

Interview with Dr. Yasushi Watanabe, Professor of the Faculty of Environment & Information Studies (Shonan Fujisawa), Keio University

What Is Caucasian Nationalism, a Key Feature of American Politics?

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

Prof. Yasushi Watanabe at Keio University in Japan is an expert on contemporary American politics and culture. In the following interview, he discusses the cultural background of American nationalism, which some regard as a driving force for protectionism in the United States.

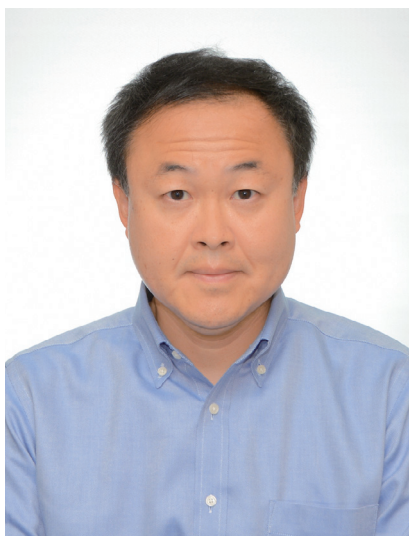
(Interviewed on Oct. 27, 2021)

Anti-Globalization

JS: Looking at the views of nationalists in the US advocating for an “America First” agenda, anti-globalization seems to be the core thought of this group. What do you think is the background of this?

Watanabe: The economic background is the structural change in the US economy caused by the transfer of factories from the US overseas under globalization for efficiency of production. This resulted in hollowing out of US industries which robbed the American working class of job opportunities and increased income inequality between the poor and the wealthy. The working class in the US started looking at globalization in a negative light due to this. Until recently, moderate centrists in the US, regardless of whether they are Republican or Democrat, had generally led the economy and society to get along with globalization, recognizing its benefits. They are the so-called establishment. But now there are strong objections and criticisms of the establishment among working-class people in particular. Politically, on the left there are people like Bernie Sanders and on the right people like Donald Trump, both of whom are severely critical of the political elites that have led the country so far. Their attacks on the elites also have another background: their growing concern about the possible degeneration of the core culture of Caucasians due to globalization and increased racial diversity.

JS: There seem to be not only economic reasons but also cultural reasons for the rise of nationalism. Not only have poor working-class Caucasian people in the so-called Rust Belt region been allegedly robbed



Dr. Yasushi Watanabe

of job opportunities by immigrants but also some intellectuals and elites seem to share the concern about the possible degeneration of Caucasian culture and have come to oppose globalization.

Watanabe: Yes, anti-globalization, anti-elitism and anti-establishment sentiment is spreading among a variety of people. The working class is more vociferously advocating for radical political action against the establishment. But there are some in the US advocating actively for more nationalist policies with theoretical and rational arguments. They are eager to present their views based on theory in intellectual seminars or discussions.

Caucasian Nationalism

JS: Do these nationalistic intellectuals insist on Christian values?

Watanabe: Yes. Caucasian nationalism certainly considers being Caucasian as important, but in fact most Caucasians are Christians of one sort or another and thus one of their core messages is that Christianity must be the basis of their society. As a result, they tend to consider the large number of Muslim immigrants as a menace to their society.

JS: Even in the 1980s, such Caucasian nationalism existed and there were many intellectuals even then worrying about the possible collapse of good American traditions, so this is not quite new.

Watanabe: I think we can see its beginning even at the time of the Civil War. When the Confederacy was defeated in the Civil War, many Caucasians then, overwhelmingly Christian, worried about the collapse of the old and traditional society in the South. Their worries led to the birth of the Ku Klux Klan, a political group of White supremacists, right after the end of the Civil War. This group was founded principally by ex-soldiers of the defeated army of the South. Since then, there had been some surges in such political actions but another major surge of Caucasian nationalism was observed during the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

In the 1980s when US President Ronald Reagan proclaimed that the US should return to “the old and good America” – meaning a Caucasian-centered society – the antipathy against not only black people but also Hispanics coming into the US from Latin American nations over the Mexican border was growing. Reagan cut social welfare spending to restore the public finances, but even this policy was interpreted as a means to preserve the interests of Caucasians by cutting expenditure on which many non-Caucasians were heavily dependent in their daily lives, since the government could not discriminate against non-Caucasians explicitly. So yes, it is true that there was a negative reaction against diversifying America even in the 1980s. At that time, the percentage of Caucasians in the total American population was around 85%, but now it is a little less than 60%. American Caucasians are increasingly concerned about this declining trend.

Meanwhile, minority peoples aggressively contest any alleged discrimination by race, religion or gender. Their claims quickly spread now via SNS and fatally damage the social credibility of those engaged in such alleged discriminatory behavior. For example, the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton was forced to be renamed The Princeton School of Public and International Affairs after it was widely alleged that President Woodrow Wilson had once behaved as a racist. Even Thomas Jefferson and George Washington are now also victims of such allegations. A statue of Jefferson was attacked and damaged. In responding to these radical minorities’ provocations, Caucasian nationalists raised their concerns about their core culture and the nation’s foundation being destroyed. President Donald Trump ingeniously took advantage of these concerns.

JS: If Caucasian nationalists respect social homogeneity and coherence, do they consider Japanese society ideal?

Watanabe: Yes, I think the majority of them would value Japan’s homogenous society and economic prosperity based on it.

JS: It is certainly true that the increasing number of immigrants under globalization will be difficult to integrate well into a host nation’s society in terms of both economy and culture. Is Caucasian nationalism

a reaction against the rapid increase in immigrants?

Watanabe: Certainly. Not only in the US but also in the United Kingdom, the rapid increase in immigrants is a threat to the domestic labor force in terms of job opportunities. This is one of the driving forces behind anti-globalization sentiment. Japan should learn about their experiences in opening its own labor market to supplement the declining labor force due to aging and depopulation. One of the key lessons is how to maintain a moderate pace of immigration to avoid social and political conflict caused by a rapid and massive inflow of immigrant labor. In particular, the concentration of immigrant workers into specific sectors or regions would increase the risk of political turmoil. Prudence and discretion must be exercised in accepting immigrants to avoid a backlash. It is also important to build on the positive outcomes of accepting immigrants in society by demonstrating that a steady and appropriate flow of immigrants would not be costly but crucial human resources for revitalizing and enriching not only the economy but also social culture.

JS: On the question of religion, is anti-Semitism is another background factor in Caucasian nationalism?

Watanabe: It is true that there are some Caucasian nationalists for whom Christianity is a supreme value and they are hostile to Islam or Judaism as being anti-Christianity. They are preoccupied with the notion that Jews all over the world are closely connected and ruling over global finance or the media and are thus the driving force for globalization, accelerating the deterioration of traditional American values. They tend to look at Jews as a symbol of globalization threatening to damage their culture, and this is nothing but prejudice.

Mitigating Nationalism

JS: How can we mitigate such Caucasian nationalism in order to maximize the merits of globalization and distribute them inclusively among all nations, an important economic policy goal? How can Americans overcome this tribalism?

Watanabe: I guess that at the root of tribalism there must be a conviction that they are the victims of globalization from which their opponents are benefitting. They are spreading out this belief on social media, which widens social divisions. It is a challenge to restore social coherence in this divided and incoherent democratic society. We have never seen it in American history so far.

I think that unless there is a big national crisis, just as with the rise of extreme National Socialism in Germany born from a similar social divide that led to the tragedy of World War II, this will not end. I

thought that the pandemic would be such a national crisis reuniting society beyond political confrontation around short-term national interests. But in reality it has ended up widening this social divide in the US. We cannot be optimistic about fixing it in the future.

Assuming this is the issue that needs to be resolved over the long term, first of all we could mitigate it by achieving inclusive growth in which all of us are beneficiaries and not victims of the global economy. High growth and equal distribution of income would be a good solution. Secondly, political leaders at least should refrain from provoking social divisions. Thirdly, I think it will be necessary to have a social venue or platform for dialogue among the divided groups of people to achieve mutual understanding.

JS: As such platforms, could local communities play an important role in restoring social coherence with enhanced communications among diversified groups?

Watanabe: In general, in local communities, daily communication among individual human beings would stop them from discriminating against each other by race or religion or whatever, as each community member would identify each other as an individual neighbor. Relations among neighbors could certainly mitigate social divisions, as each individual must get along with the other individuals in the local community to have a happy life there regardless of their race or religion. In a local community, nobody would avoid talking or shaking hands with their black or Hispanic neighbors. However, it is a different story when they start thinking about a bigger issue like the future of American society. They would tend to start thinking about race, religion, gender and the other categorical issues and not about individuals in a local community. This is a difficult part of this issue.

JS: A question on soft power. US-Japan relations have significantly improved these past decades mostly due to both nations' policy efforts in the domain of trade and economy. But long-term personal relations among people such as American English teachers and their Japanese students would also work as well in ameliorating relations between the nations in the long run. Could such personal relations mitigate hostility based on racial or religious prejudice?

Watanabe: Yes, they could do. US-Japan relations have been greatly ameliorated by a wide range of human relations between Americans and Japanese through English lessons or the US military bases in Japan. In addition, Japanese pop culture, food or athletes have made Americans feel closer to real personalities in Japan. Thus their psychological barriers to the Japanese have been significantly reduced. These cultural contacts have played a big role in improving foreign relations.

JS: To distribute the merits of globalization among as many people as possible, a US-China "cold war" must be prevented, as these superpowers' arbitrary unilateralism would make rules useless and discourage growth of trade and investment. To achieve a rules-based system in trade and investment, we would need to restore the functions of the WTO or revitalize regional FTAs, but nationalism or tribalism could work to the disadvantage of such a system. However, the economic growth encouraged by this rules-based trade system could achieve income equality and inclusivity, which would be good news for those nationalists lamenting about the widening income gap due to globalization. How can we make more convincing arguments for the merits of rules-based international trade?

Watanabe: The rise of nationalism in the US was certainly a factor in the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). For a while, it is unlikely the US will return to this regional trade system. Unless we can present a convincing case for the merits of this rules-based system exceeding its costs or risks to American voters, particularly those of the middle class, it will be difficult to assume that the US will rejoin the TPP or any other multilateral trade system.

At this moment, China seems keen on joining the TPP, though it is not clear how serious it is, but if China joins it, the US reluctance to rejoin may eventually see the US lose the benefits of international trade and this would also be undesirable in terms of national security. If our arguments are more convincing, then the US may be ready to rejoin it. But at this moment, it is not the time for the US to do so.

JS: Most Asian countries are keen on rules-based trade regimes and European nationalism does not seem to be as strong as in the US. So it would probably be possible to expand alliances among these nations and thus we could consolidate a trade regime in which the US would lose significant benefits unless it was a part of it. This could work to convince the US of the utility of a rules-based trade regime.

Watanabe: Yes. The US is generally a nation convinced of the utility of free trade. However, the TPP is not to be a trade regime from which the US can benefit. That is the logic behind its withdrawal. The key question is what trade regime would serve US national interests in their own interpretation.

JS: Are American voters in general annoyed at even the mention of international trade?

Watanabe: It is certainly true that most of them are very concerned about the possible erosion of traditional American society due to globalization led by political elites in the establishment. On the other hand, I think the overwhelming majority of them consider the US-China decoupling of supply chains unrealistic and impossible to be achieved in this age where economic interdependency cannot be eliminated. Many voters must be engaged in international trade and believe in its benefits if done fairly, and in particular if trade with China were done by transparent rules. They worry about China's geopolitical intentions in promoting trade and investment.

Future Prospects for Caucasian Nationalism

JS: Caucasian nationalism is deeply rooted in American society and not easy to eliminate. Could it remain as it is for a while and continue to destabilize the global economy?

Watanabe: At this moment, the percentage of the Caucasian population in the US is around 60% and by 2045 the percentage of the non-Caucasian population will be 60%. So we are now at a critical moment when the percentages of population are becoming equal between Caucasians and non-Caucasians. In such a period of transition, there is growing hostility toward each other in both groups. Both reactions are increasingly radical. This situation, I guess, will continue for another two or three decades. We Japanese must face the US as such, and change our thinking about the Americans from pro-globalization and open to immigrants to more inward-looking.

However, one thing is to be noted. In the US population by age, the population under 40 years old is now growing and has become the majority of the voters. Those that we call Millennials are characterized as extremely open to diversity or globalization. They are open to the human rights of the LGBT groups or immigrants, and as they grow in the population, the US will be divided between Caucasian nationalism and more open-minded Millennials. I think this conflict between the two would continue for a while. We are now entering an age where you cannot talk about America as a whole – there will be two “Americas”, one pursuing economic nationalism with inward-looking policies and the other keeping significant openness. We will need to watch both.

JS: China seems likely to pursue an aggressive nationalism for another two or three decades as well. This means the US-China cold war will continue for a while with a high risk of collision.

Watanabe: There will be long-term competition between the two, and it could have the aspect of strong and critical confrontation. But the US and China would also have to collaborate with each other in dealing with global challenges like climate change or the pandemic.

US-China relations would have diverse aspects.

As globalization proceeds, nostalgia for each nation's past glories is growing. China, once unfairly exploited by various other nations, would hope to restore the old “Great China”, while the US may continue to pursue “America First” policies with nostalgia for its golden age of the 1950s. In Europe as well, national identity is now associated with nostalgia for the most glorious epoch for each nation. We are now at a critical moment to prevent such sentiments from provoking any irreparable incidents. In our age, the most crucial challenge is how to deal with national identity and pride or nostalgia for a nation's golden age in an era of globalization and how to reconcile them with economic interests.

JS: Could common global challenges like the pandemic or climate change mitigate possible conflicts between nations? In particular, the climate change issue will continue for a long time, but could it work to mitigate serious confrontations?

Watanabe: It is possible that the climate change issue will work in that direction, as it is now a big global challenge for all nations and they would have an incentive to collaborate with each other. Assuming that the environment itself could be a business opportunity, that could be another incentive to work together to get business benefits. However, other common global challenges like space or the oceans have a different story. For example, in the age of a digital economy, the satellite business will be another battleground for the superpowers, since digital communication is now done through space.

JS: Globalization itself could stop nationalism eventually. A US-China decoupling would not be realistic in terms of business perspectives or economic rationale. As most people learn about this, would nationalism lose its strength?

Watanabe: The pandemic has temporarily slowed down the pace of globalization. After the pandemic is over, the speed of globalization could be restored and mutual economic interdependency will continue to be strengthened. Virtual currencies are starting to be used today beyond borders. I think in this regard that globalization cannot be stopped. A little slowing down or partial correction of globalization would be possible, but in general it would continue to go on as it is. With national interests embedded in such growing economic interdependency, I hope that radical nationalism would be checked, as it could prove detrimental even to the nationalists as well.

JS

Written by Naoyuki Haraoka, editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, with the assistance of TapeRewrite Cooperation.