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Living on borrowed time: rethinking temporality, self, nihilism, and schooling

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ABSTRACT

Seeking to contribute to recent attempts to rethink the deepest foundations of the field, this paper offers new ways of contemplating time, specifically its relations to self, nihilism, and schooling. We briefly review how some leading Western thinkers have contemplated time before detailing Japanese scholars who have offered divergent, original, and arguably more sophisticated, theoretical accounts. We then illustrate these ideas by sketching how Japan ‘borrowed time’ following the abrupt political rupture of 1868, showing how Linear Time came to be disseminated and diffused, largely through modern schooling. Last, we spotlight the nihilism that has arisen as consequence. Our primary aim is not empirical elaboration, however, but instead disclosure of a complex of relations that the field of comparative education has yet to discuss. We offer both the experience-cum-thought of Japan and this complex itself as reconstructive resources for the field which remains shallow in its parochial presumptions and unwillingness to engage ontologically.

KEYWORDS

Time; theory; metaphysics; God; post-modernism; ontology; being; Nietzsche; Heidegger; Keiji Nishitani; Maki Yusuke; Japan; comparative education

1. Introduction

Time and space are the deepest foundations of any attempt to grasp existence, both individually and collectively. Whether acknowledged explicitly or not, temporality and spatiality form the conceptual ground upon which our World arises and retreats. Space has dominated the social science research imaginary in recent decades, primarily in ongoing attempts to reconstruct bounded and static spatial categories such as the nation/state, global/local, self/other, and so on. Within educational research specifically, recent work has been characterised by critical interventions that attempt to (re)open increasingly taken-for-granted images of space (e.g. Larsen and Beech 2014). This work has been rich and important, not least because it demonstrates how seemingly once-so-certain epistemological and ontological starting points can quickly collapse.

*Both authors contributed equally to this piece. After several years of discussion and mutual learning, we feel designating a first author is neither possible nor useful.

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Absent to date, however, is the other dimension: time. What is clearly missing from three decades of the ‘spatial turn’ are serious attempts to challenge and reconstruct temporality at the same deep depths. Of course, leading social theorists in the English-speaking world have long spoken of ‘time–space compression’ (Giddens 1987; Harvey 1990; Massey 1994; see also Wallerstein 2001) and educational researchers studying globalisation now adopt this trope to avoid working overtime. Such work, however, hardly qualifies then as epistemological and ontological reconstruction: it merely offers up ‘accelerated’ form of existing notions of time.

Considerably richer work is put forth, of course, by anthropologists. Their excursions out of Western Europe over the last two centuries have provided the well-spring of the rare voices in the Western academy challenging dominant notions of time (e.g. Eliade 1954; Fabian 1983; Levi-Strauss 1966). Unfortunately, most educational researchers tend to still view these works like exotic specimens in a zoo, rather than mirror useful in the (re)constructive project. Today, as more and more ‘savage minds’ appropriate familiar, dominant notions of time, the possibility of studying time in Other societies as a means of regeneration itself might be coming to an end.

In this essay, our attempt is to (re)open our taken-for-granted images of time, provocatively contemplating what time reconstructed at its epistemological and ontological depths might look like and what implications it might hold for educational research. To do so we work historically. Yet, we also move beyond Western Europe, its intellectual traditions and the various mimetic civilizations it has spawned globally through conquest, colonization, and consumption. Our history thus retains the anthropological ‘advantage’ in a sense: putting the Other in view allows us to question taken-for-granted concepts of time and self. Our goal is ambitious: to dredge up the concept of time, one that has sunk so far below the level of consciousness that social theorists working from the Western tradition appear to take it simply as ontological ‘fact’. Refutation of a particular concept of time, we argue, carries far more serious consequences than commonly conceived: it not only leaves us slowly sinking into a nihilistic abyss, but also without recourse to other ways of being.

Our empirical entry point is demonstrating how an abstract, infinite, and absolute *Linear Time* was ‘borrowed’ by Japan at the dawn of modernity. *Linear Time* refers to abstract time that runs on infinitely into the future, without reference to context, nature, or human interaction, the time of Newtonian physics and its mechanical embodiment: clock time.\(^1\) We describe how this *Linear Time* gradually displaced alternative notions of temporality and argue that this has led – predictably – to the emergence of a pervasive nihilism within the span of roughly 100 years. Our sketch focuses on how modern schools acted as the primary channels through which this ‘borrowed time’ was delivered. To construct this history, we synthesise a range of primary, secondary, and theoretical sources, nearly all of these are written in Japanese and which have never been translated, let alone drawn on by educational researchers outside Japan.\(^2\)

Yet our purpose is less empirical elaboration, more theoretical originality. We lean heavily on Japanese thinkers and social theorists – primarily philosopher Nishitani Keiji and sociologist Maki Yusuke – to locate lacuna in the works of Western theoretical luminaries Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger among others. The foremost ‘blind spots’ that Japanese thinkers reveal are, we argue, three-fold: (i) how our taken-for-granted
notion of time has a social history, (ii) how this dominant notion of time implicates the self and ensures nihilistic consequences, and (iii) how this nihilism is not the consequence of the ‘death of God’ and thus not inevitable and irreversible, even in the West. We emphasise that the ‘case of Japan’ is presented here not as exception, outlier, or exotic Other that adds an empirical data-point to existing epistemologies, but a resource for reflecting on the very ontological ground upon which the existing theoretical-cum-existential foundations of educational research rest.

2. Theory: time, self, and nihilism

2.1. Some views of temporality in western thought: Nietzsche and Heidegger

The obvious starting point for readers trained in the Western tradition is Friedrich Nietzsche. It was Nietzsche who turned to deep reflection on temporality to launch his fatal critique of Kant’s conceptualisation of Reason and the noumenal Self, specifically Kant’s claims that these reside outside of time. Nietzsche offered a resolution to one of Kant’s fundamental antinomies by showing that a-priori judgements that thinkers such as Hegel posited as arising from a pure, ahistorical ego had, in fact, their own history and were thus subject to change. This geneological approach shifted the entire ground of critique from epistemological skirmishes waged on the terrain of idealism to tracking tectonic shifts in language (metaphors), morals (values), and notions of self (consciousness) at the empirical level. It would come to form the starting point for a long, powerful line of critique of metaphysical-cum-modernist foundations in Western thought found in social theories derived from Hegel and Marx alike, enabling the works of Max Weber and Michael Foucault among others (Owen 1994).

Nietzsche argued, among other things, that language originally arose out of human distress and anxiety in the face of an existential unknown: metaphors that tried to bestow meaning on that which was unspeakable. These metaphors eventually hardened – became reified – thus providing the illusion of mastery. Nietzsche called the reification of this once negotiated metaphorical language as ‘conceptual language’. He stressed that those who use this conceptual language forget their authorship of it, leading to the illusion of unchangeable, timeless, a-priori structures:

Truths are illusions whose illusory nature has been forgotten, metaphors that have been used up and have lost their imprint and now operate as mere metal, no longer as coins. (Nietzsche [1871–1873] 1979, 84)

With language itself shot through with historical contingency, all claims to objective causality – ‘cause-ascription’ – could be nothing more than historical products. Foucault’s entire project can be understood as an elaboration of this point. Grounding the potential for metaphysical flight from Kant through recourse to temporal contingency was a mighty feat in-and-of-itself, but what Nietzsche had actually done was undercut the entire premise of Western Enlightenment thought.

The Enlightenment was, of course, predicated on the truth of Reason and a conscious, autonomous self that could come to Reason and thus bridge the chasm between the noumenal and phenomenal realms. Progressively, the World would be aligned – at the hands of the rational self – with supposedly timeless, eternal moral law. Yet, when Nietzsche
recast the a priori and causality as temporally contingent, both idealist philosophers and empirical scientists appeared as a single group of wayward metaphysicians: both sought to uncover the supposedly timeless laws from a position of reified conceptual metaphors. More specifically, Nietzsche posited that the assumptions of Christian morality had dropped below the level of consciousness (i.e. human authorship had been forgotten), forming the timeless a-priori reference points for claims to objectivity, Reason, and causality. Through roughly reconstructing a mythological-cum-cultural rereading of the Jewish and Greek historical experience, Nietzsche suggested that ‘Christian morality’ ultimately evolved into a ‘Will to Truth’: the belief that an autonomous self could understand eternal law.

So strong was this ‘Will to Truth’, Nietzsche argued, that it would ultimately overpower the notion of God itself, seen specifically in the rise of science: the self’s ‘Will to Truth’ would eventually destroy the unifying notion of God. When ‘God is Dead’ – as Nietzsche so provocatively proclaimed – all that could remain was an increasingly desperate, although impossible, search by the self for a ground on which to assert the value of truth, the only constitutive soil of self-hood itself. The consequence would be a coming ‘crisis of Nihilism’ in Western civilisation: the tipping point where the ‘Will to Truth’ increasingly destroyed the ground of its own values and was thus faced with the purpose of the search (and thus the ground of self) as existential problems. Put simply, the further science – as cultural heir to Judeo-Christian morality – progressed, the more we would be hurled forward into a deepening nihilistic void. Nietzsche’s first formulation is the essential starting point for understanding later critiques by Japanese thinkers.

The only other thinker in the Western tradition to approach Nietzsche’s level of radical questioning of the taken-for-granted Western worldview was profoundly influenced by him: Martin Heidegger. Yet, Heidegger, even more than Nietzsche, viewed temporality, self, and existence as inextricably interwoven. While Nietzsche remained wedded to the appeal of an autonomous self – that is, the Übermensch who might have the power to escape the looming nihilistic abyss through creating a new moral system – Heidegger saw no chance for escape from the inevitability of our own death, only awareness and acknowledgement. Acknowledgement was the only entry point into deeper questions; denial could only result in technologies that would continue to separate us from the fundamental questions surrounding Being. Following his mentor Husserl and the wider phenomenological tradition, Heidegger’s critique placed time at the very centre. Da-sein was posited as fundamentally a temporal phenomenon.

Yet, for Heidegger time was not to be understood in the classic Aristotelian-cum-Kantian sense of some linear, infinite a-priori ‘ruler’ that could solidly ground everything from physics to metaphysics. In the latter chapters of The Basic Problems of Phenomenology (1927) he offers an exacting and crippling critique of Aristotle’s treatise on time found in Physics (Book 8), characterising it as an instance of ‘falling’ that covers up ‘original time’. It was this Aristotelian concept of time, Heidegger held, that came to underpin the ill-fated turn to Platonic metaphysics. Instead, Heidegger sought to recast time as ‘original time’: temporality as the horizon of each individual’s own death; the possibility of one’s own non-being that makes authentic engagement with existence possible. In this sense, taken-for-granted notions of time are, for Heidegger, merely technology that deepens the trend towards ontological blindness – ‘forgetting Being’ – and perpetuate the
shallowness of Western thought. Social theorists such as Derrida and Giddens were inspired by Heidegger and operationalised his vision, albeit only to a limited extent (Adams 1990; Hodge 2007). These later thinkers failed to go to the same existential depths, leaving Western social theory wholly dependent on Aristotelian time, still blind to ontological questions, and – indeed – shallow. Such shallowness becomes clear when viewed in relation to Japanese thought.

2.2. Some views of temporality in Japanese thought: Nishitani and Maki

Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990), a leading member of the Kyoto School of Philosophy, was heavily influenced by both Nietzsche and Heidegger, reading and rereading *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* throughout his youth and personally attending Heidegger’s lectures on Nietzsche in Freiburg in the late 1930s (Parkes 1990). Nishitani too affirmed the connections to nihilism that Nietzsche had sketched and, like Heidegger, granted a central place to time:

Along with the teleological system of a divine world order, the hierarchy of values it implied also collapsed … This corresponds to a situation in a world devoid of God where *time became open-ended in both directions*. The time that lost the beginning and the end it had through the Will of God is the time of the world in secularization. Within that time, every function of life, as something that is autotelic and therefore aimless, is given over to the unrestricted pursuit of the self. It is here that the infinite drive, or what may be termed ‘self-will’, is to be seen. (Nishitani [1955] 1983, 236, emphasis added)

This quote, however, also reveals two critical divergences staked out by Nishitani. First, Nishitani places a greater emphasis than either Nietzsche or Heidegger on the mutual relations between self-autonomy, this new ‘open-ended’ time, and the emergence of a ‘kind of infinity’ within human existence itself. Second, Nishitani spotlights specifically the quality of the self that arises as a consequence of the emergence of this infinitely ‘open-ended’ time: one burdened by ‘infinite drive’ and ‘unrestricted pursuit of the self’. In his words:

It is part and parcel of the being of restless, incessant becoming which seems to be spurred on from within by an infinite drive. When our being comes about as an incessant becoming brought about by its being destined to a constant doing, this doing can only come about as doing something and this, in turn, cannot come to be without this world-nexus. (Nishitani [1955] 1983, 240)

Here Nishitani is arguing that the ‘constant doing’ of self – ‘will’ – has co-arisen with a new concept of time arising from historical circumstance (‘world-nexus’). There are surely echoes of Heidegger here, but Nishitani places his emphasis not on the enduring legacy of productionist metaphysics (Platonism), but instead upon new time-self relations whose consequence is an infinite self-will.

Nishitani points out that Nietzsche himself remained almost wholly locked into the assumptions an enduring ‘self-will’ and ‘infinite drive’, thus Nietzsche had not found the answer to nihilism but was instead an instance of historical processes he had (mis) described:

We can find the concept of will at the ground of all the most important Western standpoints regarding time and history. This is obviously the case with the Will of God in Christianity and the Will to Power in Nietzsche’s atheism, but a human self-will, which can be called a kind of
daemonic infinite drive, lies hidden even behind the man-centered reason of modern secularism. (Nishitani [1955] 1983, 251)

In other words, Nietzsche could not imagine no-self or a self without ‘infinite drive’ – a state of just being, not doing. In contradistinction to Heidegger, Nishitani, in turn, places a greater emphasis on the historical contingency of this formation. While Heidegger was content to only dissect the logic and consequences of the western philosophical tradition from its Greek foundations, Nishitani pushes us to see the diffusion of this view of time/self a relatively recent phenomenon and understand its social consequences. Yet, we are better to explore this critique not via Nishitani, but through a richer elaboration found in the social theory of Maki Yusuke.

Maki Yusuke’s (1937–) seminal work, A Comparative Sociology of Time (1981), opens by making the central problematique a pervasive, ever-present feeling/thoughts that our lives are meaningless: individual life is meaningless because of the inevitability of our own death; collectively we face the parallel inevitability of human extinction and thus confront the sheer meaninglessness of human history. Yet, Maki provocatively questions the inevitability of this tragic nihilism: Are such feelings inescapable, somehow founded on historical realities offered up by Nietzsche or the metaphysical ‘wrong turn’ described by Heidegger? Maki diverges, suggesting that, in fact, nihilistic thoughts are based on a set of at least three implicit assumptions, all of which are embedded in a historically contingent ‘time consciousness’ that, in turn, produces a historically contingent self.

First, present nihilism is rooted in the idea that time eliminates everything; that since the future is the source of meaning of the present (i.e. only the ‘results’ of tomorrow bestow meaning on today) and since death destroys all, individually and collectively, this can only mean that the present is ultimately condemned to lack meaning. Second, such nihilism is premised on the idea that life is extremely short and precarious as seen from standpoint of the self. This feeling arises from an implicit conceptualisation-cum-standard that time stretches out infinitely, a measure that inevitably renders any life span, no matter how long, a mere millisecond in the history of the universe. Third, our existing ‘time consciousness’ holds that finite existences are void, rooted in an implicit assumption of the irreversibility or ‘one-off’ nature of time and our own individual existence. That is, we view finite ‘instances’ (e.g. self) as a one-time occurrence, rather than as, say, an accumulation of the past (e.g. continuity of characteristics and struggles of the past) or as a reoccurrence of past (e.g. another manifestation of a particular set of persistent familial characteristics, sacred beliefs/truths, or nature itself). Maki points out that we have ceased to see ourselves as part of anything larger – the past, the collective, or nature – that extends beyond individual existence. Maki’s entire sociologically project revolves around challenging such reified assumptions about time and thus self. But Maki is not merely interested in challenging the trope of ‘clock time’ that some Western social theorists have also seen as problematic (e.g. Adams 1990: Sorokin and Merton 1937) but doing so in ways that reconnect sociology to philosophy.

Concretely, Maki works historically and comparatively to show that existing concepts of time/self are, in fact, specific to modern society. Time in modern society is understood as the infinite, Linear Time mentioned above – Aristotelian-Kantian time, Newtonian time, ‘clock time’, abstract and absolute temporality. Although it goes by many names, the crucial point is that time is now assumed to be ‘open-ended in both directions’. Maki’s
approach to reopening this assumption begins with a meta-synthesis that effectively historicizes modern time. He undertakes a wide-ranging review of classic anthropological studies that explicitly suggest alternatives to dominant notions of time (e.g. Evans-Pritchard, Levi-Strauss, Eliade, Mbiti) and more implicit challenges found in works drawn widely across geographical space (e.g. African, Hopi, Australian aborigines, Hellenistic Greece, and medieval Japan). Out of this synthesis, Maki discerns a ‘movement’ (but without any sense of teleology) towards modern ‘time consciousness’. To describe this transition, he uses the concepts of Iterative, Circular, and/or Segmented Time in contradistinction to modern notions of Linear Time. His vision is reproduced in Figure 1. Here the X-Axis represents how humans relate to nature, with the Y-Axis represents relations between the individual and the community.

Iterative Time was found in ‘primeval collectives’ (literally, social formations predating time itself) that conceptualised time as a primary and derived series: human affairs (derived) were merely a manifestation of an immortal world of nature and mythical events (primary). Here Maki cites Mbiti’s (1969) discussion of ‘Zamani’ and ‘Sasa’ time of some African tribes and its concomitant linguistic-grammatical structures as a classic example. He also contrasts Japanese poetry from Manyoshu separated in time by 200 years, showing the falling of blossoms was understood in the ninth century as an indicator of passing time, rather than simply portrayed as an occurrence as it was in the seventh century. Maki also highlights here Evans-Pritchard’s notion of ‘Cow Time’ among the Nuer in which the natural rhythms of the cattle provided the basis for the human community to synchronise communal daily affairs.

Next emerged Segmented Time in some societies, whilst Circular Time emerged in others. As most classically represented by Judaism (‘Hebrew-ism’), Segmented Time is marked by the emergence of a start and ending – opening the possibility for teleology. However, at this stage only certain events held significance along the new teleological axis, interspersed with mundane events that lacked similar meaning. Time was still thus qualitative: lacking an independent existence and remaining concrete, similar to ‘Cow Time’, within the frameworks of meaning that formed shared horizons of the human collective itself. Still, a rupture was evident: the replacement of the natural rhythms of the

![Figure 1](https://example.com/figure1.png)

**Figure 1.** Maki Yusuke’s Conceptualization of Time (translated directly from Maki, 1981, 195).
cow, with abstracted, anthropocentric concerns of the collective itself. *Segmented Time* thus inaugurated the slow independence of the ‘human’ from nature and an emerging eschatological notion that time was irreversible.

An alternative route out was *Circular Time*, with Maki citing Hellenistic Greeks as representative. Here individuals remained more embedded in nature and primarily cognizant of recurrence (e.g. changing seasons, rhythms of the body, activity/rest, renewal/decay, but especially the rotations of heavenly bodies). Here was well, this movement marked a rupture: an abstraction of time and its independent existence, but this time outside of collective human horizons. Aristotle’s contemplations on time emerged from this period. As such, such time became quantifiable for the first time and accessible by individuals who did not share or partake in collective meaning. Here Maki usefully illustrates by drawing parallels to the search for abstract standards of justice and the ‘abstracted quantification’ of goods and labour in the form of monetary currency that emerged around roughly the same time in classical Greece.

The uniqueness of Maki’s approach arguably becomes most evident in his (re)reading of the forefathers of Western modern thought, primarily John Calvin, Pascal, Rene Descartes, and Montaigne among others. He argues that despite being commonly portrayed as standing on opposite sides of the religious-Christian and humanist-Renaissance divide, all can be grouped together: united in a shared project of recovering the lost relationship between self and eternal existence, on the one hand, and between self and reality, on the other. Maki points out that their methods all began with ‘I believe’, ‘I think’, or ‘I feel’, as most famously summed up in Descartes *Cognito Ergo Sum*. For Maki, what this signals is not the emergence from the grip of the powerful myth of Christianity (as the narrative of modernity itself would suggest) or even continuation of Christian morality cloaked in secular form (as Nietzsche would have us believe), but instead the unfolding of a new ‘time consciousness’ in which individuals felt themselves for the first time independent of ‘meaning-making’ horizons of either the collective (Judaism) or the cycles found in nature (Hellenism). Maki elaborates Nishitani here, positing these ideas as evidence that an absolute, *Linear Time* conception and an absolute, self-enclosed finite Self had mutually arisen around this juncture.

Maki emphasises that the great paradox in this development was that the acquisition of an absolute, yet finite self that co-arose with modern *Linear Time* carried the consequence of a ‘loss of reality’ for the self. ‘Loss of reality’ signifies the desperate search for meaning in the world and desire for return. In other words, a nihilism derived not from the death of God but from the vertigo of no foundation of self and yet a now raging ‘self-will’. In effect, Maki reads the emergence of a lost connection between the reality of self and the World as the central driver of the outpouring of Western secular thought that began 500 years ago. For Maki and Nishitani then, the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ and Western modernity was not the unleashing of human ingenuity after hundreds of years of Church dogma, but the start of a new phase of time, one marked by a desperate attempt to reconnect an increasingly independent, individualised self with the World.

The contribution of the current article begins here. While *Linear Time* arguably evolved of conditions specific to the West (Judaism and Greek thought), we argue first that it was ‘borrowed’ into the non-West as a finished product in such forms as clocks, calendars, timetables, and other time-related technologies. Arguably, there could no more vital piece of Western thought to ‘borrow’ if one hoped to understand and face the challenge
of Western modernity. To the degree we find evidence of ‘borrowing’ and a rupture in time consciousness, the more it supports Maki and Nishitani claims that Linear Time was not an a-priori structure of the mind or simply an instance of bad faith (ala Heidegger), but historically contingent. But our concerns extend beyond historicising Linear Time, we are also interested in understanding if this form of time does indeed carry nihilistic consequences for self – an ontological–existential dimension absent from nearly all Western social theory. If we find evidence of a pervasive nihilism even in contexts untouched by the ‘death of God’, then it greatly undercuts Nietzsche’s project and suggests that the actual culprit is time – once ‘borrowed’ as simply an innocuous technology of modernity. On these grounds, we seek to elaborate our empirical account: how Japan ‘borrowed’ Linear Time from the West at the dawn of the Meiji Era (1868), how this new concept of time was transmitted via schools, and how it gradually spread throughout Japanese society to a point in which – by the mid-1990s – it had delivered the nihilistic tragedy that both Nishitani and Maki predicted.

But again, at risk of repetition, our project is as much about Japan as it is about the West. It is about releasing us from our own nihilistic tragedy, not the least through education. We return to explicitly draw these connections in the conclusion.

3. Borrowing time: the case of Japan

Today Japan is widely recognised as an extremely punctual place. Japanese airlines perennially lead the globe in on-time arrivals, mirroring thousands of trains, buses, and subways crisscrossing the country daily that are rarely even a minute late. Japanese watchmakers – Citizen, Seiko, and Casio – continue to be leading global brands, battling Swiss luxury with mass precision. Yet, all of this is a relatively new phenomenon. Consider the stark contrast with 150 years ago, when a top English diplomat residing in Edo-era Tokyo from 1862 to 1883 complained of the utter lack of punctuality among Japanese: ‘If you were invited for two o’clock, you went most often at … three, or perhaps later’ (Satow, 1921).

So how did this major shift in ‘time consciousness’ unfold? What role did schools play therein? In what follows, we empirically track the changing ‘time consciousness’ over the 150-year span of modern Japan (1860s–1990s), illustrated visually in Figure 2. Within this rough historical sketch, we highlight three major themes. First, the presence of two major transitions in ‘time consciousness’: an initial transition from what we call ‘event-repetitive time’ (Iterative Time) to ‘clock-repetitive’ time (Circular Time), followed by a later transformation from ‘clock-repetitive time’ to ‘clock-progressive time’ (Linear Time). These designations are directly inspired by and parallel Maki’s theorisation of time.

Second, we argue that schools can be understood as social spheres highly significant not only as sites for glimpsing this shift, but as sites of diffusion and enforcement of this new ‘time consciousness’. We hold that changing ‘time consciousness’ within schools were both cause and correlate of wider changes occurring at different speeds in other spheres: economic-industrial (factories), domestic, and agricultural spheres. Originally, we aimed to briefly highlight changes across all of those spheres to confirm our argument, but given length restrictions we have been forced to foreshorten our discussion of the domestic space and completely remove the agricultural sphere. We retain the results of our research on these spheres on the figures, however, to give interested readers a sense of our wider argument and project.
Third, in addition to the gradual transition within each of these respective spheres to the new ‘time consciousness’, there was a simultaneous shift in the relative balance among these spheres within Japanese society: via schooling larger and larger percentages of the population came to concentrate in spheres where newer forms of time were more dominant and more strictly enforced. All of this led to the diffusion and dominance – by the 1980s – of Linear Time across Japanese society as a whole.

3.1. Meiji period (1868–1912)

Directly preceding Japan’s sudden political shift to modernity signalled by the Meiji Restoration (1867), Edo-era Japan (1603–1867) had largely closed itself off to the World. Japanese people were anything but punctual during this time, as shown in the quote above. But why? Punctuality, by definition, required the notion of ‘clock time’ – a quantified measure standing independent of actual events. Yet time in Edo Japan was inextricably interwoven with events, both human and natural. Consider, for example, the time system utilised in the Edo era: it divided a single day into daytime and night time; hours were then figured by dividing daytime and nighttime into a set number of equal periods. Thus, the length of an ‘hour’ differed in duration depending on if it was day or night and upon the season. People would ‘tell time’ by predicting, when necessary, temporal change by reference to nature – the height of the sun on the horizon or diurnal shifts in wind direction (Koto, 2011).

The new Meiji government that swept to power in 1868 immediately sought to change this concept of time, officially borrowing the Western time system in 1873 (Tanaka 2004). Western ‘clock time’ would help Japan gain Western recognition as a civilised country operating according to familiar rules (Nishimoto 1997). Moreover, it was seen as the key to a modern factory system – necessary for national strength to ensure Japan sovereignty – that would require close manpower coordination and time-disciplined workers.

During the Meiji transition, factories were the first to shift to the new concept of time, but schools quickly followed, as sketched in Figure 3. The initial introduction of clock time into factories encountered numerous difficulties, as one might expect, before eventually spreading across the burgeoning modern industrial sphere. Yet, it is precisely these problems that allow us to glimpse the transition.

![Figure 2. ‘Sketch of Changing Time Consciousness’, adapted from Maki (1981).](image-url)
Take, for example, the case the Yokohama Steel Plant. Steel was vital for modernisation and the plant had adopted, at the behest of their Western advisors, the Western time system in 1866 to ensure efficiency. The French engineer running the plant initially laid out strict rules: any worker arriving even one minute late would not be paid for that day. Despite such laws, however, so few workers were on-time the rules had to be drastically relaxed and revised (Suzuki 2013). Another factory owned by the Bureau of Naval Munitions required its workers to arrive at 6:30 am even though work officially began at 7:30. Only in this way could management hope to have a complete work force on the factory floor by the opening whistle.

Schools were right behind the modern industrial sphere in transitioning to clock time. Bold attempts to shift from pre-modern event time to clock time were part and parcel to the 1872 shift to a modern education system: schools old and new alike were required to introduce yearly, monthly, and hourly timetables based on the Western time system. These timetables would have been wholly unfamiliar to students, parents, and teachers alike, not the least because Edo-era schools did not use mass instruction techniques such as whole class lessons (students came and went relatively freely, learning at according to their pace, age, and abilities) (Nishimoto 2001; Tsujimoto 2012). It is little wonder then that School Regulations published in 1873 heavily emphasised the need for punctuality among both students and teachers. These directives exhorted students to ‘Ensure you arrive at school each day at least ten minutes before classes begin’ (Nishimoto 1997). Still, all of this is curious given the severe shortage of clocks in both schools and society at that time: in 1873 few schools had clocks and nearly no households did. How could pupils know what time it was or understand the duration of ‘10 minutes’?

By about 1910, however, both teachers and students appear to have grown accustomed to clock time. Clocks – now manufactured in Japan, as shown in Table 1 – became generally available in schools from about 1890 (Nishimoto 2001). Indeed, every new school built embedded a large clock at the top of its highest building (and every new modern national university was laid out around a central clock tower (tokeidai)). For that reason, from 1900 onwards students who arrived late were now subject to punishment (Nishimoto 2001). Alongside clocks, this ‘success’ probably reflected explicit teachings on time that featured centrally in mandatory morals textbooks from 1870 to 1910.
For example, a fourth-grade moral education (shushin) textbook published in 1904 taught ‘self-discipline’ (jiko kiritsu) through a discussion of time entitled ‘Let’s Save Time’. In those days, even figures and themes in moral education textbooks were often pastiche of images around a single theme ‘borrowed’ from the West, in this case French magistrate Henri Francois d’Aguesseau to begin and Franklin’s famous axiom to end:

Let’s Save Time: There was a Frenchman named d’Aguesseau who was very self-disciplined. At precisely noon, he went immediately to the cafeteria for lunch. Dishes had not been prepared yet, and he was made to wait. He took a pen and some paper to the cafeteria each time, writing down his thoughts before the meal was finally served. Ten years later, these notes were reworked into an entire book. Remember: Time is Money.

Significantly, such textbook sections carrying explicit reference to time started to noticeably decrease from 1910 onwards, suggesting the general success of the new Western clock time within schools and the minds of pupils. After 30 years, time, clocks, and punctuality were no longer unfamiliar borrowings, but had come to be taken-for-granted. Significantly, this occurred at the same time schools became more central to Japanese society: primary enrollments exploded in early Meiji, reaching upwards of 95% by 1910, as shown in Figure 4 – meaning everyone would have been educated into this ‘borrowed time’.

While well underway in factories and schools, the same transition lagged far behind in the domestic and agricultural sectors (Figure 2). It was only around 1912 that clocks become more widely available and electrification (electric lights) begins to transform

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of imported clocks (\times 10^3)</th>
<th>Number of domestic clocks (\times 10^3)</th>
<th>Number of households (\times 10^3)</th>
<th>Diffusion ratio (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7500</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>695</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7771</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>2125</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>8058</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>3448</td>
<td>5535</td>
<td>9250</td>
<td>72.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Number of clocks in early modern Japan (adapted from Uchida, 2001).*

*Figure 4. Enrollment Rates and Population of School Age Children in Japan, 1870s–1990s.*
the domestic sphere (Uchida 2001). For the first four decades a lack of clocks and electric lighting prevented most people from understanding time as independent of events. To be sure, some elites such as Mokoto Hani – the pioneer of rationalised housework in Japan – began publishing her journal called ‘The Housewife’s Helper’ in 1903 and exhorted women to follow a weekly jikan-wari (timetable): ‘Wash clothes on Mondays. Postpone it when it rains. Starch shirts on Tuesdays. Polish plates, cups, and iron bowls on Wednesdays …’ (cited in Ito 2001). Still we assume that most Japanese housewives would still have had trouble understanding all of this until clock time became fully diffused in the postwar period.

As sketched above then, in the Meiji period event time had been replaced by ‘borrowed’ clock time. However, the total diffusion across Japanese society was limited, restricted to the modern spheres of factories and schools. The next major transition from clock-repetitive time to clock-progressive time was still many decades away. By this we mean that clocks were used to coordinate new ‘modern’ social activities occurring repeatedly, but not yet understood as symbols of abstract, infinite Linear Time that would carry on forever, in distinction to the ephemeral finitude of one’s own life.

Nonetheless, elites who were leading (or expected to lead) Japan’s compressed modernisation – its ‘catch-up’ with the West – did appear to have clock-progressive time. Confirming this and linking to the propositions of Maki, we find that numerous elites were already struck, even in the Meiji period, by the onslaught of nihilism. For example, Misao Fujimura, a student of the prestigious First High School (later The University of Tokyo, Faculty of Letters), famously committed suicide in 1903 at majestic Kegon Falls outside Tokyo leaving a prescient suicide note directly carved into the trunk of a nearby tree:

> The sphere is infinite and time is eternal. I, being a mere 150 centimeter tall, have attempted to measure this infinity/eternity. […] The truth of everything is incomprehensible. After suffering from the chaos induced by this truth, I decided to commit suicide. (cited in Zhang 2013)

Fujimura’s nihilism arose out of the contradiction between the finitude of his existence with appearance of infinity/eternity of space/time. Fujimura’s philosophical suicide surprised most ‘common people’ in Japan after being widely publicised in several leading newspapers. However, many elites spoke out in deep sympathy with his suicide, including the famed novelist Natsume Soseki (Hiraishi 2002). In fact, within just four years of Fujimura’s suicide, 145 people attempted suicide at the same spot, although only 45 were successful (Komatsu 2009). We read this as an indication that Meiji elites trained in modern schools and thoroughly embodying the new ‘time consciousness’ were already racked by a pervasive nihilism; stalked by the dark shadow inevitably creeping quietly behind the diffusion of ‘borrowed time’.

### 3.2. Prewar: Taisho and early Showa (1912–1945)

Beginning in the Taisho period (1912–1926) factory managers were swept by an enthusiasm for improving factory efficiency, inaugurating a wider social shift from clock-repetitive (Circular) to clock-progressive (Linear Time). Much of this impetus apparently came from the 1912 translation to Japanese of Fredrick Winslow Taylor’s classic The Principles of Scientific Management (1911) that introduced the concept of time and motion studies
— a technique many Japanese felt were the secret behind the efficiency-cum-dominance of American factory work. The translation was followed immediately by a more accessible volume entitled ‘Methods of Removing Unprofitable Labor’ (Ikeda 1913) which was based on Taylor’s ideas but made the discussion more relevant for a Japanese audience. That volume sold some 1.5 million copies in subsequent years (Takemura 2001) – an astounding figure considering the market of readers and general population of 50 million at that time. Taylor’s ‘Time and Motion Studies’ were novel because they divided factory work into a series of simple components and measured the standard time for each component. But not just that: Taylor’s ideas set the goal as continual, unending improvement of these standardised times, a vision of ‘progress without end’ that would no longer assume static, ideal conditions, but aim for a continual overcoming of the present as the ideal itself.

In contrast to this shifting industrial sphere, we argue that a parallel transition from clock-repetitive to clock-progressive time did not take place in schools until after the Second World War, as shown in Figure 2. One reason for this delay may have been the strengthening image of the Emperor and the national polity as eternal, unchanging entities. Perhaps the concept of progress – positing the constant overcoming of the present to reach a better future – would have been anathema to the wider political vision of the time. We note here a telling excerpt from a 1941 moral education textbook lesson on ‘self-discipline’ entitled ‘The Anniversary of Time’:

June 10th is the Anniversary of Time: This is the day when Emperor Tenji informed citizens of time about 1300 years ago using a water clock he had made by himself … When we see a clock then, let us always be reminded to be punctual. (cited in Yagi 2002, 115)

Here the ‘borrowed origins’ of Western time are erased and Emperor Tenji is now given credit for clock time. Clearly it was still important to continuing teaching ‘borrowed time’ via schools, even though d’Aguesseau and Franklin had been pushed aside by ‘tradition’ and the Emperor.

The diffusion of clock time into the domestic sphere was given a major boost in campaigns initiated by the Association of Life Improvement (ALI). Founded in 1920 but expanding its work during the larger drive to war, ALI campaigns aimed directly at those who still lived in pre-modern, event time. ALI posters in a special exhibit on time portrayed a group of disheveled people talking casually around a well followed by an admonishing, blunt caption: ‘People who do not have the concept of time’ (Hashimoto 2001).

Importantly, the Ministry of Education was the power behind the ALI, setting it up and funding it with the intention of modernising the domestic sphere, including the spread of clock time among people who were unable to attend the full compulsory cycle during their childhood and thus threatened the new ‘time consciousness’ and social punctuality with their ‘lazy’ ways (Nishimoto 2001). Interestingly, in the 1930s, the ALI conducted studies of its members strikingly similar to time-motion studies used in industry: collecting data on 432 associational members on times of sleep, meals, and breaks. Still, the purpose of the study was rationalisation, but not necessarily progress. That is, it tried to find ways to give housewives more time to rest rather than somehow improve efficiency to make room for more tasks. Indeed, the introduction of electric ‘time-saving’ devices was still regarded as extravagant and unnecessary at this time (Suzuki 2013), but these would soon explode into the domestic consciousness after the War.
Total war on two fronts – Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the Asia-Pacific War (1941–1945) – must be seen as another key driver in the spread of clock time to the remaining pockets of Japanese society where event time still reigned. Radios became pervasive in not just factories and schools, but also in the domestic sphere, carrying much awaited news from the front – at set times during the day – about family members and neighbours who had gone off to fight (Inoue 2013). As the war deepened, men who had once left simple agricultural villages to fill the industrial labor shortages were now sent to the front, with the women they left behind being the final replacement in factories (Daimon 2009). Movement into these spheres by these populations meant movement into clock time by the last pockets of Japanese society living on time connected to the rhythms of nature or the horizons of the local collective.


Only with postwar defeat, the explicit repudiation of the Emperor system, and the American Occupation in 1945 did clock-repetitive time finally give way to clock-progressive time – Linear Time – within schools. Underpinning this transition laid the widespread belief that Japan’s war defeat was primarily due to differences in science and technology between the United States and Japan (and the American Occupations belief that science was the antidote to Japanese superstition-cum-Fascism). Science and technology were thus widely viewed across Japan as the keys to future progress and national strength, but these – in turn – relied on rolling out a new ‘time consciousness’: science had to become one’s ‘own’, but it could only do so if linked to the ideas of progress.

Almost immediately this new notion of time appeared in schools. In 1947 the new national Curricular Guidelines formulated by the Ministry of Education under the watchful eye (and hidden hand) of the United States Occupation Authorities proclaimed that one goal of education was ‘to have an ability to apply science to progress in Japan’s industry in this new era, and [for students] to strongly aspire to achieve the progress’. The Guidelines even went so far as to touch upon domestic life as well: students would be taught ‘to think of domestic life scientifically and rationally, obtain knowledge and skills to make life more efficient for more advanced life’. Such an emphasis on progress rooted in science and technology was staple for classroom materials from 1945 through the early 1970s. Embedded in this notion of progress was the implicit idea of past as lagging behind and future as focus.

Further evidence for the coupling of science, technology, and a new sense of progressive time can also be found in the ‘heroes’ that featured in Japanese elementary school textbooks. Replacing the Emperor and historical figures in the postwar period were biographies of Thomas Edison, Madame Curie, and Louis Pasteur among many others. These scientists far outnumbered any other figure (Ikuta 2012). Through such figures textbooks portrayed the implicit message of science-as-progress; exhorting Japanese youth in the 1950s to reimagine Japan not as a static, enduring entity, but as a country that had yet to ‘catch-up’ with the advanced civilisation of the West; a country that needed its youth to make scientific advances linked to creating a better nation. Here then, schools began to inculcate, much as factories had previously done, the continual overcoming of the present as the ideal itself.
Another way to capture the internalisation of this progressive time that we argue occurred here is to turn to popular cartoons; images which captured and shaped the minds of Japanese youth – arguably more so than textbooks. In this period, one of the major themes was futuristic cities and plots. Representative here is ‘Astro Boy’ (Tetsuwan Atomu) in English. First appearing in serial comics in 1952, the story was made into a feature film released in 1963. Tetsuwan Atom quickly became a national hero, with the first showing viewed by over 30% of the population – no small feat in an era when movie theatres were not yet widespread. Set in a city glittering with futuristic vehicles and buildings, the protagonist ‘Atom’ is a humanoid robot possessing atomic power and human emotion who spends his days solving problems that befall the city. The feature epitomised the widespread view that, despite Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the future of scientific and technological progress would be bright (Yoshimi 2012).

In the domestic sphere, which had experienced a delayed transition from event-repetitive time to clock-repetitive time in the prewar period, soon took a great leap forward to clock-progressive time after 1945 (see Figure 2). Although complex and increasingly difficult to tie to one single factor, one major driver appears to be that the average Japanese housewives began to know and venerate American life following the War, particularly domestic lives ‘aided’ by electric appliances – symbols of science and technology. This appears to be the result of growing awareness of ‘modern’ domestic life through Occupation radio programmes and American comics such as Blondie (Yoshikawa 2012). It also has links to Japan’s shift away from munitions to household appliances manufacturing. During 1955–1965, washing machines, televisions, and refrigerators were introduced rapidly in most Japanese homes. These were understood as ‘time-saving devices’. Widespread television and print advertisement pushing these products exhorted housewives to join their salaried workers husbands in overcoming the past and stepping into a brighter future (Arakawa 2009). With each tick of the clock, it now appeared that even Japan’s domestic sphere was moving upward along the path of progress.

We are arguing then that the concept of clock-progressive time overran nearly all spheres of Japanese society by roughly the 1970s. If Maki is correct, we would expect nihilism to begin migrating from elites to common people, following like a shadow behind the spread of Linear Time. Yet, considerable methodological challenges attend accessing common views (one would perhaps need to undertake analysis of personal diaries), we are forced to instead rely on social commentators and popular media for insights. Indeed, we find many philosophers-cum-social critics such as Junzo Karaki observed and wrote about emergence of nihilism at this time. In the 1960s, Karaki commented:

nihilism has been already widely observed. Nihilism has been spread to such an extent that it is difficult to see this situation as nihilism. Nihilism is not an opinion of a specific person or group. (Karaki 1965, 8)

Confirming this, the theme of nihilism also became increasingly popular in novels and cartoon stories published later in the 1960s. Significant here is Tezuka Osamu, the author of ‘Tetsuwan Atom’ which was once the symbol of a shining future, a decade later published a hugely popular cartoon entitled ‘Firebird–A Story of the Future’ (Hinotori Mirai-Hen) (Tezuka [1967–1968] 2009). Tezuka set this story in 3404, when human beings were no longer progressing, but found themselves on the edge of extinction symbolised by human life being forced underground. Doubts about eternal progress pervade the
work, with Tezuka writing sarcastically but prophetically: ‘Underground was the last bastion. Human developed the City of Eternity there. They named it like this to forget the sadness which has struck deep into their being.’ While the underground setting may implicitly gesture toward Dostoevsky, the explicit focus is on time and being - eternity.

Yoshimichi Nakajima, another prominent philosopher who gained widespread popularity for his accessible prose in a postwar era, eloquently confirms the nihilistic shadow that had grown larger across Japanese society since his childhood:

I will die lonely in this infinite universe. I was born only a few years ago and will die soon enough. I will be dead forever after that. Finally, all human beings will die. The earth will be absorbed by the expanding sun, and then the universe will cease to exist. What tragedy! I must reveal the meaning of our dark destiny as soon as possible. (Nakajima 2005, 15, italics added)

Nakajima’s nihilism bears distinct affinities with Osamu, centering infinite time echoing Maki. In the absence of the death of the Christian God (Japan had none), a major social upheaval or loss (the 1960s–1970s were increasingly rich and stable), and the widespread uptake of works like these, we argue that nihilism is best understood as the dark underside of the successful advance of Linear Time – a ‘time consciousness’ that had been transmitted through schools and finally fully diffused throughout Japanese society by the 1970s from its Meiji beginnings. In effect, all of Japan was now ‘living on borrowed’ time and would now face the consequences.

4. Consequences of linear time: nihilism in contemporary Japan

Having sketched above how ‘open-ended time’ was first borrowed in Meiji Japan, then seeped progressively deeper into Japanese society and individual consciousness, we now turn to examine the nihilistic consequences for contemporary Japanese society. This is no easy task for two reasons.

First, nihilism is experienced individually and inwardly, rarely surfacing in explicit verbal form. It is more commonly encountered in the form of pre-subjective ‘mood’ or what Heidegger calls ‘fundamental attunements’ that include anxiety, boredom, being-toward-death, and holy mourning. We certainly acknowledge that nihilism can potentially arise within individuals in any age, at any particular point in the life course, and for various reasons. Still, although experienced individually and always potentially present for individuals (ala Heidegger), the case for a historically contingent collective nihilism (ala Nietzsche) becomes stronger when we detect nihilistic tendencies across different cultural–social spheres of life. Thus, our case rests on tracking these trends across four interrelated domains: popular culture, personal behavior, the rise of spirituality (new ‘new’ religions), and social theory. We assert that Japan’s collective nihilism became widely evident from roughly the mid-1980s – within a decade of Linear Time conquering the entire social space.

A second reason that tracing nihilism is difficult in the context of this article specifically is that the school itself is a site of transmission, not revelation. That is, schools continue to operate much as they did after the Meiji transformation: as sites dedicated to the transmission, not transformation, of ‘open-ended time’. As such, nihilistic consequences are most detectable outside the formal school lives of youth, not within that institutional
domain. Schools continue to instruct and enforce ‘open-ended time’, despite the nihilistic consequences – a central paradox we revisit explicitly in conclusion to bring our analytical gaze back around from Japan to the implications for contemporary schooling.

Popular culture in Japan opens up the first window on contemporary Japanese nihilism. Arising in the mid-1980s and accelerating through the 1990s, popular culture has been progressively marked by explicit reflections on ‘ikigai’ – the meaning of life (Ozawa de-Silva 2008). While tempting to attribute this to trauma of tragedy and/or the collapse of the Japanese asset bubble in 1990–1991, in fact, this deeper shift in popular culture comes from the period before the economic ‘bubble’ burst: a craze for post-apocalyptic fantasies that swept through the youth visual culture (animation, film, novels) from the mid-1980s onwards. Representative of a genre that came to dominate subculture was megahits such as Otomo Katsuhiro’s Akira (1988) and Miyazaki Hayao’s Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind (1984) portraying life after the complete obliteration of contemporary society by nuclear/toxin attacks and what it meant to live in a world that had lost all meaning.

Classified here as well is the runaway, overnight publishing success of the Complete Guide to Suicide (Tsurumi 1993). Selling 1 million copies mostly to teens and young adults (ages 15–25), the author of the Guide was responding to the same problematique as the subculture productions mentioned above, prefacing the work: ‘The Big Bang is not coming. Even the twenty second Century will come [after the 21st] … The World will continue on and on without end’ (cited in Miyadai 1998, 89). Although understanding suicide is undoubtedly complex, requires caution on attributing causality, and statistics are always deceptive, general figures for the dramatic spike in actual suicides in Japan from 1995 to 2005 at least confirm that the publishing success of the Guide cannot be attributed to its sensational character alone (Ozawa de-Silva 2008).

The late 1980s also witnessed a parallel emergence and profusion in ‘Self Transformation Seminars’ (jiko kaizo zemi), where individuals would voluntarily come to ‘transform’ themselves. Sometimes paying large sums of money or submitting themselves to rigorous ascetic training, such sessions were remarkable for the lack of desire to reach specified goals through new skills or boosts in self-esteem (as was the case in, say, America). Instead, the aim was to ‘transform’ the self – now (de)finite enough to become an object of possession and explicit intervention – in ways that would reduce the sense of alienation-cum-nihilism of the surrounding World. In other words, such seminars were akin to a collective version of ‘healing’ and therapeutic ‘adjustment’ to an inevitable, irreversible loss of purpose, an approach admitting vertigo but stopping short of self-destruction through suicide.

New forms of spirituality can also be seen as a response to creeping nihilism. In Japan, ‘old religions’ came to denote long-established sects of Buddhism and Christianity after the rise of ‘new religions’ following the Second World War. These ‘new religions’ were characterised by promises of relieving the immediate needs of its followers: poverty, disease, and conflict. Postwar Japanese flocked to these ‘new religions’ to cope with the loss and destruction of first the War, then the dislocations associated with rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. Those who joined were eager to forge new collective bonds to replace now inaccessible rural social belonging.

However, in the late 1980s arose ‘New New Religions’ that were of a completely different nature. These promised not fulfillment of an imagined ‘ideal’ either in this
World or the next, but instead a site of escape from the real world into the world of ‘fiction’. As such, these ‘New New Religions’ attracted a younger generation, often highly educated, with the underlying motive no longer poverty, disease, and conflict, but instead reprieve from the shadow of an overall ‘emptiness’ to life. These organisations sought to help individuals escape from that emptiness by reversing ‘the value placed on the real versus the fictitious, placing the overwhelming emphasis on the fictional side’ (Osawa, 1996, 48). AUM was the classic manifestation of these ‘New New Religions’.

AUM, combining techniques from Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism, and yogic practice gained thousands of followers in the 1980s and early 1990s. Today it is (in)famous only for its sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo Subway in March 1995. Yet startlingly, this was not the work of an extremist fringe outside of society in the way cults in, say, America tended to be: most of the top leaders of AUM were highly educated, lived fully within society, and enjoyed a high social class standing – doctors, lawyers, scientists, and so on. The ‘teachings’ of AUM leader Asahara Shoko were praised by many prominent intellectuals in the late 1980s (i.e. Professor Nakazawa Shinichi). Many have attributed this paradox primarily to an all-pervasive nihilism in which the only ‘escape’ would be to destroy the ‘real’ World. That is, the ‘real’ world had to give way to ‘fiction’ if meaning was to be re-infused into life, leading to – in effect – a real attempt to bring about the subculture fantasy of apocalypse.

In numerous places the top AUM leadership and followers interlace notions of time, self, and nihilism. The following is an oft-cited poem found in the high school era notebooks of AUM top official Inoue ‘Ananda’ Yoshihiro:

Being chased by time, walking around all day and then … the next morning. Together with the rise of the sun, there is no escape – the engulfing swirl of the crowd. Nothing can save you! If this is our tomorrow, I want to be saved! From this hopeless wave of humanity, I ride out on the midnight train. (cited in Miyadai1998, 82)

Here destruction (i.e. sarin gas attacks) was not to put in place some loftier ‘ideal’ as in past revolutionary movements of modernity, but it was an attempt to re-infuse a now meaningless present with a sense of purpose. Indeed, AUM had no plans for what came ‘after’ the attacks. The point was not building then, but ‘retreat’ into fantasy to avoid – however briefly – the unbearable burden of Linear Time and personal finitude.

Fascinatingly, connections between nihilism, ‘open-ended time’, and self become explicit even in Japanese sociological theory by the late 1990s. Space requires we limit our focus on only one theorist – Osawa Masachi – as illustrative, despite the presence of several others (e.g. Miyadai 1998). In his The Limits of the Era of Fiction: Aum and The War to End the World (1996), sociologist Osawa Masachi focuses on the AUM tragedy. He makes the point that AUM was not a ‘religious phenomenon’ but a collective cultural manifestation (75). Osawa digs deeply into the internal logic of not simply AUM but the other ‘End of Days’ scenarios that emerged forcefully in these years. He ultimately locates the ‘headwaters of these visions of final end were conceptions of modern time’ (Osawa, 1996, 148). He argues these ‘End of Days’ scenarios shared the feature of promising a temporal end, thus attracting followers. He writes, ‘From the very point when a Final End was established, time itself ceased to be infinite. Time would have a definite duration.’ In this sense, AUM can be understood as seeking to bring about a return to a ‘limited form
of time that had a definite end’, akin to those arising within and binding pre-modern collectives in meaning (i.e. the eschatology of Judaism) (148).

Osawa views this as highly significant because the only explanation for the infatuation with time could be that ‘open-ended time’ had sunk so deeply into the Japanese consciousness that it was now taken-for-granted:

all of these ‘final end’ scenarios began by setting up the end of time. Yet, if we distill down the underlying logic lying concealed within it can only mean that time had already become limitless. (168)

In effect, the triumph of ‘End of Days’ scenarios was the reverse side of total conquest of ‘open-ended’ time across the Japanese social space. The promise of a ‘Final End’ offered by AUM leaders attracted followers less because of what would come after, more through its promise of escape – however brief – from an ‘open-ended’, infinite time whose long shadow of nihilism now enshrouded Japanese society. ‘In the final analysis then’, concludes Osawa, ‘the reason that life became devoid of meaning could be found within the structure of time that now surrounds life’ (184).

5. Conclusions: implications for educational research, schooling, and self

We have now sketched how Japan ‘borrowed time’ following the abrupt political rupture of 1868, specifically how ‘open-ended time’ – Linear Time – came to be disseminated and diffused thereafter, largely through modern schools. We then spotlighted various manifestations of contemporary nihilism as consequence. Such a sketch is necessarily an incomplete first attempt, demanding deeper empirical elaboration in the future. However, our primary aim was not empirical detail, but instead focusing attention on a complex that Western social theory, let alone educational research, has failed to recognise.

For non-Christian Japan to have descended into nihilism poses serious challenges to Nietzsche and his distinguished sociological heirs, Weber and Foucault among others. Specifically, it suggests that metamorphosis of Christian morality was not the sole source of nihilism: How could Japan arrive at a nihilistic terminus without the Christian cultural legacy? The Japanese experience instead suggests another source: ‘open-ended’, Linear Time engendering a self-enclosed, finite Self. In Europe, time was unified and standardised on the ‘open-ended’ model around the mid-fourteenth century (e.g. Germany 1330, England 1370). When the earliest and most influential Enlightenment thinkers – Spinoza, Descartes, Pascal, and Locke among others – wrote three centuries later, the time/self consequences of the shift had, we hypothesise, been forgotten. Linear Time and a finite self were taken-for-granted as ontological truths, becoming reifications whose human authorship had been forgotten. Nietzsche understood the general process well, but from Maki’s perspective failed to provide a deep enough critique because Nietzsche still rested on reification: the Übermensch was merely an instance of the novel time/self consequence.

Heidegger at first blush appears to offer a way out. Heidegger’s project revolved around exploring time/self relations and challenging simplistic notions of Linear Time:

The common understanding of time first manifests itself explicitly in the use of the clock, in the measurement of time. However, we measure time because we need and use time … When we look at a clock, since time itself does not lie in the clock, we assign time to the
...But where does it [Da-sein] get the time it reckons with and which it expresses in the now, then, and at-the-time? (Heidegger 1927, 261)

Heidegger answers his question by saying that ‘reckoning’ begins in relation to Da-sein’s own possibility of non-being – death itself. However, in doing so Heidegger implicitly sets up ‘original time’ as something universal that holds in all places, throughout time for all beings. He lacks an expansive historical imagination; his horizon is still confined to Western civilisation. As such, it becomes clear that Heidegger too is locked into a range of taken-for-granted assumptions including a solitary self, the duality between Aristotelian/original time, and the impossibility of imagining a different sort of ‘original time’, of the sorts that Maki opens us up to. Heidegger too then emerges then not as refutation nor re-opening, but again an instance of the new ‘time consciousness’.

But how could Japanese thinkers arrive at such original conclusions? One reason may have been that Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990), in particular, was old enough to witness how ‘open-ended’ time seeped progressively deeper into Japanese society reworking the self as it went along during the course of the long twentieth century. This ‘lived experience’ was not open to Nietzsche or Heidegger who wrote some 500–600 years after ‘open-ended’ time emerged in fourteenth-century Europe, a rupture they could not see, accepted as truth, and whose consequences they tried to understand from within their own time/self moment.

It is in this sense that we can understand Japan’s experience and its profound intellectual heritage as valuable resources to regain what has been lost in the West. Because Nietzsche and Heidegger misidentified the sole source of nihilism in the Christian God and Platonic Form, respectively, their projects – today increasingly popular as the foundations of Western modernity look shakier with each passing moment – unfortunately do not show us the way out. Instead, those ideas merely accelerate the advance towards a nihilistic end, so long as they continue to leave in place dominant notions of time. Escape routes then can only be glimpsed, for now, through Nishitani and Maki, but conceivably similar resources exist Worldwide if educational researchers are willing to dig a little deeper. Indeed, we must not forget Maki was drawing as much on those resources as he was the Japanese historical experience to construct his social theory.

So what then of comparative education specifically? If Nishitani and Maki fundamentally challenge Nietzsche, Heidegger, and subsequent Western social theorists who adopt their assumptions, they cannot help but challenge comparative education as well. Of course, the field of comparative education perennially plays out on far more shallow ground. Epistemology remains a difficult term, let alone ontology. However, postmodern sensitivities evident in, among other places, recent rethinking of space (Larsen & Beech, 2014) surely signal a new willingness, at least by some, to take the discussion deeper.

Still, the core problems with such postmodern interventions are yet to be recognised, let alone unpacked. Specifically, we submit that these interventions still begin with the taken-for-granted assumptions of the West; reifications of fundamental categories become the starting points for analysis (Berger and Luckmann 1966), not least time and self. As such, what appear to be novel directions are actually further elaborations of Western assumptions on new, usually non-Western, empirical objects. If Nietzsche failed to escape these assumptions, what hope can there be for his lesser postmodern disciples
in comparative education? What appears to be an avenue for expanding the conversation turns out, disappointingly, to thus be a closed set of utterances made atop a ground of preexisting Western ontological assumptions.

For a field committed to moving beyond parochial understandings of education and the World, this is yet another reason that non-Western experiences must become not merely an ‘empirical but epistemological other’ (Takayama, 2016). But even epistemological reconstruction will fail if we cannot simultaneously rework the ontological foundations these rest upon. What might comparative education refocused on ontological–existential questions look like? How much more lasting and influential might our contribution be? How much more rich our depth of thought? How might we best proceed? We see this paper as a modest first attempt to sketch some possible directions, with more to follow (see Komatsu & Rappleye, forthcoming).

But let us conclude by returning our gaze to contemporary schooling. As shown, in Japan the beginning of modern schooling coincided with the borrowing of ‘open-ended’ time. Early on, schools inculcated a ‘time consciousness’ that was at odds with the existing event time. Today, however, ‘open-ended’ time has conquered the entire social space; seeped down so deep into the consciousness of youth that undoubtedly all would understand ‘open-ended time’ even if schools no longer explicitly taught it. Meanwhile, ‘time management skills’ and ‘life planning’ are increasingly taught in classrooms and the pace of school life has quickened to make being ‘on time’ more important than ever. Efficiency reigns and technology has put time-motion studies in classrooms within reach. In other words, schools inculcate a ‘time consciousness’ in ways qualitatively unchanged – nay, accelerated, and more strictly enforced – since the dawn of modern schooling.

Paradoxically, and beneath the façade of classroom rituals, students in places such as Japan have qualitatively changed: they are now more likely to be existentially anxious, if not nihilistically resigned. What was once a ‘coin’ only redeemable in schools has become ‘mere metal’ that imprisons students at a shallow epistemological level across all spheres and domains of society. Nihilism is then inevitable and expedited, even while questions of ontology and existence remain unopened. Educational researchers locked in modernist assumptions and their taken-for-granted assumptions are all but blind to this. The modern school now functions not as space to actualise a reopening of taken-for-granted assumptions, but a site to transmit and enforce closure.

Undoubtedly, remaking the school in ways that would bring about a deep change in this situation first requires a change in us as educational researchers. Indeed, researchers are instance and consequence of what we have described, functioning now as the active ‘agents’ of reification. Nothing will change in schools then until we ourselves first learn to see in new ways. If we cannot dredge up what has fallen below the level of consciousness and is taken as ‘ontological fact’, who will? It may be fully on academic comparativists who can both rethink the ‘unit ideas’ of the field (Cowen 2002) and can see beyond the Western tradition to make that contribution.

But ultimately this goes deeper than the field. By seeing how the Japanese are ‘living on borrowed time’ we may begin to see how we are condemning our-selves to do so as well. Then again, these same Japanese thinkers have gestured towards a way out, if we can make time to listen to them, thereby remaking time and self, right now.
Notes

1. Throughout this paper, we utilise the terms dominant time, familiar time, Linear Time, and open-ended time interchangeably. Readers interested in a more elaborated definition of the concept in the English language are directed to Barbara Adam’s Time and Social Theory, Chapter 2 (in particular see pages 50–55). Among other points, Adam relates perhaps Newton’s most famous statement on time found in The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy:

   Absolute, true and mathematical time, of itself and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything eternal, and by another name is called duration… All motions may be accelerated or retarded but the flowing of absolute time is not liable to change. (51)

   See also Burtt (1932), particularly pages 244–246.

2. All works listed in the reference list which carry a romanised Japanese title (followed by an English title in parenthesis) have not been translated to English to date, to the best knowledge of the authors. Works by Japanese authors which appear only in English (such as Nishitani Keiji’s Religion and Nothingness) have previously been translated into English. We use those translations in our paper, rather than retranslating from the Japanese originals. At various points in the article we refer to textbook content. These data come from two secondary sources, a large-scale longitudinal analysis of postwar (after 1945) textbook content (Ikuta 2012) and a compilation of original excerpts of moral textbooks in the prewar period (1868–1945) deemed by the compiler to be representative of all textbooks in that period (Yagi 2002). All translations of materials originally in Japanese were made by the current authors.

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