

The Quest for Japanese Fascism: A Historiographical Overview

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Abstract ‘Japanese fascism’ is a historiographical construct rather than a historical reality. Whether Japan’s sociopolitical developments in the 1930s and early 1940s can be legitimately and authoritatively defined as ‘fascist’ depends on the triangulation of three axes of analysis: historical reconstructions of institutional, political, social, and ideological processes; historiographical surveys of the palimpsest of interpretations historians have given to this period of Japanese history; and metahistorical analyses of the cognitive legitimacy of the category of ‘fascism’. This essay focuses on the second axis, offering a historical survey of the historiographical debate on ‘Japanese fascism’ worldwide.

Keywords Fascism. Japanese Fascism. Japanese Imperialism. Second World War. Historiography.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Marxists. – 3 Maruyama Masao and Japan’s Fascist Modernisation. – 4 Fascism during the Cold War. – 5 ‘Japanese Fascism’ after the End of History. – 6 Conclusions.

In every statement involving proper names or definite descriptions, the reader or listener is supposed to take for granted the existence of the entity about which something is predicated. (Eco 1994, 99)

1 Introduction

The idea of a ‘Japanese Fascism’ is a historiographical construct. Historically, there were no political parties or movements in Japan between the 1920s and the early 1940s that bore that name or that were so dubbed. There was no po-



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litical ideology that openly declared to follow the ideas of Mussolini's Fascism. Nor did the political regime of the 1930s and 1940s openly embraced fascism as governmental model. Fascist ideas, texts, slogans, and agents surely circulated in transwar Japan, enticing debates, confrontations, and imitations. But Fascism spread to many other countries before the war, including those that ended up fighting against the countries of the Axis in the Second World War (Ledeen 1972; Payne 1995, 129-354; Finchelstein 2010; Hart 2018). It is certainly possible to write a history of how Fascism attracted, inspired, or repulsed Japanese thinkers, journalists, authors, and political activists in the transwar period (Hofmann 2015). But a history of 'Fascism in Japan' is not equivalent to a history of 'Fascist Japan'. The debates and confrontations that Italian Fascism provoked in Japan is a historical topic distinct from the historiographical interpretation of the nature of the Japanese regime in the 1930s and early 1940s. Whether Japan underwent a 'fascist turn' in the course of the 1930s is a question of historical interpretation and political judgment, the legitimacy of which cannot be assumed but argued for – legitimation that, in turn, depends on the heuristic capacity of 'fascism' to operate as generic category, which is also something that cannot be assumed but must be argued for.

Whether or not Japanese politics and society in the 1930s and early 1940s can be legitimately and authoritatively framed as 'fascist' is an inquiry that requires the interaction and combination of three analytical perspectives: historical reconstructions of institutional, political, social, and ideological processes; historiographical surveys of the palimpsest of interpretations historians have given to this period of Japanese history; and metahistorical analyses of the cognitive legitimacy of the category of 'fascism'. This essay focuses on the second of these perspectives and offers a survey of some crucial historiographical genealogies of historiographical interpretation of Japanese politics and society in the transwar period. Historicising historical interpretations does not intend to defend an agnostic perspective that conceives of historical knowledge as, at best, relativistic or, at worst, ideological. It rather aims to reinforce the truth-value of historians' cognitive labour by analysing the mediating effect of their interpretations.

It goes without saying that a reluctance to attribute the qualifier 'fascist' to the Japanese political regime of the 1930s and 1940s does not immediately translate into an affirmation of its democratic nature. Japan developed into a reactionary, repressive, and aggressively expansive imperial power without the support of a revolutionary mass movement or coup d'état from above, without a charismatic leader, and without colour-shirted paramilitary squads. Japan developed into a corporate state, with original ideological myths and popular support, through processes that are distinct from those of western European countries, even though it ended up sharing with them structural analogies and eventually embracing them in a military alliance.

2 The Marxists

It was Marxism that developed the first theorisations of Japanese Fascism. In response to Georgi Dimitrov's report at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International of 2 August 1935, Marxist thinkers of all countries began investigations on the dissemination of fascist movements and ideologies worldwide (Dimitrov 1935). Dimitrov's statement originated from the admonition, given at the previous Congress of 1928, that "a new fascist offensive was under way and called for a struggle against it" (Dimitrov 1935). The Comintern elites felt it was necessary to investigate the manifest and disguised forms that fascism could take, on the premises that "in a more or less developed form, fascist tendencies and the germs of a fascist movement are to be found almost everywhere" (Dimitrov 1935). The struggle against fascism, for Marxists, was vital for two main reasons: first, 'fascism' represented the most sophisticated political form developed by monopoly capitalism in the context of a worldwide crisis of capital accumulation; second, fascism distorted people's understanding of class struggle, thus preventing the emergence of emancipatory revolutionary movements:

[f]ascism aims at the most unbridled exploitation of the masses, but it approaches them with the most artful anti-capitalist demagoguery, taking advantage of the deep hatred of the working people against the plundering bourgeoisie, the banks, trusts and financial magnates, and advancing those slogans which at the given moment are most alluring to the politically immature masses. (Dimitrov 1935)

Fascist elements, Dimitrov argued, were ubiquitous in all industrial societies. But it was far less clear the extent to which they occupied state institutions. In the cases of Italy and Germany the situation was clear: there,

[f]ascism, appearing as an open terroristic dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic, and most imperialistic elements of finance capital, shakes off all the "democratic" cloaks masking the subordination of the state apparatus to the monopolies. (Dimitrov 1935)

On that model, I.A. Latyshev, a Russian historian and *Pravda* journalist who in 1952 defended a dissertation on "The Establishment of a Military-Fascist Regime in Japan on the Eve of the War in the Pacific, 1940-41", argued, echoing Dimitrov, that Japan was an "openly terroristic fascist regime", the specific character of which laid

in that absolute monarchy was its form, while the leaders of the Japanese military came forward in the role of fascist dictators [and were] the most ardent servants of the *zaibatsu* and landlords, the cruellest butchers of the Japanese people. Therefore, in order to set off and underline the specific character of the fascist dictatorship in Japan, [we may] call it monarcho-fascist dictatorship, or military-fascist dictatorship. (Latyshev 1955a, 215-16; English transl. in Wilson 1968, 402)¹

If Latyshev's study, together with the work of Y.I. Avdeyev and V.N. Strunnikov on Japanese imperialism, represented the orthodox views on Japanese fascism in postwar USSR and the template for orthodox Marxists worldwide, in the 1930s Marxist theorists hold conflicting positions (Avdeyev, Strunnikov 1962; see also Kirby 1981, 50-1). The famous study of the two Russian orientalist known as O. Tanin and E. Yohan, pseudonyms of historians O.S. Tarkhanov and Y.S. Iolk, *Militarism and Fascism in Japan*, published in 1934, rejected the notion that the Japanese "reactionary chauvinist regime" could be assimilated to the Western notion of fascism because of the "peculiarities of the social structure and the peculiar historical development of Japanese military-feudal imperialism" (Tanin, Yohan 1934, 266). Tanin and Yohan gave two arguments for that assertion. First, while Western European fascism was "primarily an instrument of finance capital", in Japan the reactionary regime was not only an instrument of "finance capital but also of the Japanese monarchy which represent[ed] a *bloc* of two class forces: finance capital and semi-feudal landowners" (267). Second, because of the less developed nature of Japanese democracy, the reactionary ruling elites made, on the whole, a "limited use of social demagoguery" (267). Furthermore, Tanin and Yohan contended, the Japanese reactionary movement was split in two factions, one grouping together reactionary organisations of the privileged classes, the other consisting of "the reactionary chauvinist organisations among the intermediate social strata, principally small landed proprietors and the urban petty bourgeoisie" (Tanin, Yohan 1934, 272). This latter one was, "in its ideology, closer to West European fascism", but was to all effects cut-off from direct state power (Tanin, Yohan 1934, 272).

Tanin and Yohan confirmed in their study the thesis that Otto Kuusien, a Finnish historian and politician who had moved to the Soviet Union in 1918, had proposed to the Comintern just a few years earlier, in March 1932, in the immediate aftermath of the Shanghai

¹ See also Latyshev 1955b and Kirby 1981, 51-2.

Incident (28 January-3 March 1932).² Published in the Comintern bulletin in the following May with the title “Extracts from the Theses of the West European Bureau of the ECCI [Executive Committee of the Communist International] on the Situation in Japan and the tasks of the Japanese Communist Party”, the report emphasised the connection between Japan’s predatory imperialist expansion abroad and the reactionary politics of the regime at home (cited in Degras 1971, 192-203).

By entering the past of war, the Japanese imperialists are seeking to maintain and to strengthen the regime of the army-police monarchy, the regime of unparalleled and arbitrary violence against the working people, to reinforce bondage on the land, to lower workers’ standard of living still more. (Degras 1971, 196)

Aggressive imperialist expansion and domestic reactionary authoritarianism were two expressions of the same political predicament, the result of an incomplete bourgeois revolution which maintained the hierarchical division of society intact from its feudal past. Rather than a fascist regime – expression of a realised bourgeois form of capitalist domination – Japan should be understood, for Kuusinen, as expression of “absolutist militaristic-feudalistic imperialism” (Degras 1971, 196).

Interestingly, a long essay introduced the first edition of Tanin and Yohan’s study. The author was the Polish-born Communist leader Karl Radek (1885-1939), who would soon be incarcerated in a labour camp in Siberia during Stalin’s purges.³ In the essay, Radek praised the analysis of the two specialists but highlighted their mistaken interpretation of fascism, which determined their failure to recognise its presence in Japan. Fascism, Radek explained,

develops on the economic basis of the domination of monopoly capitalism, which is no longer able to solve the main economic problems facing society, which is feeling the approach of the social revolution and which is experiencing an ever-deepening crisis. (Tanin, Yohan 1934, 14)

It was on account of this sense of impending revolution that fascism developed into a “dictatorship resting upon mass organisations, mostly petty-bourgeois”, which “combine[d] the greatest terrorism against workers and revolutionary peasants with an unbridled social demagoguery” (Tanin, Yohan 1934, 14). Following quite closely the interpre-

² Influential for Tanin and Yohan was also the study of Japanese economic situation of the Soviet historian K.T. Eidus (1896-1972). See Kirby 1981, 39-42.

³ John Dower believes that O.S. Tarkhanov and Y.S. Iolk too ended up dead during Stalin’s purges (Dower 1975, 37).

tation of Communists like Dimitrov, Trotsky, and Togliatti, Radek emphasised that fascism was not “simply a reactionary dictatorship”, but a dictatorship that was expression of finance capital and “which has been able [...] to secure for itself the support of the petty bourgeoisie by means of a demagogic policy and mass mobilisation” (14). The case of Japan, according to Radek, was not dissimilar.

The fascist parties in western Europe are, in their composition, petty-bourgeois parties. Their leading strata in them are to a large extent landowners, but they pursue a policy of defending the interests of finance capital, which represents the leading force of capitalist society which has reached the stage of monopoly capitalism. And the same holds true of Japan, although the leading role in the fascist movement of that country is played by the landowners and the higher bureaucracy. (Tanin, Yohan 1934, 21-2)

Japan’s imperialism should be therefore understood in terms of finance capital extending its monopolistic reach in search of resources, cheap manpower, and controlled markets. Its only difference from European fascisms rested in the social composition of those who defended it: a mixture of finance capitalist, semi-feudal agrarian landowners, and state bureaucrats.

When the Soviet reports began to circulate in Japan – Matsubara Hiroshi and Mori Kiichi translated Tanin and Yohan’s study in 1936 for the publisher Sōbunkaku – they exercised an enormous influence upon Japanese Marxists and their interpretations of the political situation of the 1930s. They also gave theoretical instruments for a controversy over Japanese ‘fascism’ among Marxist thinkers in the immediate postwar period. It was certainly a controversy over the interpretation of the origins of Japanese imperialism, but it was also a critique of the left’s failure to avert Japan’s descent into total war. As Germaine Hoston put it, “the controversies on the origins and nature of Japanese imperialism and ‘fascism’ allowed the Rōnō-ha and Kōza-ha to confront, in theoretical terms, the political events they had tried vainly to avert” (Hoston 1986, 256).

The differing interpretations of Japanese imperialism of the two factions of Japanese Marxism were grounded on divergent understandings of the events of 1868 and whether the social and political transformation of the Meiji Restoration could be interpreted as tantamount of a bourgeois revolution. The theoretical conflicts that divided the two factions of Japanese Marxists originated in the 1930s. The Kōza (‘Lectures’, or ‘Symposia’) faction, more responsive to Comintern directives, took its name from the seven-volume history of Japanese Capitalism, *Nihon shihonshugi hattatsushi kōza*, published by Iwanami Shoten in 1932-33. The Rōnō (Worker-Farmer) faction, made up of dissident and eclectic Marxists vis-à-vis Soviet orthodoxy,

took its name from the magazine *Rōnō*, published between 1927 and 1932. In the view of the *Kōza-ha*, Japan did not have a complete bourgeois revolution in 1868, which explained the resilience of feudal privileges among economic and political elites. As a result, there were no mature bourgeois institutions that could sustain the development of class consciousness and emancipatory movements, so that the semi-feudal power structures inside the modern state were protected by a retrograde consciousness. The *Rōnō-ha* activists, instead, argued that the Meiji Restoration, incomplete as it might have been in the immediate aftermath of the Boshin War of 1868-69, marked a revolutionary transformation of Japanese society into a full-fledged capitalist state, protected by institutions that could be conceived as analogous to liberal democracies. The different interpretations of 1868 of the two Marxist factions gave a different spin to their respective understanding of the intensification of Japanese military expansion in 1931. In that regard, the *Kōza-ha* activists maintained a closer adherence to the feudal interpretation of the militaristic character of the Japanese state given by Kuusinen's 1932 Theses: they

established as orthodoxy the view that the Japanese formation was to be characterised as imperial absolutism (*tennōsei zattaishugi*), not, as some [*Rōnō-ha*] had been inclined to argue, a bloc of mixed class forces within which the bourgeoisie had been gradually establishing its hegemony. (McCormack 1980, 134)

The differing interpretations of the Meiji Restoration called for different political strategies. *Kōza-ha* scholar-activists like Noro Eitarō, Yamada Shōtarō, Hirano Yoshitarō, Hattori Shisō, and Hani Gorō, focused on cultural and political analyses, proposed a two-stage political programme that aimed at the development of democratic institutions and consciousness, on the basis of which a mature socialist movement could only successively develop. *Rōnō* activists like Hirabayashi Taiko, Sakai Toshihiko, and Yamakawa Hitoshi, among others, emphasised quantitative economic analyses and insisted on the incidental nature of feudal relics among Japanese society, which was solidly structured around a capitalist mode of production (see Satō 2015; see also Barshay 2004, 72-91 and Hoston 1986). The split between the two factions continued in the postwar period, when analyses of 'Japanese fascism' diverged on the basis of the theoretical stance of the two factions. What united the political thinkers of the two groups "in the context of the cold war, the Occupation's reverse course, and hostilities in Korea" was a deeply felt "desire to prevent its recurrence" (Hoston 1986, 261).

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, *Rōnō* thinkers strove to develop an original theory of Japanese fascism. Following the example of Sakisaka Itsurō and Takahashi Masao, who

in 1932 had published warnings on the strengthening of fascism in Japan, *Rōnō-ha* activists like Yamakawa Hitoshi, Ōuchi Hyōe, and Tasuchiya Takao, with the collaboration of Sakisaka and Takahashi themselves, analysed the transition from a liberal parliamentarism of the 1920s to fascism (see Sakisaka [1935] 1947). “Political power”, Yamakawa wrote, “shifted from the grasp of the political parties, the proper representatives of bourgeois political forces, based on the combination of the military, bureaucracy, and zaibatsu” (cited in Hoston 1986, 261). Following quite faithfully Dimitrov’s interpretive model, *Rōnō* activists conceived of fascism as the systematic combination of state power and monopoly capital, which for them was inevitable to preserve the interests of the capitalist shareholders in a time of systematic economic crisis at a global level. In the context of Japan, “the *Rōnō-ha* had willingly acknowledged that semi-feudal ‘remnants’ existed in the prewar state” (Hoston 1986, 262), but these lingering elements – a mixture of agricultural landownership, patriotic military officials, and the Emperor worship – became integral part of the fascist transformation of the state.

The *Kōza* faction initially denied that Japan experienced a fascist phase precisely because of the presence of feudal holdovers. Kamiyama Shigeo, in particular, continued to insist, as he had done in the 1930s, that the emperor system was enough to explain the “absolutist reaction” of the war years (what he termed “absolutist monarchy”, *zettai kunshusei*, or “emperor-system absolutism”, *tennōsei zettaishugi*) (Kamiyama 1956). Soon, however, Kamiyama found himself in a minority position among fellow *Kōza* members. *Kōza* scholars like Shiga Yoshio and Inoue Kiyoshi, in fact, criticised Kamiyama’s analysis and developed, in contrast to prewar positions, a new conception according to which in the 1930s Japan had indeed fostered a fascist transformation that was peculiar to Japan, and thus distinct from the cases of Italy and Germany. As Shiga explained:

The development of Japanese finance capital and the intensification of its contradictions by the world economic depression caused fascism to grow dramatically between 1931 and 1945. Comrade Kamiyama has fallen into the position of explaining the essential difference between militaristic-feudalistic imperialism and fascism conceptually by means of a formula, so he cannot clarify the relationship between the emperor system and fascism. (Shiga 1949, 47-8; English transl. in Hoston 1986, 262)

Shiga concluded that, between 1931 and 1945, during, that is, the war years of Japan in Asia, “the absolutist emperor system came to be made to execute fascist tasks” (Shiga 1949, 47-8; English transl. in Hoston 1986, 262). Shiga’s position was soon endorsed by theorists like Inoue Kiyoshi – who called the wartime regime an “emperor-system fascism”

(*tennōsei fashizumu*) (Inoue 1966, 3: 188) – Hattori Shisō, and Moriya Fumio, who further refined Shiga's analysis. Their analyses of fascism reduced the doctrinal gap between the two factions of Marxists theorists. Both *Rōnō* and *Kōza* Marxists now conceived of fascism as essentially an expression of monopoly capital, which assured its own existence via form of political dictatorship characterised by internal repression, external aggression, and exasperated nationalism in the form of emperor worship – whereby the formula "*tennōsei fashizumu*". As *Kōza* member Tanaka Sōgorō put it, "fascism in one form of dictatorship attempted at the time when capitalist society stands at the brink of disaster" (Tanaka 1960, 3; English transl. in Wilson 1968, 403).

The debate over Japanese fascism in the first decades of the post-war period was at the same time a theoretical attempt to come to terms with the catastrophe of the fifteen-year war and a political intervention on the future of Japan in the context of an intensifying cold war. The debate was carried on in a Marxian terminology and on the basis of a Marxist political dialectic of stage-development of base-superstructure forms. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, it dominated the intellectual landscape of historical research and gave political orientation to the majority of intellectuals. For Marxist theorists the analyses of monopoly capitalism, represented in Japan by the *zaibatsu* conglomerates that the Occupying Forces had just pretended to dismantle, served as a perspective through which it was possible to understand the Emperor-system (*tennōsei*) and the aggressive imperialism in Asia in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as to critically assess the continuation of prewar conservatism after 1945, in the context of the 'soft fascism' of Cold War capitalism. The association of arm forces, *zaibatsu*, political parties, and state bureaucracy that constituted the formal structure of Japanese fascism (for the *Rōnō-ha*) or emperor-centred absolutist fascism (for the *Kōza-ha*) in the 1930s became, for Marxist theorists, allegories that revealed the corrupted and authoritarian governance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), among whose leaders it was possible to count many war criminals – in particular Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke.

Despite doctrinal divergences among thinkers of different Marxist factions, 'fascism' maintained a clear conceptual consistency in their formulations. It stood for the name of an objective stage of sociopolitical development, characteristic of monopolistic capitalist economies in times of protracted crisis. As such, it stood for more than a political form or style of propaganda (superstructure): it was a universal category, the attribution of which depended on scholars' analyses of the socioeconomic development of Japanese society in the inter-war period. Despite its many differences with European movements, 'Japanese fascism', as particular declination contingent of the socio-historical conditions of Japan, fit in with the notion of universal fascism that the Comintern had defined in the 1930s.

3 Maruyama Masao and Japan's Fascist Modernisation

While *Kōza-ha* and *Rōnō-ha* theorists debated over 'Japanese fascism', the only non-Marxist analysis of Japanese imperialism that had great political bearing among Japanese intellectuals was that of Maruyama Masao, one of the most prominent political theorists of postwar Japan. His historical studies and political analyses had an unrivalled impact upon a variety of fields in Japan and abroad, from social and intellectual history to political science and philosophy. Soon after his graduation from the Law School of the University of Tokyo, in 1937, Maruyama Masao had served as researcher specialised in modern European political thought. During the Pacific War, he was mobilised and dispatched in the Imperial Army headquarters of Hiroshima, where he stationed until the blast of the atomic bomb. In the first years after the end of the war, his intellectual activity concentrated on two projects: first, to understand the intellectual and political reasons behind the advent of 'Japanese fascism'; second, to create the conditions for a democratic transformation of Japanese society.

Maruyama had assiduously pursued the first goal during the war years. It resulted in one of the most influential study of the political thought of the Tokugawa period, *Nihon seiji shisōshi kenkyū*, completed in 1944 and published in 1947, and a series of essays on Japanese 'fascism', nationalism, and authoritarianism that would be later published in 1956-57 as *Gendai seiji no shisō to kōdō*.⁴ Of these essays, the first two focused primarily on the question of 'Japanese fascism': "Chōkokkashugi no ronri to shinri" ("Theory and Psychology of Ultra-Nationalism", originally published in the May 1946 issue of *Sekai*) and "Nihon fashizumu no shisō to undō" ("The Ideology and Dynamic of Japanese Fascism", originally a lecture he delivered at the University of Tokyo in 1947 and later published as an article in 1948).

Maruyama's argument is well known: Japan had a defective modernisation, the causes of which had to be traced back to the Tokugawa period. It was in the writings of the Confucian thinker Ogyū Sorai, he argued, that Japan first developed an original form of political rationality, which 'secularised' ethics and politics away from Zhu Xi's deterministic metaphysics. This modernising impetus in thought further unfolded, in the early Meiji period, in Fukuzawa Yukichi's enlightenment project of individual growth and citizens' political autonomy. Alongside Sorai, however, the Tokugawa period saw also the emergence of an irrationalist form of ethico-political thought, originating in Motoori Norinaga, which insisted on Japanese natural con-

⁴ See Maruyama 1952 (English transl. in Maruyama 1974), and Maruyama 1956 (English transl. in Maruyama 1963).

nection with the deities and which developed in the mid-nineteenth century in those forms of emperor-worship (*sonnō*) and antiforeignism (*jōi*) that paved the way to the authoritarianism of the emperor-system and, eventually, fascism. The dialectic of “artifice” (*sakui*) and “nature” (*shizen*), of Sorai and Norinaga, and of modernising rationalism and irrationalist nativism, were, for Maruyama, constitutive of the political immaturity of Japanese citizens and pivotal to understanding the authoritarianism of its parliamentary institution in the interwar period (Maruyama 1952).

The intellectual template that Maruyama set up in his study of Tokugawa political thought was indispensable to explain his understanding of the divide between a “fascism from above” and a “fascism from below”. As George Wilson later elaborated,

[i]n a Japan lacking the tradition of a bourgeois-democratic revolution, fascism had to develop from above since mass energy, having never before been a main force in political change, could not serve to bring it to power. (Wilson 1968, 405)

In “The Ideology and Dynamic of Japanese Fascism” Maruyama proposed a three-stage developmental model of Japan’s ‘fascism’ in which “fascism from above” and “fascism from below” interacted and reinforced each other. After an initial “preparatory” phase, between the end of the First World War and the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, which saw the emergence of an array of right-wing movements among civilians, a second phase, that of “maturity”, spanning to the 26 February 1936 incident, saw those civilian movements becoming “concretely linked to with segment of military power”, which became the “driving force of the fascist movement, gradually coming to occupy the core of the national government” (Maruyama 1963, 26). The third phase, that of the “consummation period”, was the actual period of “Japanese fascism” that lasted until the end of the war, on 15 August 1945. In this phase,

the military, now the open supporters of fascism from above, fashioned an unstable ruling structure in coalition with the semi-feudal power of the bureaucracy and the Senior Retainers on the one hand, and with monopoly capital and the political parties on the other. (Maruyama 1963, 27)

Distinctively from Italy and Germany, where fascist movements developed since the beginning as movements from below, in Japan civilian fascism and military-bureaucratic fascism were engaged into a complex dialectic of opposition and assimilation that eventually reinforced one another. This characteristic explained, for Maruyama, the marked difference between Japan and its two European allies. On

the one hand, the three forms of fascism shared an opposition to liberalism and parliamentarism, a stark antagonism against Marxism and capitalism (this last one only demagogic, being fascism, for Maruyama as well as for the Marxists, expression of monopoly capital), and aggressively expansionist policies:

Japanese fascism shared the ideology of its Italian and German counterparts in such matters as the rejection of the world view of individualistic liberalism, opposition to parliamentary politics which is the political expression of liberalism, insistence on foreign expansion, a tendency to glorify military built-up and war, a strong emphasis on racial myths and the national essence, a rejection of class warfare based on totalitarianism, and the struggle against Marxism. (Maruyama 1963, 35)

On the other hand, however, the ideology of “Japanese fascism” had “distinctive characteristics”. First, the “family-system tendency”, in its institutional, economic, and ideological declinations of the “family state” (*kazoku-kokka*), of “entrepreneurial familism” (*keiei kazokushugi*), and, most importantly, of *kokutai* (the multilayered trope of the “national body”), descended directly from that late-Tokugawa emperor-worship that connected people’s morality (*dōtoku*) with nature (*shizen*) and the gods (*kami*), of which the emperor (*tennō*) was human progeny (Maruyama 1963, 36-7). Second, “agrarianism” (*nōhonshugi*), which had common characteristics with the semi-feudalism conceptualised by *Kōza-ha* Marxists, represented a distinguishing characteristic of “Japanese fascism”, emphasising the autonomist rural movement that dialectically counteracted the centralising and statist tendencies of fascism (Maruyama 1963, 37-50). The third characteristic was “panasianism” (*DaiAjiashugi*), “the ideal of the emancipation of Asian people from European colonialism, a task which had been upheld since the days of the Popular Rights Movement (*Jiyūminken undō*) in the Meiji era”, which, however, “became inextricably tied up with the idea that Japan should seize hegemony in Asia in place of European imperialism” (Maruyama 1963, 51). A further common feature of European and Japanese fascisms was the organisation of mass consensus through the violent coercion of police forces and censorship, but also, at an ideological level, through the activities of middle-class “pseudo- or sub-intellectuals” – whose activities of propaganda and demagoguery echoed Gramsci’s notion of the “organic intellectual” (Maruyama 1963, 58).⁵

Maruyama Masao’s theorisation of ‘fascism’ had striking similarities with the Marxist interpretation. They both conceived of ‘fascism’

⁵ On organic intellectuals, see Gramsci 1975, 3: 1550-1.

in realist terms: it pointed to a distinct and real (in the ontological sense) form of political organisation, with both universal characteristics and local specificities. Also like the Marxists, Maruyama's analysis of fascism was propaedeutic to the construction of an authentically democratic consciousness in postwar Japanese society, of which he became one of the most prominent public advocates during social conflicts of the 1960s. For Maruyama, the analysis of "Japanese fascism" was indispensable to counteract what he called a chronic "system of irresponsibility" dominant in Japanese public sphere, which he conceptualised in the essay "Chōkokkashugi no ronri to shinri" as "the product of interaction between [...] common characteristics of mass society and the peculiar power structure of Japan" (Maruyama 1963, 1-24).⁶ Finally, like theorists of the *Kōza-ha* and *Rōnō-ha*, he understood fascism as emerging in an economic context of monopoly capitalism. What distinguished Maruyama's 'fascism' from the Marxist's was that for him it pointed to a *political* form of power, whereas for Marxist theorists ultimately pointed to the socioeconomic condition of monopoly capitalism that constituted the base for the development of specific form of authoritarian political institutions (superstructure).

Despite doctrinal disputes and different interpretations continued, the notion that Japan underwent a 'fascist' phase in the 1930s remained hegemonic among Japanese intellectuals well until the 1970s. In that context, 'fascism', the heuristic legitimacy of which was never questioned, had a twofold function: one was historical, as it gave an interpretive meaning to the wartime experience of Japan that was to be regarded as a negative template against which a new model of democratic citizenship had to evolve in postwar Japan; the other was political, as it stood as a memento of the ever-present danger of political power to turn authoritarian, especially as the intensification of the Cold War confrontation with the Communist neighbours required that Japan bent to the requests of the United States (McCormack 2007).

4 Fascism during the Cold War

"In the 'thirties", George Wilson stated, "both Japanese and Western writers were quick to fasten on fascism as a label for the extremist patriotic group - civilian and military - that were appearing on the scene" (Wilson 1968, 408). So, for instance, in 1932 American journalist Thomas Arthur Bisson, sympathiser of the Chinese Communist movement, reported on "The Rise of Fascism in Japan" (Bisson 1932). The same year, Yoshino Sakuzō published a piece in English on

⁶ On the political implication of this view on the political activism of Maruyama Masao in postwar Japan, see Bronson 2016.

"Fascism in Japan" (Yoshino 1932).⁷ In 1936, journalist William Henry Chamberlin described Japan as a "semi-fascist" state and anticipated its "natural alliance" between Germany and Japan. In Japan, he wrote, "intellectuals, always responsive to new foreign ideas and influences, were impressed by the sweep of Fascism in Europe" (Chamberlin 1937, 143). In 1937, W.B. Ashton compared Japanese political and economic systems to those of fascist states like Italy and Germany, pointing out the similar collectivisation of capitalist economy by monopolistic agents who operated in close collaboration with fascist elites inside the state apparatus (Ashton 1937, 42-3). E. Wilfrid Fleisher, after fleeing Japan in the summer of 1941, declared that the country had entered a fascist stage as a "collective dictatorship". A resident of Japan since his childhood, Fleisher moved back to the United States to work in the Foreign Office and, during the postwar Occupation, he became an investigator for Gen. Douglas MacArthur. In two texts he published in 1941 and 1942, Fleischer described Japan as "engulfed by the Fascist tide", and explained:

Japanese insistently repudiate the term "Fascist" as applied to their national movement, contending that it is not a copy of Italian and German methods but a nationalism of Japanese origin, rooted in feudal days. Certainly Japanese Fascism has elements of its own, but in recent years it has looked principally to Germany for guidance in the establishment of a totalitarian state. (Fleischer 1941, 62)⁸

During the war years, and especially after Japan's alliance with Italy and Germany, Japan would be regarded as part of the fascist Axis, and yet, even in propaganda products like Frank Capra's documentary *Know Your Enemy: Japan*, the emphasis was in explaining how Japan's feudal samurai mentality had indoctrinated its population to accept sacrifice for the semi-divine emperor, rather than in 'fascism'. Interestingly, when all wartime commentators appealed to 'fascism' to clarify the nature of the authoritarianism and aggressive imperialism of Japan, they tended to refer to Nazi Germany, rather than Fascist Italy, as the model upon which Japanese 'fascism' unfolded.

In the postwar period, the situation flipped, especially in the West. If the majority of Japanese historians and theorists, most of whom of Marxian leaning, throughout the first two decades after 1945 supported the notion that Japan in the 1930s had indeed turned fas-

⁷ "The party politicians work under the orders of their paymasters, the plutocrats, and these orders are obviously to serve the interests of big business, while the little man, and particularly the farmer, is progressively impoverished" (Yoshino 1932, 194).

⁸ See also Fleisher 1942.

cist, quite the opposite was the interpretation given by European and American historians, independently of their political orientation. With the exception of Robert A. Scalapino, who coined the term of “military-fascism”,⁹ and Richard Storry, who adopted from Maruyama Masao the notions of a “headless fascism from above”, the majority of Anglo-American historians rejected the attribution of ‘fascism’ for Japan. Edwin Reischauer, in *Japan, Past and Present*, opted to “organised ultranationalist movement” and of “military dictatorship with totalitarian tendencies” (Reischauer 1946). Delmer Brown, in his *Nationalism in Japan: An Introductory Historical Analysis* (1955), rejected ‘fascism’ as well, preferring locutions like “militarist ultranationalism” (Brown 1955). Albert Craig, too, favoured “militarism”, although he acknowledged the similarities between Japan and Nazi Germany as an effect of their latecomer modernisation (Fairbank, Reischauer, Craig 1973, 682-725). John Hall rejected the notion of ‘fascist Japan’ and rather characterised it as a “defensive State” sustained by an “ultranationalist ideology”, which mixed the authoritarianism of the Meiji constitution with the notions of “militarism” and “state socialism” (Hall 1970). Marius Jansen largely agreed with the interpretation of the first generation of American historians of Japan who, as members of the so-called modernisation theory school that formed in the context of the Hakone conference of 1960, were at the time responding to the predominantly Marxist Japanese academic historians and their consensus over a ‘Japanese fascism’. “At first glance”, Jansen argued,

the course of Japanese history in the 1930s differs so radically from that of the decade before that it presumes a profound discontinuity. Terms like ‘military takeover’ or ‘fascism’ have been employed to emphasize that gap.

In truth, for Jansen, the situation was much more complex than the view of a fascism or militarism imposed from above suggested.

Many of the development of the 1930s would in fact have been impossible without the development of mass culture and participation that had come before, and it is no less true that the military buildup and domination had powerful roots in the institutional pattern of the modern Meiji state. (Jansen 2000, 576)

⁹ Scalapino: “It is clear that there were some important differences between this Japanese ‘Fascism’ and its Western counterparts. In the first place, the concept of *der Führer* was absent in Japan. There was a great difference between a Hitler and a Tojo, and this reflected the complete lack of individualism in Japanese society. Moreover, Japanese ‘Fascism’, as was noted earlier, never approached a mass movement” (1953, 391).

As the Cold War intensified and Japan strengthened its position of strongest U.S. ally in an increasingly red East Asia, there was a mounting concern among Western historians of Japan to demonstrate the democratic and modern nature of Japanese society. This view was sustained in opposition to the prewar assessments about the political immaturity for democratic autonomy of the Japanese, still under the spell of premodern feudal power relations, which ostensibly explained Japan's fall into 'fascism'.¹⁰ But it was also predicated against the notion that Japan did not have a tradition of liberal thought strong enough to resist the ideological appeal of communism.

Opposition against the notion of a 'fascist Japan', however, did not come only from liberal and conservative historians. It was defended and pursued by Marxist historians as well. E.H. Norman, reprising Tanin and Yohan's study, argued that Japan lacked some important distinctive characters of fascist dictatorships (Norman 1940). Jon Halliday, too, upheld Tanin and Yohan's interpretation and explained the ultramilitarism of the 1930s as an effect of lingering feudal relations. As he put it,

to over-generalize is pointless. If every form of reaction can be termed "fascism", the word loses its meaning. Fascism can be only a *specific* form of reaction. It seems an open question whether the most valuable approach is indeed to try to compare Japan with the European fascist states. (Halliday 1975, 134)

Halliday's answer was negative. He insisted that "if Japan became a fascist country, then it must be possible to locate the transition" (Halliday 1975, 136). He showed that it was quite difficult indeed to do so. First, he argued, "bourgeois democracy in Japan was much weaker than in either Germany or Italy, and the left-wing movement was not comparable either". Second, "the system of imperial absolutism led to definite limitations on those who were fascists". Third, "the army certainly was more important politically in Japan than in Germany, Italy or even Spain, but it is by no means clear that it was qualitatively more important than it had been in the 1920s or even in the Meiji period" (Halliday 1975, 137). Finally, for Halliday "[t]he trouble with the term 'fascism' is that it forces any examination of Japan into a Eurocentric category", since "it is virtually impossible to examine the phenome-

¹⁰ This was the official view of the U.S. armed forces during the war, illustrated by Frank Capra in his propaganda documentary. It continued, however, during the 'reverse course' of U.S. Occupation. As George Frost Kennan, at the time personal adviser of Secretary of State George C. Marshall, admitted: "We should cease to talk about vague and - for the Far East - unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards and democratisation. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are hampered by idealistic slogans, the better" (cited in Bove, Duhan Kaplan 1995, 32).

non without constructing such an examination in terms of comparisons with Germany, Italy, and Spain". So, for him "Tanin and Yohan [were] correct to talk of imperial absolutism" (Halliday 1975, 139).

In continental Europe, where the Marxist historiographical tradition was stronger than in the Anglophone world, historians were less hostile to the notion of a 'Japanese fascism', although they tended to qualify that interpretation by appealing to the distinct socio-cultural context of Japan. For instance, in Italy economic historians like Franco Mazzei and Alessandro Valota linked the fascist origin of Japanese ultra-militarism in the pressures of monopoly capital, but, in a logic that reminded that of the Frankfurt theorist Friedrich Pollock, they stressed the "predominant role played by state capital" (Mazzei 1979, 108 and Valota 1980, 238-78). Franco Gatti argued that, despite the absence, in Japan, of a one-party politics (until quite late) and of a charismatic leader, the bureaucratic transformation of the state to accommodate the needs of monopoly capital and the supporting ultranationalist rhetoric of *kokutai*, of *kazoku kokka*, and of emperor worship, suggested that the attribution of 'fascism' to Japan was not so far-fetched (Gatti 1983, 256-64).

Between the late 1960s and throughout the 1980s, Anglo-American historians of Japan remained suspicious of the qualifier 'fascist' to describe transwar and wartime Japan. But if their immediate postwar predecessors understood fascism in terms of an objective developmental stage of modernisation, now historians looked at 'fascism' as heuristic model, the characteristics of which might or might not fit the case of imperial Japan. The first postwar generation of historians, Wilson argued, were moved by

an almost intuitive conviction that Japan's rapid evolution from "feudalism" to "absolutism" and "capitalism" indicates the proximity of Japanese historical development to the pattern of early modern and modern Western history. This conviction had led some to conclude that Japan's history should have followed a pattern practically identical to that of modern Europe were it not for certain "peculiarities". (Wilson 1968, 408)

Wilson's articles on "A New Look at the Problem of 'Japanese Fascism'" signalled the passage from a developmental model to a structural-typological one. Not persuaded by the developmental explanation of both Japanese and American historians, Wilson "recommended turning to the possibility of drawing enlightenment from comparisons with the late-developing non-Western nations". Midway between a new developmental heuristic paradigm and an understanding of political forms through patterns or structures, he suggested to

view interwar Japan as proceeding developmentally from the political stage represented by the precursory Meiji nationalist ‘movement-regime’ to a point where the ‘extinction’ of that regime’s original dynamism, coupled however with the tenacity of its institutions and the onset of total war, brought a reassertion of authoritarian tendencies and a corollary restraint on the exercise of liberalism and individual freedoms. (Wilson 1968, 411-12)

The turn from a developmental analysis to a typological definition of ‘fascism’ is best exemplified in a provocative ‘comment’ article in the *Journal of Asian Studies* by two young assistant professors at Stanford University, Peter Duus and Daniel I. Okimoto. After rejecting the old developmental interpretations, both Marxist and non-Marxist, and asserting the unfitness of analytical models framed upon European history, the two historians urged that

instead of remaining transfixed by the need to explain the aberrational phenomenon of fascism [...] we need to press beyond the orthodox concerns of the past to formulate new questions, [...] new models, and test these empirically with a broad spectrum of heretofore unexplored perspectives. (Duus, Okimoto 1979, 76)

If there certainly were fascist tendencies among minority movements, especially among military officials, for them the term that best explain the sociopolitical character of transwar Japan was “corporatism”. The 1930s should therefore be regarded as a “formative period of a managerial state or polity, in which a dirigist bureaucracy became the central element in the formation and execution of national policy” (Duus, Okimoto 1979, 72).¹¹

Duus and Okimoto echoed Gilbert Allardyce’s rejection of the heuristic category of ‘fascism’, on account that

only individual things are real; everything abstracted from them, whether concepts or universals, exists solely in the mind. There is no such *thing* as fascism. There are only the men and movements that we call by that name. (Allardyce 1979, 368; italics in the original)

Similarly, for Duus and Okimoto the question of ‘fascism’ ceased to be an eminently ontological problem, as it was in the developmental model of stages of earlier historiography, and became a matter of heuristic accuracy. Accordingly, the research on ‘Japanese fascism’ in the late 1970s through the 1990s generally relied on structuralist

¹¹ For a critique, see McCormack 1980, 140-1.

terminology. If the epistemological approach changed, still the overarching majority of historians tended to reject the attribution 'fascist' to transwar-period Japan. Gregory Kasza rejected 'fascism' and opted for "military-bureaucratic regime" (Kasza 1988). Relying on Japanese historians who rejected the term – in particular on the work of the revisionist historian Itō Takashi (Itō 1976; 1978) – Kasza underlined the "conceptual fuzziness" ("fascism" applies to "the entire right wing"), the questionable Marxist "political motivation" behind the uncritical use of the concept, and the fact that "Japan differed from Europe", in that they lacked charismatic dictator, one-party politics, and grassroots origins.¹² Possible alternative conceptions, for him, were "imperial absolutism", "developmental dictatorship",¹³ "wartime politics", and reliance on "historical nominalism", by which he meant the adoption of "native terms that were prominent in interwar political discourse" like "idealist right" (*kannen uyoku*) and "*kakushin*". Itō Takashi was the leading Japanese historian defending this "native nominalism", which Kasza endorsed in his own support of *kakushin*, a term that he renders as "renovationist authoritarian right" and that, for him, "fills an awkward gap in the comparative typology of rightist (and perhaps also leftist) political tendencies, and it also fills a void in the English language" (Kasza 2001, 231-2).¹⁴ The conceptual operation in both Itō and Kasza's interpretation, however, was that of creating synecdochically a new heuristic category which was supposed to stand – instead of 'fascism', but from an epistemological perspective performing the analogous conceptual labour of generic 'fascism' – for the regime that Japan ended up developing in the 1930s and in the 1940s.

Ben-Amy Shillony, in his *Politics and Culture in Wartime Japan*, emphasised the continuation of political institutions during the wartime, arguing that labels such as "totalitarian" and "fascist state" "are meaningful only if understood in their broadest and pejorative sense, as nicknames for highlighting the repressive and aggressive character of the state". But at closer look, Japan "possessed neither an official dogma nor an omniscient leader to interpret the truth", and oppression was never comparable "to the concentration camps

¹² As in Yamaguchi 1980 (Kasza 2001, 186).

¹³ As in Wilson 1968 and Takabakate 1979.

¹⁴ "Alas", he polemically acknowledges, "there seems to be a law that political concepts must derive from English" (Kasza 2001, 231-2). See also Kasza 1984. *Kakushin* "has no equivalent in the English language. In the interwar context, it is sometimes translated 'renovation'. In the postwar context, it is often translated 'progressive' [...]. Neither translation does it justice. *Kakushin* falls half way between 'reform', a modest change within an existing system, and 'revolution', the replacement of one system by another. *Kakushin* advocates would keep some features of the existing politico-economic system but change others fundamentally. They are selective revolutionaries" (Kasza 2001, 199).

and wholesale bloodshed of Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia" (Shillony 1981, 15-16). Similarly, William Miles Fletcher III researched on "common themes between European fascist movements and the New Order Movement in Japan", but because "there were few institutional similarities between prewar Japan and fascist Italy or Nazi Germany" he contended that "the Japanese state was not fascist" (Fletcher 1982, 163-4). Interestingly, even though they negated its heuristic accuracy, 'fascism' for these historians stood mostly for Nazi Germany rather than Fascist Italy, and the accuracy of such conceptual reductionism was never questioned.

Other US historians who, in the 1980s, rejected the attribution of 'fascist' to the Japanese state were Mark Peattie, Gordon Berger, and Richard Mitchell (Berger 1977; Peattie 1988; Mitchell 1976). They all engaged in a conversation with European specialists of fascism who were at the same time struggling to develop a typological profile of fascism that could be applicable to historical regimes beyond Italy. Stanley Payne, in particular, was receptive to the research of Kasza, Peattie, Mitchell, Fletcher and Shillony. In his encyclopedic *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* he concluded that "Japan had evolved a somewhat pluralistic authoritarian system which exhibited some of the characteristic of fascism, but it did not develop fascism's most distinctive and revolutionary aspects" (Payne 1995, 336). In an earlier review essays, Payne built upon Fletcher and Shillony to emphasise that fascism was deeply embedded in European intellectual traditions as it "stemmed from the intersection of the new doctrines of nationalism, militarism, and social Darwinism with philosophical and cultural currents of neoidealism, vitalism, activism, and the cult of the her". These intellectual strains, for Payne, became fertile grounds for the development of fascism in those countries where the "transition to mobilised liberal democracy" was interrupted by "military defeat and severe national frustration or status deprivation" (Payne 1980, 275). In contrast, Japan "had never experienced the degree of liberal democratic mobilisation that had earlier occurred in both Germany and Italy". In addition, it had "experienced only a few of the cultural influences which produced Fascism" (Payne 1980, 275).

An exception to Anglophone scholars' tendency to reject the notion of a 'Japanese fascism' came from the Australian historian Gavan MacCormack, who, while acknowledging the convenience of such label as *tennōsei* state, quite cautiously defended some advantages that the heuristic category of 'fascism' offered to understanding the socioeconomic developments of transwar Japan. For him,

in so far as fascism is to be used as a generic term in history and the social sciences, and subject to real doubts as to whether it should be, it would seem to be widely agreed that it is a phenomenon of capitalism in a time of crisis, its historic role being to con-

solidate bourgeois dominance by neutralising or crushing opposition and mobilising the active support of the masses. (McCormack 1980, 142)

If Japanese historians, he argued, should pay more attention to American criticism of the explanatory power of 'fascism', it was equally desirable that Western historians followed and understood the epistemological reason for the persisting use of 'fascism' in Japanese scholarship.

From an epistemological perspective, historians' interpretation of transwar Japan as fascist followed distinct heuristic perspectives in the research of the first and second generation of postwar historians of Japan. The first generation conceived of 'fascism' in terms of developmental stage in political structures, economic relations, and intellectual conceptions of the nation, which required of historians to recognise those sociocultural symptoms that could justify the assertion that Japan had indeed entered a 'fascist' stage of development. Obviously, developmental stages were differently conceived in the works of Marxist and liberal historians, in their respective variations – *Rōnō*, *Kōza*, aligned to Soviet orthodoxy, or heterodox for Marxist; of the so-called 'Modernisation school' or following Maruyama Masao's idiosyncratic Hegelianism. Both understood these stages ontologically, as actual conditions of those historical societies. The second generation of historians followed instead a typological procedure, whereby the attribution of the qualifier 'fascism' was determined by matching a generic ideal-type with the historical society under investigation. Whether or not Japan underwent a fascist turn, therefore, was no longer conceived in ontological terms, but as the result of a hermeneutic operation of the historian who read beyond the literal meaning of Japanese political institutions.

5 'Japanese Fascism' after the End of History

With the end of the Cold War, the question of 'Japanese fascism' has reappeared in a new form. Today 'fascism' no longer nourishes the ambition of describing a stage of Japanese sociopolitical development, nor does it define the typology of the Japanese regime in the transwar period. Its target is smaller in size and heuristic ambition. It is rarely called to qualify political institutions, economic organisations, or ideological forms in their entirety, but rather certain cultural and social practices, forms of thought, and patterns of sociability. This change in focus mirrors changes in the writing of history in general that occurred in the last thirty years, especially after the so-called 'cultural turn' and the many subsequent sub-turns it triggered. The institutionalisation of new genres of historical in-

quiry like post-colonial studies, environmental history, subaltern studies, the history of science and technology, gender history, transnational history, and media studies, among many others, gave space to new research questions, new methods, new approaches, and new interpretations of the past. Post-structuralism has undermined the credibility of 'grand narratives', giving space to micro-historical research that were for the first time able to shed new light in previously uncharted topics like gender construction, sexuality, cognitive practices, material histories, etc. This transformation comes also at a cost. If thick descriptions have offered new depths in the analysis of social dynamics, the capacity to talk about or even conceptualise historical change seems to have been imperilled today, especially since the Marxian analytical paradigm has lost, among historians, its cognitive and institutional legitimacy with the disappearance of really existing socialist states (the failure of which has been shrewdly exploited to delegitimise Marxian theory *tout-court*) and the global affirmation of a capitalist "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992). As a consequence of these transformations in society and in the forms of historical knowledge they sustain, the heuristic category of 'fascism' has changed as well. Its application is narrower, targeted at specific cultural and intellectual forms, or particular political and economic dynamics. The restriction of its field of applicability, however, has at times rendered its meaning and thus its heuristic function even fuzzier than before. As a result, 'fascism' has lost not only cognitive power, but also political efficacy, notwithstanding its resurgence in the wake of Donald Trump's presidency.

In Japan, the hegemonic presence of practicing Marxist historians began to wane in the 1980s. Despite their ideological commitment, the eminently empiricist approach (*jishshōshugi*) they embraced resulted in a systematic organisation of the documentary sources on Japanese history. But dissenting voices began emerging. Itō Takashi, as we have seen, joined forces with the Italian revisionist historian of Fascism Renzo De Felice, contending that the generic use of 'fascism' was nothing but a Marxist creation (Itō 1976; see also De Felice, Ledeen 1975). In response to that, Marxist historian Furuya Tetsuo developed a definition of 'fascism' that could apply everywhere in the world. Fascism was for him a form of dictatorship which strived to develop a "uniform organisation of the masses at the level of daily life", which could "completely eliminate the roots of resistance" and to "mobilise the people in accordance with the wishes of the authority" (Furuya 1976, 84-6; English transl. in Mark 2015, 18). Among the group of historians that would be later defined as practitioners of "people's history" (*minshūshi*), politically on the left but no longer committed to Marxism, Yoshimi Yoshiaki published in 1984 a people's history of wartime Japan, in which he demonstrated the widespread

popular support for Japanese militarist expansion.¹⁵ Entitled *Kusa no ne no fashizumu* – recently translated as *Grassroots Fascism: The War Experience of the Japanese People* – the study, while aligning along the Marxist interpretation of transwar Japanese history as ‘fascist’, corrected the conventional vision of both Marxists and Maruyama Masao that ‘Japanese fascism’ was imposed from above, in the forms of a “militarist fascism” or “imperial fascism” (*tennōsei fashizumu*). For Yoshimi, who shared the documentary approach of *minshūshi* pioneers like Irokawa Daikichi and Kano Masanao, which strived to recuperate and reconstruct the historical experience of people detached from power, the fascist phase of Japanese modernisation was not violently imposed from above, but found in large sectors of the population support for the military efforts of the Japanese Imperial Army. Less clear, however, was the meaning and heuristic function Yoshimi gave the concept of ‘fascism’, which he did not define, but assumed.

Yoshimi’s ground-breaking study, together with the waning of the institutional predominance of Marxist historians in Japanese research universities, opened up new research venues on wartime Japan. Among the vast bibliographical production, Suzaki Shin’ichi focused on fascism’s appeal on state bureaucrats, who looked at Nazi Germany and, to a much lesser extent, Fascist Italy for new forms of administrative and technological solutions to improve the governance of the Japanese empire (Suzaki 1998). Most recently, Fuke Takahiro looked at the cultural and intellectual exchanges of Japanese right-wing activists and ideologues with Italian and German thinkers (Fuke 2010).

In the United States, as early as 1991, Andrew Gordon broke a decade-long reluctance to employ the concept of ‘fascism’ and utilised it, with keen attention “to avoid nominalist and Eurocentric snares”, to scout for “analytic common ground” in specific social dynamics in Italy, Germany and Japan (Gordon 1991, 334-5). In *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan*, he analysed changes in the relations between state and labourers in conjunction with the rise of militarism and imperialist expansion, which gave new nuances to the notion of “fascism from above” in Maruyama Masao and Yamaguchi Yasushi (Maruyama 1956; Yamaguchi 1979). What passed unnoticed to the reviewers of the book, most of whom critical of Gordon’s adoption of ‘fascism’, was that in the book the term did not intend to describe, either ontologically or epistemologically, transwar Japan in general, but only certain forms of state intervention in labour relations in the context of empire building.

Harry Harootunian’s *Overcome by Modernity* employed an even more contentious use of ‘fascism’, which did not label transwar Japan

15 On the history of *minshūshi*, see Gluck 1978 and 2007.

in general but rather named a recurring attitude among intellectuals like Miki Kiyoshi, Hirabayashi Hatsunosuke, Yanagita Kunio, Kon Wajirō, and others, to criticise the alienating effect of modernisation and its technological and economic mechanisms in favour of a return to “authenticity, folkism, and communitarianism”. “Fascism”, for Harootunian, pointed to the ideological and demagogic nature of the critique of modernity in the works of these intellectuals, as the appeal to “overcoming modernity” (*kindai no chōkoku*) implied the actual reproduction of the technologically most advanced forms of repression and violence, both domestically and internationally (Harootunian 2000, xxvii-xxxi). Harootunian found inspiration in the critical strategy of the Japanese Marxist Tosaka Jun, whose *Nihon ideorogii ron* represented the most ambitious form of *Ideologiekritik* in 1930s Japan. In this essay, Tosaka

forcefully juxtaposed this image of modern life filled with new customs to the fictive abstractions of natural culture in order to reveal the utter bankruptcy of all those pronouncements claiming the eternality of Japanese culture. (Harootunian 2000, 118)

This Tosaka called “*Nihon ideorogii*” (or in the form of alternative conjugates like *bunkenshugi*, a neologism we can render with ‘classicism’, or *Nihon bunkashugi*, or ‘Japanese culturalism’), a Heideggerian cultural essentialism that Harootunian unburies in the texts of different thinkers and describes as ‘fascist’.

Julia Adeney Thomas, in her study of the ideological use of the concept of ‘nature’ (*shizen*) that sustained the modernisation of the Japanese state, has argued that

[c]laims to immemorial harmony with nature have become part of the evidence adduced by those who see Japan as “traditional” in the 1930s, and “tradition” has in turn been one of the touchstones in the debate over whether Japan’s ultranationalism should be characterised as “fascist”. (Thomas 2001, 181)

The appeal to ‘nature’, in the ideological constructs of thinkers like Miki Kiyoshi, Nishida Kitarō, Watsuji Tetsurō, and Tanabe Hajime, among others, supported, according to Thomas, those conceptions of agrarianism, primeval communitarianism, and national characters that were constitutive of wartime ultra-nationalism and analogous to fascism (Thomas 2001, 181-8).

Alan Tansman has scouted the cultural production of the 1920s and 1930s in search of “fascist moments”, and found “a wide range of cultural expressions that share an urge for aesthetic wholeness”: the anaesthetisation of violence, militarism, expansionism, a religious attachment to national community, among others, were all elements

that echoed similar ones in the European context (Tansman 2009a). In the edited volume *The Culture of Japanese Fascism*, Tansman argues “for the presence of a fascist culture in Japan and for the presence of fascistic ways of healing the crisis of interwar modernity” (Tansman 2009b, 1). In his analyses of different literary works in the transwar period, Tansman uses “fascism” to highlight the effects of certain aesthetic texts “to enchant a culture stripped of its magic by modernity”, thus becoming an ideological tool to propose “a reactionary response to modernity”, paradoxically articulating “a vision of a modernity that was born in the West yet was resistant to Westernisation” (Tansman 2009a, 9, 14-15).

Other historians have recently employed ‘fascism’ to speak of political changes in Japanese modernity. Takashi Fujitani argued that a feminine character distinguished the Japanese nationalist ideology from European fascisms (Fujitani 1996, 172). Kenneth Ruoff, in his reconstruction of the wartime celebration of the 2600th anniversary of the foundation of Japan, argued that “in political terms, Japan in 1940 shared far more in common with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy than it did with the United States and Britain” (Ruoff 2010, 19). Janis Mimura argued for the heuristic value of “fascism’s ideology, expansionist policies, and modern technocratic thrust – all of which Japanese fascism shared with its European counterparts”. According to Mimura, fascism offered Japanese technocrats and ideologists “a means to overcome the crisis of capitalism and resolve the problem of class conflict and authority in modern industrial society” (Mimura 2011, 5). Historians of ‘Japanese fascism’, following Maruyama Masao, “have tended to emphasise the nativist, agrarian, and pan-Asianist visions” (Mimura 2011, 107-8). In contrast to such view, Mimura coined the term “techno-fascism” to refer to those “Nazi-inspired concepts of ‘leadership principle,’ ‘living space,’ and ‘national land planning’” (Mimura 2011, 3) which appealed to state bureaucrats and industrial managers, but also “progressive intellectuals and politicians”, all university-educated middle-class professionals, who “sought to realise a productive, hierarchical, organic, national community based on cultural and geopolitical notions of Japanese ethnic superiority” (Mimura 2011, 3). The late Aaron Stephen Moore also adopted the notion of “techno-fascism”. In his study of the technological and ideological foundations of the Japanese empire, he argued that

[w]artime Japan’s technological imaginary represented a form of fascist ideology that employed familiar tropes of modernity and rationality rather than relying primarily on cultural appeals to spiritualism or ultranationalism. (Moore 2013, 7)

In his study, engineers and technocratic bureaucrats are the agents of fascism rather than philosopher, ethnographers, Shintō priests, or

Buddhist monks (Victoria 2006). In line with the research of Suzuki and Mimura, Moore demonstrated how technology “serve[d] as a system of power and mobilisation” in Japan not only during its imperial expansion between 1931 and 1945, but also in the postwar period, as it sustained Japan’s industrial high-growth (Moore 2013, 226-39).

Reto Hofmann has researched on the cultural exchanges between Italy and Japan, and on the popularity of ‘fascist’ ideas in Japan between the 1920s and the end of the war. Hofmann, whose approach is one of the most sophisticated in the recent scholarship on Japanese fascism, searched scholarly texts, popular books, political documents, newspaper articles, theatrical pieces, monuments and artifacts to reconstruct the circulation, understanding, appeal, or refusal of the concept of ‘fascism’ as it was imported in Japan from Italy. Hofmann, however, acknowledged “fascism” to be “both nationally specific and structurally transnational” (Hofmann 2015, 3). Distinguishing a Fascism distinct of Italy, which he renders with capital ‘F’, and a generic, transnational fascism, which he renders with a small ‘f’, he defends the notion that Fascism, by moving around the world through cultural and intellectual exchanges, transformed into a generic political idea that could become inspiration to other political movements “to counteract the negative effects of capitalist modernity” (Hofmann 2015, 2). When the poet and journalist Shimoi Harukichi popularised Fascism in Japan in the 1920s, Mussolini and his movement enticed intellectuals and political activists as an exemplary strategy to kindle patriotism and organise consensus for the state (Hofmann 2015, 8-37). Articles and monographs on Fascism – *fashizumu* or *fasshō undō* were its Japanese translations – had initially a good editorial success. Moreover, Hofmann shows, between 1928 and 1931 the image of Mussolini was at the centre of a cultural boom: theatrical pieces, *manga* comics, and young-adult novellas popularised Mussolini as a moral hero, engaging him in a variety of fictional adventures that evidenced his courage, strength, patriotism, and moral rectitude. “Japanese critics of parliamentary democracy”, too, found in Mussolini an “extraordinary man”, an “iron man”. As such, he was taken as an example to emulate (Hofmann 2015, 38-62). But political enthusiasm for Fascism rapidly waned and remained quite timid throughout the 1930s and hostile during the Ethiopian War of 1935-36, as were the diplomatic relations between the two countries until the signing of the Tripartite Pact, on 27 September 1940. In Japan, the strongest antagonism against Fascism came from ultranationalist groups and activists – Hofmann calls this heterogenous group, with a certain degree of conceptual trickstery, “fascists against Fascism” (Hofmann 2015, 80-8) – who rejected the notion of its universality and its adaptability to Japan. Japanese ultranationalists – the majority of whom ended up politically marginalised, imprisoned, or sentenced to death before the alliance with Germany and Italy in 1940 – preferred to insist

on terms such *kokutai*, *tennōshugi*, *nihonshugi*, or *nōhonshugi* rather than rely on imported foreign terms like 'fascism'.

The return of 'fascism' as heuristic category in the Anglophone historiography of the last twenty years evidences a profound change in its hermeneutic function. Today 'fascism' operates in a quite distinct manner than in the postwar era. It does no longer define a stage of development in an ontologically given teleology of modernisation, aimed at the final affirmation of either capitalist liberalism or communist socialism in accordance with the politico-metaphysical orientation of historians. It does no longer operate as an epistemic category that is capable of capturing the essential nature of the political system and social organisation of a specific historical context. It is rather employed to emphasise the character of *distinct* sociocultural phenomena.

In the process, the meaning of 'fascism' has become however more difficult to pin down. It may stand today for authoritarianism, statism, racial ethnocentrism, cultural communitarianism, or revolutionary conservatism; it can stand for the aestheticisation of violence, ultra-militarism, the worship of war and violence, for popular support of a charismatic leader, or for the demagogic ideology of anti-modern modernism. It stands, in other words, for one or more characteristics that have been once associated with Italian Fascism or, more contentiously, with German National Socialism, without, however, presupposing or requiring an explicit comparison (or connection) with the actual historical experiences of Italy and Germany. More precisely, when 'fascism' is adopted to describe or explain certain characteristics of specific social, intellectual, economic, or political phenomena of transwar Japan (from bureaucratic technocracy and economic planning, to political discourses on the national community, philosophical investigations on the alienating effects of industrial modernisation, and the aesthetic appreciation of everyday life), the meaning historians attribute to this heuristic category is only loosely reconstructed comparatively from the contemporary historical situations of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany; it is rather derived from the typological domains that historians of fascism had previously conceptualised in generalised definitions of 'fascism'. Relying on the works on typological fascism of Payne, Griffin, Laqueur, Paxton, Mosse, and others, 'fascism' is now understood as a generic category, in itself bearing semantic values that are distilled in its definitions, but one-step removed from actual historical references to Italy (or Germany). In turn, since 'fascism' is genericised in this manner, it is no longer required of the historian to argue for its application in extra-European contexts, as it once was, because the definition of 'fascism' can be removed from the genesis of the term in the historically specific events of Italy between 1919 and 1945. That is why Mimura, Moore, Victoria, and others can attribute 'fascism' to the sociocultural phenomena they inquired even though

Japanese historical actors have adopted these from Nazi Germany rather than Fascist Italy. That is why Hofmann, after reconstructing the penetration of Italian Fascism in popular and intellectual discourses of 1930s Japan, can conceptualise the resistance against Italian Fascism by Japanese right-wing ideologues in terms of “fascists against Fascism” (Hofmann 2015, 80).

6 Conclusions

The changes in historians’ understanding of Japan in the 1930s do not merely reflect the opening of new archives and perspectives. It also bears witness of the changes in historian’s sociohistorical situation. During the Cold War, the use of ‘fascism’ as a discrete political ideal-type was convenient to historians of both Marxian and liberal (or conservative) leanings: for the first, ‘fascism’ represented an inevitable development of monopoly capitalism in a period of crisis of profit accumulation; for the second, it was a new political form delinked from and independent of capitalism. The return of populist and authoritarian tendencies in twenty-first century world politics, especially in those countries of Western Europe and North America that presented themselves as the champions of democratic liberalism during the Cold War, is calling for a rethinking of the heuristic advantages and disadvantages of the category of ‘fascism’.¹⁶

Today’s semantic encyclopedia justifies a genericised use of ‘fascism’. And yet, its meaning – not only what the term refers to, but the internal consistency of the encyclopedia of definitions, characteristics, nuances, uses, and connotations that history has added to it – are more than ever uncertain and fuzzy. As Umberto Eco once put it,

[i]t is pointless to say that Fascism contained in itself all elements of successive totalitarian movements, so to speak “in a quintessential state”. On the contrary, Fascism contained no quintessence, and not even a single essence. It was a fuzzy form of totalitarianism. It was not a monolithic ideology, but rather a collage of different political and philosophical ideas, a tangle of contradictions. (Eco 2001, 72-3)

The fuzziness of its conceptual core makes it a malleable tool, but it also deprives it of heuristic efficacy, as Jon Halliday has pointed out (Halliday 1975, 134-6). Differently from other coeval political concepts like socialism, communism, democracy, and liberalism, ‘fas-

¹⁶ See, for instance, Camus, Lebourg 2017; Snyder 2017; Berizzi 2018; Cusset 2018; Stanley 2018; Brown, Gordon, Pensky 2018; Gentile 2019; Temelkuran 2019; Traverso 2019; Giroux 2019; Ben-Ghiat 2020.

cism' is a term that had originally no meaning apart from the political movement it came to refer to as proper name. It had no inherent conceptual content, no set of ideas or notions that existed before the historical vicissitudes of the movement it named.¹⁷ Today's encyclopedia understands 'fascism' or 'fascist' as referring to the violently autocratic, intolerant, or oppressive behaviour of a person, regime, or ideology; but this sense of the term is the result of the contingent historical development of the movement. The conceptual meanings we assign to 'fascism' today is nothing but the history of the regime it named, the character of which was the product not of a preexisting set of ideals, but of Italy's contingent situation between the two wars and of the opportunistic decisions of its leader.

The cognitive fuzziness of the category 'fascism' translates into heuristic weakness. Italian Fascism, like German National-Socialism, was symptomatic of the structural weakness of liberal democratic institutions that made them vulnerable to become totalitarian under certain socioeconomic conditions specific of the 1920s and 1930s. On the contrary, Japan did not undergo any revolutionary change: its economy developed corporatist dynamics and strong ties to the state since the Meiji period; the vibrant political debates and liberal tendencies of the Taishō period unfolded within the narrow limits of the authoritarian constitution of 1889; and the aesthetic currents that shared tastes and ideals with European Nazifascism can be traced in those countries that ended up fighting fascism (Griffin 2007). Furthermore, many of the elements that Japan developed in the 1930s can be more easily explained contextually, as effect of the transnational situation of conflicting imperialisms, expanding communist revolutions, anticolonial movements, economic crises, and total war.

Fascism's fuzziness translates also in political weakness. If analogously dangerous circumstances would arise today, evoking 'fascism', despite its convenience as boo word, would conjure up ultranationalists marching in the streets in unicoloured shirts, invoking their leader, war, and different forms of 'final solutions' for all social problems on the basis of some invented myths. In other words, it is

¹⁷ We can identify three distinct historical usages of the term 'fascism' – each with its own peculiar history. First, it is the *proper name* of a new political movement, of a regime, and, only much later, of an ideology specific to Italy. Second, it is the term that coeval antifascist activists and thinkers adopted and transformed, by metonymical procedures, into a generic term that inductively explained the common causes of the rise of distinct ultranationalist regimes and movements in the 1920s and 1930s. Third, it is the name of a metahistorical category that seeks to understand 'fascism', in synecdochical fashion, as a generic political ideal-type analogous to communism, socialism, and liberalism. The historians who utilised this metahistorical category developed all-encompassing definitions of a "fascist minimum" which they then deductively mobilised to categorise a variety of movements and regimes from the late 19th to the early 21st century, of which Italian Fascism was but one example.

perceived as a threat from *without* democratic institutions, whereas Fascism, like Nazism, as 'revolutionary conservatism' originated *within* them. In other words, the genericisation of 'fascism' has the reifying effect of externalising a phenomenon that was born within democratic institutions. Fascism was not an invading pathogen, but an intrinsic neoplastic disease.

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