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Anti-Olympic Rallying Points, Public Alienation, and Transnational Alliances

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Abstract: Since the radicalization of some leftist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, political activism in Japan is often met with skepticism or suspicion, and social movements are largely characterized by small and senior membership. Anti-Olympic opposition in Japan is largely sustained by activist veterans from this "invisible civil society". While this activism may alienate the public, connections to other Japanese social movements are rich, especially to the anti-nuclear movement that has emerged since the 2011 nuclear disaster.

When Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko and Olympic dignitaries pushed the button to light up an Olympic symbol floating off Odaiba, there was a discernible and discordant background noise on the live TV broadcast despite the loud celebratory fireworks: the voices of protestors screaming, "Stop the Olympics right now!"[1] Members of the group Hangorin-no-kai (English: No Olympics 2020) had gathered in front of the luxury hotel where the festive ceremony rang in the six month count down to the Tokyo Summer Olympics. In addition, OkotowaLink, the broader network Orinpikku-saigai-okotowari-renrakukai (No Thank You to 2020 Olympic Disasters Link), held a demonstration on a close-by waterfront deck. "Many people seem to be excited about the upcoming Games, but quite a lot of foreign tourists asked us why we are protesting," one activist relates afterwards. "Most Japanese don't talk to us, but unlike at our usual protests, this time, many also accepted our Japanese-language flyers!"[2]

Fig. 1: Anti-Olympic protest at Odaiba, January 24, 2020 Photo: Sonja Ganseforth

This response reflects the divided coverage of anti-Olympic protests in foreign and domestic media. One activist complains, "Why are people abroad paying so much attention to us, when we do not receive any attention in Japan?!" Anti-Olympic campaigners therefore celebrated their transgressive audio infiltration of national television as a major success. "The big newspapers are full of celebratory reporting – no wonder!" complains another: the main Japanese newspapers Yomiuri, Asahi, Mainichi, Nikkei and Sankei are all official sponsors for Tokyo 2020. Anti-Olympic activism, however, can be spotted at monthly protest actions around Tokyo, and criticism is also expressed in public lectures and in (mostly academic) publications and opinion pieces, including a number of edited volumes (e.g. Amano & Ukai 2019; Watanabe 2019; Amano 2017;

Ogasawara & Yamamoto 2016; Sekai 2016). Drawing on qualitative interviews, participatory fieldwork, and a literature review of critical publications, this article analyzes the main arguments of anti-Olympic activists in Tokyo, their historical roots in social movements in Japan, and their connectivity to the larger Japanese public.

Alienated social movements in Japan

Since the radicalization of some leftist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, political activism in Japan is often met with skepticism or suspicion, and social movements are largely characterized by small and senior membership. The new millennium, however, has seen some revival as the nuclear accident in Fukushima in 2011 sparked new mass demonstrations against nuclear energy policies in Japan and the Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDS) movement rallied against the Abe administration's security legislation in 2015 (Andrews 2016). Anti-Olympic opposition in Japan, however, is largely sustained by activist veterans from an "invisible civil society" (Steinhoff 2018), continuing their oppositional work off the radar since the 1960s or 1970s. Asked about this apparent generational gap, OkotowaLink members blame the Japanese education system neglecting media literacy and not allowing students to voice their own opinion. Nevertheless, they hope to sustain opposition until Japanese society is ready for mass mobilization again – possibly triggered by a post-Olympic economic recession: "The Olympics could be a chance to spark protest among young people, just like the global protests started after the 1964 'Recovery Olympics'."

During Tokyo's unsuccessful bidding for the 2016 Olympics, surveys conducted by the IOC as well as by anti-Olympic campaigners showed lower support rates than the surveys conducted by the Tokyo 2016 bid committee (Kietlinski 2011, 462). Activists believe that privately, many people are not too happy about the Olympic Games coming to Tokyo, but "…they involve the mass media in fomenting 'Olympic fever', making whoever is against the 2020 Tokyo Olympics seem like a bad citizen." (Koide 2019, 111) "In Japan, protesting after a decision has been reached is considered anti-social," remarks one activist. Even if fundamental criticism is limited to social movement activists and academic publications, however, Japanese newspapers are full of problematic news concerning the Tokyo Olympics. Broadly defined, there are three categories of arguments against the Olympics with differing degrees of connectivity to broader public opinion: financial, technical, and procedural issues; socio-economic and political problems surrounding the Olympics; and, finally, more fundamental political, social, and cultural arguments.

The hot and potholed road to Tokyo 2020

Probably most straightforward, a range of scandals and financial, technical, and procedural problems haunting the Tokyo Olympics has been widely discussed in Japanese mainstream media. Tokyo 2020 organizers now calculate their adjusted budget at 1.35 trillion yen, around double the original amount (TOCOG 2019). Other estimates including related costs, however, put the price at over 3 trillion yen. In view of exploding expenses and negative financial legacies, some candidate cities have withdrawn their bids, and interest in hosting the Olympics is fading (Ogawa, M. 2016, 108–111). Hangorin-no-kai assert that in view of budget cuts in social services, the severe lack of childcare facilities, and the recent consumption tax rise, money would have been much better invested in welfare and social facilities instead (also Ogawa, M. 2016, 58–60).

A number of scandals and hiccups accompanied

Tokyo 2020 preparations. The official logo had to be replaced after allegations of plagiarism. Spiraling costs led to the scrapping of the original design for the New National Stadium by Zaha Hadid in favor of a leaner design by Japanese architect Kuma Kengo. Downplaying the real costs of the Olympics seems to be a common strategy, but there were other instances of sugarcoating and outright untruthfulness in the bidding process. Promotional material described the Japanese summer as "an ideal climate for athletes to perform at their best," and it was only after 2019 World Athletics Championships in Doha that the International Olympic Committee (IOC), fearing for the athletes' safety in the sweltering Tokyo summer heat, disregarded Tokyo's opposition and moved the marathon and walking competitions to Sapporo. Besides various technical measures to protect athletes and spectators from the heat, water sports venues in Tokyo Bay are also seeing sophisticated technical installations in the fight against critical levels of pollution with enterobacteria (Kuhn 2020). With millions of international visitors expected, Tokyoites are bracing for further strain on infamously congested public transportation, with plans to close a number of road lanes for exclusive use of Olympic participants aggravating these concerns.

Allegations of corruption in Tokyo's successful bid for the Olympics, likely the gravest scandal in the run-up to 2020, have led to a criminal investigation in France against the resigned President of the Japanese Olympic Committee Takeda Tsunekazu and raised suspicions against Japan's influential advertising company Dentsu. Procedures were further tainted by the involvement of Princess Takamado Hisako in the bidding process, widely discussed as an unconstitutional political instrumentalization of the imperial family (Singler 2019, 23-42). Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's strong statement about the safety of the damaged nuclear power plant Fukushima Dai'ichi before the IOC in Buenos Aires in 2013 immediately drew a wave criticism, exasperation, and ridicule (Singler 2019, 20-23). Coined the "under control" lie, this affair connects to larger issues and other social movements in Japan.

Fig. 2: Information produced by anti-Olympic groups

Photo: Sonja Ganseforth

Socio-economic grievances surrounding the Olympics

For their critics, the Tokyo 2020 Games are a prism comprising most of the problems in contemporary Japanese society, bringing together activists from a variety of different social movements (Amano 2017; Ganseforth 2020a). Pointing to the ongoing nuclear emergency in Fukushima, further threatened by lurking dangers of a large earthquake in the Kantō region, and the great reconstruction challenges in Tōhoku, protestors often ask, "*Orinpikku yatte iru ba'ai kai?!*" – Is this really the time to hold the Olympics?!" There are thus strong connections to the anti-nuclear movements in Japan, which persist even after the mass demonstrations of 2012 subsided.

Some anti-nuclear activists have joined the anti-Olympic groups, and their transnational networks also mobilize against Tokyo's "radioactive Olympics" (Watanabe 2019). "Using the Olympics, they are trying to divert our attention from the nuclear risk and create the illusion that the situation in Fukushima is back to normal. Now evacuees are told they have to move back, but in reality, the emergency continues," says one activist. Denying that the "*Fukkō Gorin*" (Reconstruction Olympics) would serve the disaster-stricken Tōhoku Region (Koide 2019), she continues, "Tax money is being squandered on the Olympics instead of supporting the victims of the nuclear disaster in Fukushima." Making regular solidarity trips to Tōhoku, a number of activists are criticizing Tokyo-centric development policies and the "colonialist exploitation" of other regions for the sake of the capital, as exemplified by the installation of risky nuclear technology in Fukushima to supply electricity for Tokyo – and by holding the *Tokyo* Olympics in venues located in Fukushima and Hokkaido.

With rising global awareness of environmental crises, international mega events such as the Olympics have come under increasing pressure to prove they are not just a waste of public money, destroying nature, and leaving behind useless gigantic stadiums. Sustainability therefore figures prominently in Tokyo 2020 promotional material. Not necessarily opposing the Olympics per se, a variety of environmental and animal welfare advocacy groups is trying to leverage the international attention to push for higher environmental standards, condemning TOCOG's *Sustainable Sourcing Code* for not upholding the benchmarks of the 2012 London Olympics (Ganseforth 2020b). Environmental NGOs allege that timber linked to rainforest destruction and human rights abuses in Indonesia and Malaysia was used in the construction of Tokyo's Olympic venues. (Singler 2019, 51-54). According to a TOCOG representative (interview on 19.2.2019), the formulation of timber standards was indeed one of the most contested issues covered in the sourcing code, necessitating the issuance of a third edition of the *Code* in 2019. In view of the meagre track record of the Olympics in terms of financial austerity and environmental protection, the proposed "sustainability legacies" (Tomlinson 2014) are often condemned as "greenwashing".

Advocates of workers' rights decry inhumane working conditions and huge amounts of overtime at Olympic construction sites, having cost the lives of four workers by the end of 2019 (Ogasawa & Yamamoto 2019, 12–14). The recruitment of around 110,000 volunteers, a record number for Olympic Games so far, is also heavily criticized for exploiting free labor, while contracting companies are making huge profits. With a large number of OkotowaLink members having a background as educators and school employees, they are also furious that university schedules have been adjusted to accommodate Olympic requirements such as opening up campus facilities for athletes' usage and allowing students to participate as volunteers.

Hangorin-no-kai first formed in early 2013 around activists living in a *nojukusha* (homeless) tent community in Yoyogi Park. They started protesting against the Tokyo 2020 bid when the route taken by visiting IOC members was temporarily "cleared" of homeless people. Naturally, Hangorin-no-kai is putting a strong focus on the defense of homeless and marginalized communities. "Olympics kill the poor", is a prominent slogan not only in their protest, but around the world. City redevelopment, evictions, gentrification, and the privatization of public space are shared grievances of anti-Olympic movements in many countries (e.g. Cohen 2013). Even though displacement of marginalized communities is by far not as dramatic as in Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo 2020 constructions are not victimless. Several Hangorin-no-kai activists stayed with a

homeless community living in Meiji Park near the site of the New National Stadium, until the park was cleared by force and construction went ahead. Similarly, the residents in the neighboring Kasumigaoka public housing complex were evicted and their homes demolished to make way for new Olympic structures (Ogawa, T., 2016). In the following years, individual *nojukusha* have also lost their living space, for example for the installation of beach-volleyball sites on Odaiba, and a considerable number of *nojukusha* sleeping in Shinjuku Station have received informal notice that the area would be "cleaned up" for the Games (Kageyama 2020).

Referring to Klein's (2007) observation that capitalist policies are pushed through against the public's will in times of crisis and disaster, one Attac Japan member in OkotowaLink says, "The whole world depends on shock doctrines now, and the nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima and the Olympics are Japan's shock doctrines." While Klein speaks of "disaster capitalism", in his analysis of Olympic spectacles, Boykoff (2014) coins the term "celebration capitalism": Similar to disasters, such megaevents create a societal state of exception, with new opportunities for capitalist exploitation – albeit in a much more joyous atmosphere and with a greater reliance on private profits through public-private partnerships. As a case in point, Hangorin-no-kai condemn the cheap sell-out of public land on Harumi Island to private developers for the construction of the Athletes' Village, with additional public funds earmarked to rebuild the complex into a private housing complex after the Games.

A poster campaign by Tokyo Metro boasts increased camera surveillance for a safer Tokyo 2020 titled "Get strong, Tokyo". The Olympics and public safety are thus being invoked to lend legitimacy to ramped up state surveillance. The danger of a terrorist attack at the upcoming Olympics was cited regularly as an urgent reason to pass the contested "anti-conspiracy bill" (*kyōbōzai-hōan*) in 2017, which criminalizes a wide range of activities vaguely connected to the planning of a crime mostly unrelated to terrorism. Critics contend the new law is threatening privacy and freedom of expression (Ogura 2017), and the Abe administration is misusing the Olympics to push an unpopular political agenda (Ogasawa & Yamamoto 2019, 61–65). Protestors deplore that Tokyo schools are now required to teach 35 hours of "Olympic education", where critical commentary is discouraged, undermining educational goals and threatening freedom of speech and democratic rights (Masuda 2019). In response, transnational anti-Olympic activists in Los Angeles are now thinking of developing an "anti-Olympic curriculum", reports one Hangorin-no-kai activist.

Sports, biopolitics, and nationalism

Some of the most fundamental criticisms touch upon issues dealing more directly with sports, athletic competitions, and their historical roots. Corruption scandals and an excessive focus on competition for medals have repeatedly tarnished the image of the Olympics (Ogawa, M., 2016, 63–93). Doping scandals are likely the most publicized aspect of what critics denounce as the exploitation of athletes in professional sports. For one OkotowaLink activist, spectators are complicit in the exploitation, which for her follows the same logic as ancient Roman gladiator games: "Olympics cannot exist without the spectators, everything caters to them. The fans are admiring the athletes, but they let them fight each other. The sponsors are making relentless demands on the athletes, and the spectators are demanding a satisfying performance from the athletes. In this way, the Olympics violate human dignity."

Since the women's Olympic judo team accused their coach of violence and power harassment in 2012, the exposure of a culture of violence

and abuse in Japanese sports by coaches and senior athletes has forced society to confront this endemic problem. (Ogasawa & Yamamoto 2019, 36–52; Singler 2019, 54–57). With a background in feminist activism, Hangorin-no-kai members are also putting a spotlight on gender issues such as discriminatory binary sex categories and femininity tests (Itani 2019), as well as homophobia, sexual harassment, and abuse in sports. They criticize as "pink-washing" the showcase project *Pride House*, a safe space for LGBT athletes, volunteers, and visitors, which, when first installed in Vancouver 2010, led to the ecological and cultural destruction of sacred indigenous lands (Itani 2016). Even though the activists are aware of the highly positive image of the Paralympics and the alienating potential their criticism might have, they assert that rather than promoting the rights of people with disabilities, Paralympics discriminates against them and subjects them to performance pressure (Kitamura 2017).

Sports should be a joyous and cooperative activity, and instead of pumping a lot of money into commercialized elite sports, more funding should go into public sports facilities, permitting "sports for everyone", stresses a senior sports analyst and occasional speaker at OkotowaLink lectures (Taniguchi 2019). However, not everyone in OkotowaLink believes in the inherent value of sports. "We disagree mainly on two things: How we think about sports – and how we should split the tab," jokes one activist. Criticizing modern fitness discourses, he continues, "It is fascist to say we need sports because everyone should be healthy, we do not need unhealthy people, they cost a lot of welfare and medical costs." An anti-royalist protest veteran adds, it's, "Just like creating a strong body for combat," pointing out continuities from militarist mobilization for the *tennō* in the past to contemporary violent sports education (Ogasawa & Yamamoto 2019, 36–52). For the anti-nationalists in OkotowaLink, the Olympics are just like fighting a war by other means, and the athletes serve as tools to promote the image of the nation and the *tennō*. Decrying a lack of reflection on Japanese historical guilt and responsibilities, they criticize that athletics have normalized the usage of imperial symbolism in the 1990s: "Today's Olympians are happy to use the *hinomaru* in celebrating victory, even when they are in countries attacked by Japan in the past. The joint soccer world cup with Korea in 2002 served to allow the imperial Japanese flag on Korean grounds – unthinkable for anyone with some historical awareness."

Fig. 3: Anti-Olympic protest in Shibuya, February 23, 2019

Photo: Sonja Ganseforth

Transnational alliances

Anti-Olympic criticism thus concerns a broad range of issues in Japanese society, politics, and culture. This comprehensive coverage is rooted in the biographies of protestors. The Olympics provide a rallying point for activists from different movements "…because the Tokyo Olympics are bringing to light most of the many problems and contradictions in

contemporary Japanese society," as one activist explains (see also Ganseforth 2020a). Anti-Olympians have been marching against nationalism, constitutional reform, the emperor system, militarization, hyper-capitalist globalization, and nuclear energy production; they have campaigned for freedom of speech, the rights of workers, low-income households, squatters, women, sexual minorities – and even Palestinians; and they have fought the use of the *hinomaru* flag, the *kimi-ga-yo* anthem, and revisionist history textbooks in schools.

While anti-Olympic activism in general, and appeals to abolish the *tennō* system or fundamental criticism of "fascist" sports in particular, are more likely to alienate the public, connections to other Japanese social movements are rich, especially to the anti-nuclear movement. Transnational anti-nuclear groups have also taken up the issue of Tokyo 2020 in their campaigns (Watanabe 2019), and relations to a transnational anti-Olympic movement are growing stronger. Transnational discourses on shared grievances such as gentrification, displacement, securitization, and sustainability deficits are influencing the arguments of Japanese campaigns, and groups have entered into a lively exchange of information and statements on their webpages and social media accounts. Some Hangorin-no-kai activists are part of the Planetary No Olympics Network and visited Rio de Janeiro, Pyeongchang, and Los Angeles counterparts. A number of activists from the former and future Olympic host cities London (2012), Rio de Janeiro (2016), Pyeongchang (2018), Paris (2024), and Los Angeles (2028) came to Tokyo for a week-full of protest events in July 2019, uniting under the slogan "No Olympics anywhere!" In his introduction to the 2016 "Anti-Olympic Manifesto", Ukai Satoshi (2016, 20) proclaims, "What we must take over from Rio is not the interest-ridden "Olympic fire", but the internationalist duty of a popular struggle against the Olympic attack, turned into global fascism, right now." It remains to be seen whether the "Anti-Olympic Torch" – in fact an artifact made of a toilet plunger with banners and inscriptions from former host cities, passed on from one anti-Olympic group to the next – will strengthen the internationalization of Japanese social movements in general – and maybe conversely even increase their acceptance at home.

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Notes

[1] See here (29.1.2020).
[2] Unless stated otherwise, quotations are from interviews conducted in January and February 2019, and January 2020. In order to protect the interviewees' privacy, no names are given. All translations of Japanese language quotes are by the author.