

Comments on Honda Kazuhisa's Paper,  
"Postwar Civil Rights Politics in the United States:  
The Dynamics of Democratization  
from a Global Perspective"

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Dr. Honda presents us with a fascinating paper exploring the dynamic process of democratization in the postwar civil rights politics in the U.S. from the viewpoint of the global context of U.S. dependency on the international community after World War II. I would like to focus on two points that Dr. Honda raises in his detailed study on the civil rights politics. First, I will reexamine Dr. Honda's sociological explanation of democratization in the U.S. from the theoretical consideration of the nature of American democracy that he calls not just democracy but rather the process of 'democratization'. Second, I will consider the possibilities and difficulties of minority politics in the contemporary global context with the help of Dr. Honda's insight on the strategic success of civil rights activists and African Americans during the 50s and 60s.

**I. The Boundaries of Democracy in the Global Context of Democratization**

The central thesis of Dr. Honda's paper is that the progress of democratization in the postwar U.S. cannot be clarified by domestic factors only, but by global trends in which the U.S. encountered the paradoxical relationship of the international community. Let me summarize his arguments in terms of the radical change and connotation of the American race problem 'before and after' World War II. Before the end of World War II, as Dr. Honda explains, "the dynamic structure of racial exclusion" was stable in the Southern states which had kept their social and political autonomy from the rest of the U.S. society even after the Reconstruction era. African Americans were subject to the "dynamic process" of racist policies and social exclusion in the *closed* spaces which were under the sovereignty of the Southern states. World War II was the turning point to wrench the door open. By entering the international fight for democracy against fascism, the U.S. government was forced to confront the disgraceful fact of its own "legal fascist caste system" (Du Bois). Nevertheless, the self-contradiction of American democracy was not challenged but rather concealed during World War II since the U.S. government prioritized national solidarity over the its racial divisions. After the end of World War II, however, racial exclusion in the U.S. was thrown into

the global context in which, as Dr. Honda points out, the “legitimacy of American democracy” was seriously questioned. The U.S., as the most powerful leader of the free world, had defeated the racist regime of Nazi Germany and then established the United Nations and confronted the communist totalitarian states. These factors dramatically changed the context and connotation of racism in America; it was no longer a local and domestic issue in the U.S. but a universal issue that was widely exposed to the watchful eyes of foreign peoples.

Dr. Honda’s illuminating perspective on the postwar global context of democratization urges me to consider a basic question: what is democracy? Although there have been many controversies among political theorists on that question, the root meaning of democracy is simply ‘rule by the people’ from the ancient Greek *demokratia*, government by the majority of people (*demos*). If so, we must move to the next question: who are the people that have the right to decision-making?

The boundaries of ‘we the people’ have been restricted within the closed communities in the traditional visions of democracy. The ancient Athenians never assumed that their equal rights to participate in the city assembly should be expanded to slaves whom they dominated and foreigners who were their potential enemies. Carl Schmitt faithfully followed such a traditional concept of democracy when he defined the kernel of democratic politics as drawing a line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in the early 1930s’ Germany. Seen from these viewpoints, the ‘legal fascist caste system’ in the Southern states would not be anti-democratic as long as it was actually the result of majoritarian decision-making in those states. The southern States’ governors and politicians tried to defend their own right to self-determination, states’ sovereignty, when they, as Dr. Honda mentions, resisted the possibility of the federal government’s intervention into the race problem in their states. Likewise, civil rights opponents and some conservatives condemned the international pressure for improvement in the American race problem as the violation of U.S. sovereignty.

However, the walls surrounding exclusive democratic spaces as such were broken in the stream of postwar global democratization. The boundaries of ‘we the people’, who have the right to take part in the democratic discourse on race problem in the South, were expanded to include all Americans and even the people in the international society. The driving force to enlarge the boundaries of ‘we the people’, as Dr. Honda argues, arose from the gap between the ideal image of American democracy and its actual conditions. I would like to point out that it originated from the moment that the U.S. was founded. Thomas Paine declared in *Common Sense* in 1776: “The cause of America is in a great measure *the cause of all mankind*. Many circumstances hath and will arise, which are *not local but universal*, and through which *the principles of all Lovers of Mankind* are affected” (Paine2001: p. 74—italics added). Paine appealed to ‘common sense’, shared and universal understanding that all human beings have by nature, to support and assent to the cause of America. His voice, as Judith Shklar points

out, "certainly impressed Jefferson genuinely and through him became a lasting voice in American democratic discourse" (Shklar1998: p. 134). Thomas Jefferson, who proclaimed that "all men are created equal" in the preamble of the Declaration of Independence in spite of the fact that he was a slaveholder in Virginia, was the embodiment of the gap between the ideal of American democracy and its actual conditions. He wished for the conquest of the existing state of America that remained far from its ideal, and prepared two conditions for the development of American democracy. First, claiming that the new generations were always better than old, Jefferson defined American democracy as the lasting process of democratization in which all the people were bringing the existing state of the U.S. closer to its ideal from generation to generation. Second, he set the process of geographical expansion of America into motion by widening its territory through the purchase of Louisiana in 1803. The process of pursuit of the ideal state of democracy started on the one hand, and the expansion of actual space for democracy started on the other. I think of them as the historical origins of what Dr. Honda calls "the dynamics of democratization" after World War II in which "the international image of American democracy" was questioned in the international community.

As Dr. Honda points out, "the international image of American democracy" has not only given the U.S. a leading position in the postwar world but also forced the U.S. to be responsive to the criticism of the foreign countries and peoples. In other words, the U.S. always has to return to its original principle of democratization in terms of which the current conditions of its democracy is steadily examined by all the people. Dr. Honda's detailed study on the postwar civil rights movement provides a clear vision that civil rights activists and African Americans relied upon "the image of American democracy" and brought the existing conditions of the U.S. closer to it.

## **II. Visions of Minority Politics in the Global Democratization**

Dr. Honda convincingly argues that the success of civil rights activists in the struggle for racial justice depended not just upon their moral rightfulness but rather upon their political 'strategies'. They understood well the postwar global contexts in which the U.S. had to avoid losing the legitimacy of American democracy and they effectively exploited the domestic and international pressure on the U.S. government. They wisely organized non-violence direct actions and won over many sympathetic supporters both in the U.S. and in the other countries, while the southern racists' use of violence against them drew heavy criticism from the public. Through the combination of the effective strategies, civil rights activists and African Americans overcame the shortage of political resources and gained a comfortable majority in the worldwide space of democratization. Focusing on the strategies of the civil rights movement, Dr. Honda provides a helpful vision of minority politics in the age of global democratization. But still I

would like to make a few comments and questions from a different point of view.

Dr. Honda refers to the leaders of the black nationalist movement, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, who “rightly said ‘where there is oppression, there is resistance’.” Trying to make ‘resistance’ to racial ‘oppression’, they went on the way utterly different from the civil rights movement. For black nationalists, the racial integration that the civil rights movement pursued would not bring liberty and equality to African Americans but force them to be assimilated into white America. In their eyes, the equal legal and political status between two race groups would only strengthen the social and economic subordination of the black minority to the white majority and deprive the black people of their own ethnic and cultural identity, or ‘Black Pride’. It is easy to point out the flaws of black nationalist movements in the late 60s that hastily pursued the social, political, and cultural independence of black people from the white majority. Insisting on the racial self-interest of black, inflaming distrust against the white people, even affirming the use of violence, they antagonized the majority of American society. Unlike civil rights activists, black nationalists lacked proper and effective strategies to gain mass support and to impact favorably on the federal government (Honda1995: pp. 403–9). But I think that there is something worth considering about the black nationalist movement in spite of its strategic failure.

First, it may let us reconsider ‘the legitimacy of American democracy’. Dr. Honda emphasizes the cooperation and solidarity between the civil rights movement in the U.S. and the global trend anti-racism and anti-colonial movements in Africa and Asia after World War II. But it is also true that black nationalists were strongly influenced by Third World anti-racist and anti-colonial activists like Frantz Fanon, who advocated that colored peoples should achieve the right to self-determination through struggle against the white colonial powers. According to Fanon, the racial exclusion of blacks in the U.S. was the result of white domination over colored peoples. From the viewpoint of Malcolm X, the strategies of civil rights activists to exploit “the legitimacy of American democracy” meant nothing but endorsement of the white race’s imperialism which white Americans had justified as their ‘manifest destiny’—please don’t misunderstand that I dare to claim rebellion against the U.S. with the brutal violence. I just want to consider, and would like to ask Dr. Honda’s opinion on, how minority groups or nations could open the channels of peaceful communication with the U.S. government, even if they have ill feeling toward the legitimacy of American democracy as well as U.S. hegemony.

Second, I will move to the more general question about the theoretical perspective of democratic discourse. Dr. Honda’s assessment of the strategic success of the civil right movement seems to me to be compatible with the concept of ‘deliberative democracy’ that Jürgen Habermas has proposed. The main idea of Habermas and his successors is that political decisions in democratic polity should depend upon the consensus which people reach through a process of

deliberation. According to this idea, minority groups who try to improve their social and political status should persuade the majority of people to recognize that their claims have valid reasons in a general or universal respect, as men of the civil rights movement did so. I agree on the basic concept of deliberative democracy as such, but I also think that it might eliminate certain claims of minority groups from the arena of democratic discourse. Although there are many interests that the ethnic, cultural, religious and sexual minorities want to protect or pursue, some of them are difficult for the majority to accept and some of them can be appropriately achieved by giving certain independence to minority groups rather than by integrating them into the majority. It is true that black nationalists' demand for the total separation from the white majority was too excessive and too dangerous, but it is also true that the minorities' demand for the right to self-determination should be seriously thought of by the majority of people. In other words, should we consider the minority politics not only in terms of the social and political integration through which all are united into a people (*demos*) but also in terms of coexistence among peoples (*demoi*), each of whom gains and develops self-reliance to a certain extent?

I am afraid that my comments and questions were too rough to clarify Dr. Honda's brilliant case study on the civil rights movement in the U.S. during the 1950s and 60s. I am convinced of and deeply affected with his insight on "the paradoxical relationship between the U.S. and the international community" in which the U.S., the most powerful country on earth as well as the pillar of global democratization, always have to "be responsive to the voices of the international community". Perhaps, I expect too much of the possibilities of American democracy because I am a Japanese. Unlike the U.S. whose historical uniqueness cannot be separated from the universal principle of democratization, Japan has been always impressed its own cultural uniqueness by the universal civilizations which came from the outside. The pre modern Japan had been under the great influence of Chinese civilization, and the Western powers replaced China in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Japan claimed its universal mission only once in its long history; during World War II, Japanese militarists and intellectuals advocated that the fight against the Allies was a just war to liberate the Asians from the brutal colonization of Western nations and to constitute a new world order whose leader is the Japanese empire. According to the philosophers of the Kyoto-school, Japan has a moral and historical mission to overcome the corruption of Western modernity. Needless to say, those claims were nothing but political rhetoric to justify unilateral policies for the national interests and thus affected few foreign peoples. The Japanese empire was isolated and finally defeated by the U.S.

In contrast, the U.S. is fated to playing a key role in the global trend of democratization whose process began with the American Revolution. The "paradoxical relationship between the U.S. and the international community remains". "We the people" have to take responsibilities for it, whether we are

Americans or non-Americans. As Dr. Honda rightly says in the end of his paper, “We should not be optimistic but our watchful eyes are not meaningless to keep the juggernauts America under some control”.

### **Bibliography**

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