

1968 in Japan, Germany and the USA: Political Protest and Cultural Change

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Considered by many historians to mark the first global revolution of the twentieth century, the year 1968 represents a central node in the period of protest spanning the 1960s and early 1970s. Worldwide, and particularly in the industrialized states, youth-led protest movements shared similar goals advocating the breakdown of the authoritarian structures of educational systems, the overthrow of capitalist economic systems, and the end of superpower intervention in the Third World.

Whether viewed from transnational or particularist perspectives, the Japanese and West German postwar experiences inevitably invite comparison along numerous lines. Following defeat in the Second World War, both Germany and Japan underwent Allied occupation, rehabilitation (for the strategic pursuit of America's global Cold War aims in Europe and

Asia), and subsequent “miracles” in their revived economies. Not only were the domestic and international politics of the two defeated powers strongly influenced by the United States, but the dramatic social and cultural changes which accompanied the post-war years in both countries also bore a distinctly American stamp, and even after official occupation ended, the global influence of American popular and youth culture deeply affected the generations coming of age in the late 1960s in West Germany and Japan.

These experiences were explored in the conference “1968 in Japan, Germany and the USA: Political Protest and Cultural Change” sponsored by the Japanese-German Center Berlin (JDZB), the German Historical Institute in Washington and the Heidelberg Center for American Studies, which took place in Berlin, from March 4-6, 2009, at the Japanese-German Center Berlin. The three-day conference marked the passing of forty-one years since the events of 1968 with eye-witness accounts from the period, as well as fourteen presentations, two films and much discussion.

Main observations/outcomes:

- Many papers attempted comparative, if not global perspectives. The challenge of overcoming national, cultural and linguistic boundaries to thoroughly explore transnational issues remains formidable, as specialists must inevitably delve into unfamiliar territory to sufficiently widen their scope for the task. This is not a risk-free undertaking, but the synthesis of ideas which resulted in this case proved highly rewarding.
- The approaches taken to 1968 in Japan, Germany and the US proved truly diverse – in terms of discipline (history, sociology, sociolinguistics, political science, media studies) and in terms of sources (contemporary eye-witnesses, photographs, painting, film and music). The papers were connected by their focus on the ways in which the developments of the 1960s and early 70s went on to influence everyday life.
- Although a great number of circumstantial parallels between 1968 in Germany and Japan seemed obvious, it quickly became clear that the discourse stemmed from very different traditions and branched out in diverse directions.
- Women’s movements in Germany and particularly Japan received considerable attention. Despite overlap in their origins, the pathways of discourse over women’s sexuality, bodies and gender roles in the two societies proved distinct from one another. As for the overall relation of second wave feminism to 1968, there was no denying that women’s experiences in the student movement influenced the women’s movements of the 1970s, although it was also clear that the movement could not be considered as simply a particular sub-interest of the same revolutionary impulse, but was part of a separate and ongoing redefinition of gender roles in society.
- Certain questions only grew in the context of discussions, such as those surrounding the comparatively sudden and intense violence of student protests and Red Army terrorism in Japan.
- In the German and American examples, one gained a sense of 1968 as a time when the younger generations felt a heightened sense of spirituality and desire to focus on the inner-self, co-existing in tension with a sense of solidarity with revolutionary struggles abroad, and at home.

Contemporary Eye-Witnesses

Following the welcoming speeches of Friederike Bosse (Japanese-German Center Berlin), Philipp Gassert (German Historical Institute in Washington) and Wilfried Mausbach (Heidelberg Center for American Studies), Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth introduced the three prominent “contemporary eye-witnesses” invited to describe how they experienced 1968. Moderated by Klimke in an arm-chair forum, they spoke initially in order of age. Ekkehart Krippendorff, a self-proclaimed 65-er, described how his experience with the comparatively laid-back American university environment he encountered at Harvard (such as being welcomed into Talcott Parsons’ office to find the professor with his feet on the desk) equipped him to challenge the relatively authoritarian German university system to which he returned. He explained how his experience and practical knowledge of American protest methods (“picketing and sandwich boards”) contributed to the organization of the first student protests in Germany.

Rainer Langhans, another active figure from Berlin in the sixties, particularly known for his role in Kommune I in Berlin, focused his comments on the spiritual and inwardly-focused nature of his nevertheless public activities during this period. Langhans, who continues to lead a communal lifestyle in Munich, explained that a search for the self has always been his central focus. Trying to explain the sick feeling of living “as if half-dead with guilt,” Langhans recounted his ongoing horror at his generation’s legacy of mass murder in the name of national socialism. Langhans said of 1968, “our actions weren’t political – they were much more.” As for the use of a transnational approach to 1968, he suggested that activists felt less as if they were partaking in a transnational phenomenon, than as if they were a part of one big family. He then challenged historians and social scientists to come up with a means of more adequately describing the spirit of the times.

Historian and feminist Toshiko Himeoka turned eighteen in 1968. Her memories of protest in Japan began with the “Anpo” protests against the ratification of a revised US-Japan Security Treaty. The Anpo protests at the Diet, which resulted in the death of a twenty year-old woman, and the death of another student in the 1967 anti-Vietnam War protests brought home an awareness of the very real danger of protest, which became even more palpable when she faced riot police as a participant in a woman-led protest in Kansai in 1969. Having studied in Germany, Himeoka was also able to compare the Japanese and German atmospheres in the early 1970s, observing that protest culture in Germany had a markedly more personal flavor, exemplified by the idea that “the problems of others are also mine.” Later, the women’s movement in Germany also seemed to place greater influence on lifestyle (as opposed to politics) than it did in Japan.

Panels

The conference was strongly positioned in a transnational, global framework by the theoretical approaches outlined in talks by Tim Brown and Martin Klimke. Brown linked “the global” to “the transnational,” observing that the global features characterizing the events of 1968 (their simultaneity, the timing of revolutions in the Third World) led to the development of a sense of a “global imagined community.” Within this community, transnational lines of influence falling across different terrains, or vectors, should be identified and their influences studied. The year 1968 could in turn be approached as having two separate parts - the “big” 1968 of global youth culture and a certain set of ideas, and the “small” 1968, focused on the form which those big ideas took in individual settings. Klimke carried the idea forward, focusing on transnational symbols and collective identity, documenting the ways in which

movement ideas were diffused transnationally, being understood differently in different places and then recontextualized, or adopted to local values and situations.

The trajectory of protest in Japan through the 1960s was elaborated upon by a number of papers and compared to protest in West Germany. It became clear that the year 1968 itself bears less emblematic weight in Japan. Claudia Derichs suggested that by 1968, postwar protest in Japan was already further advanced than in Germany, where the New Left had overthrown the old by 1957. The New Left and student movements, as well as Red Army radicals in Japan had different origins and long term trajectories in Japan than in West Germany, despite numerous surface parallels. Indeed, her paper sparked commentary from Japanese conference participants who emphasized that being a veteran of 1968 in Japan was considered, in comparison to Germany, to be neither a symbolic generation marker nor a point of pride or status.

Cultural shifts and the integration of counter-culture into everyday culture:

Moving away from specific German-Japanese comparisons to a more Euro-American focus, Philipp Gassert analyzed how the counter-culture eventually penetrated consumer culture to alter mainstream culture, while also leading to a democratization of lifestyles, revolutionizing and repositioning sexuality in the context of everyday life, and unleashing a new wave of critical thought. Kathrin Fahlenbrach took on the icons of revolution in 1968, delving into the synchronic and diachronic pathways by which these visual images transformed into icons which became uniquely embedded in the collective memories of varied cultures.

Tadahisa Izeki, Joachim Scharloth and Yoshie Mitobe analyzed social and cultural consequences of 1968. Izeki explored the popular and revolutionary publications which influenced the postwar “baby-boomers” who went on to lead the student movement. He also described how student movement activities were marked by Japanese universities, forty years on. Scharloth followed with a tightly documented panorama of the ways in which 1968 led to the heightened presence of emotion and informality in daily practice, particularly in aspects of language and behaviour. Mitobe approached the consequences of 1968 through a comparative analysis of abortion debates in Japan and West Germany, paying particular attention to participation of men and women in the debates, finding that male participation in Germany was, for the most part, considerably less than in Japan.

Toshiko Himeoka compared the women’s movements in Japan and West Germany, elaborating on the theme of liberating women’s sexuality in Japan, as proclaimed by Mitsu Tanaka’s “Liberation from the Toilet.” Comparatively speaking, the Japanese movement remained a radical fringe as opposed to the movement West Germany, where the movement had more success in altering social practices. Interestingly however, the Japanese movement remained more open to mothers and children than did its German counterpart. The 2004 documentary film by Chieko Yamagami and Noriko Seyama featuring veterans of the women’s movement in Japan, titled “30 Years of Sisterhood,” was presented by Laura Wong, who argued that the movement could not simply be viewed as a later offshoot of left wing protest, but rather as part of a separate and ongoing revolution in the construction of gender roles. Kae Ishii discussed the role and construction of gender in the Japanese and German film industries since the 1960s, as exemplified by the work of female directors like Sachi Hamano, who, excluded from the club of male directors came up through the genre of low budget, short production time “pink films.” Directors like Hamano appropriated the genre and used it to show female sexuality from a female perspective, eventually gaining a diverse and loyal audience of women film lovers. Moving from the revolution in the film industry to the

revolution in education, Meike Sophia Baader discussed the formation of “Kinderläden” - parent-sponsored alternative childcare centers or kindergartens - which emerged in West Germany following the 1965 education reforms and proliferated under the influence of the 1968 generation, and later, the women’s movement. Although the first “Kinderläden” in Berlin and Frankfurt were known for their politicized anti-authoritarian stances, the character of “Kinderläden” developed and broadened as the model became more widespread through the country in subsequent decades.

Cultures of Violence

It is particularly noteworthy that Germany and Japan, which led brutal expansionist campaigns through World War II, saw particularly strong and violent left-wing terrorist groups emerge in the late 1960s, which, unlike their counterparts in the United States, eventually took a large number of lives before their implosion and capture. Conference participants viewed Wakamatsu Kouji’s unsettling film “United Red Army,” (2007) dramatizing the Japanese Red Army’s mountain camps and eventual siege in the winter of 1971-72. The culture of violence in Japan, Germany and the United States was approached from a comparative perspective in Dorothea Hauser’s talk on Red Army groups in Japan and West Germany, where she identified parallel strains of anti-Americanism in the two terror organizations bred in former Axis powers. Jeremy Varon addressed the inadequacies of viewing the Red Army Faction in West Germany and the Weathermen in the United States from purely national perspectives, which provide only inadequate explanations of the “apocalyptic violence” of these groups. Varon argued that understanding these groups’ views of themselves as participants in a global movement is essential if one is to begin to comprehend how they came to view violence as a form of sacred action in the redemption of a falling/fallen world.

As the conference wound to a close, participants reflected on how another conference marking the fiftieth anniversary of 1968 in Japan, Germany and the United States might look. Aspects which should receive greater emphasis next time included those of translation, terminology, sociological impact, political institutions and culture. Further analytic research of the Japanese experience was also called for. Overall, the challenge of bringing three distinct cultures and locations together to explore a period whose legacy is still unresolved proved a significant step in generating locally specific, as well as transnationally and transculturally meaningful portraits of 1968 in Japan, Germany and the United States.