

Why Japan and Europe are (not so) different...

Values play an increasingly prominent role in European politics, but to what extent is this trend unique to European states? François Foret and Airo Hino present insights from a new book comparing the rise of value politics in Japan and Europe. They highlight some clear parallels in the changing relationship between values and political behaviour in the two polities.

The understanding of contemporary European politics has increasingly been shaped by the resurgence of *values*. Internally, this has been illustrated by the rise of populist and nationalist forces, battles over the rule of law and migration, and the instrumentalisation of identity and memory to demarcate ‘otherness’ and stir controversy, with the internet and social media being viewed as a new battlefield.

Externally, European countries have increasingly faced the threat of a loss of security and significance compared to major players like the US and China that set the new standards of reference and challenge claims about the universality of European values.

But to what extent is this resurgence of values in politics and its linkage with multiple crises specific to Europe? The history of the social sciences shows that the best antidote against cultural relativism lies in the comparison. Japan emerges as a fascinating candidate for a comparison with Europe in this sense due both to its similarities and differences.

On the one hand, Japan is a highly developed, capitalist, and democratic society that is going through a decades-long and multiform crisis. On the other hand, it is frequently (self-)defined as an exceptional case due to its trajectory towards modernity, its history of borrowing from but not duplicating the western tradition, its geopolitical situation, and its ethnocultural specificity.

Still, beyond its narrative of national harmony and consensus, the Japanese state and society have been going through constant transformations of values, the appropriation of imported models, and updates of endogenous traditions, all while searching for accommodation with global pressures.

Value politics

In a new [edited volume](#), we bring together European and Japanese scholars to assess the increasing importance of value politics in Europe and Japan. Our purpose is not to offer a ready-made theoretical model, but to develop systematic and synthetic case studies contrasting Japan and Europe.

Europe is a more diversified and fragmented polity than Japan, and the focus on one or several European countries may not be representative of the whole. But Japan is itself much more complex and heterogenous than is commonly assumed. When it comes to values, Japan could even be viewed as an extra European state due to the similarities in responses to international value surveys. It also offers a mirror in which Europe stands united by contrast.

Our book explores the hypothesis that value politics is an increasingly important element in the competition for power across the world. By ‘value politics’ we mean the trend for issues to be framed in a way that goes beyond the mere opposition of interests and instead represents a clash between different moral worldviews. The consequence of the rise of this type of politics is that political choices tend to be viewed in dramatic terms: as a choice between good and evil, between loyalty and betrayal, or between freedom and alienation.

Value politics is a more flexible, indirect, and market-friendly technique of government than classic identity politics, but both approaches tend to carry the same injunction to conformity and compliance. Value politics may go hand in hand and even merge with the mainstream legitimating narratives of contemporary states in terms of fundamental rights, expertise, and legal-bureaucratic rationality. As such, value politics may be found everywhere within and across institutions, at the crossroads of markets, societies, media, and governance frameworks.

Comparing Japan and Europe

Subsequently, our contributors examine value politics from the grassroots levels in Japan and Europe – namely the prevalent long-standing social representations in each society – to the most recent and ephemeral expressions of value politics on social media.

One of the most important questions is how the presence of value politics has affected electoral competition and party/coalition-building in Japan and Europe. The most complex overlapping of values and politics takes place in relation to religion. We therefore include a comparison between Christian democracy in Europe and the Kōmeitō party in Japan, which is sometimes described as a vehicle for ‘Buddhist democracy’.

Beyond obvious differences in terms of their context, nature, and size, these two forces are commensurable regarding their centrism and moderation of values; the tensions they have faced to combine reliance on their religious heritage and constituencies with the requirement of government and electoral competition; and the increasing challenges set by more radical forces drawing on religion to advocate strong identity politics.

This focus on religion also informs other important topics. Some of the more provocative questions include whether the treatment of children born to one Japanese parent and one non-Japanese parent – often referred to in Japanese using the word ‘hāfu’ – has parallels with the way European Muslims are treated in Europe. Similarly, in light of religiously inspired terrorism, we examine what a ‘good religion’ is considered to be in both Japan and Europe.

Values are not only instrumental abstractions but also influence the distribution of power and resources. We show how (social) media contributes to depicting normative hierarchies, in a way that frames and possibly polarises individual and collective choices. We also demonstrate the way values affect key decision-makers and justifications in public and private governance of the economy. For instance, how can we understand events such as the Carlos Ghosn affair, centring on the former chairman of Renault, Nissan, and Mitsubishi Motors, who dramatically fled Japan after being charged with financial crimes?

What is apparent from these analyses is that despite their many differences, Japan and Europe do not stand as far apart from each other as they might appear. We also hope our contributions will encourage further comparative research to improve our understanding of how each society accommodates the same common trends in their own singular way.

For more information, see the authors’ new edited volume, [Value Politics in Japan and Europe](#) (Routledge, 2021)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)
