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ROUNDTABLE

# Teaching Fascism from a Global Perspective: Lessons from Interwar Japan

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This essay draws upon the history of fascism and its critique in interwar Japan to propose three interrelated points concerning how we teach fascism: that it is important for students to understand fascism as a global phenomenon, that some of the most insightful analyses of fascism were written by those who confronted its first manifestations in the interwar period, and that when read together, these early analyses reveal the limits of liberalism to adequately address the conditions that produce fascism or to counter the threat it poses. To consider these three points, the essay focuses on Tosaka Jun (1900–45) and how he can be assigned and read alongside his European contemporaries such as Ernst Bloch (1885–1977) and Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979).

I teach about fascism in my history courses on modern Japanese history and in a thematic seminar on global fascism developed and co-taught with my colleague Maggie Clinton at Middlebury College.[1] I have also written on the conditions in which fascism was able to consolidate in Japan in the 1930s as well as some of its particular ideological expressions.[2] Thus, for my contribution to this roundtable, I would like to draw on the history of Japan to propose three interrelated points concerning how we teach fascism: (1) that it is important for students to understand fascism as a global phenomenon because it is an ideological-political reaction to the dynamics and contradictions of capitalist modernity; (2) that some of the most insightful analyses of fascism were written by those who confronted its first manifestations in the 1920s and 1930s, which students can read in order to reflect on the current political moment; and (3) that when read together, these earlier analyses reveal to students the limits of liberalism to adequately address the conditions in which fascism emerges and the threat that it poses, prompting them to understand fascism beyond simply as a threat to law, rights, or electoral politics. In solidarity with our colleague Sungik Yang's objective to 'decenter' Europe when studying fascism, I will elaborate on these points through the particular history of interwar Japan.[3] And for

[1] See Maggie's book on rightwing revolutionary politics in interwar China: Maggie Clinton, *Revolutionary Nativism: Fascism and Culture in China, 1925-1937* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[2] For the conditions which helped fascism to consolidate in Japan, see: Max Ward, 'Thinking Like a State: Policing Dangerous Thought in Imperial Japan, 1900–1945', *Positions: Asia Critique* 30, no. 1 (February 2022): 35–60; Max Ward, *Thought Crime: Ideology and State Power in Interwar Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

[3] Sungik Yang, 'The Highest Stage of Nationalism: Postcolonial Fascism in Korea and Breaking Fascism Out of a Eurocentric Frame', *The American Historical Review* 130, no. 4 (December 2025): 1512–34.

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those interested in integrating more East Asian history into their teaching, I will provide references to English-language sources in the footnotes.[4]

I begin by preparing students with a theory of fascism extrapolated from the European experience, so that they have some working themes and tropes to consider when reading non-western sources. When successful, students identify underlying logics of fascism in the assigned readings but also how these were expressed in particular form in interwar Japan or elsewhere. There is a built-in comparative analysis to such a teaching exercise, since what is presented as a 'general theory' of fascism is derived from specific writings and events in European history, and students can then compare these European examples once we start reading primary sources from other regions. However, I purposely assign theories of fascism that describe it as an ideology of reaction rather than a type of movement or state regime (which is how I was taught about fascism as an undergraduate in the 1990s). This provides students with a method to analyse how this ideological form found expression in different national contexts, even as its content varied widely.

For example, I assign Mark Neocleous's introduction to fascism, in which he appropriates Jeffrey Herf's idea of 'reactionary modernism' and expands it into a general temporal politics that distinguishes fascism from other forms of reactionary or conservative politics.[5] Specifically, Neocleous argues that, as an ideological form, fascism presents a vision of radical transformation that emerges from within the temporality of capitalism, but as a revolution that will realise a mythic past 'for the first time'.[6] Although Neocleous's study is strictly focused on Europe, I would argue that by grounding fascism's unique 'politics of time' in the socio-temporal dynamics of capitalism, his theory suggests that fascism becomes an available form of reaction when the contradictions endemic to capitalism become particularly acute, which compels reactionary elements to plumb the myths unique to their particular nation in order to imagine a radical transformation and national regeneration in the future.[7] This also helps students distinguish between other forms of rightist politics such as conventional conservatism, which may be reacting against social change or crises in the name of tradition and order, but are not calling for a revolutionary transformation based on a mythic past. This approach has also inspired discussions in my class about how contemporary calls to restore, regenerate or 'make great again' derive their appeal more from myth than reference to an empirical past, which also illuminates how these ideas inform a more radical vision of socio-political transformation than simple conservative nostalgia. However, it is also important for students to recognise that, because there is a shared commitment to nation, ethnic purity, patriarchy, and most importantly, property (discussed below), within certain conditions, conservatives will ally themselves with fascist elements despite their different temporal dispositions, as exemplified in every historical case of fascism coming to power, and which we can see occurring in different parts of the world today.

[4]I should mention that there was a debate in Anglophone Japanese Studies about whether interwar Japan could be categorised as 'fascist', based on the social and political scientific models used to define a political system as totalitarian in the 1950s and 1960s. Although not very insightful, this debate reflected the intellectual trajectory of Area Studies at the time and provides an example of the politics underwriting debates over fascism more generally. For a survey of these debates, see: Gavan McCormack, 'Nineteen-Thirties Japan: Fascism?', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 14, no. 2 (June 1982): 20–32; Alan Tansman, *The Culture of Japanese Fascism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 1–28.

[5]Mark Neocleous, *Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[6]Neocleous's theory of political temporality is drawn from: Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-garde* (London: Verso, 1995). See: Neocleous, *Fascism*, 73. Note that, although Roger Griffin's theory of 'national palingenesis' finds a similar temporal dynamic within fascism, this is not contextualised in relation to capitalism but rather a more general theory of 'modernity' and 'modernism'. For a concise outline of Griffin's theory, see: Roger Griffin, 'Modernity, Modernism, and Fascism. A "Mazeway Resynthesis"', *Modernism /Modernity* 15, no. 1 (January 2008): 9–24.

[7]The exploration of fascism as an ideology can be complimented with materialist analyses that locate fascism in a capitalist world-system. I find Walter Goldfrank's often overlooked essay insightful: Walter Goldfrank, 'Fascism and World Economy,' in *Social Change in the Capitalist World System,* ed. Barbara Kaplan (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1978), 75–117. In the study of the Japanese context, I find Herbert Bix's essay informative: Herbert Bix, 'Rethinking "Emperor-System Fascism": Ruptures and Continuities in Modern Japanese History', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 14, no. 2 (April–June 1982): 2–19.

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There are numerous historical examples of thinkers or movements in the 1930s espousing a politics in this ideological form – i.e., in fascism's unique 'politics of time' – wherein a radical social transformation was envisioned through the symbols and tropes of national myth.[8] In 1930s Japan, for example, there was a conjuncture of socio-economic crises and geopolitical tensions that produced the conditions in which earlier, more conventional conservative critiques of individualism, materialism and 'western' modernity gave way to a more radical ideology envisioning an all-encompassing 'renovation' (*kakushin*) of the Japanese Empire so that it could create a 'new order in Asia' (*Tōa shinchitsujo*).[9] By the late-1930s, state officials borrowed this once marginal ideology as they used it to justify Japan's invasion of China in world-historical terms and mobilise the empire for total war.[10] Much of this material has been translated into English, which students can read and compare with European texts.[11] There were also, for a time, many critiques of fascism written in Japan, the most insightful of which was Tosaka Jun's *The Japanese Ideology* (1935), which was published just a few years before Tosaka was imprisoned where he languished until his death in August 1945.[12] I will discuss teaching Tosaka further below, but here I want to emphasise that although Tosaka and other Japanese writers were analysing specific developments in Japan, they all approached fascism as a general phenomenon in which Japan was simply one 'link in a global chain' (Tosaka) of fascist reaction to a global crisis.[13] This general approach allows students to extrapolate themes and concepts from these Japanese texts and to consider their analytical value in other national or historical settings, which is the second point I would like to discuss.

Most students who take my classes arrive with some familiarity with the recent 'fascism debate' in the United States in which liberal pundits debated if Donald Trump and the so-called MAGA movement could be labelled 'fascist'.[14] This debate hinged on analogies to Italian Fascism and German Nazism, focusing on comparisons of political rhetoric, charismatic leaders, anti-democratic tendencies, campaign style and degree of disregard for the law. Interestingly, the merits of such debate were litigated after the first Trump presidency, when American liberals breathed a sigh of relief and reflected on the debate for what it supposedly revealed about political thinking in contemporary America.[15] However, my students do not find this debate satisfactory, for two reasons: first, it

[8]The best analysis of fascist ideology in Japan is: Harry Harootunian, *Archaicism and Actuality: Japan and the Global Fascist Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023). For an overview of the critique of modernity in interwar Japan, see: Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[9]There were some elements within the ultra-rightist coalition in Japan who emulated Italian fascism and German Nazism. See: Reto Hofmann, *The Fascist Effect: Japan and Italy, 1915-1952* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Ricky Law, *Transnational Nazism: Ideology and Culture in German-Japanese Relations, 1919–1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[10]See: Max Ward 'Displaying the Worldview of Japanese Fascism: The Tokyo Thought War Exhibition of 1938', *Critical Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (September 2015): 414–39; Max Ward, 'Crisis Ideology and the Articulation of Fascism in Interwar Japan: The 1938 Thought War Symposium', *Japan Forum* 26, no. 4 (December 2014): 462–85.

[11]For an early text that inspired many rightists in the 1920s and 1930s, see Brij Tanaka's translation and analysis of Kita Ikki's writings: Brij Tankha, *Kita Ikki and the Making of Modern Japan: A Vision of Empire* (Kent, UK: Global Oriental, 2006). For later, official tracts translated into English, see: *Kokutai no Hongi: Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949); *The Way of the Subject* (1941), excerpts in: *Japan: A Documentary History*, Vol II, edited by David Lu, 435–40 (London: ME Sharpe, 1997). The Lu anthology has many translated texts from this period, including Japan's pacts with Germany and Italy (1940) and with the areas that Japan occupied by 1943. See Chapter 4 of Lu, *Japan: A Documentary History*, Vol II.

[12]Tosaka Jun, *The Japanese Ideology: A Marxist Critique of Liberalism and Fascism*, trans. Robert Stolz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024).

[13]Tosaka, *The Japanese Ideology*, 14.

[14]For an overview, see: Udi Greenberg, 'What was the Fascism Debate?,' *Dissent Magazine*, September 2021, accessed May 26, 2026, https://dissentmagazine.org/article/what-was-the-fascism-debate/.

[15]See: Mabel Berezin, 'Does the "Fascism Debate" Matter for Understanding 2024 American Politics?', *American Academy of Political and Social Science* 708, no. 1 (March 2024): 31–43; Udi Greenberg, 'Intellectual History and the Fascism Debate: On Analogies and Polemic', *Modern Intellectual History* 20 (March 2023): 571–81.

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was largely focused on political style and not the conditions which made reactionary ideology (i.e., MAGA) appeal to a variety of constituencies; and; second, many students closely follow international events and find it myopic to debate contemporary American party politics in isolation from similar developments elsewhere, particularly as MAGA ideologues continued to establish connections with far-right parties in other countries, including in South Korea and Japan.[16]

Here I would argue that interwar analyses of fascism, including those of Tosaka Jun, Ernst Bloch, Antonio Gramsci, Herbert Marcuse, Karl Polanyi and others, provide students with a much more useful array of analytical concepts and themes to study fascism than those found in current debates.[17] For example, Bloch provides a theory of multi-level dialectics to understand how various classes experienced an objective crisis in a range of different temporal dispositions (what he calls 'synchronous non-synchronicity', i.e., the lived social experience of capitalism), but which were captured by the false non-synchronicity of fascist mythology.[18] Recently, Alberto Toscano has productively considered our current conjuncture – what he calls 'late fascism' – through Bloch's theory of synchronous non-synchronicity.[19] Students find in Bloch a useful way to consider how grievances from different class positions can coalesce around an ideology, while at the same time, learning that it is, in certain conditions, the petit-bourgeoisie that provide the primary social support for reactionary politics (what has been identified as 'suburban rage' in the contemporary United States).[20]

Writing at the same time as Bloch, Tosaka analysed the specific situation in 1930s Japan, and saw an ideology forming with the same distinctive temporal politics constitutive of fascism as elsewhere. He called this ideology 'Japanism' (*Nihonshugi*) and characterised it as the 'Japanese form of fascism'.[21] Specifically, he analysed how many Japanese ideologues extracted terms and phrases from eighth-century imperial myths and wielded them to answer the socio-economic crises afflicting Japan, an ahistorical and anachronistic move he categorised as 'restorationism' (*fukkōshugi*). Here students learn a different, non-European, expression of the political temporality theorised by Neocleous, and can compare Tosaka's analysis with those of his contemporaries such as Bloch. Together, these thinkers not only teach students about how contemporaries analysed fascism in different regions, but also provide useful categories to consider contemporary reactionary ideologies that invoke myth to imagine a total renovation of society and politics, such as the more extreme versions of white Christian nationalism in the United States.[22]

To my third point, many of these interwar critics of fascism emphasised the relationship between fascism and the constitutive limits of liberalism. Some of the liveliest debates in my classes have

[16]See: BBC, 'Bannon plan for Europe-wide populist 'supergroup' sparks alarm,' 24 July 2018, accessed May 26, 2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44926417. This has only strengthened with the second Trump presidency, see: Andrew Roth, 'JD Vance breaks taboo by meeting with leader of Germany's far-right party,' *The Guardian*, 14 Feb 2025, accessed August 14, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/14/jd-vance-alice-weidel-meeting-germany-far-right. Charlie Kirk's last international trip before his death was in East Asia, including meeting with the leader of Japan's ultra-right party Sanseitō. See: John Geddie and Josh Smith, 'Days before death, Charlie Kirk debuted his conservative message in Asia,' *Reuters* 11 September 2025, accessed May 26, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/us/days-before-death-charlie-kirk-debuted-his-conservative-message-asia-2025-09-11/.

[17]Karl Polanyi, 'The Essence of Fascism,' in *Christianity and the Social Revolution,* ed. John Lewis (London: Camelot Press, 1935), 359–94. Walter Benjamin should also be mentioned. See his: Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,' in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 3, 1935-1938,* ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 251–83.

[18]Ernst Bloch, 'Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics', *New German Critique*, no. 11 (Spring, 1977): 22–38.

[19]Alberto Toscano, *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis* (London: Verso, 2023).

[20]Chicago Project on Security and Threats, 'Trump Suburban Rage: The Conclusive Findings on Who Stormed the US Capitol and Why It Matters' (14 April, 2025), accessed May 30, 2026, https://cpost.uchicago.edu/publications/research_report_trump_suburban_rage/.

[21]Tosaka, *The Japanese Ideology*, 14.

[22]Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor, *End Times Fascism: And the Fight for the Living World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2026); Philip Gorski, Samuel Perry, and Jemar Tisby, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

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been inspired by pairing Marcuse's 1934 essay 'The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State' with Tosaka's critique of liberalism in Japan and how it produced the conditions for 'Japanism' to coalesce in the 1930s. Both Marcuse and Tosaka problematise the conventional assumption (which many of my students share) that liberalism and fascism are diametrically opposed, and that fascism only forms against and at the expense of liberalism. However, there are differences between how Marcuse and Tosaka understood this relationship, which can be a useful exercise for students to read and compare.

For example, Marcuse works through the totalitarian worldview (fascism) and its ostensible target of critique: liberalism. He notes that fascism's critique of liberalism bypasses the socio-historical reality – the 'real content' – of liberalism and renders it simply a 'vague "*Weltanschauung*"' (think here of ambiguous critiques of 'globalism' or 'woke ideology').[23] What fascism overlooks is the foundation of liberalism, namely 'the individual economic subject's free ownership and control of private property and the politically and legally guaranteed security of these rights'.[24] The ideological move here is that fascism is 'itself largely in accord with this basic structure' (i.e., property) – and simply attacks other principles that liberalism had itself failed to produce (e.g., equality, liberty, etc.).[25] Writing at the same time, Karl Polanyi arrived at a similar conclusion.[26] This prompts my students to reflect on their own assumptions about what fascism seems to be threatening, or if liberalism provides an adequate response to fascism or other reactionary political threats.

Tosaka approached this relationship by developing a historical schema, finding liberalism unfolding in three historical stages in both Europe and Japan – first as an economic stage, then a political stage, to finally what he saw in his own moment in Japan, a cultural stage. He explained that although liberalism emerged from and corresponded to the historical development of bourgeois capitalism in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe and in late–nineteenth–century Japan (i.e., Meiji period, 1868–1912), it no longer corresponded to the contemporary form of accumulation following the Great War; namely, monopoly capitalism, which was highly administered, controlled and consolidated. Unable to account for monopoly capitalism or address its unique contradictions, liberalism retreated further into the realm of idealism – 'an escape from reality' – into a kind of 'religious consciousness' that sought salvation in culture. This is when Japanism and its mythic restorationism was able to take root and spread. Although very different, students have considered Tosaka's distinctions when debating the contemporary 'culture wars' and how these 'wars' relate to the social conditions that neoliberal economics generated, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis and the political realignments it made possible.[27] In his own time, Tosaka believed that liberalism's retreat revealed that it lacked objective standards to evaluate political ideas or proposals to then-current socio-economic problems, allowing various forms of idealism unrelated to contemporary conditions to take root.[28] Such an approach challenges students to reflect on their own assumptions, and to clarify the underlying principles of their often vague political convictions when discussing difficult problems such as what is the nature of fascism. Along with Marcuse and Polanyi, Tosaka can be productively read alongside contemporary theorists who have also returned to reflect on the relationship between liberalism and fascism.[29]

[23] Marcuse, 'Totalitarian View of the State,' 5.

[24] Ibid.

[25] From this basis, Marcuse points to analogical elements between the totalitarian view and liberalism, including their different emphases on nature (for liberalism, natural law theory) as well as their shared emphasis on security.

[26] Polanyi, 'The Essence of Fascism,' 367.

[27] Here I would recommend: Harry Harootunian, 'A Fascism for Our Time,' *The Massachusetts Review*, 6 January 2021, accessed August 30, 2021, https://www.massreview.org/node/9428.

[28] Tosaka, *The Japanese Ideology*, 9, 14.

[29] For example: Slavoj Žižek, *Liberal Fascisms* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2026).

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To conclude, I have argued that it is important for students to learn about historical fascism from a global perspective since it was a reactionary ideology that found expression in various locations that were experiencing the crises and dislocations of capitalism, such as Japan.[30] Many of the interwar analyses of fascism understood it in this way, thereby producing an archive of insights into the phenomenon which students can read when considering the global but uneven conditions in which various forms of reaction have spread today. I believe that Neocleous's theory of the political temporality unique to fascist ideology provides one way to distinguish fascism from other forms of reaction, a political temporality that Tosaka, Bloch and others saw in their historical moments. Indeed, beyond what Tosaka teaches us about the political history of interwar Japan, he offers a method to analyse various ideological expressions of fascism that, paired with others, can inspire students to rethink many of the assumptions they have about fascism and the conditions that produce it.[31]

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[30]In a British iteration of the 'fascism debate', Daniel Trilling has recently asked if Britons are witnessing the rise of fascism (spoiler alert, he answers 'no', rather it is rightwing populism). However, he initiates his inquiry by mentioning developments outside of the United Kingdom and situates the rise of rightist populism in the socio-economic and demographic dislocations of neoliberalism, both of which suggest an international approach to the question. See: Daniel Trilling, 'The Impossible Promise: Are We Witnessing the Return of Fascism?,' *The Guardian*, 18 April 2026, accessed September 11, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2026/apr/18/the-impossible-promise-are-we-witnessing-the-return-of-fascism.

[31]See Robert Stolz's introduction to his translation of Tosaka, *The Japanese Ideology* ix–xxxii. For undergraduate classes, I recommend assigning Chapters 1 and 23 of *The Japanese Ideology*.

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