also felt that there are similarities between Ardern’s crisis response and that of Andrew Cuomo, Governor of New York, who conveyed the facts candidly while also mixing in some emotional episodes. At the same time, I think some reacted negatively as he is emblematic of the anti-Trump camp.

**Uno:** A good reference for what elements political leaders need in their crisis responses is the three criteria for good politics discussed in Pierre Rosanvallon’s *Good Government: Democracy beyond Elections (Le Bon Gouvernement)*. The first is “understandability,” which is about whether policy-making is explained in a way that is understandable to the people. The second is about how to take “responsibility” when a decision doesn’t go well. The third is “answerability,” which is about how much you can respond to the grievances, complaints, and worries of the people.

In the first stage of a crisis, it’s extremely important to be able to explain things to the people. In this regard, I was very impressed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. She was persuasive when she asked for the people’s cooperation although she understood how difficult it is to have your freedom of movement restricted, speaking as someone from East Germany. It really revealed the difference in ability to communicate.

Like Mr. Watanabe said, the response by Ardern was a fresh one. She’s extremely skillful at explaining matters to the people. She’s soft-spoken yet dauntless. If a message from a citizen reaches her on social media during a press conference, she answers there and then. I felt that she is a leader for the new age as she responds flexibly to the will of the people while seeking support for her political policies.

In contrast, Trump just keeps making utterly irresponsible statements, perhaps because he is irritated by his failure to implement effective measures.

## **BLM vs White Nationalism**

—What are your views on the BLM movement in the US during the COVID-19 outbreak?

**Watanabe:** Protests with a connection to BLM are currently spreading across the world. A broad range of human rights movements and social justice movements, such as for countries’ native peoples, LGBTQ, and anti-lookism, are developing. I’m sure the COVID-19 outbreak and BLM will be included in future history textbooks.

The killing of George Floyd itself was not an unusual incident in the US. Inequalities from racial discrimination, a white-supremacist policy system, a gun society, criminal justice, medical insurance—all kinds of issues are now so entangled with each other that you don’t know where to start, which is what’s allowing structural discrimination. However, the current BLM demonstrations have gained more social acceptance than before. There is even survey data saying that two-thirds of Americans support it. The shock of the incident must have provoked irritation over Trump’s COVID-19 measures, chauvinist speech and conduct, and slow police reforms. It’s not a problem that can be solved overnight. I expect this surge calling for social justice will continue, always changing its focus, for example to the removal and destruction of bronze statues (issues of historical perception).

**Uno:** It's said that this year is as if the 1918 Spanish flu (pandemic), the 1929 Great Depression (unprecedented unemployment rate), and the 1965 civil rights movement (BLM) all hit the US at once. The three are complexly intertwined and deep-rooted. It might appear that the pandemic affects everyone equally, but most deaths are actually among blacks and other minorities and low-income workers, with risks and burden forced upon essential workers. The killing of George Floyd provided an outlet for their feelings of despondency and fueled BLM. Many sympathized with them and I think this is why it developed into such a large movement protesting the unfairness and discrimination that exists structurally at the root of American society.

Alongside this growing movement to restore the rights of the oppressed, we're also hearing about increasing numbers of "white nationalists" who think the white culture that is part of the American tradition is under threat from the emergence of LGBTQ, multiculturalism, and political correctness. This simultaneous movement toward protecting diversity and growing white nationalism is starting to look like a cultural war, so the situation in the US really is difficult.

**Watanabe:** BLM is provoking the desperate victim mentality of white conservatives who think that, "Our place is disappearing more and more as we're becoming people who do nothing but apologize." In a survey two years ago, actually 43% of Americans responded that, "Whites are under attack," so we can't just dismiss white nationalists as a frivolous group. We need to know their worldview if only to understand them as a force that will continue to exert influence for decades post-Trump.

White nationalism is also growing in Europe where there's an influx of migrants and refugees as well as a shrinking middle class. Unprecedented change is happening in countries that were always assumed to be white societies, turning them into hotbeds of right-wing populism. The existence of radicalized white people who turn to terrorism has now become a security risk.

**Uno:** There was an interesting expression called "stay at home nationalism" in Ivan Krastev's *Is It Tomorrow Yet?: Paradoxes of the Pandemic*, which was recently urgently published. He writes that the COVID-19 outbreak has set fire to cultural nationalism, meaning the place where we belong (home). The nationalism that has emerged in opposition to multiculturalism in the US has manifested as a rejection of migrants and refugees in Europe. We can note the observation that there is a growing illusion about the national borders that protect us. If the economy continues to worsen, there will likely be mass migration. Tourism decreases while many, many people rush to Europe to escape economic difficulties. The friction that comes from there is also something highly relevant to Japan.

## **We Don't Know How the Presidential Election Will Go**

**Watanabe:** In Europe and North America, we were already seeing trends like in the 1930s, meaning the emergence of chauvinism and protectionism under strong leaders as well as skepticism about international cooperation, but those have been accelerated by the coronavirus crisis. I sense a danger that this might further the public opinion that puts your own country first,

which wants to stop the influx of the “virus” of migrants and refugees and move as much as possible of production domestically.

In particular, Trump has had the experience of being elected by converting social division into political energy for himself. The same goes for BLM where he’s not trying to unite the people but is rather fueling the wariness of the white conservatives by playing a strong leader who views the liberals as hostile. Voter turnout in the last presidential election was 55%. It might be that he thinks that he can get most of those 45% non-voters by unwaveringly highlighting himself as someone fighting the liberals.

Meanwhile, former Vice President Joe Biden is currently in a place where he just has to watch Mr. Trump implode, but he has a dilemma too. If he listens too much to the Democratic left-wing that demands police reform and the removal of statutes, then he risks dissociating from the white workers and anti-Trump moderate conservatives that he’s thought to appeal to.

**Uno:** At present, Biden has a lead in the polls, but we still don’t know, since Trump’s core supporters won’t be swayed regardless of how many die from COVID-19. We also don’t know what will happen to the economy. The unemployment rate is high and the retail, service, and energy industries have taken a blow, but IT, finance, and other knowledge-intensive industries are growing, which might lead to a change in industrial makeup. It’s not obvious that Biden will be able to keep his lead when he hasn’t come up with an effective economic vision.

**Watanabe:** Even now, there’s a majority who think Trump can be trusted more when it comes to economic and China policy. Biden’s lead is a mere 9 points (as of July 9), so it’s too early to say anything for sure.

## The Libertarian Youths

**Uno:** Mr. Watanabe’s *Libertarianism: America wo Yurugasu Jiyu Shijo Shugi (Libertarianism: The ultrafreedomism shaking up America)* left an impression on me. Before, American political thought was discussed in terms of big or small government and liberal or conservative, but we’re now seeing the emergence of “libertarianism,” which is a new element that can’t be explained with this binary opposition. They are similar to the conservatives as they support privatization and a minimal state, but are liberal in the sense that they respect individual freedom and are understanding of diversity. It’s spreading especially among young people.

**Watanabe:** In the upcoming election, the “millennial generation” (born in 1981–1996) and the younger Generation Z are the biggest voter groups. These groups include many youths who are extremely diverse and also radical, resonating with anything from socialism to white nationalism and libertarianism. At the root lies anger over not having been rewarded in the erstwhile binary system of conservative vs. liberal. There is polarization in terms of how to resolve the existing problems, with cosmopolitan libertarians being open to the movement of people and marriage freedom and against the state restricting such freedoms, and white nationalists being skeptical of globalization, but they do share a sense of hopelessness with regard to the system as it is now. Biden

has not been able to present a vision for breaking down this sense of distrust and entrapment. It's his old style.

**Uno:** This quality of objecting to the traditional left–right binary, respecting individual freedoms, and favoring diverse lifestyles is something young Japanese also possess. It's definitely not the case that all young people are becoming more conservative and supportive of the Abe administration. I believe this mentality will spread across the world more in the future, and where they're headed will be a major factor for deciding each country's politics. Although it seems Japanese politics has no firm grasp of this group.

**Watanabe:** Liberals think that individual lifestyles ought to be diverse, but they're also aware that there's a limit to government finances and that they cannot rely on centralized government like in the past. They don't see the market as an enemy but do things like creating new public spaces through the Internet, managing them by utilizing private and market dynamism. In their eyes, government policies are expensive, bad, and late. A prime example is the so-called Abenomask, to which they say that it would better to use that money to give companies face mask machines and produce them domestically. I believe there were many youths who keenly felt how inflexible and insensitive the government is.

### **Why the “Voluntary Self-Restraint Request”?**

**Uno:** I think the Japanese government's response has been underexplained in all respects, creating a big divide with the people's understanding. For example, it wasn't sufficiently explained why they decided to focus on counter-cluster measures and why they were reluctant to expand PCR testing. The “voluntary restraint” also created an extremely Japanese situation. It makes little logical sense to “request voluntary restraint.” The state has to provide compensation if companies are requested to close, so this isn't an option. This is why they opted to cultivate an atmosphere of wanting them to show self-restraint voluntarily, giving rise to “self-appointed pandemic police” among the people. Some said that Japan showed a very high moral standard since civilians kept an eye on each other without the need for state power, in situations enforced by the police in Europe, but it could also be said that it created a suffocating society where overly suspicious people monitor each other. I think it was a truly unethical policy.

**Watanabe:** It's said that Japan overcame the first wave through voluntary self-restraint, but we still don't know the real reason why there were so few deaths.

In contrast with the American conservative media that belittled the crisis, I think Japanese media in general encouraged self-restraint and created an environment where it was easy for the whole country to share the sense of crisis. However, it's also possible that the approach of asking for self-restraint caused delays to the travel restrictions and the declaration of the state of emergency. The Olympics, Xi Jinping's visit to Japan, the companies' year-end book-closing, and many other factors must have had an effect too. Yet I also suspect that there was a level of optimism that things would work out if things were left to the people's self-restraint. I get this feeling when I look at the New Zealand case.

**Uno:** A recent international opinion poll yielded data that made me think. On the statement “I do not mind sacrificing some of my human rights if it will help preventing the spread of the virus,” the majority responded “I agree” in Italy and other European countries, but it was only about 30% in Japan, which was extremely low. This result doesn’t lead me to conclude that Japanese have a high awareness of human rights. This is because, in reality, the two are restricting each other’s freedom of movement.

In Japan, instead of discussing how much to restrict individual freedoms and how to secure safety as a public good, creating rules based on that, they ended up entrusting things to a mood of “They’ll take note of me if I do this.” The reason for the extremely great opposition to right infringements by the state, despite de facto restrictions on human rights already in place, is the lack of trust in the national government and the public sphere, and this is something brought to the fore by the request for voluntary self-restraint.

### **Japan, Where “Human Rights” Has Taken on a Life of Its Own**

**Watanabe:** European and North American societies have an acute awareness of “freedom,” telling of the fierce debates of the past that even developed into political strife. In the case of Japan, the concepts relating to the limits of the public and freedom spread quickly after the Second World War with little debate surrounding it, so there’s a tendency to dogmatically believe that “freedom is sacred.” I think this is why we’re seeing this bizarre paradox where people reflexively reject attempts at “restricting freedoms,” while not noticing that they’re already de facto restricted.

**Uno:** I wholeheartedly agree. Liberalism as a political philosophy has a history of struggling over restraints from individual freedoms and public welfare. Also now, it was necessary to debate whether a level of restricting freedom of movement is unavoidable and, if it is to be restricted, to what extent, but because the word “human rights” has taken on a life of its own in Japan and as a result of sensing the mood and trying not to protrude too much, self-appointed pandemic police have become rampant.

I think the tracking of personal information is another extremely important issue. Taiwan has self-awareness of how much behavioral data is tied to personal information, but in Japan, there’s not been enough discussion leading up to now when the app is finished. Not reaching any consensus among the people about what is acceptable and what is not is just a way of turning a blind eye to future trouble.

**Watanabe:** Japan might be a society that easily limits its own private rights and seeks centralization in its leaders. Something I didn’t expect this time was that the Liberal Democratic Party was more careful about restricting private rights, while the opposition parties were demanding a swift declaration of a state of emergency. I thought the opposition parties would object from a standpoint of guarding human rights and protecting personal information, but it was a twist that that wasn’t the case. I don’t know why. Was it simply political strategy or do they have some deep thoughts about freedom?

## The Presence of the Governors and the Reality

**Uno:** Osaka Governor Yoshimura Hirofumi, Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko, Hokkaido Governor Suzuki Naomichi, and other governors have also been standing out. The pandemic has hit different areas very differently, so the local responses have to be decided by the local governments. Japan has a population of more than 100 million so it's too big for a centralized government, which is why I am fundamentally happy that regional leaders get to decide on local matters. The problem is the contents. There are those governors for whom making their presence known has become a goal in itself, standing out because their pitch is speaking strong words or criticizing others.

**Watanabe:** It's a common phenomenon for people to rally under their leaders in times of crisis, but the centralization of power happens especially easily in Japan, which tends to cause a corresponding misalignment with people in general. Also now, we've seen examples of sensibilities out of synch, like how the video by Hoshino Gen, musician and actor, was used and Abenomask. It's each local government's local chief executives who normally have the most contact with residents, so it must have been persuasive. In recent years, we've seen the emergence of regional politicians rebelling against the central government in Japan. This time, they displayed how they differ in term of crisis response, but there was also a major performative dimension.

**Uno:** It's a situation with no obvious answer after all. The expectation was for each local government to try out measures, take cues and learn from each other about the ones that worked, and increase the overall level. There were those governors who worked creatively and tried to follow up on projects while engaging in dialog with residents, but others seemed to think the goal was just to stand out, so there were considerable differences in the quality of their presence. There were governors who took proactive leadership and there were those who delegated everything to their staff and just waited. Not only were the qualities of different countries' leaders exposed, but also those of governors in Japan.

## Leadership for Japan in the New Era

—Finally, in closing, I want to ask you to say a few words about what kind of new leadership Japan needs in the post-coronavirus era.

**Uno:** Demand for the three criteria of “understandability,” “responsibility,” and “answerability” is spreading across the world. If we look at the three criteria, then Prime Minister Abe Shinzo cannot be assessed favorably. Explanations have not been sufficient, the basis for decisions has been unclear, and nobody takes responsibility in the end. The constantly late responses, such as that regarding compensation for absence from work, have lacked in “answerability.” At the same time, the opposition parties have not been able to come up with countermeasures.

Since we're seeing an increase in people with a libertarian mentality, which emphasizes individual freedoms and choice and is also sensitive to diversity and issues of inequality, yet also doesn't simply wait for the government to save the day but discovers potential solutions in the private sphere, we need new leaders who actively make available different kinds of data, increase

transparency in policy decision-making, and possess high scientific expertise and affinity that allows them to swiftly take in good ideas born from dynamic discussions with the people. My hope is that we'll see the young generation give birth to the kind of leader that we're already seeing in Taiwan and New Zealand.

**Watanabe:** Since some time back, I was already feeling that Japan's affluence is an illusion and that there's a high degree of institutional fatigue, but that hunch turned into conviction with COVID-19. The backwardness of our IT and labor environments has also become apparent. The big question from here on will be how constructively we can engage in institutional reform.

Indispensable to this is appointment of human resources based on ability rather than number of times you've been elected or your faction. The eyes of the people have become much more unforgiving than before the COVID-19 outbreak. Will we be able to turn this crisis into an opportunity? That's something to keep our eyes on.

Interview by Takamatsu Yuka

*Translated from "Sekai wo sekken, ribatarian-teki wakamono to shidosha wa domukiauka (Conversation: What of the United States? Or Japan? New Visions of Leadership under COVID-19: How Will Leaders Engage the Libertarian Youths Sweeping over the World?)," Chuokoron, September 2020, pp. 72-81. (Courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha) [November 2020]*

---

### **UNO Shigeki , Ph.D.**

**Professor, Institute of Social Science, University of Tokyo**

Born in 1967. Earned his doctorate at the University of Tokyo Graduate School of Law and Politics. Assumed current post after serving as an assistant professor at the Faculty of Law, Politics & Economics at Chiba University. His special areas of study are the history of French political thought and the history of political science. His books include *Seiji tetsugaku e* (Introduction to political philosophy) (University of Tokyo Press), *Tocqueville – byodo to fubyodo no rironka* (Tocqueville – Theorist of equality and inequality) (Kodansha Sensho Métier, Suntory Prize for Social Science and Humanities) and *“Watashi” jidai no demokurashi* (Democracy in the age of me-ism) (Iwanami Shinsho).

### **WATANABE Yasushi, Ph.D.**

**Professor, Keio University**

He received a doctorate from Harvard University in 1997. He specializes in American Studies and Public Diplomacy. He is the author of numerous books, including *Rethinking “Culture”: On the Concept of Cultural Security* (2015), *American Legacy: The Spread of Soft Power and Its Implications* (2015) and *America Does Not Sink* (2015) and *Culture and Diplomacy: The Age of Public Diplomacy* (2011).

---