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


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T
two recent monographs establish David Williams as the leading Western authority on Kyoto School philosophy. With his trademark iconoclasms 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 Kawanami 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, Kōtsuka and Nishitani3 and Tanabe’s ‘response to Heidegger’s controversial rectoral address of May 1931 that appeared in 13 parts in the Asahi newspaper in the autumn of 1931, his secret lecture of May 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 Kōtsuka. 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 studies’ argues that ‘Japanology must begin all over again’ by returning to Max Weber and reading the Kyoto School liberally in the destiny of the American Empire (p.169).

If the Kyoto School has been ‘attacked from both the right and the left 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’s thinkers’,4 Williams goes a step further by both criticising ‘the black legacies of the Kyoto School’ (Chapter 7) and defending it as “liberal nationalism” in character (p.752). 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.5

The main targets for his sometimes scathing criticism are the ‘so-called progressive intellectuals’ who serve under the neo-Marxist banner’ (p.47) and ‘some of the most influential Western students of modern Japanese religious thought’ (p.54). He finds both groups guilty of misrepresenting the Kyoto School’s positions and the development of the Kyoto School and the purpose of his analysis of its political philosophy is to help ‘the achievement of non-Americanism and non-white world’ (p.11). A conspicuous silence is the relationship of Kyoto philosophy to other bodies of thought, especially those broadly labelled ‘postcolonial theory’. Yet many of its preoccupations overlap 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.100), but he does not explore the possible linkages.

Scholarship and propaganda

While ‘aims to stamp firmly on the Kyoto School philosopher who pretended to be a scholar’ (p.15), his 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 ‘Overcoming 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 as 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 propagandising for the ‘Allied orthodoxy’ 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.117). 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. C

Notes
1. The two Tanabe texts are ‘The Philosophy of Crisis or a Crisis in Philosophy: Reflections on Heidegger’s Rectoral Address’ (1931) and the secret lecture ‘On the Logic of Co-prosperity Spheres: Towards a Philosophy of Regional Blocs’ (1942).

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