

“We Are the Grass Roots” : Grassroots Rhetoric by Conservatives in Gender-Bashing Discourse

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Abstract

In Japan, objections to gender free or a gender-equal society have existed since the latter half of the 1990s. I define “gender bashing” as denigrating the concept of “gender” and related issues, and inquire into the backlash against feminism in Japan. Many who have analyzed gender bashing regard it as the activity of “conservatives,” but few studies treat it as a conservative movement. I regard it as a conservative movement. Some conservatives who engage in gender bashing refer to themselves as “grass roots”, and some in positions of power call for “grassroots conservatives” to stand up and oppose the gender-equal society or feminism. I use the term “grassroots rhetoric” to refer to both the self-identification as “grass roots” by conservative actors, and calling on the grass roots to stand up. I explore how conservatives use grassroots rhetoric and why they use it in gender bashing. I analyze gender-bashing discourse using frame analysis, focusing on conservative publications (magazines and books) and the new media (Internet websites, blogs, and BBSs) from 1998 to 2009. I divide gender-bashing actors into two types: “propagators” and “ordinary citizens”. I explore each actor’s frames and frame resonance. I have chosen two frames that are important to consider in grassroots rhetoric: an anti-power frame and a grass roots frame. I show the frames made by both the “propagators” and “ordinary citizens”, and show that the frames are resonant among them. When conservative people who engage in gender bashing use grassroots rhetoric, I argue that there is an anti-power component in the activity. Conservatives create a movement by claiming that they resist the power of the left wing by identifying themselves as grassroots citizens.

Key words: gender bashing, grassroots rhetoric, conservative movement, frame analysis, anti-power

1. Introduction

In Japan, objections to gender free or a gender-equal society have existed since the latter half of the 1990s. The main points of objection are that a gender-equal society denies masculinity and femininity and that feminism destroys the family. These arguments are accompanied by objections to sexual education (Wakakuwa 2006). Some feminists and their sympathizers call such opposition a “backlash against feminism.” Backlash means regression or rebounding, but Susan Faludi used this word in her book *Backlash* (Faludi 1991=1994) to include all antifeminist movements that appeared in America in the 1980s, and discussed the various reactions to feminism that had progressed since the 1970s (Humm 1995=1999; Inoue [eds.] 2002). I define “gender bashing” as denigrating the concept of “gender” and related issues (feminism, gender-equal society, gender free and sexual education, among others), and inquire into the backlash against feminism in Japan since the latter half of the 1990s.

Feminists and their sympathizers have published books that oppose gender bashing (e.g., Asai [eds.] 2003; Asai et al. 2006; Kimura [ed.] 2005; Ueno et al., Sofusha editorial department [ed.] 2006; Wakakuwa [eds.] 2006; and The Women’s Studies Association of Japan Gender Studies Research Group [ed.] 2006). Their research reveals that gender bashing has been practiced by conservative politicians, intellectuals, the media (*The Sankei Shimbun*, *Seiron*, *Shokun!* and *Shukan Shincho*, among others), and conservative organizations such as the Japan Conference; Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform; Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership; and the religious right wing group, The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (Wakakuwa 2006). The journalist Takenobu (Takenobu 2005) says that there has been “close teamwork,” especially among politicians, intellectuals, and the media. Many who have analyzed gender bashing regard it as the activity of “conservatives,” but few studies treat it as a conservative movement. In my analysis, I do not oppose gender bashing, but regard it as a conservative movement.

Some of those who engage in gender bashing—

specifically, the actors in the conservative movement—identify themselves as grass roots. There are people in positions of power, such as politicians and intellectuals, who call for “grassroots conservatives” to stand up and oppose the gender-equal society or feminism. Why do they use the term “grass roots”? Is this effective usage? I find this phenomenon significant. In this article, I use the term “grassroots rhetoric” to refer to both the self-identification as “grass roots” by conservative actors, and calling on the grass roots to stand up. I explore how conservatives use grassroots rhetoric and why they use it in gender bashing. This article analyzes grassroots rhetoric to deepen the understanding of the conservative movement and the reasons conservatives reject “gender” and related issues.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Analysis of gender bashing by its opponents

The social background of gender bashing has been interpreted as the strengthening of neo-conservatism, neo-liberalism, imperialism, patriarchy, and nationalism (Asai 2006; Koyama & Ogiue 2006; Koyasu 2006; The Women’s Studies Association of Japan Gender Studies Research Group [ed.] 2006). There is heterogeneity in age among the gender-bashing groups and actors—the middle-aged, elderly, and young men also participate in organized groups or individually, as sympathizing citizens (Kitada 2005; Sato 2006). Communication via the Internet plays an enormous role (Kaizuma 2005; Suzuki 2006).

Many studies have analyzed gender bashing at the discourse level. I also do so in this study, because gender bashing is extensively covered in books, magazines, and on the Internet and these media play a prominent part in the subject.

2.2. Discourse in social movement

From the late 1970s to the 1980s, the resource mobilization theory constituted the core of the social movement study. Later, however, theories of new social movements and frame analysis appeared. Ogino analyzes the movement’s discourse using frame analysis, “focusing not at the level of the individual’s perception but at the level of discourse,” and considers “how the movement can be described” (Ogino 2002: 138). Like Ogino, I also focus on the discourse level of gender bashing. Nomiya asserts that “statements against the dominant way of thinking of the time are also a movement” (Nomiya [ed.] 2002: iv). In this article, I also refer to certain types of statements or expressions of opinion as movements.

2.3. Preceding studies of the conservative movement

Oguma and Ueno (2003) have studied the Kanagawa prefecture branch of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform. Ueno’s interest lies in movements by

people who call themselves “ordinary citizens” (Oguma & Ueno 2003: 72). She reported that they do not like the “left wing,” and do not regard themselves as “right wing” either (Oguma & Ueno 2003: 90). One member of the group (in his 30s at the time) said that conservative movements should not take a top-down approach but should look at the world through the eyes of citizens (Oguma & Ueno 2003: 113). Another member (in her late 20s) declared in Ueno’s questionnaire that “I don’t like the left wing because they judge things not by truth but by whether it is ‘anti-power’ or not” (Oguma & Ueno 2003: 156). Ueno says that they call themselves “ordinary citizens” because there is no alternative term (Oguma & Ueno 2003: 145), and that in modern Japanese society, some “ordinary citizens” feel anxious and return to nationalism searching for a kind of “healing.”

Murai (1997) interviewed the Japanese teachers who ran the “Association for Advancement of an Unbiased View of History” to find out what types supported a review of modern and contemporary Japanese history. He identified four categories and concluded that the group was not homogenous: teachers who (i) were previously “left-wing,” (ii) were previously isolated, (iii) regarded tradition as important, and (iv) had left the association.

Yoshino (1997), who focused on cultural nationalism, interviewed teachers and businesspersons to find out how “*Nihonjinron*” was “consumed.” He argued that “nationalism” was not monolithic and consisted of various groups.

My study examines conservative movements that center on the issue of gender bashing. Oguma and Ueno (2003) and Murai (1997) homed in on “grassroots” actors in movements (as they claimed in their articles); and Yoshino (1997), on nationalism’s “consumers” (meaning, recipients). I have conducted research not only on “grassroots” people and “consumers,” but also on those in positions of power as producers of nationalism to determine how and why they use the term “grass roots.”

In sociology, there are many studies on movements by the “left wing” or “reformists,” but few on movements by the “right wing” or “conservatives” (Tarrow 1998=2006: 24-25; Ushiyama 2006: 260). In this article, I analyze the conservative movement using frame analysis, a method of social movement theory, and try to add new knowledge to the field.

When approaching gender bashing, it is also necessary to look at activity on the Web, which earlier analyses have tended to neglect. As for the relation between the conservative movement and the Internet, Ogiue (2009) sees collective action on the Web (or *Matsuri*, meaning “carnival” in Japanese) as a social movement. According to Tsuji (2008), people who behave like right-wingers online tend to support the movement offline. Gender bashing is also spread on the Web, so Internet blogs and

bulletin board systems (BBSs) also comprise an important subject matter that I have analyzed in my study.

2.4. Grassroots movements

Takada (1985) says that “grass roots” is used to identify ordinary citizens and refers to activities in a broad range of areas—from locality to family and from county to neighborhood. Takada states that the image of a grassroots movement in Japan is that of a “movement which has a new form, that is, an independent and voluntary movement by nonsectarian individuals and workers.” He defines a grassroots movement as a “social movement in which individuals address problems that affect their daily lives” (Takada 1985: 178). My research examines how the word grassroots is used at present in Japan by members of the conservative movement.

3. Method and Subject of This Analysis

3.1. Method: frame analysis

I investigate gender-bashing discourse using frame analysis, which invokes the viewpoint of symbolic interactionism and extends the resource mobilization theory (Hongo 2002: 215). According to the sociologist Snow, in the social movement theory, the meaning of “frame” in frame analysis is “schemata interpretation,” which enables individuals “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” occurrences within their life space and the world at large (Snow et al. 1986: 464; Soranaka 2004: 240). Snow et al. refer to the frame that a movement organization uses as a “collective action frame” (Miyamoto 2008: 75). The interaction between a movement and the people it wants to mobilize is captured as “frame resonance,” or the extent to which a movement actually mobilizes people’s sympathy (Snow & Benford 1988: 199; Soranaka 2004: 243). By using frame analysis, we can see how meaning is attached. Movement organizations, the mass media, and individuals create their own frames, through which they express their own movements and understand others’ movements. It is possible to examine movements from various perspectives by considering each frame and the correlations between these frames. I used frame analysis because it allows the exploration of the perceptions that gender bashers show and of the correlations between actors.

3.2. Subject of analysis

My research on the gender-bashing discourse focuses on conservative publications, such as magazines and books (e.g., Hayashi 2005; Nishio & Yagi 2005; Nomura [ed.] 2006; Yamamoto [ed.] 2006), and the new media, such as Internet websites, blogs, and BBSs from 1998 to 2009.

I analyzed two magazines that carried many gender-bashing articles: *Shokun!* (10 articles) and *Seiron* (60

articles). I searched for these articles using the keywords gender free, gender-equal society, and the names of individuals regarded as gender-bashing actors by feminists and their sympathizers, using the article database service CiNii. As it was claimed that the origin of gender bashing was a question asked by an LDP legislator in the metropolitan assembly in 1998 (Ehara 2007), I searched for articles from 1998. In choosing articles of conservative publications and on the Web, I considered both gender-bashing discourse and discourse opposed to gender bashing.

Discourse on the Internet is an important subject matter for two reasons: (i) ordinary citizens who lack the resources to publish in magazines or books prefer to share their opinions on the Internet and (ii) in the social movement field, we are told to pay attention not only to classical media but also to new media such as the Internet (Ohata 2004: 169). Furthermore, gender bashing is intense on the Web, which is used as a major platform.

4. Analysis

In this study, I define actors of social movements as a wide variety of subjects, ranging from ordinary citizens to politicians, intellectuals, and journalists. Yoshino (1997) inquires into the manner by which cultural nationalism is “consumed” and discusses both the “producers” and “consumers” of nationalism. Borrowing this approach, I have considered the activity of both sides: the intellectuals, politicians, and media who produce gender-bashing discourse, and the people who consume it. I consider both activities as movements in this article. Some studies regard the actions of politicians and intellectuals as movements, but I treat the actions of authorities and ordinary citizens equally.

I divide gender-bashing actors into two types: “propagators” and “ordinary citizens.” The propagators include those who participate in “close teamwork” (Takenobu 2005), such as politicians, intellectuals, and journalists. According to analysts, these people “spread” gender bashing, hence the term “propagators.” Meanwhile, ordinary citizens include such actors as grassroots conservatives. Oguma and Ueno (2003) reported that there were “ordinary citizens” in the Kanagawa prefecture branch of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform; I have called them ordinary citizens on the assumption that they belong to a similar social class.

The propagators in this study roughly correspond to the producers in Yoshino’s analysis, and ordinary citizens, to the consumers. I called the groups by different names because even ordinary citizens could easily generate gender-bashing discourse on the Internet. There are people who take the middle ground, but it is possible to see how ordinary citizens use the discourse of

propagators as a resource by dividing the participants into these two types. When it is difficult to judge whether the person is a propagator or an ordinary citizen, I have considered self-designation more important than “truth” in this article.

I look at how each actor in gender bashing interprets the situation, how the perception of each is shared with other actors, and how they influence each other. In other words, I explore each actor’s frames and frame resonance.

I have extracted the frames of perception that are characteristic of the gender-bashing discourse. I have chosen two frames that are important to consider in grassroots rhetoric: an anti-power frame and a grass roots frame. Because of space constraints, I can present only a few examples in this article.

4.1. Anti-power frame

This is a frame of perception that gender free, feminism, and a gender-equal society are a top-down revolution by powerful feminists who belong to the establishment and that people need to resist this power.

4.1.1. Frames of perception of the “propagators”

Below are three examples of anti-power frames produced by the propagators that show resonance:

We are facing a time of crisis in which there is no future in this country unless we protect young people against the dangerous top-down gender revolution by feminists who belong to the establishment and the gender propaganda by the fourth estate mass media. (Sakurai 2006.5: 349). (Source: *Seiron*)

And now, bush bitches begin a counterattack, holding up a gender-equal society, a revolutionary ideology. This revolution is definitely different from old-style violent revolutions in that it is a cultural revolution where feminists enter the establishment and destroy traditional values from the inside (Nomura [ed.] 2006: 3). (Source: *Gender Equal Idiot*)

Now Japanese people should say “No” to the UN’s feminist world revolution (Imai 2006: 156). (Source: *Gender Equal Idiot*)

In each frame, similar phrases are used and each writer shares a common line of perception. In the language of frame analysis, we can say that these frames are resonant.

4.1.2. Frames of perception of “ordinary citizens”

Below are anti-power frames of “ordinary citizens” showing how frames are shared between “propagators”

and “ordinary citizens.”

(1) Discourse of the manager of “BBS for watching feminazis” in *Seiron*

Here is a passage from an article in *Seiron* written by the manager of “BBS for watching feminazis” (Masutani 2004/9):

Feminists who aim to force gender free using the administrative machinery are totally exclusive, undemocratic, and invoking the power of the state (Masutani 2004/9: 257).

The phraseology in the quotation above is similar to that of the articles of propagators cited earlier. This demonstrates that the frames are resonant and that frames of perception are shared between propagators and ordinary citizens.

(2) “BBS for watching feminazis” <http://www.azaq-net.com/bbs/bbs.cgi?tani6010>

“BBS for watching feminazis” is “a BBS that calls citizens’ attention to feminist fascism.” Users argue that “feminists promote a ‘gender-free’ policy that destroys culture and denies the family in the name of a ‘gender-equal society.’”

Far from useless, it is only privileged feminists who benefit, so we should argue about an “equal society” that poisons the state’s ordinary citizens. (BBS archives No.831, <http://www.azaq-net.com:8080/tani6010/831.html>, 2010.09.26)

Judging from this wording, the users seem to think that elite feminists have power and intend to manipulate and dominate ordinary citizens. Their frame of criticism is resonant with the anti-power frame. I consider “resisting the establishment’s power” a common perception among conservative citizens, who may criticize feminists because they believe that feminists intend to use power to control them.

(3) <Japan>Petition against “bills destroying Japan” . com <Let’s protect>

As another example, I cite a phrase from an online-petition entitled “Petition against the bills destroying Japan” against the ratification of the United Nation’s Optional Protocol to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women:

In Article 2 of the Charter of the United Nations, it is said that “nothing contained in the present charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic

jurisdiction of any state." I think that Article 2 is violated if the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which acts as a higher judicial body than the Japanese Supreme Court, interferes in a state where there is no discrimination against women such as Japan. ("◆ A model sentence ◆ Optional Protocol to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1" <http://sitarou09.blog91.fc2.com/blog-entry-25.html>, 2010.09.26).

The point of this petition is "not to use UN's authority to eliminate discrimination against women," which makes this argument resonant with the "anti-power frame." Other criticism against the Convention contains the argument that "we must oppose the feminists belonging to the establishment." These arguments are likewise resonant with the "anti-power frame." As a side note, I compare this with similar rhetoric from the United States. American religious right-wingers also oppose the Convention because it interferes with state sovereignty (Kosaka 2008). This reasoning, too, is resonant with the "anti-power frame."

4.2. Grass roots frame

The "grass roots frame" regards some participants in a movement as grassroots actors. Grassroots rhetoric used in this frame shows two kinds of expression. One, used by ordinary citizens, uses the first person for the subject; for example, "we (including themselves) are the grass roots." The other, used by propagators, refers to the reader or listener as the grass roots; for example, "stand up, grass roots." I show that the grass roots frame of the propagators and ordinary citizens are resonant, and examine how this rhetoric is used.

4.2.1. Frames of perception used by "propagators"

I present three examples of propagators (those in positions of power, such as politicians and intellectuals) calling for the grass roots to stand up.

For example, the website of Japan's largest conservative organization, the Japan Conference (<http://www.nipponkaigi.org/>, 2010.11.27), says that they will spread the nation's grassroots movement. The Japan Conference is said to partake in gender bashing.

When Abe Shinzo became Prime Minister, Yagi Hidetsugu, representative of Nippon Kyouiku Saisei Kiko, who is regarded by feminists and their sympathizers as a prominent gender-bashing actor, said that he wanted the grassroots movement to move political power and contribute to the regeneration of education without being united with political power (*The Sankei Shimbun*, 2006/09/22, morning edition). Nippon Kyouiku Saisei Kiko says on its website (<http://www.kyoiku-saisei.jp/kiko/>

kiko.html, 2010.11.27), "we propose policy that corrects gender-free education and radical sexual education."

Below is another example from *Seiron*:

In this critical situation, local antifeminism movements at the "grassroots" level are important. (Hayashi 2005.5: 353)

From these three examples, we see conservative people in positions of power recommending gender bashing to the "grassroots movement." Here the grass roots frames are mutually resonant and the use of grassroots rhetoric is evident.

4.2.2. Frames of perception of "ordinary citizens"

I present three examples of the use of rhetoric by ordinary citizens who call themselves grass roots, and show how these grass roots frames are resonant among ordinary citizens and between propagators and ordinary citizens.

One blogger under the title "Grassroots movement by a shiba inu @Ameba" (<http://ameblo.jp/londonline/>, 2010.11.27) introduces various conservative flyers. One such flyer attacks the bill that accepts separate surnames for married couples, thus implying that conservative people who criticize separate surnames for married couples can call their act a "grassroots movement."

Another example from a blog entitled "A conservative in Tokushima" introduces an article from a conservative magazine *Homeland and the Youth*, which describes the experience of collecting the signatures of those who oppose separate surnames for married couples. The writer also attacks gender free, and calls the act a national grassroots movement (<http://d.hatena.ne.jp/minoru20000/20100416/p1>, 2010.11.27).

In a third example, a home page entitled "A site which collects handmade flyers!" (<http://chirashihokanko.makibisi.net/>, 2010.11.27) introduces numerous conservative flyers, including one attacking a gender-equal society, gender free, and separate surnames for married couples. The site manager introduces herself as "a mediocre housewife who does not belong to any organization" and says that "this is the site where ordinary citizens gather who think that Japan is in danger." She also manages a BBS entitled "A site that collects handmade flyers: a grass roots report" (<http://chirashihokanko.bbs.fc2.com/>, 2010.11.27). The BBS gives information about conservative flyers, which implies that a conservative housewife who passes on information about conservative flyers regards her activity as being grassroots.

From these three examples, we can see how grassroots frames are resonant among ordinary citizens and between propagators and ordinary citizens, and how ordinary citizens use grassroots rhetoric.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

I have shown the anti-power and grass roots frames in this article and examined how these are used and resonant among conservatives. I will now consider the reasons they use grassroots rhetoric.

The term “grassroots movement” presents an image of bottom-up activity by ordinary citizens, rather than top-down control by authority. When conservative, gender-bashing citizens call themselves “grass roots” and conservative authorities such as politicians, intellectuals, and the mass media ask for a “grassroots movement,” I argue that there is an anti-power component in the picture.

Gender bashing contains an aspect of resistance to top-down control by authority, such as resistance to government by the feminazis. When conservative people involved in gender bashing use the term grassroots movement, there are two possible reasons. One is strategic, and the other is that they really believe it. In either case, it is a fact that they repeatedly state that people should resist feminists who belong to the establishment, although feminists are not the only target of their criticism. Such conservatives often claim to be numerous, and sometimes, that they are the majority. They also claim that feminists are a small group of people—a minority. When they criticize feminists, however, they would be wiser to say that they resist the establishment rather than claim that they exclude the minority. Now that gender-equal policies, such as the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society, have been introduced (whether effective or not) and women have gradually come to participate in society, “feminists” have won rights and gained authority. While minorities usually seek to ensure their rights through grassroots movements, we see the opposite phenomenon in the case of gender bashing. Here the “majority” and the conservatives, who have had vested interests so far, choose to call themselves the grass roots.

Self-identification as “ordinary citizens” is sometimes seen in anti-power and grassroots frames, and it is also used as a keyword in gender bashing. In the discourse of gender bashing, the rhetoric of being ordinary citizens is sometimes used, such as the person who posted a message under the name “ordinary resident” on “BBS for watching feminazis.” This also connotes that they regard themselves as ordinary, in contrast to the feminists who belong to the establishment.

Using frame analysis, I have extracted from gender-bashing discourse two frames of perception that are characteristic of gender-bashing actors: an anti-power frame and a grass roots frame. My findings are that these frames are resonant in each gender-bashing discourse. I also classified the gender-bashing actors into “propagators” and “ordinary citizens.” I found that their

frames of perception were shared—that is, resonant—and examined how grassroots rhetoric was used in these frames.

Oguma and Ueno (2003) said that ordinary citizens join the conservative movement to find healing; some feminists have explained the social background of gender bashing in a similar way. Ueno also says that conservative people call themselves ordinary citizens for lack of a better term. I argue, however, that conservatives also create a movement in claiming that they resist the power of the left wing by identifying themselves as grassroots citizens. Grassroots rhetoric could be used as a resource when people contend that they want to resist power and mobilize others.

There are several limitations to this study, though. Because this analysis has focused on the discourse level, it is sometimes difficult to judge whether the writer of the discourse is “really” a “propagator” or an “ordinary citizen.” In addition, I did not analyze all the discourses (especially on the Web), so that the examples I selected may be biased. I also did not measure the impact of the grassroots rhetoric.

When persons of power, such as politicians and intellectuals, call for “ordinary citizens” to stand up and be noticed, and people start a movement, does that make it a grassroots movement? In this article, I have regarded the activities of politicians and intellectuals as a movement; however, when ordinary citizens accept the request of authorities to start a movement, whether it is a grassroots movement or not was not established. Future studies can explore this issue. Whether the grassroots rhetoric was used before and is used in other countries could also be the theme of future research.

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