Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies 28 (1996) 57-65. © The Hitotsubashi Academy

NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE UNITED STATES AND JAPAN*

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When the Gulf War ended successfully, the President of the United States, George Bush, led the victory celebration in Washington, D. C., the nation's capital. When he closed his speech by saying, "We are Americans. May God bless this great nation," the congressmen, senators, Supreme Court justices, and various other VIPs gave him one of the longest standing ovations that I had ever witnessed. I have never seen or expect to see in the Japanese Diet such an outpouring of patriotic fervor because a Prime Minister said, "We are Japanese." I was surprised, on the other hand, because I did not even know that some Americans raise the question what it meant to be an American.

I now realize that this has been a recurrent question throughout the history of the United States (See, for example, Walzer, 1992). In fact, in almost every period in their history, some Americans have, in some degree, asked Crèvecoeur's classic question: "What then is the American?" (Crèvecoeur, 1782: 42). Because of the ethnic diversity and immigrant heritage, Americans seemingly cannot live a meaningful life without being able to fit themselves into the national mosaic. Newly naturalized Americans, indeed, beam joyfully once they are able to identify themselves as Americans, as constituents of "America," eligible to pursue "the American Dream." But one need not be a newly made citizen to experience the thrill of being an American. Did you see their faces at the Olympics as they chanted, "USA, USA, USA?"

The kind of reception Bush's speech got would be implausible in Japan. A Prime Minister of Japan delivering a speech in the Diet would not close it by saying, "We are Japanese." Most Japanese congressmen and citizens would consider such a remark as absolutely nonsense, although a few conservative nationalists might find certain meaning in it. Why is it that the question of what it means to be an American forms a substantial context in the United States and that the question of what it means to be a Japanese has no meaning in Japan? In fact, the question of who the Japanese are has not been raised as a part of public discourse since World War II. It seems that Japanese have dodged asking it and they have no difficulties living their daily lives without the answer to that question. In other words, Japanese do not feel that they always have to be prepared to answer the question who they are. As a matter of course, Japanese seem, in this respect, to avoid the discussion of a sense of national identity, while Americans seem always eager and maybe even compelled to do so.

Where does this difference come from? A comparison may, I hope, add some new insights into how Japanese may fashion a national identity. I will examine in the following

* The major part of this paper was delivered at the Kyoto American Studies Summer Seminar held at Ritsumeikan University on August 3, 1996. It was read in response to the Lawrence W. Levine's paper titled "The Search for American Identity," which is one of the chapters of his new book *Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Beacon Press, 1996).

sections how the national identity has evolved in the United States and not in Japan. The purpose of this paper, in short, is to analyze the frame of reference which has defined or not defined Americans and Japanese. I shall attempt to raise questions rather than to provide an answer or offer a grandiose theory of national identity.

The Discourse on America

When Los Angeles was devastated by riot in 1992, according to Ronald Takaki, many shocked viewers asked, "Is this America?" (Takaki, 1993b: 4) Many politicians declared, "This is not what America is all about." There is no equivalent rhetoric in Japan to express the national polity. It is inconceivable that a Japanese politician would use "Japan" as part of his or her rhetoric in the way that politicians in the United States speak of "America." What does this word "America" mean to Americans? A discourse on America seems to be paramount among Americans, although there is not necessarily total agreement on just what constitutes a real American. That Americans raise the question what an American is is noteworthy. The historian Ron Takaki pointed out how millions of Americans felt excluded from the national framework that is widely accepted by the majority of Americans to be axiomatic:

> I realized that the traditional historians had offered me, and many people like me, a mirror which had rendered us invisible, that had excluded us from the definition of what it meant to be an American. 'American' meant having European ancestry; 'American' meant white — and I could just look at myself in the morning and know that this was not true, this was not accurate. [*Congressional Record*, 103 Cong. 2nd Session, June 8, 1994, S6613.]

What Takaki wanted is that non-European immigrants should be included in the public discourse on America. He demands that non-whites be allowed to join the discourse on an equal footing, and that the discourse be reinforced with a racial and ethnic point of view. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s highly controversial book, *The Disuniting of America*, although seemingly at odds with opinions expressed by Takaki, also illustrates the point that America can be interpreted in the framework of race and ethnicity.

In his book Schlesinger criticized such notions as Afrocentrism. Schlesinger wrote a book in which the points he made were little different from those made by Diane Ravitch in her article "Multiculturalism" that appeared in *The American Scholar* (Ravitch, 1990). Schlesinger treated multiculturalism as it was almost the same as ethnocentrism and defined it negatively. The debate about multiculturalism can be dated from the time of Schlesinger's book. Beginning with such journals as *American Quarterly*, *Annals*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *American Journal of Education*, *Vital Speeches of the Day*, *Journal of Black Studies*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, etc., various magazines and the mass media took up the subject.

First, I would like to make the point here that this debate about multiculturalism spread as an interpretation of America. It started as a literary debate over whether or not a dismantling of America was occurring. One side which saw the disintegration of American society as a pending crisis turned from positions of strengthening patriotism and American nationalism to nativism. However, as already seen, Takaki also does not deny or doubt the concept of America and sees America as Schlesinger does as a composite of ethnicity. His main point is that minorities are insisting that neither America nor its history belongs to one group

(Takaki, 1993a: 117). On this point both Schlesinger and Takaki even seem to be battling concerning whether there is an orthodox America.

My second point is that the debate occurs because of the factors of race and ethnicity. That in a sense was inevitable. According to the 1990 census a great flow of immigrants and refugees would bring about a change in the racial composition of the United States. Scientific data has shown that whites will cease to be the majority group by the mid-twenty-first century. The media reported the occurrence of the LA riots as an increase in ethnic and racial tension and by doing so helped to reinforce the predisposition of many whites to see serious community concerns about police behavior merely as an issue of racial and ethnic tension.

In the media, much was made of the supposed tension between Korean-Americans and African-Americans. One Korean-American, however, in an essay written in *Newsweek* magazine, complained that the media helped to foster animosity between the two groups through "visual media racism" (*Newsweek*, May 18, 1992: 10). She felt that Korean-Americans had learned a lot about what it meant to be a minority American from the activities of blacks during the civil rights era.

The writer of this article clearly understands that American values and ideas such as egalitarianism, equal opportunity, liberalism, and rights of individuals are not solely the prerogative of the majority group. She acknowledged the unceasing fight that African Americans made to make those pillars of American society more inclusive. The writer seems to understand better than Schlesinger that American society and ideas should be viewed and evaluated within a framework of both ethnicity and values, and historically it was generally acknowledged that ethnic diversity enhanced rather than detracted from the beauty of America. In America, people ordinarily pay homage to ethnic diversity. At least, this is true when they come to Japan.

It is notable that both Takaki and Schlesinger acknowledge, more or less, American ethnic diversity. Both admit citizens from various backgrounds have contributed greatly to the building of America. Tales of immigrant boys who arrived in America and realized their dreams have been constants in an American myth encouraged to bind members of any ethnic group to the national polity. Meritorious service and an accent on national unity over ethnic diversity have been trumpeted as the preeminent elements for success in the United States. As Ron Takaki suggests a real understanding of America can be garnered through an understanding of the history of ethnic groups.

With regard to this point, Schlesinger who is at odds with Takaki's conclusions argues within the same framework. On the final page of the last chapter of his book, Schlesinger asserts: "The American identity will never be fixed and final; it will always be in the making. Changes in the population have always brought changes in the national ethos and will continue to do so; but not, one must hope, at the expense of national integration" (Schlesinger, 1991: 138). He apparently sees changes in the ethnic composition of the American population as changes detrimental to what he imagines to be the American identity. Schlesinger, however, insists that the public discourse on American identity is irrelevant to race. "The American Creed," he writes, "is the ideals of the essential dignity and equality of all human beings, of inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and opportunity" (Schlesinger, 1991: 27). While proposing that ways to transcend race be made imperative, Schlesinger's work expresses his anxiety regarding race and ethnicity. His definition of America leans toward the kind of sanctimony about which Toni Morrison, the noted writer, has been highly critical.

> Statements to the contrary, insisting on the meaninglessness of race to the American identity, are themselves full of meaning. The world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion. The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act. ...Race, in fact, now functions as a metaphor so necessary to the construction of Americanness... Deep within the word American is its association with race. [Morrison, 1990: 46–47]

My third point is that these debates on the understanding America are closely related to changes in perceptions of the world, particularly since the collapse of the Cold War. All people, of course, are affected by world change, but since World War II a part of the American sense of identity was the view that the United States stood as a bastion against communist tyranny; Americans were the white knights on white horses ready to stand against the agents of the evil empire. The United States, which had been the strongest single power opposing communism, as a result of the breakdown of the Soviet Union, has lost that aspect of its self perception and sense of identity that derived from its role as the world leader against communism.

As Edward W. Said has shown, Europe, in establishing its identity, needed to invent the Orient as a negative force to juxtapose against a positive Europe (Said, 1978). Likewise, Louis Hartz has suggested that America needed Europe particularly in the 18th and the 19th century to achieve a sense of identity that ultimately would not be European, and Toni Morrison argues that the United States needed Africa to bring into existence an America that would be different from Africa. (Hartz, 1955; Morrison, 1992) Native American opposition to the celebration of the quincentenary of the Columbian voyage in 1992 and the Hawaiian independence movement's observation of the centenary of the islands occupation in 1993, among other things, help to generate changing perspectives regarding the authenticity of American historical presentations. Thus the framework for looking at America, long believed to be self-evident, more recently has been called into question.

In short, Americans in the 1990s have been forced to review basic pillars of faith as a result of both internal and external circumstances. The seeming readiness to place questions of identity at the center of public discourse is an experience that would be unthinkable in Japan.

What then is the Japanese?

Japanese scholars of American studies, it seems to me, view certain concepts and terminology concerning the United States somewhat differently from American scholars. For example, many Japanese scholars regard the American national motto, "E pluribus unum," as the ideal towards which Americans strive and find that praiseworthy. Many of these same scholars, however, view the ideas of national unification, social integration, or any symptoms of nationalism as dangerous if transplanted to Japan. Even American multiculturalism is generally regarded as positive in Japan whereas it may be viewed somewhat negatively among members of the majority group in the United States. In Japan, where the myth of ethnic homogeneity is deeply rooted, people had no need to espouse an idea of national integration.

Japan was forced to relinquish prewar nationalism and came to embrace American integration based on cultural diversity as I shall discuss further later in this paper. Japan's

sense of identity has been colored by the historical fact that it was compelled by East Asian countries and occupation authorities to atone for prewar activities. Thus, in order to assess Japan's national identity, it must be viewed in a broader context than that of national boundaries.

In Japan to ask what a Japanese is in the way Americans ask what an American is would be meaningless today. This is not to say that that has always been so. In the period when dedication to emperor-centered nationalism was strong the image of Japan or Japanese was made definitive. The concept of a Japanese dates back to the first century of Japan's existence. In Chinese records the existence of Japanese is first confirmed in references to the "wa" or dwarf people.

In Japanese records, however, the word "Nihonjin," meaning Japanese, first appears in an order issued by Hideyoshi Toyotomi in 1587 expelling Portuguese and Spanish Christian clergy from Japan:

> "Christian Ministers are reported to sell Japanese people to China, Southwestern Europe, and Korea. Trade in human beings shall be prohibited in Japan." [*Takashi Gonoi, Christian History in Japan* (Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1990), pp. 152–153.]

In 1855 the word "Nihonjin" appeared again in a treaty of commerce between Japan and the Netherlands:

> In case any Netherlander should be improperly treated by a Japanese, the matter shall, on complaint by the Netherlands' Commissioner in Japan, be enquired into by the Japanese Magistrates, and the Japanese shall be punished according to the Japanese law. (Preliminary Convention of Commerce Between the Netherlands and Japan, Art. III) [*Miscellaneous Old Treaties*, Vol. 1, Part 2.]

Until then the *han* or domain was the basic system of provincial government under the *Bakuhan* system during the *Edo* period and the people of the *han* lived without a sense of identity with outsiders. For example, of course, before that time, the concept of Japanese existed but it was used to refer to people who lived in Japan or lived as ethnic Japanese. Certain intellectuals during the *Meiji* Period began to ask what a Japanese was. By the time of the Sino-Japanese War for most people the question was resolved.

However, raising the question what a Japanese is like Americans who asked what an American is occurred during the time when there was debate about Japan's national essence in response to creating a policy to address what was perceived as Westernization in the late 1880s. Several nationalistic newspapers made their debut in this period. Soho Tokutomi published *Kokumin no Tomo* (Friend of the People) in 1887 and complained that Japan's long seclusion had nearly annihilated thoughts of nationhood. The following year Setsurei Miyake came out with *Nihonjin* on the anniversary of Japan's founding praising the greatness and wisdom of the Japanese people for having established Greater Japan. In 1889 Katsunan Kuga published *Nihon* formulating the idea of Japanism, "the new national character of Japan" centered on the emperor. The efforts of private individuals to spark a sense of nationalism was greatly augmented the following year with the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education.

The Rescript on Education underscored Japan's unique national polity based on a historical relationship between benevolent rulers and their loyal subjects. It promulgated the notion that the true value of the national essence was to unify the spirit of hundreds of millions

of loyal subjects. It stressed the importance of the traditional Confucian virtues of loyalty (*chû*) and filial piety (*kô*). In addition to these virtues, the Rescript listed respect for the constitution and working for the public good as necessary concomitants for a modern state. In every school, principals read the Rescript on appropriate occasions such as graduations, national holidays, birthdays of the emperor and the state. Students were required to memorize the text for moral education classes. Thus the self-sacrificing allegiance to the state and the imperial house, in addition to sanctification of the national polity, became the highest virtues for over half a century until the defeat in WWII.

Prewar Japanese identity, in fact, was molded along with a Japanese nationalism forged in wars such as the Sino-Japanese war (1894), the Russo-Japanese war (1905–1906), and the second Sino-Japanese war (1931–1945). The national identity which upheld the emperor system, however, was nullified with the surrender of Japan at the end of WWII. Occupation authorities attempted to eliminate Japanese nationalism as part of its scheme to refashion Japan. American occupation authorities bestowed on the people of Japan a new Constitution that begins with the phrase "We, the Japanese people." Article 1 prescribes that "the Emperor shall be the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people, deriving his position from the will of the people." The preamble, however, proclaims that "sovereign power presides with the people." The Americans gave Japan democracy, a new educational system, a new economic system, and women's rights. Yet even after the war, the emperor remained as the symbol of the Japanese people. Regarding Japan's national identity, this is significant.

Spiritually, the continuation of the imperial system means that elements of prewar nationalism have not been completely extinguished. Values such as loyalty, piety, frugality, philanthropy, and obedience to law may be worthwhile in themselves, but in Japan these have become associated with the prewar nationalism and continue to be so, precisely because the imperial system remains intact. Thus, intellectuals and politicians have some inhibitions about advocating free and wide ranging debate. To do so could very well invite an attack from some right-wing assailants.

Moral education, which had been regarded as feudalistic and dangerous immediately after the war, has been reintroduced in elementary schools recently. Previously, when the Ministry of Education advocated such a move, teachers unions opposed it, but today may lack the power to offset conservative trends. Many Japanese would fear and oppose even a ritual such as the pledge of allegiance that Americans make before the flag of the United States.

Many Japanese see the Constitution as something that was given them and fail to see it as prioritizing them when citizen appears as Article 10 and the emperor appears in Article 1. After defeat in the war, peace, liberty, and democracy became Japan's new unique values replacing the core values of national identity held prior to the war. Today, however, peace as a core value is threatened when Japanese military forces, which themselves have no literal standing in the constitution, are now being deployed abroad. The ideal of democracy for nearly half a century has been hostage to a preference for one party rule.

The postwar period is the time when Japanese are supposed to redefine their sense of national identity. Since they were not allowed to rebuild a political nationalism, Japanese dedicated themselves to economic nationalism vis-à-vis the West. Some even bragged that they had built an economic bomb. Those economic national goals, former Prime Minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone declared, had been reached in the mid 1980s, ironically divesting the Japanese of the sense of national identity that had sustained them during their drive to overtake the West.

Japanese today have come to realize that working toward a nebulous competition with foreign competitors was not necessarily self-satisfying. Perhaps they were reminded also that there were higher aims in living than just being economic cogs in a machine that Americans particularly viewed as "Japan, Inc."

Under these circumstances, Japanese, after losing the war, became wary of the danger of totalitarianism. The search for national identity was retarded as people held suspect tendencies toward national movements. Even the symbols of nationalism, such as flag, anthem, and emperor, evoke among some people a fear of a return to the bad old days. Therefore, patriotism or loyalty to the state become negative values. Of course, the conservative right-wing oppose the denigration of the symbols of nationhood. But they have little impact on the public discourse.

One of the reasons that this situation arose was that the terms of surrender left the emperor system in place. In a real sense, Japan during the occupation had an opportunity to fashion a new society rooted in universal principles, but was unable to correlate these principles with the traditional values that placed the emperor at the center of society. Accordingly, some Japanese political leaders often seem devoid of self-confidence when functioning within a political context.

Part of this problem of self-confidence arises from the failure to fashion a real sense of national purpose which in turn stems from the lack of a true sense of national identity. The lack of a national identity is what makes Japan uniquely Japanese. This is why Japanese do not raise the question what a Japanese is.

Redefinition of the Japanese Identity

Some scholars, believing the twentieth century to be the period that comprises the largest number of refugees and diasporas, suggest that it is the worst one in human history. Refugees are often victims of nationalism, zionism, or tribalism. Separating cultures and peoples according to race, ethnicity, and nationality has led to prejudice, discrimination, persecution, and genocide. Racism and nationalism must be constantly guarded against. The slightest provocation, under adverse circumstances, may prompt neighbors to murder neighbors or governments to persecute citizens.

Where people have been oppressed by an external power, on the other hand, a sense of nationalism has often served as a rallying force binding disparate groups fighting for independence into an effective and cohesive unity. Just as often, once the common foe was vanquished that nationalism would dissipate into its constituent parts. In the 1950s through the 1970s, would-be leaders wrapped themselves in the accouterments of nationalism while promising freedom to the peoples of Asia and Africa who supported wars of national liberation. What the would-be Messiahs produced by the 1980s and 1990s were countless thousands of displaced persons variously referred to as refugees, diasporas, nomads of the present, *Gastarbeiter*, and undocumented immigrants.

National identity, as Benedict Anderson (1983) and Anthony D. Smith (1991: Ch.2) say, may be in this sense an historically imaginative fabrication. But people cannot easily imagine existing without some sense of national identity. Learning to live with one's sense of identity without transgressing upon the rights and dignity of others is a problem.

In the case of Japan, ironically, from defeat in war and occupation, the Japanese created a new national identity rooted in a positive nationalism. They embraced the so-called Peace Constitution that had been foisted on them by American occupiers. Rather than an army of aggression, the government of Japan created a self-defense force that acts as an emergency force in times of domestic disaster. More recently, the government has expanded the role of the SDF to include service internationally as a Peace Keeping Force under UN auspices in Cambodia, Mozambique, and Rwanda. Young Japanese, too, voluntarily go overseas to serve in countries of Africa, Eastern Europe, and other hardship areas helping to foster a Japanese identification with positive involvement in the problems of the world.

The Japanese government has accepted a part of the responsibility for helping resettlement and building infrastructure in areas of need designated by the United Nations. That plus the work of Sadako Ogata and Yasushi Akashi, and the quest for a permanent seat on the security council help to focus and foster the people's interest in a greater role for Japan in the international arena.

Yet the Japanese government has been slow to offer apologies and make amends for past intransigences particularly in East Asia. As a result, a great many Asians still resent and remain ever vigilant against any hint of Japanese militarism, thus, they are deeply suspicious of proposals that would deploy Japanese military forces abroad. Many Japanese citizens as well are opposed to having any type of military forces at all. If serious, for example, about inserting peace, liberty, and democracy as core values of a new national identity, the Japanese government must remember that there is no shortcut to achieving that goal. It must resolve the problems leftover from the time of WWII not only at a diplomatic level but also at a moral level.

The task of redefining the Japanese identity, however, cannot and should not be assumed only by the government. Intellectuals and scholars of every stamp must be allowed to contribute to the creative process — theses, antitheses, and syntheses — that define and sharpen that identity into clear focus.

Certain thinkers, such as Shoichi Watanabe, see Japan's racially essential element as a product of the emperor system. In his book, *The Instinct of the Japanese People*, Watanabe argues that Japan is a divine country ruled from the beginning of its history by an unbroken line of emperors descended from the mythic goddess Amaterasu Omikami (Watanabe, 1996: Chap.1). Although anachronistic, Watanabe's views serve as a maypole around which gather those who are frustrated, angry, and defensive about criticism of Japan stemming from issues such as comfort women, atrocities against prisoners, and other residual issues from the Pacific War period. Those Japanese who are locked into the prewar nationalistic mindset tend to be few and elderly. Younger people, who are more widely traveled, tend to be more international in outlook. While proud to be Japanese, they lack the mindless patriotism that dictates a blind allegiance to mythologies. Other Japanese, who may adhere to liberal philosophies, tend to be hypercritical of Japan's past as vice-laden.

The new national identity of Japan must be redefined not based on some national essence associated with the emperor system but at least on values such as peace, liberty, humanitarianism, and rights of the people as outlined in the preamble of the Constitution of Japan. The creation of a positive national identity rooted in universally recognized values that extol humanity over boundaries, whether they be geographic, ethnic, cultural, or societal, would really make Japan a country of integrity.

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