

Japan

David H. Slater and Patricia G. Steinhoff, eds.

Alternative Politics in Contemporary Japan: New Directions in Social Movements

Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2024. 360 pages, 14 illustrations. Hardcover, \$70.00. ISBN 9780824897437.

Compared to increasingly polarized conflicts in Europe and the United States, Japan's political landscape has remained remarkably calm. What some might value as political stability, many others interpret as apathy: the result of a suffocating dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and a lack of civic engagement, let alone activism in a rapidly aging society. At the same time, several recent book-length publications focus on new directions in social movements and political activism that emerged in the aftermath of the triple disaster on March 11, 2011. *Alternative Politics in Contemporary Japan: New Directions in Social Movements* adds to this growing literature with a compilation of ethnographic studies on alternative forms of political engagement in Japan between 1990 and 2021.

The main strength of this edited volume is its coherence. Together with the book's ethnographic methodology, a consistent analytical framework provides a solid foundation that ties the contributions together well. Using Patricia Steinhoff's concept of Japan's "invisible civil society" in the aftermath of the Anpo protests in the 1960s and 1970s as a starting point, the introduction elegantly frames "alternative politics" as a term that carries a double meaning. It describes a form of political engagement beyond established formal channels, but also the attempt to seek an alternative to political activism in the 1960s and 1970s, commonly associated with radical ideologies, rigid hierarchies, and violence.

Within this framework, the following twelve contributions offer detailed accounts of different social movements that have emerged (and at times disappeared again) over the past thirty years, with a focus on the post-3/11 period. The contributions cover a broad range of topics, from workers' rights, homelessness, and "fleeter" movements (Kojima, Cassegard, Day) via alternative energy movements (Nishikido) and post-Fukushima mothers' activism (Morioka) to new right-wing movements (Asahina), changing approaches to anti-racism (Shaw), and the massive SEALDs protests (Slater).

Despite this diverse array of topics and movements, the contributions are held together nicely by their focus on how different generations of "alternative" political activists try to come to terms with the past—the stigmatizing "burden of Anpo" (8), as well as forms of dogmatic and violent activism that appear unappealing to "normal" citizens. The volume illustrates this vividly and shows how the effort to reinvent more inclusive, playful, and ultimately "normal" political activism can translate into a lack of organizational and political coherence and, ultimately, impact. At times, new or "artistic" approaches to activism have clashed with more traditional objectives and practices, as Carl Cassegård's chapter on homelessness shows. Also, attempts to rebrand existing groups have not necessarily led to success—as exemplified well by the futile efforts of younger members to give the veteran New Left group Chūkaku-ha a more colorful image (Furuie). But the volume also highlights productive links between the generations: Steinhoff's chapter shows how networks and practices of Japan's post-Anpo

“invisible civil society” have directly informed more recent alternative politics. Several other contributions reveal how both established and emerging actors (often including women) have benefitted from a “normalization” of political protest in the post-3/11 period (Shaw, Iida, Morioka). Vivian Shaw’s chapter on anti-racism, for example, offers a fascinating account of how an initiative led by a female victim of hate speech transformed a movement hitherto dominated by Japanese men in the specific historical context of the post-3/11 protest wave.

At times, some of the themes and core arguments that run through the volume overlap to an extent that it feels slightly repetitive. This is a small price to pay for a strikingly coherent edited volume, and it does not take away from the individual contributions. Yet, for some readers the volume may also feel repetitive in a different sense: the contributions all revisit previous research from the post-3/11 years or even earlier—much of which has been published before in some form or the other. Rather than updating earlier work, each chapter instead comes with a postscript that briefly covers more recent developments. This is, of course, a conscious editorial decision that may well be taken as a strength, as the editors argue themselves: Instead of “collapsing the past into our present concerns,” the contributions capture the “distinctiveness of the moment” in which the research was conducted (6–7). Yet, at least for readers who are familiar with the topics and the work of the authors, the takeaways from revisiting past research can be somewhat limited.

This being said, *Alternative Politics in Contemporary Japan* is an edited volume that clearly succeeds to be much more than the sum of its contributions. It showcases the strengths of ethnographic research on social movements and—taken collectively—helps to understand the diverse manifestations of “alternative politics” in post-3/11 Japan and the challenges they have been facing in the specific historical and political context of postwar political activism in Japan. As such, the volume is a useful resource for teaching, and not least a productive point of departure for future research. After all, the postscripts—many of which report the demise or decline of the groups covered in the chapters—raise urgent questions about the state of contemporary political activism in the *post post-3/11* era.

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