6 The 1960s’ Japanese Student Movement in Retrospect

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In June of 1985 Japan passed a historic milestone – the twenty-fifth anniversary of the peak of the 1960 demonstrations against the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty (Anpo). These demonstrations, called ‘the greatest mass movement in her [Japan’s] political history’, featured the leftist student movement and individual radicals playing a significant, if not crucial, role.

Yet, intellectual and popular journals contained only a few articles commemorating the event, and some of these were written by famous former student leaders who have since converted to the right. Privately, and more as if they had been part of a college fraternity than a political movement, ex-student radicals held nostalgia parties and reunions with former comrades. All of this took place in a Japan ruled by the same party that was in power in 1960, now under the leadership of its most conservative prime minister in decades, with the same security treaty still in effect. The student movement, having briefly played a major role in politics in the widespread campus movements of the late 1960s, had long since degenerated into a small, fractionalised, often violent shadow of its former self, lacking in both campus and public support.

Witnessing the subdued commemoration of the Anpo demonstrations a quarter of a century later in the affluent, high-tech, urban-middle-class and politically conservative Japan of the 1980s, I could not help but feel that the 1960s’ student movement had become arcane and irrelevant. This surely must be the way most of the high-fashion teenagers feel as, equipped with stereo walkmans, they stroll along the same streets on which their predecessors had snake-danced only a generation earlier.

Of course, I knew that not all former student radicals had converted, that the 1960 movement had been instrumental in bringing down a hawkish prime minister and turning the Liberal Democratic Party
more towards the non-controversial policy of rapid economic growth, and that the late-1960s' movements had led to a few reforms in higher education. None the less, for an American who had done research on the 1960s' movement and had personally observed the student protests in the latter part of the decade, the toned-down observance of the anniversary of the Anpo movement provoked several vexing questions. What was the long-term significance, if any, of the 1960 Anpo movement and the campus movements of the late 1960s? Did they have a common political and sociological meaning, one that transcended their obviously 'failed' objectives of ending the US–Japan treaty or fundamentally restructuring Japanese society and higher education? Did they have any connection to the present? What has happened to the spirit and beliefs that motivated those idealistic students two decades ago?

THE SOCIALISATION OF STUDENT ACTIVISTS OF THE 1960s: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Sufficient data exist on students who were politically active in the 1960s to enable us to draw a portrait of them in terms of their backgrounds, motivation and values. First, however, it is necessary to distinguish among several different types of student activists. Those who played a major role in the 1960 Anpo movement may be called 'committed activists'. These students rebelled against the authoritarianism and 'revisionism' of the Communist Party and captured the leadership of Zengakuren (All Japan Student Federation), the nationwide organisation of student governments. Their descendants, organised into various factions, along with 'non-sect' radicals, were prominent in the campus protests of the late 1960s.

By contrast, 'non-committed activists' were those who had briefly been mobilised to participate in the movement during the Anpo crisis, but were otherwise not committed participants in student organisations. Finally, students who remained part of the Communist Party's Minsei (Democratic Youth) organisations, as we shall see, were separate from the radical student movements in this decade.

The typical anti-Yoyogi (i.e. anti-Japan Communist Party) 'committed activist' of the 1960 Anpo generation came from a family in which the father was employed in management or administration, white-collar work or the professions. The 'non-committed activists', on the other hand, were more likely to come from families in which the father