A New Social Frame of Reference
for American Studies

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First of all I deem it a great honor to deliver an address at the annual conference of the JAAS. Particularly, I am pleased to share the session with President George Sanchez of the American Studies Association.

It is natural that we are inclined to cherish a desire or hope at the beginning of any season and particularly so this year as we stand at the dawn of the third millennium. In reality, however, we are confronted with a new critical age; moreover, this crisis relates deeply to the United States and is of great importance to the perspective of American studies.

In considering American studies at such a critical moment, a passage by a great historian, Charles A. Beard, comes across my mind. Giving a presidential address entitled "Written History as an Act of Faith" at the conference of the American Historical Association in 1934, which my teacher assigned me to read in the 1960s, Beard stressed the importance of a new frame of reference in historical studies so that historical studies might be effective in analyzing serious problems of the day. I was impressed by Beard's address because the 1960s was really another critical age, and the field of American studies as well as American society was undergoing great upheaval.

Now in inquiring into the character and significance of the present crisis, I would like to first review briefly the historical meaning of the 1960s

and then in comparison of these two turbulent periods in mind, express a more personal opinion about what is needed for a social frame of reference or a radical reconstruction for American studies in this critical international arena.

I

Looking back upon the upheaval of the 1960s in academic circles, we can recognize three conspicuous moves which had a view toward democratizing or reforming America. First, the New Left oriented criticism of power structures, together with a vision of a thorough-going welfare state system. Second, the civil rights movement for minorities and women, and provocative efforts to reconstruct American history from their standpoints. Third, a sort of inner or self-criticism of American interventionist strategy that had led to the Vietnam War. There were of course some mutual influences or linkage among them.

The first point relates in essence to the function and nature of a "positive state" system which has developed since the late 19th century. Based on an American liberal tradition, the main aim of the government's role underwent changes through the long process of evolution from original anti-monopoly regulation to the coordination of interests through the so called "broker state" function, which, paving the way for a welfare state in the New Deal, had the meaning of a social democracy designed to meet the needs of the working people. After the second world war, however, while the expansion of social security policies was a continual national concern, under the serious international circumstances of the Cold War, the United States was driven to build what might be called a "national security state," where political priority was put on national security in conjunction with the military element, in scientific research as well as in the national economy.

It was rather understandable that one of the radical reformist criticisms of the time was concerned with the question of how to restrain military power or influence in society while accepting the expansion of government roles in welfare and civil rights programs. C. Wright Mills pointed out the existence of power elites consisting of executives, the military, and big business as early as the 1950s. Victor Perlo argued that the military-centricity of the economy even weakened the international competitive power of American business in main industries such as steel and automobiles. This was not even to mention various criticisms of the

growing military-industrial complex. Particularly harmful was the trend that scientific research was not merely financially dependent on defense institutions but gave a higher priority to military needs or programs. The military influence in the research and development field became even more serious as major academic institutions cooperated positively with defense institutions throughout the Vietnam War in order to secure abundant funds, consequently bringing about the military-industrial-academic complex. It was natural that the student revolt aimed, among other things, at checking military research as a part of the move to democratize academic institutions. However reasonable and desirable such an anti-military stance might be, nonetheless, it is difficult to check a dominant military influence as long as it is a structural part of the national security state system. In just such a case, one might have expected that the progress of détente after the 1970s, particularly the final disappearance of the Cold War, would have offered favorable conditions for the United States to steer itself in that direction; though it would have been a hard task to sever the close interest relations of defense expenditures and military industries.

Judging from the course of US foreign policy, especially its consistency in nuclear arms development, the New Left oriented move to reform America has apparently failed to achieve any remarkable results. While the United States has made progress in strategic arms limitation and then restriction talks with the communist bloc since the 1970s, non-nuclear weapons equipped with the most advanced technologies have been developed continually at amazing speed as clearly shown in the Gulf War and the recent military actions in Afghanistan. It seems that US military interests have been tenacious and consistent enough to reject any influence from the favorable turn in international circumstances caused by the end of the Cold War. On the contrary, the terrorist attacks of 9.11 and the following military action afforded a big opportunity for US military interests to push on with arms development and defense programs, with all their might. Furthermore, under the current dominant patriotic mood of the nation we see no force or move to check this development, in contrast to the 1960s when anti-war criticism had considerable influence on public opinion; in the current climate one must certainly feel some apprehension about the boundless military enterprises in the United States.

II

Another function of the "positive state" (the welfare state system) made remarkable progress through the 1960s when welfare programs were docked with the civil rights movement. In this respect, American people, whom Mills had referred to as "the mass," proved themselves full of vitality and capable of reforming their society, while the federal government strikingly expanded its role in combating racial discrimination; consequently marking a new and significant development of the positive state function. Certainly L.B. Johnson's 'Great Society' policy was of epoch-making character in connecting welfare policy with social projects for disadvantaged minorities, both reflecting and pressed on by the urgent social crises of the day. Moreover, domestic reform concerning racial discrimination had, needless to say, connotations for international relations, for it would be difficult for the US to play a leading role abroad without tackling internal injustices.

Of particular importance was the strong impact of the civil rights movement on academic circles. With the social upheaval providing a momentum for radical reconstruction, American studies was offered an opening for new and fruitful perspectives in approaches to analyzing or examining American society and culture. One of the most significant results was, of course, the provocative move to review American history itself from the standpoint of the oppressed or disadvantaged, such as minorities and women, thus bringing forth a boom in historical studies of common people, labor, and immigrants. It was certainly a period of great democratization for academic activities correlated with social reform movements.

As this situation clearly shows, the boom of social history in the 1960s was highly reformist-oriented and deeply rooted in political concerns. In the process of its subsequent development, however, we cannot but recognize a possible degeneration of its social connotations. Now with a rich, uncultivated frontier open for academic work, it was necessary that the study of social history should expand into the detailed examination of ways of life and various cultural aspects. While detailed studies are also basic and important to the understanding of the common people's life and culture, it would be difficult to deny that some social-historical works of this period were too minute in scope or personal in character. Essentially, it would be necessary or desirable to set up a framework of political or social concerns as realized by the rise of multiculturalism. In

this sense it may be said that works concerning social or cultural histories are tending now to promote social reform through scholarly activities, or coming to concentrate upon rather trivial subjects full of fascination but of a non-political character.

Borne along with the social upheaval and dilemmas of the 1960s came the recognition of another aspect of progress. The enactment of the Civil Rights Acts and the welfare policies on behalf of minorities certainly marked great progress in social democracy, but in fact, the anticipated results were too slow in coming. With no time to spare, the government set out on another positive measure, affirmative action. Intended to bring about immediate results, this innovation made it inevitable that some basic aspects of the American value system would have to change. While all previous civil rights policies had aimed at realizing equality of opportunity, affirmative action set out to achieve equality of results, by approving preference to the disadvantaged—contrary to the principle of equal opportunity. It was unavoidable that the innovation should be criticized as reverse discrimination, in contradiction to its intent of social reform. Reflecting such a serious conflict in principle, public opinion was not firmly in support of the new direction, as shown by the referenda in California and Washington in the late 1990s. We also should not disregard some ambivalence on the side of African Americans about affirmative action. In spite of its apparent design to act on their behalf, highly capable African Americans may have been inclined to disapprove of the measure as something even harmful to the status they had obtained through their real capability and, vice versa, people in lower strata who needed propping-up support most urgently may have found it rather difficult to take advantage of this radical policy. Considering all these contradictory elements, the issue of how best to find a way forwards out of the problem forms a touchstone from which to judge American social reform.

At this point there emerged another trend running counter to the social reforms of the 1960s. This touched on the crux of the political stance of criticizing the development of a "positive state" system itself, aiming at switching over to "small government." A basic factor for the trend was the accumulation of a federal financial deficit, which had been accelerated by the Vietnam War. It is not too much to say that the realization of a balanced budget became one of the most pressing political goals for successive administrations after the 1970s, and that so long as the defense budget was maintained, it necessarily had the effect of restricting

welfare expenditures. A most important trend, which had serious political consequences, was that the white working class became rather passive or even negative toward the welfare state system, as they were less dependent on social security programs and more interested in tax reduction. Now that minorities were likely to be the main beneficiaries of welfare measures, a passive stance toward the welfare state became closely related to a conservative social trend, which has gathered strength gradually in the past three decades. We may also refer to the busing problem to demonstrate the dilemma facing white liberals. While properly supporting the reform to do away with racial discrimination in the South, some liberals were forced to fall back in the face of the busing policy, which was intended to mix while pupils from the suburbs and African American pupils from the urban slums by means of long-distance rides on school buses. Recognizing a disadvantage to their personal interests, whites raised some resistance to the further progress of social democracy, which would cause a deterioration in the value of their real estate and favorable living conditions. This might reflect some sort of limitation of basic human nature. Such being the case, the recovering conservative trend would certainly be another serious barrier the social reform movement since the 1960s could not evade in struggling on towards its goal.

As one more factor lending a gloomy perspective to social securities programs, we are also obliged to consider the remarkable increase of the elderly population. While in essence a desirable result of a civilized society, the high ratio of the elderly population would certainly exert an influence on the whole system of social security, particularly annuities, making it a pressing question to reexamine the appropriateness and foundation of a welfare state. We should then consider this another challenging problem calling for a new social frame of reference.

III

New Left criticism of US interventionist global strategy also exerted a remarkable effect on scholarly works about not merely American diplomatic history, but also post-World War II foreign policies. The so-called "Williams School" became accepted among academic circles, promoting the trend for coordinating the orthodox and revisionist schools. Particularly impressive was the popular move to criticize the militaristic stance of US diplomacy, as demonstrated by the anti-Vietnam War movement. While such peace-oriented public opinion certainly played a

part in the current towards détente, one might remain cautious about post-Cold War international relations and the specific role of the United States. The disappearance of the bipolar confrontation was certainly desirable, but the subsequent unipolar structure of the international community essentially involved a serious, uneasy element, as an unbalanced system under US hegemony.

What is called "globalization" not merely made US national security more assured, but at the same time placed the US in a difficult position requiring a well organized, self-controlled, and open-minded posture and even circumspect consideration of international welfare, all which must be a heavy burden for the United States, requiring it to cast off its own traditional nationalism.

Though it may be an unduly severe view, it does not seem that the United States has achieved this difficult but significant task in a spirit of self-command. Accordingly globalization has in fact brought forth a system of what might be called American-centralism rather than the harmony of international interests; this has had unfortunate consequences for the United States itself. The greater part of the reality concerning US dominance might not be attributable to American diplomacy but to the inevitable progress of international power politics. Nevertheless it would be difficult to disregard the US unilateralist stance in many respects. Some examples are the refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the one-sided abandonment of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the negative posture toward both the Kyoto Agreement concerning the global temperature environment and the final declaration to ban biological and chemical arms, and, above all, the missile defense program that will expand the nuclear stockpile despite international public opinion.

Let us now consider the economic aspect of globalization. It is often pointed out that globalization means Americanization in this respect too, effecting the expansion of American principles based on market and competition over the world. The principle, of course, is appropriate and certainly indispensable to economic development. As it is propagated on a global scale, however, the condition of areas not competent in capitalist economic rationality will deteriorate at a faster pace, making the economic disparity still more serious.

Furthermore we now see the trend of globalization making progress in cultural aspects, which also means the expansion of American culture over the world, even into the former communist areas. It must be in a sense a natural development caused by the fascinating substance and

vitality of American cultural activities. While it has a very remarkable ability to suit the popular taste, we cannot but recognize that this kind of cultural globalization has been in many cases closely related to the energy or power of American commercialism, promoted by the consideration of local economic interests. If cultural globalization leads to cultural Americanization in line with American economic expansion, then it will be all the more important for the United Stats to be mindful of the necessity of not regarding "American" as universal. This is another hard task, but may be indispensable to maintaining American cultural influence in a sound way and the compatibility of various cultural traditions and value systems. Interestingly, in 2000 the outgoing president of the JAAS, Professor Hiroko Sato, stressed in her presidential address the importance of two dimensions of "otherness" in analyzing American society, focusing on the views of ethnic minorities and women. Though the context is different, it should be insisted upon again how important and necessary it is for the United States to examine its culture and society from the standpoint of "otherness" in the international arena. In a classic book on American democracy *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Louis Hartz, in his lucid argument, warned of the danger of the American inclination to regard its creed or value system as absolute, however valuable they might be. One might speculate that as a historian specializing in political thought in the Western world, Hartz was qualified to examine America from a sort of "otherness" perspective, understanding well both the universal merit and the uniqueness of American culture and society in comparison to those of Europe. Such a standpoint, competent to grasp America in a relative way, would be required even more acutely in the circumstances of globalization.

<p style="text-align:center">IV</p>

We have briefly reviewed the consequences of the reform movements of the 1960s and the serious problems the United States is confronted with under the rather favorable conditions of globalization taking place under US hegemony. I would now like to conclude by arguing for a new social frame of reference for American studies that I regard as desirable for the United States to meet the critical international situation of today.

The first point in my mind is the question of why the United States has not been understood or well respected in the international arena, with all its great merits and strong points. This may be the result of a wide gap

between the inner image of American democracy, cherished by Americans themselves, and the realities of American power, so impressive to the outside. In order to fill the gap, it would be appropriate to have the principles of American democracy function as far as possible not merely as propaganda but in playing a leading role for the international community. In this respect there are two crucial elements in the history of how American society has managed to pursue its course of stable and democratic development: the system of checks and balances, and the tradition of civilian control.

Without a doubt the system of checks and balances contributed greatly to the stability of American political institutions by preventing the emergence of a dictatorial power. While experiencing the fluctuation among the three powers throughout its history, American society has demonstrated the merit of the system fully in domestic politics. In contrast, the world society has lost a balanced structure, not to mention any effective check system. Of course, we cannot argue that the domestic and international societies are the same in rank, and it would be ill-advised to expect any truly balanced system in world politics. Nonetheless, there can be various forces to check dominant powers, such as the United Nations and other international organizations as well as some world powers themselves; in this regard, we should also consider various non-governmental organizations active in the international community. How much they can function as a force for checks and balances would be to a great extent dependent on the American stance toward them. In reality, the United States is apt to disregard too often the checking role of those institutions, including the United Nations. A more positive or voluntary posture respecting these checking forces should be stressed with a view to the US leadership in such a way as to have the world system conform to the principle of American democracy.

The establishment of civilian control was certainly another great work of the founding fathers, making military dominance or a coup d'état impossible, and thus forming the basis of stable development. Though the system is of course still maintained, nonetheless the international image of America is without a doubt that of an ominous military power, and this impression has been amplified as the United States has resorted to arms on a global scale on almost every occasion. The greater part of military action might have been unavoidable, in view of the gravity of world politics, but it would be hard to overlook the estrangement of the actual situation from the American original principle. It seems that the

military establishment in excess would be quite a disadvantage to the United States itself in playing a leading part, as American influence would be perceived more as the result of military power than as the result of the democratic character that US leaders publicize. It is also self-evident that military power cannot solve the causes of international miseries and tragedies even if it appears to be temporarily effective in suppressing or controlling violence.

Comparatively new concerns with the democratic cause stimulated through American social upheaval of the 1960s might be added to those traditional principles. One is a welfare measure principally for non-white minorities. The stern fact of the ethno-class system, reflecting the inseparable relationship of minorities and poverty, conforms to the international community on an amplified scale, and thus contributes to the impetus for terrorism and unrest. Of course, the idea and policy of economic aid has already a long history through the Cold War era, but up to now it has been affected by the political interests of the major powers. In this post-Cold War period, the United States will be expected to conduct the war on poverty, or a sort of affirmative action, on a global level, to support disadvantaged people or societies in cooperation with other affluent nations. Needless to say the disbursement of any funds would be more constructive when used for international welfare than in the case of military expenditures, accordingly conducive to the overseas demonstration of the kind of reformist stance shown in the 1960s.

From another new perspective, would it not be advisable to take an interest in what may be called "international multiculturalism?" While multiculturalism is still a serious issue in the argument over the appropriate course for American society, it should be applied to the international community with a view to the co-existence or co-living of various societies and cultures. Such a positive posture toward mutual understanding on the global scale is needed and should be solidified particularly in the current environment where there is grave concern about the 'clash of civilizations.' In the effort to pave the way toward this direction we are inclined to anticipate that the United States will take the lead not only because the coordination of the dominant American culture or value system and those of other societies is vital to the realization of stable international relations, but also because the process would certainly facilitate the situation in which American people would be able to stand in a position of "otherness" and contemplate their own society and

culture from a relative viewpoint, a position no doubt amply to be re-
warded.

The term "American Century" is often used in reviewing the 20th cen-
tury. I would like to conclude the address by expressing my sincere desire
that, in the new century, the "American Century" will not be maintained
by means of a dominant position of military power but be appreciated
through the prevalence of democratic principles, and that American stud-
ies both at home and abroad will contribute greatly to the cause.