

The Melancholy of Japan's Liberal Opposition: Politician-penned Books and Their Narratives of Redemption

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Abstract: *This article interrogates the ways in which two political books written by elites in the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) take different tacks to represent their party as trustworthy, responsible, and competent against the background of the liberal opposition's political difficulties since 2012. Focusing on two books published in the lead-up to the 2021 general election by former Prime Minister Kan Naoto and then-leader of the CDP Edano Yukio, it argues that the liberal opposition parties in Japan are, on top of the more commonly understood institutional pressures, constrained by demands that the narrative is a conventionally satisfying one when crafting claims about their viability as an alternative to government.*

Keywords: *Edano Yukio, Kan Naoto, narrative, opposition, Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, emotion, politics*

After nearly a decade of government under the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), two books written by liberal opposition elites in the lead up to the 2021 general election offer distinctive accounts for why their party should finally take over the reins again. Former Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) Prime Minister Kan Naoto's

(2021b) *The DPJ Government* and former Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) leader Edano Yukio's (2021) *Edano Vision* are attempts to use the length and accessibility of the mass-market paperback form to craft a redemptive narrative about their party's past struggles in government and as an ineffective opposition.¹ More precisely, Kan does this through a highly specific accounting of both overlooked successes by the DPJ government and the valiant efforts of the liberal opposition in subsequent years. Edano for his part tries to redeem the liberal opposition through the melodramatic depiction of a Japan rooted in liberal values but threatened by historical currents that his party will correct. But despite the differences in the political events that they foreground and the meanings they ascribe through their narrative ordering, the two stories are not mutually exclusive. After all, if we take the demands readers have of such narratives, there is between Kan's realism and Edano's romanticism the common drive towards a resolution of a tension regarding the competence and viability of the liberal opposition that takes precedence over the specific facts of the two narratives.

The two books should be prime examples of how political science has at times described narratives as the skillful construction of stories that advances one's political interests (Mayer 2014; Roselle, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2014; Gaffney 2017). And to a degree they are. They grapple, for instance, with the long-standing difficulties the opposition has faced in

presenting the Japanese people with a viable choice for government (Scheiner 2006; Day & Neary 2020; Scheiner & Thies 2022). But social scientists have also increasingly drawn attention to the ways in which storytelling is driven by constraints that relate to the effects of certain forms of representations (Polletta 2006; Fernandes 2017; Shenhav 2015). Anker (2014a) and Leheny (2018) notably build on the observation from literary theory that narratives set in generic forms (be it the TV crime procedural or a fantasy novel, or in this case the politician's book) provide much of their emotional satisfaction through their adherence to a conventional structure instead of a careful appraisal of each individual story beat or claim.² So, while it is undeniable that political actors have the nominal freedom to craft a narrative that fits a preferred political outcome, in which case one would presumably leave out anything that is politically inconvenient, they are more likely to respect how genre conventions structure the reader's expectations. In sum, the pressure of achieving narrative fulfillment weighs onto the representation of certain facts and details.

This article interrogates the ways in which these two political books are unified by a common narrative arc even as they take diverging paths to represent the opposition as trustworthy, responsible, and competent. It takes Kan and Edano's books as not just an interpretation of a political problem, but a narrative one as well. My argument is that this arc serves as a form of what I call the liberal melancholic narrative, broadly adapting Anker (2014b: 203-224).³ As a heuristic for interpreting the narratives of Japan's liberal opposition, the liberal melancholic narrative is liberal because it pertains to pressures that primarily affect Japan's liberal parties on account of their experiences since 2009; and melancholic because it is a narrative structured around the mourning, and working through, of the opposition's failure to bring about lasting political competition. It points to a broadly

recognizable storyline that pervades discourses about the opposition. On the one hand, responding to an arguably successful attempt by conservatives to frame the DPJ government as unequivocally disastrous (O'Shea 2021; Sakaiya 2022), while on the other providing a sequential ordering of the Japanese opposition's failures that can yet offer meaning and optimism if addressed. I use the concept to suggest that these narratives are not clean, unfettered attempts at shaping a storyline for the benefit of a politically struggling opposition or its politicians. It instead draws attention to how these actors are themselves embroiled in the ongoing task to represent politics in ways that can satisfy expectations of both form and history.

This article begins by exploring the role of books written by politicians and proposes an interpretive strategy oriented around the emotional dynamics of the texts. Moving on to the two case studies, we first begin with Kan Naoto's book. In it, he builds a claim for effective opposition on a painstaking account of the failures and lessons of the DPJ government, as well as of the CDP's four years of struggle against the unpopular Abe Shinzō administration. This is followed by a discussion of Edano's book, who in contrast to Kan makes the bold choice to root his party's political liberalism on the inherent political values of the Japanese people. The article finally concludes with a discussion of the political role of this liberal melancholic narrative and the genre of the politician's book.

The Pressures of Narrative and the Politician's Book

In the 2021 general election, the CDP was hit particularly hard, with Edano stepping down after four years of leadership to take responsibility for losing seats. Although the degree of their setback was surprising at the time of the election, it was entirely predictable

that the CDP would fare poorly, even considering the unpopularity of the LDP government. As many political scientists and politicians have already explained, Japan's institutions (chiefly, its electoral system) keep the opposition trapped in an up-hill battle. The architects of the electoral reforms passed in the 90's had hoped that electoral rules mixing proportional representation and first-past-the-post voting would usher in a two-party system with regular changes in government (Scheiner 2006). It is against this background that the 2009 victory of the DPJ was described by one of its leaders as the equivalent of a 'bloodless Heisei restoration' (Nakano 2015: 196) and was seen by some political scientists as finally setting the stage for a more competitive political system (Reed, Scheiner, & Thies 2012). Instead, after the DPJ was voted out in 2012 and became the opposition once more, the party and its successors became surprisingly unviable as an alternative to the LDP (Day & Neary 2020; Scheiner & Thies 2022).

Yet, an institutional analysis only sheds light on part of this puzzle, as is illustrated by public intellectuals who have wondered why, at least, the party could not produce better stories for the policies it has on offer. That was notably the question posed by political scientist Yamaguchi Jirō in a conversation for the progressive magazine *Weekly Friday* (*Shūkan Kinyōbi*). Yamaguchi, a long-term advisor for the liberal opposition, noted that Edano and his allies are, despite their extensive knowledge of policy making, bad storytellers who possibly 'did not really read any novels during their youth' (Yamaguchi & Tanaka 2021: 19). This question was particularly trenchant because it seemed at the time that the early pandemic response mishaps, a stalling vaccine roll-out, and an unpopular commitment to having the Olympics in the summer of 2021 were giving the CDP a golden opportunity to present its alternative (Maeda 2023; Leheny 2023). But other than the careful optimism of some,

bolstered by successful by-elections in early 2021, the prospect of a national advance remained puzzlingly hazy.

Although he was by no means suggesting that storytelling was the secret weapon that could lead to the opposition's success, Yamaguchi's comment raises valuable questions about the opposition's ability to present persuasive stories and the forces that shape them. We often presume that political actors—politicians as well as organizations and states—can influence how voters perceive the world around them with an attractive narrative, and that they can do this relatively unobstructed by anything other than their access to resources and their own skill levels. Of course, no one would deny that stories can unify a party, mobilize members, or convince people to go to the polls. But even in the rational world of the political game, storytelling is subject to the demands of a fitting emotional catharsis which places constraints on political actors that they must become adept at dealing with (Leheny 2018: 22). After all, Edano was a lawyer before becoming a lawmaker. He has made arguments before, written books before, and won election after election making persuasive claims to his base. All that may not make him good at telling the kind of stories that would get his party a majority of votes on the national level, but his attempts at crafting representations of effective opposition are likely based on careful reflection and a deep familiarity with the demands placed on opposition leaders, not to mention of his own feelings as an opposition lawmaker.

The pressure of catharsis exists within social narratives of various forms, some more diffuse than others (Shenhav 2015: 13-14), but it is perhaps most recognizable within mass-market long-form writing. In general, opposition politicians use language to shape public perceptions through short and concise messages that likely require no more than a few minutes to get through, including manifestos, slogans, speeches, or statements,

but an often-overlooked exception are books. According to the literary scholar Peter Brooks (1992), it is the fact that it takes time for events to unfold in narrative form, and that it takes time for the reader to get through the narrative, that sets the printed long-form apart from other textual discourses. That length is likely to limit how much exposure any book will realistically have, but as a routine form of political speech it forces politicians to engage with narrative logics of time, causality, and personal agency that they otherwise are prone to gloss over in service of brevity.

In other words, the politician's book follows certain conventions. Writing in the French context, political scientist Christian Le Bart (2014) explains that in the politician's book 'the exposition of [the politician's] convictions could not do without a precise and sincere self-portrait' (157). He continues:

Politicians take up the pen to describe their career, to describe the parts they played in political events of the past, the battles they fought. Their approach is a personalization of the text: the author appears without exception on the cover, they express themselves in the first-person singular, and they are at once signatory, narrator, and main character. It does not matter that, in reality, they are only occasionally the author' (Ibid.).

Many of the conventions Le Bart expounds reflect the increasingly personalized nature of politics in liberal democratic systems (Rahat & Kenig 2018). In fact, books written by politicians have become common in Japan since former PM Tanaka Kakuei published his best-selling *Plan for Remodeling the Japanese Archipelago* (*Nihon rettō kaizō ron*) in 1972. 'For the first time,' writes Tsuda (2023) 'disparate notions about industrial relocation,

infrastructure expansion, urban planning, land use, and tax policy were combined and skillfully elucidated in a short, highly readable text, which was widely marketed under the name of a well-known political figure' (10). Since then, ambitious politicians have recognized books that meld personality and expertise with political vision as an integral part of political discourse, particularly among LDP politicians. And after 2009, penning books that particularly 'place weight on the nation-building and national vision of how to organize a national government' also became prominent within the opposition (Katō & Tatemachi 2018).

We can read these types of books in a number of ways, but they are often too unwieldy to effectively contribute to a campaign and too 'trivial' to be insightful to policy details (Le Bart 2014). Bureaucrats and politicians do read them to confirm an author's policy agenda, but that information can often be gleaned elsewhere. What we can say of these books is that they are obligatory: anyone with designs of becoming a prime minister, and many others who do not, publish because it is expected of politicians to have a story to tell. For Kan and Edano more specifically, what that story is supposed to lead to is determined from the get-go. Theirs must be an account that resolves a tension that has loomed large over Japanese politics: the strange and confounding difficulty of parties other than the LDP to gain a foothold in government. That tension, as well as its resolution, it bears to stress here, is something produced in the text. It is determined by the authors' negotiation between various elements and pressures as opposed to, for instance, the encounter of a reader's preexisting beliefs with the concrete claims of the text. With this in mind, we can now move on to the two books, each section providing an interpretive reading of the strategies used to represent their central tensions and the moves made to resolve them.

Kan Naoto: From Nightmare to Redemption

Kan Naoto was first elected in 1980 and received his first ministerial post in the 1996 Hashimoto cabinet. He came to prominence when he openly apologized for his Ministry of Health and Welfare's involvement in cases of HIV-tainted blood products being sold to sufferers of hemophilia—an investigation that was handled in large part by a young upstart Edano Yukio at the time. Kan's image of fighting back against the bureaucracy made him a popular spokesperson for the DPJ, which he co-founded and co-headed with Hatoyama Yukio. In 2010, Kan succeeded Hatoyama as prime minister and managed the March 2011 Fukushima disaster. Kan declined in prominence in the years after the DPJ fell from government but followed Edano to the CDP in the 2017 general election.

The publication of Kan's *The DPJ Government: Japan's Incomplete Reform* followed Edano's book by several months. This analysis begins with Kan because he explicitly positions his book as complementary to *Edano Vision*, and because he was a less politically salient figure in the 2021 general election. Much of its content is dedicated to a retrospective of the DPJ government, not only to reevaluate its general policy successes and shortcomings, but also to engage with its crisis management against the new backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, Kan serves as a natural comparative case to both Abe and Suga Yoshihide given the respective national crises they attended to during their administrations (Onaka 2021). His own intentions in writing the book, however, were more political than academic. He had just published a different book that same year on the transition from nuclear energy to renewables (Kan 2021a) and found it an opportune time to revisit the DPJ government now that 'emotional and unfounded bashing of [himself] and the DPJ had disappeared' (Kan 2021b: 9).

One of Abe's most successful political maneuvers was the way in which he undermined the opposition through the language he deployed (Maslow & Wirth 2021). The *Asahi Shimbun* pointed out in its 2021 retrospective series on the longest-serving prime minister that a tendency to be "intolerant of differences of opinion and to take a hostile attitude to criticism was a characteristic of the Abe government" (*Asahi Shimbun* 2021). Abe "repeatedly called [the DPJ government] a 'nightmare' for the Japanese people," a tactic through which he "effectively delegitimized the opposition and entrenched a powerful and united LDP in power" (Pugliese & Maslow 2020). Over time, such catastrophizing narratives of the DPJ's failure became accepted even by the opposition itself and began to inform their own strategic considerations in opposition (Sakaiya 2022). One political scientist cum CDP member summed up the consequences succinctly when he said that, failing to appeal on the merits of its own "alternative vision," "liberals and the left ... became tinged by the image of unadventurously opposing everything ('*nan demo hantai' to iu taieiteki imēji*)" (Ōi 2021: 237). Over time, dispelling this negative image and replacing it with that of a party one could feel good about voting for became a central task of the main liberal opposition. The DPJ Government addresses this by attempting to turn the claim on its head and provocatively proposes if it was perhaps the Abe government itself that was the real nightmare.

To make this claim Kan's book starts with a remarkably detailed exposition of the trials the DPJ government faced and overcame, as well as the record of successes for which it never received adequate recognition. In Kan's telling, the future of the opposition depends on correcting the record of the DPJ government. He suggests that a positive vision is to be eked out from what was already there: the DPJ government *did* achieve many things, and where it failed it was held back by forces

outside of its control.

In the 2009 general election, the DPJ put forth a manifesto that included a child allowance, free high school, and individual income compensation for farmers, and realized these policies. In addition, the DPJ was able to realize many other policies in the areas of welfare, education, child rearing, and employment, not to mention the enhancement of the long-term care insurance system. . . . On the other hand, it is undeniable that the party was immature in its internal governance, as evidenced by the split within the party over the consumption tax hike, which resulted in many members leaving the party. Whenever there was a political situation (*seikyoku*) like this, the mass media competed with each other to give it a large coverage, and many probably had the impression that the party was constantly involved in intra-party squabbles (Kan 2021b: 10-11).

This characterization is in line with what many other scholars as well as observers have argued already (O’Shea 2021; Nakano 2015). For example, Yamaguchi Jirō and Nakakita Kōji’s *What Was the DPJ Government?* (2014), Yakushiji Katsuyuki’s *Testimony: Inner Politics of the Democratic Party* (2012), and the Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation’s *The Democratic Party of Japan in Power* (Funabashi & Nakano 2016). The existence of these in-depth investigations likely motivated Kan’s choice to make the chapter called “Policies We Could Not Deliver” (*Jitsugen dekinakatta seisaku*) the shortest of the book, numbering a mere 15 pages. But it bears considering why he treats the topic at length at all, especially given that it runs the risk of reinforcing frames that the book is meant to counteract.

One way to understand it is that Kan’s choice to represent the failures of the DPJ in this way is determined by generic conventions instead of the careful curation of politically beneficial interpretations. There remains a certain believability to the claim that the DPJ was thwarted by forces outside of its control. Kan had himself certainly been something of a tragic figure during the Fukushima crisis and remained much maligned even afterwards when reports vindicated some of his decisions. Richard Samuels (2013) for instance noted how certain actors represented Kan during the crisis:

[A] motif of leadership villainy evolved in which the center-left government of Kan Naoto became the lead rogue. On this account, the DPJ was a group of “amateurs” who were insufficiently aggressive in implementing the changes they had promised in their 2009 party manifesto and too slow to respond to the crisis itself. Prime Minister Kan, who went to Fukushima the day after the quake and tsunami, was roundly criticized for trying to micromanage rescue and relief (33-34).

But the reassessments that came in the aftermath painted Kan as more of a tragic figure than a vindicated leader, becoming a reverse of the ‘villainy’ motif. It is of course par for the course of the genre that the book plays out in the first-person, and it is perfectly reasonable that such personalized accounts will veer towards defensiveness. Kan makes many claims about the successes of the DPJ while weaving in criticisms of Abe. He makes it explicit that both the DPJ and the Abe government are woefully misrepresented, the former on account of exaggerated accounts of its failure in government, and the latter for its exaggerated successes and stability. But more important is that it is not an easy task to break

out of a role that has already been assigned.

It also matters for Kan to what ends the defense occurs. Although the book is mostly centered on an account of the DPJ's achievements and difficulties in government, its framing is still about the future of the liberal opposition. Reinterpretation of the DPJ matters for the CDP today since it inherited that party's experience in government. The final section of the book bridges that gap by applying those lessons to the contemporary CDP. Kan points to how the CDP became prepared for its role today through a litany of difficulties and hurdles that started with the DPJ's fall from government. For instance, he accords a large role to the nature of the electoral system and the sudden entry of third force challenger parties, such as the right-wing Japan Restoration Party (JRP), in the 2012 election. He laments that a confluence of elements produced the effect of a major defeat that sapped the DPJ's will. However, Kan argues that the position of largest opposition party, which they held after 2012, is a deeply meaningful one: "It means one is the counterpart in a two-party system. Whether the government or opposition are evenly matched, or the difference in seats is large does not matter" (Kan 2021b: 214). With more seats than the JRP, one of the responsibilities of the main liberal opposition is to not cede ground to such challengers who may end up narrowing the choices of citizens by marginalizing the liberal parties. Indeed, the way Kan values the survival of a liberal force against the conservative ruling party recalls the ways in which progressives served as "steadfast surrogate opposition" in the postwar era when the LDP was dominant (Gluck 1997: 8).

In this way, even painful tactical failures on the part of liberals can become a strategic victory over the forces of conservatism. While not ideal, keeping the struggle going is often sufficient to inspire a political cause, to a point. Kan repeats a popular refrain when he claims

that the fact of the liberal project's survival throughout the decade is what kept Abe from revising the constitution and the Diet becoming a post-cold war version of the imperial rule assistance association: "It was difficult to stop the Abe government's repeated forced vote [on legislation] (*kyōkō saiketsu*). What the opposition can only do in this situation, and what only the opposition can do, is [to take on] its most important role as a check on government" (Kan 2021b: 248). In a case where the opposition lost unequivocally—Abe's forced passing of the law allowing Japan to enter collective self-defense—the loss at least served a purpose. After quoting a speech by Edano against the law at length, Kan notes that although opposition and protest movements organizing, speeches, and chanting outside of the Diet building may have failed at stopping Abe's designs, the sense of failure "somehow felt different" (Ibid: 225). He explains:

Voices on the streets, mainly coming from the younger generations, shook the inside of the Diet. On the other hand, as with Edano's speech reaching citizens, the inner workings of the Diet reached the citizens as well. Cooperation between politics and citizens, which had become estranged [from one another] after the DPJ returned to opposition, seemed to have begun to reemerge in the struggle against the security legislation (Ibid: 225–226).

Considering the fact that few of Japan's population directly shared in this experience, the claim that citizens and politicians were finally repairing their relationship to one another appears exaggerated. But even if it is, it retains its believability for the more activist readers—the narrow group of opposition-leaning liberals that the word 'citizens' (*shimin*) often refers to in contemporary intellectual debates. The genre of the political book is such

that we expect the author to explore any presentiment of change that may have been undersold by the media. Part of what such books offer, then, is an account of how these overlooked moments relate to one another, showing hopeful partisans that the path was already paved and hidden in plain sight. For Kan as well, each struggle was another building block in the foundation of a proper alternative to government; each split or merger is evidence of the growing import of maintaining a liberal project to counterbalance conservative hegemony. When *The DPJ Government* explains that those struggles have appeared to pay off with the 2021 general election now in sight, it is banking its believability on narrative rather than a strictly factual coherence.

The liberal opposition would prefer that voters understood a more nuanced version of its role in politics since 2012, and even of the DPJ's time in power. Politicians such as Kan, however, can do little but attempt to balance a correction of the record with a narrative of learning from one's mistakes and failures. They can also become prosecutor and accuse, as he does, the opposite side of much more nefarious acts in government. He ultimately veers into a melodramatic register when he describes Abe and Suga's governments as "truly the politics of darkness [and] a regime of darkness (*masa ni ankoku seiji, ankoku no seiken de aru*)" (256). But for the most part, his style is focused on an evidentiary account that values democratic procedures and the role of the opposition as a check on the ruling party. In sum, Kan represents in his narrative the central tension in opposition politics and offers the current moment, which was hurtling towards an election, as a turning point in our unfavorable understanding of the past. As an example of a liberal melancholic narrative, his text transforms that past into a collection of bitter experiences that coalesce into the skills needed to manage the nation today. In that sense Kan personalizes the party's own redemption, lending a tragic flair to his narrative that

suggests resolution comes from careful recognition. This need for recognition is shared, of course, by Edano's book, which by dint of working in the same genre space makes use of similar themes and rhetorical styles. But the representational strategies differ in important ways, as we will now explore further.

Edano Yukio: The CDP in Japan's National Story

Edano Yukio entered politics in 1993, spending the first few years of his career in government. A staunch, perhaps overeager, reformist at the time, Edano was described by some as an internal opposition of sorts (Edano 1998: 29). He later joined the DPJ and gained prominence in several roles including Minister of State for Government Revitalization, Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry, and most famously Chief Cabinet Secretary, which he occupied under the Kan administration. He founded the CDP in 2017 after the collapse of the DPJ. Attempting to offer a broadly social democratic alternative to the conservative LDP, Edano served as the CDP leader for four years, in sharp contrast to a previous decade of revolving door leadership. Edano's leadership ended after the 2021 election after failing to deliver adequate seats for the party.

Edano Vision: A Japan of Mutual Support was published in May 2021. As an election was only barely beginning to come into view, the book was not exactly a policy document, although it was broadly understood to form "the basis of a new CDP-led Edano government manifesto" (Kan 2021b: 24). It was his first time to publish an election-oriented book since his time as Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry during the twilight of the DPJ government. That book was described at the time by one journalist as a "policy declaration" (*rosen sengen*) for the struggling DPJ (Japan National Press Club 2012). In it, he calls on Japan to respond to the 2011 Fukushima disaster by

abandoning modernization, which he claims has led to the self-destructive Promethean assumption that the environment can be mastered (Edano 2012: 16). Instead, Japan is to embrace “postmodernization” (*datsu kindai*) and the “redistribution of burden” (*fu no saibunpai*) within a dwindling economic pie (Edano 2012: 195–203).

For the most part, Edano’s core ideas did not change too much between 2012 and 2021. He remained committed to his view that modernization has run its course, that Japan needs to look towards the preservation rather than the growth of its wealth, and that the costs of maintaining a thriving society will have to be shared. As he was Chief Cabinet Secretary to the Kan administration during the Fukushima crisis, he naturally engages in an account of the DPJ government, but he takes very different lessons from it. While Kan focuses on what the DPJ’s manifesto did to bring the party into power in 2009, Edano believes that the party overpromised. Both foreground how struggle turned into experience, but where Kan seeks to uncover victories from a maligned past, Edano (2021) represents that experience as humbling “failures” (*zasetu*) (589).⁴ Where Kan positions the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to show off the party’s expertise with detailed policy, Edano endeavors to exude “security and safety,” rather than promising things that may constrain him in government (Ibid.).

Central to the book, then, is an exploration of the values and guiding principles of his future government. To do so, he begins in an unexpected place: with his ideas on conservatism and liberalism, as well as the relation of these ideologies to Japan’s national history. This is surprising in large part because Edano has long been considered a liberal firebrand, although it is clear he was never quite comfortable with the term (Mainichi Shimbun Reporting Team 2018: 44). *Edano Vision*’s opening pages sets this up clearly:

Since forming the [CDP] three years ago, I have repeatedly claimed that I am both a liberal and a conservative, or that the CDP is a mainstream conservative party. I have been criticized by some for using difficult language. Yet at the same time, the CDP has been branded with equally unclear labels [that treat] ‘liberal’ [as] equal to ‘left-wing’ [as] equal to ‘anti-authority.’ Sadly, the manner of understanding the party, myself, and Japanese politics is distorted (Edano 2021: 228–233).

As such, much of the book is dedicated to a minutely crafted argument about the role of opposition through an interrogation of the ideologies and labels we use to speak about politics. Particularly, Edano takes aim at the modern conflation between the older term of ‘progressive’ (*kakushin*) and the newer term ‘liberal’ (*riberaru*) that still colors current debates. Progressives—primarily socialists and communists—once opposed the conservative LDP in the 1955 system, but became a minority in the 21st century. The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) can still be seen as belonging to this ‘progressive’ tradition, but the word mostly fell out of use. Instead, the anti-LDP parties and politicians of the center, center-left, and the radical left broadly became known as liberal or reformist (*kaikaku*). The concern for Edano is that Japan’s so-called liberal politicians are fundamentally different from the old progressives, not necessarily in terms of the policies they support, but rather in liberalism’s disavowal of the radical worldview: that an ideal society can be achieved through calculated human intervention.

Here, Edano introduces the rather counterintuitive idea of the CDP as simultaneously a liberal and a conservative party, or rather a party that is liberal *because* it is conservative in temperament. Conservatism,

he argues, is based on the “modest understanding that all humans are imperfect,” and that therefore “[a]n ideal society has never been and never will be possible” (Ibid: 247–250). Conservatism is thus opposed to forms of progressivism, but not to the liberal values of tolerance and diversity, which conservatism can, and does, account for. In fact, as conservatives do not entertain nostalgia or an idealization of the future but seek to “improve the world through trial and error, using to their advantage the accrued experiences of history” (Ibid: 250), the LDP in its current state much more “resembles the progressivism [of the old left]” (Ibid: 472). For instance, the ruling party’s ambition to change the constitution—a document that is to be understood as “an aggregate of past experience” (Ibid: 431)—betrays the LDP’s radicalism. In sum, he argues, if they are conservatives in any way, it is only in so far as they attempt to conserve the short-sighted values and modernizing momentum of the Meiji era.

This is Edano’s main representational strategy: the description of grand historical forces and currents. He attempts to reveal, for instance, the CDP’s liberal conservatism through a closer look at the full history of Japan before the Meiji period. His examples are expansive, stretching across Japan’s 1500-year written history. Japan’s animistic traditions, for instance, allowed for cultural inclusivity that would have been difficult in monotheistic societies, leading to the introduction of other religions and syncretism as well as the Chinese-influenced kanji system, and later the extensive use of loan words. Material circumstances also contributed to Japanese liberal thought, as contingencies of wet rice agriculture forced villages to organize in a way that prioritized consensus-building and nurtured a society based on the principle of mutual aid. And even with regards to violence, Edano claims that while the wars waged throughout Japan’s history would continue to capture the imagination of people

for centuries, they were ultimately few and far between, often ending in a compromise of some sort and long periods of peace. With this, Edano aims to overturn assumptions about so-called liberal opposition’s purported neglect of national identity.

In his account, the leaders of Japan’s postwar era, particularly during its period of high-speed growth, were true conservatives only because they understood this history. These once responsible managers of growth only lost their claim to conservatism when they chose to embrace ‘Western neoliberalism’ (*ōbeiryū no shinjiyūshugi*), which introduced values of individualism (Ibid: 490). The idea of self-responsibility (*jikosekinin ron*) that came out of this legitimated a shift of responsibility away from the state and to the individual, in a move diametrically opposed to the liberal principle of mutual aid (Ibid: 705). The shift to neoliberalism was instigated by unreasonable leadership, particularly by prime ministers Koizumi, Abe, and Suga. They neither created stable growth nor spread the wealth equitably, and have thoroughly divided the country. Instead, these leaders offered spectacle in the form of the 2020 Olympics and the planned 2025 Osaka World Expo, which Edano decried as attempts at selling the people an old “dream of high-speed growth” instead of facing the challenges of the present (Ibid: 1171). In other words, while Japanese society had once built itself up into a caring and tolerant one, a foreign ideology suddenly brought sweeping changes to the fabric of society and gave rise to the perception of a society split between the poor and the well-off.

The book goes on to lay out policies that would dismantle the neoliberal consensus, particularly focusing on a robust welfare system capable of raising consumer confidence, and bring back Japanese values of mutuality. Luckily, even with the damages wrought by the pursuit of growth through neoliberalism, Japan had a decisive advantage in its history of

equally distributed wealth. This, Edano argues, cushioned Japanese society's falling living standards and saved it from more dramatic forms of discontent. "It is because the thirty years before [neoliberalism took hold in the 1980s] was an age of a fully-realized middle class society achieved through high-speed growth that Japan was able to withstand it, to an extent, with what it had already built up, even as the gap continued to widen at the same time" (Ibid: 2511-2514). This advantage, presumably lacking in some other nations facing similar changes in their economies, leaves Japan with the ability and resources needed to change course.

Neither nostalgic representations of pre-modern Japan nor of postwar Japan are new to political discourse. The postwar is fondly remembered as a time of optimism and national purpose (Leheny 2018) while the Edo period's imaginaries of harmony regularly float up during crises as sources of solutions for the excesses of modern capitalism (Samuels 2013; Morris-Suzuki 1995). While the two are usually juxtaposed, neoliberalism—increasingly used by liberals as shorthand for the LDP's political project—added a new contrast on top of the two, in effect bridging one font of nostalgia with another. But another important observation is that these are described as historical forces operating at an impersonal scale. The development of neoliberalism is a story coterminous with the end of modernization and growth, not just for Japan, but for the world. Edano closes out his book by arguing that the DPJ bore the historical responsibility of bringing about the same social democratic shift that the world saw with the Obama and Blair administrations. He says,

As already explained, the neoliberal trend began in Japan with the reforms enacted by Nakasone, around the same time that U.S. President Reagan and British Prime

Minister Thatcher reinforced it [in their nations]. In Japan, the trend has continued consistently for more than 30 years since then. The DPJ government from 2009, which attempted to move in a different direction, ended after three years without sufficiently changing the trend, partly due to the Great East Japan Earthquake. There were periods of relatively weak neoliberal tendencies, such as the Obuchi administration, but overall, a consistent trend has continued through the administrations of Nakasone, Koizumi, and Abe. ... It is largely the responsibility of the DPJ, including myself, that there has not been a [move back to social democracy] like in the United States and the United Kingdom. This time, we must create a government that can 'conserve,' in the true sense, the 'liberal' Japanese society, and achieve results (Ibid: 2501-2518).

In this final evocation of a failed global synchronicity, Edano reveals that at the core of the liberal melancholic narrative is the liberal opposition's unmet responsibility to fulfill a historic role. It was to aid Japan in becoming a democracy with meaningful choices in who gets to govern, and it failed. The CDP, humbly inheriting that failure from its predecessor party, learned to reproduce the values of the old LDP—good, conservative leadership that cared about minority opinions. Crucially, the narrative tension caused by the open wound of opposition failure is not resolved by the CDP entering government. Rather, it comes through a recognition of that failure's circumstances. Unlike Kan's personalized, pragmatic, and evidentiary approach, however, Edano's narrative is a nearly melodramatic depiction of impersonal forces and historical currents. And so, if the question on one's mind is how the liberal opposition can overcome its difficulties after 2012, then these are broadly incompatible

analyses. Yet, they cohere together and can be read back-to-back as intended, thanks in large part to their shared melancholic structure. We now move on to the final section, which explores the broader politics of this narrative and the genre of the politician's book.

The Narratives of a Liberal Opposition

Political actors are engaged in storytelling for the same reasons these stories are presumed to work on citizens: they help make sense of the world and provide meaning to social action. On the most strategic end of the spectrum, actors can, for instance, narrate economic policy by comparing the state to a household with outlays limited by income, or they can vilify populations with Manichaeian depictions of good and evil to profit electorally. But a narrative account of a party's struggles written by party elites cannot just be a politically expedient tally of events and their causes. A narrative of a particular length and published through the popular press invariably needs to wrangle personal experience, interpretations of events, and one's beliefs about politics with the conventions of storytelling. At that point, the agency of the politician as narrator is limited. More specifically, in Japan's liberal melancholic narrative, it is primarily the loss of the DPJ government and what it could have meant—and could mean again under a new liberal government—that the narrative must work through to reach a state of resolution.

Both books analyzed in this article share an affective structure that I have called the liberal melancholic narrative for its capacity to make diverging interpretations and differing accounts recognizable to one another. The books foreground the movement of the narrative towards recognition of the circumstances of opposition failure. That movement is an emotional one, as Brooks (1992) has expounded upon in his work in *Reading for the Plot*. Brooks, as Leheny (2018)

glosses, focuses here on “the complicity between reader and author in propelling a story forward, ideally toward an ending that—with or without surprises—ought to be satisfying” (20). Indeed, the ‘triviality’ of the politician's book as a genre with few surprises (Le Bart 2014) both works for and against the goals of its authors. On the one hand, it allows politicians to reach audiences through a narrative that is substantially longer than most forms of political communication. Its accessibility is in large part a result of its generic form, which brings assurances that it will be a broadly satisfying one narratively. After all, it is unlikely that a politician's book will end halfway through the biography of their career, or with an electoral loss ten years before. But if there are always some lessons to be learned, it is the learning itself and not the lesson that carries the narrative forward, just as it is the opposition's act of working through its past that matters in its melancholic narrative.

On the other hand, the formal triviality of the politician's book also makes it politically trivial. In fact, the reception of both books was largely muted. Critics from the conservative and liberal side alike poked holes in Edano's book, particularly with regards to his vagueness on policy (Kawaguchi 2021; Tamura 2021). Though some took heart from the book. For Yamaguchi Jirō, the book served as evidence that Edano had finally become “serious” (*honki*) (Mainichi Shimbun 2021). One liberal journalist praised some of the major ideas of the book and urged Edano to quit hedging on his vaguer positions as the public would invariably see through it (Samejima 2021). On the political scene, the head of the labor union federation expressed contentment at Edano's plans for raising incomes, while the JCP found affinity with the book's enthusiastic rebuke of neoliberalism (Furukawa 2021).

More to the point, perhaps, was that the book did not lead to an outcry on the part of the

party's liberal base against its odd deployment of conservatism, especially considering that its depiction of an essentialized past could easily upset progressives skeptical of inherent national values. Kan's book, on the other hand, flew almost entirely under the radar. Its political salience was of course less than Edano's, but Kan was a favorite target of conservatives critical of the liberal opposition, and so it stands out that his book did not inspire any notable critical essays. This deafening silence reflected Kan's already dwindling importance in the political conversation, and in 2023 he announced that he would not run in the following election.

Clearly, commentators, journalists, bureaucrats, and politicians read these books for what they might signal in terms of political strategy or policy. But their effect is usually small, and their lifespans run out quickly. Moreover, many of the details that bring the reader to the narrative's resolution seem to fall by the wayside. Edano's invocation of conservatism did not invite a strong reaction, nor was it widely accepted as part of the common discourse of the CDP or its supporters. Though self-styled conservatives exist in the CDP, it never changed the media's portrayal of the party as liberal. Kan for his part could also have been seen as intentionally driving a wedge into the party. His book followed Edano's, but predates the release of an official manifesto, so it is not unlikely that Kan's book was written and published when it was because he disagreed with the common assertion, repeated by Edano, that the DPJ overpromised and underdelivered. That the two narratives nevertheless flow in compatible ways points towards their narrative affinity, even as the demands behind that affinity are also why political actors are not entirely free to represent their political preferences.

This article offered the liberal melancholic narrative to think through the shared affective logic of two key texts in contemporary Japan's

main liberal opposition party. By taking seriously the emotional structures of genre work, we can interpret texts that are usually read as too conventional and too blatantly manipulative to warrant interest in the study of Japanese politics. After all, we often attribute a great deal of political agency in storytelling of this kind. If we instead choose to see narrative's constraints and delve further into the methodologies that help us interpret them, we can uncover new ways of understanding Japan's continually thwarted opposition and the stories that surround it.

We can see, as this article argues, that the failure of the opposition after 2012 asserts itself as something to be resolved, not just through political strategy, careful analysis, thoughtful philosophy, or a preponderance of evidence, but more importantly by engaging all of the above through the logic of narrative. However, these resolutions are fleeting, contained in the narrative of a couple hundred pages and the time it takes to read such. The discourses by liberal opposition party elites discussed are melancholic in large part because they struggle to resolve that tension with a new political settlement. This analysis also suggests that stories cannot always be so easily deployed to intentionally shape political facts. For Japan's opposition, it may very well be shifts in demographics, influxes of new politicians, and other exogenous variables that can best set the stage for crafting a less melancholic and more positive vision. Although there is no magic bullet, it is likely that the constraints on such narratives must change before the narratives themselves can change.

The photograph used in this article's homepage thumbnail was taken by Kim Youngjoon and can be found [here](#).

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Notes

¹ All translations of these two books are my own.

² Anker (2014b: 203-224) describes, for instance, the ways in which theoretical texts on the contemporary political left can reproduce a stultifying approach to the critique of global capitalism by following the emotional scripts of the original *Communist Manifesto*. These texts, ranging from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to Giorgio Agamben, make different claims but resonate in similar ways due to their dramatic exposition of villains, victims, the root causes of oppression, and their proposed roads to emancipation. In a similar vein, Leheny (2022) shows how fictional narratives converging on the historical character of the businessman Idemitsu Sazō maintained his believability as national inspiration even as the narratives ceded the biographical facts to the demands of building an appealing story.

³ Anker (2014b) uses the term “left melodramatic political discourse” to describe the patterns taken by key texts of left-wing political theory. Left melodrama is for her an expression of a melancholic attachment to the *Communist Manifesto* pervasive among the Western European and North American left. In my adaptation of her approach, I am more directly concerned with the latter aspect of melancholy derived more directly from Freud and Walther Benjamin’s subsequent critique of left-wing melancholy, as well as other political theorists (Benjamin 1974; Brown 1999; Dean 2012; Nunes 2021).

⁴ In lieu of pages, I have opted to include approximate Kindle book locations when quoting directly from *Edano Vision*.