



ARCHAISM
AND
ACTUALITY
JAPAN AND
THE GLOBAL
FASCIST
IMAGINARY

HARRY HAROOTUNIAN



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AND
ACTUALITY

BUY

THEORY IN FORMS

SERIES EDITORS

Nancy Rose Hunt, Achille Mbembe, and Todd Meyers

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For the memory of Tetsuo Najita

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Despite diverse arguments, Japanism is a version of a Japanese type of fascism. To the extent that this is not seen it will be impossible to coherently grasp it as a link in an international phenomenon and explain the unique circumstances of how Japanism employed a good deal of European fascist philosophy.

—Tosaka Jun, *Nihon ideogiron*

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PREFACE

Any account of Japan's momentary embrace of fascism in the 1930s, like accounts of similar events in many other societies, may appear somewhat out of joint with the concerns of contemporary life. Yet despite technological advances that distract, displace, mediate, and even control lives more thoroughly than ever before, the present remains plagued by familiar problems of the past that apparently have never gone away. There are still foreign wars, whether fought by proxies or directly; acute and increasing inequality; global economic uncertainty that behaves cyclically and repetitiously; and political failures of systems that have long outlived their shelf lives—all of which lead to new violent divisions that are beginning to tear apart the fabric of already frayed so-called democratic orders, with the reappearance of the vague silhouette of fascism falsely promising to restore wholeness.

The principal question of levels of historical life comes into focus here because it invariably points to the necessity of accounting for and explaining the relationship between forms of ideological production and how they penetrate diverse social constituencies in everyday life to become articles of mass belief. The phenomenon of the so-called big lie in contemporary American political life is only the most recent example of the persistence of this question, whose history undoubtedly stretches back to earlier fascist successes in mobilizing large numbers of people to subject themselves to unquestioned obedience and followership, violence, and ruin. This is not to say that what is occurring today in a number of societies like the United States is simply a replay of what happened in the 1930s, since the two moments are too different and belong to vastly different temporal registers. The principal difference between these two moments of fascism was

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marked by the inversion of the earlier experience into what prevails today. What this means is that if the historic fascism seized the opportunity to exploit the economic, political, and social chaos produced by a world historical crisis in the 1930s, the more recent forms initiated by Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and other like-minded aspirants have no crisis to resolve, as such, or one that is fixable; they project no other plan but vague promises of bringing back some made-up golden age when things were better to relieve the present of the crises they have generated. They believe in nothing more than their own self-interest and identify its realization with their conception of a new order. But the fact that we seem to be compelled to recall the earlier episodes of fascism at this moment suggests the fear of the return of a shapeless historical revenant, of a corpse long dead.

One way to respond to the unknown is to appeal to allegory, which allows the historian to focus on some other's past or another present to draw attention away from what is closer at hand without directly engaging with it, especially if that historian is driven by the Gramscian conviction that politics is primary. A distant account substitutes for a nearby one, even if the former is not immediate and contains risks leading to censorship, imprisonment, and worse that are always imminent but indefinite. In fascist regimes and other authoritarian regimes. In the dark days of the late 1930s, Japanese historians like Hani Gorō turned to their more remote past to speak critically about the impending dangers of their immediate present. This has led me to imagine the possibility of both looking at the formation of Japan's earlier fascist experience from the perspectives supplied by the contemporary era and recognizing in that experience a vague parallelism to what seems to be the shape of our current situation. Part of the impulse to do so stems from the practice of history and its preoccupation with the past—either distant or near, but rarely the immediate past in which that practice is carried out. To allegorize what is close by substituting another time or place for one's own is a rhetorical device with political ambitions: a form of action, not a determination of historical knowledge. At the same time that such allegorization interrupts the normal procedure of historical practice, it discontinues the movement of history from past into present and suspends its dedication to demonstrating historical continuity with an unmoving present. The allegorization of history thus transmutes the discipline's diachronic vocation into the standstill of synchronic displacement and removes history's reliance on narrative linearity and its fixed subject in a closed chain that demands meaning (that is, interpretation). And

the initial premise of a direct causal relationship serves only to maintain the idea of historical continuity necessitated by the linear trajectory, while we have learned that historical continuity itself is a reification. But allegorical perception, at most, provides only an imprecise road map of where we might have been and the possibilities that history may bring us. Walter Benjamin acknowledged the limitations of allegorization when he remarked that “even the story of the life of Christ lent itself to that turning of history into nature” and “what remains is a living image amenable to all corrective interventions.”⁷¹

It is worth recalling that, the Japanese literary critic Kobayashi Hideo (of whom I say more below) was more right than wrong when he explained his reason for rejecting history and considering it useless in a reasonable manner that is more persuasive today than when he first articulated it before World War II. Kobayashi early observed that history was framed by chronology that both limited it and hindered it from achieving full disclosure because its patterning “imitates the movement of things” instead of giving us self-knowledge. His solution was to recommend the exercise of a hermeneutic “entry” into or access to the world expressed in archaic words to suggest how the ancient Japanese lived and looked upon their world. While Kobayashi believed that this method of reading could be carried on in every present and proposed this strategy as an alternative to historical practice, its horizon was limited to those who were members of a specific “language community,” such as the Japanese in Japan. His historicist solution was no improvement. Yet his critique inadvertently implied that history was characterized by progressive linearity, if not punctuated by stages, a procedure shared by both Marxian and bourgeois historians. In this connection, it has been said that Michel Foucault once confessed, somewhere, that he could not tell the difference between bourgeois and Marxist historiography and pointed out the evident similarity of the two practices in their uncritical fidelity to linear narrative form, distinguished by a unidirectional progressive movement of time and interspersed by epochal stages as regular as train stops, marking a before and after. Marx went further, critically discerning in the form of history a concealed theory that privileged the nation-form as the primary unit of organizing the historical field, with history adopting capitalism’s accountancy of time from its successive production processes. History was thus turned into a one-way street moving toward the bourgeois concept of progress (capitalist modernization), following the itinerary demanded by a society constructed on the principle of commodity exchange.

It was, I believe, this observation that preoccupied prewar thinkers like Benjamin and Ernst Bloch, especially, as well as their successors like Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, Henri Lefebvre, Peter Osborne, Daniel Ben-Said, and Massimiliano Tomba. The question for such thinkers was what form should history itself take. In this instance, the concealed theory in the form that Marx uncovered was eventually rethought and referred to as “real abstraction” or the “commodity exchange system” that generates an abstracted “social synthesis” rather than labor and value rather than use-value.² Thus, the system was capable of producing accumulated abstractions that prevailed in 1930s Japan like idealist philosophy and epistemology, as well as a culture that, according to the philosopher Tosaka Jun, performed the work of ideology, which he called the “Japanist ideology.”

The issue for thinkers who turned to interrogating history’s form and its conception of time was the inadequacy of the figure of linearity that structured and disposed historical narratives (as it did the form of biography, a condensation of history). In this discourse, the principal proponents were philosophers and historians were usually absent, which confirmed Jacques Rancière’s view that discussions of time, even historical time, belonged to the domain of philosophy rather than history. Historians, excepting Reinhart Kosellek, rarely saw the importance of the form of historical time as such, often confusing it with chronology. Historical narratives accepted as unproblematic the figure of unilinearity without rethinking the question of causal progression from a past to the present by bracketing the present in which the practice was carried out on the assumption that they were starting from the past. By the same measure, it is difficult to know what provoked Marxian philosophers to undertake the labor of thinking about the necessary rejection of conventional linearity and to begin imagining the relationship between time and history as a suitable detour that would allow them to envision an adequate form of history. Those philosophers may have been prompted by the lingering residues of the interwar period’s controversy over historicism and history’s failure to explain how pasts led to presents, as well as residues of the critique of excessive historical production that threw into doubt the discipline’s capacity to avoid the relativizing of values. In this connection, the Western Marxism that emerged in the interwar years turned away from the concreteness of the historical and toward the abstraction of a critical appraisal of prewar Marxian orthodoxy and bourgeois science, which never led back to the concrete (which Marx had projected it would).³ The turn stemmed less from the Russian Revolution’s priority of addressing the practical problem of constructing a new

everydayness than it did from the advent of the more urgent question of determining the consequences of revolutionary consciousness and agency under a maturing capitalism, in which the commodity form seemed to be approaching its completion and value was finessing history as its result. Considerations of the conception of everydayness in the West turned from Lenin's emphasis on matters of politics and history to issues of philosophy and value.⁴ In time, this hegemony of value over history (use-value) obscured the Marxian historical vocation, and it is hard not to conclude that the embrace of value by some of its more enthusiastic proponents was encouraged by that embrace's offer of a convenient alibi for forgetting history altogether. In such cases, value theory thus strove to empty history of its capacity for independence and difference and sought to make it essentially indistinguishable from capital. Under certain conditions of rupture, history's counter temporality was able to provide a release or exist from an outside⁵ represented by the received social order through intervening in the present.⁶ But in areas like Latin America, Asia, and Africa, the practical and historically concrete problem of constructing new societies after World War II, aided by new readings of Marx, led to a shift to history furnished with a new conception of form that no longer depended on linearity and unidirectionality.

In this book I have tried to envision historical practice as a mode of intervening in the past from the present as a telescoping, which is the only experiential perspective available. It is the time in which historical practice is carried on and when the past is animated and brought to life. This practice requires confronting the problem of historical time and responding to the need to think about it alongside capital's dominant structuring of everyday life and to consider the exits to the outside that the practice might offer. In this regard, I have relied on Benjamin's pertinent reflections on historical time and Bloch's protean notion of the multiversum, along with Antonio Gramsci's conception of passive revolution in the context of uneven development, which characterized not only Japan's capitalist development since the Meiji Restoration of 1868 but also most societies in their modernizing political transformations, leaving them laden with co-existing different temporalities (levels of time) in the present that mixed with, collided with, and rubbed against each other to produce the figure of constant friction and tensions that Tomba has usefully named "chronotone."⁷ Gramsci's conception of passive revolution provided what is still a timely warning of how a fascist outcome was invariably able to develop from the political ground of liberal democracy: it was initiated

by passive revolution through inverting the conditions that had enabled an earlier active revolution. This process has the historical authority to back up more recently identifiable signs of the spectacles that have already begun to appear in certain European states like Hungary and Poland, as well as in Turkey and India, and is now confronting American society. In this regard, the arrival of signs of fascisms must be seen as signifying the possibility of a dialectical reversal, whereby all the putative circumstances and resulting institutional safeguards said to have ensured the safety of liberal democratic polities can be easily reversed to enable the turn to oligarchic authoritarianism and demagogic fascism.

Concern with the agency of historical time has steered me to primarily focus this study on what might be called the contemporizing of the past that produced the figure of contemporary noncontemporaneity or synchronic nonsynchronisms, as well as the reverse of that production, the domination of the noncontemporary over the contemporary with the rise of fascism and its relentless campaign to banish history altogether and replace it with archaic myth or ideological fictions of an imagined past, what Benita Parry named fascist “symptoms of morbidity.” Benjamin’s rethinking of historical practice led him to designate the act of contemporizing the past, unmaking and refiguring it to serve the capitalist present, to express the historical materialistic principle of “actuality,” “in order for part of the past to be touched by the present instant”—that is, *Aktualität* (*jissai* in Japanese) praxis, or political intervention into the present. At the same time, “if part of the past is to be touched by the present instant,” there must be no continuity between them.⁸ What this requires is an approach to the past that relieves it from its fixed point of history, turning “political categories into theoretical categories” to intervene and politically interrupt the present, by making history yield a political meaning it had repressed or forgot.⁹ But the idea of contemporizing pasts was prefigured by Marx (in *Capital*), where he proposed that capital was positioned to appropriate what was at hand from prior economic modes like labor and to reconfigure them if necessary to put them to work for capitalism’s new production agenda. Hence, contemporizing signified a momentary coming together “in a flash” of part of the past with the “now” of the present to form a “constellation.” The result was an intense production of congested heterogeneous temporalities that Benjamin named “dialectics at a standstill.”¹⁰ By the same token, “the history that shows things” as they really were is a delusion and “was the strongest narcotic of the century.”¹¹ The true method of “making things present” compels us to “[represent] them in our space.”

"We don't displace our being," Benjamin warned, "into theirs; they step into our life."¹²

The thematic thread of Japan's modern history shows the experience of uneven and combined development inaugurated by the Meiji Restoration and its program dedicated to transforming the country into a modern society, instantiating capital's initial use of practices from the past to enable or enhance its own production system. While unevenness was not limited to latecomers to capitalism and implicated all societies committed to its production program, we are obliged to respond to capital's demand of a global perspective, as Marx proposed in the 1860s with his acknowledgment of the formation of the world market.

It should be stated here that while earlier Marxian interpretations saw the appearance of unevenness as a stage to be reached in the linear trajectory that ultimately would be overcome by a more progressive one, my reading, explained in detail later, proposes that all societies experience the status of unevenness the moment they embrace the capitalist agenda and remain permanently bound to it, even as the capitalist endowment may mature and advance. The reason for this comes from the uneven distribution of resources, which is capitalism's founding presupposition that is continually reproduced. In other words, capitalism, from its inception, has appropriated practices presupposed by prior modes of production to function with procedures derived from capitalism itself, thus assimilating what is outside of it to its inside and implanting an irresolvable contradiction at its origin. In this respect, unevenness refers to both the mixed methods capitalism appropriates and uses from the past with those it innovates and devises in the present to augment its production process, which widens the material disparity between those who must work for their subsistence and the owners of the means of production for whom they work. This approach results in putting an end to the necessity of following a tradition of linear history comprised of progressively moving from one stage to another imposed by an earlier Marxism for a temporal configuration consisting of capitalism's mixed unevenness and the possibility of its future overcoming, which is not linear but an inversion leading to its replacement.

Since given the appearance of multiple different routes to capitalist development, there could be no pure development of capitalism or the certainty that one size would fit all. Unevenness thus pointed to a plurality of societies, relationality, and different pathways toward the development of capitalism that made each experience manifestly worldly. Each also brought in its train survivals from the past to the present, observable in

contemporaneous noncontemporary temporalities that coexisted and indexed their different historical formations. It is precisely this dialectical encounter between history and capital's logic for producing combinations out of what appear to be incommensurables that brings us back to the importance of memory's vocation to restore the true meaning of the incommensurate and the critical restraints it puts on history's ambitions.

I have organized Japan's modern historical past into three separate montage-like moments, not causally connected to each other as if in a chain. Yet they are still readable not as stories but as temporalized political images in the manner of a palimpsest, from the Meiji Restoration to the world crises in the 1930s that drove Japan, along with other societies, to fascism and to its postwar life filled with dormant traces of the past ready to be reawakened. The appearance of such lingering residues of a dangerous past in the postwar present provides us with what Kristin Ross once called the "figurability of the present."¹³ This refers to the recognition of presents as "landscape[s]" capable of offering occasions of figurability at moments when capitalist time is interrupted by the unanticipated arrival and forcible entry of untimeliness brought about by the reanimated coexisting traces of what Marx described as the "inherited evils arising from the passive survival of archaic modes of production, with their accompanying train of anachronistic social and political relations"—that is, unwanted remains of the past bursting into the present.¹⁴ With the mobilization of figurability we have moved to a different perspective on what earlier might have seemed like a familiar scene, from vistas of "unchanging abstraction" to the possibility of catching sight of "the colour of the concrete."¹⁵ The moment of figurability thus signals the appearance of heterogeneous temporal congestion, whose presence requires overcoming the addiction of "abstraction" inflicted by the historicist hermeneutic of empathetic entry. Among historians, this approach had been an unquestioned matter of common sense and had been employed for a long time, substituting the act of feeling oneself into subjects in the past (or standing in their footprints) for the politics of "actuality" in historical understanding. It had made history interpretative rather than an interventionist interruption of the present, precisely the critique that Tosaka directed against the Japanist ideology. The scandals that have lain dormant in every present can be energized to surface in moments of contemporary crisis to show their presentness: they appear as significant and function as forms to stimulate the presence of mind, which puts forth the possibility of completion. But Benjamin's conception of "mindfulness" also sparks the reappearance of remembrance, of

what had been forgotten, and it encourages the need for completion, for finishing business.¹⁶ In the Japan (as well as a good part of the rest of the world) of the 1930s, conjunctural forces led to an economic crisis that fused with efforts to find political solutions. This provided the ground for the rise of fascism in a number of nation-states that ultimately led to worldwide conflict. In Japan, it was a configuration that summoned the archaic form of primal mythic and fictive histories—which, as Benjamin observed, made “semblance in history still more delusive by mandating nature as its homeland.”¹⁷ The Japanese response to the situation resulted in the construction of a Japanist program based on archaism, which recruited its followers from diverse social classes and promised to replace the troubled present by installing a nonexistent but supposed historical experience of the originary past of deities and the first emperor, which elicited a powerful critique dedicated to articulating a strategy founded on actuality (praxis) and the primacy of politics. Like the Meiji Restoration, remembrance ignited the claims of historical apocatastasis in the demand for a second restoration in the 1930s, completing what Japanists believed had remained unfinished, which was an even more magical fable than its predecessor. Postwar Japan experienced *déjà vu* in the steady reappearance of archaism in the activities of revived Shinto associations and in cultural expressions that sought to continue the rhythms of a Japanese historical consciousness in the archaic stratum and the desire for the archaic by showing the solidarity of a “linguistic community” rooted in the ancient “spirit of words.” The archaic was thus seen as pointing to an “origin” (not as a “genesis” or another beginning) and as calling for “restoration” or “restitution” (referring to something that remained unfinished and required completion).¹⁸

NOTES

Preface

- 1 Benjamin, *Origin of German Trauerspiel*, 194.
- 2 Not all the thinkers who contributed to this discourse used the conceptualization of “real abstraction,” but most were concerned with the mystifying relationship of capitalist abstraction and ideology. The idea of real abstraction was worked out by Alfred Sohn-Rethel in *Intellectual and Manual Labour*. It was, among other things, a critique of the artificial division between mental and manual labor, which Marx and Friedrich Engels had already raised in *The German Ideology*.
- 3 Marx, *Grundrisse*.
- 4 Roberts, *Philosophizing the Everyday*, 16 and 21–23.
- 5 See Walker, *Marx et la politique du dehors*, 23–55, 145–75, and 369–93.
- 6 See Tombazos, *Time in Marx*, 5–6.
- 7 Tomba, *Insurgent Universality, Historical Materialism*, chap. 1.
- 8 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 470. For a fuller explanation of this historical practice, see also N7a,1 on the same page.
- 9 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 857.
- 10 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 462.
- 11 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 463.
- 12 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 846.
- 13 Ross, *L’imaginaire de la commune*, 1–18.
- 14 Marx, *Capital*, 1:91.
- 15 Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 253.
- 16 See Max Horkheimer’s view in Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 471.
- 17 Benjamin, *Origin of German Trauerspiel*, 24–25.
- 18 Benjamin, *Origin of German Trauerspiel*, 24–25.

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