Washed out by the boundless waves of constant changes, interwar Japan was filled with foreign objects and ideas that replaced the familiar cultural order and urban landscape with an incessant flood of things modern. Caught within the tight grasp of this historical condition of relentless transformation, it appeared that nothing fell outside its powerful influences; the spell of the age entirely transformed every facet of human life – from the sight of a familiar street-corner to the inner landscape of the individual. The popular experience of fascination, bewilderment and confusion in such a dramatic transformation was naturally reflected in the nature of the knowledge produced, allowing us a glimpse of the lived experience of those who were involved in this turbulent historical time. The residue of an awareness of oneself unaffected by such intense alienation gave rise to the ghost of erased specificity and foregone possibilities of a life filled with meaning, inclined to fix the temporal scheme of the world to its own modality of the imagined past.

In *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan*, Harry Harootunian takes up the ambitious task of locating various texts produced by Japanese intellectuals during the interwar years in the context of the historical transformation described above. The historical drama is depicted in 414 pages of careful study of texts produced by Tosaka Jun, Gonda Yasunosuke, Kon Wajiro, Kuki Shuzo, Watsuji Tetsuro, Yanagita Kunio, Orikuchi Shinobu, Miki Kiyoshi and others, who are seen in a comparative perspective to major European, especially German, thinkers of the same time period, including Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger and Siegfried Kracauer. Like its twin-volume published in the same year, *History’s Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life*, this volume assumes its readers to be well-versed in theory, as well as Japanese intellectual history – which may make this significant book less accessible to a broader readership. Viewing history from a vantage point distant from those involved in the immediate turmoil, Harootunian sees rising capitalist consumer culture – and the plural temporalities it unleashed – as making many Japanese intellectuals of the time uneasy, producing unsettling feelings of ‘unevenness’ or fragmentary and fleeting senses of the present, and eventually leading...
them to redeem the disappearing sense of the ‘everyday’ in the knowledge they produced. The author argues that the development of such troubled knowledge, which sought to repress signs of divisions and conflicts, contributed to the ‘crisis of representation’ in the 1930s, and invited calls for a ‘political resolution’ to this cultural crisis. It is this attempt at a resolution that he sees as the core of fascism. Seen from this perspective, Harootunian concludes that modern Japanese history was in the process of being overcome by the dynamic forces of modernity rather than – as Japanese intellectuals proclaimed at the opening of the WWII – ‘overcoming modernity’.

Doing justice in reviewing this complex and sophisticated inquiry into the question of modernity is not an easy task. Therefore, I will only attempt to engage with the main argument Harootunian presents in Overcome by Modernity from the perspective of my primary interest in rethinking the problematic of the Japanese experience of modernity, especially the question of modernity and fascism, and more generally that of culture and politics. While Harootunian conceptualises modernisation as an integral human process beyond the conventional segregation between the subjective/conceptual and the objective/material, this intent is circumscribed by his reluctance to step outside the realm of the discursive. Throughout, history is largely approached from a perspective that focuses on the reflection of experience in the knowledge Japanese intellectuals produced in this critical period. This methodological stance is closely related to the author’s ambivalence about Marxism in general, and to its dialectical epistemology and historical materialism in particular. It results in what appears to be a phenomenological study of Japanese modernity that locates texts in neither the historical context of their production nor the specific topographic make-up of the discursive terrain of the time. By excluding the historical context from his analytical scope, particularly the extra-discursive forces that operated beneath the formation of interwar Japanese discourse, the volume gives an impression of attributing too much credit to texts themselves, while knowledge-production as historical practice is diminished.

In this brief review, I will discuss the general argumentative traits of the volume before turning to those issues of primary interest to me – methodological questions; the relation between fascism and modernity; and the status of writing in history.

Responses to the assaults of capitalism

Harootunian is one of the most influential figures in the field of Japanese studies. In the late 1980s, he introduced poststructuralist-informed approaches that virtually transformed the orientation of the field. Since this incursion, the field began opening itself up to more theoretically rigorous approaches, partially integrating itself into other disciplines, such as postcolonial studies and cultural studies. More generally, this field became conscious of the political dimension of knowledge creation, which led to a critical self-examination of the field itself. Harootunian’s 1988 Things Seen and