Preface

Postwar Revival and Americanization

When the Japanese economy registered a real growth of 9% in 1955, everyone was saying it was “the postwar economy’s best year.” The Economic White Paper produced by the Economic Planning Agency the following year stated: “The ‘postwar’ period is no more. We are about to face a different state of affairs altogether.” Thus did the government of this country proclaim the end of the postwar revival. In the research on postwar economic history being carried out in this country, 1955 is considered to mark the historical starting point of a period of sustained high growth that lasted into the early 1970s, and the phase from the end of the war until this starting point was reached represented a slow and steady march from bewildered disorientation and disorder toward assiduous reconstruction, with the eventual recovery, one after another, of prewar levels on the part of the textile industry, steel industry, shipbuilding industry, coal industry, electrical power industry, and other parts of the industrial sector. Still, this very rapid postwar revival was not just a simple return to the prewar state. No, it was achieved hand in hand with an Americanization of traditional Japanese management practices. The special focus of the articles in this volume is an attempt to inform readers, through the latest research of Japanese scholars, of the movements towards Americanization that began immediately after the war’s end.

The 30th annual conference of the Japan Business History Society, held in 1994, took up the general theme of “Postwar Business History
and Americanization.” After the conference organizer, Professor Terushi Hara (Waseda University) defined the problem and set it within a proper framework, other participants contributed international comparisons of the productivity improvement movement as it occurred in Japan, West Germany, and France. Professor Hara stated that, in the business history of the period following World War II, the international transfer of American-style management is a central theme; maintaining that “in the rivalry between the two establishments involved in the Cold War, emphasis was put upon nonmilitary, economic rivalry, and the mainstay of that economic rivalry, in the last analysis, was the productivity improvement movement in individual enterprises,” Professor Hara felt that, especially now, when there is a rising tendency to reevaluate the American style of mass production, more research ought to be done on the selective adaptation and modification of American techniques in various countries.

This volume’s special feature gathers together in edited form some of the fruits of the 1994 conference. The Saitô article is a survey of the published works of Japanese business management scholars and business consultants who were influenced by Americanization. The Sunaga article deals with the particulars of the establishment of the Japan Productivity Center, which played a central role in the productivity improvement movement. The Sasaki article discusses the significance of the observation teams that were sent to the United States by the Japan Productivity Center. These three contributors also presented papers at the 30th annual conference, but the fourth contributor to our special feature, Toshihiro Wada, presents a case study of the quality control movement at NEC. His work marks the first in what we hope will be a regular series of works by young (under-forty) Japanese researchers (see Editor’s Postscript).

In Japan there is at present an extremely heated debate raging over the origins of the Japanese-style management system, between those who look for the origins in the wartime economy and those who look for the origins in the postwar reform. In our special feature we have focussed on the latter point of view. We hope to deal with the connection between present-day management and the wartime economy on a later occasion.

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