'Overcoming modernity', overcoming what?: 'Modernity' in wartime Japan and its implication

Atsuko Ichijo (Kingston University, UK)

Abstract
The Overcoming Modernity symposium that took place in wartime Japan (in summer 1942) has gained notoriety in the postwar period as a centrepiece of wartime propaganda justifying and legitimising Japanese military actions across Asia. While the published proceedings of the symposium were not as widely read as its postwar notoriety suggests, the phrase 'overcoming modernity' certainly captured the *zeitgeist* of the time in which 'modernity' was questioned, debated and contested. The efforts to examine 'modernity' in the first half of the twentieth century in Japan were led by a group of philosophers and intellectuals often referred to as the Kyoto School of philosophy because the school mainly drew its members from the Philosophy Department of the Imperial University of Kyoto, but their efforts were not made in isolation. Questioning of modernity in the form of western civilisation had been gathering pace in the West since the end of the nineteenth century, which the members of the Kyoto School were all well aware of. This naturally leads to a few questions: what did the Kyoto School mean by 'modernity' in this intellectual climate? Does their 'modernity' justify their claim to have overcome modernity? The paper explores what the wartime Japanese intellectuals including the members of the Kyoto School understood as modernity and what they suggested as a way of overcoming it by examining two sets of symposia that took place between 1941 and 1942: the Overcoming Modernity symposium (1942) and the *Chūōkōron* symposia (1941-42). The examination has implications on the theoretical debate on modernity, in particular, on the strengths of multiple modernities thesis.

Introduction
The now infamous Overcoming Modernity symposium took place in July 1942, shortly after the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941. Its edited proceedings were first published in September and October 1942 issues of *Bungakukai* (the *Literary World*), a literary magazine, and then in a book form in 1943 by Sōgensha[1]. While Kawakami Tetsutarō, who organised the symposium, stated he was not certain if the symposium achieved its aim (Kawakami 1979: 166), the phrase, 'overcoming modernity', certainly caught the attention of intellectuals and the public of wartime Japan and established itself as a 'magical' phrase that was supposed to capture the *zeitgeist* (Takeuchi 1979: 274). Because of this, the phrase came to be deeply entangled with the Pacific War in postwar Japan to the extent that it became almost a taboo to refer to the phrase. However, the contemporary reception of the symposium was not as wide as the level of notoriety the phrase achieved in postwar Japan suggests. Suzuki (2010: 209-16) reports that only 6,000 copies of the first edition of the symposium proceedings in the book format were actually sold. This stands in contrast to the case of the proceedings of the World-Historical Standpoint and Japan symposia, which took place around the same time. They were first published in January and April 1942 issues and January 1943 issue of *Chūōkōron* (the *Central Review*), a major literary magazine, and then turned into a single volume in 1943, reaching much wider readership with 15,000 copies of the first edition

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[1] The book was translated into English by Richard Calichman in 2008. The article, however, uses the 1979 edition in Japanese as the main source.

printed and further 10,000 copies of the second edition made available in 1943. In fact, the idea of 'overcoming modernity' was not only articulated in the Overcoming Modernity symposium but had been discussed and explored intensively by members of the Kyoto School of philosophy, major members of which took part in the *Chūōkōron* symposia. In other words, 'overcoming modernity' was a phrase that captured a prominent feature of the intellectual landscape of wartime Japan where 'modernity' was questioned, debated and contested in earnest.

The questioning of modernity was not, however, unique to wartime Japan. It had already started in Europe, in particular, in the form of questioning the future of European/western civilisation from the end of the nineteenth century (Reijnen and Rensen 2014). These efforts intensified in the aftermath of World War I. While no attention was paid to intellectual activities in relation to peace building when the League of Nations was set up in 1919, by 1921 the role of intellectuals in the pursuit of peace came to be recognised and International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation (CICI) was founded with backing from the League and a number of eminent scholars. In 1926, the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (IICI), which came to serve as the executive organ of the CICI, was set up in Paris (van Heerikhuizen, 2014). The IICI was behind the celebrated three-day conference on the future of the European mind chaired by Paul Valéry in Paris on 16-18 October 1933. In terms of chronology, therefore, the questioning of modernity in wartime Japan was very much in synch with developments in Europe/the West, if not following the European/western trend. Those who participated in the debate including the Overcoming Modernity symposium and the *Chūōkōron* symposia were well-versed in a variety of western disciplines including philosophy, literature, musicology, film studies and physics. Many of them were trained in Europe. It is therefore not surprising if they shared concern about modernity with their contemporaries in Europe/the West. A glimpse of the proceedings of these symposia, however, tells us that those intellectuals were engaged with the question from perspectives which were intentionally differentiated from the European ones. So what was the 'modernity' they sought to overcome? What were the conditions under which 'modernity' was questioned by intellectuals led by the Kyoto School of philosophy? Did they succeed in 'overcoming modernity' despite Kawakami's misgiving? The article seeks to answer these questions by examining the two sets of symposia, the Overcoming Modernity symposium and the *Chūōkōron* symposia with particular reference to the understanding expressed by the members of the Kyoto School of philosophy.

The context

Clearly, modernity is a contested concept as in the case of any other concept in social sciences. The problem is arguably more confounded with the concept of modernity because it is circular in construction or reflexively constructed: 'When people use this concept to observe, recognize, and describe reality, they simultaneously create the reality they anticipate and want to perceive' (Tang: 2018: 333). Although the current article does not aim to engage in the conceptual and theoretical discussion of modernity, in order to investigate the idea of 'overcoming modernity' in wartime Japan, some exploration of the concept of modernity is necessary.

Needless to say, modernity has many faces but two are particularly relevant to the discussion here. First, modernity is a label given to a historic period. In this case modernity is a historical period which is defined in contrast to the Middle Ages often perceived as the Dark Ages. As a label of a historical period, there is inevitably disagreement as to exactly when modernity set in and replaced the Middle

Ages, but a number of indicators to signal the arrival of modernity have been suggested: the Renaissance, the Reformation, the rise of science, industrialisation, the development of capitalism and so on. This perception of modernity as 'a historical, periodizing concept' is arguably established in the eighteenth century (Koselleck 2002: 155). Since the periodisation of history suggested here is based on the European/western experience, the way modernity is conceptualised and applied is legitimately seen as Euro-/western centric. It follows, then, that if the modernity to overcome is defined in this vein, 'overcoming modernity' represents a rejection of the established and authoritative, above all, European/western approach to the study of history, a kind of intellectual revolt in the study of history in particular.

The second major dimension of the concept of modernity describes a state or condition of society or human existence rather than how to understand history. This dimension is mainly debated by social theorists and philosophers. Classic examples include Max Weber's idea of disenchantment with the world and Emile Durkheim's view of modern society as highly differentiated and held together with organic solidarity. More recently, Chih-Chieh Tang (2018), who looks into the question of modernity in the case of Taiwan at the intersection of different civilisations, argues, following Nicolas Luhmann, that modernity is essentially about functional differentiation in society, which emerges through the formation of world society. More relevant to the concern of the current article, the idea of overcoming modernity or contestation about modernity, is Shmuel Eisenstadt's idea of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000). Eisenstadt argues that modernity should not be understood as a linear, evolutionary process consisting of clearly demarcated stages and converging on the European model but as 'a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs' (*ibid*.: 2). Eisenstadt emphasises the centrality of human agency in thinking about modernity; modernity is about an 'intensive reflexivity' and 'an emphasis on the autonomy of man'. This is a view supported by, among others, Edward Tiryakian (2011: 243): it is a 'vision' about 'the capability of men to transform the world for the better, without the constraining beliefs and institutions of the past which had been the anchors (if not chains) of the social order'.

The designation of human agency as the defining feature of modernity has some logical consequences. When the focus is placed on the workings of human agency, although structural and institutional differentiation remains important, the ways in which modernity unfolds would, by definition, differ from society to society because the human agents are subjectively involved with meaning making in various contexts (Roniger 2016). Multiplicity and heterogeneity become inevitable features of modernity 'since the way a human agent interprets and reinterprets things around him/her is by definition unique to the individual, because of his/her individuality and because of the particularity of the temporal and geographical situation in which he/she finds himself/herself. This means that modernity could crystallise in numerous forms because the human agent can draw from a variety of raw materials, including cultural, religious and civilisational heritages, the availability of which is specific to the locality' (Ichijo 2013: 29). The perspective of multiple modernities therefore allows us to envisage different constellations of modernity in the world, each of which is marked by continuous internal challenge and conflict. What is more, this perspective allows us to investigate the overcoming modernity movement in wartime Japan as an endogenous and autonomous movement rather than a symptom or reaction of Japan being absorbed in dominant, i.e., European/western modernity. This is in itself liberating because it offers us a way of acknowledging agency in the subject of investigation.

Having outlined two major dimensions of the concept of modernity, we now turn to the Japanese case. There is no doubt that the concept of modernity was imported by Japan as the Meiji government pursued its modernisation/westernisation programme in the second half of the nineteenth century. This is not to say that the Japanese before the Meiji Restoration lacked in historical consciousness. Firmly embedded in the Chinese cultural sphere, history/chronology writing had long been part of its culture and ways to manage society. The earliest official historical writing, *Kojiki, Records of Ancient Matters*, was presented to the Empress Genmei in 712 and *Nihonshoki, the Chronicles of Japan*, was finished in 720. As seen in efforts made by Ogyū Sorai (1666-1728) to go back to ancient Confucian texts in order to fully understand Confucius's teaching, and the *Kokugaku* movement inspired by Sorai's idea to study ancient text, there was a strong sense among scholars, if not among the general public, in Edo period (1603-1847) of a cleavage between the ancient past and the contemporary period. In the case of Tokugawa Japan, in particular, in the *Kokugaku* movement, the contemporary period was often seen as crises-ridden and representing all-round deterioration from the idyllic antiquity. In other words, while there was a clear sense of periodisation of history in pre-Meiji Japan, unlike in contemporary Europe, the contemporary period was not perceived to represent progress or improvement[2].

As the so-called seclusion policies of the Tokugawa Shogunate was loosened in response to western pressures in the 1860s and with the Meiji government's efforts to modernise Japanese society and polity, a vast quantity of foreign books covering wide ranging subjects, from natural science and technology, law and public administration to aesthetics, was imported, translated into Japanese and published. Many of the ideas expressed in these books did not have any immediate equivalent, and the early translators of western books were compelled to invent new words while translating. 'Translating' what did not exist in Japanese and classical Chinese texts as well as texts translated into Chinese by Christian missionaries was fraught with challenges. Not all translated words introduced in these early years survived; different suggestions were put forward for a particular idea/word and it took time for these translated words to be stabilised. Modernity is one such idea/word. Reflecting the multi-faceted meaning of modernity, there appeared two translations: 近世 (*kinsei*) and 近代 (*kindai*) (Yanabu 1982). The former, *kinsei*, the first to be used to translate 'modernity' into Japanese, was soon established as a term used in the periodisation of history[3]. The latter, *kindai*, which appeared later than *kinsei*, turned out to be a much fuzzier term. Akira Yanabu (1982) points out that while *kinsei* was relatively quickly established as a technical term in the study of history as the label for a historical period, the use of *kindai* continued to be ambiguous and vague and the word was often used interchangeably with 現代 (*gendai*), the translation of contemporary. This suggests, according to Yanabu (1982), that *kindai* was after all an empty word which was used to

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[2] This may be explained in reference to the Buddhist idea of Latter Day of the Law, also known as the Degenerate Age, which was influential in medieval Japan. The Three Ages of Buddhism thesis holds that as time passes after the passing of Buddha, the efficacy of his teaching (Dharma) decreases, making the world an increasingly worse place. However, this is not a place to follow this line of inquiry.

[3] The fact that modernity as *kinsei* was quickly absorbed by Japanese scholars can be seen in works by Japanese historians. For instance, Naitō Konan, a historian of East Asia, is well-known for advocating that the Tang-Song transition represented a shift from the medieval period to early modernity in China in early twentieth century against the then established view that China was still in the feudal system (Luo 2005).

capture a 'certain atmosphere' to do with something new and contemporary[4]. This appears to correspond to the second aspect of modernity as a description of the condition or state of modern society. The modernity implied in the Overcoming Modernity symposium was *kindai*, not *kinsei*; in other words, the symposium was not about the periodisation of history but about the perception of the condition of contemporary society.

The Overcoming Modernity symposium
The Overcoming Modernity symposium took place on 23-24 July 1942 in Tokyo. The participants were Nishitani Keiji, a philosopher from the Imperial University of Kyoto; Moroi Saburō, a musicologist; Suzuki Shigetaka, a historian from the Imperial University of Kyoto; Kikuchi Seishi, an atomic physicist from the Imperial University of Osaka; Shimomura Toratarō, a philosopher of science from the Imperial University of Tokyo; Yoshimitsu Yoshihiko, a Catholic theologian from Sophia Uiversity; Kobayashi Hideo, a literary critic; Kamei Katsuichirō, a literary critic; Hayashi Fusao, a novelist; Miyoshi Tatsuji, a poet; Tsumura Hideo, a film critic; Nakamura Mitsuo, a literary critic and Kawakami Tetsutarō, a literary critic and the organiser of the symposium. Nishitani, Suzuki and Shimomura were usually seen as members of Kyoto School of philosophy and Kobayashi, Kamei, Hayashi, Miyoshi, Nakamura and Kawakami were members of the coterie that ran the *Literary World*. Kamei and Hayoshi were regarded as members of the Japanese Romantic School (Calichman 2008). The idea of holding a symposium was floated early in 1942 and Kawakami, Kamei and Kobayashi finalised the idea in May and started to contact the selected participants. All those contacted agreed to take part except Yasuda Yojūrō, a literary critic and the leader of the Japanese Romantic School who had to pull out from the symposium at the last moment. Each of them was asked to produce a written piece on the theme of overcoming modernity before the symposium which was circulated among the participants. The transcript of the symposium and these contributions were first published in the September and October 1942 issues of the *Literary World*, and then, after some participants revised their papers, were published in a book format in 1943.

As it is widely acknowledged, the symposium did not make substantial intellectual contribution to the examination of modernity (Takeuchi 1979; Suzuki 2015). The organiser, Kawakami, himself admitted that 'the strange sense of chaos and rupture' 'dominated the symposium' doubting if the event was a success (Kawakami 1979: 166). Still the 'careless' proposal to discuss 'overcoming modernity', as Kawakami put it, produced enough utterances to fill space in the *Literary World*. The symposium covered a wide range of topics including the modernity of the Renaissance and science, the relationship between science and God[5], modern Japanese music, the mutable and the immutable in history, the Meiji government's civilisation and enlightenment policy, modernism and

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[4] Yanabu (1982) further reports that there were three periods in modern Japanese history when the term *kindai* was used frequently: around the 1910s, it was used frequently in the literary context; around 1942 when the proceedings of the 'Overcoming Modernity' symposium were published and the immediate aftermath of the Japanese defeat at World War II. In the first period, *kindai* was used in an ambiguous manner, in the second period as something to be negated (as suggested in the symposium title) and in the third period, as something progressive and positive.

[5] As Christian missionaries in sixteenth century Japan found out, it is problematic to uncritically translate God as 神 (*kami*) since these two ideas are not coextensive. The symposium participants must have been aware of this given the level of their scholarly training but for some reason, this point was never problematised and both Yoshimura, a Catholic theologian, Nishitani, a philosopher who was well versed in Buddhism, and Kamei, a literary critic, use the same term *kami* which is translated by Calichman as God.

Americanism and so on. The participants often talked past each other. Because of the disparate nature of the discussion, Sadami Suzuki (2015: 318) concludes, intellectually speaking, there is no point in examining the transcript in detail.

Still, the symposium transcript contains clues as to what the symposium participants' understanding of modernity was. First, while the symposium started off with a discussion of modernity as a historical period, because Suzuki Shigataka was asked by Kawakami to address the modernity of the Renaissance, on the whole, modernity was understood as a condition or state of modern society or human existence. Suzuki argued that it was wrong to locate the origin of European modernity in the Renaissance. He then introduced a view which was becoming dominant at that time among historians that modernity started with the French Revolution and that the nineteenth century marked by the rise of liberalism, the development of capitalism and the rise of science was quintessentially modern. In these instances, Suzuki, a historian, appeared to regard modernity as a distinct historical period marked by a set of material conditions. However, as the symposium proceeded he identified modernity as fundamentally European in a world-historical sense, and made reference to the Great East Asia War as a moment of resistance to Europe's domination of the world (Kawakami and Takeuchi 19719: 175-180). Apart from the opening discussion of the symposium, modernity was largely described as a condition or state they were in. For instance, Yoshimura the theologian presented his understanding of modernity as the loss of unity and universalistic logic. While Yoshimura contrasted modernity with the Middle Ages, which suggests that modernity was understood as a historical period, his argument was focused on the question of spiritual order. Though he saw continuity between the Middle Ages and modernity, he argued what marked out modernity was the crisis in spiritual order as a consequence of the loss of unifying principles. Therefore for him, overcoming modernity was to rebuild the lost spiritual order or the recovery of unifying principles (*ibid*.: 180-185).

Following Yoshimura, Shimomura, the philosopher of science, presented his view clearly differentiating modernity as a historical period (*kinsei*) and as the condition of society (*kindai*) (*ibid*.: 187-194). In fact, he focused on modernity as adjective as seen in modern science. He contrasted modernity to antiquity rather than the Middle Ages and identified empiricism in modern science as its defining feature. In his view, empiricism implied active engagement on the part of human beings with their surroundings unlike the ancients who observed nature statically. Having listened to Shimomura, Kobayashi exclaimed that 'torturing nature so that it reveals its secrets' is the most apt description of modern science, and by inference, modernity (*ibid*.: 194).

In the following discussion, Nakamura described modernity as a condition since the Renaissance in which human spiritual activities were thrown into the realm of unknown. He further stated the true identity of modernity is a spiritual or psychological state in which human beings were constantly forced to seek the unknown, something new (*ibid*.: 203-4). Some participants then agreed that modernity was about specialisation and differentiation; some, such as Kobayashi, thought it was negative and corrupting because of the implied loss of the sense of unity and totality while others, such as Shimomura, thought it did not necessarily mean decadence (*ibid*.: 233-239).

There was underlying tension in the discussion of modernity, which was supposed to be overcome. As seen above, modernity was discussed as a condition or state of being rather than a particular

historical period in the symposium, and as such, modernity was described in a universalistic language – as the loss of unity, an urge to work upon one's environment rather than to observe quietly or a particular spiritual or psychological state. At the same time, the participants were at pains to emphasise modernity as European or western (in particular, Tsumura introduced Americanism as a form of modernity), in other words, alien to the Japanese. Kamei, in particular, described modernity as chaos and loss of faith, as poison from the West and Hell (*ibid*.: 200-202). As seen in the constant use of the term 'western modernity', it appeared that they shared an understanding that there were a variety of modernity. At the same time, the participants struggled to define what non-western or, in particular, Japanese modernity was. Except for Suzuki's reference to the Great East Asia War as a war of resistance against western modernity, very little was suggested as what non-western modernity was. Kobayashi's mischievous intervention that overcoming modernity was a matter of overcoming western modernity and that there was no problem in overcoming Japanese modernity was not helpful at all in illuminating what Japanese modernity was (*ibid*.: 247)

In this respect, it was interesting to note that the symposium participants did not advocate simple and straightforward revivalism as a way of overcoming *western* modernity. Moroi did not see a moment for development in traditional Japanese music, and therefore did not suggest a return to tradition as the remedy (*ibid*.: 210). Miyoshi was against the way the Ministry of Education was enforcing a particular interpretation of the Japanese classics because it was not scientific (*ibid*.: 264-266). Several participants agreed that in their youth they found modern western literature gripping and engaging and it was in their forties that they came to appreciate the Japanese classics. Naturally, they did not advocate banning modern western literature from school as a way of overcoming modernity given their shared experience. They then started to consider how to ensure the possibility of a rediscovery of the Japanese classics for the Japanese and moved on to discuss school education. The suggestion was to ensure the basics of the Japanese classics were taught in schools so as to allow the Japanese to rediscover them as they grow old (*ibid*.: 245-248; 265-268). When the discussion turned to pros and cons of military discipline in education, Kawakami brought the proceedings to close (*ibid*.: 268-271).

The Overcoming Modernity symposium was certainly incoherent and chaotic, and it failed to present a clear view as to how modernity could be overcome. As Kawakami, the organiser, admitted himself, it was hardly successful in answering the posed question. However, its proceedings allow us a glimpse into what was understood as modernity by the participants. Modernity was primarily understood as a condition or state of modern life. While the exact definition of modernity was never offered, the proceedings shed light on existential issues some Japanese intellectuals of the time were grappling with. While there was a strong sense among the symposium participants that modernity as they knew it was fundamentally European or western, alien to Japanese culture; there was also a sense that modernity was universal in defining their being. They knew in order to answer the question of overcoming modernity, it was necessary to establish what non-western modernity was, but they struggled to articulate what it could be. The significance of the symposium, if there is any, is that it was a clear manifestation of the subjective engagement of these intellectuals with their surroundings, a clear sign of human reflexivity, an unmistakably modern endeavour.

The *Chūōkōron* symposia

The Overcoming Modernity symposium was not an intellectual success in examining the question of how to overcome modernity though the symposium title caught popular imagination. It caught on because, as in contemporary Europe, the question of modernity was keenly discussed in wartime Japan. In this intellectual climate, the Kyoto School of philosophy loomed large. The Kyoto School of philosophy refers to a loose grouping of philosophers and academics taught by or under the influence of Nishida Kitarō, one of the most famous Japanese philosophers, of the Imperial University of Kyoto. Nishida is credited to have written 'philosophy in the modern Japanese language for the first time' (Kasulis 2013: xii) under the title, *An Inquiry to the Good*. A keen Zen practitioner, Nishida is seen to have explored the ways in which religion and philosophy were entangled as a way of understanding the eastern mode of thinking (Carter, 2013). The Kyoto School, which focused on the uniqueness of eastern thinking, in particular Japanese thinking, is often considered to be an apologist for Japan's imperialist expansion since the beginning of the twentieth century though it has been recently claimed that contrary to the established view, the Kyoto School was secretly engaged with a section of the Japanese Navy to avoid conflict with the US and to try to change the ideological direction of the Pacific war to the effect that they could be seen as anti-establishment (Ōhashi, 2001). Whether the Kyoto School of philosophy was responsible for wartime Japan's behaviour is not a concern of this article: the point here is that the Kyoto School was a major player in the intellectual landscape of wartime Japan.

The most widely known Kyoto School's contribution to the discussion of modernity and how to overcome it is found in three symposia that took place in Kyoto from 1941 to 1942. The transcript of those was subsequently published in three issues of *Chūōkōron* and as a single volume in 1943. The participants of the three symposia were Kōsaka Masaaki (philosopher), Nishitani Keiji (philosopher), Kōyama Iwao (philosopher) and Suzuki Shigetka (historian); Nishitani and Suzuki took part in the Overcoming Modernity symposium as well. The first symposium, 'the World-Historical Standpoint and Japan' took place in Kyoto on 26 November 1941, a few weeks prior to the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbour. The transcript was then published in the January 1942 issue of *Chūōkōron*. The second one, 'the Ethical and Historical Character of the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere' took place in Kyoto on 4 March 1942 and its transcript was published in the April 1942 issue. The third one, 'the Philosophy of World-Historical War' was published on 24 November 1942 and its transcript in the January 1943 issue. The transcripts of the three symposia were then put together as a single volume with a preface written by the four and published on 15 March 1943 under the title, *The World-Historical Standpoint and Japan* by Chūōkōron-sha. The second edition was published on 21 August 1943.

Unlike the Overcoming Modernity symposium, thanks to the more homogeneous intellectual background shared by the participants, the *Chūōkōron* symposia were intellectually more coherent and certain lines of argument emerged. The symposium participants were in complete agreement about Japan's world-historical standpoint and that the key to the discussion of world history was subjectivity. In the preface to the *World-Historical Standpoint and Japan*, they countered the criticism that their stance in the symposia transcripts published in *Chūōkōron* was weak on Japanese subjectivity as follows:

> While we do argue for Japan's subjectivity in world history, we are not making light of it, let alone ignoring it. We want to logically clarify that Japan's subjectivity cannot be self-righteous

or dogmatic. What we call world-historical necessity is not a mere natural necessity but a subjective necessity that is developed through the self-awareness and practice of Japanese subjectivity, which at the same time represents the significance of the world-historical ought (Kōsaka et al. 1943: xi).[6]

At this point we need to recall that subjectivity and its exercise, or reflexivity, is understood to be the defining feature of sociological/philosophical understanding being modern. Given that three of the four participants in the symposia were philosophers, it is not surprising that they understood modernity primarily as a condition or state of being rather than a historical period, although the temporal aspect of modernity was sometimes discussed. The understanding of modernity emerging from the symposia transcripts is clearer than that from the Overcoming Modernity symposium. Modernity was understood to be European which Japan subjectively took on and successfully made its own, 'a phase of human experience' 'founded on [national] self-criticism and self-examination' (*ibid*.: 4), i.e. enhanced reflexivity. European culture, which underpinned modernity, was seen as having 'universal validity of the highest order' which 'made a European global order possible' (*ibid*.: 21-22). European culture was also seen as characterised by rationality and empiricism (*ibid*.: 25, 30), individualism and commerce (*ibid*.: 26-7), the idea of progress (*ibid*.: 33) and 'atomistic' (*ibid*.: 49). On the point of what modern life was, Nishitani gave a lengthy description:

> But the modern period saw the shift from the 'person' mediated by an absolute relationship to one grounded in the absolute individual. And the significance of this transformation can be found in the way the individual is unable to separate himself from the existing public order, no matter what political complexion that order may take. In other words, if public order collapses, the individual goes down with it. … The focus of this life is the event or experience. It is this that makes the endeavour of modern life an adventure. One of the defining features of modern man is found in what he seeks from experience. One must see and touch things; otherwise, one is not persuaded of their existence (*ibid*: 51-2).

The primacy of empiricism and individualism, identified by the symposium participants as the defining features of modernity, is encapsulated here. As noted earlier, the participants were at pains not to dismiss this version of modernity, European modernity, out of hand; they acknowledged its validity and achievements. It was once a world-historical force. In this regard, they also rejected criticisms meted against efforts made during the Meiji and Taishō periods as a loss of Japaneseness because they saw that what was achieved in these periods, in the end, led to the manifestation of Japan's world-historical significance (*ibid*.: 121).

However, the participants were also in agreement that this modernity was in a cul-de-sac and necessitated its overcoming with a new order, a new principle. Kōsaka proclaimed: 'Modern European civilisation has given birth to a host of disasters and tragedies. And it now finds its future path blocked. In this sense one can describe the modern European state as a tragedy' (*ibid*.: 343). What was wrong with European modernity? Specifically in reference to economics, Kōyama identified the problem of modernity to be the rule of human life 'exclusively by the drive to satisfy

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[6] While the quotes from the symposia follow the translation offered by Williams (2014), the preface to the book is not translated by him. Therefore, this is my own translation.

material wants' (*ibid*.: 322) while lacking in meaningful internal life. In the ensuing discussion, the problem of European modernity appears to boil down to the loss of a whole due to extreme fragmentation, which was also aired at the Overcoming Modernity symposium. Again in Kōyama's words:

> In every sphere, modernity acts as an acid, breaking down [reality and the study of reality] into ever smaller units. But without the resurrection of the whole, the part itself is incapable of life, and that is why we must once more seek to unite these disparate parts into a whole. This is the situation in which, I conclude, those who work in culture, the economy, scholarship and the arts all find themselves today (*ibid*.: 324)

The observation momentarily led to a discussion of 'the one *qua* the many' and 'the many *qua* the one', the logic of the history of the Latter Day of the Law (*ibid*.: 334) and absolute nothingness in which the individual is transcended to achieve true freedom (*ibid*.: 417), both being major topics in the works of the Kyoto School of philosophy. However, they were not fully developed in the last symposium and mentioned only in passing.

The aim of the symposia was to argue that it was only Japan that could overcome European modernity, now in a cul-de-sac, in order to build a new order, a new principle as a world-historical nation. The participants therefore spent a considerable amount of time analysing why Japan was special to be granted the mission to create a new world order in reference to the comparisons between the East and the West, Japan and Europe, and Japan and China. In these discussions, subjectivity, again, featured prominently. It was noted in the first symposium that the East and the West, as two distinct civilisations, 'pursued different ways of thinking from the start' (*ibid*.: 6). It appears this was regarded as a self-evident truth by the participants, and was not particularly pursued. The contrast between the East and the West was referred to in the discussion of the degree of unity as a region, a 'world', in Europe and East Asia. In the words of Kōsaka:

> If contemporary world history is a version of European history, the dynamic of previous eastern history is somewhat different from its western equivalent. In the West's modern phase, one can observe numerous quarrels between various peoples and states, and the West is characterised by more than one centre. The changing relationship between these various centres drives the history of change in the West. By contrast, eastern civilisation has had a single centre: China. The centre orders our 'world'. According to the Chinese view of our 'world', there is China the centre, and there is the variety of other countries that complement it, forming the margins of eastern civilisation (*ibid*.: 85).

A faint echo of the classic 'the dynamic/contentious West vs the static/harmonious East' dichotomy was reproduced here suggesting a degree of internalisation of the stereotype by the symposium participants, or it may suggest the strength of civilisational discourse at that time[7]. Japan was part of the static/harmonious East, and the comparison made between Europe and Japan listed several differences. Kōyama held that:

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[7] In the symposia, culture and civilisation were often referred to and used interchangeably. Given the intellectual calibre of the participants, this level of inattentiveness to key concepts is puzzling.

Japan's experience of modernity began roughly at the same time as Europe's. When Europeans began to expand overseas, the Japanese started to do so as well. The background for such expansion was the same in both cases: the development of individualism and commerce (*ibid*.: 26).

According to him, it was the Tokugawa Shogunate's isolationist policy that diverted the course of Japanese modernity from the European one. Denied the opportunity of overseas expansion, the samurai, who turned into bureaucrats in the Edo period without major armed conflict, came to acquire the spirit of modernity in the form of individualism and commercialism while the merchant class became feudal in that the focus of business activity was not on the individual but on the family. This resulted in a different kind of modernity in Tokugawa Japan, according to Kōyama, which was then replaced by European modernity that Meiji Japan chose to adopt. In reference to the investigation into understandings of modernity, it is interesting to note that in this formulation an understanding that modernity can take a variety of forms, a view that is similar to the multiple modernities thesis, is evident. While Eisenstadt has come to advocate a revised understanding of modernity as multiple modernities by means of his critical engagement with existent social theories, the symposium participants appeared to have reached a similar view while subjectively engaged with the question of modernity in a particular geo- political and historical environment.

Other differences listed include the absence of empiricism or the experimental spirit (*ibid*.: 30) and of the concept of developmental progress (*ibid*.: 33) in Japan in particular and in the East in general. Japan was clearly part of the East, not the West, but uniquely in East Asia, Japan was able to accept European modernity and succeeded in making it its own. This was explained by reference to the comparison of Japan and China: Japan was awake to world history while China was not:

> True, they identify collectively with the notion of China as the core and substance of the world, as the only meaningful reality, thus rejecting the claims of the 'world' as it is. The latter forms no part of their consciousness. The resulting notion of history is therefore extremely passive and radically ahistorical. The tidal movements of history themselves contribute to the Chinese view of the past as a sense of historical calamities immune to the shaping forces of human subjectivity. The Japanese response is very different. On each occasion when we encounter 'the other', we adopt a course of action that at once recognises [the external or non-Japanese character of] global trends and at the same time attempts to harness such trends to our purposes (*ibid*.: 163).

According to the symposium participants, because Japan was aware of world history, which was essentially external to Japan, Japan was able to exercise their subjectivity to take on modernity, which was essentially European and therefore alien to Japan or the East as a whole, and successful in making it its own. In Kōsaka's words: 'It is precisely by virtue of our active embrace of modernity that we have cultivated the truth of history in which we negate modernity by mediating it' (*ibid*.: 392). This in turn, in the mind of the symposium participants, obligated Japan to be the leader in bringing about a new world order, a new world-historical force.

The discussion of Japan's successful mastering of European modernity then took on a circular nature. The participants repeatedly asserted that Japanese adaptation of things European was qualitatively different from Europeanization enforced on weaker peoples by the West, including China which came to it 'willy-nilly.' For 'Japan had already possessed its own form of subjectivity that it was able to import selectively and freely the products and ideas of Europe. This is why Japan was able to create a modern state' (*ibid*.: 390). At the same time, they also made the point that 'Japan's subjectivity today is a consequence of this country's successful programme of modernisation' (*ibid*.: 391). On the one hand, it was argued that Japan was successful in making European modernity its own because it had already possessed its own subjectivity, whereby it could choose what to adopt and what to reject. On the other hand they argued that Japan's subjectivity was a product of its successful programme of modernisation, apparently in reference to the development after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. It is fair to say that the relationship between subjectivity and modernisation, presented towards the end of the third symposium, remained unclear.

In this context, the discussion of antiquity that was introduced in the first symposium became relevant. In the first symposium, the topic of antiquity was brought up in the context of difference between the East and the West and the special status Japan occupied in the movement of world-history as the participants saw it. The gist of the discussion was as follows:

> My conclusion is that eastern antiquity was a superb achievement, rivalling anything produced by Greco-Roman antiquity; but in no sense can we say that the East produced the revolution that we call 'modern'. However, this general eastern failure does not include Japan. Japan has produced its own version of modernity, and this fact has revolutionary implications for East Asia. It announces the arrival of a new age in the history of the East. And this event is of the greatest world-historical significance (*ibid*.: 34).

The theme of antiquity was later picked up in the same symposium in the discussion of historical consciousness in Japan. It was argued that the ancient Japanese were very internationally aware and thought about their country in reference to the complex international relations of the time (*ibid*.: 77, 82) implying vaguely that there was a sign of world-historical consciousness in ancient Japan. When the discussion of the relationship between subjectivity and modernity/modernisation became circular in the third symposium, this was picked up by Nishitani as follows:

> The cardinal insight at issue here is that Japan has achieved what the world regards as a genuine form of modernity; but beyond this we are arguing that Japan has been able to become modern because it experienced a form of antiquity that provided the foundations for this modern achievement. Or, to reverse the proposition, the success of Japan's antiquity made possible our modern success. This is the paradoxical truth that counts (*ibid*.: 393)

Thus, the circularity of the preceding discussion was resolved by introducing an ancient origin of Japanese modernity. The antiquity referred to here was internationally aware and subjectively engaged with its surroundings as discussed in the first symposium. Nishitani's reference to Japanese antiquity to explain Japan's successful modernisation reminds us of Eisenstadt's emphasis on the importance of Axial Age civilisation in bringing about revolution and the break-down of regimes in

early modernity, although Eisenstadt has specifically stated that the Meiji Restoration was not such a revolution because Japanese civilisation was non-axial (Eisenstadt 1992). As Karl Jaspers's *The Origin and Goal of History* in which he introduced the concept of Axial Age was published in 1949, it is unlikely that Nishitani took cue from Jaspers. However, interest in antiquity, the distant past, as a living and influential force in modernity appeared to be shared by intellectuals of the time, both in the East and the West.

In place of conclusion
The article has examined the ways in which modernity was understood and how they were intertwined with the idea of 'overcoming modernity' in wartime Japan based on transcripts of four symposia: the Overcoming Modernity symposium (July 1942), the World-Historical Standpoint and Japan symposium (November 1941), the Ethical and Historical Character of the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere symposium (March 1942) and the Philosophy of World-Historical War symposium (November 1942). As it is widely acknowledged, although the intellectual coherence of the Overcoming Modernity symposium is rather low, it still provides a number of insights into what the participants – the leading intellectuals of wartime Japan – were grappling with in relation to modernity. The latter three symposia by major members of the Kyoto School provide a more coherent account of what modernity was and why Japan was uniquely placed to overcome it by creating a new world order.

The transcripts show that the participants saw modernity primarily as a condition or state of human existence in their discussion and shared an understanding that modernity as they knew it originated from Europe and is alien to Japan. While they thought it was necessary to overcome modernity thus defined, they did admit that European/western modernity had its validity and universality which had helped Europe and the West to achieve unprecedented hegemony in the world. At the same time, they shared an understanding that European/western modernity was in crisis, no longer an effective world-historical force. The problem of the current state of European/western modernity was diagnosed to lie in the extreme fragmentation of life resulting in the loss of unity, totality, or any real relationship between parts and the whole. According to the intellectuals gathered in these symposia, overcoming modernity was possible by regaining and restoring unity and totality, making the disparate parts whole again. How to achieve this was not clearly articulated after all. In the *Chūōkōron* symposia, it was forcefully argued that Japan was uniquely qualified to take on this task as a newly emerging world-historical force, but 'how' remained unarticulated. Why only Japan could lead the way in creating a new world order was explained in reference to subjectivity, a very modern concept. According to the participants of the *Chūōkōron* symposia, it was because Japan possessed its own subjectivity originating from its internationalist and world-historical antiquity that it could take on European/western modernity and make it its own. This ability to marry the East and the West, a rather simplistic formula, according to them, clearly showed that Japan was now the world-historical force to bring back unity and totality to the world. This would start with the construction of the East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere and be pursued through the execution of the Pacific War as a world-historical war.

What is summarised above is not theoretically or philosophically very profound or illuminating. This may be attributed to the nature of the events – symposia on interesting questions with a view to be published in popular, not academic, periodicals albeit high-brow ones at that. It is therefore not fair

to expect these transcripts to convey intellectually water-tight arguments. As a manual to instruct readers of these periodicals, and the Japanese in general, how to overcome modernity, they were rather feeble with no clear and concrete suggestions. The participants of the Overcoming Modernity symposium did not advocate simplistic revivalism or 'going back to the classics' in the manner the Ministry of Education at that time pursued; they did not advocate abandoning modern science; they did not deny that modern western literature spoke to many contemporary Japanese. How the wholeness of the human being could be recovered under Japanese leadership was not articulated other than by references to abstract ideas such as absolute nothingness. Still, it is also clear that these intellectuals saw the question of modernity as their own and the symposia represent their serious and even existential engagement with the question of modernity (Miamoto 1994; Harootunian 2000; Heisig 1994).

If we turn to examining implications of these intellectuals' endeavour to our efforts to understand modernity, a few points can be made. First, the symposia transcripts raise further doubt about the validity of the conventional view of modernisation that it spreads by diffusion. While the history of Meiji Japan in which various modernisation/westernisation programmes were forcefully pursued by the state could be seen as a prototypical case of modernisation by diffusion, the intellectual engagement with the question of modernity demonstrated in the symposia suggests that it was not a smooth process as the diffusionist account implies. Historically speaking there were many acts of objection and resistance to modernisation as pursued by the Meiji government including the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877 and a series of rebellion by peasants against Land Tax Reform of 1873. There was also intellectual objection as seen in criticism towards the Meiji government's policies as undermining the Japanese-ness at the time of the symposia. The participants of the *Chūōkōron* symposia repeatedly asserted that Japan's modernisation was subjectively pursued by the Japanese, therefore, in effect, objecting to the diffusionist account of modernisation.

In this regard, the multiple modernities perspective as developed by Eisenstadt is more helpful to come to grips with what these intellectuals were engaged in. As noted earlier, subjectivity, a very modern concept, was the key to the discussion for the symposium participants. While transcending individuality was discussed in reference to absolute nothingness, human agency and its exercise was at the heart of their discussion. Clearly, the discussion was conducted based on a full adaption and absorption of the central tenet of modernity, that is, the centrality of human agency which is emphasised in the theory of multiple modernities. From the angle suggested by Eisenstadt, we can also see the symposium participants were clearly engaged in the production and promotion of different cultural programmes as to how to master the environment and to bring about a better tomorrow. The way the particular – Japan's leadership in overcoming European/western modernity to create a new world order – was argued was deeply embedded in a universalistic principle: the importance of subjectivity. In other words, it is possible to see that their understanding of modernity as articulated in these symposia almost predicted what Eisenstadt later theorised. What is sometimes chided as 'Kyoto professors' rant' against westernisation (Buruma and Margalit 2004) turns out to provide rich material for the students of modernity to deepen their understanding of what it is to be modern.

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