

Book review: Sabu Kohso, *Radiation and Revolution*

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Sabu Kohso, 2020, *Radiation and Revolution*. Durham and London: Duke University Press (202; USD \$25.95)

Sabu Kohso's *Radiation and Revolution*, published by Duke as part of its Thought in the Act series edited by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, is probably the first full-length book to bring a revolutionary perspective to the Fukushima disaster. Like my *Anti-nuclear Protest in Post-Fukushima Japan* and Azumi Tamura's *Post-Fukushima Activism*, it examines post-Fukushima activism from a perspective rooted in contemporary left theory. But Kohso goes beyond these academic analyses to deliver a searing critique of nuclear-state capitalism with an unwavering revolutionary commitment. This is a manifesto in the best sense of the term ranging across what the author describes as 'personal narrative, empirical description, theoretical analysis, and metaphysical speculation' (ix). Like any manifesto, it can be criticised for a lack of empirical detail and theoretical moderation. However, it successfully captures both the terror of the Fukushima disaster and the sense of possibility that social movement responses to it inspired within the radical left, both within and beyond Japan.

Sabu Kohso was born in Japan and grew up in the fire of the post-1968 revolutionary movement, becoming a student activist in high school. He moved to the United States in 1980 and has worked since at the interface of Anglo-European and Japanese intellectual, artistic, and political culture. In the 2000s, Kohso established a reputation as a translator of the work of Japanese intellectuals like literary critic Karatani Kōjin and architectural theorist Isozaki Arata. He contributed to the global intellectual ferment of the alter-globalisation movement, in particular through his collaboration with the Marxist intellectuals who write together as the Midnight Notes Collective. He is a translator and interpreter of David Graeber's work and has facilitated exchanges between radical intellectuals and activists in Japan and the English-speaking world as part of the VOL Collective, which produced a fascinating journal for Japanese publisher Ibunsha in the mid-2000s. These activities helped build the first major alter-globalisation counter-summit in Japan against the G8 meeting in Hokkaido in 2008. Kohso's 2009 book *Genealogy of the New Anarchism* (in Japanese), brought together this period of activism, writing, and translation, combining Graeber's 'New Anarchism' with a Deleuzian ontology.

When the Fukushima disaster struck in 2011, Kohso worked with revolutionary intellectuals in North America, Japan, and elsewhere to produce the blog *Japan: Fissures in the Planetary Apparatus*¹ and translated activism, citizen

¹ <https://jfissures.wordpress.com/>

science, and critical theory between English and Japanese. Contributors organised international solidarity and information sharing events in Japan and North America. Kohso wrote continuously, sharing his observations of the largest social movements in Japan since the 1960s. *Radiation and Revolution* is based on Kohso's activism and writing during this time. It builds upon the theoretical lines of flight developed in his earlier work and incorporates debates within the global current of activist intellectuals writing on the disaster in Japanese and English. His original and engaged reading of Fukushima and its aftermath also serves as a record of debates within the global left that emerged in response to the disaster.

Structured as a series of semi-independent essays, Kohso introduces a geophilosophical perspective as the central problematic of the book. He posits a tension between a universalist Kantian World, defined as 'the expanding and totalizing movement of capitalist nation-states,' and an Earth conceptualised as 'the assemblage of *lives-as-struggle* of planetary beings' (xii). Using a Deleuzian reading of the Book of Revelation, Kohso interpret the Fukushima disaster as the apocalypse, from which emerges a 'planetary crowd' made up of 'reverberating' struggles in different geographical and cultural locations. This crowd, he explains, is constituted by participants in locally-rooted struggles for survival in ecosystems damaged by the expansive techno-industrial development of the capitalist World.

Four substantial essays make up the body of the work. In Chapter 1, Kohso examines the cascading effects of the nuclear disaster and the way it dispersed nuclear refugees and radionuclides, blurring boundaries between inside and outside, affected and unaffected. This disruption to the smooth functioning of society also opened up space for resistance. Chapter 2 traces the relationship between Japanese nationalism and the nuclear industry. Kohso understands the rise of the modern Japanese nation-state as a foreclosure of Japan's expansive potential as an East Asian archipelago, whose island chains connect the Russian Far East with Taiwan, and Korea. This archipelagic potential was forestalled by an insularity that created hard borders defined by capitalist developmentalism and militarism. In their response to the Fukushima disaster, Japanese authorities doubled down on this insularity to contain the contradictions opened up by the disaster and staged a return to 'normality' to enable continued economic development, such as by hosting the Olympic Games in a contaminated northeast Japan.

In Chapter 3 Kohso zooms out, situating the Fukushima disaster in a long history of radical critiques of nuclear power that link the military and civilian uses of nuclear technology. Nuclear energy requires a regime of social control to contain the risks it poses and creates the potential, whether utilised or not, for states to build nuclear weapons. But nuclear technologies produce waste and radioactive fallout that become a 'masterless object' (*mushubutsu*). This is a term Kohso adapts from the legal argument deployed by the Fukushima nuclear power station operator Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) to evade responsibility for the radioactive contamination of land and sea beyond

the boundaries of the power station itself. The proliferation of nuclear technologies and uncontrollable wastes capture sand control the future, creating the need for an unending regime of nuclear governance.

In Chapter 4 Kohso gives a potted history of social movements in Japan between the 1968 uprising and the Fukushima disaster. In the 1960s, he suggests, activists maintained a belief in revolution as a discrete event that leads to victory or defeat. Today, he maintains, such revolutionary optimism is impossible. Paradoxically, however, this creates the potential for struggles better rooted in the material reality of life.

This shift might be described as one from Politics with a capital *P* to the politics of everyday life: from macro- to micropolitics, citizens' and nation's movements to residents' and migrants' (inhabitants') movements, internationalism to transterritorial association. (114)

In his final Epilogue he enjoins us to 'Forget Japan' and embrace a diversity of archipelagic forms of life that reach beyond the insular nation-state. For Kohso, the decline of the nation and of the universalist World is inevitable. What matters is that we organise within local contexts, not to save the (Kantian) World but to inhabit the (Reculsián) Earth. Revolutionary democracy will require learning to 'reverberate' with one another across time and space, while developing a new relationship with the Earth.

It is possible to read movements against the Israeli genocide in Palestine (and now Lebanon) along these lines. Protests against Israel's war direct their demands to governments to take action, embodying a traditional understanding of power and enacting protest as supplication (within the World). But we can also see them as a movement for survival, both within Palestinian territories where they are subject to continuous Israeli bombardment but also in the struggles on university campuses, and in movements to blockade supply chains that provide weapons to the front. These struggles are not necessarily united formally (though elements of them are) but they do resonate in the way Kohso describes, 'reverberating' in territories across the Earth.

It is easy to find fault with *Radiation and Revolution*'s grand theoretical commitments. Kohso's sweeping generalisations are in constant danger of becoming caricatures. He tends to skip over the complexity and contradictions at work within structures and processes, portraying them as uncomplicated expressions of Japanese nationalism and global capitalism. This leads to serious errors. For all Japanese civil society's conservatism, since 1945 it has constructed a bulwark against the reemergence of the barely concealed fascist desires of the Japanese ruling class. Decades of work, often undertaken by women, in education, peace, anti-base, and residents movements – LeBlanc's (1999) 'bicycle citizens' – are largely absent from Kohso's account which focuses only on the most militant fringe. Were he to take these movements more seriously, his account might be both more nuanced and ultimately more

optimistic. Kohso also struggles to accept that the development of nuclear power might actually be a more chaotic process, one where the possibility of absolute domination by a ‘nuclear state’ threatens, but has arguably never been completely achieved. The totalising instincts of his revolutionary thought lead to an underestimation of the power of a multitude of struggles to disrupt the smooth operation of the capitalist order and overestimate the internal coherence of that order.

I think, however, that we can forgive Kohso these blind spots and read this work as a scream of outrage and a song of hope. For Kohso, it is necessary to understand the relationships between Japanese capitalism as a total system, and its alliance with nationalism and the state to fully comprehend the enormity of the Fukushima disaster. Despite the grandiosity of his narrative, Kohso’s conclusions are modest and suggestive of the kind of hopefulness that can be maintained alongside widespread pessimism and despair. ‘We want to achieve a future that is undetermined, a future that we can create’ (165), he concludes, suggesting that there will be no salvation for the World but that we can continue to inhabit and co-create an archipelago of spaces on the Earth, no matter how difficult the circumstances. A future that we can create is a future worth fighting for.

References

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About the review author

Alexander Brown is a writer, scholar, and activist based in Wollongong, Australia. He is the author of *Anti-nuclear Protest in Post-Fukushima Japan: Power Struggles* (Routledge, 2018). He is currently fighting the AUKUS pact, which threatens to put a nuclear-powered submarine base on his doorstep at Port Kembla and writing a book of essays about fighting the nuclear industry in Australia and Japan. Alexander maintains a website at alexanderbrown.online and can be contacted at mail AT alexanderbrown.online