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Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES AND NEW HORIZONS

Edited by Patrick W. Galbraith, Thiam Huat Kam and Björn-Ole Kamm

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Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
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1385 Broadway
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USA

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published 2015
Paperback edition first published 2016

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4725-9497-6
PB: 978-1-350-01416-9
ePDF: 978-1-4725-9499-0
ePub: 978-1-4725-9498-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Debating otaku in contemporary Japan : historical perspectives and new horizons / edited by Patrick W. Galbraith, Thiam Huat Kam and Björn-Ole Kamm.
pages cm. — (SOAS studies in modern and contemporary Japan)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4725-9497-6 (hbk)
1. Mass media and culture—Japan. 2. Popular culture—Japan. 3. Subculture—Japan.
4. Japan—Civilization—1945– I. Galbraith, Patrick W.
II. Kam, Thiam Huat. III. Kamm, Björn-Ole.
P94.65.J3D43 2015
306'.10952—dc23
2014045818

Series: SOAS Studies in Modern and Contemporary Japan

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

For those who came before, and those yet to come

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Okada Toshio is an anime producer, author and lecturer. He is a co-founder of Daicon Film, which produced legendary opening animation for science fiction conventions in 1981 and 1983, and General Products, one of the first stores to produce and sell 'garage kits'. From this experience, Okada became the president of Gainax, where he worked on such classic anime as *Royal Space Force: The Wings of Honneamise* (1987), *Gunbuster* (1988–9) and *Otaku no Video* (1991). After leaving the company, Okada lectured on the topic of otaku culture at the University of Tokyo from 1994 to 1997. During this time, he wrote several books on otaku culture, including *Introduction to Otakuology* (Otakugaku nyūmon, 1996), *University of Tokyo Otaku Studies Course* (Tōdai otakugaku kōza, 1997) and *International Otaku Studies* (Kokusai otaku daigaku, 1998). Having also appeared widely in the mass media, Okada is an authority on otaku and is sometimes called the 'otaking' (king of otaku). He is currently a visiting lecturer at Osaka University of Arts.

Ōtsuka Eiji is an author of stories for manga, an ethnologist and an educator. As a professor at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, he is involved in a project on otaku culture during and after the Pacific War in Japan, and as a specially appointed professor at the Interfaculty Initiative in Information Studies at the University of Tokyo, he is involved in a project on Kadokawa and the media mix. In his current positions at these institutions, Ōtsuka draws on his vast personal and

professional experience. He was the editor of *Manga Burikko*, a niche manga magazine that hosted the first debate about 'otaku' in 1983, and worked at a division of Kadokawa in the 1980s, where he helped to develop a media mix strategy based on niche markets. Ōtsuka has published widely on topics such as subcultures, consumption, literature and politics, and three excerpts of his work have been translated into English and published in the *Mechademia* series (2008, 2010 and 2013).

Lien Fan Shen is an associate professor in the Department of Film and Media Arts at the University of Utah. She earned her Ph.D. in Art Education at Ohio State University and an MFA in Computer Art from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Her creative work includes manga, animation and digital arts. Shen is the author of five manga published in Taiwan, including *Let's Fall in Love* (1996), *I'll be Your Paradise* (1997–8) and *Clair de Lune* (2000–1), which was named Best Romantic Comic in Taiwan. Her animation work has received several international awards, and has been screened and exhibited in Singapore, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, the Netherlands and the United States. Shen's scholarly research focuses on the intersection of pleasure, power and politics in viewing animation, as well as the subject's persistent practices in visual fields. Her current project investigates female masculinity in Taiwan through animated documentary.

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Foreword

Otaku Culture as 'Conversion Literature'[1]

Ōtsuka Eiji

Translator's introduction

Known to fans for his work on manga, anime and games such as *Mahō no rūju rippusutikku* (*Magical Rouge Lipstick*, 1985), *Madara* (1987) and *Multiple Personality Detective Psycho* (1997), Ōtsuka Eiji is also among the most important cultural critics in Japan today. While working at the publisher Kadokawa, Ōtsuka developed the idea of 'narrative consumption', which became a crucial component of corporate 'media mix' strategies integrating fan activities.[2] Ōtsuka would later go on to write how-to manuals for producing character-based fiction. Two of his books, *Monogatari shōhiron* (*A Theory of Narrative Consumption*, 1989) and *Kyarakutā shōsetsu no tsukurikata* (*How to Make Character Novels*, 2003), were the inspiration for Azuma Hiroki's *Dōbutsuka suru posuto modan* (*The Animalizing Postmodern*) one (2001) and two (2007), which helped open the field for new academic approaches to 'otaku' culture in Japan and abroad.[3]

Despite gaining recognition through English translations of Azuma's work (and his own), Ōtsuka is for his part dismissive of academic interest in 'otaku'. Faced with Azuma's discussion of postmodernity, Ōtsuka scoffs, recalling how he and others jokingly put critical jargon into niche media and marketing theory in the 1980s, which has come to be taken as serious scholarship in the 2000s. For some time, Ōtsuka was content to simply laugh at new academic approaches to 'otaku', which to him seemed like the ultimate farce, or what he describes an 'un-self-aware Alan Sokal' incident. Though present at and involved in various key moments in the debate about 'otaku' – as the editor of *Manga Burikko*, where the term was first used to describe uncool fan cultures in 1983, his argument against the word as discriminatory helped define it (see Yamanaka, this volume); in writings after the arrest of serial killer Miyazaki Tsutomu in 1989, his insistence that 'otaku' were being demonized in the media ultimately served to spread the word to the wider public (see Kamm, this volume) – Ōtsuka sees no value in discussing 'otaku' in the academy.[4] It is good for a laugh, but nothing more.

However, against the backdrop of increasing scholarly attention to 'otaku' both inside and outside Japan, Ōtsuka no longer finds the joke to be funny. Particularly upsetting is the tendency toward Orientalist knowledge production about others to define the self, if not also auto-Orientalism, which comes with its own essentializing assurances about who 'we' are. For example, Ōtsuka finds it repugnant that some

scholars attempt to link 'otaku' culture – manga, anime, games, related merchandise and personages, and fan activities surrounding them – with premodern Japan.[5] Others locate 'otaku' in postwar or postmodern Japan, which, though often explicitly arguing otherwise, risks presenting 'otaku' as a Japanese phenomenon.[6] In the 2000s, such connections offered to the Japanese government new tools for its nation-building project, whereby 'otaku' culture, which was popular overseas, was claimed as Japanese culture. To put it bluntly, the growing academic interest in 'otaku' culture catered to and was reciprocally influenced by a government strategy to promote 'Cool Japan'.[7]

Discussions that position 'otaku' in premodern, postwar or postmodern Japan represent, as Ōtsuka sees it, a concomitant erasure of modern history – a history of fascism, war and abandoned leftism.[8] By missing these connections, we also miss the opportunity to critique the gradual conservative slide occurring in Japan today, which is reflected in 'otaku' culture and discussions of it.

In his Foreword, written for this edited volume, Ōtsuka insists upon a modern history of 'otaku'. In explaining the broader context of writing about 'otaku', he states clearly his issues with 'otaku' research as it is emblazoned in personages like Azuma Hiroki. Ōtsuka also calls out Murakami Takashi, whose contemporary art and 'Superflat' theory have done much to introduce the world to 'otaku', but in the context of postwar US–Japan relations. In an earlier time, this situation was referred to as 'bilateral narcissism',[9] whereby Japan's special postwar relationship with the United States snapped into focus even as its prewar relationships with Asia blurred in the background. Area Studies often played into this by producing knowledge about and sustaining interest in 'Japan'; not only were American scholars studying Japan, but Japanese scholars began to do the same, with increasingly tight feedback loops contributing to new 'theories of Japanese-ness' (*nihonjinron*) in the 1970s.[10] Though the special relationship between Japan and the United States was somewhat destabilized in the 1990s by the end of the Cold War, the global spread of Japanese popular culture at the same time encouraged renewed interest in the nation.[11] The study of Japanese popular culture tends to posit an entity called 'Japan', and taking 'Japan' as the most manageable (and marketable) frame of reference reinforces boundaries, an example of what has been called 'methodological nationalism'.[12]

In his characteristically provocative way, Ōtsuka argues that uncritical studies of 'Japanese popular culture' are complicit with a nationalist agenda.[13] The Japanese government is certainly more than happy to fund 'otaku' research of manga and anime as Japanese culture gone global, which exposes the aligned interests of scholars and conservative leaders such as Asō Tarō who carry on about 'Cool Japan'.

In this way, Ōtsuka demands an accounting of politics, or at the very least a critical reflexivity about the conditions that make our research possible and what its effects might be. Ōtsuka's criticism is at times brutal, and extends to everyone writing about 'otaku', including those in this edited volume. He is clearly ambivalent about writing about 'otaku' at all, and asks the reader of this book to be relentlessly critical of the contributions. One might presume that he is talking about Okada Toshio – whose seminal work, *Otakugaku nyūmon* (*Introduction to Otakuology*, 1996), ties 'otaku' to Japanese culture and resonates in part with Azuma and Murakami,[14] though his more

recent critiques also resonate with Ōtsuka (see Okada, Chapters 5 and 9, this volume) – but the warning should apply equally to everyone.

In his Foreword, Ōtsuka means to raise questions about 'otaku' and the politics of writing about 'otaku' in certain ways. In the process, he introduces names, dates and events, which he maps in a way that may be unfamiliar to the reader. He does this not only so that the reader can find his or her bearings, but also to highlight uncomfortable connections that may serve to 'splash cold water' on the overheated discussion of 'otaku' as part of 'Cool Japan'. The barrage of information and its idiosyncratic presentation – he writes 'otaku' in *hiragana* in the original Japanese manuscript, another way to insist on history (see Introduction, this volume) – can be confusing, even disorienting, but that is also one of the strengths of Ōtsuka's writing. He succeeds in introducing uncertainty into the discussion of 'otaku'. After debating 'otaku' for thirty years, Ōtsuka announces in his Foreword that this will be the last time he writes on the topic. He wants this to be the end of it, but, as has been the case for Ōtsuka so many times in the past, the intervention may rather serve to inspire new interest in 'otaku'. For our part, the editors hope that this Foreword will lead to debate about 'otaku' in contemporary Japan and raise questions of social and political significance that are often obscured by naturalizing and trivializing discourses.

Foreword

Outside of Japan, or in work written in a context outside of Japan, there are times when, to put it somewhat ironically, people seem to believe that in an island nation in the Far East, alongside '*samurai*', '*geisha*' and '*ninja*',[15] a bizarre social group called '*otaku*'[16] exists. These '*otaku*' are seen to have roots in the tradition or postmodern condition of that island nation. I am tempted to start here by writing a fake essay – something like, 'The "otaku" system should be taken as middle-class thought in a Kantian system that was finally established in the delayed modernity of Japan; "*otaku*" refers to an existence where one cannot bear the antinomy of the heightened awareness of the impossibility of comprehending the "ding an sich" and even hates the "sublime" in the background of the thing in itself, but cannot avoid clinging to the incomprehensibility of "*moe*"' – to mimic the Sokal hoax.[17] That is how meaningless and futile I at times think that the current discourse surrounding '*otaku*' is.

We would do well to notice that among people in the cultural sphere of the non-West (*hiseiō-teki bunkaken*), including Japan, there is a technique of survival (*shoseijutsu*) whereby one performs in accordance with the stereotypes and labels desired by others in order to avoid cultural friction. The discourse surrounding 'otaku' produced by the Japanese is in no small part something customized with the awareness that it is 'for overseas' (*kaigai muke*) consumption. However, this sort of 'reserved criticism' (*hikaeme na hikyōsei*) is, at the very least inside of Japan, certainly in the process of coming undone. In other words, even if limited to '*otaku*' theory, the current state of affairs is that the perversion of speaking in accordance with Western expectations is no longer understood as a perversion, even by Japanese speakers. I think that 'otaku' and their 'culture' becoming an object of academic attention is an

accurate reflection of the state of affairs where 'jokes' (*jōdan*) have been converted into something 'serious' (*honki*) in Japan in the past thirty years. That is the primary point that I want to stress in this Foreword. What I can say, and this is not a joke, is that the conversion of jokes into something serious is in no small part the achievement of a sort of cultural revolution that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s in an island nation in the Far East.

I will not go into all of the details at this time, but we should consider a little more the fact that the people coming up during and in the fallout of the two failed student movements that occurred in postwar Japan – the conflict over the US–Japan Security Treaty (*anpo tōsō*), or the Anpo movement, in the 1960s, and the All-Campus Joint Struggle League (*zenkyōtō undō*), or the Zenkyōtō movement, before and after 1970 – are not only the ideological defenders of the subculture that was established before 'otaku' culture, but also those who created the genres and set the stage for the first generation of 'otaku'.[18] These defeated members of the student movement acquired nourishment to live from the lowest levels of the Japanese industry and media hierarchy, children's culture, or from TV, which was still of low status, or from underground media such as pornography magazines and 'pink films'.

For example, Suzuki Toshio, who played a central role as chief editor of *Animage* (Tokuma Shoten) and later in founding Studio Ghibli, was during his days at Keio University part of a New Left sect. After he got out, Suzuki became a researcher at the 'Children's Culture Research Centre' (*kodomo bunka kenkyūjo*). It is said that the marketing research centre targeting children was, to begin with, founded by students of the social sciences who were involved with the Anpo movement against the US–Japan Security Treaty in the 1960s. After the end of the Zenkyōtō movement in the 1970s, this research centre took on people such as Suzuki Toshio; Shibuya Yō'ichi, a founding member of Rockin' On, Inc.; Kitsukawa Yukio; Murakami Tomohiko, a manga critic; and so on. This is something that I always point out, but we should not overlook the fact that Tomino Yoshiyuki – who gave the characters of his *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979–80) Islamic names and made the theme of that anime the 'promised land' – is the underclassman of Adachi Masao, a former member of the Red Army. Or that Yasuhiko Yoshikazu, who did the character designs for *Gundam*, had an activist pedigree in the New Left, even though it was garden variety for young people at the time. The Palestinian issue is there in the background of the original *Gundam*. We must rework how we grasp *Gundam* to account for it as converted leftist culture (*tenkō sayoku no bunka*). I have argued this elsewhere (Ōtsuka, 2012a), and will not repeat it here.[19] For now, suffice it to say that we should be aware that in Japanese intellectual history, Marxist youths' moderate conversion through the medium of 'children's culture', even if it is not as extreme as Oguma Hideo and other poets coming under the control of the Ministry of Home Affairs through the regulation of children's literature in wartime, is one form of conversion in Japan. On the other hand, pornography publishers called '*erohonya*' consistently played the role of catching the excess runoff of converted leftist youth in the 1960s and 1970s.

For that reason, when I entered the field of media production in the early 1980s, the older editors' 'attributes' (*zokusei*) were associated with their positions in the student movement in the 1960s and the names of New Left sects with which they were affiliated

from the 1960s to the beginning of the 1970s. There were a number of people who had come out of a New Left sect among the editors at Serufu Shuppan, the publisher of *Manga Burikko*, where I worked as an editor. You could say that our proximity to these political converts served to implant deep in those of us from the younger generation 'a complex about our lack of politics' (*seijisei no ketsujo to iu konpurekkusu*) and 'a disgust for politics' (*seijisei e no ken'o*). It is a trivial thing, but let me point out that there is a large disassociation surrounding 'politics' (*seijisei*) among those of us who directly felt the presence of the previous generation with experience on the left and those who missed it by the breadth of a hair. Even though critics of the first group such as Miyadai Shinji, Kayama Rika, Fukuda Kazuya and Tsubouchi Yūzō were of the generation called 'otaku' or 'new breed' (*shinjinrui*), we can also see the political meaning of dividing along the lines of a '1955 system of liberal and conservative'. I will not go into any further detail than this, but we must think a little more about the relationship between 'otaku' culture and Japanese leftist movements.

When we do, we must not overlook the fact that the Zenkyōtō movement was itself a sort of pop culture that the new mass of students encountered at universities, where it began the process of massification (*taishūka*). It was characteristic for these university students to regard 'pop culture' as 'counter culture' and to use it as a tool of criticism toward the social system and capitalism. This is clearly apparent, for example, in the stance whereby such students found the theme of class conflict in Shirato Sanpei's *gekiga* (graphic novels). Glorifying 'yakuza movies' as 'anti-establishment' occurred in the same context. However, as Tatsumi Yoshihiro writes, from the beginning, *gekiga* was not made by university students, but rather by proletariat youth (Tatsumi, 2008). The true nature of 'disparity' (*kakusa*) in the background of the superficial homogeneity of contemporary Japanese society begins after the Second World War with the babyboomers (*dankaisedai*), specifically the stratification of junior high school students after graduation on their way to university and cohort hiring, which has since then advanced into fixed 'classes' (*kaikyū*). However, *gekiga*, mediated by the Zenkyōtō movement into the 1970s, changed from 'working-class' culture to the white-collar culture of 'university students'. The result: de-politicization (*datsu-seijika*) of *gekiga* and its incorporation (*taiseika*). In this sense, it is symbolic that Hirokane Kenshi, a *gekiga* artist who became a university student along with others of the babyboomer generation, is a cultured man who represents Japanese neoliberalism. In this sense, someone really ought to seriously examine how *Gundam* as 'conversion literature' (*tenkō bungaku*) has had an effect on the revival of nationalism in Japanese society.

The 'losers' (*haisha*) of the Zenkyōtō movement in this way came round to become the leaders of children's culture and subculture from the 1970s onward. At the time, subculture was given two contexts by them. The first is the marketing context. Taking as its object the capitalist system, this is the attitude of evaluating everything as a commodity and the masses as consumers who can be manipulated. This is the departure point of the contemporary practice of unequivocally defining people on the web as 'users'. Why was it that only the business dimension called the 'media mix' expanded in Japanese otaku culture from the 1980s? To state it in an extreme way, the ideology of 'otaku' culture in Japan since the 1980s is 'marketing'. There is a tendency to compensate for the emptiness of that reality by intentionally connecting 'otaku' culture with

'tradition' (*dentō*). The second context, however, even though it is in collusion with capitalism, coexists with a mentality that still evaluates subculture as 'counter to the establishment' (*taisei e no kauntā*). These two ways of thinking were claimed as the fundamental frameworks of criticism by the first generation of 'otaku'.

If I stress that my 'Theory of Narrative Consumption' was primarily created as marketing theory for Dentsu and Kadokawa Shoten, then this is because I witnessed the scene of 'illicit collusion' (*yagō*) between marketing and contemporary philosophy (that is, structuralism and poststructuralism) as the faddish thinking of the Zenkyōtō generation after their conversion. Contemporary philosophers in Japan in the 1980s for the most part received support from advertising companies. A generation later, I started my own career as a critic amid all of this. So if you ask why Suzuki Toshio stresses his profile as a marketer, you must think about the question within the context that I have been discussing. You can also think of the trend of marketing theory in the 1980s as one 'form of conversion' (*tenkō no keishiki*) in Japan. 'Otaku' culture was for one thing established in this context.

Another thing to keep in mind is the issue of the mentality of regarding subculture as counterculture. Here we must not forget that semiotics was the thinking that replaced Marxism. The Zenkyōtō generation and the preceding political generation, even after their conversion, continued to take subculture, the bottom of the cultural hierarchy, as an anti-establishment tool. This went on to become a 'means' (*hōben*) of assertive support for them in a state of affairs called 'the becoming youth culture of children's culture' (*kodomo bunka no wakamono bunka-ka*) – for example in animation and manga, which had come to the fore by the 1980s. They had abandoned Marxism, but in some way sought to change (*henkaku*) the system; they could not rid themselves completely of their ambition as vague revolutionaries (*aimai na kakumeika*). Abandoning Marxism and taking up semiotics, they, in a manner of speaking, desired a state that we could call a culture of semiotic disturbance (*bunka no kigōron-teki kakuran*). This is tied to the attitude of 'participating in meaningless subculture to invalidate the hierarchy of bottom and top'. A good example of this is Chikushi Tetsuya, who comes from the generation of Anpo in the 1960s and presented the general idea of the 'new breed' (*shinjinrui*) in *Asahi Journal*. With the title the 'Flag Bearers of the New Breed' (*shinjinrui no kishu-tachi*), this series of interviews followed 'The Gods of the Young' (*wakamono-tachi no kamigami*), but while the interviews of the 'Gods' series were with young people who had distinguished themselves in the business world or academy or won literary prizes – that is, success stories within the existing hierarchy – the 'New Breed' series focused on people who were simply young and had accomplished nothing at the time. The 'new breed' was a 'tag' (*tagu*) given to these young people as a sign and nothing more. *Asahi Journal*, a brand within the old hierarchy, in order to invalidate hierarchy, stamped its authority on 'youth who have accomplished nothing' (*nanimo nashieteinai wakamono*) (Ōtsuka, 2004a). Leaving aside the issue of how reflexive he was about the desire to invalidate hierarchy by randomly applying the 'tag' of 'new breed', Chikushi was clearly complicit with it.

However, needless to say, this sort of 'destruction of hierarchy' (*hierarukī kuzushi*) in reality was not advancing a leftist cultural strategy. The primary cause for this was that university students had replaced the working class as the mainstream consumers of

Japanese popular culture. ('Yankees' represent the class and culture of those who dropped out.) Amid the backdrop of university students – who should be the bearers of 'cultivation' (*kyōyō*) – transforming into simply consumers of culture (*bunka no shōhisha*), subculture changed into the consumer culture of the 'middle class' (*chūkansō no shōhi bunka*), not popular culture as the culture of the working class (*rōdō kaikyū no bunka toshite no taishū bunka*). The first step in this process was *gekiga* becoming white-collar culture, as I stated earlier, but this spread to other areas, as well. Next, the generation born around 1960 (in other words, the first generation of otaku), which refused to let go of manga and anime as 'children's culture', birthed a situation where a new market could be realized. Concretely, in the first half of the 1980s, it became commercially possible to establish anime magazines such as *Animage*, and magazines such as *Manga Burikko*, which would become the source of what we now call '*moe*'.

As I have already written, the appearance of anime magazines such as *Animage* and media such as *Manga Burikko*, where I was editor, came about in the form of the Zenkyōtō generation offering a place for the activity of the first generation of 'otaku'. For example, at Tokuma Shoten, with editors from the 1960s' Anpo generation and the 1970s' Zenkyōtō generation as the front line of employees, the first generation of 'otaku', who were university students at the beginning of the 1980s, were actively providing 'subordinate work' (*shita bataraki*) as writers, freelance editors, part-timers and so on. Among those who worked as part-timers at *Animage*, we find such luminaries as Ōtsuki Toshimichi (a producer at King Records) and Hashimoto Shinji (an operating officer at Enix); among those who worked part time at *Animec*, a rival magazine published by a different company, we find Inoue Shin'ichirō (the president of Kadokawa Shoten). In this way, the first generation of 'otaku' entered the world of media as what nowadays we call 'irregular employees' (*hiseiki sha'in*). Needless to say, I was one of these people. We were just part-timers, but amid being placed in collusion (*kyōhan kankei*) with the older generation's thinking about the 'overturning of culture' (*bunka no tentō*), we succeeded in making a number of media into outlets for our own culture. *Animage* and *Manga Burikko* increased their circulation in this way. The result was that 'otaku' subculture (*otaku-teki sabukaruchā*) became visible on the surface of society.

Actually, both conservatives and leftists have written critically about this state of affairs. Etō Jun calls the overturning of literature by inferior culture such as manga the 'subcultural-ization of literature' (*bunka no sabukaruchā-ka*) (Etō, 1989),[20] and Yoshimoto Taka'aki calls the state where substructures can no longer be even stratified or a superior culture decided 'multilayered indetermination' (*jūsō-teki na hikettei*) (Yoshimoto, 1984, 1985). Related to the collusion with the subcultural-ization of all of Japanese culture – as a strategy of relativizing hierarchies, based on the claims of semiotics, structuralism and poststructuralism – is contemporary philosophy as marketing theory. Structuralism was originally a method of relativizing the ossified thought and ethnocentrism of the West,[21] but for the society of 'Japan', which is non-Western and continually at a standstill with the form of Western modern individualism and publicness, I think that relativism through structuralism was an unnecessary strategy in the first place. That is why discourses along the lines of cultural semiotics and poststructuralism – talking about inferior culture using the high cultural discourse called 'contemporary philosophy' – was only a game of pronouncing the confusion of

cultural hierarchy and its deconstruction. To put it another way, the stubborn, festering, anti-establishment movement of the Zenkyōtō generation was no longer even comprised of students.

In this way, the chaos of 'cultural hierarchy' in postwar Japanese society, which had never been stable in the first place, began. With the tag 'new breed', young people who were nobody were for a brief moment of the same rank and file as those with social authority. Similarly, by talking about *shōjo* (for girls) manga or professional wrestling using contemporary philosophy, we were captive to the hallucination of deconstructing academism. The bad influence in Japan of Roland Barthes, who talked about professional wrestling in terms of semiotics, is unexpectedly large. Of course, this was a really bad 'joke' (*akushitsu na jōdan*), but many people were telling it, with the convenient fiction that the act of telling the joke was in and of itself a kind of 'critique' (*hihyō*) of cultural hierarchy. The reason why I cannot avoid saying that my own criticism in the 1980s was first of all and more than anything a 'joke' is because people like me must bear the responsibility of participating in the playful confusion of value emblazoned in talking about trivial subculture using the high-culture rhetoric called contemporary philosophy, against the backdrop of the older generation's failed 'revolution'.

Let's get back to 'otaku'. In the 1980s, Nakamori Akio proposed the notion of 'otaku' in *Manga Burikko*, a magazine that I edited. I objected to what Nakamori wrote, saying that the word 'otaku' as he used it was not criticism, but rather 'discrimination' (*sabetsu*). Those are all of the facts. In the background of this, for the 'new breed' that was trying to earn social standing by manipulating 'signs', it was necessary to put a different tag on those of the same generation who resembled them but were different. In other words, it was necessary to discover an object for semiotic differentiation. This is not the slightest bit different from how in the past the modern West, in order to affirm its own 'civilization' (*bunmei*), needed the Other as 'savage' (*mikai*). 'Otaku' is a term of semiotic discrimination (*bunka kigōron-teki sabetsu yōgo*) presented by people who happened to be labelled a certain way ('new breed'), based on the 'distortion' (*konran*) of cultural hierarchy, and who tried to make that label into a special privilege. It follows, as I wrote in '*Otaku' no seishinshi* (*Intellectual History of 'Otaku'*), that it is not the case that 'otaku' and the 'new breed' actually 'look alike' (*yoku nite iru*) – rather, we should say that they are exactly the 'same' (*onaji*) (Ōtsuka, 2004a). From this point, the tag 'otaku' was converted from a tool of semiotic criminals, who enjoy fabricating difference and hierarchy, to something for the purpose of social standing or, to put it another way, to secure a new hierarchy. The transformation of 'otaku' in *hiragana* to '*otaku*' in *katakana* is nothing other than the creation of a 'new breed' of 'otaku'. By changing 'otaku' to '*otaku*', this concept was reset as the top of a hierarchy. It is necessary to consider why people like Okada Toshio, Azuma Hiroki, Morikawa Ka'ichirō and the rest of them use the *katakana* form of '*otaku*'. In the end, this leads to Cool Japan, the conservative turn and the nationalism of an '*otaku*' culture that is now 'Japanese culture'. Further, we have the *otaku* postmodernism theory, which was championed by Azuma Hiroki, the late arrival to poststructuralism, who takes seriously the 'joke' of the 'first generation of otaku' and speaks with good intentions.[22]

If you sort it out, this is the extent of the discourse surrounding 'otaku' and '*otaku*'. Since before Azuma Hiroki arrived on the scene, 'otaku' and '*otaku*' theory has had an

affinity with contemporary philosophy, especially structuralism and poststructuralism. So of course it is highly compatible with contemporary academic and critical discourse. In the 1980s, I alluded to Asada Akira on the cover of *Manga Burikko*, and Inoue Shin'ichirō actually cited Foucault and Derrida in articles that he wrote for *Animec*. Our 'embarrassing experiences' (*hazukashii keiken*) speak to the times of the first generation of 'otaku', who could not quite become Alan Sokal. We were playing around as a joke, but could not really become honestly critical. That was our limit. In a sense, perhaps it is possible to say critically that only Taku Hachirō, who played up the stereotype of the 'otaku' that society desired after the Miyazaki Tsutomu incident and succeeded in making everyone believe that he was a real 'otaku', provides an example of something that we cannot help but still evaluate as a Sokal hoax (Ōtsuka, 1991). So, when people speak again about 'otaku' and '*otaku*', many probably feel that in a way it is faithful to the transition of critical theory and contemporary philosophy since the 1980s. Maybe this is the discourse itself surrounding 'otaku', but by birthing the 'change' (*henyō*) that really deconstructed cultural hierarchy while being a parody of the critical theory of the day and envisioning cultural hierarchy's relativization and deconstruction, a 'twist' (*nejire*) has been engendered whereby that existence comes to hold critically persuasive power. That is probably the essence of the discourse surrounding 'otaku' today. To the extent that '*otaku*' has become the 'serious' (*honki*) research object of the academy, the existence called 'otaku', and even the character (*seikaku*) that it was made to shoulder as the disrupter of order, has been purged. Be that as it may, as far as such critical spirit (which disrupts order) itself was in the first place lacking, the loss of the character is nothing to regret in the slightest.

In the past, in a short essay (Ōtsuka, 1992), I wrote that after the double failure of the 'revolution' of the Anpo and Zenkyōtō movements in the 1960s and 1970s, a bloodless revolution occurred at the beginning of the 1980s by 'semiotic conversion of main culture and subculture'. In a slightly broader context, it may appear that I foretold that the internet, since the 2000s, is achieving the relativization of social stratification that Marxism could not, at least to a certain extent. But to me what I wrote in that essay is nothing more than a 'joke'. Taking it seriously or to mean more than it does is no different from a well intentioned postmodern 'misreading' (*godoku*) of my 'Theory of Narrative Consumption', which states that the work is claiming the deconstruction of the privileged author and the flattening of the hierarchy of authorship.

What I have done so far is no more than recollect my personal experiences in a somewhat biased form, but, if there is one thing that I would like to stress, it is the importance of historical and political context in order to inspect the formational history of the notion of 'otaku' and '*otaku*'. I assert here that inspections of only what goes on within 'otaku' culture – and, of course, the leaping arguments into theories of Japanese culture – are absolutely unpersuasive. It appears as though '*otaku*' culture itself has been scrupulously de-politicized, but those currently responsible for it are also the bearers of historical revisionism and neoliberalism in Japan. Against a state of affairs of de- or anti-politicization (*datsu naishi hi seijika*) and de-historicization (*datsu rekishika*), it need not even be said that there is nothing to be gained from contemporary de-politicized and de-historicized 'otaku' or '*otaku*' theory. That is why, if '*otaku*' theorists want to make statements about the existence of bearers of culture and social

stratification called '*otaku*', no matter what, I think that it is necessary as a prerequisite of the argument to consider from a Marxist perspective the extent of changes in the substructure of Japanese society that gave birth to this existence, or at least how far it is possible to take such an explanation. The 'otaku' issue is one that must be considered in the context of class change in Japanese society.

That said, I myself just cannot be interested in contemporary 'otaku' theory, which is a discourse that in the past we engaged in as a 'joke' and now is an un-self-aware Sokal-like recapitulation. After I spent the majority of the 1990s at the trial of murderer Miyazaki Tsutomu, which was the trigger for the publicizing of the word 'otaku', I have since the 2000s been living as an 'unrepentant old leftist' (*kakure mo shinai kyū sayoku*). I am from my very roots sceptical of the 'revision' of the constitution, have been involved in movements to restore public speech such as the 'Constitutional Preamble for Children' (*kodomotachi ni kenpō zenbun*) (Ōtsuka, 2002), as well as a trial to stop the deployment of Japan's Self-Defence Forces to Iraq (Ōtsuka and Kawaguchi, 2009). (Because of our lawsuit, the Supreme Court declared the deployment of the Self Defence Forces to Iraq to be unconstitutional.) In a world where the privilege of authors is deconstructed and everybody gets one's hands on the infrastructure, the problem of how people tell stories becomes important once again. Aware of this issue, and from the idea that education surrounding 'writing' (*kaku*) is necessary, I have for several years been immersed in constructing curricula for an education in 'how to write' (*kakikata*) (Ōtsuka, 2003). That is how I have come to live. While acting as an 'old leftist', I continue to produce manga as a 'commodity' in the capitalist system. I live a double life, and have no need of philosophy or theory to resolve the 'contradiction' (*mujun*). After this, I probably will not be involved even a little in the argument – which is akin to a theological debate (*shingaku ronsō-teki*) – surrounding 'otaku'. I do not acknowledge the value of talking about 'otaku'.

However, at least at present, there are two things related to the issue that I have some critical interest in, which I will close by touching on. The first is the question of what historical context (*rekishi-teki bunmyaku*) to give to 'otaku' culture, and the second is the necessity of guiding attention to 'class' (*kaikyū*) in 'otaku' theory. On the first point, there is the issue of the origin of 'aesthetics' (*bigaku*) in the field of what is usually concretely listed as 'otaku' culture: manga, animation, special effects TV shows and films, railroads, models of military vehicles, uniforms and so on. For example, and this is a somewhat improper way of saying it, why do otaku feel that the war machines and uniforms of Nazi Germany are 'beautiful'? In Japan, compared to the West, there is a tendency to detach criticism of Nazism and the Holocaust from the cultural items that they brought about. Of course these things should be criticized, but I think that we cannot avoid facing the fact that the 'aesthetics' of fascism are the root of 'otaku' culture. This is connected to questions such as why is Miyazaki Hayao, who is politically an antiwar pacifist, at the same time a military fanatic who cannot deny the attraction and beauty of war machines? I cannot think that the formation of the Fleisher brothers' and Disney's aesthetics in America are unrelated to the First and Second World Wars. There is an aesthetics of culture in times of war, whether one wants to acknowledge it or not, and life under fascism is a similar state of affairs. In the state of war in Japan, from the Manchurian Incident in 1931 to defeat in 1945, amid the fascism of these