CHAPTER EIGHT

THE RECOVERY OF ACTIVISM

Despite the changes in Japanese society since the onset of the “post-bubble” recession in the 1990s and the ensuing neoliberal reforms, protest movements among the young were scarce and weak during this decade. To be sure, following the end of the Cold War and the seeming triumph of global capitalism, established Leftist parties and unions had been weakened globally, not just in Japan. The absence of protest among young Japanese was nevertheless in remarkable contrast to what happened in many other countries, where during the late 1990s criticism against the new global economy gained force and the global justice movement achieved a breakthrough, especially after the WTO summit in Seattle 1999. Only with the demonstrations against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s and with the ensuing precarity movement did large-scale public protests make an appearance in Japan in which young people played a major role.

Why, then, were protest movements so relatively weak during the 1990s, and why did they begin to grow during the following decade? When open protest did emerge, why did it take a form that appeared to have so little in common with older traditions of protest in Japan? What new ideas, arguments and uses of space emerged in the course of the transition? In this book I have tried to show that these questions cannot be answered simply by referring to changes that have been taking place since the 1990s. Instead, the development of freeter activism also must be understood in relation to the history of previous radical protest movements in Japan. The New Left factions of the 1960s and 1970s in particular left a traumatic and lingering legacy of political failure, sectarian infighting, dogmatism and distance from the concerns of ordinary people. Together with the growing sense of affluence in Japan produced by the country’s decades of high growth, this legacy explains why existing radical movements in Japan in the early 1990s were widely regarded as discredited and avoided by young people. Even when the sense of affluence was eroded in the 1990s, this legacy ensured that social discontent among the young was largely expressed in a mood of impasse and in acts of withdrawal rather than in open protest.
Paying attention to the legacy of the New Left makes it easier to bring into view several important historical factors that distinguish the Japanese case from other countries. It will be useful to make a brief inventory of such factors here, since they show us the specificity of the context in which Japanese youth movements have been forced to operate and thereby help us explain their trajectory.

To make sense of the particularly traumatic quality of the New Left’s defeat, the first factor that springs to mind is of course the New Left’s own self-destructive violence. Violence per se, however, was not unique to Japan but can also be seen in the development of the radical Left in many other countries, such as West Germany, Italy and the United States (Zwerman et al. 2000). To make sense of the long-lasting impact of the New Left’s defeat in Japan, a second factor needs to be taken into consideration, namely Japan’s position in the world-system as a developmental state that during the postwar era achieved a remarkable “economic miracle” through its model of export-led growth and administrative guidance (Johnson 1982). The economic successes generated by this model and the growing sense of affluence in the 1970s and 1980s strengthened the hand of domestic capital against the labour movement and made the general public more disinclined to support radical anti-capitalism. This is the context that best explains the Japanese New Left’s failure to achieve tangible results and why it inspired so few successor movements (along the lines of the “new social movements” that developed in the West).

The seemingly robust strength of Japanese capitalism until the burst of the bubble economy in the early 1990s is in turn related to a third factor, namely the timing of Japan’s turn to neoliberalism. While many other major economies suffered a crisis of profitability in the 1970s which made them move in the direction of deregulation and privatisation in the 1980s, Japan did not start to do so in earnest until during the “lost decade”, particularly from the mid-1990s onwards. Whereas neoliberalism increasingly came under fire in many other countries during the late 1990s, in Japan, by contrast, the post-bubble recession helped prop up legitimacy for the neoliberal reforms, which could be justified as necessary for a recovery of Japan’s economy and national self-esteem while their ill effects could be blamed on the recession and remaining “vested interests”.

Taken together, these factors helped create a situation in which the neoliberal reforms faced little criticism when they started to be introduced in the late 1990s. They also strongly suggest that the trauma of the New Left was not simply the result of any particular event, such as the Asama Sansō incident 1972, but are better seen as the product of a larger