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The Hidden Conservatism of the 'Radical' Sixties Generation

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The blowback of the Global Financial Crisis and the rise of populism in Europe and America during the twenty-teens pushed me to think more deeply about Japan's political and economic trajectory since 1993 and its roots in the social and political milieu of the late 1960s. In *Mobilizing Japanese Youth*, I establish how, despite the dominant narrative of countercultural fashions that shape popular memory of the era, it was an underlying cultural conservatism of the Sixties Generation that shaped their political consciousness from the late 1970s well into the twenty-first century.

I argue that Japan's 'transwar generation' (born between 1890 and 1920) used nonstate institutions to actively shape the political consciousness of the first generation of youth born after the end of the Second World War. Despite protestations to the contrary, I found that the older transwar generation, who led Japan's civic institutions for nearly five decades after 1945, shared a common set of conservative cultural mores that influenced the political consciousness of the generation of young people who by the late 1960s were the demographic majority of voting-age adults.

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I deploy an interdisciplinary toolkit to unpack how notions of class and gender shaped the discourses produced by, and for, young men and women—from the weekly rants found in a sports gambling magazine to the political subject embedded within the first commercial punk rock record album released in Japan.

I re-read how Japan was during the 1980s enthralled by the hubris of Hayekian economic discourses that had seemed since the 1960s to promise a nation defined by middle-class affluence. Since the economic bubble burst in 1993, successive government administrations have failed to solve the cascade of economic problems. For Japanese born after 1960, the continually ailing economy has made it difficult to attain the "minimum cultured living," which the 1947 constitution guaranteed, and it has been nigh impossible for those born since 1980.

how to bear all the risks of economic decline through an endless string of impermanent jobs that have only limited or no social benefits or statutory entitlements.

Not uncommon to the myth of the 'American Dream', discourses of Japanese uniqueness (*nihonjinron*) promoted a mythology of satisfied, hardworking, middle-class salarymen who supported suburban families managed by dedicated “good wives and wise mothers” (*ryōsai kenbo*). This is an invented set of “traditional” social aspirations for men and women that was first inscribed into state ideology during the late nineteenth century and survives without a significant material basis into the twenty-first century.

Even while many believed in the foundational myths associated with “harmonious workplace relations,” a white-collar nation of male salarymen was supported by the denizens of a pink-collar ghetto who in turn belied a long history of conflict and confrontation that gave flight to the affluent society in which the Japanese then lived. During the 1980s, and even after, it was easy to think that Japan’s spectacular economic growth made it an exemplar of modern capitalism.

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By the mid-1990s, however, the hubris and certainty that drove the 1980s—“We have all the answers”—was gone: the bubble burst, the Cold War ended, the population aged, rural areas hemorrhaged their populations and struggled to stay alive. Also known as the *Lost Decade*, the economic malaise of the 1990s stretched well into the twenty-first century.

Unemployment rates hovered around five percent all through the century’s first decade (the highest sustained levels of unemployment since the early 1950s), while the average unemployment rate for individuals between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four exceeded double that for the overall population.

Perhaps more troubling still is that the year-on-year aggregate wages for young people declined, and the ratio of part-time temporary to full-time regular employment rose. Both scenarios are the result of an employment system that favored adults who already had jobs over those who sought them. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, hundreds of thousands of Japanese youths engaged with national politics through mass public protest, and through this, they aimed to change the course of a parliament mired in the political mud of business as usual.

Indeed, it appeared as if the system, as well as the bureaucrats, politicians, and business leaders who ran it, was incapable of adapting to a changing world, and young people feared that since the 1990s, the system, and the social bargains that had enabled it, had closed off rather than created the kinds of social and economic opportunities that had defined the early postwar era.

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While social critics and political pundits blamed the state for not developing practical welfare strategies for the future of the nation, many of those same critics and pundits also insisted that it was the filial duty of this Lost Generation of “lazy” young people to buckle down and work harder. These lazy young people, in reality, were the victims of a political mugging; the postwar pathways from education to work that made Japan affluent were replaced by wave after wave of ill-prepared youth with little or no economic prospects.

Harvard Sociologist Mary C. Brinton defines Japan’s Lost Generation as individuals who completed their formal education and tried to enter employment between 1997 and 2003. It was during this period that unemployment rates among youth

cohort of fifteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds reeled off by 2003.

Importantly, the government sought to use this generation's inability to achieve the "normal" measure of permanent employment as a lever for relabeling unconventional youth as the lazy, unmotivated adult children of affluent families, despite significant evidence that the problem lies with the state's withdrawal of the work-to-employment guarantee that had underpinned the unprecedented economic growth prior to 1990.

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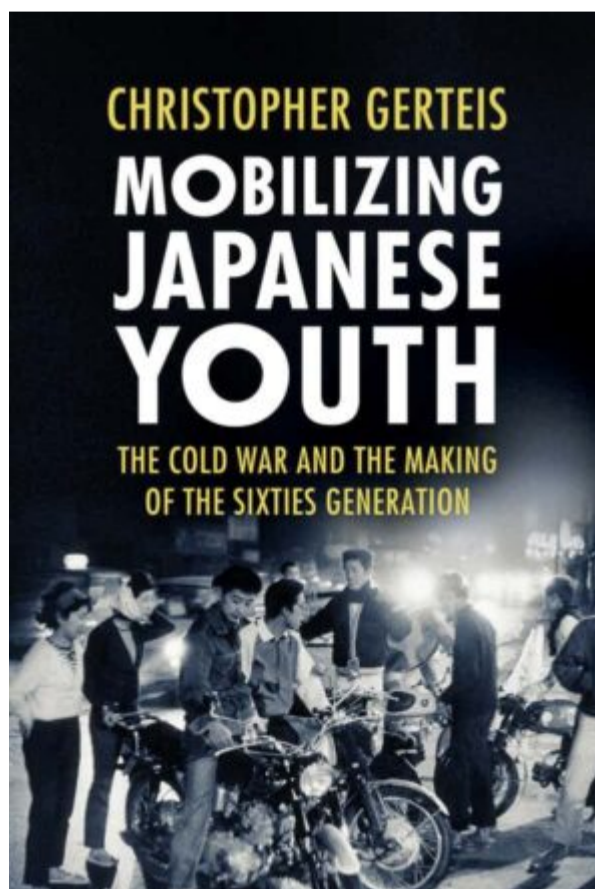
The resulting ideal-type notions of work, family, and political participation invoked attributes associated with manliness and femininity that are more publicly associated with those advocated by the Far Right, while also underpinning the gender roles that constrained the political and economic trajectories available to men and women of the Far Left.

Much more significant, the failure of the older generation of political leaders to foster sufficient economic and political opportunities for young people has created a bleak future for the succeeding generations of Japanese, who face unrelenting underemployment and political irrelevance in a society likely to be dominated by a generation that will maintain its demographic majority well into the 2020s.

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*Featured image: Kaleidoscope showing an abstract object of blue and yellow, by [Christian Liebel](#).



Cover image of *Mobilizing Japanese Youth*.

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