

## A Summary of NASSS 2009 Workshop II: Politics and International Relations Section

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This panel consisted of Honda (presenter), Morikawa (commentator), and Kim (moderator) with a well-attended floor that included Campbell, Gottschalk, Okayama, and other scholars and graduate students from the US and Japan. The title of Honda's paper was "Postwar Civil Rights Politics in the United States: The Dynamics of Democratization from a Global Perspective." Our workshop resonated well with the previous morning session, in that both addressed the discursive vicissitude of "Americanism" in post-WWII US politics from an international, even geopolitical perspective. In our case, the focus was the civil rights movement against the backdrop of the Cold War geopolitics and its domestic ramifications in the US.

Honda's paper focused on an important and relatively well-trodden subject in American studies, that is, the postwar civil rights movement. To that extent, its virtue and strength lie less in providing a welth of new information than in the fresh perspective and concepts it adopted for analysis. Often approached as a US domestic issue, according to this paper, the civil rights movement was intricately involved with the changing international environment in which the US had to define and redefine its political role abroad. The Second World War was a turning-point since the US framed its war efforts, especially in Europe, as a protracted struggle against racism and colonialism as well as fascism and militarism. The post bellum establishment of the United Nations was a direct consequence of this kind of war-time framing as the lofty ideals of its Charter and the Human Rights Declaration attested to. With the onset of the Cold War, the anti-colonial/—racist edifice of the US foreign policy has more forcefully come to the fore. The UN became a diplomatic battleground of propaganda and rhetoric between the US and the USSR where an increasing number of the member states had recently attained or were in the process of gaining independence from the colonial powers of Europe, whether victorious or defeated. This early Cold War engagement was not sustainable on the US side, however, as its political rhetoric abroad and the "apartheid" reality at home did not match to its international embarrassment. The NAACP and other civil rights advocacy groups tactfully exploited the Cold War circumstances by frequently seeking the international public audience, issuing petitions and statements to the UN and other international human rights organizations. Seldom acknowledged as it is due, Honda

concluded, this international-geopolitical dimension of the civil rights politics was more than instrumental for a profound transformation of the domestic public opinion, eventual dismantling of the Jim Crow regime in the South, and further “democratization” of the US politics.

Morikawa’s comments seized upon this last point in Honda’s conclusion and probed deeper into the meaning of democracy in America from a theoretical perspective. The concept of democracy has traditionally revolved around the idea of popular sovereignty understood as an inviolable right of self-determination that a firmly demarcated group of people (*demos*) claim as a matter of entitlement. This “thin” notion of democracy, however, had come to sit awkwardly in the novel international landscape that followed the end of the Second World War in which the universalist tenets of human rights claims have increasingly come into conflict with the principle of popular or national sovereignty. The US was no exception in this regard as the domestic “apartheid” regime, which had a majoritarian support at least in the South, contradicted its self-portrayal abroad as the “city on a hill” that other nations in the postwar world looked up to. Fortunately, Morikawa argued, democracy in America was exceptional, although not alone in this regard, that it was built on a set of universal values, so eloquently championed by Paine, Jefferson, and other founding fathers, from the very inception. From this theoretical and historical perspective, “democracy” in America is better understood as a steady process of “democratization,” which is driven by its built-in conflict between ideals and reality. The postwar civil rights movement and its eventual success (no doubt aided by the changing Cold War circumstances) formed a part of this still unfolding drama of *pas-de-deux* between “We the People” and “a More Perfect Union” that they eternally strive to.

The floor produced many an interesting comments and critics. Some found lacking a more rigorous causal explanation, warning that Honda’s argument might be perceived as that of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. For example, it was not clear as to the causal role that the Cold War geopolitics played in the motivational structure of the activists and/or their detractors in domestic politics, in the absence of which the argument amounts to a plausible narrative but likely not much more. In a more substantive vein, others raised questions about the relative importance of the international impact on the course of the civil rights movement. This suspicion was built on the notorious imperviousness with which the US has traditionally (and still in our present time) responded to the public opinion abroad. It is noteworthy that these critical voices did come mostly from our American colleagues on the floor. Their spirited self-criticism bespoke the robust tradition of “loyal opposition” that constitutes the other side of American patriotism and its continuing vitality in our time. Coupled with still more comments from the floor and the panelists’ spirited replies, the panel saw a lively exchange of ideas from both Japanese and American perspective that it was meant to foster.