

The lament of progressivism: voicing war responsibility in postwar Japan

Every decade since August 1945, the world has scrutinized anew the manner in which Japan chooses to remember WWII. Invariably, microscopic attention is paid to semantics: does the word 'sorry' appear at all in official statements, and if so, is it qualified by self-congratulatory statements about how Japan 'liberated' Asia? Is the horror of the Nanjing Massacre relativised by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Are Japan's war dead - including designated war criminals - acknowledged through visits by serving Cabinet members to the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo?

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For the past sixty years international interrogation of Japanese war guilt has assumed the worst: Japan, taken as a moral monolith, is consistently found to be wanting in its historical memory and political commitment to denouncing past wrongs. While obfuscation and inconsistency have typified official government statements on the war (and individual conservative politicians have provoked outrage through their episodic revisionist statements), official statements do not represent the full range of feeling in Japan concerning WWII. This is even more marked when the topic becomes Japanese atrocities in that war, and how these atrocities should be remembered.

Beneath the hail of international accusation, the past sixty years have also featured the dogged persistence of a countervailing voice within Japan. Collectively known as 'progressive thinkers', these individuals have campaigned on the margins of political relevance since 1945. Their voices have barely been audible in the angry cacophony that dominates those countries touched by atrocities, while the international anonymity of Japanese war responsibility discourse further suffers from the lack of translation into more accessible languages. Borrowing the words of one significant progressive thinker and activist, Tsurumi Shunsuke, the voices of guilt, acknowledgment and memory have become the 'voiceless voices' of postwar Japan.¹

Marginal yet relevant

Seen from the standpoint of 2005, we could be forgiven for declaring that this strain of opinion in Japan has been ineffectual. Yet, it would be facile to argue that marginality equals irrelevance. Operating on the political periphery has been both a historical necessity and a deliberate ethical choice on the part of progressives. As we can see from the fate of the Social Democratic Party of Japan (formerly the Japan Socialist Party), occupying the pinnacle of political power can be fatal for progressive forces. Soon after Murayama's prime ministership in 1995, his party almost fell off the political spectrum. And while Murayama provided subsequent Japanese governments with a linguistic formula for war apology (repeated again in 2005), it came at a high price. To position their man within the governing coalition in that crucial war memory year of 1995, the socialists effectively ditched every other progressive policy position they had held since 1955. They lost moral suasion as a result.

Marginality has thus been historically essential for those promoting discussion of Japanese war guilt. In 1945, 'progressive' meant being on the Left, and in 1945, this carried moral force. A hand-

ful of communists had been the last to hold out against the wartime state, and the liberation of surviving communists from Japan's jails in September 1945 ushered in an era where socialism and communism flowed seamlessly into the promotion of democracy. The reality of the Cold War descended onto this liberal intellectual scene as early as 1947, leaving us with one of the great ironies of postwar Japanese discourse on WWII: U.S. occupation policies stigmatised and marginalised the very flag-bearers of war responsibility debate. Similarly, the retention of the emperor in postwar political life (as a symbol of the unity of the nation) and his exclusion from indictment as a war criminal led to a selective narrative on Japanese war guilt.

Guilt allocation also omitted the majority of the Japanese population. With responsibility for the war pinned on military leaders and those in official wartime positions (the July 1945 Potsdam Declaration had declared the Japanese people 'deceived and misled' by 'self-willed militaristic advisors') war guilt discourse was marginalized on the project of postwar democratization. While the U.S.-led occupation's censorship, education and propaganda wings tried to correct this disassociation of democracy and war guilt, there is little doubt that war responsibility discourse was ethically distorted thereafter.

This ethical twisting even flowed into the minds of postwar 'progressives'. In the postwar period, Japan's progressive thinkers positioned themselves against the conservative-led state and occupation as well as the war-time state. Fol-

For progressive thinkers, the normative association between constructing postwar democracy and defending individual subjectivity was crucial. Within the rubric of democracy and pacifism, thinkers such as Tsurumi Shunsuke, Maruyama Masao, Hidaka Rokuro, Kuno Osamu and Shimizu Ikutaro (amongst many others) constructed the foundation of war responsibility discourse. In the process, they shaped the very contours of postwar politics.

Postwar Japanese politics, and war responsibility discourse, is in large measure a product of discord between disparate forces, not the monopoly of a conservative regime – the longevity of postwar conservative political leadership does not represent the dynamism and breadth of the struggle for political ideas and ethics, but the outcome of the struggle for power.

Collaboration and enlightenment

In January 1956 Tsurumi Shunsuke provoked a turn in the discourse on blame and guilt in his essay 'The war responsibility of intellectuals'.² Progressive intellectuals had, according to Tsurumi, failed to identify the actual nature of collaboration and their own complicity. He argued that through their own efforts, neither compelled by force nor convinced by love of country, thinkers had divested themselves of the power to dispel myths, thus facilitating deception by the state: '[intellectuals] actually decided to distort the functioning of their own minds while facing the forces that they knew in their minds to be wrong'.³ Intellectuals should now 'confess that in the past they did not personally resist', and

ity' by highlighting the great disparity between the objective promotion and facilitation of war and fascism, and the subjective awareness of having done so. Yet the 'duty' of progressive thinkers was to render visible and comprehensible the 'mechanism that led the ruling class to perpetrate the war even though they were wailing all the while about how awful it all was'.⁴

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In Tsurumi and Maruyama, we see in cameo the dilemma that confronted postwar progressive thinkers on responsibility for the war. Confronting the personal failure to resist the wartime state and its ideology was stark and unflinching, but it was inner-directed, almost quarantined, from the postwar present. If there was any continuity between war and postwar, it was the implicit acknowledgement that intellectuals had an enlightenment mission within society. After 1956, war responsibility discourse became focused on postwar responsibility, on intellectual leadership of anti-state and pacifist movements.

Tsurumi stood at the forefront of a major study of war-time intellectual collaboration, the three-volume *Kyodo Kenkyu Tenko* study, convinced that exposing the structure of war-era intellectual weakness would bolster progressive thinkers in the postwar world. Tsurumi's approach infuriated other thinkers such as Yoshimoto Takaaki, who would become the nemesis of progressive thinkers in the 1960s. The elitism implicit in the enlightenment motive seemed to Yoshimoto a transwar phenomenon, with intellectuals continuing their belief in enlightened leadership of the people without realizing how alienated they were from them.

Yoshimoto referred to postwar progressive discourse on the war as 'the flip-side of a counterfeit coin', where both sides shared the fatal flaw of an experiential gap between theory and reality, between perception of reality and actual reality. He maintains that intellectuals facilitated the state's deception of the nation during the war: 'if we examine the history of revolutionary movements in Japan, we can say that the absolutist authorities utilized this dark zone that existed between the parallel layers of vanguard consciousness and popular consciousness, and absorbed it'.⁵ While progressive thinkers were focused on preserving society from the clutches of the postwar state, their critics were focused on what they saw as the yawning gap between thinkers and ordinary people.

Heroic periphery, ethical core

The legacy of the postwar progressive movement is ever-present in contemporary Japan. The tireless history text-

book campaigners (such as Net 21) insist on detailing the facts of Japan's war atrocities in high school textbooks, and continue to sustain citizen's movements against textbook censorship. Japan's courts are bursting with former victims of wartime Japan demanding compensation, supported by citizens groups and teams of pro-bono Japanese lawyers. Committees of intellectuals form bilat-

eral research groups with counterparts in Korea and China, digging ever deeper into the history of Japanese atrocities in those countries. And they have had some successes. So-called 'comfort women' were finally acknowledged by the Japanese government in the early 1990s when a progressive thinker, Yoshimi Yoshiaki, exposed documentary evidence of official complicity.

All of these movements feature thinkers and activists of a progressive bent, in that they are self-consciously anti-state, engaged in active resistance, putting their ideas to the people. It is an intellectual life on the periphery, far from the bowels of power in the Diet. Yet it is inherently, necessarily a peripheral existence, where ideas of accountability and subjectivity exalt in their marginality from the conservative mainstream. The pulse of progressivism is its normative commitment to opposition and resistance, placing progressives heroically on the periphery of political efficacy, where they represent the ethical core upon which meaningful war responsibility discourse ultimately depends. The lament of postwar progressivism is that its ethics ensure continued political marginality, in a setting where the conservatives in power show little inclination to absorb and own the progressive agenda of war responsibility discourse. ◀

Notes

1. The 'voiceless voices' (Koe Naki Koe no Kai) was a citizens' movement that arose in 1960 during the protests against the renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. Tsurumi Shunsuke was a key figure in this movement, and a major proponent of its activities.
2. Tsurumi Shunsuke, 'Chishikijin no senso sekinin', *Chuo Koron* No. 71, January 1956, pp 57-63.
3. Tsurumi, 'Chishikijin', 61.
4. Maruyama Masao, 'Senso sekinin ni tsuite', *Shiso no Kagaku* No. 16 (part 1 of three parts), 1956, p 3.
5. Yoshimoto Takaaki, 'Geijutsuteki teiko to zasetsu' (Artistic resistance and disillusionment), *Yoshimoto Takaaki Zenchosakushu* Vol. 4 (Tokyo: Keiso Shobo, 1969), p. 165.

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Students of the new left

lowing the logic of deception and victimhood, progressive thinkers engaged with war guilt by allocating responsibility to the imperial state and its emperor-system ideology. The state had deceived the people in war-time; intellectuals had been unable to resist the apparatus of police terror and blind patriotism; thus accepting war responsibility in the early postwar years meant engaging in active opposition to the state.

place their energy instead into the postwar peace movement.

Tsurumi's essay unleashed a fury of recriminations exposing the complexities that festered beneath the vibrant intellectual culture of the postwar era. The explosion of debate saw Maruyama Masao, a leading progressive thinker, follow up with 'The blindspots of war responsibility' and 'On war responsibil-