Destructive Discourse

‘Japan-bashing’ in the United States, Australia and Japan in the 1980s and 1990s

This thesis is presented for the degree of
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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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ABSTRACT

By the 1960s-70s, most Western commentators agreed that Japan had rehabilitated itself from World War II, in the process becoming on the whole a reliable member of the international community. From the late 1970s onwards, however, as Japan’s economy continued to rise, this premise began to be questioned. By the late 1980s, a new ‘Japan Problem’ had been identified in Western countries, although the presentation of Japan as a dangerous ‘other’ was nevertheless familiar from past historical eras. The term ‘Japan-bashing’ was used by opponents of this negative view to suggest that much of the critical rhetoric about a ‘Japan Problem’ could be reduced to an unwarranted, probably racist, assault on Japan.

This thesis argues that the invention and popularisation of the highly-contested label ‘Japan-bashing’, rather than averting criticism of Japan, perversely helped to exacerbate and transform the moderate anti-Japanese sentiment that had existed in Western countries in the late 1970s and early 1980s into a widely disseminated, heavily politicised and even enculturated phenomenon in the late 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, when the term ‘Japan-bashing’ spread to Japan itself, Japanese commentators were quick to respond. In fact, the level and the nature of the response from the Japanese side is one crucial factor that distinguishes ‘Japan-bashing’ in the 1980s and 1990s from anti-Japanese sentiment expressed in the West in earlier periods.

Ultimately, the label and the practice of ‘Japan-bashing’ helped to transform intellectual and popular discourses about Japan in both Western countries and Japan itself in the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, in doing so, it revealed crucial features of wider Western and Japanese perceptions of the global order in the late twentieth century. Debates about Japan showed, for example, that economic strength had become at least as important as military power to national discourses about identity. However, the view that Western countries and Japan are generally incompatible, and share few, if any, common values, interests or goals, has been largely discarded in the early twenty-first century, in a process that demonstrated just how constructed, and transitory, such views can be.
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AUTHOR’S NOTE

Disclaimer
This thesis is a work of academic scholarship on the concept and practice of ‘Japan-bashing’. As such, it includes written and visual references to historical and contemporary views of Japan that reflect racial or prejudicial attitudes towards Japan common to the period of their composition. The author does not endorse these views, nor the practice of ‘Japan-bashing’ generally.

Names
Japanese names are given following Japanese custom, with surname first, except in the case of authors who are more widely known for their English-language writings under their Western-style names.

Macrons have not been used in the case of well-known place names such as Tokyo, Kyoto or Osaka.
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