

Essay

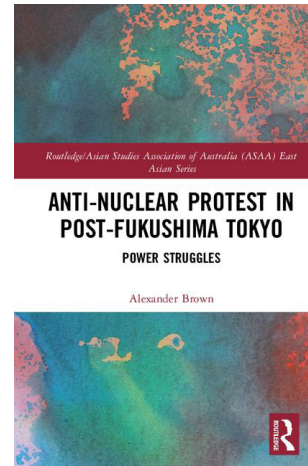
Introducing Anti-nuclear Protest in Post-Fukushima Tokyo: Power Struggles

Alexander BROWN

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

I am pleased to announce the publication of *Anti-nuclear Protest in Post-Fukushima Tokyo* (2018) as part of the Routledge/Asian Studies Association of Australia East Asian Series. This book documents the research I conducted into social movements in Tokyo during my PhD candidacy at the University of Wollongong between 2010 and 2015. During this time I was fortunate to spend eighteen months as a Japanese Government (Monbukagakusho) Research Scholar at Hitotsubashi University, where I undertook fieldwork for the project under the supervision of Professor Machimura Takashi and took part in the Study Group on Infrastructure and Society. I lived near the university in the Tokyo municipality of Kunitachi and visited protest sites all over the metropolis. I joined demonstrations and rallies, attended art exhibitions and film screenings and immersed myself in the world of anti-nuclear protest. These experiences are reflected in the detailed case study chapters within the book.

My motivation for writing *Anti-nuclear Protest in Post-Fukushima Tokyo* sprang from many years of experience as a participant in social movements in Australia, in particular in the alter-globalization and anti-war movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s. During this period I was inspired by the work of autonomist Marxist writers such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004). While I found their ideas spoke to the experience of urban social movements in



Australia, I was dissatisfied with the lack of attention to East Asia in Hardt and Negri's work and in that of autonomist theorists more generally. During twelve months spent working as an English teacher in the Greater Tokyo Area between 2008 and 2009, I came into contact with diverse social movements such as the campaign against 'Nike-fication' of Miyashita Park in Shibuya and the Shirōto no Ran network, which organizes demonstrations around issues of urban poverty and alternative space in Kōenji. When I began the research for my PhD I decided to see if a close reading of autonomist theory in the Japanese context might yield new insights and facilitate a way out of the Euro-centrism that is implicit in autonomist theory. Autonomism developed out of the new social movements that emerged in response to the breakdown of the mass working class movement in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s and hence its key concerns incorporate the relationship between changing forms of the social organization of work in post-industrial societies the impact this has on

Alexander BROWN is a JSPS International Research Fellow at Japan Women's University and an Honorary Associate at University of Technology Sydney. His work has appeared in *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* and *Emotion, Space and Society*. Alexander's translation of Shimizu Hiromu's *Grassroots Globalization* will be published by Trans Pacific Press in early 2019.

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social movement organization. This book explores some of these concerns, including how people organize themselves in struggle outside of formal party political structures and the relationship between social movements and the formally constituted power of the state.

'Precarity' Movements and Anti-nuclear Politics

I began the research project that led to *Anti-nuclear Protest in Post-Fukushima Tokyo* by looking not at nuclear issues but at urban social networks that combine alternative lifestyles with activist politics. The key concept in this early stage of the research was the notion of precarity, which has been used by activists in Japan (Amamiya 2007) who are engaged with the broader transnational conversation about the transformation of work that has accompanied deindustrialization (Standing 2011). The intervention of the Great East Japan Earthquake Disaster in 2011 widened the scope of my research to take into account the anti-nuclear issues that emerged from the Fukushima disaster. As books appeared in both English (Allison 2013; Cassegård 2014) and Japanese (Watanabe 2012) detailing the rise of precarity movements in Japan I came to realize that my original contribution to this research area lay in exploring the intersection between so-called 'precarity' movements and anti-nuclear politics. One of the key concepts that emerges in the book is the notion of 'precarious life' and the way the threat of radioactive contamination in Japan after Fukushima intersected with the generalized anxiety caused by endemic precariousness to produce a widespread rejection of the special interest group politics symbolized by the 'nuclear village'. The nuclear village refers to a loose coalition of groups spanning government, political parties, private industry, the media and academia that had long promoted the use of nuclear energy in

Japan. Drawing on Oguma Eiji's (2016) work on the anti-nuclear movement I came to understand the way opposition to nuclear power and the nuclear village had encapsulated a broad dissatisfaction with Japan's stagnant political and economic systems.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Shirōto no Ran

The structure of the book reflects the development of my ideas as I expanded my research from the initial focus on precarity movements to incorporate anti-nuclear activism. After outlining some of the theoretical concerns and the background to the anti-nuclear movement in Chapter One, in Chapter Two I look at the first major demonstration against nuclear power that took place after Fukushima took place in Tokyo's Kōenji district in April 2011, one month after the disaster. Kōenji is a youth sub-cultural hub located close to downtown Tokyo which is known as a major center of artistic, musical and cultural life. The district is also home to activist network Shirōto no Ran (Amateur Revolt), whose creative and irreverent protest style developed in struggles against the growing inequality experienced by the urban poor following the recession of the 1990s. After the tragedy of the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster, a mood of 'self-restraint' (jishuku) prevailed in the capital. The festive demonstrations organized by the group helped to shift this mood, claiming a space where participants could express a wide spectrum of affective responses to the disaster. Shirōto no Ran's critiques of precarious work and of the inequities of neoliberal capitalism fed into their anti-nuclear activism after the Fukushima disaster, deepening the group's criticism of the energy-intensive consumer capitalism for which Tokyo has become a global symbol.

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In the years prior to the Fukushima disaster, activists associated with Shirōto no Ran and similar networks had established bars, cafes and bookshops that constituted a loosely organized activist *kawai* or neighborhood. As I explain in Chapter Three, these places provided a space for anti-nuclear organizing and for cementing the relationships between activists that sustain political action over the long term. The neighborhood also generated a diverse print and electronic media that was produced in and distributed through these physical spaces and helped create a sense of community among activists, artists and the disenfranchised. These spaces emerged in the context of rising inequality and urban poverty after the collapse of the bubble economy. They enabled part-time, casual and freelance workers and alienated youth to seek refuge in the interstices of a city from which they often felt excluded. After Fukushima they provided a kind of asylum in the uncertain context of a radioactive city.

'Hiroba' as Place for Social Movements

While activist spaces were places of refuge after the disaster, activists did not simply disappear into them but sallied forth into the public streets, which they transformed into a theatre of protest. During two protests in Shinjuku in June and September of 2011, anti-nuclear activists occupied the east exit plaza of Shinjuku station and renamed it 'No Nukes Plaza'. As I discuss in Chapter Four, they deliberately invoked the pre-existing notion of a *hiroba* (plaza) in their efforts to redefine public spaces such as the consumer paradise of Shinjuku station as places for democratic practice and debate. No Nukes Plaza evoked a history of struggles for public space in Tokyo as Shinjuku station had long been a site of student and peace movement protest. The most famous example of this was the so-called 'folk guerrilla' movement of the late 1960s, when activists occupied the west exit

hiroba on a weekly basis to hold political discussions and sing folk songs. Struggles to reclaim public space in turn raised questions about the limits of democratic participation imposed by the police and on the degree of internal heterogeneity activists themselves could accept.

The debates on democracy which occurred in and through the *hiroba* were not limited to the national space but were discursively linked with a global network of squares and public places where similar actions took place in 2011 and 2012 including the Occupy Wall Street camp in New York's Zuccotti Park and the Spanish 15-M Movement's occupation of public plazas in Barcelona and other cities. Nor were the demonstrations in Tokyo confined to large central actions in Shinjuku or Chiyoda wards. Residents of municipalities across the metropolis also organized local demonstrations. In Chapter Five I explore the anti-nuclear movement in Kunitachi in Tokyo's western Tama region, where demonstrators performed their opposition to nuclear power in colorful costume demonstrations that were themed according to seasonal festivals such as the bean-throwing festival *Setsubun* in February 2012 or Halloween in October. These seasonal themes naturalized the idea of demonstrating and aligned it with the normal rhythms of everyday life.

Beginning in March 2012, activists gathered outside the prime minister's residence in Tokyo's Nagatacho every Friday evening between six and eight o'clock to protest nuclear power. These weekly protests, which eventually grew to 100,000 and even 200,000 participants in 2012, are the focus of Chapter Six. By protesting outside the buildings which house the institutions of the government, the protests highlighted two different visions of politics: one centered on the formal representative democratic structures of the state and the other on grassroots participatory democracy. Their staging in

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the government district revealed a tension between horizontal and vertical conceptions of politics and acknowledged the continuing importance of institutional politics in Japan today. Anti-nuclear protest transformed the order of public space in the city and reclaimed it as a place where citizens could participate in politics. Activists' diverse tactical interventions suggest a wider strategic vision of the city as a space for creative self-expression, sustainable livelihoods, strong communities and grassroots democracy.

Legacy of the Anti-Nuclear Social Movements

In Chapter Seven I try to make sense of the anti-nuclear movement as a whole and discuss its influence on subsequent struggles. For many anti-nuclear activists, the return of the pro-nuclear Liberal Democratic Party coalition under Prime Minister Abe Shinzō in 2012 was a major disappointment. In reality, however, the change of government produced little real change in terms of nuclear policy. Neither major party was willing to make nuclear power into an electoral issue in 2012 and the successful LDP election campaign focused instead on economic concerns, thereby taking the political sting out of the nuclear issue. This is a strategy that has continued to serve the LDP well, particularly in the context of historically low levels of voter turnout. Despite the Abe government's publicly stated intention to proceed with reactor restarts once safety checks are complete, restarting Japan's nuclear fleet has proved to be extremely difficult. Many nuclear reactors failed the stress tests that were introduced by the Kan government after Fukushima. Others require extensive and expensive retrofitting and upgrading in order to meet the stricter safety standards that were adopted by the new Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA). Where final approval has been obtained from

the NRA, other delays such as objections from local political leaders or successful court challenges have further impeded the restart of the reactor fleet. At the time of writing in February 2019, only nine reactors have been restarted. This is compared with 54 that were operating before the 2011 disaster. Public opinion polls indicate that opposition to a return to nuclear power in Japan remains firm.

Since the election of the Abe government in December 2012, Abe's neo-nationalist and militarist agenda has generated many new protests in the streets of Tokyo. When the government moved to introduce a raft of security-related legislation in 2014, tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets outside the National Diet. As the nuclear issue began to fall out of the news cycle and other issues took its place, a new common sense developed through the collective experiences of the anti-nuclear movement informed a new wave of protests. The experience of anti-nuclear protest rejuvenated civil society in Japan and schooled a generation of young people in street politics. These actions suggest that a new culture of protest, most clearly visible in these large-scale actions in the government district, has taken root in Japan since the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

Notes

An earlier version of this article was published in June 2018 in *Asian Currents*, the electronic news bulletin of the Asian Studies Association of Australia

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