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Natalie Kohout

Wayne State University, bb2996@wayne.edu

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Under Scrutiny: Youth in Contemporary Japan

Review Essay by Natalie Kohout, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, bb2996@wayne.edu

Anne Mette Fisker-Nielsen. *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Japan: Soka Gakkai Youth and Komeito*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Roger Goodman, Yuki Imoto, and Tuukka Toivonen (Eds.). *A Sociology of Japanese Youth and Religion: From Returnees to NEETs*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Youth in many cultures are often the subject of intense and colorful debate. Problems perceived by society at large as deviant or delinquent behavior are favored topics, whether that is in the media and pop culture or in academia, and Japanese youth are no strangers to this discourse. Both *A Sociology of Japanese Youth and Religion: From Returnees to NEETs* and *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Japan: Soka Gakkai Youth and Komeito* add significantly to the scholarship on studies of youth in Japanese society. In *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Japan*, Anne Mette Fisker-Nielsen addresses the notion of political apathy in the youth of the country by assessing the experiences of one small segment of Japanese youth, the members of Soka Gakkai, the largest Buddhist organization in Japan, who are also politically active on behalf of the Komeito Party. In the text edited by Roger Goodman, Yuki Imoto, and Tuukka Toivonen, *A Sociology of Japanese Youth*, a more diverse portion of youth in Japan are examined through several case studies.

While *A Sociology of Japanese Youth* explores social problems among the youth of Japan through a collection of eight essays, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Japan* engages the topic of Japanese young people by examining the political participation and activities of one facet of Japanese youth. Religion and politics converge with Fisker-Nielsen's analysis of the political activities of youth members of the Buddhist organization Soka Gakkai.

By focusing on one narrow sliver of Japanese society, Fisker-Nielsen is able to present a very rich and detailed look at the Soka Gakkai, the political party it founded, and the youth who play roles in each. The first chapter covers a broad, yet essential cluster of topics for this subject. The historical context for the Soka Gakkai and the Komeito, the political party they founded in 1964, is explored. The author also provides a look at the teachings of Nichiren, a 13th century Buddhist monk, whose writings play an important role in the theology of Soka Gakkai, and an analysis of how his writings have been interpreted and adopted by the organization. Lastly, the first chapter describes the group's political party, Komeito, and presents a clear view of the party's principles and its role in working with Japan's Liberal Democratic Party. This provides a crucial grounding that is required before one can explore the political activities of this group's younger members.

Chapter two takes a closer look at the young people directly engaged in political activities on behalf of the Soka Gakkai and Komeito. The information, vignettes, and events that Fisker-Nielsen presents in this section are all drawn from her interactions with members affiliated with the Soka Gakkai Youth Division, especially that of the Young Men's Division, as they campaigned for Komeito politicians. The ethnographical information that the author provides here presents an insight into the societal values and aspirations that these youth possess and are striving toward with their political activity. Based on these conversations and observations, it is

clear that Japanese youth have taken a serious interest in politics and that many Komeito supporters believe that the party they support is progressive and focused on social change to benefit society as a whole.

The subsequent three chapters of the book broach the overarching theme of *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Japan* from different angles. Situated in the time frame immediately surrounding the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the perceptions of Komeito by the youth who support the party are discussed in chapter three. The Japanese government supported the invasion of Iraq at the time, and this caused friction with local political activists. Members of Soka Gakkai value peace, especially with regards to the collective good, and the insistence of Komeito, which was the party in power at that time, in supporting the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq caused the party's supporters to reassess their perceptions of and support for the party. Some viewed themselves as pawns in the game of politics and abandoned the party over this issue.

This book also addresses the role of women in Soka Gakkai, which seemingly clashes with the philosophical underpinnings of the religious organization as well as with the political rhetoric of Komeito. As chapter four outlines, the reality for women in both Soka Gakkai and in Japanese society overall does not correspond to the ideology advocated by each group.

The second book, *A Sociology of Japanese Youth*, is a compilation of essays contributed by several different authors, including the three editors, Roger Goodman, Yuki Imoto, and Tuukka Toivonen. This text is part of The Nissan Institute/Routledge Japanese Studies Series. The majority of the book revolves around a collection of case studies that have been constructed through a combination of both participant observation in the field and extensive interviews. The case studies profile different youth problems or behavior in contemporary Japanese society. Instead of focusing on the nature of behavior that is seen as deviant, the authors employ a constructionist approach in assessing these categories, or social problems. Emphasis is placed on the discourse involving the categories, not the actual behavior that society has deemed unacceptable. From a sociological perspective, the patterns and assumptions that underlie these categories and the question of how to explore them within a sociological framework is at the core of this work's purpose. Case studies examining an array of youth problems represent the majority of the essays. Each case study is designed to be a standalone element that explains how a concept has "come to stand in for a youth problem that has engaged the entire society in moral debate." Indeed, as the work demonstrates, the myriad of youth problems, all seemingly dissimilar to one another, in actuality are connected through processes that are both comparable and in a general sense, predictable.

In the opening essay, "Making Sense of Youth Problems," authors Toivonen and Imoto set the overall tone for the book. They provide a basic introduction to the broad topic of social problems by briefly looking at Japan's important socioeconomic issues, that of the acute demographic burden facing the country and the changing labor market; these topics, however, are given a much more exhaustive treatment in the concluding chapter. This essay also surveys the methods available for this analysis, with a concise explanation of the "consensus model," the "conflict model," and the relationship between structure and agency, before presenting a thorough explanation of "Constructionism" and why this approach was employed for this compilation of studies. Lastly, Toivonen's and Imoto's essay outlines six propositions that they contend are crucial to examining the problems of youth in many societies. This particular section further explains to the reader how the various case studies presented are linked. Overall, the first chapter lays a firm foundation for a meaningful discussion of Japanese youth and the problems they are perceived to have.

In another essay, Sharon Kinsella writes about compensated dating, a story that seemed to dominate pop culture, politics, and academic research in the early to late 1990s. Compensated dating describes the phenomenon of Japanese schoolgirls trading sex for money or designer consumer goods. The media latched onto the story, sensationalized it, and gave it widespread coverage. In reality, Kinsella contends, evidence to show that compensated dating was as widespread as the media portrayed is lacking. She also asserts that this media-driven story has its roots in the shifting balance of power between men and women at the time. More women were exerting financial and sexual independence, and the idea of compensated dating played well with the cultural anxieties of that time.

Another case study involves child abuse in Japan. In this essay, Roger Goodman looks at why the 1980s in Japan saw very little child abuse reported, while in the 1990s this number rose and then increased dramatically in the 2000s. Reasons for the apparent absence of child abuse in the 1980s seemed to hinge on cultural explanations. The Japanese family unit, the lack of single mothers, and the general stability that Japan enjoyed in its post-war years were all seen as reasons for the lack of child abuse, or rather the lack of reporting it. As Goodman explains, however, the increase in reports of child abuse in Japan during the 1990s has more to do with awareness of the issue than with an actual dramatic uptick in cases. Several factors came together at that point in time that contributed to this trend. One significant contributing factor was the economic recession that Japan experienced in the 1990s. Under the stress brought about by economic anxiety, various Japanese institutions which had long been above reproach were now coming under more scrutiny and questioning. The new focus and acknowledgement of child abuse in Japan has had far reaching effects. The relationship between the Japanese family and the state, along with the changes in social policy toward children in Japan, have all been profoundly influenced by this shift.

The concluding chapter of *A Sociology of Japanese Youth* presents a generalized look at the social, political, and economic changes that have impacted Japanese youth in the past four decades and provides context for the elements described in the preceding case studies. In this essay, Goodman begins by discussing the notion of Japanese culture, and how many, especially outsiders, hold assumptions that are used to explain social problems in Japan. Relying on arguments that focus on cultural values like group-mindedness or duty do not help in understanding social problems among the youth of Japan, argues Goodman, but instead do much in constructing these problems and therefore is a highly problematic approach to take. Instead, he argues that Japan's changing demographics, the education system, and the labor market for youth all play significant roles in this discourse and have contributed significantly in constructing the problems that have recently been associated with youth in Japan.

Both *A Sociology of Japanese Youth* and *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Japan* add to the scholarship on youth in Japanese society, and could be utilized in the classroom for a myriad of disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, history, or political science. As a basic introductory treatment of various segments of Japanese youth, the text edited by Goodman, Imoto, and Toivonen promises to be very useful. In addition, it provides a taut sociological analysis of Japanese youth culture well grounded in the constructionist approach. Photographs of the various subjects detailed in the text are scarce, but there is an abundance of figures and tables, all of which aid in further illustrating and buttressing the book's claim. Fisker-Nielsen's work on the convergence of religion and politics in contemporary Japan also provides a meticulous scholarly treatment, but with an in-depth examination of the history, politics, and overall context surrounding her topic. As an insight into Japanese youth in general, this book

would work well in conjunction with other texts in order to help illustrate a greater range of experiences. In a way, Fisker-Nielsen's work presents an inverse of the approach taken with *A Sociology of Japanese Youth* by presenting a view of the government and the establishment by examining how those from below, that is the youth of Soka Gakkai who are politically active, perceive it.

In *A Sociology of Japanese Youth*, Goodman states that, "Social problems do not appear out of a vacuum, but are the result of human activity and interaction." This clearly rings true when examining the deviant behavior or social problems affecting the youth in Japanese society, but also is very relevant to Fisker-Nielsen's work. Human activity and interaction is what drives her portrait of the religious-political experience of young Soka Gakkai and Komeito supporters. As evidenced by these two works, the only way by which to truly gain a better understanding and fuller picture of Japanese youth is to engage the topic at the human level through observation, interaction, and understanding.