

The Predicament of Speaking about Cultural Differences: Two Readings of Watsuji Tetsurō's Cultural Typology and the Context of American Multiculturalism

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In his wartime essay, “The National Character of the Americans” (1944), Watsuji Tetsurō ruthlessly indicts the materialistic nature of Anglo-American civilization, tracing its origin back to the philosophy of the two seventeenth-century philosophers: Thomas Hobbes and Francis Bacon. The postwar Japanese public has always regarded this essay as evidence of Watsuji’s wartime collaboration with Japanese fascism. In the latter half of the 1980s, however, two American scholars of Japanese intellectual history, Naoki Sakai and William Lafleur, shed a new light on this notorious essay by Watsuji. These recent critical reappraisals were made possible by the adoption of postmodernism—a school that both Sakai and Lafleur passionately espouse; however, the details of their arguments differ distinctly. Sakai harshly criticizes Watsuji’s anti-Westernism as a reversed form of Orientalism. On the other hand, Lafleur tries to rescue Watsuji’s moderate liberalism by interpreting Watsuji’s vehement attack on the West as a deliberate disguise for his support of the good rationality of the modern West, as embodied most prominently in the philosophies of Hobbes and Bacon. The question remains: From where does this standoff come? Addressing this issue will necessarily entail a scrutiny of the Janus-faced nature of postmodernism and the U.S. culture war.