

Class and Ethnicity in American History: Studies of American Labor and Immigrant Histories in Japan

Tatsuro NOMURA
Aichi Gakuin University

We are celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the Japanese Association for American Studies (JAAS). Last evening we had the thirtieth anniversary special lectures by Professor Linda Kerber and Professor Makoto Saito and today we are going to have a symposium, "The JAAS and the history of American Studies in Japan." But to be exact, although we are celebrating its thirtieth anniversary today, the JAAS has a history of some forty-nine years.

In 1947, two years after the end of the war, Yasaka Takagi, a professor at the Law Faculty of Tokyo University, and other scholars including Ken-ichi Nakaya and Hiroshi Shimizu, to name historians only, organized *Amerika Gakkai* (the Japanese Association for American Studies). The original membership was only about twenty-five. They published a monthly *Amerika Kenkyu* [The American Review], held study and lecture meetings, and published six volumes of *Genten Amerika-shi* [A Documentary History of the American People]. Their work established the true foundation of American studies in post-war Japan.

Despite their enthusiasm and the widespread intense interest in American culture just after the war in Japan, it was too great a burden for a small number of scholars to keep the Association business going,

Copyright © 1997 Tatsuro Nomura. All rights reserved. This work may be used, with this notice included, for noncommercial purposes. No copies of this work may be distributed, electronically or otherwise, in whole or in part, without permission from the author.

especially the publication of a monthly journal. The *America kenkyu* was discontinued in 1950. Afterwards, the activities of the Association gradually fell into “hibernation,” although the editing of *Genten America-shi* continued until 1958.

American Studies of this early period was very difficult. Japanese people, including scholars, were extremely poor and hungry. There were not many books about America in most universities. Scholars had to rely heavily on the libraries of American C.I.E. (Civil Information and Education), and later on the American Cultural Centers. But gradually students of American Studies increased. Fulbrighters came to teach at universities and many distinguished American scholars visited Japan to teach at seminars like the Kyoto American Studies Summer Seminars, which greatly contributed to the development of American studies in Japan.

In January, 1964, an American Studies Scholars Conference was held at the International House in Tokyo under the auspices and with the financial aid of the *Amerika Kenkyu Shinkokai* (American Studies Foundation). The Japanese Association for American Studies (JAAS) was reestablished when the second conference was held in January 1966.

The reconstructed JAAS held its first annual conference at Tokyo University's Komaba Campus in April 1967. The second conference was held the following year at Doshisha University in Kyoto. Since then the JAAS has continued to grow favorably, and now we have a membership of more than one thousand. Members' fields of study are quite diverse: history, literature, politics, economy, international relations, law, religion, education, sociology, philosophy, women's studies, popular culture, ethnicity, and journalism, etc. We hold a large annual conference, and we publish *America Kenkyu* [The American Review] annually in Japanese, *The Japanese Journal of American Studies* annually in English, and our association newsletter four times a year among others. In addition, there are a number of organizations of American Studies in Japan now and we can say that American Studies in Japan are thriving now.

Because my specialty is history, I would like to begin with a brief recollection of American historical studies in Japan. One of the historical associations, *Shigaku-kai* (Historical Society of Japan) publishes a monthly journal, *Shigaku-zasshi* [The Journal of History], the May issue of which every year is entitled “Recollections and Perspectives:

Historical Studies in Japan,” reviewing the publications of the previous year in each area of historical studies in Japan.

These “recollections and perspectives” began in 1949. Until 1960 American history was not given a separate section, and European history scholars wrote most of the reviews of American historical studies. American history in this period was just peripheral in the historical studies in Japan. “Western history” was equivalent to “European history.”

I counted the number of publications about American history referred to in this review issue every year. In 1949 only three received comment. But the average number of each year increased from eighteen in the 1950s, to twenty-seven in the 1960s, forty-four in the 1970s, seventy-one in the 1980s, and to eighty-three during the years from 1990 to 1993. The American history section of “Recollections and Perspectives” for 1994 referred to sixteen books (not including translations) and eighty-eight articles. The number of works referred to in “Recollections and Perspectives” varies by reviewer. Every paper does not necessarily receive comment in this review. When I reviewed in 1979, I read about 130 works and commented on seventy-eight works, and I read about 120 works and commented on eighty-seven works in 1984. Studies on American history increased thereafter in Japan. Thus to write “Recollections and Perspectives” is a great burden for reviewers, although to be asked to write is a great honor.

The rise of American historical studies was a notable phenomenon in Japanese historiography after the war. Yoshihiko Akamatsu, a scholar of European history, wrote in “Recollections and Perspectives” in 1955 that “the most fruitful area in the studies of modern history was probably the area of American history.”¹ Now the *Amerikashi Kenkyukai* (Society for American Historical Studies) has a membership of around 300 and publishes an annual *Amerika-shi Kenkyu* [Studies of American History] and the *Kansai Amerika-shi Kenkyu-kai* (Kansai Area American Historical Society) publishes *Amerika-shi Hyoron* [The American History Review]. Nearly one hundred American history scholars assemble for a three-day meeting every summer. We can say that the number of scholars of American history in Japan is quite large among the non-U.S. countries. But it is unfortunate that most of their publications are written in Japanese and are internationally unknown.

It was the so-called “progressive history” that was introduced to Japan after the war. Beard, Turner, and Parrington were well read.

American “progressive history,” which stressed the progress of American political democracy and the people’s struggle for social reforms, fit well with the trend towards democratization in postwar Japan. Many Japanese scholars of American history combined the American “progressive history” with the Marxian tendency of the so-called “postwar historiography” (*Sengo Rekishi-gaku*) in Japan. One notable example was Ken-ichi Kikuchi, a Communist Party activist, who wrote an excellent book on American slavery. Ken-ichi Nakaya, professor of Tokyo University, who played an important role in the growth of American studies in Japan, translated in collaboration *The Triumph of American Capitalism* (1940) by Louis M. Hacker, who had once been a Marxian theorist in the 1930s.

Consistent with the political task of democratizing Japan, Japanese scholars concentrated on studies of the political progress of American democracy and studied about such subjects as the American Revolution, Jacksonian Democracy, the Populist movement, Progressivism, and the New Deal. At the same time, slavery and the development of American capitalism and imperialism attracted much attention, especially among scholars who were very critical toward the American cold war policy.

Next, the neo-conservative or consensus history came to be introduced to American historical studies in Japan in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (1948) and *The Age of Reform* (1955), Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (1953), and other books were translated into Japanese. Our response is difficult to explain briefly. Many of us felt sympathy to some extent toward the view that American history was essentially conservative. Surely, there were no very strong anti-capitalistic movements in American history. The reforms which the “progressive historians” saw as “progressive” were essentially within the framework of bourgeois liberalism. But many of us felt embarrassment and antipathy toward the denial of the role of the common people in American history, because many of us considered ourselves to be progressives in Japanese society.

Then, after the middle of the 1960s, the Vietnam War came to exert a great influence on us. The age of radicalism had come. I found the following sentences by Takeshi Muramoto in the review issue of *Shigakuzasshi* of May 1969: “The situation of 1968 continuously poses the es-

sential question to each scholar of American history why he or she is studying American history. Probably every scholar felt great pain trying to find the answer.”² Many of us welcomed the new left interpretations of the American past, and some became new leftist in their writings. We began in earnest to make historiographical reflections about the American new left history and new proposals were made to absorb this new trend in American history. A typical Japanese response was the translation of *Toward the New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (1968) edited by Barton Bernstein, and the publication of Tomohisa Shimizu’s *Amerika Teikoku* [The American Empire (1968)].

It was after the middle of the 1970s that so-called “new social history” approaches began to increase in Japan. Phrases such as “ordinary people” and “from the bottom up” gained popularity. Reviewing American historical studies of 1979 for *Shigaku-zasshi*, I noticed the proportion of essays on orthodox vs. newer ones was changing. While the number of articles about such orthodox subjects as the American Revolution, Jacksonian Democracy, and Progressivism decreased, those about race, immigration, labor and women’s histories increased.

In the case of American labor history, my own field of study for a long time, there were many works by labor economists, but very few by historians. Hideyo Naganuma, Yu Takeda and I were “exceptions.” But recently many scholars of various fields of American history have started to take an interest in the history of the working class. Also, there is a remarkable trend among labor economists and business historians to turn their eyes to shop floor relations, but here I wish to limit my discussion to the trends among historians. It was mainly in connection with the immigrant and black histories that American working class history came to attract much attention among historians in Japan.

Let me introduce some examples. Tomohisa Shimizu and Hideyuki Otsuka made theoretical reflections about immigrants as a main source of the labor force in America. Shimizu paid attention to the ways in which emigrant-exporting poor countries gave economic aid historically toward immigrant-importing rich countries. Otsuka tried to demonstrate the relationship between the formation of the labor force in the United States and the influx of immigrants by making statistical surveys of labor markets. Hironori Uzuki wrote an article about the Philadelphia Irish workers’ riots, introducing the analytical style of

E.P. Thompson, and explained the traditional working class culture, unity and disunity of ethnic urban workers. Kikuyo Tanaka wrote historiographical studies of immigrant history and dealt with the immigrant and poor relief problems.

Fumiaki Hama studied the Irish immigrant workers involved in canal construction. Yuko Matsumoto analyzed the unity and disunity of ethnic and racial groups in labor struggles, integrating labor, immigrant, and women's histories. Yu Takeda, a labor historian, broadened his study to various fields, including the division of residential areas among workers according to ethnic and racial groupings with the development of metropolises. Daisaburo Yui, a political and diplomatic historian, made an analysis of the anti-Chinese nativist movement of Irish workers in California.

There are many studies of Japanese immigrant workers and their struggles, including Katsutoshi Kurokawa's research into their connection with the Seattle general strike. Jun Furuya wrote about American urban socialism and its immigrant background. Chieko Otsuji wrote about A. Philip Randolph as a trade union organizer and analyzed the Women's Trade Union League's organizing efforts among immigrant women workers.

Koji Takenaka treated black workers in the meat packing industry and the formation of the black ghetto in Chicago in his book. Hayumi Higuchi analyzed black workers in labor-management relations. Shinobu Uesugi analyzed the struggles of black workers in Southern agriculture during the great depression. Eiichi Akimoto, an economic historian, traced the movement of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and its cooperatives under the New Deal. Keiichi Shoji analyzed the background of Mexican emigration and the restructuring of the American economy. Masanori Nakagawa wrote about the strikes of Chicano agricultural workers.

Of course, there are historians who wrote about American labor from other perspectives. Among them are Natsuki Aruga, who wrote about women's labor participation during World War II, Yumiko Moriwaki, who wrote about New York artisan workers, Yukako Hisada, who wrote about the Lowell mill girls, and Hidetaka Yasutake, who wrote about Thomas Skidmore and the New York working men's party. These are just a few examples.

I felt very happy about these developments. Many years ago when I was researching the IWW, I noticed and emphasized the significant role

of immigrants in American labor history. The combination of immigrant and labor histories should be quite natural. The foreign stock (immigrants and their children's generation) occupied a tremendous proportion of the American labor force in the early present century. For example, in 1910, foreign-born people accounted for 14.7% of the whole American population, and those native-born but of foreign parentage constituted 20.5%. The "foreign-stock" thus constituted 35% of the population.³ "Foreign-stock" constituted 78% of New York City's population in 1910. New York City was not an exception: "foreign-stock" constituted more than 70% of the population in Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Boston, Buffalo, Milwaukee and other cities in the same year.⁴ Immigrants and their children made up the majority of the American working class. With this large foreign-stock labor force, the United States rose from the semi-periphery to the central position in world capitalism.

Thus, in America, immigrant and labor histories have overlapped, as Herbert Gutman emphasized.⁵ As he argued, the formative process of the American working class should be understood in the trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific dimensions, in other words, in the framework of modern world history.

I myself have been engaged in various kinds of activities as a historical scholar. I published some twenty articles on the IWW and wrote about various aspects of American labor history. My work includes the joint translations of Herbert Gutman's *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (1976) and MARHO's *Vision of History* (1984). Two of my books are especially related to today's subject, the combination of labor and ethnic histories. They are "*Minzoku*" *de yomu Amerika* [America Interpreted through Ethnicity] and *Yudaya Imin no New York* [Jewish Immigrants in New York City : The World of Life and Labor of the Immigrant Generation]. Please allow me to explain briefly about the latter book, because I tried to combine labor and ethnic histories in this book.

Why was I attracted to the world of Jewish immigrant workers? My interest goes back to more than thirty years ago, when I was young. At that time I was very much interested in the fact that the Jewish immigrant labor movement showed a remarkable socialistic tendency despite the prevalent business unionism in the mainstream American labor movement.

In the summer of 1973, I had a chance to visit the headquarters of

the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), and to talk with Jewish labor activists. In Chicago I found the sign "Debs' Room" on the door of a large assembly room of the ACWA. "Are you truly inheriting the spirit of Eugene Debs?" I asked. The union activist who was guiding me said, "Yes, of course." I asked, "Are you a socialist?" He said, "Why not!" In the early 1970s, there remained Jewish labor leaders and activists in the garment unions, including Leon Stein, the editor of *Justice*, the organ of the ILGWU, and the socialist traditions lingered on there.

The second event which stimulated my interest in Jewish labor came in the summer of 1982, when Irving Howe came to the Kyoto American Studies Summer Seminar. His book, *The World of Our Fathers*, is a wonderful work in which Howe, a member of an East European Jewish immigrant family, made a superb description of the world of the Jewish immigrant generation. But the section in which I participated was not Howe's literature section, but Herbert Gutman's history section. Gutman, a champion of the new labor history, provided us with tremendous excitement for nearly two weeks. The participants could, I believe, understand what the new labor history was. We were able to see how it described the "total" historical experiences of the working class, and was, at the same time, immigrant history, ethnic history, cultural history, women's history, economic history, and political history. Gutman emphasized that working people made their own worlds as active agents of history. And he was also born into an East European Jewish immigrant family in New York.⁶ Since then, I made it a major part of my works to research "the world East European Jewish immigrant workers made in New York City."

Jewish immigrants around the turn of the century came mostly from the Russian Empire and other East European countries. Pogroms by peasants and repressive measures by the czarist government played important roles in driving the Jews to America. But their massive migration should be understood as a part of the trans-Atlantic waves of immigrants which originated in the process of the socio-economic transformation of Europe.

In order to understand the social character of immigrant groups, we should know their origins. I investigated the socio-economic background of Jewish emigration from the Russian Empire. Great transformations were occurring among the Jewish population, including rapid

population growth, urbanization, and migration within the empire. Especially I noticed the changing patterns of their job structure.

In 1897 within the Russian Pale, the region where Jews were allowed to reside, only 3% of them were engaged in agricultural pursuits, 32% were in commercial pursuits, and 38% were engaged in various kinds of manufacturing industries.⁷ Jews were in the process of rapid industrialization. Many Jews were changing their jobs from commerce to industry. Russian scholars call this process "producerization."⁸ Jewish industries were small and many of the Jewish workers were handicraft artisans. But a genuine proletariat, estimated at 400,000, had appeared among them by the end of the nineteenth century. With this background they came to America. The proportion of "skilled workers" among the Jewish immigrants to America from 1899 to 1909 was an amazingly high 67%.⁹

According to an article by Isaac Rubinow published in 1905, the vast majority of "Russian Jews" in New York were on a very low economic level, and within these "masses" industrial labor of various kinds was the main source of livelihood.¹⁰ In the Jewish "ghetto" of the Lower East Side in 1905, 73% of the population were manual workers, among whom about 60% were garment workers.¹¹ Vertically constructed from various classes, the Jewish immigrant community was, to borrow Herbert Gutman's phrase, a "cross-class but predominantly working class" community.¹²

It is well-known that the Jewish working class suffered low wages, long hours, irregular employment and unsanitary conditions in the notorious sweatshops of the garment industries. But they brought their own cultural traditions and work habits into the industrial system in New York. Their heavy concentration in the garment industry originated in Jewish job structures in Eastern Europe. Their sweatshop conditions and subcontract systems reflected the "sacrifice the Jews willingly made in order to observe the Sabbath." Various communal ties provided them with a sense of community in the workshops: the Yiddish language, Jewish life habits, the Sabbath and religious customs, and mutual aid in finding jobs. But they had to suffer the pains of a "severe reconstruction of the labor process" in New York.

Their living quarters presented typical slum conditions. Population density, uncleanness, bad smells, disease and crime distressed them. But it should be emphasized that even these inhabitants of slums, as active agents in history, created their own world by their own initiatives.

This “predominantly working class” community needed various kinds of services for its working-class inhabitants. The streets of the Lower East Side were crowded and very lively. In the blocks of the Lower East Side were many restaurants, cafes, saloons, barbers, bakeries, butcher shops, groceries, drugstores, laundries, photographers, lawyers, dentists and doctors.

The world they made in New York was the world made by the “immigrant Jews,” shaped by the interactions between the Jewish traditions which they had brought from Eastern Europe and the new environment which they confronted in the modern metropolis of New York. It was neither the world they had left behind in Europe, nor the world created by “Jewish Americans” adapted to American culture.

Immigrants continued to live in poverty. But with the lapse of time, they got some upgrading in skills and some advancement in the employment hierarchy. Consumption expenditures increased for cultural and educational activities, as well as for entertainment and leisure. Their poverty changed from the “disconsolate” poverty of the early period to “a poverty that took on a livelier complexion.”¹³ And they established networks of amazing numbers and kinds of organizations: landsmanschafts, synagogues, benevolent and mutual aid organizations, educational and other cultural institutions, and labor organizations. With the continuous influx of newer immigrants, the Jewish community continued to swell. Unlike the early immigrants who came in the 1880s, the later immigrants did not arrive in an alien and unfriendly world. They found a large Jewish community waiting to welcome them.

Irving Howe wrote about their culture that “The world of the immigrant Jews could not, in any ordinary sense, be called a ‘high culture.’ It lacked an aristocracy to emulate or attack, it lacked a leisure class that could validate the pursuit of pleasure, it lacked an aesthetic celebrating the idea of pure art. It had no symphonies or operas, no ballets or museums.”¹⁴ In other words, the immigrant culture was the subculture of a “cross-class but predominantly working class” community.

The most notable human type in the immigrant experiences was the “self-educated worker.” The search for knowledge was widespread among Jewish workers. Marcus Ravage remembered the lunch hour at a garment workshop when many workers “had their heads buried in their volumes or their papers, so that the littered, unswept loft had the

air of having been miraculously turned into a library.”¹⁵ And it was natural that their intellectual search turned toward the thought of working class liberation.

The Jewish working class began to assert itself. Jewish needle trade workers had their “heroic age” and succeeded in building such powerful unions as the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. Strikes in this period became “social outpourings which fused workplaces and neighborhoods in massive demonstrations of the solidarity of the entire working class.”¹⁶

And in this atmosphere the socialist movement flourished. For the Jewish working class, David A. Shannon wrote, “socialism was more than just a political movement; it was a way of life.”¹⁷ The New York socialist movement drew strength “not only from the shops, but from the rich and vibrant working class culture that flourished in the neighborhoods.”¹⁸

The Jewish working class succeeded in electing Socialist Mayor London to Congress in 1914, 1916, and 1920. And the memorable year for the Jewish workers was 1917, when Morris Hillquit received 22% of votes in the New York mayoralty campaign. In this year New York City Socialists elected ten state assemblymen, seven city aldermen, and one municipal judge. This was the zenith of the Jewish working class community of the immigrant generation in New York. My book was an effort to explain the origins, formation, growth, and flowering of the world which the Jewish immigrant working class made by their own initiatives. And I endeavored to place this world within the framework of the international migration of populations.

The Jewish labor movement had the day of David Dubinsky and Sidney Hillman during and after the 1930s. However, the world of the Jews in New York was changing from the “cross-class but predominantly working class” community. New York Jews had been transformed from “the Jews in Eastern Europe” to “East European Jewish immigrants in America” and then to “Jewish Americans.”

These kinds of transformations occurred in all immigrant groups. Many immigrants started as manual workers at the bottom of American industrial society, and then began to rise in social and economic status, vacating the bottom ladder for the newer migrants from outside America. The American working class has always been, and still is, in this fluid condition.

The various worlds of immigrant workers are extremely diverse, and differ from group to group. Only by analyzing each group and the relations among them can we reach a full understanding of American working class history. We must combine various areas of labor history with immigrant history, and at the same time we must combine various aspects of immigrant history with labor history. We must combine ethnic studies and class analysis in order to understand the serious social problems in the present-day United States. The "crisis of the cities" includes vast inequalities of wealth, unemployment, homelessness, and the so-called underclass problems. These problems have ethnic and racial dimensions. But here I wish to quote Irving Howe's words: "Toward problems of this kind and magnitude, what answers can ethnicity offer? Very weak ones, I fear."¹⁹ We should not forget the class dimensions in our approach toward the past and present of United States society.

In concluding this review of the development of one phase of American Studies in Japan, I would like to take the opportunity to express our Association's gratitude to the many people who have extended kind hands of help to us.

NOTES

¹ Yoshihiko Akamatsu, "Modern Age, 1954," Shigakukai, ed., *Recollections and Perspectives of the Historical Scholarship in Japan* (Reprint Edition), Vol. 25: *America* (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1988), 12.

² Takeshi Muramoto, "1968," *ibid.*, 80.

³ *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910*, Vol. 1. *Population* (Washington, D.C., 1913), 184.

⁴ Niles Carpenter, *Immigrants and Their Children, 1920* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1927), 26-27.

⁵ "Herbert Gutman" (interview), MARHO (Mid-Atlantic Radical Historians Organization) ed., *Visions of History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 196.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁷ Isaac M. Rubinow, *Economic Conditions of the Jews in Russia* (New York: Arno Press, 1975) [Reprint of *Bulletin of U.S. Bureau of Labor*, No. 15, (1907)], 500.

⁸ Teruyuki Hara, "Anti-Semitism and Russian Jewish Society," [in Japanese] *Shiso Magazine*, No. 642 (December 1977), 23.

⁹ Samuel Joseph, *Jewish Immigration to the United States from 1881 to 1910* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1914), 141.

¹⁰ Isaac Rubinow, "Economic and Industrial Condition: (A) New York," in Charles Bernheimer, ed. *The Russian Jews in the United States* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1905), 108.

¹¹ Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 521-28. Appendix B.

¹² Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 44.

¹³ Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1976), 120.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁵ Marcus Ramage, *An American in the Making: The Life Story of an Immigrant* [1917] (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 147-48.

¹⁶ Charles Leinenweber, "The Socialists in the Street: The New York City Socialists in Working Class Neighborhoods, 1908-1918," *Science and Society*, Vol. 41 (1977), 154.

¹⁷ David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 8.

¹⁸ Leinenweber, 153.

¹⁹ Irving Howe, "The Limits of Ethnicity," *New Republic*, June 25, 1977, quoted in Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity and Class in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1981), 261.