

# Processes of “*Astroturfing*” by Power On Environmental Movements in Today’s Japan ; Some Examples in Aichi Prefecture

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## Abstract

In this paper, I will report on the interim results of an investigation that I have been conducting over the last 14 years in the Aichi prefecture, as well as the idea of *Astroturfing* approached as thought to be necessary during the process of comprehending these results which I believe are a useful perspective from which to investigate social movements in Japan, and thereby investigate the validity of the ‘rational’ analysis framework which has been mainstream within the Environmental Sociology and the study of Social Movements in Japan and the validity of the viewpoint of a ‘partnership of the administration and Social Movements’.

Keywords : Social Movements, *Astroturfing*, Grassroots Movements,  
Power, Environmental Movements in Japan

## 1. About *Astroturfing* Perspective

When we consider the social movements in Japan, the next question always comes to mind; why do social movements are weak or at least it seems so in Japan compared to other developed countries despite its economic development. For that question, *Astroturfing* by power such as administrations or huge companies, which I am now observing, might be an answer.

Originally, “Astroturf” is a brand name of the American artificial turf, and “*Astroturfing*” is a coined word made from this name. This word indicates the enterprises propaganda that dresses the one (That is, “grassroots”) by the consumer, aiming the intentional use of a consequential advertising potential by consumer’s word

of blog etc., originally by the marketing industry term of U.S.

I’d like to introduce this word into social movements’ analysis / description, and call the administrative activism that dresses the grassroots campaign, administrative *Astroturfing*. It’s a phenomenon of being discussed with term of institutionalization of social movements or co-optation by the power.

In addition, the following two points are the premise of this report. The first is that since the Cold war, there has been a general understanding within the nation as Japan being one of the ‘nations of the west,’ and while the same effect continues to be felt today, at the same time, with the ever expanding presence of China and South Korea,

the view of Japan as an Asian nation is gaining familiarity. The second is that in 2009 there was a regime change from the 60 year Liberal Democrat administration to that of the Democrats, and even though there has been an aim within politics to break down the bureaucratic dominance and revise to a US centric policy, these remain un-established while the Democrat administration itself is unstable.

Put simply, the current Japanese Political situation, from the view of both self-identity vis-à-vis the outside and policy, is an extremely fluid, and the contents of this report reflects these fluid situations.

## 2. Anti “Eco”-Expo Environmental Movements

The Aichi prefecture is located the center of Honshu (main land of Japan) and where the Japan’s third major urban district Nagoya metropolitan area is. It is also well known for being the location of the head office of Toyota Motor Corporation.

In this region the 2005 international exposition was held. The ‘Aichi Ban-paku,’ as it was called in Japan, was known as an ‘ecology’ themed exposition. However, the site of the expo saw opposition from local residents from the time the plan was announced in 1990 due to factors such as the inclusion of forest development, initially planned housing development after expo as well as financial issues. The movement in the initial phases was the ‘Mt. Monomi Nature Society’ which was led by the housewives residing in Seto city. Since then, various opposition movements continued to appear and disappear occasionally in response to the changing circumstances. The main developing bodies were the Aichi prefecture, the Ministry of International Trade & Industry and the Economic Organization – with the core being headed by the National Exposition Promotion Committee lead by the Director of the Toyota Motor Corporation.

Many means were implemented by the developing body until the successful establishment of the exposition. One of which was changing the theme of the expo to ‘the environment.’ However, it is doubtful that this was ever a sincere change of theme given the process of this alteration: was took place after the inception of the local timber trust movement (08/1995), done after the Calgary in Canada (who was a rival for this exposition)

declared their theme to be the environment (09/1995), was based on a declaration made by the Governor of Aichi at the prefectural assembly that ‘the Aichi Expo is for the construction of homes, roads and a new airport’ (09/1995) and further, that the pledge to carry out environmental monitoring made to 3 big environmental NPOs in Tokyo<sup>1)</sup> who agreed to the exposition was not fulfilled after the change of theme (03/2005).

The second effort was the promotion of ‘the participation of citizens.’ An argument emerged among some sociologists in Japan, evaluating this as the formation of Japan’s ‘new public sphere.’ The ‘deliberation council’ that was a symbol of citizen participation converged on the premise that the expo would indeed be held, and moreover, would be held at the site proposed from the inception of the plan. However, they saw no participation from groups and individuals opposing the hosting of the expo itself. And, in the city of Seto - which was the planned site of the expo – while a citizen group was formed to welcome the Aichi Expo, one of the leaders originally existed as part of the same group but with a different objective and formed a welcoming group at the request of a staff member from the Ministry of International Trade & Industry. Therefore, we are forced to remark rather dubiously about the nature of such ‘citizen participation.’

What can be of no doubt is that the efforts of the developing body generated a single effect; movements that opposed the expo were labeled as ‘extremist opposition’ and were isolated from other opposing movements. Though not taken up by the mass-media, these movements continued their activities until the expo was held by approaching Greenpeace and demonstrating on websites.

There is no fact that the movements that opposed the expo itself that were dubbed ‘extremist’ engaged in any physical acts of violence or other unlawful conduct towards the event holders. However, these movements were certainly ‘hostile’ to the event holders who were comprised of those of influence from the local administration and financial world. Further, they were neither invited to nor attended the “dialogue with the people”- a meeting which was the visible expression of the ‘new public sphere’ - which they excluded from

their opposition activities. Due to this we must said that totalitarian pressure was functioning effectively. The existence of opposing environmental activists was impermissible to the event hosts who were successful in making it appear as though there were no such movements.

When once viewed from this perspective, the various contrivances by the developing body start to look remarkably similar to the astroturfing carried out by corporations. In order to execute their plan, the developing body was required to render the existence of opposition movements invisible to the BIE. The assertions of the opposition movements centered on environmental protection was mainstream in wider international society while also fast becoming a mainstream value within Japan. Hence head-on confrontation with assertions based on such a background had to be avoided, so the event hosts promoted themselves as thoroughly ‘ecological’ and ‘participating with the people.’ As a result many of the environmental movements and citizen activists lost the unique language they were using to express their values, were won over by the event hosts or voluntarily / strategically decided to join them and opted to cease their opposition to the hosting of the expo. The same was also true for the 3 Big environmental NPOs in Tokyo whose existence is central to the Japanese environmental movement. In this way, those that remained in opposition to the hosting of the expo itself were too few to make a difference and were rendered invisible to both the BIE and the Japanese public.

### **3. The Campaign against the Toyota Test Course Construction**

The campaign against the Toyota Test Course was a movement opposing the planned development of over 5,000,000m<sup>2</sup> of Satoyama that straddled the cities of Toyota and Okazaki in former Shimoyama village and Nukata town. The land consisted of forests and rice paddies and was home to plentiful wildlife including rare plants and animals being located in Okumikawa which was designated in the lead-up to the COP10 in a pamphlet called ‘The Mountain Recess Environment Chart’ as being ‘abound with rare species’ (in recent

years such human inhabited mountain and forest areas have been called ‘*Satoyama*’ in mainstream Japan, and former Prime Minister Hatoyama’s Cabinet advocated the ‘*Satoyama* initiative’ ). The land is scheduled to see the construction of the Toyota automobile research laboratory and test driving course, though the developing body at present is the Aichi Development Agency which will sell the completed development to the Toyota Motor Corporation. The opposition movement was initially set-up by a resident of Okazaki city - Shigemi Oda who is a member of the wild bird society and a dentist. However, the movement was to suffer from failing to attract sympathizers and almost any attention whatsoever from the mass-media. Also, the area scheduled for development, as with other Japanese mountain communities, was witnessing progressive depopulation and the lack of successors to the agricultural industry meant that no opposition activity was seen from the landowners themselves.

The lack of participation of local opposition movements can also be attributed to the massive influence exerted by the Toyota Motor Corporation in the area. Many of the residents of the cities of Toyota and Okazaki are employees of either Toyota or their affiliated companies. Furthermore, there is another factor at the locale. According to Oda, it is locally believed that within Toyota there is an organization known as the ‘Koh-an’ (originally meaning a department within the Japanese police force that regulates radical social activism and terrorism) that, for example, as claimed by opposing movement activists, arrives ahead of the police to complete an ‘investigation’ in the event that a Toyota employee causes an automobile accident in the surrounding area on their day off. Similarly, the participants of the same opposition movement believed that the ‘Koh-an’ held facial photographs and details of the workplace of opposition activists. Unfortunately, to date I have been unable to obtain evidence of the existence of such an organization within Toyota, however while I was planning a symposium on the Toyota test course issue last year, a colleague at Nagoya Bunri University received an enquiry from Dentsu – the largest advertising firm in Japan – (the largest client of which is Toyota) regarding my relationship to the Toyota issue (I do not have any

direct relations with Toyota or Dentsu whatsoever). Personally I think it is credible that this was some form of Toyota related information gathering or approach.

The reason that this issue was not taken up by the mass-media can firstly be attributed to the fact that Dentsu's largest client is Toyota, who has a massive advertising budget. Former president of Toyota corporation, Hiroshi Okuda's problematic response to the criticism, 'shall I reduce our advertisements?' (12.11.2008, at the meeting at The prime minister's official residence) is a famous story within Japan. However, a Yasushi Hirai from the 'Shukan Kinyobi' (weekly Vendredi) commented, 'While coverage may not actually negatively affect the interests of journalists or the media to which they belong, there is a 'tacit self-restraint' on the part of journalists.' While Masaharu Okuda, the journalist who wrote an article about the fatality due to overwork issues (Karoshi) within Toyota Motors was shocked when asked by the wife of a member of the staff who had suffered such a fate whether he would 'cover the story using the actual name of the company,' the same reporter suffered no disadvantageous consequences of doing so, and was awarded the Galaxy Prize for the article by mass-media company peers.<sup>2)</sup>

The last possible reason is astroturfing. The Aichi prefecture, Toyota Motor Corporation and Dentsu are currently teaming-up to host a COP 10; Convention on Biological Diversity. Since last year, the Aichi prefecture and Toyota Motors have organized many nature conservation activities at the local site and are promoting themselves as addressing environmental issues, including charcoal making volunteer activity<sup>3)</sup> by citizen at 'Toyota no mori = the forest of Toyota' that Toyota Motor Corporation made at Toyota city that is the Toyota test course planned site ([http://www.toyota.co.jp/jp/social\\_contribution/forest\\_of\\_toyota/index.html](http://www.toyota.co.jp/jp/social_contribution/forest_of_toyota/index.html)).

Also the government of Aichi prefecture is running a lot of events one it. However, in the shadow of these eco activities involving citizen, as claimed by a leader of the opposition, the test-course issue is being sheltered from the public eye. Astroturfing is working here again.

The Dentsu staff member who questioned my colleague last year about me is the officer in charge of the COP10 publicity. Apparently regarding Toyota's

progression of the development plan in the Aichi prefecture in the run-up to the COP10, this staff member stated to my colleague that 'Frankly, I am concerned.' As a matter of fact, this contradiction is hardly pointed out. It is 1980's that Toyota Motor Corporation started above kind of activities, and it is 1970's that this company sent their staff members to the US to learn ecology movements, while generally almost Japanese were enjoying the economical come-back story after World War II at those days. The ecology movements<sup>4)</sup> appeared only 1980's in Japan.

The activist groups had hopes for the regime change in August 2009 (from the conservative Liberal Democrat Party to the liberal dubbed Democratic Party), but there have been no changes regarding this issue. One mainstay of support for the Democratic Party is the Toyota Labor Union.

At present, sitting in a delicate position between the side of the development and the opposition is the Japanese Ecosystem Conservation Society (who has an office in Tokyo). Rather than the 3 Big environmental NPOs who's trust with the Aichi prefecture has been lost over the Aichi Expo issue, siding with the Japanese Ecosystem Conservation Society is the strategy of the COP10 (that is, the developers) which is something also accepted by the Japanese Ecosystem Conservation Society. However, this society is in contact with the opposition. B who works at the office of the Japanese Ecosystem Conservation Society (who belonged to the same group as myself 30 years earlier), made it clear to me in an interview in March this year that he was morally distressed.

#### **4. The Hirabari Satoyama Protection Movement**

In contrast to the Toyota test course issue, the movement to protect the Hirabari Satoyama, at the same time as when Democrat Takashi Kawamura was appointed mayor of Nagoya, was taken up in a major way by the mass-media. This movement was a campaign against the planned development of 50,000m<sup>2</sup> of the 150,000m<sup>2</sup> of *satoyama* located in the prefectural capital of Nagoya city, and was started by a retired university lecturer Junichi Ohnuma who was a local resident. The developing body was a general development company

‘Seals’ which formerly undertook public projects for the city of Nagoya. When the democrat Takashi Kawamura took over as mayor of Nagoya from the liberal democrat Takehisa Matsubara, the position of the Hirabari forest development changed. Mayor Kawamura proclaimed that he wanted to preserve the forest of Hirabari as a symbol of the COP10, secured the support of the animator and concerned environmental conservation activist Hayao Miyazaki and obtained the latter’s consent to name the forest ‘Nagoya’s Totoro’s Forest’ (‘Totoro’ being a character that appears in one of Miyazaki’s famous animations), and the activity ‘The activity to protect Nagoya’s Totoro’s Forest’. One of the members described it on my interview that Mayor Kawamura and residents’ movement are using each other in good relationship. We may say that this is amicable *Astroturfing*.

Nagoya Mayor Kawamura planned to buy the land, but the funds procured by the city fell 0.5 billion yen short of the asking price, (the owner’s asking price was initially 2.8 billion yen falling later to 2.5 billion yen while the purchase price of the land was 1.3 billion yen) and so the mayor announced in December that he would abandon the purchase. However, the development company had planned to sell the developed site to Sekisui House (a famous Japanese housing company currently promoting itself as sincerely approaching environmental issues) and a private elementary school, but as issues arose the purchases were cancelled one after another and subsequently the price dropped making the sale to Nagoya city the best option. The environmental activists were hoping for strong leadership from the mayor, but following confrontation between the mayor and the diet, it was apparent from an interview I conducted in March with an activist (Nagoya University Professor C of Engineering) who was an old acquaintance of the mayor that there were problems between the latter and the Seals side. However, at present there are no actual plans on the horizon to progress with the Hirabari Satoyama development plan.

##### **5. Consideration about the difference of *Astroturfing* effects to the glass roots Movements**

We saw above how the administration carried out Astroturfing. The intent in both instances was thought

to be to increase the legitimacy of the administration through bringing about the success of the big event such as Expo and COP10.

However, the effect on environmental activism is not the same. With the Toyota test course issue, in the same way as the Aichi Expo issue, countless political and administration led ‘environmental movements’ for the sake of bringing about the success of the COP10 worked to conceal the Toyota test-course issue. Conversely, with the Hirabari Satoyama development issue, in order to make the COP10 succeed, the Hirabari issue was used as a key element in the environmental activism of the administration and functioned to actually halt the proposed development.

This difference is thought to be as follows:

- 1) Difference in Scale of the main developers: The main developers behind the developments in the Aichi Expo and Toyota test-course issues are the Aichi prefecture, Toyota Motors and Dentsu. With the Hirabari Satoyama development issue, this role was played by the former Nagoya city administration and Seals; that is, the regional development company and Sekisui House. It is thought that there exists a huge gap between the political powers of both bodies.
- 2) Difference in Teamwork of the main developers: There is an unchanging relationship between the Aichi Public Enterprise Bureau and Toyota Motors. On the other hand, the relationship between Nagoya city and Seals had majorly deteriorated with the establishment of the Kawamura municipal government.
- 3) Difference in Power relation between the administration and corporations within the main developer team: The Aichi prefecture <Toyota Motors, Nagoya City> Seals, Sekisui House.
- 4) Difference in Location of the development: The planned site of the Toyota test course is located on the fringe of the Aichi prefecture in the cities of Toyota and Okazaki, while the Hirabari Satoyama is within the Nagoya city limits.

I am currently proceeding with interviews of those people related to the Toyota test-course and Hirabari Satoyama issues in order to consider the reasons for the differences in the consequences of administrative astroturfing, and plan to make comparisons later with

other case studies within Japan.

## **6. Conclusion: Capability of moving to “the political viewpoint” from a ‘rational’ framework**

In conclusion, there is reason to doubt the view which positively assesses the ‘partnership between the administration and environmental activism’ that has been employed by the Japanese Association for Environmental Sociology and other academic societies in Japan over the last 15 years. The theoretical background to this view becoming mainstream in Japan is the western social movement theory; in other words, the ‘rational’ analysis framework that rests on the axis of on one hand, Resource Mobilization Theory and Political Opportunity Structure Theory from the US, and on the other, the concept of the European ‘public sphere’.

As a result of having examined *Astroturfing* in the ecology movements in Aichi prefecture, we notice that there might be a difference in achievement on using an imported idea such as ecology or activities, by their each status. In Japan, administration and the power of the mega business is overwhelming superior about the skill of a new idea and are very skillful in the use of the idea still now. And it can be explanation of dullness of the Japanese New Social Movements, that available original language and activities are not left already for citizen, or it may be made citizen to feel diffidence. Therefore, this does not become clear in surface, one side, and short term observing an action and verbal expression of each actor<sup>5)</sup>.

In the country such as Japan in pursuit of west advanced nations, process of institutionalization of the ecology movements and the co-optation process by the administration and power are processing at the same time with the relatively independent process of the reception process of western culture.

Since there has been a danger that lingers around of falsely perceiving something unoriginal within a ‘Japanese original’ framework as original, there are merits to using a ‘world standard’ as a basis for comparative research.

However, at the same time there is a limit to the applicability of individual case studies of ‘world standards.’ As we have just seen, the reason that

Japan’s mass-media hesitates to write articles not in the interests of Toyota Motors cannot be sufficiently explained from the point of view of rational conduct. Accordingly, on finding a world standard as universal as possible, it will be necessary to create supplementary tools that respond more to individual cases<sup>6)</sup> *Astroturfing* is this supplementary tool.

Similarly, it is often pointed out that what is ‘public’ to the Japanese, often indicates governmental and administrative authority. On top of this, the existence of administrative astroturfing as well as what was seen in the case with the Aichi Expo, cases where the opposing campaign groups do not sit at the table set-up by the administration for ‘citizen dialogue’ shows the mutual lack of trust between the administration and the social activists. In regions with such political circumstances there is an even greater danger than in various advanced western nations for ‘the public domain’ to exist merely as another expression of the hegemony of those in power<sup>7)</sup>.

One more issue here is locating a theoretical framework that must be applied for such a supplementary tool. In order to analyze social activism under globalization, instead of the two ‘rational’ idealist analysis frameworks, the results of investigations to date give the following conditions for a theoretical framework:

- a. Understanding of the social movements opposing the government and administration
- b. A framework that renders it possible to analyze political processes such as astroturfing that are both difficult to expose and unjust if not necessarily illegal
- c. The potential to pay attention to collective identities

As a theory to fulfill these conditions, Chantal Mouffe’s argument is significant. Mouffe’s argument differs from the rational conduct theory in that she places the most emphasis on the view that human conduct yearns to have collective identity, and also differs from theories that postulate the possibility of the public domain due to her argument’s premise of the existence of pressure towards collectivism and the inevitability of confrontation. To date, Mouffe’s arguments do not cover researched case studies from East Asia or Japan. I hope to make a thorough comparison with the results of my investigation while similarly consulting other theories as a possible framework. The investigations conducted

within Japan may provide material that will reinforce Mouffe’s argument relating to ‘democracy that centers on discussion.’

## Notes

- <sup>1)</sup> 3 Big environmental NPOs in Tokyo: Wild Birds Society of Japan (since 1934), The Nature Conservation Society of Japan (since 1951), and WWF-Japan (since 1968),
- <sup>2)</sup> At present the mass-media coverage is improving, and this change occurred only after Toyota Motor Corporation began to be addressed as a problem due to the Toyota recall cover-up allegations in the US. The procedures for the Toyota test course development are proceeding without a great deal of attention, and the opposition campaigners will bear witness to the start of the development from next year after the conclusion of the COP10. There may be a connection between the fact that the problem occurred overseas (in particular in the US) and the transformation in the attitude of the Japanese mass-media. However, that is beyond the scope of the current purpose.
- <sup>3)</sup> charcoal making volunteer activity is: one of the activities that is performed for the purpose of regaining the economic value of satoyama lost by the modernization again.
- <sup>4)</sup> ecology movements in Japan: the social movements against pollution/ the movements by pollution disease patients and their families or supporters should be classified from ecology movements.
- <sup>5)</sup> Tausuru Uchida explains this trend on the basis of Japan’s position on the border of culture from ancient times importing culture from China via the Korean Peninsula up until the present (‘Nihonhenkyoron’, 11/2009, Shincho-sha).
- <sup>6)</sup> In developing supplementary concepts that are both convenient and that must be invented on a case-by-case basis to respond to individual cases, further in-depth investigations which make it possible to compare and critically examine different ideologies and which are capable of looking into micro-issues are required. This is also a condition to make international comparisons possible. These kinds of investigations

have reliability issues in the data they provide due to concerns over the social safety and anonymity of the informants, and efforts to resolve the latter need to be added to the list of necessary conditions.

- <sup>7)</sup> However, of course, it is clear when looking at the works of Hannah Arendt and Chantal Mouffe that there is potential for pressure towards Totalitarianism in any nation

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