

Alexandra-Gabriela Baranyi, 2021

Volume 1, pp. 01-11

Date of Publication: 26th May 2021

This paper can be cited as: Baranyi, A., (2021). *The Impact of European Nihilism over the Contemporary Japanese Society*. *Socialis Series in Social Science*, 1, 01-11.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN NIHILISM OVER THE CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE SOCIETY

Alexandra-Gabriela Baranyi

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania

baranyi.alexandra@yahoo.ro

Abstract

The concept of nothingness was present in the Japanese philosophy long before European nihilism, in terms of emptiness, as a Buddhist theory, and it was later developed by the Kyoto School, as a key element of their philosophy. However, the Western sense of nothingness spread out, as a consequence of blind exposure to European influence. The present paper will discuss the channels through which European nihilism arrived in Japan, not only as a philosophic theory but moreover the way it was unconsciously absorbed during the Modern Era. The essay will analyze the dialogues between East and West, such as the critics of Karl Löwith and Keiji Nishitani's responses, to find the linkage between nihilism and the changes the Contemporary Japanese society had suffered in the latest decades. The need for development after World War II caused them to blindly soak up the Western culture, creating many gaps between the traditional way of thinking and the new, Western-like mentality. After the 'euphoric stage' of the Economic boom, the society was left on 'the ground of nihility', leading to social issues, such as increasing suicidal rate, population's general depression, or increase of nationalist movements. What remains as a solution is to first critically analyze the traditional way of thinking, and after that to find a pattern by which the foreign influence should be approached.

Keywords

1. Introduction

The concept of nothingness is present in both, the Continental and the Japanese philosophies as well, though its meaning has different directions. If the Western society associates nothingness with Nietzsche's nihilism – which in a general sense suggests the denial of existence in the absence of its meaning – the Eastern nothingness (or emptiness) has its origin in Zen Buddhism, meaning that every object exists only in relation to one another.

In history, Japanese society was influenced by Chinese culture on many layers. For this reason, the traditional Japanese mentality can be perceived as a mixture of five fountainheads (Kasulis, 2019), the three main ones being:

- Confucianism (6th Century BC), a philosophic ideology based on a set of ethical codes and values which are the foundation of a strong and prosperous society.
- Buddhism, which arrived in Japan via China and South Korea in 550 BC and is based on the process of enlightenment during one's life. Zen Buddhism is the most common practice found in Japan.
- Shinto, the first Japanese religion, which is considered to be dating from the Kofun (250-535 AD), is based on animism, where all the elements are represented by kami, the Japanese term for spirits.

All three sources are sharing the same idea that every member coexisting in a group depends on the other, and so the group's interest is above the individuals (Choong, et al., 2020). This is a fundamental value based on which the traditional Japanese society has developed, and it gives a meaningful role for each person who is part of the community.

In many actual contexts, nothingness is understood as a philosophical idea, and so interpreted merely as a theory or ideology related to the Modern Era. The truth is its pattern can be easily pointed out in contemporary societies as well. Nowadays, both the European and the Japanese societies are driven by a nihilistic wave – in the Western sense – affecting not only the general mentality but the well-being of the individuals as well. The rapid changes regarding technology, religion, or traditions had shrunk all the values that were before meaningful for each person (Thacker, 2016; Akinbode & Shuhumi, 2018). For Europe, it is not something uncommon, as it has repeatedly happened since the 18th Century, and each time new values were

put forward, there was never enough time for those to grow any roots in the collective mentality before other changes would occur.

Still, this pattern was not observed at such a big level in Japan before the Meiji period (1868-1912), when the country started to *blindly* absorb all the information coming from the West – blindly because much of the information was not filtered at the time it was imported. The present paper analyzes the means through which the Western influence arrived in Japan, in order to find out the context that enhanced the nihilism to spread and shrink the firm ground of the Japanese traditional values. There are two hypotheses, to begin with: (1) The European Nihilism was blindly absorbed by the exposure to the Western influence during the 20th Century and the pattern is repeating in the current era, and (2) The current social issues, such as growing tendency of suicidal cases and reluctance to ideas and values coming from Western countries in the recent years are the results of the current nihilistic wave.

The issue this paper follows is to argue when and how did European nihilism arrive in Japan, and if there is any connection between nowadays social issues – as suicidal rate, or depression – and a possible third nihilistic wave. Moreover, what could be some practical solutions in overcoming a nihilistic stage at a society level.

The research methods used are mostly non-empirical, following a critical analysis of the philosophical ideas and theories regarding the Continental and the Japanese perspectives over nihilism and the dialogues between West and East regarding the changes in the Japanese mentality during the 19th and the 20th Centuries. The results also consist of proposing some possible solutions for combating nihilism in Japan, following the ideas of Keiji Nishitani.

2. Nothingness in the Continental versus the Japanese Philosophy

In order to discuss the impact of Western nihilism in Japan, we must clarify the difference between the two approaches over nothingness in philosophy.

2.1 The European Nihilism

In Continental philosophy, the term nihilism has its roots in the Latin term “Nihil”, which means “that which does not exist”. It was firstly used by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743-1819) and later developed by many other influential philosophers of the 19th Century, who introduced the word in moral, political, and existential philosophy. (Toribio Vazquez, 2020) In this paper, I

will refer mostly to the existential nihilism, attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), which is guided by the main idea that life has no intrinsic meaning.

In Nietzsche's philosophy, nihilism came out during a period in Europe's history when the religious ideologies and values were being contested by an increasing part of the population, and this became the argument he used in his writings. Nietzsche had stated: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him (Nietzsche, 1882)." (Kaufmann, 1974). In other words, he does not sustain the idea that God does not exist, like that of an atheist belief. On contrary, he says that God existed, but people themselves have killed him – by denying him – and so he cannot be brought back at a stage where the values sustaining his existence had once been erased. And so, all the values that were representing the firm ground before – conferring to every single individual meaning of life – being denied, the society is left with nothing to rely on. Therefore, nihilism in the European sense is the stage where everything that faith was previously based on collapses, and the person is left with no answers to the question of *why* (Carter, 2013).

In Nietzsche's view, the solution in combating nihilism is to create a new set of values that could form a firm ground, based on development. Though contemporary societies have relied mostly on science-based values, this might not be the solution to a nihilistic wave.

2.2 Nihilism in Japanese Japan

In Japanese philosophy, nothingness is a Zen Buddhism thought, also referred to as emptiness or *sunyata* – where all things are empty of intrinsic existence (Balogh, 2020). On contrary to the European meaning, the emptiness itself gives the core meaning of life. Each being or object in this world is empty when it is described alone, removed from the whole picture. At the same time, every single thing is full of meaning when placed in connection with the other ones.

Keiji Nishitani (1900-1990) was part of the Kyoto School – a group of thinkers who approached Western philosophy in comparison with the Japanese traditional way of thinking. He studied Nietzsche's theories very closely and came out with a Japanese perspective regarding nihilism. Nishitani is interested in existential nihilism, which he is conceiving as a natural stage that each individual may encounter during his life. In other words, the nihility, as the meaninglessness of life, is always there, beneath our feet (Carter, 2013).

In Nishitani's philosophy, he perceives nihilism as a process on three levels. The first one is the field of consciousness, where the individual is only relating to the material world, and he is

seeing the objects from the standpoint of the self. He is not in touch with true reality. The second level is the field of nihility, a stage when the individual himself becomes the nihility and so he wakes up standing on a ground that is not solid anymore. Everything becomes nullified and the nihility that was not observed in the field of consciousness opens up (Davis et al., 2011).

On contrary to Nietzsche's perspective, Nishitani sustains that the next step here is passing to the field of emptiness. And so, come to the original values where everything, including the nihility, becomes empty. But even though this solution in overcoming nihilism has its roots in Zen Buddhism, Nishitani failed to provide a practicable method that could help the individual in advancing to the field of emptiness. (Toribio Vazquez, 2020)

3. The Blind Absorption of the European Nihilism in Japan

There are two waves of nihilism that had been observed in Japanese society after they opened the country to Western influence, which is the subject of the discussions between Karl Löwith and Keiji Nishitani.

3.1 Two Waves of Nihilism in Japan

The first wave of nihilism was during the Meiji period (1868-1912). After the 214 years of Sakoku during the Edo Period (1603-1868) – during which Japan kept its border closed and the society had almost no interaction with any Western influence – the Japanese needed to open themselves to the influence that was coming from overseas. The past shogunate system was replaced with emperorship and besides, they started to study all the Western sciences. This implied the Japanese society importing not only products and studies but also social and moral values, different from the ones that were built before. (Heising et al., 2011) As a result, they fast learned everything, with no time to filter the information and create a fusion between the traditional way of thinking and the Western one. This caused society to doubt over what are the true values, a question to which they could not find an answer.

The second wave of nihilism was observed during the first decades after Japan fell to American occupation as a result of World War II. More than it happened in the first wave, the Japanese society struggled with accepting and assimilating Western values as their own. Again, with no time to filter all the information, the trust they had in their power and culture was put into question. The pattern was similar in both cases: The old values and faith forming the firm ground had shrunk, leaving the society wondering about what is true after all (Elbe, 2001).

3.2 Discussions between the West and the East

Many discussions between Western and Japanese philosophers aroused, regarding the nihilism that was subconsciously absorbed by the Japanese as an effect of the exposure to Western influence.

Karl Löwith, a German thinker who also lived in Japan after WWII, is stating that: “Japan came to know us only after it was too late after we lost faith in our civilization and the best, we had to offer was a self-critique of which Japan took no notice. (Löwith, 1990)” (Davis et al., 2011) In other words, the moment when Japan started to import Western culture, the Europeans were struggling with nihilism, as a result, it came along with all the other values. But Japan did not notice a practice that was helping the European to go through this stage and develop the one of self-critique. This know-how is missing in Japan, in Löwith’s view, and is causing them to separate their mentality in two directions, the old traditional way of thinking and the other one based on Western values and sciences. The Japanese cannot create a fusion of the two directions because they lack critical-analysis know-how.

In response, Nishitani is agreeing with Löwith’s critique, saying “There is no such unity of self and the others in the case of Japan. Löwith says that modern Japan is itself a “living contradiction.” What he says is true – but how are we then to resolve such a contradiction?” (Nishitani, 1983) Nishitani emphasizes that the solution to this contradiction is not necessarily going back to the roots of the Japanese traditional values, but to have a critical analysis over it from the current standpoint. At the same time, Japan should have the same approach over the process of Westernization and filter the information that could have a contribution to its evolution.

4. Nihilism in the Contemporary Japanese Society

Analyzing the first two waves of nihilism the Japanese society had encountered in the past, there is a similar pattern which may be observed repeating from the beginning of the 21st Century.

4.1 The Third Wave of Nihilism

The problems through which contemporary society is going through could be perceived as a sign of a nihilistic wave that is influencing people’s mentality. Even though analyzed

separately each one has different roots, the fact that they all occur simultaneously is suggesting that there might be a further reason that changed the previous directions.

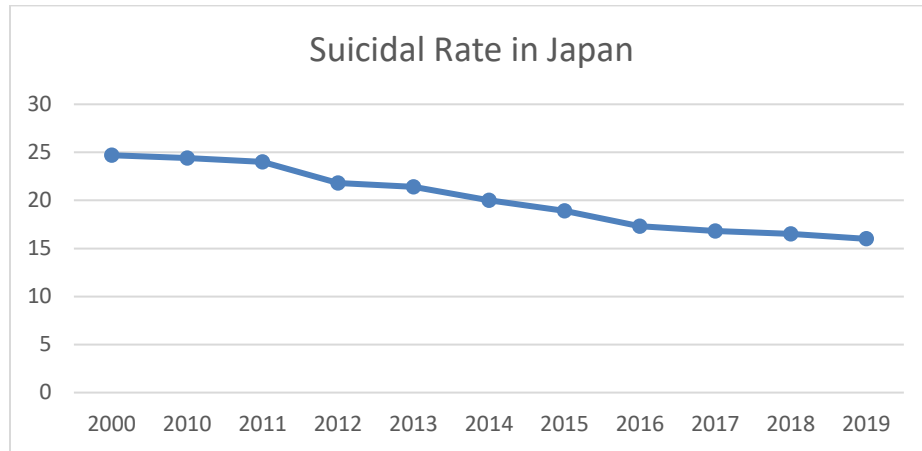


Figure 1: *The Suicidal Rate in Japan (2010-2019)*

The suicidal rate from 2000 to 2010 was constantly between 24% and 25% to 100,000 populations; it decreased to 16% until 2019, but the percentage is still high compared with other countries (Macrotrends, 2020). Most of the suicides are due to overwork and depression. In the last years, the companies and the government introduced a few work policies in order to help decrease the frequency of those acts.

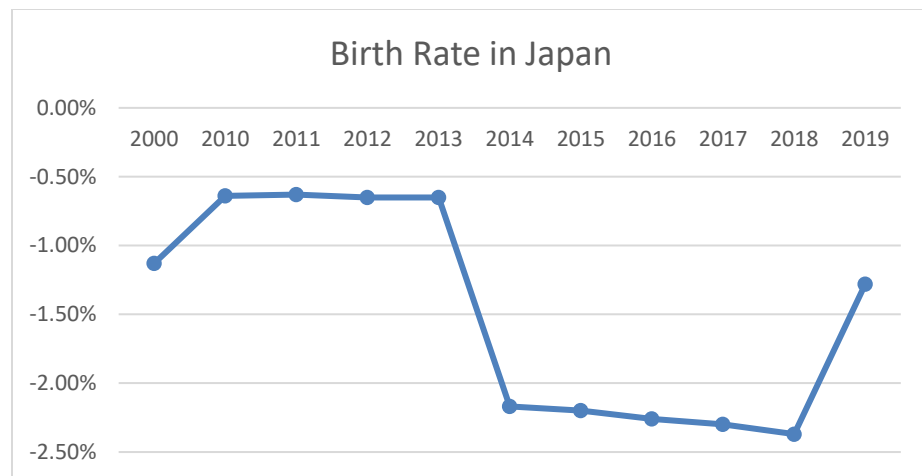


Figure 2: *The Birth Rate in Japan (2010-2019)*

During 10 years, the birth rate got higher, arriving at -0.64% in 2010, and remained constant until 2014, when it decreased again to 2.17% and maintained to that low rate for the next years (Macrotrends, 2020). From the year 2015, Japan tried to relax the immigration regulation and as a result in 2019 there was an increase in the number of births.

In those two cases, overwork is one of the main reasons that fueled the problem. This tendency of the Japanese of giving more importance to their job than their personal life in some cases can be perceived as a sign of a nihilistic stage. This stage may be associated with a struggle of the individual to create a new firm ground on which he could base his faith on. In this case, he tries to replace the old family and spiritual values with the ones related to work activity. When nihilism shows up, the individual cannot remain in the field of nihilism. It is a natural process of searching for a new set of beliefs that can give his life meaning.

As a consequence of the fact that those values proved to be unstable, the last years have shown a trend for Japanese of reticence to Western influence – as in ideas, lifestyle, or even products – and even cases of discrimination towards foreigners coming to Japan. These should be perceived as actions driven by subconscious factors, in a struggle to find a solution to the nihilistic wave.

4.2 Going Back to the Roots – A Solution for Combating the Nihilism

As Nishitani has stated, the solution here is to have a critical attitude over the Japanese traditional values and traditions, in order to see which of those values relate to the contemporary society and contribute to overall development. This process is needed firstly, because the context in which the old ideas were attributed is not matching with the current one, and secondly because the old values had never been analyzed from another point of view by the Japanese individuals, but only taken as they stand.

But further, than just a critical analysis which is not a practicable solution, there is the need for creating a fusion between the two mentalities – the Western one and the Eastern one. Löwith had stated that there is a big gap between those levels in Japanese society and because of this, they are not correlated. This statement is only half true because the first two waves of nihilism in Japan were handled by creating a system based on the Western structure which was organized in a Japanese manner by adapting the old traditional values to the new economic and political environment (Cestari, 2015).

Thus, there is a background of fusion ability, but it is mostly found at a national level. Still, the main problem is to find a practicable method in overcoming nihilism at the level of the individual. Even though Nishitani's studies in overcoming nihilism do not necessarily express the possible method, the critical analysis may offer new perspectives over the old practices of meditation and so adapt them to the contemporary era.

5. Conclusions

The assimilation of Western culture during the Meiji period took place at a time when Europe was struggling with nihilism, a fact that caused the Japanese society to blindly absorb the nihilism behind all the sciences and information as well. The fact that the Japanese spent more than 200 years with their borders closed had a notable influence on the way they perceived all the information that was coming from the West at that time. And so, because they were deeply connected with the traditional Japanese values, the first nihilistic wave was a result of the contradiction between the newly imported Western values and the previous ones (Davis, 2011).

The second nihilistic wave took place after the end of World War II and had the same causes as the first one – the loss of previous beliefs. In both cases, the solution was to create a fusion between the two mentalities, which proved to be helpful to reestablish a new set of values for that moment. Still, the Japanese never precede a self-critique analysis over their old values, but only adapted them to the contemporary social structure. And so, even if they managed to create a strong fusion of the two mentalities at a national level, the individual still lacks this ability (Cestari, 2015). The current social issues that are simultaneously occurring show that there is a third nihilistic wave spreading in contemporary Japanese society, so there is a need of developing a strategy of overcoming nihilism at an individual level.

6. Discussions

There are a few limitations to the current research paper. Firstly, the topic of European nihilism in contemporary Japanese society was not approached by many researchers and most of the analyses are purely theoretical, regarding the comparison between the West and the East. My hypothesis regarding the third wave of nihilism is based on the theoretical study and previous experiences in a Japanese university, where the topic was highly debated. Still, further correlations with the Japanese social issues need to have proceeded in order to determine whether my hypothesis is true or false. The lack of data here has also part of the limitations of my research methods.

REFERENCES

- Akinbode, A. I. & Al Shuhumi, S. R. A. (2018). The Principalship in the Twenty-First Century. *PUPIL: International Journal of Teaching, Education and Learning*, 2(2), 137-148.
<https://doi.org/10.20319/pijtel.2018.22.137148>
- Balogh, L. (2020). Nothingness, the Self, and the Meaning of Life. Nishida, Nishitani, and Japanese Psychotherapeutic Approaches to the Challenge of Nihilism. *Journal of Philosophy of Life* Vol.10, No.1:98-119
- Carter, R. E. (2013). *The Kyoto School: An Introduction*. New York: Suny Press
- Cestari, M. (2015). Nihilistic Practices of the Self: General Remarks on Nihilism and Subjectivity in Modern Japan. *Ca' Foscari Japanese Studies* (Book Collection). *Contemporary Japan*. Vol.3. Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari. Retrieved from:
<http://lear.unive.it/jspui/bitstream/11707/5233/1/8.%20Cestari.pdf>
- Choong, S. H., Daniel, E. G. S. & De Witt, D. (2020). Literature Review on Confucian Heritage Culture Identity in Malaysian Chinese Pre-University Students. *PUPIL: International Journal of Teaching, Education and Learning*, 4(1), 12-18.
<https://doi.org/10.20319/pijtel.2020.41.1218>
- Davis, B. W., Schroeder B. & Wirth J. M. (2011). *Japanese and Continental Philosophy*, Indiana: Indiana University Press
- Elbe, S. H. E. (2001). *European Nihilism and the Meaning of the European Idea: A Study of Nietzsche's 'Good Europeanism' in Response to the Debate in the Post-Cold War Era*. (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations. (UMI No. U615465)
- Heising, J. W., Kasulis T. P., Maraldo J. C. (2011). *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
<https://doi.org/10.21313/hawaii/9780824835521.001.0001>
- Kasulis, T. (2019). *Five Fountainheads of Japanese Philosophy*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/japanese-philosophy/#FiveFounJapaPhil>
- Kaufmann, W. (1974). *Nietzsche: Parable of the Madman*. Internet Modern History Sourcebook. Retrieved from <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/nietzsche-madman.asp>
- Macrotrends (2020). *Japan Suicide Rate 2000-2020*. Retrieved from <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/JPN/japan/suicide-rate>

Macrotrends (2020). *Japan Birth Rate 1950-2020*. Retrieved from

<https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/JPN/japan/birth-rate>

Nishitani, K. (1983). *Religion and Nothingness*. California: University of California Press

Thacker, E. (2016, April 30). *Black Illumination: the abyss of Keiji Nishitani*. The Japan Times.

Retrieved from [https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2016/04/30/books/black-](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2016/04/30/books/black-illumination-abyss-keiji-nishitani/)

[illumination-abyss-keiji-nishitani/](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2016/04/30/books/black-illumination-abyss-keiji-nishitani/)

Toribio Vazquez, J. L. (2020). Nietzsche's shadow: On the origin and development of the term nihilism. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. 1-14. Retrieved from

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0191453720975454>