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The Kyoto School, American empire and the post-white world

- Williams, David. 2004. *Defending Japan's Pacific War: The Kyoto School Philosophers and Post-White Power*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon. 238 pp. ISBN 0-415-32315-0

Kenn Nakata Steffensen

Two previous monographs established David Williams as the *enfant terrible* of Japanese political studies. With his trademark iconoclasm and elegant prose, he provokes critical reflection on the ethnocentrism and political biases of dominant western views on intellectual and political history.

Kyoto School as political philosophy

The book is organised into five parts in 12 chapters and an appendix with the author's translation of two texts by Tanabe Hajime, whom he considers the dominant figure of the Kyoto School's middle phase from 1928 to 1946.¹ The term 'Kyoto School' was coined by Tosaka Jun to designate the group around Nishida Kitarō at Kyoto Imperial University. It dominated Japanese philosophy from the 1920s, with all major thinkers belonging to or defining themselves against it. The first phase of the school is conventionally considered apolitical and metaphysical in orientation.² Challenged by Kawakami Hajime's Marxism, 'the focal concern of the middle phase of the Kyoto School was political philosophy' (p.176).

Williams focuses on four works by Tanabe and four colleagues: 'The Standpoint of World History and Japan' by Kōyama, Suzuki, Kōsaka and Nishitani' and Tanabe's 'response to Heidegger's controversial rectoral address of May 1933 that appeared in three parts in the *Asahi* newspaper in the autumn of 1933; his secret lecture of 1942 on the philosophy of co-prosperity spheres, which was part of Tanabe's intellectual alliance with the Imperial Navy to resist Tojo's policies, and Tanabe's magnum opus, *The Logic of the Species*, that appeared in 13 parts between 1934 and 1946' (p.18). The book, however, goes far beyond mere exegesis and commentary on these four texts.

The emphasis is on Tanabe and, to a lesser extent, Nishitani. Little is said about Kōyama, Suzuki and Kōsaka. In chapters 8-11 Williams reads the attacks on the Kyoto School for its alleged complicity with ultra-nationalism in the context of the debate on Heidegger's relationship with the Nazi regime, and exonerates both Heidegger and Tanabe. Rather than acting for the military government, Tanabe and associates were aligned with parts of the navy in a 'struggle against Tojo' (Chapter 5). The concluding 'manifesto on the future of Japan studies' argues that 'Japanology must begin all over again' by returning to Max Weber and reading the Kyoto School liberated from the 'Allied gaze'. Their writings should be read 'not as some absent-minded lapse from Zen Buddhism but as political thought in the classic sense' because 'these Japanese

philosophers fashioned a vessel for Japanology to renew itself, to begin all over again' (p.176).

Pacific War revisionism versus the Allied gaze

Williams confronts the 'Allied orthodox' intellectual history of 1930s and 1940s Japan. This view has tended to see the Kyoto School 'as thinkers complicit with wartime nationalism'.³ There has also been a parallel current in comparative philosophy and religious studies, which 'for decades presented Nishida, Tanabe and Nishitani as essentially apolitical religious thinkers' (p.34), resulting in a lack of 'recognition that the Kyoto School also produced a profound meditation on the nature of politics, history and society in a world dominated by the West' (p.79).

If the Kyoto School has been 'attacked from both the right and the left'⁵ since the 1930s, Williams' defence defies easy categorisation. Where Graham Parkes held that 'To criticize the critics, however, is not to condone the political writings of the Kyoto School thinkers',⁶ Williams goes a step further by both criticising 'the black legend of the Kyoto School' (Chapter 7) and defending it as 'liberal nationalist' in character (p.152). In doing so, he departs more radically from even the relatively sympathetic assessments of Tanabe in other recent studies, e.g. Goto-Jones' inaugural volume in the Leiden Series in Modern East Asian Politics and History.⁷

The main targets for his sometimes scathing criticism are the 'so-called progressive intellectual historians who serve under the neo-Marxist banner' (p.47) and 'some of the most influential Western students of modern Japanese religious thought' (p.34). He finds both groups guilty of misrepresenting the Kyoto School's positions before and during the Pacific War, but James Heisig and other religious studies scholars are seen in a more favourable light than historians Peter Dale and Harry Harootunian:

Unlike their neo-Marxist colleagues, these Western scholars did not abandon proper standards of research or their hard-won understanding of Kyoto thought. But there was an implicit endorsement of the reasoning behind the victor's justice meted out by the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal. The implied moral simplicities – Allied virtue versus Japanese evil – are so morally satisfying precisely because they exploit the least fair and most self-flattering comparison possible: our high ideals against their base conduct (p.34).

The weakness of 'the religious paradigm', according to Williams, is that 'for such critics, "politics" means neither research on political institutions nor the study of political philosophy

but something much narrower and less scientific: the ethical criticism of wartime Japan from an Allied perspective' (p.154).

Global power imbalance

The context in which Williams reads Tanabe and associates is today's 'global imbalance of power' (p.9), which he finds unacceptable because 'uncontained power is unacceptable, no matter how wisely or generously the holders of that power may exercise it' (p.7). He considers the book a contribution to 'liberal opposition to the neo-con agenda' (p.9) and to how 'the rest of the world might be able to compel America, peacefully, to ease the fetters of its global domination' (p.8). Like Chalmers Johnson and the Kyoto philosophers, he sees himself as a 'loyal critic' of his country's foreign policy. Williams links his concerns over contemporary developments in the US with the wartime Kyoto School because he believes it holds resources necessary for the 'post-White world' that he is confident is dawning:

Among all non-White thinkers who have dwelled on the nature and consequences of the planetary hegemony of the White West, Japanese philosophers have a unique place. They even proposed a cure for Western hegemony. Their insights are as unforgiving as they are indispensable at this decisive hour in the destiny of the American Republic (p.4).

He elaborates 'a post-nationalist vision of America's post-White destiny with the aid of Kyoto philosophy (p.xvii). For Williams, the relevance of the Kyoto School and the purpose of his analysis of its political philosophy is to help 'the achievement by non-Americans of mature subjectivity' (p.11). A conspicuous silence is the relation-

ship of Kyoto philosophy to other bodies of thought, especially those broadly labelled 'postcolonial theory'. Yet many of its preoccupations overlap both with those of Williams and the Kyoto School. Postcolonial critique aims to theoretically and politically empower 'subaltern' subjects in a similar way to Williams' preoccupation with 'post-White subjectivity' and his purpose of 'nurturing, *ex nihilo*, of agency itself' (p.110), but he does not explore the possible linkages.

Scholarship and propaganda

While he 'aims to stamp firmly on the propagandist who pretends to be a scholar' (p.15), the parts of his monograph that predict a 'post-White' future for the United States and the wider world can also be considered propagandistic. Chapter 4 points out some serious flaws in Harootunian's *Overcome by Modernity*, but it is not clear how Williams distinguishes between scholarship and propaganda. The closest he comes to a definition is the statement that 'The academic defence of this wartime discourse, a defence which is rife with bias and prejudice, persuasive definitions and value claims, does not qualify as scholarship' (p.4). If Harootunian's obsession with 'fascism is the conceptual fallacy that sinks this great galleon of a monograph' (p.60), one might argue that Williams' claims about the coming 'post-White world' is his Achilles heel. If Harootunian is guilty of propaganda for the 'Allied orthodox' interpretation of the past, is Williams himself not propagandising for his imagined utopian future?

Defending Japan's Pacific War is a major achievement for which the author must be congratulated. A necessarily selective review cannot do full justice to it. It deserves a wide readership

beyond Japan studies. Williams' 'Pacific War revisionism, in the Western liberal mode' (p.15) is uncompromising. He has 'offered no quarter and taken no prisoners' (p. xvii). His impassioned argument for his case and his equally passionate attack on those he disagrees with may upset some, but even then it stimulates thought and critical self-reflection. ◀

Notes

1. The two Tanabe texts are 'The Philosophy of Crisis or a Crisis in Philosophy: Reflections on Heidegger's Rectoral Address' (1933) and the secret lecture 'On the Logic of Co-prosperity Spheres: Towards a Philosophy of Regional Blocs' (1942).
2. Christopher S. Goto-Jones goes against this convention when he argues that Nishida's early works contained elements of a political philosophy. See Jones, Christopher S. January 2003. 'Ethics and Politics in the Early Nishida: Reconsidering Zen no Kenkyū'. *Philosophy East & West* 53-1.
3. Arisaka, Yoko. 1996. 'The Nishida Enigma: "The Principle of the New World Order" (1943)'. *Monumenta Nipponica* 51-1.
4. Townsend, Susan. 'Japan's New Order in Asia, 1938-45: Rethinking Globalism', p.2. <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/iaps/SueArticle.pdf>
5. Arisaka 1996, op.cit.
6. Parkes, Graham. July 1997. 'The Putative Fascism of the Kyoto School and the Political Correctness of the Modern Academy'. *Philosophy East & West* 47-3.
7. Goto-Jones, Christopher S. 2005. *Political Philosophy in Japan: Nishida, the Kyoto School and Co-Prosperity*. Routledge: London and New York.

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