

History and Society Workshop 1 Summary of Discussion

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The presentation Dr. Miyuki Kita of the University of Kitakyushu, “Seeking Justice: The Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism and Jews at Brandeis University,” started the first workshop of the morning session of the second day of NASSS 2009, followed by comments by Dr. Makoto Kurosaki, and a question-answer session. Miyuki Kita wisely chose to only read out important sections of the text of her paper, already circulated to NASSS participants. She meticulously pointed out to the audience the lines that she wished them to skip from her document. Nevertheless, it was impossible for her, and the moderator of the session, to maintain the specified 30-minute time limit. The discussion was amply spurred by Dr. Makoto Kurosaki’s remarks.

The NASSS convention, which is only fair, allows presenters to provide their response to the commentator’s remarks. Accordingly, Dr. Kita had given us an incisive (pre-written) critique to her written text. Dr. Kurosaki’s response was to basically point out the sections of her text that addressed the issues related to Brandeis University’s massive support for the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s and summarize his critique in four broad questions that asked about the wider context of university activism, about the religious versus racial divide at Brandeis and about the nature of the basic source of the paper, i.e., the student’s newspaper, *The Justice*. The rationale of Jewish-white support for blacks, as stressed by Dr. Kita, was the founding principle of the university by its Jewish President, Rabbi Israel Goldstein, to avoid all forms of discrimination on campus that targeted a persons’ religion or race. At the same time, in an effort to prevent Brandeis University from becoming a sort of Jewish ghetto, its administration encouraged African Americans to seek admission to this otherwise white university. In addition, its students played a frontline role at sit-ins, freedom fasts, and other anti racial discrimination strategies that precipitated civil rights reforms in the United States.

However, the two basic leitmotifs of NASSS 09, alluded to in the paper and the discussant’s remarks, were not adequately satisfied during the proceedings of NASSS 09: “Americanism and Social Justice”. Martin Luther King (MLK), the paper had informed us, had referred to social justice eight times in his “I Have A Dream” speech. But how was it part of the American creed, especially in the context of the paper? Were the civil rights movement, and/or the establishment

and “project” of Brandeis University, in fact, expressions of social justice in a universal context or specific to the 1960s USA? Was Brandeis an attempt at social justice in the US, in the world, or an effort to provide a place for higher education for Jews, with a tinge of black to assuage the white-Jewish conscience? After all, as Dr. Kurosaki pointed out during the discussions, MLK may have visited Brandeis a couple of times but he had not been convinced of the authenticity of the stated goals and had actually spoken against the setting up of Brandeis University.

It appeared that, in a rush to support her central argument of Brandeis’ “color blindness,” Dr. Kita had glossed over the critical arguments that may have occurred to her. The discussions made it apparent that she had yet to answer the crucial questions raised by the commentator and other interlocutors. To her credit, Dr. Kita graciously admitted she considered her paper in its present form to be a work-in-progress; that she would incorporate answers to the queries raised during NASSS, and that this was her first public presentation in the English language.

The discussion generated active participation by the room full of academics. NASSS’s entire History and Society group had diligently turned up for this morning session on the second day of the profession seminar (i.e., prior to the two day graduate student seminar). Additional interested audience members had also traveled across Japan to participate in the meeting. The presentations and the ensuing questions led to broader discussions about the twin issues of Americanism and social justice. We concluded that our discussions had not adequately linked up Americanism. We had almost fallen victim to despondency about defining it, when we recalled that America is itself is a “work-in-progress.” It was, at least since its encounter with Europe, an imaginary place where one could find the mythical El Dorado. It was an idealistic utopia, a land with a level playing field where dreams could come through, where people could, in the original Spanish language of its early settlers *hacer America*—“make it” up the socio-economic and political ladder. And we recalled that since this ideal and exceptional America existed only in the minds of those who imagined it, it was entirely possible for people across the globe to achieve “Americanism” and social justice within the societies that they already resided in.