

Rising Sun, Dark Ocean: The Fascist Trajectory of Japanese “Ultra-Nationalism”

I. The Maruyama Definition

This essay will consider the question of Japanese ultra-nationalism before the Pacific War, and the meaning of fascism in the Japanese context. I will summarize the views of Maruyama Masao, presented in three essays of the early 1950s in his book *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics*, and evaluate the subsequent criticism of Maruyama’s position by Peter Duus and Daniel I. Okimoto in their 1979 paper, “Fascism and the History of Pre-War Japan: the Failure of a Concept.”

Maruyama defined fascism with elegant simplicity as the “concentrated expansion of ...counter-revolution.” Where fascism appears, it “corresponds to particular revolutionary circumstances.”¹

Contact with Western industrial modernity was the revolutionary circumstance that catalytically radicalized late Tokugawa economic progress and social change. “Confronted by the overwhelming superiority of the West in industry, technology, and armament, [the old privileged classes] were soon compelled to recognize that only by arming themselves...could they defend the old world against the new.” Maruyama wrote, “It is well established that modern Japanese nationalism stems from the impact of European power in the closing period of the Tokugawa era.” Nationalism was the form of Japan’s counter-revolution. “To explain [Japanese nationalism] ... we are obliged ... to focus on the unique pattern of Japan’s evolution as a modern state.” The pattern was built on an ancient and venerated concept. “Restoration leaders swiftly routed the

¹ F, pp. 160.

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pluralistic feudal powers within the country and brought them together under the authority of the Emperor.”²

What is genuinely different about Japanese nationalism is its multi-generational development. This permitted sufficient time for the cultural transference for all moral and political values to the Emperor against an economic background of industrial and military modernization. Through years of cultural conditioning, the authority of the Emperor was imbedded more deeply and effectively in the minds of the Japanese people than any fascist dictator before the age of television and the internet could dream. Maruyama called the “qualitative difference in the inner motive power that spurred Japan”³ *ultra-nationalism*.

II. Ultra-nationalism as Fascist Counter-revolution

Maruyama recognized that “[s]tructural content is one source of complexity.... Japan’s particular social organization, political structure, and cultural patterns have been the primary determinants of Japanese nationalism.” The installation of this structure in Japanese society was an internal process. “First and foremost, national consciousness ... was implanted by a systematic mobilization of traditional values.”⁴ Compulsory education effectively delivered the new ideology to the young.⁵ The importance of national unity, sharpened by chronic diplomatic and military insecurity, was paramount. The state’s fear of the external world, somewhat justified, provided focus. “In certain

² NiJ, pp. 135-142.

³ TPU, pp. 3.

⁴ NiJ, pp. 136, 146.

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cases nationalism became the direct force of anti-revolutionary oppression; in others it operated as a transfer mechanism for revolutionary energy, a role it played consistently until 1945.”⁶

Rooted in the revolution of western contact, as contact expanded and became more energetic, intimate, and articulated in culture and technology—as the exposure to the infection became more pronounced—the intensity of the counter-revolution deepened and took the form of similar political reactions elsewhere in the twentieth century world. This form met Maruyama’s definition. “Fascism is the twentieth century’s most acute and aggressive form of counter-revolution.” Maruyama understood that instances of fascism could vary significantly. “The concrete forms of fascism change with the concrete circumstances of the revolutionary situation.” Maruyama’s definition provides the fascist genotype; a concrete form of fascism exhibits a fascist phenotype. The “orthodox ideology of Japanese fascism,” he recounted, “was at pains to distinguish itself from Nazism and from Italian fascism, and it was in fact of a considerably different breed.” Maruyama gave an example of how the fascist phenotypes differed, “...unlike their German counterparts, the ‘lawless adventurers’ never succeeded in climbing to the seats of power *qua* adventurers; they merely played a spectacularly violent role in accelerating the growth of fascism from above.” The fascist genotype accommodated both instances, “...this division of labor between authority, power, and violence, formed a total system that both internally and externally was as fascist in function as anything Nazi Germany could show.”⁷

⁵ Pyle, 156.

⁶ NiJ, pp. 143.

⁷ F, pp. 159, 161, 167, 169, 170.

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There were other differences. “Der Fuhrer,” “Il Duce,” and “the Generalissimo” were the visible centers of mass in the Euro-fascist systems. In Japan, the Emperor was the dark matter of the ultra-nationalist galaxy, “...ultra-nationalism succeeded in spreading a many-layered, though invisible, net over the Japanese people.”⁸

The major distinction I draw between the fascist phenotypes of Europe and Japan is in their *trajectories*. Where in each case of Euro-fascism the counter-revolutionary political system was *precipitated* within a single lifetime by its “particular revolutionary circumstances,” the ultra-nationalist system in Japan was *cultivated* over three generations and three imperial eras. (Figure 1.)

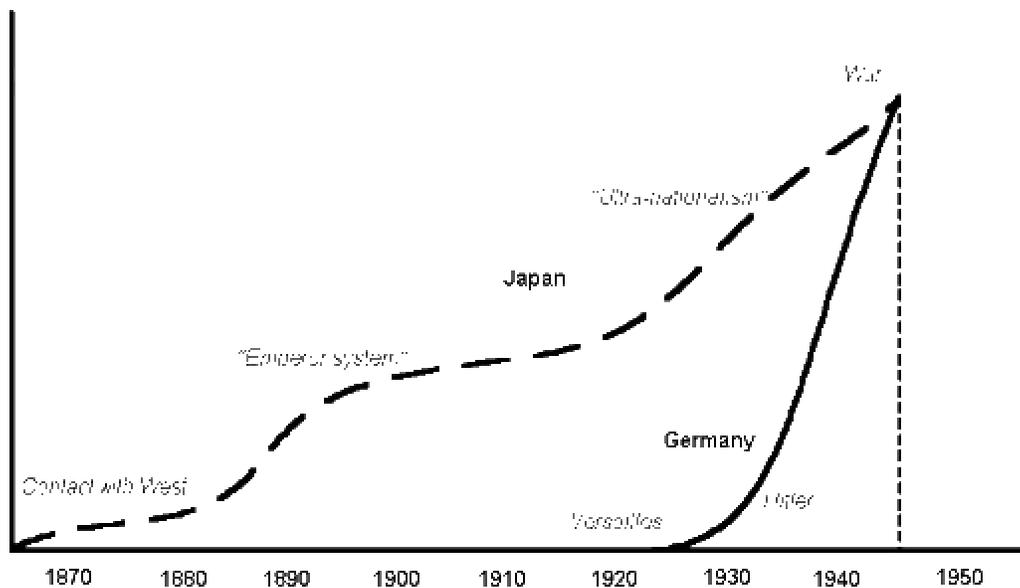


Figure 1. The fascist trajectory.

III. Contra Duus and Okimoto

⁸ TPU, pp.1.

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Duus and Okimoto deny that Japanese ultra-nationalism was fascist, but they are unable to state precisely what else it might have been.

Noting that “[d]efinitions of fascism come in all shapes and sizes” they quickly reject economically oriented hypotheses. I agree: whatever it is, fascism’s nature is political.

Duus and Okimoto mention Nolte’s characterization as an “intellectual style”—which grossly understates the historical reality of fascist capabilities. I also concur in their rejection of a class or social basis for fascism—Maruyama denies fascism “from below” on logical grounds based on his definition as “counter-revolution.” Duus and Okimoto are not satisfied to view fascism as “simply a form of political movement”—yet this is the *very essence of fascism*.⁹

Duus and Okimoto erect barrier after barrier to the proposition that Japanese ultra-nationalism was an instance of fascism. “[E]mpirical difficulties” and “logical problems” block the way. They question whether a “generic definition” of fascism “is feasible.”¹⁰

Duus and Okimoto misconstrue Maruyama when they claim that he pointed out that “in Japan there was no mass movement and no cult of the supreme leader.” They declare that it is “obvious” that “the Japanese case is so dissimilar that it is meaningless to speak of Japan in the 1930s as a ‘fascist’ political system.” Contrary to this assertion, Maruyama’s 1946 essay “Theory and Psychology of Ultra-Nationalism” ably demonstrated how the Japanese people were culturally conditioned to transfer political and moral matters of public and private conscience to the Emperor. It is by no means obvious that the Japanese ultra-nationalist phenotype is so dissimilar from other modern

⁹ DO, pp. 65.

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examples that it cannot be placed in the fascist genotype. Maruyama, in his essay, does not “neglect” the “microsocietal level” when he discusses the “emperor system’ or ‘fascism’ at the top,” for he discusses at length the psychological phenomenon he calls the “transfer of oppression.”¹¹

Their case unproven, Duus and Okimoto invite us to consider “why fascism failed” in pre-war Japan. Quickly correcting themselves, they suggest that “perhaps we should abandon the paradigm of fascism as one that has served its purpose but is no longer ... useful.... Unless it is possible to work out a more complex typology of fascism that would account for national and regional variations, the hazards of using the fascist paradigm as an analytical tool are likely to offset its benefits.”¹² This conditional statement is rather contemptuous of the power of scientific language applied to historiography; the methods of systems theory, particularly as applied to linguistics and genetics, amply supplement the lexicon of sociopolitical discourse. The notion of fascism, succinctly defined and taken as a genotype in the category of political systems, can be further dissected through the identification of specific phenotypes, such as Germany, Italy, and the subject of our inquiry, Japan. Duus and Okimoto themselves establish that another characteristic of fascist genotype, extreme compartmentalization of the governing bureaucracy, was present in the Japanese phenotype when they ask “how and why bureaucracies in Japan have wielded such extraordinary *de facto* power when the *de jure* authority has been limited.”¹³ Again, they have ignored the central position of

¹⁰ DO, pp. 66.

¹¹ DO, pp. 66-67. TPU, pp. 18.

¹² DO, pp. 67.

¹³ DO, pp. 74.

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the Emperor, from whom each quasi-autonomous ministry and department independently drew its power.

Deterred by “the many problems that bedevil the study of Japanese fascism,” Duus and Okimoto call for new paradigms. They suggest that the problems might go away if we ignore them, for they are concerned that “the phenomenon of fascism has deflected attention from other intriguing questions...about the 1930s.” These remarks are an astounding shirk of the historian’s responsibility, given the well-documented human impact of fascism; the “hazards” lay in a failure to comprehend the mechanisms of the fascist political system.¹⁴

Assuming that “‘fascism’ is not an apt tag for the [Japanese] total political system” Duus and Okimoto curiously undercut their own assumption by asking why fascist rhetoric and ideas had so much appeal in the 1930s in Japan, Germany and elsewhere. Second, they ask how to account for the similarities in the Japanese system to the fascist regimes in Europe. They ask was it something other than fascism? Third, they question how the shape of the world may have shaped Japanese politics. I do not agree that fascism is not an apt tag. To address their first and second points, the regimes of Japan, Germany and elsewhere were distinct applied instances of a single political concept, multiple phenotypes of a genotype for which Maruyama has provided a succinct definition as “counter-revolution.” To answer their third point, the “pattern of response to the outside world that has characterized Japan since the Meiji era”¹⁵ was just the fascist trajectory, 1868 to 1945, of the Japanese nationalist counter-revolutionary program initiated by the “old ruling class” and carried to its apocalyptic conclusion by twentieth

¹⁴ DO, pp. 67.

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century bureaucrats and militarists, under the aegis of the ever-present will of the Emperor. By the 1930s, it was Japan that was about to shape the world.

With the elephant comfortably seated in the middle of the room, Duus and Okimoto search for the question by stating its answer. “Was the fascist strain in Japanese thought during the 1930s anything more than a manifestation of cultural continuity?” That is exactly what it was: cultural continuity. Admitting that what Kamishima Jiro called “emperor system fascism” had “shaped the values and behavior of the bulk of the Japanese population before World War II,” Duus and Okimoto inquire why this fascist ideology was produced as late as the 1930s, given the left-wing tendencies of the previous decade.¹⁶ The fascist foundation of ultra-nationalism had been laid decades earlier in the Imperial Rescript on Education and the Meiji Constitution. Transient cultural events could not perturb the momentum toward ultra-nationalism.

Duus and Okimoto suggest that the “general impulse toward managed economies” in the 1930s could supply a different adjective than “fascist” to describe the Japanese political scene: “managerial.” The latter adjective describes the activity of the bureaucracy, but utterly ignores the sovereign centrality of the Emperor. Then Duus and Okimoto offer a new paradigm of “corporatism.” I would rephrase their identification of fascism with the managerial impulse to say that corporatism is more properly the sub-species of the impulse, not fascism. The concept does have relevance in the context of the Japanese fascist trajectory, where dynamic dominance of the state over the private sector was possible because of the cultural preparation to render the state, in the person of

¹⁵ DO, pp. 68.

¹⁶ DO, pp. 68.

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the Emperor, the source of all value judgements. In the German case, the private sector, to a large degree in its own self-interest, cooperated with the state.

Yet again Duus and Okimoto deliberately avoid a range of possibilities to account for Japanese ultra-nationalism by turning away from the resemblance (or lack thereof) of Japan to the European fascist states, ignoring the formative power of unique national characteristics such as race and geography. They entreat us to “abandon the ethnocentric biases inherent in attempts to find fascism in Japan.”¹⁷ Maruyama cut to the quick of this politically correct entreaty in 1951 when he wrote that ethnocentrism is “the irrational source of nationalism in general.”¹⁸

Finally Duus and Okimoto return to where the whole ultra-nationalist process in Japan began, the international issue. The key to the relationship of international factors to the Japanese domestic situation is that the very origin of the ultra-nationalist movement was contact with the West. All that followed was counter-revolution to that revolutionary situation.

IV. Conclusion

Duus and Okimoto make much of the “difficulties inherent in macro-theory.”¹⁹ They frequently seem to step back when confronted with the complexity of the problem at hand. Thirty years earlier, Maruyama identified the two reasons why no attempt at fundamental analysis of the intellectual structure or psychological basis of Japanese ultra-

¹⁷ DO, pp. 71-72.

¹⁸ NiJ, pp. 140.

¹⁹ DO, pp. 74.

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nationalism had yet been made: “in the first place, the problem is too simple; secondly, it is too complex.”²⁰ I have suggested that the modern scientific language of complex systems such as genetics and linguistics facilitates an analytic consideration of the nature of fascism. Maruyama intuitively understood that the best solution to complexity of description was simplicity of explanation.

-Pete Ahrens 03-05-07

²⁰ TPU, pp. 1.

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