

Histories Across Borders Lecture Series

"How change happens in Japan: A Grand Unified Theory of Japanese History"

Carol Gluck (Columbia University)

December 8 2015, 6:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m.

EHESS bâtiment Le France (190 Av. de France 75013 Paris),
Conference room 638

To Japan often appears in the international media as a country that does not -- or even, cannot -- change. Despite endless talk of reform, nothing dramatic seems to happen. But different societies change in different ways, each with its own patterns. Here is a modestly titled "Grand Unified Theory of Japanese history," derived from the patterns of the past and then deployed to illuminate the changes in the present. The theory thus purports to explain how history happens in Japan.

The particular focus is the durability of institutions and the seeming viscosity of institutional change, of the sort exemplified by the "long end of the Tokugawa shogunate" and the "long end of the Liberal Democratic Party," which according to the theory is currently -- if slowly and lurchingly -- underway. The two are by no means identical, since the end of LDP rule does not in itself presage institutional collapse but rather signifies yet another phase in the long end of the postwar -- a period that may one day be known as sengomatsu.

The "Gluck Theorem" suggests that Japan is in the midst of a period of fairly intense but deliberately incremental change that began around the early 1990s and is likely to continue for another decade or so. Absent an unexpected external crisis -- some things, the political economy, for example, will come out of this period substantially altered, while others, such as the social acceptance of immigrants (even in the face of an increasing labor shortage), will be resisted at almost every turn. And however slow such change may seem to outsiders, it is generally perceived as unnervingly rapid by many Japanese, who signal their disinclination to disorder in part by a perduring allegiance to the system they still call "the postwar."



Carol Gluck is the George Sansom Professor of History at Columbia University in New York, specializing in the history of modern Japan from the nineteenth century to the present, international relations, history-writing and public memory in Asia and the West. Her books include *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (1985); *Showa: The Japan of Hirohito* (1992); *Asia in Western and World History* (1997); *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon* (2009); *Thinking with the Past: Japan and Modern History* (2013); and *Past Obsessions: World War Two in History and Memory* (forthcoming).