



Commentary. Nishida Kitarō and ‘The Principle of the New World Order’¹

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Abstract. This is a commentary on ‘The Principle of the New World Order’, a geopolitical essay written by Japanese Philosopher, Kitarō Nishida in 1944. This essay has been a source of postwar controversy over the philosophical justification of Japan’s involvement in the Second World War and the relationship between Japanese thoughts and Western colonial domination in Asia. As a text of Japanese formal geopolitics, the essay is a historical example to illustrate how Japanese academics geopolitically situated their country and themselves within the imperial rivalry during the War. The essay attracted not only criticisms that problematized Nishida’s approach to politics (imperialism and nationalism) and justification of the War, but also positive reviews that appreciated his proposal of a multicultural worldview countering Western modernity (i.e. the world dominated by the West). The translation of the essay is not easy to read but contains important insights into how to see the current world (dis)order under hegemonic powers.

Keywords: Kitarō Nishida; geopolitics; Japanese Philosophy; East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere; new world order.

[es] Comentario. Nishida Kitarō y “El principio del nuevo orden mundial”

Resumen. Este es un comentario sobre "El principio del nuevo orden mundial", un ensayo geopolítico escrito por el filósofo japonés Kitarō Nishida en 1944. Este ensayo ha sido en la posguerra una fuente de controversia sobre la justificación filosófica de la participación de Japón en la Segunda Guerra Mundial y la relación entre el pensamiento japonés y la dominación colonial occidental en Asia. Como texto de geopolítica formal japonesa, el ensayo es un ejemplo histórico para ilustrar cómo los académicos japoneses situaron geopolíticamente a su país y a sí mismos dentro de la rivalidad imperial durante la Guerra. El ensayo atrajo no solo críticas que problematizaban el enfoque de Nishida sobre la política (imperialismo y nacionalismo) y la justificación de la guerra, sino también comentarios positivos que apreciaban su propuesta de una visión del mundo multicultural que contrarrestara la modernidad occidental (es decir, el mundo dominado por Occidente). La traducción del ensayo no es fácil de leer, pero contiene ideas importantes sobre cómo ver el (des)orden mundial actual bajo los poderes hegemónicos.

¹ (Editor’s note) This is a commentary about the text of Nishida Kitarō ‘The Principle of the New World Order,’ written in 1944. It is published exceptionally in English (in addition to the Spanish translation) for its great interest.

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Palabras clave: Kitarō Nishida; geopolítica; filosofía japonesa; Esfera de Co-prosperidad del Asia Oriental; nuevo orden mundial.

[pt] Comentário. Nishida Kitarō e “O principio do novo ordem mundial”

Resumo. Este é um comentário sobre "O começo da nova ordem mundial", um ensaio geopolítico escrito pelo filósofo japonês Kitarō Nishida em 1944. Este ensaio tem sido uma fonte de controvérsia na controvérsia do pós-guerra sobre a justificativa filosófica da participação do Japão na Segunda Guerra Mundial e a relação entre os pensamentos japoneses e o domínio colonial ocidental na Ásia. Como um texto da geopolítica japonesa formal, o ensaio é um exemplo histórico para ilustrar como os estudiosos japoneses colocaram geopoliticamente seu país e a si mesmos na rivalidade imperial durante a Guerra. O ensaio atraiu não apenas críticas que problematizavam a abordagem de Nishida à política (imperialismo e nacionalismo) e a justificativa da guerra, mas também comentários positivos que apreciavam sua proposta de uma visão do mundo multicultural que contrariava a modernidade ocidental (ou seja, o mundo dominado pelo Ocidente). A tradução do ensaio não é fácil de ler, mas contém idéias importantes sobre como ver a (des)ordem mundial atual sob os poderes hegemônicos.

Palavras-chave: Kitarō Nishida; geopolítica; filosofia japonesa; Esfera de Co-prosperidade da Ásia Oriental; novo ordem mundial.

Summary. Introduction. 1. Nishida and the Kyoto School of Philosophy. 2. Post-modern geopolitics?. 3. Discussion. References.

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Introduction

‘The Principle of the New World Order’ (hereafter ‘The Principle’) was a lecture text with additional remarks authored by Kitarō Nishida (1870-1945, Figure 1). Nishida was a preeminent philosopher and religious thinker representing prewar Japan and Professor of Kyoto Imperial University (1910-1928). He received the Order of Cultural Merit (*Bunka Kunshō*), the highest award for cultural achievement in Japan, in 1940.

Nishida attempted to combine Eastern thoughts and Western philosophy in his *An Inquiry into the Good (Zen no kenkyū)* (Nishida, [1911] 1990) that focused on pure experience and reality. ‘Pure experience’ is the primordial state of consciousness in which the subject and the object are undifferentiated. Nishida, like William James, considered pure experience the fundamental aspect of reality. For Nishida, pure experience was the site where ‘absolute contradiction (*zettai mujun*)’, the incompatible (the subject vs. the object, the individual vs. the collective, the particular vs. the universal, etc.) is integrated. This site is called ‘an absolute place of nothingness (*zettai mu no basho*)’ and mediates absolute contradiction. The mediation of absolute contradiction is also the main framework of ‘The Principle’.

Figure 1. Kitarō Nishida (February 1943)



西田幾多郎、昭和18年2月

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The lecture on ‘The Principle’ was given in 1943 according to the request by the Research Institute of National Policy (*Kokusaku Kenkyūkai*). The Institute, a brain trust organization established in 1933, began to develop policy proposals for the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere (*Daitōa Kyōeiken*) from 1942, meaning that the Institute was connected to the Japanese government led by the Army general and Prime Minister, Hideki Tōjō. The coordinators of the lecture asked Nishida to write it down to be used for Tōjō’s speech that was planned at the Greater East Asia Conference in 1943. However, Nishida’s original essay was too difficult to understand so that the Army requested Nishida to revise it. Since Nishida refused the request, the essay was revised by the third party (Yusa, 1990; Ōhashi, 2001; Fujita, 2005). The fact that it was eventually not used by Tōjō disappointed Nishida. As Yusa (1990) and Ōhashi (2001) pointed out, the first revision is in some significant ways different from Nishida’s thoughts.³ On the other hand, according to its contents and terminologies, ‘The Principle’ can be thought to be the second revision made by Nishida himself (see also Yusa, 1990).

‘The Principle’ was written in 1944 and included in the second edition of *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* (*The Complete Works of Kitarō Nishida*) in 1966.⁴ This essay has been a source of postwar controversy over the philosophical justification of Japan’s involvement in the Second World (Asia-Pacific) War and the relationship between Japanese thoughts and Western colonial domination in Asia. As a text of Japanese formal geopolitics,⁵ ‘The Principle’ is a historical example to illustrate how Japanese academics geopolitically situated their country and themselves within the imperial rivalry during the Second World War.

1. Nishida and the Kyoto School of Philosophy

In order to understand the context of Nishida’s involvement in such political writing, it would be necessary to know the ideas of ‘a philosophy of world history (*sekaishi no tetsugaku*)’ and ‘overcoming modernity (*kindai no chōkoku*)’ promoted by the Kyoto School of Philosophy. Nishida, together with his colleague Hajime Tanabe and his students, formed the Kyoto School of Philosophy that was active until the end of the Second World War. The activities of the School in the early 1940s constituted the context of Nishida’s essay. Four of his students, Masaaki Kōsaka, Keiji Nishitani, Iwao Kōyama, and Shigetaka Suzuki, were called ‘the big four (*shitennō*)’ and played an important role in promoting the ideas of ‘a philosophy of world history’ and ‘overcoming modernity’.

‘A philosophy of world history’ was advocated mainly by Iwao Kōyama. With the rest of the big four, Kōyama attended the round-table talk titled ‘A World-Historical Position and Japan (*Sekaishi-teki tachiba to nihon*)’ that was serialized

³ The first revision is extracted in Fujita (2005). Unlike Nishida’s thoughts, the revision described the Greater East Asian War as “the holy war (*seisen*)” and praised the Tripartite Pact between Japan, Germany and Italy (see also Furuta, 1979). There are no such descriptions in the second revision (see also Yusa, 1990; Ōhashi, 2001).

⁴ *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1966), Vol. 12, pp. 426-434. The essay is also available online at https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000182/files/3668_16431.html (accessed 18 March 2019).

⁵ ‘Formal geopolitics’ is a type of geopolitical discourse that refers to the advanced geopolitical theories and visions produced by intellectuals of statecraft (Ō Tuathail, 2006: 9).

in the Japanese journal *Chuō Kōron* from 1942 to 1943. This round-table talk attempted to situate the Greater East Asian War (*Daitōa Sensō*) in the history of philosophical thoughts. Kōyama and his colleagues criticized Western modernity and colonialism and identified the mission of a state/nation (i.e. Japan/Japanese) to realize the multicultural co-existence of each state/nation's tradition based on concrete (plural) world histories. Nishida called such a multicultural world 'a world-historical world (*sekaishi-teki sekai*)'.

'Overcoming modernity' was the theme of the symposium titled 'Conference on Intellectual Collaboration (*Chiteki Kyōryoku Kaigi*)' in 1942 and the special issue published in the journal *Bungaku-kai* in 1943. Intellectuals and critics participating in the symposium discussed how to critically reflect on and overcome the West (Western modernity) that had had a tremendous impact on Japan's modernization since the Meiji era. Keiji Nishitani and Shigetaka Suzuki participated in the symposium. For the Kyoto School, overcoming western modernity was a necessary step towards the construction of a world-historical world.

Rather than Nishida himself (who retired from his university in 1928), the big four and his other students were active in promoting public awareness of the philosophical significance of the Greater East Asian War against Western powers. Philosophers in the School including Nishida were critical of military policies led by the Army (i.e. Tōjō Hideki's Cabinet), and some of them approached the Navy hoping to shift the course of politics (Ōhashi, 2001; Fujita 2005). As conflicts became tense between war-advocates in the Army and liberalists in the Navy, these philosophers made intellectual arguments to counter the proliferation of right-wing and ultranationalist thoughts connected to the Army. They believed that the government's foreign and military policies were based on parochial nationalism and self-righteous imperialism as opposed to their position of philosophical universalism.⁶ Just as they attempted to affect governmental policies through the Navy, so Nishida presented 'The Principle' to the Army, hoping to affect Tōjō's policies towards East Asia (Yusa, 1990; Ōhashi, 2001; Fujita 2005). At the same time, however, these philosophers were under constant condemnation from conservatives and nationalists supporting Tōjō Cabinet and the Army. Taking such a complex historical context into account, we can understand 'The Principle' as an *implicit* critique of imperialistic governmental policies at that time.

2. Post-modern geopolitics?

'The Principle' is short but would be hard to understand without any knowledge of 'the philosophy of world history.' As shown above, it does not seem to have been applicable to actual political practices (especially by the Army). Nishida's statements about the Emperor (*Tennō*) system and the Imperial Way (*kōdō*) also need to be carefully read.⁷ Otherwise they would be easily misunderstood as

⁶ This, however, does not mean that they were pacifists and anti-nationalists. In their secret meetings with the Navy, they expressed their views to justify the War and believed Japanese national superiority to other Asian nations (Ōhashi, 2001).

⁷ According to his other unfinished essay related to 'The Principle' (written also in 1944), Nishida was loyal to the Emperor and supportive of the Japanese Emperor system as the quintessence of Japanese history and

parochial nationalism and self-righteous imperialism, that is, Japanese exceptionalism. In this sense, unlike other protagonists of Japanese geopolitics such as Saneshige Komaki (Takagi, 1998; Shibata, 2016), Nishida proposed a vision of a new world order according to the spatial and temporal trajectory of the world. After the War, ‘The Principle’ attracted not only criticism that problematized Nishida’s approach to politics (imperialism and nationalism) and justification of the War, but also positive reviews that appreciated his proposal of a multicultural world view countering Western modernity (i.e. the world dominated by the West).⁸

The central argument Nishida made in ‘The Principle’ is to construct ‘a world-historical world (*sekaiishi-teki sekai*)’ which is different from the world dominated by the West. Nishida argued that the First World War created no other principles for world formation than an abstract notion of national self-determination. He believed that such an abstract notion could not solve historical challenges the world faced, which was proved by the outbreak of the Second World War. He maintained that each state/nation must realize its world-historical mission to construct the world-historical world in which states/nations would be united to form ‘a global world (*sekai-teki sekai*)’ while maintaining their own historical uniqueness.

For Nishida, each state/nation is established on its own historical foundation and has its own world-historical mission, which makes each a historical entity. In order for such historically unique entities to be united into the whole without losing their uniqueness, Nishida assumed an intermediate process of forming ‘a particular world (*tokushu-teki sekai*)’. In this process, each state/nation transcends itself, connects to neighboring states/nations, and follows its own regional (supra-national) tradition at the same time, leading to the establishment of non-Western worlds. Then, particular worlds thus constructed on their historical foundations would connect with each other and transform the whole world into a single global world. Nishida thought that each state/nation could retain its own historical uniqueness in such a global world and that this must become the principle of the new world order arrived as a result of the Second World War.

Another important argument Nishida made is the relationship of Japan to the process of forming a particular world in East Asia, that is, the East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere (hereafter EACS in this explanatory part, see Figure 2). East Asian nations, Nishida argued, must realize their world-historical mission and construct a particular world based on the idea of East Asian culture. Then he maintained that there must be a central player to tackle such challenges and that there was no other country than Japan to play such a role. Therefore, he suggested that the future direction of world history would be determined by the action of Japan in the East Asian War.

His statements such as these may make us think that Nishida’s prospect is no less than a version of Japanese exceptionalism. Perceiving that European imperialism had long colonized East Asian nations and deprived them of their

national polity. See the essay ‘Kokka to Kokutai (State and National Polity)’ in *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005), Vol. 11, pp. 457-461.

⁸ For the controversy over the political nature of “The Principle,” see Arisaka (1996, 1997).

world-historical mission, Nishida believed that Japan would be the only candidate to restore the mission.

Figure 2. Area of the Japan-led Greater East-Asian Co-prosperity Sphere during the Second World War



Note: Members of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere; territory controlled at maximum height. Japan and its allies in the darkest gray; occupied territories/client states in the second darkest gray. Korea, Taiwan, and Karafuto (South Sakhalin) were integral parts of Japan.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greater_Asian_Co-prosperity_sphere.png (accessed 25 August 2019).

He further justified his prospect by referring to the nature of Japan's national polity and the Imperial House. Nishida argued that the polity had been formed as a historically perpetuated national state with the Imperial House at its center and that the Imperial Way, or political practices by the emperors, embodied the inclusive principle of world formation called 'Eight corners of the world under one roof'

(*hakkō ichiu*).⁹ In other words, Nishida thought that Japan as a historical national state could carry out the world-historical mission to construct a particular world *beyond* itself according to the principle of the Imperial Way.

Unlike the historical fact that Japan acted as another empire in East Asia, of which Nishida was actually very critical (Yusa, 1990), he insisted that the formation of a global world did not contradict the preservation of each state's/nation's uniqueness. He believed that a global world could be formed by the self-realization of each state/nation. As a necessary step towards this goal and a medium between each part and the whole, he assumed a particular world (the EACS). No country within the world, he maintained, was to dominate others and make itself subject to Western powers, although the results of the War were quite contrary to his assumption.

While Nishida regarded a nation (*minzoku*) as a central vehicle for new world formation, he thought that any leader nation for the EACS would not be internationally selected but emerge historically. For him, the Japanese nation has its own moral mission and responsibility for the formation of a global world as a historical consequence. Nishida again argued that this was embodied in the Japanese national polity based on the perpetuated Imperial House and the inclusive principle of 'Eight corners of the world under one roof'. What Nishida wanted to emphasize here is not to repeat a Japanese exceptionalism that identified Japan as an empire distinguished from and superior to other Asian countries, but to redefine Japan as one of the national states having historical and cultural traditions or 'worldly-ness (*sekaisei*)' applicable to the formation of a multicultural world (Fujita, 2005: 560). It can be said from this that Nishida tried to propose a kind of formal geopolitics to counter Western modernity according to his own philosophical thoughts.

3. Discussion

As discussed above, the evaluation of the political nature of 'The Principle' remains ambivalent even today. As generally seen in criticisms against war-time geopolitics, 'The Principle' and the Kyoto School of Philosophy were considered to be academic advocates of Japanese exceptionalism and imperialism. This, however, is rather a simplistic reading in light of works that reevaluated the essay after the 1990s (Yusa, 1990; Arisaka, 1996, 1997; Ōhashi, 2001; Fujita, 2005).

On the other hand, as the author argued elsewhere (Yamazaki, 2017), there are some recent works that regard Japanese war-time geopolitics itself as an alternative to Western classical geopolitics (Sato, 2015; Shibata, 2016; see also Watanabe, 2018). Any version of the EACS could be considered an alternative to the world dominated by the West. What 'The Principle' attempted to show, however, is more than that: the construction of the EACS *as a way to* a multicultural world. Since multiculturalism or universalism implied in 'The Principle' was not put into

⁹ The term *hakkō ichiu* 八紘一宇 first appeared in *Nihon-shoki* 日本書紀, the oldest chronicles of Japan compiled in the eighth century. It originally means that the Japanese ancient dynasty was established to govern the whole country. However, the term was coined in 1903 by a Japanese religious thinker, Chigaku Tanaka, to mean a principle for the unification of the world by Japan.

practice in Japanese foreign policies, the essay indeed made a critique of Japanese imperialism.

Nevertheless, what confuses us is Nishida's cordial sentiment towards the Emperor and the Imperial House. The central status of the Japanese Emperor system in 'The Principle' is a reflection not only of his sentiment but also of its essentiality for his philosophical arguments. This also makes it harder to distinguish Nishida from other ultranationalists and has induced many criticisms of him (see Arisaka, 1996: 88-91). As mentioned above, however, Nishida and the Kyoto School were actually the target of conservative and nationalist condemnations because of their universalist and globalist philosophies (Ōhashi, 2001). It can be inferred from this that Nishida used similar terms and concepts as his opponents did to express something different.

Unlike postwar critical or alternative geopolitics (Koopman, 2011), Nishida's world view is nothing but state-centrism. For him, the state is not just a governing body but a cradle of culture and has its own historical life as a national polity.¹⁰ That is why the state was considered an indivisible component for the formation of a particular/global world in which each state (or nation to form a state) could retain its tradition. The formation of a particular world in East Asia, Nishida argued, could be initiated by Japan due to its universalistic tradition of the Emperor system.

Needless to say, the actual development of Japanese imperialism in East Asia was quite contrary to Nishida's assumption. Japanese nationalism and exceptionalism were imposed on East Asia as a pseudo-universal principle of imperialism. No practical way to avoid this situation can be found in 'The Principle'. Given the above-mentioned limits of Nishida's vision (i.e. the centrism of national state and the Emperor), it is doubtful that his geopolitical thought could have become a true alternative to Japanese exceptionalism and imperialism. Nishida, however, showed how absolute contradiction in world politics should be managed through the War. This is a geopolitical mediation between incompatible elements (i.e. national particularity and universal world order). While realist classical geopolitics basically assumes the world as inherently conflictual, Nishida at least ideationally attempted to transcend this dimension.

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¹⁰ See Nishida's statements in his unfinished essays listed in *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005), Vol. 11, p. 455, 458.

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