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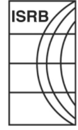

Review essay

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Social movement studies in post-3.11 Japan: A sociological analysis

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Abstract

Between the decline of mass protests in the 1970s and the Great East Japan Earthquake and Fukushima nuclear meltdown in the 2010s, which resulted in the resurgence of mass demonstrations, social movements were widely regarded as uncommon in Japan. In this essay, the author reviews Japan's social movement studies in the last decade, focusing on the influence of the lack of mass protest since the 1970s on scholarly interests. The essay examines the following four topics: (1) slow responses to the resurgence of mass demonstrations in post-3.11 Japan, (2) quick responses to the rise of the radical right movement, (3) the emergence of cynical approaches to studying social movements, and (4) the redemption of the history of Japan's postwar social movements. Despite some twists and turns, we can see how social protests are a perpetual element of Japanese society that sociologists study as a common phenomenon.

Keywords

3.11, 1968, antinuclear movement, radical right, social movement

For a long time, Japan has been a country of weak social movements: the results of the ISSP survey conducted in 2013 show that the country was ranked 32nd among 34 countries in terms of the proportion of citizens who have participated in demonstrations at some point in their lives (Higuchi and Matsutani, 2020). However, Japan experienced a massive wave of labor, student, peace and environmental protests around 1970. After that point, social movements in Japan rapidly withered away: event analyses by Nishikido (2012) showed that the number and magnitude of protests in the first half of the 1990s decreased to one-quarter and one-eighth the number and magnitude of those in the peak period, respectively. Unlike in most Western countries, in which the student protests

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around 1968 are held in high regard, Japan's youth revolt is generally remembered as a rather traumatic event: the reckless behavior of students resulted in terrorism and instilled in the Japanese a phobia of social movements.

However, Japan is not completely lacking in research on social movements. There has been constant interest in local environmental protests (see the essays of Hasegawa and Machimura in this special issue). American and European theories on social movements, such as collective behavior, resource mobilization, new social movements and political process approaches, were promptly introduced to the Japanese literature after they emerged. While social movement studies have remained a minor field of sociology in Japan, the last decade has nevertheless seen newly emerging research trends worth mentioning that are closely linked to my research question in this essay: how has the long-term absence of mass protest influenced social movement studies in this country? I answer this question in the following ways. First, I examine the different responses of researchers to mobilization on the left and right in the last decade: the rise of nativist movements and the resurgence of mass demonstrations after the East Japan Great Earthquake, which occurred on March 11, 2011 (hereafter 3.11). Second, I focus on two contrasting interests of young researchers in terms of feelings toward movement cultures and past movements.

Asymmetrical responses of researchers to post-3.11 movements

The last decade in Japan was characterized by the rise of a new protest cycle for the first time since the late 1970s (Chiavacci and Obinger, 2018). The first of these movements involved antinuclear protests, which were triggered by the meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. While 15,000 demonstrators gathered in Tokyo a month after 3.11, large protests were sporadic and began to decline as early as autumn 2011. It was July 2012, however, when the protest cycle reached its first peak of mobilization: the antinuclear movement succeeded in attracting approximately 200,000 demonstrators, which was the largest group in four decades since the government decided to restart the Oi nuclear power plant. Although the antinuclear movement abated in 2013, it was soon followed by an antisecurity law movement, which was against the fundamental change of Japan's defense policy. Protests reached their second peak of mobilization in summer 2015, and the number of antisecurity law protesters was almost comparable to those of the antinuclear demonstrations.

Slow responses to opportunities: The paucity of research on antinuclear and antisecurity law movements

The resurgence of social movements has resulted in rather contrasting responses from social movement scholars. On the one hand, it has attracted the interest of young researchers outside of Japan. Brown (2018), Manabe (2015), Tamura (2018) and Wiemann (2018) conducted fieldwork on antinuclear protests. On the other hand, sociologists in Japan have been slow to respond to the rise of protests and those who have done so are few in number. Facing an unprecedented level of mobilization in their scholarly lives, only a

few groups of sociologists have conducted empirical research on these social movements. Nevertheless, there is a latent debate on the background factors and novelty of the post-3.11 protests that is worth mentioning.

The fastest response among the small number of scholars came from Eiji Oguma (2013, 2016), who was a prominent sociologist but had never conducted empirical studies on social movements. His fieldwork on the antinuclear demonstrations was an extension of his commitment to movements. He also directed a documentary film about the antinuclear movement (Oguma, 2017) that was highly sympathetic toward the activists, which is why his message was aimed at encouraging protesters and emphasizing that such demonstrations could significantly change the nuclear policy of the Japanese government, although his explanation of the emergence of the movement was more or less analogous to the breakdown model. The declining significance of organizations in a postindustrial society, he argued, led conventional political actors to withdraw from the front line and new actors, such as those of the 'cognitive precariat,' to take the stage instead. As a corollary, he emphasized the novelty of the antinuclear movement in terms of the demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds of the activists.

Oguma was followed by Machimura and Satoh (2016), who carried out surveys on antinuclear groups. While they emphasized that most of the post-3.11 antinuclear protests were an extension of prior movements, they also pointed out that one-third of the antinuclear groups were established after 3.11. These new groups were more short-lived than older organizations, but they brought with them tactical innovations: newcomers had a more skillful command of the Internet and expanded networks within the antinuclear movement. Antinuclear organizations also played a crucial role in joint mobilization efforts and information circulation beyond nuclear issues, which enabled a general upsurge of activism during the antisecurity law protest (Satoh et al., 2020).

Higuchi and Matsutani (2020) conducted a large-scale online survey with close reference to research on European anti-austerity movements. Although the anti-austerity and antinuclear movements were triggered by crises such as the great recession and a nuclear meltdown, the profiles of the demonstrators involved differed in important ways. While demographic and socioeconomic (SES) variables other than age and gender were poorly related to participation in the post-3.11 demonstrations, political ideology was much more important because it was those on the left who were the most shocked by the earthquake and who were much more likely to join the movement. Higuchi and Matsutani share the view with other scholars that the nuclear accident triggered the antinuclear movement, but they do not find the movement to be particularly novel. Instead, they emphasize the role of veteran protesters who had taken part in previous demonstrations, and the authors thus point to the continuity, instead of discontinuity, of social movements before and after 3.11.

Despite the limited number of empirical studies on post-3.11 protests, those that exist shed new light on questions regarding social movements in Japan, such as what the reasons for the absence of mass protests and conditions for the resurgence of mass demonstrations in this country are. Oguma (2013) suggests that behind the rise of the antinuclear protest are an increasing number of new actors outside of the organized sectors of Japanese society who boost participation in social movements. Others focus on the self-fulfilling nature of social movements. On the one hand, Satoh and colleagues (2020)

show that antinuclear groups serve as the hub of organizational networks, enabling any mobilization efforts to address multiple different concerns. Higuchi and Matsutani (2020) also find that participation in antinuclear demonstrations dramatically enhanced the odds of participating in subsequent antisecurity demonstrations. They argue that present demonstrations will serve as the infrastructure for future demonstrations, which will inspire demonstrations after that, and thus Japan's long-term lack of mass demonstrations was at least partly due to the lack of demonstrations themselves.

Quick response to threats: Research on radical right movements

The last decade has also witnessed the rise of mass movements on the right, which were previously unfamiliar in Japan because conventional radical right movements had been organized by quasi-outlaw cadres with strong connections to the mafia, making mass mobilization difficult (Higuchi, 2018). These newly emerging radical right movements include antifeminist campaigns against gender issues and nativist attacks against Koreans in Japan. These movements have mobilized a much smaller number of people than the antinuclear and antisecurity law movements, and they have attracted a disproportionate amount of scholarly attention. Although members of radical right movements were thought to be from socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, researchers have found activists to have unexpectedly 'normal' backgrounds (see also Tanabe's essay in this special issue).

The fastest research to emerge was that of a group of feminists (Yamaguchi et al., 2012) who conducted fieldwork to investigate the backlash against feminism in the 2000s. Criticizing other Japanese feminists' reluctance to study the reality of the radical right, these researchers report on how the activities of the religious right are firmly rooted in local communities. They saw, in contrast to the common-sense view of the centralized order of national right-wing campaigns, that local movements tenaciously resisted the mainstreaming of gender issues, making full use of their local networks to lessen the impact of gender-related ordinances.

Second, Higuchi's study on the nativist movement (2016 [2014]) reflects the changing focus of the radical right – from gender issues to nativism – in the 2000s. Criticizing the conventional view of the rise of the nativist movement, which was thought to attract socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, Higuchi used resource-mobilization and political process approaches to analyze the rise of a nativist organization. He first showed that the nativist movement recruited members from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Although nativists lacked locally embedded social networks, the Internet served as an alternative mobilizing structure, thus enabling the organization of the new movement (see also Akiyoshi's essay in this special issue). In addition, behind the rise of the nativists lay, he argues, changing discursive opportunities in which the hostility of the right-wing establishment toward China and Korea legitimized the cause of the nativist movement.

Third, Suzuki (2019) focuses on women in radical right groups and examines why women participate in antifeminism movements. She finds that members of a conservative movement from different ideological backgrounds, such as nationalist groups or religious organizations, are not explicitly antifeminism. By the same token, female activists are also conscious of gendered barriers and oppressions that most Japanese women

have experienced. Nevertheless, their belief in certain family values pushes these women into activism against gender equality.

While these researchers focusing on the radical right were motivated to study such movements with a very critical lens by the rise of their 'enemies,' they encountered activists who were quite moderate except for their outrageous claims. The interview analyses in the studies also suggest that activists' motives for and processes of becoming involved are easily understandable. What legitimizes their extremely biased views are orthodox conservative values such as a preference for traditional families and hostility toward neighboring countries, which link the radical right and the right-wing establishment. In this sense, Japan's radical right movement is different from its European counterparts, which are regarded as countercultural or antiestablishment forces; Japan's radical right should be regarded as an extraparliamentary ally of the conservative establishment.

Explaining the asymmetrical responses to mobilization on the left and that on the right

Except for one notable exception (Oguma and Ueno, 2003), sociological research on Japan's radical right had no precedent in the last decade. In contrast, the antinuclear movement and the peace movement were popular topics of social movement studies in Japan until the 1980s. Nevertheless, the antinuclear movement after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011 inspired only a few Japanese sociologists to conduct empirical research. It seems that the different opportunities and threats brought about asymmetrical responses among researchers regarding the rise of movements on the left and right, as Tilly (1978) hypothesized that a given level of threat tends to generate more collective action than the same level of opportunity.

Although there were social movement scholars living in Tohoku and the Greater Tokyo area, both regions that were hit by the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster, they were in no position to conduct research on antinuclear protests. Instead, they put all their energy into studying community reconstruction processes following the earthquake and the radiation contamination resulting from the nuclear meltdown. Other researchers failed to respond to opportunities because they did not foresee the resurgence of large-scale demonstrations and were far from prepared to alter their organization pattern to conduct research on protests. Feeling threatened by the rise of radical right movements, on the other hand, the abovementioned researchers reluctantly began fieldwork. As they saw their preferred research subjects faced with crisis, they were motivated to explore how to deal with their 'enemies.' They were also prepared to respond to threats via their established routines as feminist ethnographers or pro-immigrant advocates.

What changed in the four decades after the collapse of student protests?

The long-term absence of mass mobilization brought about bifurcating research interests among younger social movement scholars in Japan. Given that social movements are marginalized in Japan, some take a cynical view of such movements, and others are enthusiastic in championing the positive aspects of protests around the 1960s.

The rise of cynical views of social movements

Although most social movement scholars are sympathetic toward or at least neutral (considering mobilization to be a way to test collective action theories) regarding social movements, there are a number of researchers who prefer to take a cynical approach in examining activism in Japan. They are characterized by their focus on the 'abnormality' of social movement culture. The rise of this approach is due to the fact that the long-term absence of mass protests brought about antipathy toward social movements. A comparative analysis of public attitudes toward activism in Japan, South Korea and Germany revealed that the Japanese are by far the least favorably inclined toward social movements (Yamamoto, 2017). Japanese citizens tend to regard social movements as ineffective and scary and, thus, distant from the lives of ordinary people.

While the cynical approach reflects the unfavorable view of activism in Japan, scholars taking this approach are not explicitly conservative and do not denounce social movements as something dangerous, disruptive, childish, or immature. They also recuse themselves from behavioral scientific perspectives that treat collective action merely as a rich source of data. Instead, they observe social movements from the point of view of nonparticipants, which enables them to identify as cynical bystanders of protests.

This kind of approach was pioneered by Ito (2006), who compared participants and nonparticipants in a solidarity group to Ainu indigenous people. Ito points out the paradoxical roles of private and public interests that divide participation and nonparticipation in the movement. Her informants sympathize with the cause of the indigenous movement and have been targeted to participate in it, but they have refrained from actually joining. According to Ito, they take the burden of getting involved in the movement very seriously, which drives them to take an all or nothing approach of dedicating their entire lives to the cause or remaining bystanders and to finally refuse to join. In contrast, the participants indicate their private interest in the indigenous culture, rather than public interest, such as indignation on Ainu's behalf, as an initial motive for engaging in activism. It is, Ito implicitly argues, the oppressive movement culture, which pressures sympathizers into an either/or choice, that prevents them from becoming involved.

This tone is echoed by Tominaga (2016, 2017), who focuses on social movement cultures, especially the implicit rules and manners shared by activists. While culture has been generally regarded as a kind of resource that social movements can mobilize, her emphasis is placed on the negative aspects of activist subcultures instead of the positive ones. In Tominaga's analysis, young activists in the antisecurity law movement distance themselves from the outdated practices of veterans because they think the old left lives in the past and that this would lead to the marginalization and stigmatization of the protests. Youth groups make full use of pop culture, such as lap music, to destigmatize protests so that sympathizers can easily join social movements. The newly emerging cultural code of young activists, however, stigmatizes and excludes veterans, even though older activists are inspired by youth groups. Tominaga's emphasis on the exclusive nature of activism is a projection of her own dislike of social movements.

Furuichi (2010) conceals his contempt of activism more poorly. He caricatures the policies and events of Peace Boat cruises where he conducted fieldwork because he thought he was compelled to play along with the leftist ideologies of the company's

secretariat (Furuichi, 2010). He expressed his discomfort with the progressive view of the Peace Boat through criticism of the cruise's illiberal atmosphere. A more sophisticated approach is proposed by Nihei (2011). Inspired by Derrida's notion of the paradox of gift, Nihei examines how volunteering has been described because he says it has been criticized by both the right and left. While the former regards volunteering as no more than hypocritical complacency, the latter asserts that volunteerism inhibits mobilization and fails to create political and social change. The paradox of gift, Nihei asserts, makes volunteering vulnerable to opposition from all sides.

Behind their cynicism regarding activism lies these researchers' own dislike of activist culture and their disdainful view of altruism or motives of the 'public good.' They regard activism either as something repressive, which leads sympathizers to hesitate to join movements, or as a fruitless effort that ends in hypocrisy. These cynical views turn out to be a well-drawn portrait of the Japanese collective consciousness, which shuns contention.

While the long-term absence of mass protest in Japan has led to such cynical approaches, which dismiss the potential importance of social movements, these approaches cannot explain the rise of demonstrations in the last decade. When Tominaga (2017) conducted an empirical study on antisecurity law activists, for example, she shed light solely on internal divisions among different generations and failed to clarify the factors that enabled mass demonstrations. If the arguments of these scholars are correct, the weakness of social movements in Japan can be attributed to the oppressive atmosphere within social movement organizations. Because these cynical approaches developed in the context of stagnating social movements in Japan, the resurgence of protests is beyond their scope of analysis. It is ironic that such an approach has flourished during the peak period of mass demonstrations.

Liberated from trauma? Rising interest in the history of social movements

The last decade has also seen another contrasting trend of social movement studies among the next generation of Japanese sociologists: a growing interest in the history of protests in the 1960s and the 1970s. The primary focus has been placed on student movements (Ando, 2013; Kosugi, 2018; Oguma, 2009), but the research has not been limited to them (Michiba, 2009, 2016; Ohno, 2014). These studies began with and are exemplified by the work of Chikanobu Michiba, who published a lot of works until his early death in 2016. His consistent interest lay in describing Japan's social movement history as enriched through the accumulation of a variety of protests (Michiba, 2005, 2009, 2016). The ill fate of the student movement in the 1970s resulted in a rhetoric of discontinuity that disallows connections between old and new social movements. Criticizing such ahistorical views, Michiba devoted himself to redeeming the history of the peace movement because he thought that past experiences with resistance were replete with lessons for understanding contemporary protests. In this sense, his work consistently took cues from history to overcome the difficulties surrounding contemporary social movements in Japan.

During the same period, Oguma (2009) published voluminous work reconsidering what the student movement around 1968 meant. Given the temporal vicinity of the events, it seems natural that those who witnessed or were involved in the student movement would write their own history as academics. Oguma argues, however, that nobody

had presented a general overview of the ’68 revolt, which is why he took the leap and conducted an objective analysis of the traumatic events. Understanding the difficulty of approaching this phenomenon, he positioned himself as an academically motivated social scientist with a kind of ‘detached concern’ that neither canonized nor made a parody of the student movement. His diagnosis was that the student protest was a collective reaction to structural strains caused by rapid social change in this period. The students were experiencing an identity crisis. Although student activists considered themselves revolutionaries, they were too naive to pursue their political goals. Instead, Oguma concludes, they joined the protests as a means to find their own identities in the midst of rapid social change.

Although Oguma was seemingly prepared to receive harsh criticism from older activist veterans, it was not clear whether he expected younger scholars to earnestly critique his work. In fact, Oguma is the primary figure of criticism in the first volume of a series on social movement history edited by Ohno, Kosugi and Matsui (2019), who were born in the late 1970s and early 1980s and take more favorable approaches to past protests. Criticizing Oguma’s lack of contextual knowledge on student movements, Matsui stresses the importance of imagination in the social movement field to paint an enriched picture of youth revolts.[1] His critique is based on the belief that having an immanent understanding of student protests enables us to pass more lessons down to the next generation.

Another critique comes from Kosugi (2018), who criticizes Oguma as engaging in structural reductionism and holding a narrow idea of politics. Kosugi instead analyzes the dynamics of the student revolts emerging from the University of Tokyo as a rivalry between strategic and prefigurative politics. Such conflicts are a rather familiar topic for social movement scholars, but what makes her analysis academically valuable is its emphasis on the dynamism of the conflicts that made the protests innovative. Her life history interviews revealed that competition between sectarians and ‘nonsect’ radicals brought about the development of the prefigurative politics of the latter. The nonsect radicals were politically socialized to join various protests, such as environmental, feminist and minority solidarity movements during and after the protest cycle in the 1960s.

This positive interest in the radical student revolts of the previous era is a sign that the country is healing from its traumatic past with the movements, although it took almost four decades to be liberated from the ‘dark history’ of the New Left, which has been wracked by internal disputes. Another topic worth mentioning is the debate on the historical appraisal of the student protests. Oguma’s unimpassioned evaluation of the student movement opened the way for academic discussion on this issue, although his work also prompted harsh criticism from next generation of researchers, who are more sympathetic toward the young rebels of the 1960s.

Conclusion

In this review essay, I have shown that Japan’s social movement studies have been significantly influenced by the stagnation of activism in the country. Having forgotten what to do in the face of mass demonstrations, social movement scholars in Japan have let research opportunities pass them by with some exceptions. It is not only Japan’s citizens but also its researchers who have forgotten how to behave during mass protests. In

contrast, the rise of radical right movements has attracted scholarly attention, bringing about research progress that has overturned the popular belief that radical right activists generally come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. This pattern is analogous to the shifting interests of European researchers, such as Ruud Koopmans and Bert Klandermans, from progressive movements to radical right ones.

The long-term absence of mass protests in Japan also brought about contrasting results in the epistemological premises of sociologists born after the collapse of student movements in the early 1970s. Some younger researchers have been infected by the cynical treatment of social movements in previous studies, regarding such movements as difficult to contend with, while others struggle to identify positive aspects of past movements. At any rate, negativity toward mass demonstrations has been common throughout the last decade.

However, even the small number of studies mentioned in this essay have developed important questions regarding social movements in Japan: Why has there been a long-term absence of mass mobilization? Will Japan remain a negative case in the social movement society hypothesis (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998)? It seems that the miserable end of student protests in the early 1970s brought about a collective trauma regarding social movements for an extended period of time, but that trauma was gradually replaced by the inertial effect of the stagnation of protests: the lack of mass demonstrations eliminated the idea of collective action from people's minds. The inverse was also true. Antinuclear demonstrations, which were triggered by the Fukushima nuclear meltdown, served as the infrastructure for the antisecurity law protests (Higuchi and Matsutani, 2020; Satoh et al., 2020).

It is still an open question whether the antinuclear movement has ended the long-term break in mass protests and Japan is now becoming a social movement society. Likewise, it would be premature to attempt to chart future directions of research on social movements in Japan. Nevertheless, I have described the signs indicating that social protests are a perpetual element in Japanese society, which sociologists study as a normal phenomenon.

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1. The authors also suggested examining the multifaceted nature of figures in the social movements of 1968: the second volume includes information on a variety of protests, such as the *buraku* liberation, the activism of artists, the peace movement and regionalism in Okinawa (Ohno et al., 2020). These volumes also challenge the conventional views on 1968.

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