Democratic Meltdown and the Contemporary Forms of Political Apathy

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“The biggest threat to our democracy is indifference. The biggest threat to our democracy is cynicism - a cynicism that’s led too many people to turn away from politics and stay home on Election Day. To all the young people who are here today, there are now more eligible voters in your generation than in any other, which means your generation now has more power than anybody to change things. If you want it, you can make sure America gets out of its current funk. If you actually care about it, you have the power to make sure we seize a brighter future. But to exercise that clout, to exercise that power, you have to show up.” Barack Obama

1 Introduction

This paper examines the ideological formation of democratic politics in contemporary Japan, focusing upon the question of political apathy and the critique of neoliberalism. I first look at contemporary discussions of neoliberalism and political apathy, and then consider the progress of “the politics of de-politicization” in Japan today, taking up an example from contemporary mass culture. Finally, I intend to illustrate how the current trend of political apathy works as part of “apathy towards life” through the complicit relation between political apathy and nationalist discourse under the post-3.11 “emergency.”

2 The contemporary forms of political apathy: the political effect of “de-politicization”

To begin with, let us look at voter turnout in national elections for the House of Representatives in postwar Japan. The data clearly show a long-term decline in the voter turnout from 73.33% in 1990 to 53.68% in 2017. The reason for declining electoral turnouts has


2 This paper is a preliminary attempt to critique contemporary democratic politics in Japan from the perspective of political thought, focusing upon the question of neoliberal nationalism and political apathy. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the international conference, “Order and Disorder: Critical Reflections on Japanese Studies,” at Cornell University, in October, 2017. I would like to thank Brett de Bary and Joshua Young for inviting me to a wonderful and memorable intellectual gathering, Ben Middleton for his comments and suggestions to the English manuscript, and Carol Gluck for her kind and encouraging comments as a discussant.

often been attributed to widespread political apathy, especially among the younger generations. Looking at the trend in the voter turnout by generation, the number in their twenties is far below the average (33.85% in 2017). Putting aside the detailed analyses of institutional changes here, it is important to pay attention to the fact that the current trend of political apathy does not emerge simply within the political consciousness of voters themselves. We also need to consider other aspects, such as an epistemological transformation at work between social consciousness and institutions, especially its political effects on younger generations. It is worth noting that this period overlaps with the collapse of the bubble economy, long-term deflation (“the lost two decades”) and the prevalence of the neoliberal discourse and policies.

From the early twentieth century, political scientists and sociologists have often discussed the question of political apathy with reference to the contemporary formation of mass society. It seems that these conventional discussions of political apathy (such as David Riesman and Maruyama Masao) tend to focus upon the psychological conditions of individuals. In contrast, recent discussions in political theory tend to pay more attention to the political functions of apathy in relation to the transformation of the democratic politics caused by the drastic changes wrought by the rise of neoliberal discourse. For instance, a political theorist, Sheldon Wolin argues that in the US politics after 9.11 in 2001, there emerged a certain type of totalitarian political system, although it is different from that of Nazi Germany. He named it “inverted totalitarianism.” Wolin points out that in inverted totalitarianism, distrust of politics and political apathy can be understood as important components of this newly emerging political system, rather than a mere result of the political system.

Representative institutions no longer represent voters... Elections have become heavily subsidized non-events that typically attract at best merely half of an electorate whose information about foreign and domestic politics is filtered through corporate-dominated media... What is crucially important here is not only the expansion of governmental power but the inevitable discrediting of constitutional limitations and institutional processes that discourages the citizenry and leaves them politically apathetic. What Wolin emphasizes here is that political apathy should be understood as a constitutive and politically organized phenomenon. When it comes to the question of a representative democracy, it is obvious that abstention from voting and low voter turnout means nothing but giving carte blanche to the politically dominant elites. This sort of de-politicization has the effect of “ politicization through de-politicization.” Wolin argues that this results in political demobilization: “inverted totalitarianism wants a politically demobilized society that hardly votes at all.”

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4 Sōmushō (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications), “Syūgiin sousenkyo ni okeru nendaibetsu tōhyōritsu no sui” (Trends in National Election Voter Turnout by generation).


7 Ibid.
This is how Wolin focuses upon the political effects of apathy in the United States after 2001. Furthermore, in his introduction for the 2006 Japanese edition of *The Presence of the Past*, he depicts fundamental transformation of the condition of the contemporary democratic politics.

While maintaining its form as the political institution, democracy abandons or loses its substance and is replaced by the apparatus in which the national election becomes nearly equal to the manipulated popularity polls, secrecy by the government becomes a normal “mode of behavior,” and counterworks are oppressed. Under such situations, what is the appropriate word suitable for this new democracy?8

Wolin argues this “new democracy” as “managed democracy.” In his last book titled *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, he examines “whether democracy is possible when the dominant ethos in the economy fosters antipolitical and antidemocratic behavior and values” and concludes that “Managed democracy’ is the application of managerial skills to the basic democratic political institution of popular elections.”9

Following Wolin’s critical evaluation of the condition of democratic politics in the United States today, a feminist political theorist, Wendy Brown persuasively argues in her recent work on democratic politics how the conception of the demos, which used to form the foundation of modern democracy, has been undone by neoliberal discourse, in which the fundamental principles of the political/social realm have been replaced by a logic of management and efficiency.

The claim that neoliberalism is profoundly destructive to the fiber and future of democracy in any form is premised on an understanding of neoliberalism as something other than a set of economic policies, an ideology, or a resetting of the relation between state and economy. Rather, neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic. All conduct is economic conduct.10

According to Brown, neoliberalism does not simply consists of a series of economic policies but gives rise to the radical transition of citizens’ views of humanity and society, leading to the “attack” on the basic understanding of modern democracy. “Neoliberalism as a political rationality has launched a frontal assault on the fundamentals of liberal democracy, displacing its basic principles of constitutionalism, legal equality, political and civil liberty, political autonomy, and universal inclusion with market criteria of cost/benefit ratios, efficiency, profitability, and efficacy.”11 According to Brown, neoliberalism fundamentally transforms the conception of modern political subjectivity on which modern democratic system should be constituted.

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3 “The politics of de-politicization” in contemporary Japan

Keeping these analyses in mind, let us now examine how this transformation of democratic politics is taking place in Japan today. Interestingly enough, AKB48, one of the most popular pop groups, shows us a good example. I do not intend to say that AKB48 was the cause of the current political condition. But what I suggest here is that we can understand AKB48 as a “symptom” of the political consciousness widely shared in Japan today.

AKB48 consists of more than one-hundred young female performers. Singers who participate in the recording of their next single are selected through an event called the “AKB General Election” (AKB sōsenkyo). A poll is conducted in which fans choose the recording members. Fans obtain voting tickets by purchasing designated CDs. Similar to a general meeting of stockholders where voting right is given according to the number of shares held, people who buy more than one CD get proportionally more voting “rights.” Although Akimoto Yasushi, the producer of AKB48, has named this system a “general election,” it is far-removed from the notion of equality, which is the central principle of universal suffrage in a representative democracy. By appropriating the vocabulary of the modern representative system, such as election, candidacy, electoral eligibility, voting, and so on, AKB general election successfully generates a totally capitalistic conception of “democratic decisions” in the show business, different from what we have understood in modern democracy.

It must also be noted that every pop star who stands in this general election has always and already been exposed to severe competition. In this sense, they are symbols of neoliberal inequality and the “gap society” (kakusa shakai). Akimoto explains that, “A general election is an expression of paternal love from our side. ‘Don’t you want to be a singer or actress? In the world of show business, not only your singing and appearance, but also your everyday affairs matter and decide the ranking.”

In this popular poll, an “election” can never be a process of making a political will of the “demos” (a general will). It is simply replaced by a commercially managed large-scale media event. Vote counting has often been broadcast live by the Fuji-Sankei TV Group, which is famous for its “conservative” political attitude. Thus, the concept of the AKB election displaces a series of political concepts into empty signs in the field of otaku popular culture, through which the image of modern representative democracy itself is being “de-politicized.” Let us remember that AKB48 has been quite popular, especially among younger generations.

As a result of appropriation of the fundamental conception of modern politics by the cultural industry in contemporary capitalism, “original” elections in real politics might look “old-fashioned” and “boring” in the sense that they do not reflect the neoliberal social realities in which we live. For instance, when I explain the basic principles of modern representative system in the classroom – representation of the nation (kokumin daihyō), public deliberation (kōkai shingi), and the superiority of the legislative over administrative power – an increas-

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12 “AKB 53rd shinguru sosenkyo (AKB 53rd Single General Election).”
https://www.akb48.co.jp/sousenkyo53rd/ [Last Accessed on September 25, 2018]. In political science, Asaba Yuki recently mentioned to the political functions of AKB48 in a newspaper article. “Seiji no koto wa kirai demo minshu-syuji ha kirai ni naranaide kudasai (Do not hate democracy even if you do not like politics),” Asahi Shimbun, April 1, 2018.

13 Akimoto Yasushi and Tahara Soichiro, AKB48 no senryaku!: Akimoto Yasushi no shigoto jutsu (An AKB48 Strategy: Akimoto Yasushi’s Working Methods) (Tokyo: Asukomu, 2013), 39. In addition to this paternalistic attitude, let us not forget that the AKB48 project is fundamentally based upon sexist social imaginary.
ing number of students respond by saying that those principles are useless because they are just ignored in real politics. They are close to supporting a view of constitutional revision that perceives the postwar Japanese Constitution, which has not changed for more than seventy years, as fitting neither the domestic nor the international political situation we face today.

In postwar Japan, representative democracy has been legitimated through the principle of the popular sovereignty and the notion of what John Locke called “trust” (in Japanese, shintaku) under the Constitution. More and more people (or students) seem to feel, however, that the concept of constitutionalism is unrecognizable and useless. In this sense, we might say that today’s constitutional crisis is taking place not only within the Diet but also through the transformation of (or simply lack of) understanding of the epistemological premises of modern democratic politics.

As neoliberal discourse has spread over politics in general, the conventional binary opposition between “conservatives” and “progressives” also looks different. Paradoxically enough, in the neoliberal imaginary, the “left,” which has long been understood as “progressive,” looks “conservative” precisely because it tries to defend the ideals of the postwar Japanese Constitution – the sovereignty of the people, pacifism, and the respect for the fundamental rights – whereas the “right,” which used to emphasize “traditional values,” now looks “progressive” or even “revolutionary” as it explicitly affirms the neoliberal conception of ever-lasting change or innovation.

Some might remember that former prime minister Mori Yoshiro (LDP) said during the 2000 election campaign that “forty percent of people have not decided which party they should vote for. It would be good if they stayed asleep without being interested in the election.” This statement attracted strong criticism. In fact, however, he went on to say, “but that won’t happen.” He seems to have realized that his “hope” was neither appropriate nor real. In contrast, current neoliberal nationalism generates political apathy far more openly and positively, and make efforts to annihilate the principles of modern democracy as a whole.

The political project that I call “the politics of de-politicization” not only functions as the discursive strategy of political intervention within contemporary forms of the political imaginary. It also generates a more direct commitment to nationalist policies. It is well known that Akimoto Yasushi has a close relationship with Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and that he has committed strongly to the policies and media events that the LDP government has promoted over the last few years. For instance, Akimoto has been involved with the Futaba Mirai High School, a newly established high school that is part of the “reconstruction” or fukkō policies formulated after the 3.11 earthquake and the TEPCO Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant disaster. In addition, the 2017 AKB election event in Okinawa received significant financial support from the government in the name of local recreation policy, or chihō sōsei. These examples suggest that while Akimoto’s project undermines the presupposition of democratic politics through what Wolin calls political “de-mobilization,” it also seeks to replace the democratic political imaginary with a contemporary form of authoritarian nationalism. As Sheldon Wolin points out, “the crux of these changes is that corporate power and its culture are no longer external.

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14 “Kanshin nai to itte nete kurerea…; Mori syusyo, koen de hatsugen (Prime Minister Mori addresses, ‘Hope that the voters sleep on election day, saying they are not interested’),” Asahi Shimbun, June 21, 2000.

forces that occasionally influence policies and legislation. As these have become integral, so the citizenry has become marginal and democracy more manageable. Political apathy thus works politically through this fundamental ideological transformation.

4 Nuclear Emergency and “apathy toward life”

If the post-9.11 political situation in the United States has impacted on Wolin’s critique of US democracy, how can we understand the socio-political impact of 3.11 when we talk about democratic politics in Japan today? To my understanding, the current trend of political apathy has a lot to with post-Fukushima political/social conditions.

On March 11, 2011, the Japanese government announced a state of emergency concerning the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. The nuclear state of emergency procedures were created as part of the Act on Special Measures Concerning Nuclear Emergency Preparedness. The declaration of a nuclear state of emergency gives the cabinet of the prime minister broad powers in a wide range of domains to directly make regulations, issue orders, and take special measures to counter the disaster.

More than seven years have passed as of September, 2018, yet the nuclear state of emergency continues. It is unclear when it will be lifted, leaving Japanese society in a “perpetual state of emergency.” This emergency seems to function through a combination of two ideological aspects: on the one hand there is the political apathy we have observed, and on the other there is strong support for nationalism. Here let us remind ourselves that both aspects are driven by the same logic of neoliberal discourse. Over the past seven years, we have seen how the post-3.11 Japanese government has made efforts to promote both “everydayness in emergency” and strong nationalist discourse. It does so through the logic of kizuna, a series of fukkō campaign, criticism of “damage by rumors and misinformation” (fuhyō higai), campaigns to “Support Fukushima by Eating Fukushima Produce,” and so on. We might be able to add a more recent example in 2017: the “threat of North Korea.”

So, beyond the issues directly related to the ongoing Fukushima accident, the “nuclear emergency” has far more significant political implications. While people are encouraged to live their daily lives in a state of political apathy as they used to do before 3.11, the political state of emergency equates peacetime with wartime and suspends, the foundational assumptions of the democratic rule of law. We must not forget in this context that, over the past several years, the Japanese government has explicitly introduced nationalist-fascist legislation, such as the 2013 State Secrecy Law, the 2015 National Security Law and the 2017 Anti-terror Conspiracy Law.

Here it is important to note that political apathy works through a complicit relation between neoliberalism and nationalism. Political apathy today does not simply bring about people’s disengagement from the real politics. It is also linked to a very strong political aspiration for national identity. But it seems that what happens through this combination of political apathy and nationalism is the promotion and strengthening of “apathy toward life,” a contemporary form of what Fujita Shōzō once called “totalitarianism toward ‘comfort’” (anraku e no zentaishugi) in which “people expect

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16 Wolin, Democracy Incorporated, 131.
that anything that causes discomfort should be indiscriminately annihilated."\(^{18}\)

Under the prevalence of the neoliberal nationalist discourse today, it is democratic politics that have become the main target of this new form of annihilation.

In the UK, when Jeremy Corbyn was elected as the new leader of Labour Party in 2015, he declared in his first speech, “the media and maybe many of us simply didn’t understand the views of many young people within our society. They had been written off as a non-political generation... They are a very political generation that were turned off by the way in which politics was being conducted and not attracted or not interested in it. We have to, and must, change that.”\(^ {19}\)

And in the United States under Trump administration in 2018, former President, Barack Obama now calls for revitalizing democratic politics through political participation, especially execution of voting rights by younger generations. He says, “Thirty minutes. Thirty minutes of your time. Is democracy worth that? ...Not by sitting around and waiting for something to happen, not by leaving it to others to do something, but by leading that movement for change themselves. And if you do that, if you get involved, and you get engaged, and you knock on some doors, and you talk with your friends, and you argue with your family members, and you change some minds, and you vote, something powerful happens.”\(^ {20}\)

Here in Japan, how can we “re-politicize” the conditions of our physical and social life in our times, beyond the current ideological formation of cynicism and “de-politicization” through contemporary forms of political apathy under neoliberal nationalism?

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