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Review of *Japan's Nationalist Right in the Internet Age* by Jeffrey J. Hall. London: Routledge, 2021. viii + 209.

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The growing visibility of nationalism and right-wing populism has been broadly discussed both by scholars and popular media since the second decade of the 21st century. Great attention was given to the role of digital technologies and social media in the spread of “new” nationalism, even though it cannot be attributed exclusively to these factors. Still, the character of digital technologies and their participatory nature allowed more significant fragmentation of national debates, while the lack of moderation and fact-checking procedures made the online spread of misinformation and extremist views easier than the offline (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez 2020). The relationship between the online environment and nationalistic activism has thus become one of the core points in the most recent scholarly literature dedicated to the issues of nationalism. Jeffrey J. Hall’s recent publication, *Japan’s Nationalist Right in the Internet Age* (2021, Routledge), joins this analysis, focusing on a rather underdiscussed, particularly in the English language, topic – the relationship between online and offline activism of the Japanese nationalist right wing. It is presented on the example of an alternative media outlet Nihon Bunka Channel Sakura (‘Japanese Culture Channel Sakura’, hereafter: Channel Sakura) and its activist wing, Ganbare Nippon.

To some extent, Hall’s publication bridges the gap that seems to be growing in the scholarship concerning the nationalism(s) of Japan. Japanese nationalism has been effectively presented as diverse in its forms, manifested both by the state and in the grassroots form, and in a whole spectrum from militarist nationalism to light, everyday “pop” nationalism (Kayama 2003, Kingston 2016, McVeigh 2004, Sakamoto 2008). Despite this diversity, much attention has been given to *uyoku* – extreme right-wing political activists, often associated with military uniforms, agitation through

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noisy sound trucks, violent protests, and extreme speech. Among still rare English-language publications concerning Japanese online nationalistic discourse, the focus also lies on the so-called *net uyoku* (*netto uyoku*), i.e. Internet users spreading ultranationalist, far-right ideology (Murai and Suzuki 2014, Nagayoshi 2021, Sakamoto 2011). This is where one of the unique aspects of Hall's work is evident. Channel Sakura and Ganbare Nippon, the main objects of Hall's study, represent what the author, following Togo (2010), calls "the assertive conservative right", emphasizing how these groups differ from *uyoku*. Their non-violent nature, no use of sound trucks, as well as criticism towards lawbreaking forms of activism and hate speech (Hall 2021: 19, 40) can be seen as the main differentiation from traditional *uyoku*, a differentiation seemingly crucial for the effectiveness of their activism, as they build "inclusive gathering of conservatives" and cultivate "a non-extremist identity" (*ibid.*, 62). Therefore, Hall's analysis significantly broadens the understanding of Japanese nationalist groups positioning themselves in opposition to *uyoku*. The analysis highlights their rhetoric, as well as the strategies of both online and offline activism, contributing consequently to the broad literature dedicated to modern Japanese nationalism.

The book is based on over a decade-long research, with primary data coming from online media content analysis of Channel Sakura broadcasts. Moreover, Hall used elements of ethnography, engaging in non-participant observation online, on Channel Sakura social media, forum, and website, as well as offline, during the demonstrations organized by the group. The theoretical framework of the analysis draws on sociology, specifically the theory of Strategic Action Fields (SAF) introduced by Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam. Hall sees Channel Sakura and its dedicated viewers as unified by the shared need to engage in activist campaigns targeting various purposes (SAF). Fields of particular interest to nationalists were described as "fields of contestation", referring to the ongoing debates over the representation of historical events and related international issues still dividing Japanese society. Nationalist voices come as "challengers" to the "anti-Japanese" narratives promoted in mainstream media, represented in Channel Sakura as influenced by "harmful business, religious, or foreign influences" (*ibid.*, 54). In his analysis of Channel Sakura initiatives, Hall puts particular emphasis on "skilled social actors", meaning activists with diverse backgrounds, resources, and competencies that allowed them to create a positive, shared meaning for Channel Sakura viewers, motivating them, in result, to the active persuasion of common goals within the action fields. Therefore, much of the focus in the book lies on the individuals

crucial for Channel Sakura's establishment and development, their abilities, the rhetoric used to reinforce the spirit of community among Channel Sakura's supporters, and specific actions that motivated and encouraged others to act.

The book can be broadly divided into two parts. The first one, consisting of Chapters 2 to 4, is dedicated to the broader background of Japanese postwar nationalism, and the history and main characteristics of Channel Sakura. Hall describes the chronological development and diversity of Japanese conservative right-wing groups in a focused, clear manner, avoiding unnecessary digressions. He refers to a long list of vital readings, allowing interested readers to explore the topic further. Moreover, his relatively short but definitively sufficient overview plays effectively the fundamental role of positioning Channel Sakura against the broader nationalistic context and pointing towards the void that the new medium attempted to fill on the Japanese conservative scene. Channel Sakura is presented as a result of a meeting of three individuals: Tagata Takeo, former kamikaze pilot, Matsuura Yoshiko, a right-wing student activist, a student of the novelist Mishima Yukio and a Tokyo's Sugunami ward Assembly member, and, finally Mizushima Satoru, activist filmmaker who became the president of the channel and its most recognized face. Channel Sakura began its broadcast as a satellite television channel in 2004, on the symbolic date of August 15. A crucial step in the development of Channel Sakura was, from Hall's perspective, the decision to significantly expand the viewership through uploading part of its program free of charge on a YouTube channel and, consequently, the change in funding from monthly subscriptions to voluntary donations. The crowdfunding system allowed Mizushima to promote its channel as independent from big businesses and their influences, a "grassroots TV channel of the Japanese people, by the Japanese people, and for the Japanese people" (*ibid.*, 52). Generally inclusive rhetoric, the distance towards extremism, hate speech and illegal actions, as well as cooperation with international activists, including pro-Taiwan independence and Uyghur advocates, enabled the cultivation of "a non-extremist identity" (*ibid.*, 61), attractive to a broader group than more traditional right-wing organizations and different from, and therefore non-threatening towards, pre-existing conservative activists. Hall emphasizes the notion of inclusiveness and community in his analysis of symbols used to create shared meaning for the Channel Sakura community, including references to historical figures, exposition of national symbols, or regular organization of specific activities, like flag marches around the Yasukuni shrine area. Therefore, much of the focus in this part of the book lies on Channel

Sakura's "uniqueness" as an inclusive platform gathering conservatives, specific methods used to achieve this image, as well as strategies implemented to create a shared sense of meaning in the present-day world through the connection to past generations of the Japanese.

Chapters 5 to 8, constituting the second part of the book, present detailed descriptions of case studies selected "because each involved distinctly different types of targets, different types of tactics, and differing outcomes" (ibid., 7). Two chapters describe campaigns launched by Channel Sakura and Ganbare Nippon related to the need for "correction" of "anti-Japanese" historical narratives presented to the Japanese public: the 2009 anti-NHK crusade after the broadcast of a documentary depicting colonization of Taiwan and the 2011 Okinawa campaign to remove mentions of *ianfu* (sexual slaves for the Japanese Imperial Military) and the massacre of civilians from a proposed historical signboard. The third case study analyzes initiatives related to Senkaku Islands, the disputed territory claimed by Japan and the People's Republic of China, and Channel Sakura's attempts to mark the territory as inherently Japanese. In each case, Hall provides detailed descriptions of the issue's background, online and offline actions conducted by Channel Sakura, and results achieved. Particular attention is given to Mizushima as the key "skilled social actor" – his rhetoric and behavior, as well as the meanings he creates. Hall argues convincingly that the grassroots nature of Channel Sakura as a primarily internet medium allows its creators to portray themselves and their viewers as "extreme underdog[s] against powerful leftist and anti-Japanese forces" (ibid., 140) and "patriots acting in place of a government that was not fulfilling its duty" (ibid., 178), capable of achieving results because they act together. The final chapter briefly describes the alleged embezzlement during the political campaign of Tomogami Toshio, one of the main contributors of Channel Sakura, and the resulting split among members. This issue, combined with a growing number of conservative YouTube channels, has led to a greater diversification among viewers and the channels' steady fall in significance. Hall's closing remarks suggest that the circle of Channel Sakura contributors and viewers may be small, but they still manage "to play a significant role in Japan's domestic and international handling of historical and territorial issues" (ibid., 202), actively influencing Japan's international relations. Hall's book is a well-researched, clearly-structured, detailed, and easy-to-read account of the Japanese "assertive conservative right" internet grassroots medium; it is a valuable reading to anyone interested in Japanese present-day right-wing activism. The author provides a clear theoretical framework that he consistently applies throughout the work. This focus leads

to an interesting overview of conservative rhetoric and symbols used to engage a broader public in their initiatives and present themselves as patriotic fighters for Japanese pride. Hall's discourse also sheds light on the diversification among Japanese conservatives, a topic that still requires more English-language studies.

Still, there are areas where the analysis could be further developed. My major issue with the book is the fact that it does not fully deliver on the "internet" aspect of the phenomenon described. While "the internet age" was placed in the title itself, the exploration of the meaning of the online environment is actually very limited. Hall emphasizes how the internet enables the broad reach of Channel Sakura's broadcasts. He mentions the content and editing of the uploaded videos (see, for example, *ibid.*, 82–83), occasionally providing the number of views or citing comments (*ibid.*, 97). However, these attempts remain extremely limited throughout the book. While discussing an internet phenomenon, Hall heavily focuses on the aspect characterizing traditional media – a linear "broadcaster to viewer" flow of information. While a broad analysis of program reception would be another level of work, probably extending the scope of the research, it is the reciprocal, participatory nature of the internet and social media that allows information to circulate and program creators to engage in direct communication with viewers. However, a bare minimum of audience response analysis leaves the questions of viewers' reactions unanswered. Hall emphasizes that Channel Sakura presented itself as inclusive, far from hate speech, meaning to attract "normal people" (*ibid.*, 62 – with the phrase "normal people" being rather risky without a broader explanation since this intellectual shortcut introduces an arbitrary definition of "normal" and "abnormal"). But did their programming also encourage some more extreme voices? Were they critical of Mizushima's "mild" attitude or supported his actions? While the narrative built by Channel Sakura's contributors is clearly stated, a possible overlap of their viewership with more extremist circles remains unexplored except for a brief mention of "cooperation" with an *uyoku* group Nihon Seinensha (*ibid.*, 161).

Moreover, the use of Twitter, named one of the "two major social media platforms utilized by Channel Sakura" (*ibid.*, 201), remains completely unexplored. What type of content was published and shared there, even in the context of the campaigns discussed? Including this aspect in the analysis would highlight the circles of interest and influence represented by Channel Sakura. Hall's focus on the image created by Channel Sakura contributors is not necessarily a bad thing, but if the phenomenon is supposed to be discussed in the context of the digital environment, as the title itself suggests,

the lack of analysis of the audience response and social media engagement limits the potential to really understand the role of new media in the spread of conservative narratives.

These limitations, however, do not change the fact that Hall's book is an important reading recommended to anyone interested in Japanese conservative activism, contested historical narratives, and present-day grassroots movements.

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