

Introduction to the Special Issue: Democratic Futures Now!

A translation project as part of the Annual Conference of the German Association of Japanese Studies (VSJF), 7.11.-9.11.2025, University of Vienna

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This special issue is the outcome of one-and-a-half years of conceptualizing and planning an academic conference, a translation class taught together with an exceptional colleague (see the introduction to this issue by Anna Linder) and tremendous students, and the generosity and solidarity of many colleagues and friends over the last two years.¹ After the decision was made to organize the annual conference of the German Association of Japanese Studies (VSJF) in Vienna in 2025, a keystone decision was to combine the conference theme "(Un)Democratic Futures: Japan and the Global Trajectories towards an (Un)Equal World", with a practice befitting the underlying reasoning of the conference. Following an understanding of the global political conjuncture as anti-democratic in its tendencies and severely threatened by a looming planetary collapse, a limitation to the study of Japan and the presentation of results in Vienna became undesirable. Rather, the attempt to focus on community building through generosity, solidarity², and multi-level exchange of pro-democratic ideas between scholars in Japan and in Europe was to be at the center. Thus, an active, constructive, and optimistic—as opposed to defeatist—engagement with "the future" is the ethos of every decision, every contribution, and summarized in the rallying cry "Democratic Futures Now!".

The introduction to the special issue develops first the rallying cry just mentioned above. How do these somewhat contradictory and normatively laden words fit in with our political moment? Second, thoughts are developed on how this collection of translations, as well as conference organizing more generally offer potential for "democratic practice" beyond steps in individual career paths following the "publish or perish" paradigm. Lastly, as is customary for any introduction, an overview of the collected texts ensues.

Are we all doomed? Democratic Futures Now!

Pessimism, nostalgia, and disorientation are widespread in the political realm of today. In a sense, the conceptualization of the conference, to which this special issue belongs, is a conscious act of defiance to such a sentiment. Against a prevalent crisis of political imagination (Gebh 2025), "Democratic Futures Now!" demands an opening up of and engagement with explicitly democratic—hence aimed at egalitarian and both individually and collectively emancipatory—futures. It is widely observed, how "social and political movements today [both left and right] [...] look back to other, earlier epochs and wish they were back there again, to recover what's been lost" (Fraser 2024). In this process, non-reversible changes, both ideationally and technologically, as well

as achieved progress are rarely engaged with in a constructive fashion. More generally, the “the people” have been left out of “the future”, as has been observed by Jonathan White. As he convincingly has laid out, while the future long had been a place of ideals and “-isms”, it was turned into a place of calculation best placed in the hands of experts by the end of the 20th century, cutting out democratic participation in the creation of an open future (White 2024: 7). An extreme version of such tendencies can be found in Silicon Valley’s “end time fascism” of today (Klein, Taylor 2025). While the fascism of Mussolini had some futurist, utopian elements, the fascism of the “contemporary far-right movements lack any credible vision for a hopeful future. The average voter is offered only remixes of a bygone past, alongside the sadistic pleasures of dominance over an ever-expanding assemblage of dehumanized others.” (Klein, Taylor 2025). As Klein and Taylor propose,

“End times fascism is a darkly festive fatalism – a final refuge for those who find it easier to celebrate destruction than imagine living without supremacy” (Klein, Taylor 2025).

One could counter that the crisis of political imagination befalls political parties alone (crisis of representation), while academia and wider civil society offer ample supply for democratic imaginaries of and practices for the future. I will not claim that this is completely falls. However, in the nexus of the now-focus brought about by the urgency of the climate crisis, increasingly individualized and precarious work relations, as well as lack of political organization, this surely is not completely true, either.

From Francis Fukuyama’s notion of the end of history to Mark Fisher’s (2009) observation of hegemonic “capitalist realism”³, or the focus on the immediate now of Extinction Rebellion, a (democratic) future is either forever in the hands of technocratic governance, brought down by the intensified struggle for individual

gain, or can only come after the survival of the planet is temporarily ensured. It is my conviction, however, that the interlocking of an environmental and political crisis of democracy can only be solved by thinking and tackling them together. As Jonathan White (2024) has argued, at its core, democratic politics cannot function as a mere defense mechanism or as a tool to manage decline, collapse, or extinction.

There are, however, ways to think ahead that need more attention than a state of constant panic and crisis aversion allows. Conceptions of political futures as undetermined and open for shaping, lie in many theorists’ works, from Machiavelli to Ernesto Laclau (Knott 2024: 9). Who says the dominant conceptualization of a foreclosed future cannot be reversed? The call to arms for this conference “Democratic Futures Now!”, in short, demands the aim to imagine and work towards these futures, and not be paralyzed by disruptions to elite trust in a declining economy and collapsing environment. Politically, the shift must lie to surpass the “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) of today—an optimism that falsely promises us affective fulfillment in the now without any lasting and significant changes. A toxic spiral dominating our approach to politics, fittingly described by Anton Jäger as “hyperpolitics” (2022). Everything is political, everywhere is politics, but other than emotional outbursts, nothing seems feasible. While this conference calls for an opening up of the future, the past has shown how dangerous the dogmatic pursuit of an idealized future can be:

“If the open future has always been central to the idea of democracy, the experience of fascism showed how an exaggerated embrace of it – sparked partly by the sense it was under threat – could tip into a movement that cancelled democratic ideals” (White 2024: 86-87)

Thus, the insistence on “democratic” futures is understood as emphasizing

the necessity to never aim to foreclose its openness.

In summation, the future, so long held as decided, or given up on, needs to be reopened. In contrast to the image of democracy as “doomed”, the Annual Conference of the German Association of Japanese Studies 2025 aims to identify feasible, better, more democratic futures. Not only because they are feasible, but because they are necessary to ensure a just adaptation to, or an overcoming of, the planetary crisis of today.

Translation and Conference Organizing as Transnational Community Building

From the above, I want to explain, why the project of the Annual Conference of the German Association of Japanese Studies and this special issue gave me a sense of the ethos I laid out. I want to begin with the conference, as such.

Academic conferences have come under serious disrepute. This is especially true for area studies, where host universities of researchers and analyzed areas are potentially far apart. The value of flying colleagues across the globe, polluting the environment, and spending scarce public/university resources has become harder and harder to justify in a time when online and hybrid formats have become easily possible and universities suffer under increasing financial pressures.⁴ However, a major reason to emphasize the importance of academic conferences is community building. If democracy is under threat due to post-truth epistemologies becoming actively propagated and the increase of anti-science attitudes, then creating, enlarging, and sustaining a scientific community (including scholars, students, and administrators alike) which stands against such trends is needed. The alternative might be “weakly tied and low-trust communication networks”,⁵ which are certainly less likely to withstand outward pressure. While online conferences, at best, connect presenting speakers with the organizers, larger in-person conferences allow the potential for wider networks to develop and a

plethora of successful future projects to spawn. Even fee-charging conferences like ours can strive to open up participation to wider audiences and stagger prices in a way to foster solidarity. The VSJF’s decision to do so since last year was certainly a step in the right direction. Due to successful third-party funding, this year’s conference allows free participation for students and further steps could be taken in the future. Admittedly, the described might be an idealized version of what happens at a conference, but the goal to create the opportunities for something ideal is surely not misdirected. Let us move on to the translation project and the texts collected in this special issue.

The rationale of translating previously published texts by invited speakers of the conference was twofold. One, it was a matter of opportunity. Translation used to be a slow process, one that urgencies of the *now* often did not allow us to endure. Technological advances in generative artificial intelligence, for all their many dangers and pitfalls, offer us the potential to make this process quicker and take up fewer resources in our busy research schedules. Through the incorporation of students into this process (see the introduction by Anna Linder in this issue), translation can become a pedagogical tool to spread language skills, technical skills, and foster deep engagement with the ideas of others. Practices such as these, to my mind, qualify as democratic academic practice. They do not center solely on the individual genius, something academia and university administrators arguably focus on,⁶ but cooperation and collective practice, mutual amplification of voice, and exchange of ideas in a deeper form than just semi-listening to the twentieth presentation on a long conference day. Two, it was a matter of necessity. Translations are, in a sense, the deep valuation of the work of somebody else and the desire to share this work with a wider audience. As area studies specialists, this motivates many of us. With the goal in mind to create a community between democratic think-

ers in Europe and Japan, there further is a significant language barrier. How are invited speakers and conference participants to engage fully with each other? If some of their work is inaccessible to those not speaking Japanese or German? It is our hope that this open access special issue allows all interested parties to engage more deeply with others' work and therefore make the conference itself a more fruitful event.

Short overview

The first part of this special issue features six translations of previously published works in Japanese language that have been translated by students of the University of Vienna. Texts have been published in varying years, but regardless of their respective age, their originality and relevance remain.

Uno Shigeki's paper "Zwischen Sozialwissenschaft und Kritik: Zusammenhang des Wissens im Nachkriegs-Japan" ("社会科学と批評の間-戦後日本における知の連関") investigates the tension and mutual influence of the social sciences and (literary) critique as two distinct, highly important spheres of thought creation in Japan. It opens this issue by taking a macro perspective on what comes after. As Uno lays out, while the social sciences in Japan have been shaped by a critical engagement with and against Marxism, (literary) critique follows a lineage of affective experience and refutation of post-Meiji institutions. The text was originally published as part of Uno's 2023 book *Nihon no hoshu to riberaru: Shikō no zahyōjiku o tatenaosu* and has been expertly translated by Kobayashi Kanau, a PhD student of philosophy at the University of Vienna. It offers a good entry point for reflecting on the places where (un)democratic futures take ideational lift-off (in German language).

The next contribution, Yamamoto Kei's "Envy, Justice, and Democracy" ("嫉妬・正義・民主主義"), deals with the political relevance of the emotion of envy (*shitto*) in democratic politics. Originally published in the philosophical journal

nyx, Yamamoto's 2024 book *Shitto-ron* (On Envy), which expanded on these early studies, has found much public acclaim since its publication. In the article, Yamamoto introduces discussions of envy, both negatively and positively, by political theorists outside and inside Japan—from Francis Bacon to Fukuzawa Yukichi. The paper offers critical reflection on an outright demonization of envy, pinpointing its democratic content, as we can arguably only be envious towards someone we see as our equal. The text was translated by Robin Herzeg, Matsumoto Momo, and Manuel Steiner, three promising undergraduate students of Japanese Studies at the University of Vienna. In the populist moment we are experiencing, such deliberations are crucial to reflect on assumptions and mechanics to "defend" democracy.

Subsequently, Takeda Hiroko's "Biopolitics and necropolitics during the pandemic from a gender perspective: The case of contemporary Japan" ("ジェンダーからパンデミック下の生政治・死政治を考える: 現代日本の場合") looks back at the Corona pandemic and the horrendous sudden rise in suicides by women in Japan during this moment of crisis. Drawing on Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe, Takeda analyzes the Japanese states treatment of women through the lens of necropolitics and critically reflects on the status of women under neoliberal capitalism in Japan as "abandoned people" (*kimin*). The paper was previously published in the *Annals of the Japanese Political Science Association* (*Nenpō seijigaku*) in 2022 and was now translated into English by Klemens Bardakji and Simon Kaiser, two more of our great undergraduate students. The text highlights the dramatic urgency for democratic imaginaries of the future to address gender issues. The following two texts only reinforce this.

First, Suzuki Ayaka's paper "An Examination of the Concept of 'Honorary Male': Why are Female Leaders Criticized?" ("「名誉男性」概念をめぐる考察: 女性リーダー批判の背景をさぐる") deals with the term "honorary male" (*meiyo dansei*), to ex-

plore the positionality of elite women in Japanese society. The election of Takaichi Sanae to LDP president has given specific relevance to this topic. Starting from the low ranking of Japan in the International Gender Gap Report, Suzuki expertly discusses the critique brought forth against those who succeeded in these difficult circumstances by, as the critique against them goes, emulating male practices. The translation of the 2024 publication from the *Tsukuba Journal of Sociology* (*Shakaigaku jānaru*) by a team consisting of Julin Wollinger (PhD candidate), Nina Urban (MA student), and the two undergraduate students Johanna Wieser and Audrey Chau of the Japanese Studies department of the University of Vienna, exemplifies the need to discuss the radicality of changes needed to bring about significant emancipatory and egalitarian change.

Next, Shimizu Akiko's "Buried Thorns: For a Queer Politics of a Potentially Invisible Multiplicity" ("埋没した棘: 現れないかもしれない複数性のクィア・ポリティクスのために") builds on Judith Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015) to analyze debates around transgender people in Japan. Her highly complex intervention, tackled with great success by Melanie Bieber and Nathalie Winsauer, demonstrates how the desire by mainstream society to hide differences and make them undetectable puts a tremendous burden on the individual. A democratic society of the future ought to be able to live with the radical acceptance of existing difference, one can draw from this text. The text was previously published in the theory journal *Shisō*.

Following, Nakano Yoshihiro's "The Regionalism of Tamanoi Yoshirō: Its Timeliness and Potential for the Anthropocene" ("玉野井芳郎の地域主義: 人新世におけるその現代性と可能性") introduces the theory of regionalism (*chi'iki shugi*) by Tamanoi Yoshirō in the wider debate on the Anthropocene and post-development theory. The text has been updated by Nakano from a talk given in 2019 at the Nihon Heiwa Gakkai and was expert-

ly translated by Daniel Taubinger and Georg Langeder, two highly skillful undergraduate students. Nakano's complex discussion of Tamanoi's work in the 1970s manages to utilize his insights for today's deliberations on human-planet relations and take his ideas a step further.

The last text in English language comes from Matsuoka Misato. "The US-Japan Alliance in the Post-COVID Era – Intensifying US-China Rivalry and the Wavering Deterrence of US Forces" ("ポストコロナ時代の日米同盟: 先鋭化する米中対立、揺らぐ米軍の抑止力松岡美里 国際関係理論、安全保障研究") offers an examination of international relations post-pandemic from a Japanese perspective. The think-piece first published on the website *Synodos*⁷ was updated for this issue and reflects on the stability and longevity of the US-Japan military alliance, as the backbone of a conservative security paradigm. It was translated by the two talented graduate students, Rabia Devici and Katja Palaszewski and offers an additional perspective into considering how imaginaries for a democratic future are bound by geopolitical tensions and never fully stable networks of cooperation.

The second part of the special issue collects texts previously published in either German or English. Thanks to the generous funding of this project by the Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies of the University of Vienna, it was possible to pay for the translation of the following texts by Kobayashi Kanau, a PhD candidate at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Vienna. With the exception of the last text, which was translated and published by Park Seung-Joon of Kwansai Gakuin University prior to this project and is now reprinted here with his permission, all texts are published in Japanese language for the first time.

Veith Selk's text "民主主義への不快感" ("Demokratische Malaise", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*) offers an excellent portrayal of how the democratic malaise⁸ of today is characterized by a loss of mass appeal for democracy and the difficulties

of democratic theory to engage with underlying disappointments. He concludes with a convincing call to reduce inequality and tackle elite cohesion. More clearly emphasizing democracy's ideals and norms and making sure this translates to lived experience is indispensable to create grounds for imaginaries of democratic futures to take hold.

The second text by Viktoria Huegel, “民主的な権威理論に向けて” (“Toward a theory of democratic authority”), similarly tackles problems in contemporary democratic theory. By distinguishing between authoritarian and authoritative rule, she emphasizes the need for a relational understanding of authority, as only the latter is compatible with the democratic principle of resistibility befitting an ever open democratic future. Her text expertly avoids romanticization of democratic equality and highlights the necessary and provocative question of how obedience and democracy fit together.

Next, Karsten Schubert's text “干渉されずにいること: アイデンティティ・ポリティクス批判における消極的自由と社会的自由の混同” (“In Ruhe gelassen werden Das Zusammenspiel von negativer und sozialer Freiheit in der Kritik an Identitätspolitik“) develops a fascinating discussion of competing forms of freedom, characterizing the debates on “identity politics”. He provides a convincing analysis of how current anti-identity politics debates are mostly characterized by a rejection of conceptions of society as structured by inequalities of power and a retreat towards conceptions of freedom as simply being “left alone”.

Following, Gabriele Michalitsch's text “ガヴァメントリティーの秘密—男性中心主義的なエコノミー概念と再生産の抑圧” (“Das Geheimnis der Gouvernementalität: Der maskulinistische Ökonomie-Begriff und die verdrängte Reproduktion“) engages critically with the often overlooked exclusion of the gendered nature of capi-

talist reproduction as part of neoliberal and capitalist governmentality. In this regard the text fits well with Takeda Hiroko's analysis of necropolitics in Japan. Although the text was published in 2013 in the journal *Femina politica: Zeitschrift für feministische Politik-Wissenschaft*, its relevance has not wavered.

Jan Groos⁹ proposes an alternative to problems laid out in the previous texts in his essay “私が計画経済について知っている二、三のこと” (“Zwei oder drei Dinge, die ich über die Freie Planwirtschaft weiß”). This thought piece offers clear alternatives to the *now* in a short and precise manner. In an accessible fashion, he thinks the political and environmental crisis of today in tandem to propose a “free planned economy” as a democratic future to aim at.

Lastly, Andreas Eder-Ramsauer's 2022 article “Yamamoto Tarō and Reiwa Shinsengumi: Love, Populism, and Radical Democracy for a Neoliberal Japan” provides insights into an attempt to create an imaginary for a democratic future by the Japanese populist political party Reiwa Shinsengumi. Originally published in the *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, the text analyses promises and difficulties to demand and practice a “friendly society”, as proposed by the party. How future-oriented is a refutation of the *now* often found in populism and a reengagement with the past? Can a vague goal, such as a “friendly society” create enough affective investment to sustain an egalitarian movement? Future work must engage with such questions to understand success and failure of progressive parties.

In summary, all texts engage very productively with theory and empirics to enrich discussions of a desirable democracy to come. They act both as preparation for and reflection on the Annual Conference of the German Association of Japanese Studies 2025. In this vein: “Democratic Futures Now!”

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Endnotes

- ¹ I want to thank the Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies of the University of Vienna for the financial support of this special issue.
- ² Solidarity is understood as an “extension of the self being in formations with others” (Quan 2024: 166). Hence, the extension of meaningful relations to many others was a goal of this endeavor.
- ³ “Capitalist realism” lays out the observation that we find it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, and became specific relevance after the world financial crisis of 2008.
- ⁴ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/highereducation/2023/08/04/we-need-to-talk-about-conferences/>
- ⁵ <https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2023/03/do-conferences-still-matter-yes-yes-they-do/>
- ⁶ <https://jacobin.com/2022/05/scientific-discovery-competition-capitalism-genius-exploitation>
- ⁷ <https://synodos.jp/opinion/international/23646/>
- ⁸ <https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/demokratie-in-gefahr-2024/549905/demokratische-malaise/>
- ⁹ His podcast „Future Histories“ (<https://www.futurehistories.today/>) offers many meaningful and engaging discussions on desirable futures and his credo of “opening up the future” has been very influential for this project.