

An Accidental Scholar: Remarks on the Special Issue on Japanese STS
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Introduction

Let me to open with the remark that I am not a likely commentator for this set of papers. Nor is this a traditional *Social Epistemology* "response" piece. I am an Americanist, and a historian of technology rather than a historian of science, who might be able to comment more intelligently on this set of papers. Nevertheless, as a Japanese American scholar in the general field of STS, I have had a long history of serving as an accidental liaison between the Japanese (indeed Asian) and U.S. STS communities, and was invited to participate in a special session on Japanese STS held during the 2010 4S Annual Meeting in Tokyo. This set of papers in *Social Epistemology* emerged out of this meeting. Having served as a kind of cultural mediator and translator during the meeting, I was asked by the editor of this journal to offer my observations. In the interests of full disclosure, let me also note that I am one of the "network administrators" of the International Network for Engineering Studies (INES); a member of the Executive Council for Society for the History of Technology (SHOT); and am on the faculty of the Department of Science and Technology Studies at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. At the time of the meeting, this was the home institution to one of the contributors to the special issue, David Hess (now at Vanderbilt), whose article, while it supplies some valuable context, will generally remain outside the scope of my remarks.

Pan-Asian STS

These papers are the result of the Society for the Social Studies of Science's decision to hold its 2010 Annual Meeting in Asia. Given the financial logic of overseas travel; an implied though not necessarily accurate hierarchy among Asian STS programs; and a history of U.S.-Japan academic relations, 4S made the decision to hold its first Asian meeting at the University of Tokyo. As I understand it from others, despite the best intentions on the part of the 4S Council, this decision was marked by the typical colonializing discourse about "helping to develop" STS scholarship in Asia, as well as fears about low attendance and the possible financial impact to the organization. (The Society for the History of Technology has been engaged in very similar conversations with regards to its 2016 meeting in Singapore.) The fact that the Tokyo meeting at the time was nearly as large as the meeting held the previous year in Washington D.C. points to the considerable size and vibrancy of the pan-Asian STS community, with important centers located in Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, India, and Australia, as well as new emerging centers in China.¹

For those not aware of the topography of this network, the community is comprised of multiple national STS, history of science, and history and philosophy of science-based societies that are interconnected through the Asia-Pacific Science, Technology and Society Network. The APSTSN holds its biennial meetings at different locations in and around Asia and Australia, the most recent meeting having taken place this year at the National University of Singapore. While

¹ Attendance at the meeting in Washington DC was 1298, while the attendance in Tokyo was 1287. Wesley Schrum to A. Akera, private correspondence, 7 August 2013.

there are also a number of nationally based journals, the flagship STS journal for the region is *EASTS (East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal)*, as sponsored by the National Science Council of Taiwan. As the papers themselves demonstrate, there is less of a firm boundary between STS and the history of science in Asia; perhaps more interesting from my point of view as a historian of technology, there is also less of a clear demarcation between science and technology, as the phrase *kagaku gijyutsu* (science-technology) has been used consistently with a meaning similar to that which we commonly ascribe to the phrase *technoscience*.

The Climate and Setting of Japanese STS Scholarship

As one might gather from the Marxist orientation of these papers, this invitational meeting on "Japanese STS" was organized as a private gathering, in what we might call a "rump" session in the West. As mentioned in several of the papers, this follows on a longstanding tradition of small research-exchange meetings (*kenkyukai*, and specifically the *Yuibutsuron Kenkyukai* [materialism study group] organized during the 1930s period) among Japanese Marxist and left-leaning science studies scholars which has allowed this group to remain a networked if sometimes internally divided sub group within Japanese STS. Also, while the history of science has had long history and its own academic society,² the Japan Association for STS is of much more recent origin, being organized only in 2001 as part of what the authors contend was a distinct neoliberal turn in Japanese STS scholarship. (This claim, incidentally, is bolstered by Hess' article, which argues that the change in U.S. and European STS scholarship parallels the shift from liberal to neoliberal ideologies.) However, prior to this, STS scholarship in Japan occurred in various institutional settings under the influence of many Marxist and left-leaning scholars.

In fact, what is most interesting about this collection of papers is how it points to the very different institutional ecology for STS scholarship in Japan. This ecology is related in turn to Japan's complex history that extends from the late imperial period, to the postwar occupation period; to the first decade of strong postwar economic recovery, and continues on to the radicalism of the 1960s, the energy crisis of the 1970s, and the neoliberal turn of the 1980s and beyond. This last stage can be divided in turn into two phases consisting of neoliberalism's early success — "the Japanese miracle" — followed by three decades of economic stagnation.

Let me reiterate that I am an Americanist with only incidental knowledge of Japanese history and Japan's scholarly communities. But in what is more or less widely known, academic Marxism in Japan originated with the anti-fascist opposition movement that emerged during the late imperial period. Then in the postwar period, the emerging strength of the ministries amidst a weak parliamentary system and a strong feudal-administrative tradition enabled the Ministry of Education to remake Japan's institutions of higher education into bastions of liberal thought, and this created a protected sphere for Marxist and Marxist-influenced scholars. Marxism within the humanities and social sciences was not uncommon in Japan, and there were certain fields, such as History, which were clearly dominated by Marxists. In this respect, the strength of Marxist scholarship in Japanese STS and the history of science was not unique. In fact, it is interesting to

² History of Science Society of Japan (Est. 1941).

read these papers, and the larger body of scholarship produced by this group of scholars' predecessors and cohort, as a continuation of the Marxist critique of science and technology begun by Nikolai Bukharin and Boris Hessen. The work by three generations of Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars in Japan have reworked Bukharin and Hessen's insights in a way that parallels our own efforts to rework Mertonian sociology. The group has also persisted in their critical stance towards science and technology. Considering that the advances in postmodern and post-structuralist social theory also have clear Marxist origins, and considering as well our own critique of the non-normative turn in STS, we should be careful not to be dismissive of scholarship produced from a frame of reference different from mainstream Euro-American scholarship.

Additional Context

Since several of the authors emphasize reflexivity and contextualization in their own work, what I can do is continue supplying a contextual analysis of these authors' papers. So as noted above, neoliberalism in Japan unfolded in two phases, the first, during the 1980s under Nakasone in the midst of Japan's "economic miracle," through changes that were directly influenced by Reagan and Thatcher's classic formulation of neoliberalism. This was a period that saw the decline of Marxist influence across the globe, and while the authors date the change in Japan to 1990, I suspect that the waning influence of Marxism in Japan began earlier. Regardless, as noted by Fujita, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 did result in the widespread defection of scholars away from Marxism. However, Japan's economic stagnation, which had also begun in the early 1990s, produced two responses.

One was the continuation of neoliberal doctrine, first under the Hashimoto administration during the 1990s (with the aid of Hiraiwa at Keidanren), and then under Koizumi between 2001-2006. In the 1990s, while a major new current in Japanese STS proceeded in a non-Marxist frame, this group nevertheless maintained a normative commitment via their work on the public engagement with science. But under what his critics regard to be Koizumi's increasingly desperate attempt to jump-start Japan's economy, the notion of public engagement with science was transformed into the public understanding of science, where a classic deficit model was invoked to suggest that the problem was really one of science communication: economic growth, and Japan's ability to compete in the increasingly competitive Pan-Asian "global" economy required a national consensus built around the continued promise of technology and innovation-based growth. Reading somewhat between the lines, it appears that it was for this reason that the Japan Association for STS was established in 2001, a new research group set up at the University of Tokyo (the Oxbridge or Harvard of Japan). This was the group and the association that were able to host the 2010 4S Annual Meeting because of the backing and resources provided by the ministries.

This is what had prompted the authors, namely STS scholars with continued commitments to Marxist interpretations, to organize a rump session. But what also emboldened these scholars was the renewed viability of Marxism amidst the drawn out economic crisis in Japan. The authors cite neo-Marxist scholars such as David Harvey and radical postmodernists such as Antonio Negri and Slavoj Žižec as part of a global resurgence in Marxism. However, the revival was also a response to local conditions and an easy target created by Japan's instantiation of

neoliberal ideology. Thus, as contrasted against Reagan and Thatcher's approach to neoliberalism, neoliberalism in Japan continued to emphasize a strong measure of central planning that complemented the financial reforms and the privatization of key industries. And despite Kihara's reference to consumer sovereignty, the Japanese economy continued to be characterized by high domestic prices and high private savings rates, and a general logic of consumer sacrifice and delayed gratification where benefits were promised to accrue only across successive generations.

Especially as new Asian economies came fully online, eliminating whatever factor advantages Japan possessed in the new "knowledge economy," there emerged a growing sense of pessimism that this delayed gratification, expressed in terms of real spending power and expanding leisure, would never materialize. Drawing on the Japanese academic Marxists' tradition of convening research-exchange meetings, the group could host a parallel meeting during 4S to discuss their revival. The rump session was also a means for this group of scholars, who were excluded from the local arrangements committee, to also take advantage of the fact that 4S was meeting in Tokyo to draw U.S. and European scholars into their own circle — a rather familiar strategy instrumental to a resurgence of their vision of STS. (Given their own emphasis on criticism and contextualization, I hope my hosts recognize that this analysis does not de-legitimize their project, but simply allows me to position myself as something other than a naïve ally to their cause.)

Prospects for Future Scholarship

In bringing this response to a close, perhaps I can offer a prognosis of the direction in scholarship suggested by these authors. This will be based on some of my experiences organizing a collaborative research network following the 2011 East Japan Disaster. Thus, in between the 2010 4S Annual Meeting and the publication of these papers, Japan was wracked by a "triple disaster," the nuclear dimensions of which drew considerable international attention. The radioactive releases and public spectacle associated with the multiple core meltdowns at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear facility became not only a national embarrassment, but it implicated the neoliberal, corporatist practices that came to be seen as sacrificing public interest in their relentless pursuit of economic growth. Similar to the way in which racialized poverty was revealed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the East Japan Disaster also unveiled many new ethical terrains whether with respect to the contract workers exposed to radiation at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant, or the problems of rural poverty and inter-generational strife that seemed to persist in the third largest economy in the world. There was also fresh criticism of the lack of transparency by the Japanese government, and renewed attention to the generally emaciated state of Japan's civil society. The East Japan Disaster created a rupture in public trust that created an opportunity for both public and academic criticism, and Marxist STS scholars have been well positioned to engage in this critique given their normative commitments as well as the obvious technological dimensions of the disaster.

Still, like the Occupy movement in the United States, the criticisms associated with the East Japan Disaster have receded into the background as the country returned to normalcy. Among the Japanese citizenry, many still retain a deep if grudging attachment to the elusive promises of neoliberalism. Marxist scholars, within STS and beyond, will have to contend with the deep set

conservatism that still constitutes a national consensus of sorts. From this point of view, this group of papers fail, as of yet, to offer a compelling national imaginary strong enough to compete with neoliberalism. Despite the supposedly favorable moment for renewed attention to academic Marxism, the general tenor of the papers remains defensive, as the authors seek to recover and preserve an academic past in what they continue to cast as a hostile institutional environment. With mounting global concerns about sustainability, the need for an alternative to neoliberalism, with its emphasis on an ever-expanding regime of production, will surely emerge. And both old and new Marxist critiques of capitalism will surely be a part of this conversation.

However, the question remains as to whether Japanese academic institutions, as highly factionalized and laden with certain European institutional precedents, can offer the fertile ground for diverse academic inquiry needed to solve the most pressing problems of the day. Despite their admirable engagement with internal criticism and reflexivity, this group of scholars — who incidentally view themselves as flexible moderates amidst an earlier history of clashes with more doctrinaire Marxists — still appear to adhere to some established Marxist tenets, such as the labor theory of value that may require reexamination as they move forward. This is not to say that scholars in the United States have necessarily done “better” with respect to normativity and societal relevance; at least from the standpoint of policy engagement, STS scholars in Japan may wield greater influence than their counterparts in the U.S., and European and especially Scandinavian STS institutions may offer a much better model in this regard. But most importantly, in being backwards looking, this collection of papers, in and of themselves, does not yet offer any alternative vision that others can embrace. I truly admire this group of scholars’ longstanding academic commitments, and their willingness to revisit and question their own assumptions. I wish them, and others, success in producing new normatively engaged scholarship that can produce a more just and equitable future.

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