

The Red Years: an Interview with Gavin Walker on Japan's 1968

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Gavin Walker on his new edited volume on the story of Japan's forgotten '68 in a global context and its relevance to contemporary struggles.

1968 was not only a pivotal year in Paris, Berkeley, and the Western world in general, but also a key moment for a new anticolonial and anticapitalist politics across the Third World. Japan's unusual position—neither Western nor Third World—provoked a complex and intense round of mass mobilizations and radical political thought through the 1960s and early '70s. In Gavin Walker's *The Red Years*, now out with Verso, major thinkers of the Left in Japan alongside scholars of the 1968 movements re-examine the historical background, cultural productions, and major organizational problems of this tumultuous moment in Japan and in the history of the global Left.

What first got you interested in the Japanese revolutionary moment of 68? How did you first discover the key figures and conflicts of the Japanese new left, and why did they interest you?

Gavin Walker: I think that for anyone on the Left, who came of age in the generations that followed, '68 globally remains a kind of mythic, legendary moment, and this fact has productive and unproductive aspects. It's good for later generations to learn from and study those moments when another possibility of emancipatory politics was opened, and when the call of rebellion against the dominant order was widespread. At the same time, '68 can often seem a kind of daunting, impossible burden for the Left in its wake, always falling short of this excessively idealized moment.

My interest in the history of Marxist theory and philosophy in Japan lead me immediately to the centrality of '68, not least because it remains such a pivotal moment there. I don't think this is unique to Japan, but certainly among the intellectual or cultural Left, the residues of '68 have been remarkably strong: sectarian allegiances, "what you did back then," which side you chose in the split of the organization, and so forth, all remain unspoken points of contestations, polemics, and relationships within the university system, publishing, the arts, and more. Many of the older friends, teachers, mentors, and comrades that I worked with in Japan were participants in one aspect or another of '68. It is a moment that marked everyone involved with the Left - and frankly, the entire cultural and intellectual field - deeply.

You mention that this moment should be put into context not only of the 60's but also all the way back to the "red purges" of the late 40's and the turn to reformism of the JCP in the late 50's. How is the 68 moment in Japan a response to this context?

'68 in Japan was without question a response to a whole series of things, just as it was in the broader global sense - the aftermath of World War II, the new affluence of mass consumer society, the hegemony of the American occupation of Japan, the movements of decolonization around the world, the imperialist wars across the Third World. But as you say, there is also a highly specific history

here. There was a sort of domino effect that helped to generate the Japanese New Left - and at the origin of that is American imperialism.

We are often used to thinking of the genesis of the global New Left in relation to the Soviet invasion of Hungary in '56, and even more so, the 'secret speech' of Khrushchev at the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, when he revealed the purges of the Stalin period, the existence of the gulag, and so forth. This too had a major effect in Japan, with important splits in '56-57 from the JCP, for instance. But there was also another local impetus. The American occupation-led "red purges" of the late 40s, which sought to destroy the rising force of the Japanese communist movement in the wake of the war, sent the JCP into the underground. Still to this day, the period between 1948 and 1955 is an understudied and volatile moment for the party: the JCP of this strange liminal period could easily have turned to an insurrectionary armed force. The early and mid-1950s are a fascinating and crucial period for the postwar Japanese Left, its cultural and intellectual roots. However, in '55, the JCP repudiated this clandestine experience and turned comprehensively towards parliamentarism and reformism. The sense of betrayal that the youth of the Left felt was strong, and had long-lasting echoes in literature of the time, the arts, and more. Thus, the conditions for a New Left were created in Japan before even the global disillusionment with the Soviet line, and when conditions in the late 50s sharpened with the first major student uprising - against the 1960 renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty - there was a clear mass ready to constitute another Left, outside of (and hostile to) the JCP. It's this movement of 1960 that constitutes the backdrop to the later movements of the 60s as such, as Hiroshi Nagasaki explains in his piece in the volume.

What do you think are the major historical factors and class structures particular to Japan in this moment of political rupture that sets this history and the conflicts that shaped it in contrast to the more well known (at least to English speakers) 68's of Europe and the US?

I would say that '68 in Japan bears a great similarity in certain ways to the movements of the 60s and 70s in Germany and Italy, not least because of the experience of defeat in World War II and the aborted process of eliminating the remnants of fascism. In both Japan and Germany, the American occupation authorities more or less decided against a true process of the elimination of fascism, choosing instead to rehabilitate low-ranking fascist bureaucrats into the reconstructed state, favouring an anti-communist politics that saw the true 'enemy' as the 'red menace'. This process in Japan, known as the 'reverse course', saw the entry of the geopolitics of the nascent Cold War, and had long-term effects on the character of the Left, particularly in terms of the importance of anti-imperialism.

In the broad sense, it cannot be forgotten that 1968 was closer to 1917 and the experience of the October Revolution than we are today to 1968. '68 in this sense took place as a revolutionizing of the legacy of 1917, still within its horizon and figures of politics. For us today, 1917 is now genuinely remote, and as much as it remains an emblem of emancipation, its lessons are much harder to locate in our reality and global situation. It's in this sense that we ought to pay greater attention to '68 as our 1917, but in this case, not a legacy of victory, or great symbol of triumph, but a more ambiguous legacy of unexpected victories, unanticipated defeats, and surprising recuperations of radicalism by the dominant order itself.

What about the other side of this question: what does this moment in Japan share with the 68's of other countries? You mention the way the global structures of capital shifted (the international oil crisis and the dawn of neoliberalism that put a strain on these movements), as well as the paths taken by certain major figures in the denouement. In both Europe and the US we know that there was a combined pattern both into more extreme tactics as well as a softening over time into more acceptable forms of liberalism.

Did this happen in Japan as well?

The moment of '68 in Japan shared a great deal with Europe and North America, especially in retrospect. While Japanese capitalism enjoyed massive expansion from the 50s through the asset-price bubble of the 80s, looking back one can easily locate the seeds of neoliberalism in the wake of 68 globally. And there is no question that the aftermath of 68 led to two paths - one away from radical politics and towards liberal accommodation with state and capital, the other towards Quixotic forms of sectarian fixations and the marginality of armed struggle without a mass basis - as much in Japan as in Europe and North America. A whole separate book could (and maybe should) be written on the thought and politics of the 'urban guerilla'-style armed struggles of the mid-to-late 70s, not just the Red Army incidents and international movements (for instance, the JRA involvement in Black September in Lebanon and adherence to the PFLP), but especially the East Asian Anti-Japanese Armed Front (Higashi Ajia han-nichi busō sensen), and the Chūkaku and Kakumaru factions of the Revolutionary Communist League. The turn to armed struggle, and some of its bloodier episodes, was not just the purview of a few fanatical militants, but was often right there in the midst of the culture of the long '68, as Yutaka Nagahara perceptively discusses. The violent and grim end of the '68 period created a deep demoralization for much of the Left.

People have been talking about an “end of the end of history,” that we are living through a moment where the structures of the neoliberal phase of capitalism that followed this moment are buckling in political and economic terms. Is this at all related to what you call the need to think about the “end of the end of 68”?

Without question, the discourse on the 'end of history' has ceased to have any meaning today whatsoever and if this 'end' ever even 'started' in the first place, then yes, it has comprehensively ended. We might even call the present moment an intense 'rebirth' of history, insofar as we are clearly living through a period with completely different political and economic dynamics than those of the 60s. It should not be forgotten that the New Left in the advanced capitalist countries was trying to contend with what radical politics would look like in a situation of mass enrichment that was subtended by the imperialist plunder of the Third World. Today, while imperialism continues to structure the geopolitics of our moment, the advanced capitalist countries are edging closer to social breakdown and mass immiseration, led by decades of vicious austerity policy, which began in earnest in the wake of 68.

The phrase 'an end to the end of 68' is really a concept proposed by Kristin Ross, in her May '68 and its Afterlives, a superb book and one of the very few texts on the 'idea of 68' that neither devolves into liberal platitudes, nor into simple worship and veneration of an idealized '68'. What I intended with this formulation has to do with the way '68 has been inherited for the global left of subsequent generations, as a "golden age." It's not just that this fantasy of the golden age prevents us from seeing the defects and failures of '68 - it also prevents us from utilizing the theoretical-political weapons of '68 as our own. It seals them into a type of memorial or tomb. As you say, today, we are in a moment where there is perhaps even more awareness of the inhumanity of capitalist society than there was in '68 - but the movement side of things appears far more fragmented. The ideology of the 'end of '68' showed that despite the radical force and critical grasp of the '68-period Left, its aftermath was nevertheless recuperated for liberalism and for parliamentary democracy. If anything, today what we see, perhaps more clearly than was possible in '68 itself, is the inseparability of anti-capitalist politics from a thoroughgoing critique of liberalism and a critique of parliamentary democracy itself.

One of the interesting things about recent uprisings is that there is a pattern of activists in the “West” following in the footsteps of movements that begin in the East or in the so-called global south. We saw this with Occupy and the Arab Spring, and now we are

witnessing in American cities tactics first employed in the streets of Hong Kong. Are there echoes to the moment of 68 in terms of the way those movements looked to the third world? How does Japan fit into this? Does it any longer make sense to think in terms of “East and West” under contemporary global capitalism? What do you think about this pattern?

I don't think that the terms 'East' and 'West' here have any genuine signification, if we are collapsing the multiple 'Arab Springs', the political upheavals in Hong Kong (whose effects and aims are still ambiguous in terms of political results), and so forth. These are disparate, situationally specific political moments that do not have 'clear' lessons, at least not yet. Of course, there is a history of the gestural transfers between movements: forms of assembly, protocols of meetings, slogans, and so forth. But at the present I see relatively little at the level of a shared political lexicon, or even perspectives that are genuinely politically legible, the way 'anti-Stalinism' or indeed 'anti-revisionism' was a globally shared discursive space in the 60s-70s, or in the way 'anti-imperialism' and the anti-war movement functioned as a mode of political solidarity.

It's true that it does not make much sense to speak of 'East and West' in contemporary global capitalism. The transnationalization of capital, however, does not mean the disappearance of geopolitics, but rather intensifies the national element on a global scale. This is precisely why, contrary to the 90s presentation of an achieved globalization, the national question has by no means disappeared, but rather its exigencies have been strengthened. There is an illegibility of politics in many contemporary movements, that are neither identifiably of the right or the left; the Japanese '68 was a revolt against 'official socialism' and its party-formations in a sense, but conjoined to this and fundamental to it was also anti-imperialism. One of the most iconic slogans, upheld especially by the split sects of the Revolutionary Communist League, but practically shared by most of the Left in 68 was 'Anti-Stalinism, Anti-Imperialism' (han-suta, han-tei). In our contemporary moment, this centrality of anti-imperialism to domestic social movements has been frequently lost, a result of the political confusion and displacements produced by global capital.

The idea of '68' has long been a sort of Hollywood level symbol, and in some leftist circles it is merely “history as trivia,” as you put it, to the point where there is now real ambivalence to this history. Its importance and the lessons that might be learned are potentially disregarded. How does this volume combat the issue of the “positivist” history of simply listing what happened? What do you think are some elements of this volume of writings that might be surprising, or might potentially bring leftists interested in this history back into a more living relationship with it?

I certainly hope the book succeeds in avoiding this kind of 'history as trivia' approach to '68, and if it does, it will be in part simply because of its composition. It is not just a collection of historians treating the Japanese '68 as some exotic 'data' in the missionary style; it is also in part a volume of theoretical reflections by major thinkers of the contemporary post-68 Left in Japan (Yutaka Nagahara, Yoshihiko Ichida, Yoshiyuki Koizumi, Hidemi Suga) on the inheritances, the thought and lessons, of this moment in which they participated, one way or the other. Hiroshi Nagasaki's contribution is key, not only because he himself was one of the great intellectual figures of "68 thought" in Japan (his 1969 Theory of Rebellion is a genuine classic), but because here he casts a sober, critical eye over '68 today as thought, refusing both liberal melancholy and self-aggrandizement.

In my view, the greatest danger to '68 as a legacy for the global Left lies in the two most common responses to it - to treat it as an audacious but ultimately futile youthful indiscretion on the one hand, or as a romanticized, heroic, nostalgic golden age of Revolution on the other. The fact is that '68 was in many ways a defeat for the Left of an unanticipated type. The desire for personal

freedom, self-creation, liberation from the old structures, transformation of the very notion of self, and so on succeeded paradoxically in providing a vocabulary at the cultural level for neoliberalism, for the radical individualism that would create its political impasses. Here, we only have to think of social media, Apple, the Whole Earth catalogue and so forth to come up with the most glaring examples. In that sense, '68 was a defeat, not a victory, since we still live on the same earth, and it is still characterized by the destructive force of capital and the geopolitics of empire. But it's OK to have great defeats in the encyclopedia of the Left too. The question is what we do with this defeat. If we treat it with dispassion and indifference or even as an excuse for defeatism and conversion to the side of reaction, then it's worth nothing, just another bundle of historical trivia without an idea in our rudderless era. If we instead insist that politics is possible, that the aims of anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, emancipatory and insurrectionary politics are just and correct, then we can newly deliver an active, passionate meaning to this historical defeat, and make its contributions a precious lexicon of struggle for our time.

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