From Relational Identity to Specific Identity: On Equality and Nationality

Naoki Sakai

If it is necessary to include in the structural conditions (both symbolic and institutional) of modern racism the fact that the societies in which racism develops are at the same time supposed to be ‘egalitarian’ societies, in other words, societies which (officially) disregard status differences between individuals, this sociological thesis (advanced most notably by L. Dumont) cannot be abstracted from the national environment itself. In other words, it is not the modern state which is “egalitarian” but the modern (nationalist) nation-state, this equality having as its internal and external limits the national community and, as its essential content, the acts which signify it directly (particularly universal suffrage and political “citizenship”). It is, first and foremost, an equality in respect of nationality.

ÉTIENNE BALIBAR (Racism and Nationalism)

I

The question I want to address in this chapter is related to the problem of how to conceptualize social justice independently of the aesthetics of nationality; or in other words, how to put forth the idea of equality against the social imaginary of the national body or kokutai (國體). In short, I am concerned with the problems of social justice and equality outside of the scope of modern national community. Of course, my question requires some explanation.

Let me start my inquiry into equality and nationality by pointing out the topic of fairness that is often mentioned when social justice is discussed. We cannot address the question of fairness independently of a particular type of social formation in which we live, for to accept that justice means fairness is to take a step toward a commitment to equality and to the kind of universalism
that implies: we are all equal qua human beings. We are not talking about fairness in a social formation in which human beings are identified in terms of their ranks and statuses. So my starting point is to recognize that we live in a social formation whose legitimacy consists in the principle that every human being ought to be regarded as equal.

However, who are these human beings who ought to be regarded as equal? Who are these human beings among whom the universalism of equality is accepted? Of course, it is ‘we’ who are entitled to be treated as equal, but, by ‘we,’ I assume the situation of the symposium from which the chapters in this volume emerge, where the shifter ‘we’ unambiguously designates Jun’ichi Isomae, Daniel Botsman, James Ketelaar, Peter Nosco, and other participants who live in a variety of places—Kyoto, Chicago, Tokyo, New Haven, Ithaca, Vancouver, and so forth—but in each of these places, it is taken for granted that we are all equal qua human beings. In this respect, the types of social formation in which we all live are ones whose legitimacy does not accept social behaviors that discriminate against some people on the grounds of social rank, birth, and heritage.

Even in today’s world, there are places where it is not taken for granted that we are all equal qua human beings. Accordingly, it is important to acknowledge that the universalism of equality is valid only for those of us living in the type of social formations that one might call ‘modern,’ ‘advanced,’ or ‘Western,’ in which it is socially illegitimate not to endorse the universalism of equality. All the participants of this symposium, it seems to me, happen to live in such social formations where nobody will be likely to object to the universalism of equality that we are all equal qua human beings.

Here, please allow me to take a brief diversion to a particular national context. This will help, I hope, to clarify a few problems that I want to address with respect to the idea of equality on the one hand, and to the concept of nationality on the other. The national context I refer to is that of Japan. Historians tell us that a drastic transformation of social formation took place there around 1868, so that the principle of equality, perhaps for the first time, came into being in the islands of Japan. Prior to the Meiji Restoration, the assemblage of feudal states under which people lived in the Japanese archipelago is referred to as the Bakuhan system today in history textbooks. This Bakuhan system, a feudal federation of the unifying authority of the Bakufu and the peripheral polities of domainal han, was not a centralized system of modern sovereignty but an alliance of provincial hans, each of which was recognized as a fiefdom by the Tokugawa Shogunate or Bakufu, the most powerful of all the domains. The continuing existence of each han and its bureaucracy was authorized by