

Contemporary Japan

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Nihilistic Practices of the Self

General Remarks on Nihilism and Subjectivity in Modern Japan

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Abstract The question of nihilism in Japan is treated from a cultural and philosophical viewpoint, aiming to provide some hints for a critical discussion. Through the perspectives of Foucault and Bourdieu, different cultural phenomena in modern Japan could be defined as 'technologies of the self' and '*habitus*': the practice of writing among some novelists; the practice of philosophy and (self-) awareness among thinkers influenced by Buddhism; as well as, in a completely different field, the practice of performing arts (dance, theatre, music), or martial arts (*budō*). The focus is on recognising two commonly spread hermeneutic tendencies: 1. Nihilism in Japan has been more often the problem of the individual than the problem of truth. 2. The debate on the individual and nihilism in Japan has not been dealt with in exclusively intellectual terms. Rather it has immediately referred to practical levels in which the dialectics between technologies of political control and technologies of the self have played a fundamental role.

Summary 1. Nihilism, Subjectivity and Practices in modern Japan. – 2. Applying the Concept of Nihilism to Japan. – 3. Nihilism and Practices of Writing in Japanese Modern Literature. – 4. Nihilism and the Individual in the Kyoto School. – 5. Nishitani and Nihilism.

1 Nihilism, Subjectivity and Practices in Modern Japan

The aim of this paper is to provide some hints for a critical discussion of the question of nihilism in Japan from a cultural and philosophical perspective. A debate on this theme requires an integrated interpretation of certain aspects that are often considered apart and that range from literature to political thought, from the history of education to philosophy. At the same time, it also requires avoidance of undue applications of certain Western hermeneutic categories to East Asian history. It is certainly easy to lapse into cultural particularism. Nevertheless, this risk should not prevent us from attempting to follow a third way between the adoption of universalist and potentially colonialist concepts, and the resigned acceptance of cultural fragmentation. This 'third way' may consist of starting to pay «close attention to the questions [Japanese philosophers] are trying to answer», since «it is easy to make the error of asking *our* questions of a

philosopher from another tradition or time» (Kasulis 2009, pp. 216-217). Discussing nihilism in Japan, then, implies paying attention to the question of modernity in general (how to define modernity?), while at the same time asking whether there can be any variation in this historiographical scheme (is multiple modernity a possible concept? Or is modernity just a 'one-size-fits-all' case?), with regards to the allegedly specific Japanese modernity (is there a peculiar Japanese way to Modernity?). In this essay, this perspective is sought via Foucault's conception of 'technologies of the self', mainly in their dialectical relation with the 'technologies of control',¹ which refers to the problem of technology. This approach may provide viable alternatives to the straight juxtaposition between modern/non-modern, all too often improperly conflated with the Western/non-Western pairing. The question of technology in Japan may prove to be of paramount importance in reallocating the general discourse on Japanese intellectual history in Japan for the reasons that will later become clear. According to Foucault, the technologies of the self «permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality» (Foucault 1988, p. 18). These technologies of the self can function as the last line of cultural, political or social self-defence, and make the individual more resistant to the technologies of control whose goal is that of homogenising social, political or cultural space. Their role can be that of variously balancing external pressure with internal urges, mitigating the conforming strength of social and political practices, and making the individual more conscious of him/herself, or negotiating the meaning of individuality in a country like Japan which, due to its cultural history, had to find its own path in these matters.

Since Foucault was mainly dealing with classical Western culture, his position on this theme should be adjusted in the light of the ways in which Buddhist and Daoist practices handle 'control' over oneself: a simple extension of **control** over the aspects that the Ego does not command could be counter-productive since this very ego represents the fundamental problem to be solved by those religious paths. In Buddhist terms, control

1 The French philosopher draws a distinction between four types of technology, that is: technologies of production; technologies of sign systems; technologies of power and control over the others and, finally, technologies of the self, which have close links with each other. The importance of this theme in Foucault's thought is admitted by Foucault himself, who began his work as a research project on normalising training in the modern state (e.g. the institutions of mental hospitals and prisons) and turned in his last years to the individualising practices in classical culture (see Foucault 1988, 2001).

cannot be considered as ultimate, but only as part of conventional truth.² For these reasons, Foucault's position should fruitfully work together with Bourdieu's idea of *habitus*, namely:

systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (Bourdieu 1980, p. 53).

In other words, from the perspective of intellectual history, the technologies of the self in modern Japan may be considered to have as their goal the attainment of certain *habitus* that work as individuating factors, **even beyond the control of the subject.**

Seen from a Foucaultian perspective, different cultural phenomena in modern Japan could be defined as technologies of the self: the practice of writing among some writers; the practice of philosophy and (self-) awareness among thinkers influenced by Buddhism; as well as, in a completely different field, the practice of performing arts (dance, theatre, music), or martial arts (*budō*) as elaborated by modern masters, who often changed the original aims of the fighting methods inherited from the past and discovered new possibilities in education or self-cultivation.³

Why mention *habitus* and technologies of the self in a discussion about nihilism? Although in this paper the limited space does not allow for much more than a general outline of the problem, the focus of this essay is on two main theses, the intention of which is not to demonstrate that all Japanese intellectuals have shared the same ideas on this question, but to recognise some diffused hermeneutic tendencies: 1. Nihilism in Japan has often been associated with the practical questions of citizenship/subjectivity/human being, and of how to configure the individual in relation to the state/society or the world. It has been intensely debated since the beginnings of the modernisation process, but, marking a certain contrast with Western intellectual history, it has been more often discussed in the context of the problem of the individual than the problem of truth. 2. The debate on the individual and nihilism in Japan has not been dealt with in exclusively intellectual terms. Rather it has been immediately referred to practical levels in which the dialectics between technologies of political control and

2 See e.g.: «One controls the mind through conventional truth, then destroys it by the highest truth» (Potter 1999, p. 297).

3 Examples of these personalities were Kanō Jigorō (1860-1938) founder of the Kōdōkan *jūdō*; Funakoshi Gichin (1868-1957), founder of Shōtōkan *karate*; Ueshiba Morihei (1883-1969), founder of *aikidō* and very close to the new religion Ōmotokyō.

technologies of the self have played a fundamental role. Hence, *habitus* and practices in general were both used to reabsorb the individualistic tide engendered by modernisation (thus becoming technologies of control, in Foucault's terms), or, conversely, **also inspired by nihilism**, they affirmed various forms of subjectivity, not necessarily convergent with Western ones, promoting political, social or cultural resistance, or at least mediating inner and outer worlds (therefore falling into the Foucaultian category of technologies of the self). To a certain extent, the very same technologies, especially those whose bodily involvement is very strong and which were highly codified by rituals, procedures and symbolism deriving from pre-modern knowledge, could be used both as normalising or individualising technology, due to the ambiguous nature of the body itself, which is what makes the individual part of the world, **and, at the same time**, what defines it as different from the world.

In fact, Confucian and Buddhist awareness that the educational and bodily factors play an important role in culture and society did not decrease in Meiji Japan, but underwent a process of adaptation to modernity, whose practical (political, ethical, religious-ritual and educational) overtones were often part of the background of both social engineers, who aimed to build an ideologically imbued citizenship in the new modern society, and of those intellectuals opposing or resisting such normalising training through individualising practices, the effects of which were bound to social, political, cultural, or simply individual spheres. These practices could aim at perfecting the individual, as well as simply opposing the mainstream mentality or bio-powers, sometimes to the point of destroying the individual in the attempt. Alternatively, some ventured to elaborate various forms of mediation. This essay will refer to two contexts of these practices of the self: literature and philosophy, but the scope of the phenomenon was (and somehow still is) much vaster.

2 Applying the Concept of Nihilism to Japan

In order to develop our subject, let us begin with the classic definition of nihilism by Friedrich Nietzsche, who in a famous fragment of his posthumous *Will to Power* wrote: «What does Nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking; “why?” finds no answer» (Nietzsche 1968, p. 9). Supreme values and transcendent ideals such as God, Truth, Good become meaningless, and lose their grip on reality. According to Nietzsche, this devaluation originated with the very creation of values by Socrates and Plato. Nihilism is the extreme backlash against the establishment of truth on a transcendent plain that has nothing to do with this world. Not only does it denounce the mechanisms of classical philosophies and religions from Plato to Christianity, from Kantism to He-

gelism, but, more essentially, it rejects their conceptions of truth and their method of knowledge (the ‘vertical’ inquiry of ‘why’).

This reflection by Nietzsche is closely related to the European milieu, but how can it be applied to other cultural environments? Does this definition pose problems in cross-cultural comparison? For example, it has often been observed that social values have no transcendent foundation in East Asia, and that wisdom develops through ‘horizontal’ (‘how’) more than ‘vertical’ (‘why’) questions (cf. Kasulis 2009, pp. 223-224; Cheng 2000, p. 18). Nevertheless, maintaining that nihilism is based on Western ideas and hence must be absent from recent Japanese intellectual history sounds grossly orientalist or culturalist, and clashes with many historical and social phenomena that have occurred. Currently, Japan is at least as nihilistic as many other post-industrial countries. The following passage is an example taken from Murakami Haruki’s *Dance Dance Dance*, in which a not specifically Japanese «advanced capitalistic society» is depicted as lacking any system of values:

«Your system» [Makimura] said. [...] «Your system may be beside the point these days. It went out with handmade vacuum tube amplifiers. Instead of wasting all your time trying to build your own, you ought to buy a brand-new transistor job. It’s cheaper and it sounds better. And if it breaks down they come fix it in no time. When it gets old, you can trade it in. Your system may not be so watertight anymore, son. It might’ve been worth something once upon a time. But not now. Nowadays money talks. It’s whatever money will buy. You can buy off the rack and piece it all together. It’s simple. It’s not so bad. Get stuck on your system and you’ll be left behind. You can’t cut tight turns and you get in everybody’s way».

«Advanced capitalist society».

«You got it», said Makimura. (Murakami 1995, pp. 193-194)

How can we interpret Japanese nihilism if the theoretical premises that led European culture to reject those ‘highest values’ are missing? Is it possible to have a similar phenomenon in Japan via an alternative route that does not pass through the Nietzschean deconstructive genealogy of the «True World Becoming Fable» (Nietzsche 2009, p. 17)?

Moreover, from cross-cultural and historical perspectives, we could ask whether nihilism is a historical phenomenon, subject to historical and cultural contingencies, or a kind of universal ‘spiritual category’. If it is a historical fact, how does it apply to one specific culture in general, and to Japan in particular? If it is not, a kind of contradiction may perhaps be at work between the negation of universal truth and the affirmation of

universal negation, which may become a kind of universal truth in itself.⁴

There is at least one example of an important Western philosopher who dealt with Japanese nihilism: in the afterword to an essay on nihilism written in 1939,⁵ the German philosopher Karl Löwith advances the thesis that Japan had completely misunderstood nihilism which, being eminently a European phenomenon, was understandable only in the context of European intellectual history, and, specifically, within the historical development of critical reason. This development found its climax in Hegel, dissolving into many rivulets after him, as with Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche. Löwith identified nihilism with the destruction of critical reason, upon which human existence was still grounded. Without this cultural background, Japan could not understand nihilism as the final result of a critical rational process, but only as a chance to demonstrate its own cultural superiority. Faced with such an uncritical attitude, Löwith felt it necessary to justify European self-criticism, criticising Japanese patriotism and ingenuous pragmatism: Japan was only interested in material advancements and material technology, refusing any encounter with European civilisation, its spirit and history. What Löwith found most disappointing was that, in his view, the Japanese were almost completely lacking in any (self-) criticism. Although they studied and understood European philosophy, they did not draw any consequence for themselves from it. They did not apply criticism, but preferred to avoid oppositions, ignoring any logical consequences deriving from nihilistic critical assumptions and following social conventions and compromises (Löwith 1983).

This position of Löwith's was based upon his limited and biased reading of Japanese culture: since he did not read Japanese, he did not realise that many intellectuals (both scholars and philosophers) were actually discussing (or practising) nihilism very seriously. Still, in his partial defence it should be pointed out that their discussions focused on a quite different, and hence less recognisable (for a European living in 1930s), approach to nihilism, which, more than its theoretical and hermeneutic aspects, considered its existential praxis in everyday life of the individuals.

In theoretical terms, this difference, which is extremely significant for the interpretation of nihilism in Japan, might be linked to the different

4 This topic could not be exhaustively dealt with here, especially through the means of a purely logical argument. Still, this essay intends to consider two opposite answers to such a question represented by Karl Löwith, who affirms that the nature of nihilism is historical and cultural, albeit 'universal' in that it is deeply involved with reason; and by Nishitani Keiji, who, on the contrary, indicates its trans-national and even trans-historical character, with reference to its existential, more than rational, trait.

5 The essay was entitled: «Der Europäische Nihilismus. Betrachtungen zur geistigen Vorgeschichte des europäischen Krieges» and was published in Japanese the following year in three issues (from September to November) in the review *Shisō* (Thought), while the philosopher was in Japan, fleeing from racial persecution. See Löwith 1983.

foundations of values, which in the Euro-American countries, as well as in the Abrahamic religions, are theoretical, transcendent and religious (God is the guarantee of ethics), but practical and socio-political in Japan (ethics is socially defined and is immediately translated into a socially determined set of deeds that must be performed, or must be accomplished according to rigidly codified procedures). In European intellectual history, nihilism has gone hand in hand with the destruction of the philosophical (Platonism) and religious (Christianity) transcendent world, epitomised by what is known as ‘God’s death’, finally resulting in the disruption of all systems of values that ushered in the fully secularised world. Nihilism in Japan was collocated in a different configuration: there was no rebellion against gods or Buddhas, no high-sounding announcement of God’s death. No ‘transcendent value’ was devalued, because social values in Japanese culture have less of a theoretical, and more of a practical nature, so that ideo-praxis and ortho-praxis are more natural than ideology (and orthodoxy). Hence, the demolition of high standards was accomplished in a way more consistent with Japanese cultural space. More specifically, in Meiji Japan, the questioning of social and political values was often accomplished by intellectuals through individual, bodily practices, which found their target in the political and religious national beliefs and rites created by Meiji ideologues to promote public civic religion (the so-called *kokka shintō*, State Shintō), as well as in the set of ethical and educational civic tenets and procedures centred around the Imperial Rescript on Education (*Kyōiku chokugo* 1890), or merely in social common sense and its related *habitus*. Far from juxtaposing reason to God or Truth, nihilism in Japan opposed two different kinds of practices or *habitus*: those defined by the individual resisted the nationally or socially established ones.

In such a context, the debate on individualism and subjectivity was paramount. For example, in a study about early post-war Japan, J. Victor Koschmann isolated «an articulate concern on human agency, manifested in a debate on active subjectivity» or *shutaisei* (1996, p. 1). Still, the concern for this theme, whose cultural and political overtones affected the development of national identity and ideology, can be traced back much earlier: Kōsaka Masaaki long ago pointed out that after the Sino-Japanese war (1895) the subject had become a fundamental issue in the Japanese intellectual and artistic debate (1958, pp. 289 ff.), but, as Sakai Naoki has affirmed, similar concerns appeared even among late Edo intellectuals (1997). Starting from the late Meiji onwards, the question of individualism had a tremendous cultural and political impact on the process of modernisation.⁶

6 Suffice it here to mention the examples of the Freedom and People’s Rights Movement (*jiyū minken undō*) in which subjectivity was said to function as a precondition of modern democracy, as well as some writings by the philosopher and politician Katō Hiroyuki (1836-1916), who, in his *Jinken shinsetsu* (A New Theory of Human Rights, 1882), wrote: «The theory

Still, this was not only an ideological process. It involved the entire sphere of practical knowledge, of *habitus* and assimilated social and national dispositions that were meticulously defined by officers whose target was the creation of the 'body of the nation' (or *kokutai*), which was not meant to be a metaphorical expression, but more essentially expressed the assimilation within one's own body of the dispositions defined by the nation and, at the same time, the nation as a body (see also Kasulis 2009, p. 228). The construction of the individual in modern Japan was radically influenced and transformed by the new modern **technologies** of control and of the self, which, through their negotiation, provided the groundwork for a radical redefinition and re-adjustment of human being in modernised Japan.

The state functionaries bound their political and religious ideology to strategies of indoctrination and normalisation, spread through a capillary organisation centred around the Imperial Rescript that created a common space of shared practices, pivotal for the construction of the Japanese nation, and that went so far as to determine many everyday practices, which ran parallel and reinforced to the ideological level.

Although for opposing reasons and aims, both the champions of social homogenisation and the forerunners of individual freedom shared similar interests in practices, represented by technologies of control and technologies of the self, respectively, both frequently inspired by the Buddhist and Confucian practical heritage, and aptly transformed to match the needs of modern world. Unavoidably, any discussion surrounding the construction of the individual in modern Japan (nihilism included) had to confront those practices of individualisation or processes of normalisation elaborated from pre-modern practices of the self. From this perspective, at least three orientations can be identified. The first was a standardising inclination, represented by the *tennōsei* (the Japanese emperor system) ideology supported by the Imperial Rescript, and by all the ethical, political, anthropological and religious traditions and habits invented in order to uniform Japanese social practices, and to create a common, national cultural space.⁷ The second orientation consisted of the individualising tendencies that, to varying degrees, aimed at passively or actively, consciously or not, opposing, or at least negotiating, this new-born national culture, keeping their distance from the social tide toward integration. These individualising tendencies were expressed by means of active opposition – the approach adopted by anarchist and communist militants – or by means of passive and indirect resistance – like the practice of writing among many *shishōsetsu*

of natural rights had no validity. We are not 'endowed' with rights; we *acquire* them. For the first time I saw clearly that our rights are those which we as individuals have been able to acquire... I saw clearly that our individually acquired rights are inextricably tied to the fortunes of our country» (as quoted in Kōsaka 1958, p. 152).

⁷ On *tennōsei* ideology, see Gluck 1985. On invented modern Japanese traditions, see Vlastos 1998.

(I-novel) authors. Finally, a mediating tendency is identifiable, in the search for a point of balance between individualising and standardising inclinations, as with some of the disciplines modernised during the Meiji period, for example, martial arts, whose founders were often very interested in the educational, ethical and political consequences of their activities for the practitioners. Such a mediating tendency in the field of philosophy can be observed in the theoretical efforts of the Kyoto School.

3 Nihilism and Practices of Writing in Japanese Modern Literature

The case of the writer and critic Takayama Chogyū (1871-1902) epitomises the lacerations between society, the nation and the individual in the period preceding the rise of naturalism, but more essentially highlights the extent to which these themes were tightly bound together in Meiji Japan. His intellectual history was characterised by unexpected, dramatic changes revealing a painstaking pursuit of balance between the state and the individual. In the first phase (1894-1897), Takayama believed in an equilibrium between these two moments, in a kind of romantic activism: the individual must be set free to develop him/herself, while at the same time being a conscious and conscientious citizen of the state. However, this harmony did not last, and Takayama abruptly turned to nationalism in the period 1897-1900. He began to venerate the Imperial Rescript, and followed its ideology, probably as a means to overcome «the sense of crisis which was prevalent after the military victory of 1895» (Kōsaka 1958, pp. 306-307). Nevertheless, this ideology soon dissatisfied him, and led him to the radical individualism of the years 1900-1902, in which he praised Nietzsche and the ‘aesthetic life’ (*biteki seikatsu*) as the only manner of satisfying instincts, raised to the status of the only life values, higher than morality and knowledge (Kōsaka 1958, p. 310).

Takayama’s vitalism anticipated naturalism (*shizenshugi*), whose importance by far exceeded that of a short-lived literary movement: it represented the beginnings of modern Japanese individualism and its practices (in the form of autobiographical/fictional writing). Naturalism has often been linked to nihilism, as in the following statement by the poet Ishikawa Takuboku (1886-1912):

From the very outset, man stands alone. The unbearableness of this loneliness leads him to build religious fantasies, leads him to have visions of glory, or wealth, or power. When he senses the loneliness of life, this feeling of *I stand alone*, this is the finish, everything becomes useless. Nothingness! Emptiness! [...] The only phrase that naturalism has been able to teach man is ‘suit yourself.’ There is neither good nor evil, beauty nor ugliness, only ‘bare facts.’ This is what we are left

with - bare facts! Suit yourself! What lonely comfortless words! And yet there is no alternative. The possession of *absolute freedom* makes 'emptiness' implicit (as quoted in Kōsaka 1958, pp. 472-473).

As with nihilism, naturalism manifested a stubborn rebellion against the social conventions, and epitomised the destruction of social (more than religious or theoretical) values. Conversely, it implied the affirmation of the individual, considered as the only knowable thing. Still, naturalist faith in 'sincerity' (*makoto*), and the subsequent description of 'pure facts' (of the self) were distant from the nihilistic total lack of faith represented by later writers like Masamune Hakuchō (1879-1962).

However, what typifies Japanese nihilism in literature, especially in the years of modernisation, is the tendency to emphasise the practical dimension of writing: many writers considered the exercise of writing as a technology of the self in every respect, through which to become, and explore, one's self more and more, acquiring independence from society, not necessarily in the positive, but sometimes also in the self-destructive sense, as an opposition to the powerful modern Japanese bio-powers. From such a perspective, for instance, the conception of writing as a practice closely linked to the writer's life can be detected both among the idealists of the Shirakabaha (White Birch School), such as Shiga Naoya (1883-1971), and the most nihilistic (and later) writers of the so-called Buraiha (Undependable School), such as Dazai Osamu (1909-1948) or Sakaguchi Ango (1906-1955). Writing as a practice of the self was quite common among literates: we can find a similar awareness of this theme in romantic writers like Kitamura Tōkoku (1868-1894) and Kunikida Doppo (1871-1908), who emphasised the importance of the interior world and the role of literature in developing oneself, but also among naturalist writers: Shimazaki Tōson (1872-1943) used writing not only as a practice to denounce old discriminations, but also to explore the new geographies of his own self, as a modern individual clashing with the social rules. Tayama Katai (1871-1930), who wrote his most famous novel *Futon* (The Quilt, 1907) from his (almost) autobiographical perspective, created a form of individual resistance in which real life and fiction were inextricably bound together, inaugurating a current, which was to have an enormous influence on the subsequent I-novel (*watakushi shōsetsu*) writers (see Bienati 2005, pp. 16 ff.). After the Sino-Japanese War (1895), these authors eluded direct confrontation with society, having lost any hope of conditioning the state or community, and restricted themselves to writing about their own selves in an autobiographical/fictionalised manner. In so doing, they resisted the normalising social ideology and rules, and opposed the apparatus of social conventions and etiquette that was moulding the individual in modern Japan. This approach to the individual was so influential in Japanese literature that its effects lingered on after the Pacific War, and echoes of this idea can still

be found among novelists of today, such as Murakami Haruki, not to speak about contemporary film makers such as Sono Shion.

4 Nihilism and the Individual in the Kyoto School

The intellectual inquiry into the modern subject was also dominant among the most important philosophical school of modern Japan, i.e. the Kyoto School (*Kyōto gakuha*), which inscribed in its philosophical agenda a radical re-discussion of (European and modern) subjectivism. These intellectuals shared with naturalist writers their search for re-configuring human beings as modern individuals, although they seemed to draw more fully from pre-modern or trans-modern theoretical and practical sources. Nishitani is a good example of ‘nihilistic practices of the self’ in philosophy: he interpreted nihilism from the perspective of the existential, living self, taking inspiration from pre-modern Buddhist practices of self-awareness. His was not an isolated case but it epitomises an important orientation for many Japanese intellectuals, who not only developed a theoretical concern for subjectivity, but whose philosophical, political, social, religious, artistic and literary interests very often went hand in hand with various **practices** regarding the newly acquired (and often still blurry) individuality, which functioned as a counterpoint to those standardising practices developed by the regime ideologues.

Although the major modern Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945) devoted most of his intellectual efforts to the question of practical philosophy, particularly at the end of his complex theoretical development (Cestari 2009), he did not directly touch on the problem of nihilism. Nevertheless, in the Kyoto School the relationship between nihilism and the individual is well represented: although they used different approaches and diverging perspectives, both Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962) and Nishitani Keiji (1900-1992) were conscious of the importance of the link between nihilism and the individual, and proposed different analyses of the phenomenon.

Tanabe aimed to reabsorb the individual in the nation, proving to be very close to the regime’s ideology, precisely because he was aware, in a more instinctual rather than a clearly conscious manner, of the importance of nihilism and its relationship with the individual. In fact, although his writings make no extensive use of the word ‘nihilism’, his *Shu no ronri* (Logic of Species) somehow came to grips with this theme in the shape of a clash between the individual’s ‘will to power’ (*kenryoku ishi*) and the society’s ‘will to life’ (*seimei ishi*). Tanabe’s ‘solution’ consisted of conferring on the nation-state the role of medium between these opposite and ultimately irrational attitudes (Cestari 2008). If, as with Clifford Geertz, ‘ideology’ provides «maps of problematic social reality» which help clarify the individual’s place in the world (Geertz 1973, pp. 193 ff.), such a solu-

tion was fully ideological, since the liberticidal state of wartime Japan was considered as the key to overcoming the aforesaid clash and to helping the individual to find his/her place in the world.

Nishitani was the philosopher of the Kyoto School who most powerfully felt the need to link the discussion around nihilism to the question of the self and its practices of self-awareness. With him, the question of nihilism became **the** pivotal problem. He provided one of the deepest and most original readings of nihilism ever elaborated in Japan. Due to the complexity and the richness of his approach, which would deserve much more than these few pages, this paper will only provide a brief outline of some aspects of his perspective on Japanese nihilism. This theme is dealt with by Nishitani, especially in the book *Nihirizumu* (Nihilism), a collection of lessons held between 1949 and 1956 (Nishitani 1990), in which he discusses many European thinkers, such as Nietzsche, Stirner and Heidegger, reconstructing post-Hegelian European philosophy. An entire chapter is devoted to nihilism in Japan. This essay is extremely important for our paper, even if nihilism is also further examined in the work *Shūkyō to wa nanika* (What is religion?) (Nishitani 1982). Nishitani's position is the result of a large set of direct or indirect influences: from Buddhism – especially Zen – to Western philosophy – particularly, Heidegger and Nietzsche. On the specific question of Japanese nihilism, his interlocutor has the name of Karl Löwith (Nishitani 1990, pp. 176 ff.), whose criticism of the Japanese intelligentsia has been mentioned before.

5 Nishitani and Nihilism

Nishitani takes Löwith's criticism very seriously. He agrees with Löwith's idea that modernisation has weakened Japanese culture and that its past has been forgotten, whereas in Europe Christianity and philosophy still oppose nihilism (Nishitani 1990, p. 175). Hence, Japanese 'tradition' no longer exists and has been replaced by a hollow void. This situation is further worsened by the fact that the Japanese generally fail to realise how strong nihilism is in their country. Therefore, in Nishitani's opinion, Löwith is right in affirming the importance for the Japanese of a critical confrontation with European culture. Still, Nishitani does not consider nihilism as a purely European matter. Far from confining it to Europe, he already sees nihilism spreading as a global phenomenon that now also casts its shadow upon Japan (Nishitani 1990, pp. 176-177).

However, it is in their interpretation of its general sense that the two philosophers are most distant and reveal a strong disagreement concerning the correct manner of doing philosophy. If Löwith criticised the Japanese intelligentsia for not having understood nihilism from the perspective of **critical** thinking, Nishitani reckons that **nihilism involves our very self**. At the

beginning of his work, this thesis sounds provocative: far from interpreting nihilism primarily as a question of critical reason, he reads it immediately as an existential and practical condition. Such a problem can be properly dealt with only if it coincides with the question of the ego lacking sense, certainty, meaning and value (Nishitani 1990, pp. 1-2). Nihilism read as the problem of the self emerges after the collapse of the rational Subject, on which the sense of the world is based. With this destruction, the immediate, existential subject – which cannot be simply defined as either substance or reason – is finally revealed. Such a change of perspective is quite radical: a proper consideration of nihilism needs the subject to **identify itself** with nihilistic void. Hence, nihilism is not simply the loss of moral and religious values in general, or the lack of reasons and aims, but **is to be enacted as the full awareness of the end of the value and the sense of (my)self, in all of its practical, bodily and existential meanings**. Differently stated, it is a practical act of presence to oneself. From the Buddhist perspective, it could be considered as the deep, bodily awareness of one's own transitoriness and mortality. Underlying the difference between the ways of interpreting nihilism in Nishitani and in European metaphysical tradition does not imply the affirmation of any culturalist position (for instance, that, within European culture, nihilism was only theoretical and not practical, or that, in Japan, nihilism was only practical) but to be aware that Nishitani's understanding of nihilism is not grounded on a process of undermining metaphysical and theological assumptions, which has the consequence of translating it into practical behaviours and practices. Nishitani's position attests that nihilism is not oriented towards negating a metaphysical plane, and, **only after that**, the existential dimension, but that it is the direct negation of existence, a practical, bodily negation that influences the metaphysical, exclusively derivative world. To sum up, Nishitani's identification with nihilism does not begin with a purely intellectual affirmation of a theoretical thesis, but with a practical act of self-awareness, like an «experiment within the self» that this very self must perform (Nishitani 1990, p. 2), and, which, we should add, links the existential self-negation with the Buddhist practice of self-awakening. This approach may partially converge with Levinas' criticism, drawn against the pre-eminence of metaphysics over practice, that led the French philosopher to propose ethics as *philosophia prima*.

From such a perspective, Löwith's criticism toward the Japanese intelligentsia accused of not having exerted (self-) criticism is tacitly broadened and deepened by Nishitani so as to include the very European critical attitude, indirectly charged with being purely objectivistic (or subjectivistic) and **not** properly recognising the immediately thinking and living subject (Nishitani 1990, p. 2). The Japanese philosopher rejects the idea that nihilism be reduced to a simple historical phenomenon, or a problem «about the essence of being human. [...] Inquiry into the philosophy of history has remained within the standpoint of reflective observation: the one

who observes and the one who is observed have been separated. [...] Its standpoint remains one of *observing*. The habit of separating essence and phenomenon is a residue of just this approach» (Nishitani 1990, p. 5). This leads Nishitani to define an inquiry from the perspective of the individual, radically historical self, admittedly indebted to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger:

There must be a way of inquiring into history that is fundamentally different from the way the philosophy of history has been conducted up until now. The questioning itself must be historical and the inquirer unified within history. What is more, the inquiry must be conducted ‘with passion’ and existentially, so that the relationship between essence and phenomenon in history and humanity is realized existentially and thoroughly within historical existence. In other words, the great historical problems need to become the problems of the self. (Nishitani 1990, p. 5)

For the purpose of our discussion, we could say that this approach brings the spiritual subtlety of Buddhist meditative practices, and its roots in bodily existence of the self into the modern discussion on the technologies of the self. Replacing theoretical with practical questions, Nishitani aims to embrace Löwith’s position, while at the same time further raising the bar: those who blame the lack of criticism among Japanese intellectuals would still miss the essential point, common to both Europe and Japan: the lack of radical **self**-criticism as individuals. In Nishitani’s words, far from being a matter of reason, nihilism deals with our very bodily existence, our self-awareness as a practical act of being present to ourselves, and our condition. Such a radical doubt destroys all certainties and, **becoming our self**, discloses us as no-selves, thus awakening to ‘the true suchness’ of things. As J. Heisig points out, this is «not a simple *blanking* of the mind, but a disciplined *emptying* of mind», that goes «far beyond the bounds of a private mental exercise», up «to metaphysical insight into reality as such» (2001, p. 221). Hence, we should note, the roots are sunk in practice, not in metaphysics.

No doubt this reading is peculiar to Nishitani: never has nihilism been so clearly related to the theme of immediate, practicing self, at least among European philosophers. Such a position has deep relations with the Japanese modern cultural milieu, whereas it can be included in the general trend of those modern Japanese thinkers who approached nihilism from the perspective of the individual and his/her status in the modern world. Nishitani, thanks to his insight into the individual through his Zen Buddhist pre-comprehensions, plays an important role in developing alternative patterns of modern subjectivity, which he centres on the importance of the religious-practical act of self-awareness. Moreover, he seems to shift the paradigms of philosophical perspective, away from the classical, humanis-

tic tradition towards a bodily and practical approach to human being. This move is accomplished through openly bio-political perspective, endowed with clearly religious overtones.

If we follow Roberto Esposito's interpretation of Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* as expression of a deep awareness of the biological nature of human being which forces us to confront with what the German philosopher variously defined as 'life', 'world' or 'existence' and could not be sufficiently represented in humanism and its classical political philosophy (2004, p. 164), we can probably say the same also about Nishitani. There are however at least two main differences. On one hand, whereas Heidegger still considered «being in the world» as more important than life (Esposito 2004, pp. 166-167), Nishitani on the contrary seems to give priority to the «pre-philosophical», which nonetheless moves toward philosophy. Far from limiting his approach to the existential and philosophical perspective, the relationship between life and nihilism is repeatedly emphasized in his writings (Nishitani 1986, p. 24). On the other, thanks to the previous difference, his ultimately religious consciousness of nihilism, unlike Heidegger, acquires a clearly bio-political weight. In Nishitani's perspective, Buddhism and nihilism merge in the individual's life, becoming the sources of the practice of self-awareness. In the Japanese philosopher, truth is clearly bound to biological and emotional life of the individuals. Nihilism does not fuel rebellion against society, but inspires a continuous practice of existential and bodily doubt, which accompanies the entire life of an individual.

As a provisional conclusion, we could ask whether the experience of nihilism in modern Japan may be helpful to understand our world today. Certainly, the stress on practices is of outmost importance, since it helps to reinvent philosophy away from contemplation back to its ancient, practical vocation. Still, the main problem is what kind of practices can be or should be encouraged in our world. If we look back to Foucault definitions of technologies of control and technologies of the self, the first ones could hardly be desirable, although they have been massively used in modern countries. Still, in late modern world, the technologies of the self seem to be particularly exposed to the risk of nihilism and self-destruction, running the risk of engendering further deregulation, in a world increasingly liquid: if not wisely balanced, they may prove to intensify the destructive power of the permanent warfare state that characterizes the «liquid societies» of late modernity (see Cestari 2014. The idea of 'liquid society' is originally by Zygmunt Bauman). Today, a good balance between inner and outer urges is extremely hard to find. Nishitani's path, notwithstanding its strongly religious nature, which someone may find difficult to share, especially from a political perspective, is intended to avoid the risks of the extremes of bending the knee to the state, as Tanabe did, as well as of destroying oneself in the attempt to rebel to the state or society, as with many *shishōsetsu* writers. This search for mediation should be carefully considered.

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