

AMERICANS VERSUS JAPANESE AMERICANS: A NEW HISTORICIST PERSPECTIVE OF THE WORLD WAR II PERIOD

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Abstract: As the title suggests, the present paper is concerned with analyzing the 1940s, a crucial period in American history. Because this research is mainly theoretical, one could claim that it introduces three important figures in the fields of philosophy, literature and history namely Michel Foucault, Stephen Greenblatt and Hayden White. While each of them play significant parts in discussions regarding new historicism, the paper will prove that by taking a look at the World War II period one could consider the American history a history comprised of a multitude of stories due to its numerous perspectives that influenced the flow of events. The paper will also look into articles and books belonging to writers of both American and Japanese descent. Donna K. Nagata, Akira Iriye, James C. McNaughton and William R. Nester are only four writers who discuss the Japanese experience during the World War II period. Accordingly, the paper will prove that the Japanese American experience from the 1940s is closely connected to the interpretation of power relations and history, to the ideology of the time and, last but not least, to different kinds of discourses.

Keywords: discourse, knowledge, new historicism, power, World War II

The present research paper aims at connecting and discussing the 1940s from a new historicist perspective, thus focusing not only on definitions and concepts, but also on presenting various perspectives concerning the World War II period. More exactly, the following pages comprise of two parts, a first one presenting and discussing definitions, key concepts and books that helped in creating a theoretical background for the critical approach of new historicism and a second one which analyses excerpts from different books that focus on representations of power depicted in the World War II period. While the paper introduces three important figures in the fields of philosophy, literature and history namely Michel Foucault, Stephen Greenblatt and Hayden White, it also brings to light interpretations of various writers interested in both Japanese and American perspectives on a crucial period in world's history.

This analysis began right after the reading of Paul Hamilton's book, *Historicism*, where a rather intriguing approach was mentioned, namely the new historicism. Even if this book is more about understanding and applying historicist approaches to different studies, it is also sensible to understand the distinction and yet the correlation between past and present. When thinking about the relationship between past and present, Hamilton considers that "both past and present have to remain separate so that one can question the other, and so that a 'fusion of horizons', making possible agreement and disagreement, can take place".¹ Hence, one needs to detach himself/herself from past events in order to understand former actions with present results. Additionally, one finds it crucial to make a clear distinction between past and present, because one cannot speak about what it is without understanding the episodes and developments that took place at a certain time. More importantly, when mentioning the difference between old historicism and the new one, Hamilton states that "current new historicism distinguishes itself by its heightened consciousness of criticism's institutional

¹ Hamilton, Paul. *Historicism*. New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 94.

past, and of how its methodological changes might have served particular cultural interests".² Unfortunately, only 12 pages are dedicated to new historicism in which Hamilton briefly presents this critical approach. Even if *Historicism* may be thought to represent the main introduction into literary studies, it would have been more interesting if his analysis would have included a more in depth analysis of texts seen through the lenses of new historicism.

Nevertheless, there are other books which could help in a better understanding of new historicism and its implications. One may start with Brannigan's *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* not only because it is an easy reading, but also because in the first part it constantly makes references to the founders of this critical approach while the second part is concerned with analyzing different texts from new historicist points of view. In the theoretical part John Brannigan claims that "new historicists have made the study of literature in relation to history less a matter of supplying incontrovertible historical facts as background information to illuminate the themes, forms and contents of literary texts, and more a matter of addressing the role that discourse, including literature, plays in negotiating and making manifest the power relations and structures of a culture".³ To put it differently, new historicism mainly focuses on the purpose of literature as being a representation of different kinds of discourses and different manifestations of power seen through the lenses of a particular culture.

Additionally, Brannigan explains that new historicists put emphasis on everyday stories which have been neglected in favor of "major battles, lines of monarchical succession and honoured heroes and leaders".⁴ To be more precise, one should be able to tell and analyze hidden histories which at first sight seem to bare little or no importance. For these main reasons, Japanese Americans could be part of new historicist criticism simply because during the 1940s, not only their opinions but also their lives have been neglected in favor of painful stereotypes which widened the gap between Japanese and Americans alike. However, before attempting to analyze the neglected and marginalized lives and culture of Japanese Americans, one finds it of great importance to briefly indicate important figures when talking about the approach of new historicism.

For these reasons it is only sensible to first mention Stephen Greenblatt who is considered to be the founder of new historicism due to his selection of key terms and his definitions of new historicism. In the introduction of *Practicing New Historicism* both Greenblatt and Gallagher rightfully recognize that new historicism "is concerned with finding the creative power that shapes literary works *outside* the narrow boundaries in which it had hitherto been located, as well as *within* those boundaries".⁵ Additionally, in his study "Introduction. The Forms of Power", he states that new historicism "challenges the assumptions that guarantee a secure distinction between 'literary foreground' and 'political background', or, more generally between artistic production and other kinds of social production".⁶ To put it differently, Stephen Greenblatt's view is that a literary work is shaped by collective beliefs, social practices and cultural discourses which leave traces in a work of literature and connect it to the extra-textual representational systems of the culture in which it is embedded. Thus Greenblatt proves that a text may be analyzed from a new historicist point of view taking into consideration practices, structures and, more importantly, the kinds of discourse used specifically for a certain culture. Greenblatt also believes that any kind of

² Hamilton, Paul. *Ibidem*. p. 153.

³ Brannigan, John. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998. p. 81.

⁴ Brannigan, John. *Ibidem*. p.35.

⁵ Gallagher, Catherine, and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000. p. 12.

⁶ Greenblatt, Stephen. "Introduction. The Forms of Power". *Genre* 7 (1982): 3-6. p. 6

work goes through cultural negotiations, transactions and exchanges, his reading being mainly concerned with power and the way it maintains itself through representation. Moreover, if we were to accept Greenblatt's definition of new historicism (or better put cultural poetics) which says that it is the "study of the collective making of distinct cultural practices and inquiry into the relations among these practices"⁷, then we should reflect on certain actions that help in understanding cultural practices: first and foremost, one needs a practitioner to talk about practices in a culture, then the practitioner needs to explain how cultural practices were formed due to a collective effort, and only after that the practitioner needs to make connections with other practices that belong to other cultures, he/she needs to discuss the differences between them.

A second equally important figure for the present analysis is Michel Foucault who contributed to the formation of new historicism and mainly analyzed the relationship between power and knowledge. His works bring to the fore certain key terms that will be present or even being referred to when talking about new historicism. First, one should emphasize the concept of **new history** which refers to the history of thoughts, of science and of philosophy, but not from proper history because proper history "appears to be abandoning the irruption of events in favor of stable structures".⁸ In other words, new history seeks to determine the relations between different fields of study and at the same time it refers to distinct ways of correlating the dominance between them. Another equally important term is **power** which usually refers "to the relations of domination and resistance which saturate our social, political and cultural relations, but it can also refer to the ways in which power is a productive, even pleasurable, part of our existence".⁹ A third concept is **discourse** and it refers to statements, texts and relationships that work together in order to form practices and fields of study in society. Discourse can be seen and analyzed from various fields of study. For instance, one could refer to the four main parts of a discourse: exposition, narration, description and argument. However one could talk also about political, literary (poetic, expressive and transactional) discourse. Another term, this time discussed by John Brannigan is **after-history** and it is believed to refer not to the end of history, but to what we might clumsily call **post-new-historicism**. After- or **post-history** is a concept that sees history not only coming to an end, but also losing its unity, in this way dissolving into a multiplicity of histories.¹⁰

While Greenblatt is the one who first defined and worked with new historicist concepts being inspired by Foucault's ideas of power and knowledge, Hayden White is the historian who managed to join both history and literature in this way proving that history is written with the tools of a literary writer, hence being able to use the traditional means of a narrative (introduction, plot, character conclusion etc) in order to create a story. His theory mainly revolves around the idea that when discussing the literary dimension of history, one needs to use the traditional devices of a narrative in order to give meaning to past events. Even if, there are some historians who do not agree with him, Hayden White also claims that history mainly gains its power from the act of introducing historical events in ordinary stories, which take their shape from **emplotment** i.e. the process through which the facts contained in chronicles are encoded as components of plots.¹¹ He further claims that no historical event

⁷ Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Oxford: Oxford University press, 1988. p. 5.

⁸ Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1989. p. 6.

⁹ Brannigan, John. *Ibidem*. p. 15.

¹⁰ Brannigan, John. *Ibidem*. p. 204.

¹¹ White, Hayden V. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973. p. 7.

can itself constitute a story; it can only be presented as such from a particular historian's point of view. Interestingly enough, in his *Metahistory* Hayden White mentions the term **poetics of history** which may, at some extent, be analyzed in comparison with Greenblatt's **cultural poetics**. If poetics of history may include references to historical knowledge as a mode of existence, cultural poetics is more preoccupied with how subjective or objective history is, in this way viewing history as only one way of thinking about the world.

Taking the already mentioned key terms and definitions into consideration, one could agree to the fact that the critical approach of new historicism can be applied to the field of ethnic studies, more exactly to Japanese American studies. One reason would be to look at the American history as a history comprised of a multitude of stories due to its numerous cultures that influenced the flow of events. Being a multicultural country, the history of the United States does not only belong to the ones born and raised on American soil, but also to the ones who emigrated and remained on the New World's territory. A second reason would be to analyze the Japanese Americans' lives prior, during and after their relocation camps experiences. In this way, one could not doubt that for an accurate new historicist analysis, texts of all kinds should be gathered and discussed taking into consideration the general things known about World War II.

In *Power and Culture: The Japanese American War 1941-1945*, Akira Iriye is mainly concerned with defining power in terms of military strength, realism and geographical position. While wondering if both the United States and Japan had similar views of the world, the author puts a great amount of emphasis on both power and culture. However, together with America's involvement in the Asian war, the Japanese felt united behind the national purpose of devotion and universal sacrifice.¹² Interestingly enough, Akira Iriye claims that "in order to live as they wished to live and preserve their cultural identity, both Japanese and Americans were impelled to pay attention to external events and to become conscious of each other, symbolically as well as physically. They had no choice but to fight".¹³ It is clear that both countries were more concerned with stability rather than revolutionizing the region, since Japan was convinced that the Anglo-American powers were looking to enslave the Asian people, while America was trying to intervene first in the European war and after that in the pan-Asian one.

Interestingly enough, as the war years passed, the roles of Japan and United States were somehow reversed when discussing the Chinese territory. If at the beginning, Japan proved to be willing to control China and all the remaining territories in Asia, during the World War II years they hinted at a possible withdrawal, while the United States was threatening to give up their position of protecting China. One could add that "although these developments did not spell a Japanese-American convergence on the China question, they indicated an interesting, although unintended, reversal of roles in the two countries' respective approaches to China. Japan was lessening its pressures while the United States was becoming more deeply involved in Chinese political affairs".¹⁴ To put it differently, in 1944 the US began to gradually end their cooperation with China in the hope of not getting involved in the Chinese internal affairs between the Communists and the Nationalists. Nevertheless, together with the Potsdam declaration, the US was hoping to demilitarize and democratize Japan, in this way setting an example of a culture being able to influence military power.

¹² Iriye, Akira. *Power and Culture: The Japanese American War 1941-1945*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981. p. 37.

¹³ Iriye, Akira. *Ibidem*. p. 37.

¹⁴ Iriye, Akira. *Ibidem*. p. 159-60.

In a similar way, William Nester's *American Power, the New World Order and the Japanese Challenge* analyzes the relations between the United States and Japan thus focusing on the successes and shortcomings of both countries. It is notable that a very important term makes itself visible in this book, namely **power**. Nester views it as an economic factor that is in a close connection with technology. At the beginning of his work, he even claims that:

Power is the ability to get others to do things they normally would not do. Powerful states are those which shift the outcomes of conflicts in their favor. States achieve power by mobilizing all their available human and natural resources toward realizing their objectives in any given conflict. A state's power is always relative to that possessed by other states. Power resources and the distribution of power among states vary greatly from one issue and relationship to another, while the outcomes of each are seldom certain. Outcomes depend on how skillfully each state involved in a given conflict mobilizes all its potential resources. [...] Power is thus a relative concept which involves both outcomes and resources. A state's actual power at any given time can only be measured by the outcomes of the conflicts in which it is involved; until then power is only potential.¹⁵

Clearly, Nester explains the concept of power within a state which to some extent is similar to Foucault's own interpretation of power. One plausible reason for relating it to Foucault is that Nester views it as a source of omnipresence. By playing along with power relations one can have complete control over other less significant matters. However, in the case of World War II, one could easily agree to the fact that the United States was able to gain power as a result of being a state which managed to have and maintain economic control. When talking about both economic power and the conflicts that may have arisen together with it, Nester cites John Jackson and William Davey who claim that "World War II was the watershed in American foreign policy - Washington finally assumed a global political role commiserate with its vast economic power. No state has ever held greater relative power than the United States immediately after World War II".¹⁶

Even if Akira Iriye and William Nester's books are not so much about Japanese Americans, but about Japanese and Americans, one can still make certain connections between the power struggles presented here and the ones experienced by Japanese Americans in concentration camps. For instance, in the preface of *Legacy of Injustice: Exploring the Cross-Generational Impact of the Japanese American Internment*, Donna Nagata recounts a personal experience at the age of 6, when she first came into contact with the word 'camp' and she mistakenly associated it with a summer camp. Instead her mother was talking about the relocation camp where she was forced to spend part of her life. Nagata also claims that:

It was not until high school that I began to understand the significance of the word, that *camp* referred to a World War II American concentration camp, not a summer camp. Much later I learned that the silence surrounding discussions about this traumatic period of my parents' lives was a phenomenon characteristic not only of my family but also of most other Japanese American families after the war.¹⁷

Clearly this excerpt is about the power of the word 'camp' and its different meanings. If for the author it represented a place where students relax and enjoy themselves, for the mother, just like any other Japanese American, it was tantamount to her darkest period in life, one she could not even talk about. This quote could also make a difference between the power

¹⁵ Nester, William R. *American Power, the New World Order and the Japanese Challenge*. London: Macmillan, 1993. p. 18.

¹⁶ Nester, William R. *Ibidem*. p. 72.

¹⁷ Nagata, Donna K. *Legacy of Injustice: Exploring the Cross-Generational Impact of the Japanese American Internment*. New York: Plenum, 1993. p. vii.

institutions usually have on students and the one a society has over individuals considered aliens in the American space.

Another book relevant for the present analysis is *Nisei Linguistics: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service during World War II* by James McNaughton, which tells the story of second generation Japanese Americans being recruited by the American Military Intelligence Service in order to serve in the war against Japan. In his review of the already mentioned book, Stephen Mercado rightfully considers that “McNaughton relates not only Nisei triumphs but their hardships and handicaps as well. Many were recruited or conscripted for military service from behind the barbed wire of internment camps where their families remained confined”.¹⁸ To put it differently, even if Japanese Americans were considered enemies of the American society, the ones who mastered the Japanese language were recruited and used for war purposes. This is just another example of a society exercising power over weak individuals who at first sight played insignificant roles in the war, but proved to be valuable for the success of the United States. By being a major source of power, the American society succeeded in shifting its conflicts with the Japanese in its favor. One can further add that in this case power is seen as both effective and productive.

Although there would be many other things related to the World War II period which need to be mentioned, this paper was only meant to provide a very brief introduction into the ways in which the 1940s could be analyzed from a new historicist point of view. These brief comments on books related to World War II only prove that there were indeed clashes between the United States and Japan not necessarily because of the different ideas encountered in each society, but rather because of the similarities between them and the power struggles present in each nation. One could only add that similar representations of power can be encountered in Japanese American writings (fiction, non-fiction and even drama) due to the fact that there are many scenes which focus on the oppression of societies and institutions over weak individuals. Hopefully, this research paper has demonstrated that works concerning both Japanese and Americans focus not only on the cultural differences that define the individual as a part of a certain society, but also on the discussion of both American and Japanese perspectives regarding World War II and its outcomes. Taking all these aspects into consideration, one could agree with the fact that various fields of study (history, sociology and anthropology) can be analyzed and at the same time integrated into one approach, in this way proving that power relations, ideology and discourse still occupy a central position in society, in this case the American one.

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¹⁸ Mercado, Stephen C. “Nisei Linguistics: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service during World War II” Rev. of *Nisei Linguistics: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service during World War II*. *Studies in Intelligence*. 52.4 (2008): 23-27. p. 25.

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