Nishida Kitaro and Japan's interwar foreign policy: war involvement and culturalist political discourse

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Abstract

Takashi Inoguchi once stated that Japan's international relations theory is characterized by its exclusive disciplinary orientation toward constructivism. Nishida Kitaro is widely recognized as one of such constructivists. In this article, I argue that Nishida's theory of world history was based on the perception of subjectivity of contradiction, and was thus exclusively culture-oriented. By emphasizing cultural aspects, he tried to disturb the coherence and consistency of the colonialist discourse on which the dominant regime of Japan of the time was entirely reliant. However, because Nishida's theory of world history completely lacked the recognition of the material relations of the colonizer and the colonized, as a direct consequence of his understanding of the term 'culture', his attempts were unrealized.

1 Introduction

Inoguchi Takashi once stated that Japan's international relations (IR) theory is characterized by its exclusive disciplinary orientation toward constructivism. This constructivist tendency inevitably led researchers to the question of subjectivity, and thus to a perspective based on structuration. Inoguchi also states that this trend is well represented by Japanese IR scholars' devotion to the historical and cultural aspects of IR rather than the theoretical ones (Inoguchi, 2007). This is because Japanese scholars have been keenly aware of one of the characteristics of constructivism in which subject and structure mutually influence each other and are thus fluid. When we investigate the origin and tradition of the Japanese IR, we find that Buddhist and Confucian thoughts may well be presented as two possible sources. However, there is another more recent school of philosophic thought that is even be more likely a direct source of the Japanese constructivist tradition – the Kyoto School. The philosophy of the Kyoto School, Nishida Kitaro's in particular, inspired the development of the philosophical theory of constructivism in the beginning of the twentieth century. Kitaro's writings have not been generally well received in the IR community, particularly in Japan, mainly because of his confusing and obscured vocabulary and his infamous involvement in the wartime regime. Despite that, many Japanese IR scholars, even today, subconsciously adopt his theory of the construction of subjectivity.

Christopher S. Jones' article, 'If Not a Clash, Then What? Huntington, Nishida Kitaro and the Politics of Civilizations', published in this journal five years before Inoguchi's article, contends that Nishida's political philosophy contains fertile ground for the further development of IR theory by calling attention to 'the special practical importance of non-Western traditions of political thought in an inter-civilization world' (Jones, 2002, p. 223). In his article, Inoguchi indeed cited Jones's argument as a good example of the applicability of Nishida's thought to the IR literature; however, because Jones's main aim in the article was to highlight the magnitude of Nishida's theory and its ability to illuminate world affairs, Nishida's involvement in the wartime regime was not extensively discussed (Jones, 2002, p. 229).

In terms of IR, Nishida's contribution can be found in the introduction of culture and nation (*Minzoku*) to the context of world affairs. While writing his theory of world history, he deliberately used the phrase, *Kokka Minzoku* (State Nation) rather than *Minzoku Kokka*

(Nation State) in referring to the subject of world construction. By reversing the order of words, Nishida represents his political engagement in the production of a counter-narrative to the dominant imperialist regime. However, his attempt to influence Japan's foreign policy and to change its course toward more cooperative relationships with other Asian countries was, by no means, successful. This article attempts to illustrate the historical and theoretical background of Nishida's political challenge to the wartime regime and its unfortunate consequences. It also strives to find possible reasons for his failures, and to glean some lessons for contemporary IR.

Our intention is to argue that Nishida's theory of world history was based on the perception of subjectivity of contradiction, and was thus exclusively culture-oriented. By emphasizing cultural aspects, he tried to disturb the coherence and consistency of the colonialist discourse on which the dominant regime of Japan of the time was entirely reliant. However, because Nishida's theory of world history completely lacked the recognition of the material relations of the colonizer and the colonized, as a direct consequence of his understanding of the term 'culture', his attempts were unrealized.

The term 'culture' is indeed confusing, though IR theory seems to focus on this aspect ever since the end of the Cold War. Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilization' and Francois Fukuyama's 'The End of History' are prominent examples of early literature on the subject, and numerous books and articles have been published in English as well as in other languages. What is striking in those texts is their total lack of perception that the texts themselves are, in fact, cultural products. They often unintentionally subscribe to the particular cultural rules and norms in which they were formulated; this lack of attention to this dimension is extremely dangerous in the sense that it produces and promotes a confrontation between the West and the rest. It is rather clear that the failure of Nishida's intention to influence imperial policies and the justifications for them, which eventually resulted in the devastation of citizens' lives in colonized areas, was caused by this lack of self-reflective insight. The insight could have revealed that his political philosophy was indeed shaped by the culture of liberal-imperialist narratives based on the modern nation-state system.

In order to clarify our argument, we begin with a brief introduction of Nishida's philosophy and its historical development with special

attention to the concept of 'subject' and 'contradiction'. Here I will analyze *Zen no Kenkyu* (An Inquiry into Good), in which Nishida developed contradiction theories toward subject, and his political argument regarding universality and particularity that directed him toward political engagement in his later years. Then, I will analyze his articles that deal specifically with the nation-state, *Sekai Shinchitujo no Genri* (The Principles of New World Order) in particular, which was reportedly the draft for Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki's declaration of the 'Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere'. There I will contend that, although there are a number of claims of similarities between the two manuscripts of *Genri* and Tōjo's declaration, clear and vital differences remain, particularly in relation to the subject of world affairs. We argue that these clear differences prove that Nishida's intention was not actively to support the government's stance, but to influence and change the course of Japan's foreign policy. Third, I will focus on Nishida's theory of state sovereignty developed in the article *Kokka Riyu no Mondai* (The Problem of State Reason) and identify the logical inconsistencies in his theory of foreign relations, the lack of attention to a self-critical understanding of culture in particular, which may well be the reason why his attempts eventually failed. Finally, we will attempt to derive some lessons from Nishida's theory and experience, which are indicative to contemporary intellectual lives.

2 From pure experience to the theory of *Basho* (Place): Nishida's philosophy

If there were ever an intellectual body of thought deserving of the name 'philosophy' in Japan, it is definitely the Kyoto School. Although as is often claimed, it is considerably difficult to identify fixed members of the group (Fujita, 2001, p. ii), some would indicate names such as Miki Kiyoshi, Nishitani Keiji, and Kōsaka Masaaki and Kōyama Iwao. Suzuki Daisetsu and Tosaka Jun could be included as members as well. It should be also mentioned here that some would deliberately avoid the use of the phrase, *Kyoto Gakuha*, and employ *Kyoto Tetsugaku* (Kyoto Philosophy) instead (Ueda, 2006, p. 3).

However, no one would disagree that Nishida Kitaro is the most prominent figure of the School, and that his name should be at the top of the member list. Nishida was born in Ishikawa Prefecture in 1870 and trained at the Tokyo Imperial University. His life at the University was

rather miserable according to his memoir, as he was not a regular course student, but an 'elective course' student who was treated in a discriminatory manner (Nishida, 1965b, p. 242). His misfortune was not limited to his university life. His personal life was full of tragedy as well: a marriage unwelcomed by his father and the loss of his wife and children. His life was indeed colored by misery, and some consider this suffering to be the main source of his theory of contradictory identity. Indeed, he wrote that philosophy starts with the fact of our self-contradictory life. Following Aristotle, he believed that philosophy's motivation must be deep sorrow rather than astonishment (Nishida, 1965a, p. 92).[1]

Nishida published numerous articles and books; the most well-known among them is being *Zen no Kenkyu*. Throughout his years of contemplation and publication, he was always searching for something deep in the human mind, something fundamental and universal to our existence regardless of cultural or traditional difference. What he saw as the key concept in this context was 'pure experience' or *Junsui Keiken*. He believed that the world could be understood by getting rid of all the words and intellectual concepts that envelop, and sometimes disturb, the process of comprehension. However, this is not just ordinary experience. It must be 'pure'. This purity becomes obtainable only when experience occurs before the division of subject and object; it is thus prior to language. Experience occurs when subject *is* object and vice versa.

According to Nishida, pure experience is a genuine phenomenon of consciousness (Nishida and Kayama, 2005, pp. 75–76). When we dig into the mind of the subject to the extent that subjectivity itself dissolves into nothing, we encounter something universal in the form of pure experience. In turn, pure experience constructs the subject. Nishida writes,

> If we are to understand true existence and true appearance of everything, we must conduct our investigation on the basis of direct knowledge which is impossible to be questioned any further. (Nishida and Kayama, 2005, pp. 75–76)

This paragraph explains his initial intention of philosophical inquiry: to dig deep into one's mind by casting doubt on the existence of anything he or she may encounter in the process. This process contributes to

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1 Comparing sorrow with astonishment here was in response to Aristotle's statement that philosophy begins with astonishment.

philosophy by understanding the world in a way in which 'pure experience' constructs and constitutes the subject.[2]

If the subject is constructed by a series of different pure experiences, how does the subject maintain an integrity of identity rather than dissolve into many different pieces? Nishida took a long time to answer this question. After obtaining a professorship at Kyoto University, he began working on neo-Kantian theory and phenomenology. He had been criticized by Japanese neo-Kantians for concentrating a lot on human consciousness that his theory contained no possibility for generalization (Fujita, 2007, p. 85–86). Nishida addressed this question of subjectivity by extending the theory of pure experience explicitly toward a Universalist orientation, which eventually led him to answer the subject of integrity.

As pure experience had been theorized in terms of individual consciousness, Nishida needed to expand and re-formulate it in order to make it applicable to a more general context. In order to understand the continuity of human consciousness, he considered that experience must transcend time. Otherwise, human integrity would fall apart. Yesterday's self-consciousness must be connected to today's self-consciousness. In this way, the integrity of the subject could be guaranteed. In the same manner, experience must transcend space – one self-consciousness is connected to another. This enabled Nishida to apply his theory to a socio-political context. What is important here is that his inquiry into subjectivity in which he regarded the integrity of experience to be more essential than individual distinction led him to the point where he began to grapple consciously with the issue of universality (Kosaka, 1994, p. 94).

His universal orientation was further developed in his logic of 'the place of absolute nothingness' articulated in *Hataraku Mono Kara Miru Mono e* (From Acting to Seeing), in which his thought arguably

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2   'Pure experience' in Nishida's early years of writing is actually a multilayered concept. Kosaka insisted that there were, at least, three different types of pure experience: narrowly defined pure experience, widely defined pure experience, and universal pure experience. The first means pure experience as genuine experience, whereas the second is defined as self-reflective thought. The third integrates the first and second. In the later writings, these re-transformed into *Chokkan* (Intuition), *Hansei* (Self-reflection), and *Jikaku* (Awakening) (Kosaka, 1994, p. 102, n. 5). Here, intuition connotes particularity, and awakening signifies universality. Therefore, 'pure experience' in *Zen no Kenkyu* simultaneously contained particularity and universality, although its universal orientation was not as explicit as its particularity.

transcended the limit of self-reflective consciousness. If one is to be perfectly self-reflective, he or she needs to be self-reflective to the self-reflective consciousness. Nishida saw this process as infinite, always incomplete. In order to transcend this incompleteness, he posited the concept of the 'place of absolute nothingness', a space where the subject disappears (Fujita, 2007, pp. 99–100) while things appear in their 'suchness' (*Ari no Mama*).

> Nishida's anti-subjectivist tendency to dismiss consciousness as a theoretical reference point brings him to define the True Subject as 'the Predicate that cannot become Subject', this Predicate being the extreme limit of universal: the Place (or universal) of Absolute Nothingness, being Nothingness, is actually identical with the True Individual Thing, disappearing in it. This approach to the problem, though an internal movement of consciousness, is already opened to the world of things. (Cestari, 2008, p. 50)

As is often mentioned, his argument was substantially influenced by Buddhism, and the Mahayana tradition in particular (Jones, 2002, p. 232). This opinion of the work is widely shared by Japanese as well as Western specialists of Nishida's philosophy. However, equally important in understanding Nishida's texts is the fact that he also frequently cited Western philosophers' arguments, even more than he did Buddhist ideas. The philosophers by whom Nishida was inspired in this era include at the very least, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, and James. Indeed, some went on to argue in this context that he was a philosopher of neither Western nor Eastern tradition but was rather a universal philosopher (Sakai and Nishitani, 1999, pp. 188–190; Nagai, 2006, p. 48). Nishida's wide range of influences from Buddhism to Western philosophy was precisely the reason why he came up with the idea that particularity is universal and universality is particular. Intellectual conversation and spiritual negotiation with the giants of Western philosophy of the past and present along with Buddhist texts inspired him to realize that universal knowledge is possible (Sakai and Nishitani, 1999, pp. 189–194). Underlying this process was his long-lasting hope for a reconciliation between West and East. He states,

> I think my intention is to find an origin of human culture . . . (Even though there are different cultures in the world), we can reveal a deep essence of the human culture by comparing different cultures and

mutually complementing each other. I am not sure how significant Eastern culture currently is. . . . However, it is not acceptable that development of Eastern culture absorbs the Western culture or the Western culture absorbs the Eastern. Nor it is that East and West remains distancing from each other. We should rather see them as two branches of the same tree. They are physically apart, but same in the root. It is impossible to imagine the world culture without finding a deep root from which both of the cultures emanate from. (Nishida, 2007a,b,c, p. 35)

This passage shows that his motivation for philosophical inquiry is to find the 'root' of human culture that encompasses the whole of humanity – thus the culture of universal quality.

Although his earlier works were more concerned with human consciousness and its logical extension, he gradually began a direct engagement with political issues in his later writing. This was partly due to his colleague Tanabe Hajime's criticism in 1930 that Nishida only formulated abstract-level arguments and neglected their connection to material forces (Hosoya, 2008, p. 146). Although it has been occasionally said to be an irrelevant piece of criticism (Nagai, 2006, pp. 76–88), Nishida indeed turned his attention unswervingly toward political issues around this period.

Although he began to engage directly in political discourse around this time, it could be argued that he was political from the very beginning of his academic life (Goto-Jones, 2005, p. 5). *Zen no Kenkyu* was very much political in the sense that in it, Nishida attempted to provide an explanation of the agency-structure relations that supposedly transcend the boundaries of cultures or history. His persistent interest in universality was based on the hope of establishing a concrete space in which different culturally constructed subjects would be able to communicate each other. He firmly believed that this communication could facilitate mutual understanding and avoid the confrontations that politically characterized the world at that time. In sum, Nishida was normative and prescriptive from the beginning of his career. He presumed, although in a confusing writing style, that this universal space was necessary at the time of the West/East division and that a mutual understanding of different subjects was essential for constructing a peaceful world. In fact, some of his contemporary readers found *Zen no Kenkyu* to be a book on world democracy. For them, the book appeared as his manifestation of straightforward political philosophy (Ueyama, 1998).

In 1938, Nishida delivered a series of lectures at Kyoto University that was specifically targeted at a public audience.[3] The lectures were later published in the form of speeches. The manuscript was also published as an academic book with substantial changes made by Nishida himself.[4] Although the book was colored by his peculiar wording and confusing concepts, the lecture manuscript was more accessible and easier to readers to comprehend, as it was exclusively directed toward a public audience.

Nishida distributed a pamphlet at these lectures entitled *Gakumonteki Hoho* (Academic Method), which he had used for a previous lecture the year before (Nishida, 2007b). The Kyoto University lectures were planned along the theoretical lines of the distributed pamphlet. His intention in the lecture series was to make sense of contemporary world affairs; his audience had been witnessing the confrontation of imperial powers since the beginning of the twentieth century. He started his first lecture by explicating the relationship between time and space. Usually, time and space are regarded as opposites, Nishida said. Time is linear and vertical, whereas space is even and horizontal. As a result, they are usually seen as mutually exclusive. However, our world is a place where time and space become one in a contradictory manner (Nishida, 2007a,b,c, p. 23). Then how does this contradictory unification become possible? For Nishida, it is a consequence of the embedded characteristics of time. He writes the following:

> The time is not a series of moments. The past, which is left behind, remains present, and the future, upcoming events, has already come. Therefore, the present must be spatial. (Nishida, 2007a, p. 23)

In the present moment, we see a number of remnants and memories of the past, although we also make plans and preparations for the future. In order for these to be present in a single moment, the element of space is necessary. For Nishida, the present is a space where the past and the future encounter each other. Therefore, the world is always spatiotemporal.

However, at the same time, we must be aware that the present inevitably contains contradiction. Time generates and fosters lives. Every individual grows and changes in accordance with his or her time line. This is

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3   The open lecture series at Kyoto University takes place even today. See Fujita (2008).
4   Both manuscripts are collected in one volume and published recently. See Nishida (2007a).

problematic, because space is essentially given and static. In this way, life generates contradictions with its surroundings. These contradictions lead one to change its environment while being born out of it. The relationship between time and space is fundamentally dialectic, and this dialectics becomes the driving force for future changes in the world (Nishida, 2007a, p. 24). He named this contradiction, the driving force for social construction, *Mujunteki Jiko Doitsu.*[5]

3 Nishida's direct engagement with political philosophy

In his later works, although some would argue that they were more political than philosophical, we can still clearly see his consistent interest in the dialectic relationship between universality and particularity based on the logic of experience.[6] However, because of the long-lasting wars and Imperialist expansionist orientation of Japan that had already reached the Asian continent, the time was a 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2005). Any intellectuals publishing political discourses inevitably faced police censorship and considerable social pressure to write in favor of the dominant regime.[7] As a result, Nishida's works, among others, were written carefully and moderately.[8]

Nishida published few works that overtly dealt with political issues such as the nation-state and governance, even in the period that is now regarded to be that of political engagement. Such articles as *Sekai Shinchitsujo no Genri* (The Principles of New World Order) (Nishida, 1965c), *Kokka Riyu no Mondai* (The Question of the State Reason) (Nishida, 2007c), and *Kokutai* (National Polity) (Nishida, 2007d) are the few exceptions. *Genri* was written for the Prime Minister Tōjo Hideki's

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5   *Mujunteki Jiko Dōitsu* is a problematic word, because it is very abstract and confusing. However, his use of the word was relatively consistent in the sense that he uses the word interchangeably with *Mujunteki Tōitsu* (Contradictory Unification). He presumably used the term to represent a similar but slightly different concept to Hegel's 'sublation'.

6   In later years, he ceased using the phrase, 'pure experience', and started using 'conductive intuition' instead.

7   This does not necessarily mean that Japan was completely dominated by ultra-nationalists or *Kokutai*-fundamentalists. Indeed, the political situation during this period was much more complicated than one might imagine. See, for example, Sakai (2007), Uemura (2007), and Nishikawa (2008).

8   His writing in this era was extremely difficult to comprehend, almost as much as Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebook,* which also used obscure and confusing vocabulary. See Gramsci (1971).

declaration of the Great East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, announced in 1943 at a conference organized by the military of Japan, allegedly with national representatives from all over Asia. *Mondai* was written in 1941, probably his first attempt to directly deal with the issue of the nation-state. *Kokutai* is an infamous article that was once published with a different title, *Testugaku Ronbunshu Daiyon Hoi* (The Fourth Appendix to the Selection of Philosophical Writings) in fear that the article would provoke the outrage of the right wing published with the original title (Nishida, 2007d, pp. 142–144).

These articles deliberately used the imperialist language of the time, widely circulating phrases such as *Hakkō Ichiu* (Eight Cords under One Roof) and *Daitōa Kyōeiken* (Great East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere). Nishida's ambiguous language and confusing writing style often gave readers the impression that he had actively become an apologist for the wartime policy of expansionism (Shillony, 1981; Dale, 1986; Sharf, 1993; Levelle, 1994). There is another interpretation, however. Some argue that Nishida intentionally but covertly tried to re-interpret each phrase and replace it with a philosophical meaning (Ueda, 1994; Yusa, 1994).[9] Although his articles at first glance seemed similar to the right-wing writings that were dominant at that time, a thorough reading of them immediately reveals their unconventional nature and their differences from the right-wing narratives of the era.

Among these, the most interesting as well as the most controversial article for those studying the connection between his philosophy and political engagement in the wartime regime is probably *Genri*. The article presumably had three versions, but the original version is unknown, and was written for a purpose that could have provided Nishida with the opportunity to influence the future direction of Japanese foreign policy: Nishida was writing for Prime Minister Tōjo. In hopes of influencing Tōjo's and the Japanese government's political direction, Nishida carefully states that Japan should not isolate or distance itself from the West.[10] The isolation is only detrimental for Japan because it is often

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9 For an excellent summary of the debate regarding Nishida's wartime complicity, see Arisaka (1996).

10 Although it is reasonable to say that Nishida attempted to influence the course of the foreign policy of Japan by 'stealing' the meanings of right-wing phrases, this does not always mean that he was averse to such ideas as the Co-prosperity Area. Rather, he often actively supported these slogans in applying his philosophy to politics. See, for example, 'Nihon Bunka no Mondai' in Nishida (1965c).

done by overemphasizing its peculiarity whether it is grounded in culture, history, tradition, or language. Particularity should be open to universality, Nishida maintains, in order to contribute to the construction of the new world order by transcending itself. If this becomes possible, the new world could be called *Sekaiteki Sekai* (World of World History).[11]

Nishida uses the term 'World History' to refer to a globalized world. This global world became real because of the process of mutual interdependence and frequent exchange of goods, money, people, and ideas that transcend state borders, which he regarded as peculiar to his day. Nishida, in this context, states that the eighteenth century was a century of individual awareness, the nineteenth one was of state awareness, and the twentieth is a century of awareness of state missions contributing to the world history. The world is no longer an abstract entity when it is constructed by concrete experience. In this way, the world became 'real' (Nishida, 1965c, p. 1).

In this world of concrete reality, the particular is simultaneously universal, and universal is particular simply because no particularity resides outside of the world, just as with a mountain in a landscape. In the previous era, the particular did stay outside of the world, as 'world' was abstract and thus located somewhere 'out there' for those who resided in particularity. Now the world appears to us as real existence, and the world is 'out there' *and* 'right here'. Thus, he regards the particular as simultaneously universal, and vice versa.

If the world is simultaneously 'out there' and 'right here', then the particular (and Nishida obviously had Japan in his mind here) should not be isolated from the rest of the world. Indeed, Nishida contends that the universal history of the concrete world only becomes possible when it is constructed on, and emanates from, the experiences of the particulars. The particular only exists in relation to other particulars, and this relationality guarantees the entire picture. Without these particular experiences, the world remains an abstract principle. This principle does not work in any sense, Nishida bluntly contends, as was exemplified by the failure of the League of Nations (Nishida, 1965c, p. 2).

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11 Arisaka (1996) translates *Sekaiteki Sekai* as 'global world'. See Arisaka (1996, p. 101, n. 96). I agree with her that 'global world' captures the sense of *Sekaiteki Sekai*, which literally means world-ly world. I use 'world of world history' and 'global world' interchangeably hereafter.

To define the particular, Nishida uses the term *Minzoku* (people or nation).[12] *Minzoku* is difficult to translate into English. Although it is often translated as 'races', 'ethnic-people', 'national folks', or 'nationals' (Arisaka, 1996, p. 101, n. 97), none of these terms seems sufficient, as the term contains various meanings. Nishida uses it to refer to a social and ethnic group constructed upon shared cultural and historical heritages. However, it is not necessarily directly connected to blood or racial origin. Again, here we can witness Nishida distancing himself from an institutionalized form of rigid existence, and expressing himself in favor of culturalist constructivism.[13]

In the *Genri* article, Nishida deliberately limits the meaning of the word by putting *Kokka* (state) in front of it – *Kokka Minzoku* (state-nation) – in reference to the subject in the world of world history. However, *Kokka Minzoku* was not a widely used expression to refer to nation-state in Japanese. *Minzoku Kokka* or *Kokumin Kokka* (nation-state) were, and still are, the words commonly used in this context. Then why did he choose to reverse these words? As stated above, here it becomes clear that his intention of writing *Genri* was indeed to re-interpret and transform the meanings of particular words. In the case of *Kokka Minzoku*, the meaning of 'state' was in question. By using *Kokka* as adjective modifying the noun *Minzoku*, Nishida presumably attempted to privilege *Minzoku* over *Kokka*. This is because he was well aware that the institution of the state is not constructed to contain contradiction within itself, but rather has a natural predisposition to avoid it. In this sense, he was more in favor of culturally constructed subjects than institutionalized universal entities. Although coherence and

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12 In order to clarify Nishida's argument, I use 'nation' to refer to *Minzoku*. Although it is not a perfect translation, 'ethnic group', 'people', or 'nationals' do not fit Nishida's usage of *Minzoku*, as it mainly connotes 'Japan' in this context. It should also be mentioned here that nation-state is usually translated as *Kokumin Kokka* in Japanese. However, it is also, though not frequently, translated as *Minzoku Kokka* in Japanese IR literature.

13 Nishida's usage of 'culture' was largely based on his constructivist idea. Nishida explains that history is a process in which individuals create 'forms' and in turn the 'forms' create individuals. According to him, culture means the way this process of history develops (Nishida, 2007a, p. 25). Therefore, I use 'culturalism' and 'culturalist' here in referring to Nishida's political thought to indicate that Nishida and his followers of the Kyoto School tended to emphasize the importance of culture on the basis of this constructivist idea in understanding and contemplating world history and IR of the time. In this sense, culturalism can be defined as an ideology that explains world affairs with an exclusive focus on the cultural dimension. For detailed discussions on the relationship between Nishida's philosophy and his articulation of cultural politics, see Feenberg (1994) and Maraldo (1994).

consistency are the most important aspects of the modern state, *Minzoku*, by definition, is full of contradictions. Although *Kokka* does limit and intervene in the richness of *Minzoku* by adding the institutional aspect to it, *Minzoku* remains as the main body of the subject in Nishida's theory of world history.[14]

We can see the importance of the word order by analyzing the second version of *Genri*, which was substantially amended for Tōjo's speech. The revisions were performed mainly by Tanabe Juri, a sociologist and acquaintance of Nishida who was closely associated with the central government (Ōhashi, 2001, pp. 49–50).[15] In the second version, *Kaku Kokka Minzoku* (each state-nation) was replaced with *Kaku Kokka Kaku Minzoku* (each state and each nation),[16] thus both *Kokka* and *Minzoku* were used as nouns.[17] This means that Tanabe was well aware of Nishida's intention of using *Kokka Minzoku* to privilege culture over the state and regarded it to be irrelevant for Tōjo's speech.[18] This, conversely, explains Nishida's intention for using *Kokka Minzoku*.

If Nishida was unwilling to cooperate with the wartime regime, why did he write the infamous article for Tōjo in the first place? Is it because he was actually a committed apologist for the government, and that his dislike of it

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14 In his earlier writings, *Zen no Kenkyu* in particular, Nishida gives special meaning to the state (*Kokka*). He contends that the state is a mediator that connects the individual to the cosmopolitan world or the unity of humanity. Thus, his understanding of state is different from the prevailing definition of the word, which refers mainly to an institutionalized political body. His contention there is more prescriptive than descriptive. In that sense, he is concerned more with what the state should be than what it is. In *Genri*, it seems that he uses *Kokka* not to refer to what he contemplated in *Zen no Kenkyu*, but to an institutionalized political body as is commonly understood. In either case, he favored a socio-political body that contains flexibility and relationality with others to one which is institutionalized and isolated. For a detailed discussion of the term in Nishida's earlier writings, see Goto-Jones (2005, pp. 62–63).

15 Ōhashi contends that the amendment was actually done twice. Thus, according to his theory, there are four versions of the manuscript (Ōhashi, 2001).

16 The second version of the article largely written by Kanai and Yatsugi was reprinted in Kawanishi (2005, pp. 79–83).

17 Here, I am presuming that the version of *Genri* collected in the *Nishida Zenshu*, which is actually the third version of the article, is similar to its first draft. To be precise in terms of chronological order, it must be said that it was Nishida who amended Tanabe's second version. However, if the first version is somehow similar to the third, as I presume, then it can be said that Tanabe's purpose in using *Kaku Kokka Kaku Minzoku* was to change Nishida's *Kaku Kokka Minzoku*.

18 In Tōjo's speech, *Kokka Minzoku* was not used; not even *Minzoku Kokka* was mentioned. *Kokka* was exclusively used as a subject instead. See *Tōjo Hideki Daitoa Kaigi Kaikai Enzetu*, Yomiuri Hochi Shimbun 5/11/1943, reprinted at 'Shiryo 4' (appendix 4) in Kawanishi (2005, pp. 85–86).

was simply a disguise? Alternatively, was he too naïve to believe that his discourse of the nation-state would affect the course of the wartime regime's foreign policy? As some critics have contended, was it was because he was forced to write under government threat, and fear of arrest? (Ienaga, 1974, pp. 96–97; Ōhashi, 2001, p. 52). To address this question, a thorough investigation of his theory of state sovereignty becomes essential.

In an article entitled *Kokka Riyu no Mondai* (The Problem of State Reason or the Problem of *Raison D'Être*), which he wrote in 1941, Nishida initially aimed to explain his understanding of state reason and to develop a theory around it. This article was written right before the Pacific War, and it is reasonable to presume that it was his answer to the rapid emergence of enthusiastic nationalism and the imperialist orientation of a militaristic government. This article was largely inspired by Friedrich Meinecke's theory of *raison d'être*, and ended up with arguing state sovereignty instead of state reason (Kado, 2007, p. 73).[19] Thus, this article appears to readers to be about state legitimacy and its relation to nation and culture.

Nishida begins by comparing Machiavelli and the tradition of natural law of Western philosophy, and shows sympathy to the former. He criticizes the natural law tradition for its lack of concrete foundation in human experience and argues that it relies too much on universalized human conscience and the laws of reason (Nishida, 2007c, p. 148). On the other hand, Nishida agrees with Machiavelli's argument that the 'state has had its practicability and its own cooperative personality'. He maintains that 'what the will of this state personality commands is the state reason' (Nishida, 2007c, p. 147). His perception toward the state is confirmed by the French Revolution, which was based on natural law, but ended with harsh oppression, mass murder. This resulted in the Restoration and universalized humanity, which Nishida calls the backlash of the State Reason (Nishida, 2007c, p. 149).

The divided tradition of European politics between State Reason and natural law, which could be called realist state-centrism and political idealism, was eventually reconciled by Hegel. Hegel famously dissolved the confrontation by claiming, 'Whatever real is rational, and whatever rational is

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19 In this context, Kado raised an extremely interesting question as to why Nishida chose to discuss *Kokka Riyu* (state reason) or *Shuken* (state sovereignty) instead of *Kokuze* (state purpose), whose translated meaning might come closer to *raison d'etre*. For a detailed discussion, see Kado (2007, pp. 70–72).

real' on the basis of his logic of dialectics concerning reason (universal will) and reality (particular will). In this sense, Hegel was a constructivist, as Nishida was. It is therefore not surprising that Nishida develops his theory of state reason largely grounded in Hegel's dialectical theory.

Nishida contends that a state should be rational. To be a rational state here means that it is established on the basis of law (Kado, 2007, p. 72). How can a state, as a manifestation of world history, be constructed on the basis of laws that are created in accordance with a particular socio-political context? Nishida argues that the command of world history can only be substantiated by 'legislators who do not produce legislations subjectively, but do so according to the historical fate of the "from-produced-to-producing" relationship at each phase of the historical world' (Nishida, 2007c, p. 171). Otherwise, the law will turn into a representation of tyrannical arbitrariness. *Minzoku* again guarantees that historical nature will be substantiated by legislators whose existences are spatiotemporally specific. In fact, Nishida sees the origin of law in religion, and contends that it has been developed historically (Nishida, 2007a,b,c, p. 168). Thus, it was reasonable for him to say that the very foundation of law lies in the 'self-formation of *Minzoku Ishi* (national will)' (Nishida, 2007a,b,c, p. 169). Obviously, *Minzoku* as representation of the particular is a manifestation of world history.

In this sense, Nishida was not totally in agreement with Machiavelli. Indeed, Nishida saw the origin of state legitimacy in the particular's cultural and historical tradition rather than the functionality of the state's existence. For him, a state should not be a manifestation of power politics. It should be rather a manifestation of absolute, contradictory self-identity. However, Nishida contends, 'it is transformed into a state by developing itself as individual self formation of the world self'. Thus, a state is a society with 'world (historical) nature' (Nishida, 2007c, p. 171). This argument, strongly prescriptive in tone, was significantly dialectical in the sense that his main contention regarding the formation of the state was based on the relationship between the world and individual, or the universal and particular.

To become a true state must mean, Nishida maintains, that 'one national society becomes the subject of individual self formation in the historical world as a finite self of the absolute present which contains the past and future'. This must also mean that the society becomes the infinite power of value production and the subject of historical event of world creation. This can be said only when 'a national society becomes one of the centres of world formation'. Nishida continues by arguing that the state

must become pregnant with a center of absolute contradictory self-identity within itself; this is what he calls state sovereignty (Nishida, 2007c, p. 172). Only in this manner, state sovereignty truly becomes state sovereignty. In this sense, the absoluteness of state sovereignty does not mean the oppression of its citizens. It is rather 'a reflection of a centre of the absolute contradictory self-identity world which consists of the whole one and individual many' (Nishida, 2007c, p. 173).

What does the state mean for individual lives in Nishida's theory? Nishida argues that through the state, formulated by systematized laws with sovereignty at the center, all individuals become a part of the public existence. Thus, all nationals will be historical existence; they will obtain the rights of non-intervention as creators of history. Now, even a newborn baby has rights as a national. Every individual obtains the rights of a historical subject (Nishida, 2007c, p. 174). Unlike the ordinary interpretation of the relationship between individuals and rights in IR literature – in which the rights of individuals should be protected because of their legal status as citizens of a nation-state – Nishida's interpretation opens up the possibility of a Kantian cosmopolitan politics in that rights of individuals should be protected for the sake of their world historical existence.

Nishida consistently saw the nation-state as a manifestation of world history on which state sovereignty totally depends. If this is considered the other way around, it can be said that state will lose its legitimacy when it ceases to be a representation of the historical world. This is precisely the reason why *Mondai* was written in a prescriptive tone. In other words, Nishida implicitly contended that the Japan of his era was not a 'true state' and tried to question the legitimacy of the nation-state's sovereignty. Indeed, it is now reasonable to speculate that the real intention for writing *Genri* for Tōjo's speech was the same as for *Mondai*.

In this sense, the debate over whether Nishida was a nationalist or universalist is misleading. It is very clear that he was a nationalist[20] *and* universalist; this is precisely what his theory of absolute contradictory self-identity conveys to us. He was nationalist in the sense that he admired the tradition of Japan as a nation, whereas he was a universalist in the sense that he was keen on developing his theory of cosmopolitan

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20 'Nationalism' here is very much a problematic word. If nationalism is defined as being synonymous with conservatism, he was not nationalist. If it means an ideology to support the militaristic orientation of the dominant regime, he was not that, either. If it is defined as an ideology that supports the importance of *Minzoku* (nation), then the answer is yes, definitely.

history. Indeed, David Williams contends, 'The nineteenth-century expression "liberal nationalist" offers a much more accurate description of where the wartime Kyoto School stood on the ideological spectrum of Imperial Japanese society' (Williams, 2004, p. 152). In this sense, Nishida was conservative *and* liberal; he was particularist *and* cosmopolitan. Any efforts to define him with dichotomies are destined to fail, simply because he is a contradictory figure in the eyes of the theorists on the basis of the nationalist/liberal confrontation.

4 Culturalist IR and its consequence

Given that his intention in writing a series of articles on the nation-state as well as state sovereignty in his later years was to show his disagreement with government policies as well as to question the legitimacy of Japan's statehood, Nishida was far from successful. We then need to ask why he failed to achieve his goal. What prevented his strategy from achieving its initial purpose? Why did Nishida end by providing a justification for the wartime regime's expansionist policies rather than changing the course of Japan's foreign policy? This point has immense implications for those who engage in culturalist interpretations of contemporary IR.

First of all, what was unfortunate in this context was that Nishida provided no concrete program to materialize his theory of state-sovereignty. Indeed, it seems that his theory of world history did not successfully connect the abstract argument with reality. Although it is probably unfair to blame him for the lack of a concrete program for implementing his idea of state sovereignty, this absence was not insignificant. Most likely, the absence was due to his intellectual style. Because he largely spent his time in contemplation, isolated from social interaction, there were undoubtedly limits to his rational, deductive approach to world history (Tosaka, 1977; Tosaka, 2007a; Tsuda, 2009).

This leads to another gap in his political writings (Tosaka, 1977; Hiromatsu, 1989). Because of his relative lack of concrete connection with reality, an awareness of those whose lives were colonized and devastated by the Japanese imperial army in the name of the East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere was totally absent. This lack of attention to the colonized was not confined to Nishida, but to almost all of the Kyoto School scholars. This was probably due to the fact that too much emphasis was placed on the confrontation between East and West in their writings. Nishida's theory was, as analyzed in detail above, based on his initial intention to find a

universal ground for mutual understanding by tracking down the origin of one's own culture and history. He believed that a universality exists, one actually represented by the place of absolute nothingness, in which subjects with different cultures and histories may interact with each other, and that this exchange could develop into world history. However, in practice, and particularly in his political writings, this universality was only based on the confrontation between West and East.[21]

Underlying this total lack of attention to the political program and to the concrete lives of the colonized was Nishida's peculiar theoretical structure, in which he saw culture and state as the only central elements constructing the history of the world. In other words, there was a complete lack of political economy. This is decisively important, as it proves that Nishida was unintentionally taking a liberal political position that often disregards the power relations between the dominant regime and the subordinated. This was rather contradictory in the sense that although Nishida was exclusively concerned with history, his contemplation of history was significantly partial and biased.[22]

The lack of a political economic dimension in Nishida's articulation of world history exposes his lack of attention toward the material power relations between Japan and other Asian nations. Nishida indeed presumes an equal relationship among actors, like many liberal philosophers did in their understanding of politics and economy. Because of this, Nishida's severest critic, Tosaka Jun, named Nishida's philosophy, 'liberal hermeneutics' (Tosaka, 1977). Any imperialist empire, regardless of its era and location, involves the power relations between core and periphery; this, in turn, ends by devastating the lives of the colonized. In any historical account of imperialism, the home country will inevitably attempt to justify its aggression and successive dominance of other

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21 Here, it is worth noting that Nishida as well as the Kyoto School philosophers were occupied with Hegel's understanding of 'Asia', which was characterized by 'despotism' and placed at the periphery of the world. Therefore, in his configuration of world history, Nishida tried to bring Japan back to the core. For a more detailed discussion, see Koyasu (2003a) and Tosa (2009).

22 Although I deliberately placed an exclusive focus on Nishida's lack of attention to political economy in order to clarify my argument here, the reasons for his involvement in the imperial regime were by no means confined to it. For example, Matteo Cestari explains this in terms of Nishida's understanding of individuals in his philosophy (Cestari, 2008, pp. 49–60). It is also convincing that what Nishida's political philosophy lacked was a focus on 'everydayness'. Indeed, Nishida was completely occupied with the dichotomy of the universal and particular, in other words, with an abstract level of argument. This was definitely related to his failure to grasp the concrete reality (Goto-Jones, 2005).

territories with cooperative liberal narratives in which the core and periphery presumably gain a mutual benefit.

A lack of attention to political economy also obscured the fact that the state, which Nishida understood only in terms of institutionalization and legal structure, is indeed constructed by its environment. In her writing on imperialism, Hannah Arendt, by drawing on Hobbes's *Leviathan*, painstakingly explicates the fragility of states and contends that a state can only be safe in the process of expanding and acquiring a greater degree of power (Arendt, 1981, p. 35). This is because of the harsh competition among states in the world, which Arendt defines as proximate to liberal society. Thus, the lack of attention to the power relations between the nations involved in Japan's regional expansionism was, in any case, indispensable.

How could such blindness to the political economic dimension of world affairs be possible? What was the cause of Nishida's neglect of material relations? The answer to these questions lies at the heart of Nishida's theory itself. For Nishida, the subject of world history was exclusively based on the nation/state, although his theory was intended to make sense of the relationship between individuals and the world. The importance of the nation/state became important only in relation to the world in which he did not see individuals and economic actors as containing the power to change world history. The nation/state was the only legitimate subject. The nation/state as the subject of world history was constructed upon the relation to other nation/states. This is the core argument of Nishida's constructivist theory. What is missing here, however, is the fact that political economy or market activities easily transcend state/national borders. Thus, the power relations generated out of interactions between economic actors similarly travel across national and state boundaries. Therefore, in many senses, power relations within the market economy are indispensably important and influential in determining the course of world history.[23] However, because Nishida was

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23 This does not necessarily mean that those who focussed on political economic relations were all against the war. On the contrary, many Marxists and Communists of the time, for example, believed that the total war against the West was a means to overcome Western Imperialism. Nevertheless, I contend here that Nishida's lack of attention to the political economic dimension was indispensable to identifying the reason for Nishida's failure. This is because some materialist Kyoto School philosophers, particularly Tosaka Jun, who focussed on the substantive and concrete political economic relations involved in the discourses of the East Asian Co-prosperity Area, were also well aware of the power relations involved in Nishida's abstract theory of world history and severely criticized it. See, for example, Tosaka (1977, 2007a,b), Hattori (2000), Harootunian (2008), and Tsuda (2009).

exclusively concerned with human consciousness and its relation to the environment, the decisive power of material conditions escaped him.

Although political economy is just one way in which individuals are connected to the world around them, Nishida was totally occupied with the idea of 'Japan', whether it signified state or nation in the configuration of world affairs. This resulted in the ignorance of the fact that the term 'Japan' itself is very fragile and changeable in the context of globalized world, in which the interactions between individuals, economic actors, and emigrants all become decisive factors in determining the course of history. Thus, there are many 'Japans' based on plurality, rather than one Japan as a singular unified existence. For Nishida, however, there were only two 'Japans' – Japan as a state constructed on the basis of institutionalization, and Japan as a culture that could provide a place of nothingness, thus absorbing the elements of other cultures and integrating them into one cultural piece.

Indeed, the term 'integration' is the key to understanding his interpretation of 'Japan'. In any phase of Nishida's theory, whether it be pure experience, self-awakening, the place of nothingness, or absolute contradictory self-identity, he was always concerned with identity and integration. Although he recognized the contradictions within a subject in theory, he was completely occupied with the coherence and consistency of subjectivity in practice. This is because his configuration of world affairs was constructed solely upon the West/East divide, and his attempts to establish a theory of world history were largely colored by the strict boundaries of the rationalist/spiritualist tradition.

What we need in the formulation of theories of world affairs is intimately related to the question of West/East, rational/spiritual dichotomies. A mere subversion of the privileged status in each dichotomy will not generate useful results. Hannah Arendt points out that the dichotomies between West and East, rational and spiritual were intimately related in the sense that the latecomers to the world political economy needed to resort to their alleged spiritual and historical origins in order to construct their identities. When the former states started to compete with the latter, they suddenly found themselves having nothing equivalent to what the advanced countries relied upon in terms of identity, such as economic development and historical achievements (Arendt, 1968, p. 232). Nishida's search for an alternative world history is a prime example of Arendt's point. Indeed, his emphasis on culture was a strong

manifestation of his intention to confront Western political philosophy and to provide a unique alternative reading of world politics.

What was missing, however, was that he was indeed within the 'modernist' cultural discourse while he was emphasizing Eastern or Japanese 'culture', in that his thought was based exclusively on the modern nation-state system (Koyasu, 2003b).[24] In this sense, Nishida's work took part in what Ralph Pettman calls 'world affairs as a modernist project' (Pettman, 2004). This project sets the discursive boundaries for the IR discourse. Slavoj Zizek proposes an excellent view of culture, one of the primary rules of which is to know how to behave as if one has no idea of what happened, or even as if it had not happened at all (Zizek 2008, p. 8). Indeed, the imperialist culture in Nishida's time was, and is, according to post-colonialist discourses, substantially colored by the devastating neglect of those who were living in occupied areas, as if the effects of colonization and state-centrism did not exist. Nishida's discourse was the same. His total lack of attention to those colonized by Japanese imperialist expansion vividly clarifies the fact that he was indeed within the imperialist culture and the modernist project. The very moment he used the ironic term 'Japanese culture', he inevitably and unintentionally drew himself into the culture of Western modernity.

The culturalist understanding of IR must take seriously the devastating consequences which Nishida's view of world history caused to the colonized and oppressed by providing a justification for imperialist Japanese foreign policies. In other words, it is indispensable for those engaging in cultural politics to understand that cultural interpretation is indeed a double-edged sword.

5 Conclusion: lessons of the Kyoto School for IR

What can we learn from the theory and experience of the School in relation to the literature of IR? First, I must express my admiration of

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24 This was, of course, not limited to Nishida. Almost all the intellectuals of this time appear to have had similar culturalist tendencies. Therefore, it is obvious that his disciples, such as Nishitani Keiji, Kōyama Iwao, and Kōsaka Masaaki developed similar theories of culturalist politics, and this translated into support for the imperial regime. Similarly, well-known writers such as Kobayahi Hideo and Hayashi Fusao, both members of *Bungakkai* (a group of well-known novelists), which organized the infamous round table of *Kindai no Chōkoku* (overcoming modernity), also expressed a culturalist view toward world affairs and enthusiastically supported the war against the West. For a more detailed discussion, see Hiromatsu (1989).

Nishida's attempt to change the course of Japanese foreign policy. It was definitely a brave move and should not be disregarded or undervalued. He boldly tried to steal the meaning of the vocabulary circulating at his time and tried to replace it with his own philosophical interpretations. He was so honest that he actually risked his life and encountered physical and mental threats by right-wing activists more than a few times. He continued to write according to his conscience in a very truthful manner. He was a very honest intellectual: honest to his readers, his conscience, and his own existence. This should be recognized in any attempt to situate him and his philosophy in the context of the War.

Nevertheless, I am obliged to point out that we cannot and should not ignore the fact that he did cooperate with the imperial government, and, though unintentionally, this resulted in providing a decisive justification for the aggression of Japanese imperialists toward other Asian nations. His experience tells us that even with goodwill, good intentions, and honesty, by establishing a culturalist politics – a general theory of IR – we could end up supporting a political regime that devastates and shatters peoples' lives. Nishida's experience indeed seems to have influenced Japanese IR literature in the post-war period, which is often described as providing a more particularistic historical account of IR compared with pure theories of universal orientation (Inoguchi, 2007).

When engaging in cultural politics, we need to become aware that although the term 'culture' provides a new possibility for comprehending contemporary world affairs, it may simultaneously become an everyday life weapon, which results in almost the same devastating effect as those inflicted by weapons of mass distraction. To avoid the latter, we must seriously consider the complexity of the term 'culture' in order to combat the uncritical acceptance of the term as non-political and non-economic. Culture is most definitely political and economic, and the double-edged nature of culture can never be emphasized very greatly.

Acknowledgements

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