

# **“From Identity to Interest” for Doing History Ethically**

**ODANAKA, Naoki (Tohoku University, Japan)**

Comment on the evening session “History and Ethics”

Int.Conf.Hist.Sci.2015 (Jinan, China, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2015)

Good evening all. I would like to make 3 comments on the talk of Mathias Middell.

One, introducing ethical dimension into the doing of history, i.e. historical research, historical education, and historical everyday practice, is necessary, when we see the actual situation surrounding it all over the world. Take my country, i.e. Japan, as an example.

Two, conceptualizing ethics which could be called transnational, global, or worlded, etc., would be difficult, as long as we look at the history from the post-modernist viewpoint or framework, which attach much importance to such and such identities, and are thus caught in the so-called “politics of identity.”

Three, in order to avoid this tragic trap, we should turn to the dimension of interest, talking about, grasping, or analyzing the history at the level and framework of the “politics of interest.”

Let me explain these 3 points a little more precisely and concretely.

## **1.**

I agree with Mathias Middell on the diagnostic that history, at least not-national history (world, transnational, or global history on the one side, and local or individual history on the other side) are facing the pressure from the supporters of nation-state, nationalism, and national history. I would like to say, in this sense, history is

somehow in the crisis, especially at the level of “praxis.”

Take high-school history education in Japan as an example. Since some decades, so-called World History course has been obligatory in Japanese public and private high-schools. KABAYAMA, Koichi, Japanese leading historian of European medieval culture who played a crucial role in introducing this policy, insisted that learning World History is very important for it could widen the consciousness and vision of the youth who would bear the future.

Our actual government, however, has just started to change this policy, aiming at making Japanese History course obligatory instead of World History one. But why? Because our government regards that learning our own national history could and would contribute to strengthening the national or nationalist sentiment of the youth. Me too, I think that knowing his or her own country’s history is also important, but, should its purpose be to serve nationalist politics like that? I don’t think so.

## 2.

According to the Ethics textbook, Ethics mean a system of norms common to the members of a community, taken to be universal there. It means that each ethics correspond to one community. If so, in the age of globalization when we are seeing global community (the Globe as a community) emerging, conceptualizing the global ethics is possible and maybe necessary.

But what is going on in reality? As for me, I could find no global ethics, seeing cultural, social, or political exclusivist trend on the one hand, and economic globalist trend on the other hand. These two trends are not contrary to each other: rather they articulated in a certain (curious, and lamentable for me) manner, merging into something which could be called “exclusivist globalization/globalized exclusivism.”

Globalization, which pretends to be universal, could be exclusive. It distinguishes the “In/Inner” and the “Out/Outer,” promoting the confrontation between the two, which leads to the exclusivism on both sides. At the same time, exclusivism, which seems to be anti-universal, could be global. For example, gated communities, the USA-born really exclusive lifestyle, has spread all over the world, i.e. globalized, hasn’t it?

If so, we have to pose a question: Why is it hard to find global or globalized ethics? My answer is: Because we are tending to regard and to grasp the history at the level or dimension of identity, heavily influenced by the post-modernism.

Post-modernism could be defined in many ways, but one of which is “a stance of grasping the world at the level of identity.” It classifies anything in the world, each person for example, according to its own identity, consequently dividing the time-space into identity-based communities.

Take social movements for example in order to understand the impact of post-modernism. In 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, social movements, represented by labor movements, were regarded as actors of the “politics of interest.” Labor movements defended the interest of laborers, confronted to capitalists’ interest. After 1968, however, we saw the emergence of “new social movements” all over the world. Post-modernist (according to my definition) social scientists such as Alain Touraine or Anthony Giddens characterized them as “the politics of identity” oriented. Their argument suggested that the observers or analyzers of social movement began to grasp it, not at the level of “the politics of interest” but at that of the “politics of identity.”

The problem of the “politics of identity” lies in the fact that it could rarely arrive at a compromise, making the conflict over it perpetual and difficult to solve. An identity is a mark which distinguishes the “In/Inner” and the “Out/Outer,” incommensurable with any other one. Identity-based communities, such as gender/sex, race, nation, religion, etc., have a common feature of closeness and exclusiveness to the “Out/Outer.”

This fact leads us to a conclusion that, as long as the “politics of identity” is dominant in the real and intellectual world, it would be a hard task to conceptualize any ethics which are global, i.e. universal for the Globe as a community.

As for us historians, we too are committing to the “politics of identity” at the intellectual level, contributing to the intensification and the lengthening or perpetuation of conflicts over identities. Sharing the shift of viewpoint from the “politics of interest” to the “politics of identity,” we have eagerly depicted the history of such and such identity. Typical are, as you know well, feminist historians.

That is why I would like to claim that, if we historians want to do the history committed to globalizing ethics, we ought to go beyond the criticism of the national history. We need to make clear that the “politics of identity” and, beyond that, the act of grasping the world at the level of identity in itself matter, and that we also need to do the history based on the practice of grasping the world at the other level than that of identity.

Then how?

### **3.**

I propose to introduce (or rather we should say: to return to) the viewpoint or framework of the “politics of interest” in doing history. At the level of interest, as I told, we could arrive at a certain compromise and stop, at least temporally, the conflict among communities.

This compromise, I hope, would and could lead to the emergence of universal, i.e. global ethics, even though the community as their basis rests not totally universal or global. We historians could in this way contribute to make ethics more universal and global at the intellectual level, couldn't we?

Thank you for your attention.