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978-0-521-19914-8 - Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan

Mary C. Brinton

Excerpt

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I

The Lost Generation

“People in my parents’ generation seem to remember the world as having been a more energetic and lively place when they were in their thirties. It’s different now. Even though everyone says the economy is recovering, there is no feeling of energy – just kind of a gloomy atmosphere.”

– Twenty-eight-year-old male graduate of a low-ranking public general high school

*Kakusa. NEET. Furitā. Parasaito shinguru. Hikikomori. Wākingu puā. Net-café refugees. Shōshika.*¹ Japanese newspapers, magazines, and books are filled with terms such as these, emblematic of a society undergoing transformation and grappling with new and bewildering social problems. To comprehend these phenomena requires an understanding of what young Japanese experienced in the 1990s when they entered adulthood. The Japanese labor market was changing under their feet, undergoing important structural transformations that made their choices and opportunities fundamentally different from the choices their parents had faced. Although young people’s work and lifestyle preferences were changing as well, more important were the changes occurring in the institutions in Japan that had supported the prior generation’s movement from school to work and into adulthood. The breakdown in school-work institutions

¹ The translations of these terms are as follows: *kakusa* (economic inequality); NEET (young people who are neither in school nor employment); *furitā* (“free arbeiter” – young people who freely move among jobs and take time out of the labor force); *parasaito shinguru* (young people who live with their parents and rely on them financially); *hikikomori* (extreme social isolates, the large majority of whom are men in their twenties or thirties); *wākingu puā* (the working poor); *net-café refugees* (homeless people who live in Internet cafés); *shōshika* (the declining birthrate).

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and in employers' guarantee of secure employment to large numbers of new graduates produced a "lost generation" in the 1990s, a cohort of young people unable to gain a stable economic toehold from which to embark on their adult lives.

Lost in the transition from school to work, the lost generation is a reflection of a deeper transition in Japanese society – a transition away from social institutions that helped guide individuals from one life stage to another. These life stages have been deeply connected in Japan to what we might call the "social locations" in which individuals find security and a sense of identity. The rupture in the social institutions guiding individuals into such social locations has profound implications, as it requires individuals to master new sets of skills to navigate what have become rocky and at times lonely transitions. The costs of these recent institutional changes in Japan have been borne mainly by the young, especially the least educated among them.

A story from my fieldwork at Japanese high schools will illuminate the idea of "social locations" and will illustrate how young people's movement among social locations was more or less smoothly orchestrated by social institutions prior to Japan's economic crisis of the 1990s.

SHAKAIJIN AS KAISHAIN

"A success is when we find a company for the student." This is what a teacher in the guidance section of a low-ranking academic public high school in Kanagawa prefecture (outside of Tokyo) told me when I asked him what the school considers a "successful outcome" for a graduating senior.² When I asked why, he replied simply, "*Anshin dakara*" (because it is safe and secure, or literally, "because it gives peace of mind"). Such a definition of success indicates that the school had fulfilled its task of placing the graduating senior into a company. The most important thing was to find a good organization (a social location or *ba*) for each student to move into in the next phase of his or her life. Success was not defined in terms of helping students find the type of work to which they were best suited. Indeed, across the twenty high schools in which I conducted

² As will be discussed more thoroughly in later chapters, the first important "fork in the road" in Japanese students' educational careers is application to high school. While not compulsory, more than 90 percent of young people matriculate to high school. Throughout the book I will distinguish between academic or general high schools, attended by more than three-quarters of young people, and vocational high schools.

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in-depth interviews of teachers, such a definition never surfaced. As one teacher commented dryly, “We talk about young people becoming *shakaijin* [adult members of society], but what we really mean is that they become *kaishain* [company people].”

The well-managed transition of individuals from school to company is a microcosm of the distinctive way that postwar Japanese society was organized before the 1990s. It was important for individuals to be attached to a *ba* – important for their material success in life and important also for their identity and sense of well-being. The concept of *ba* is difficult to translate into English, as the nuances go beyond such neutral terms as “organization” or “institution.” The concept was so central to sociologist Nakane Chie’s analysis of Japanese society and social structure as to merit explanation at the beginning of the first chapter of her classic *Japanese Society*.³ Translating *ba* as “frame,” Nakane wrote: “*Frame* may be a locality, an institution or a particular relationship which binds a set of individuals into one group: in all cases it indicates a criterion which sets a boundary and gives a common basis to a set of individuals who are located or involved in it” (Nakane 1970: 1).

Scholars studying a foreign culture often suffer the occupational hazard of declaring certain terms untranslatable into English, and Western scholars of Japanese society are as likely as others to fall prey to this. But the concept of *ba* is just such a term. “Frame” denotes the bounded quality of *ba*, the idea of a line defining the “groupness” of a collection of individuals. But frame remains an awkward translation. Nor does “organization” quite capture the quality of *ba*, as the term organization evokes neither a sense of long-term membership for individuals nor the way in which *ba* shapes and reinforces individuals’ identity. For these reasons, I prefer the term “social location.” I will use *ba* and social location interchangeably to denote an organization or bounded collective to which individuals belong and from which they derive a sense of identity and security. “Social location” has the additional advantage of capturing the sense in which such membership also defines or categorizes the individual in the eyes of others standing outside the situation. For example, the role

³ The late economic historian Murakami Yasusuke extended the idea of *ba* in his writings (with Kumon Shumpei and Satō Seizaburō) on “Japan as *ie shakai*.” Murakami traced the historical evolution of *ba* as an organizing principle in Japanese society, and asserted that this principle of social organization is more efficient under certain environmental conditions (such as *sakoku*, or a relatively closed society as exemplified by Japan during the Tokugawa period from 1600 to the middle of the nineteenth century) than others. For a summary of the argument see Murakami (1984).

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of “wife” defines a woman as a member of the *ba* of family, identifying her to those outside the marriage as being in the “state” or “social location” of marriage.

Although Nakane has been strongly criticized over the years by foreign anthropologists and sociologists for depicting a stereotypical and elitist view of a homogeneous Japanese society and downplaying the significant boundaries between social classes or between ethnic Japanese and ethnic minorities, the validity of her emphasis on the importance of *ba* or social location for individual identity and psychological and economic security remains largely intact. Nakane contrasted the importance of *ba* as an organizing principle of Japanese society with the importance of individual characteristics or attributes in societies such as the U.S. She depicted the U.S. as a society where individuals move more frequently between *ba*, depending less on attachment to a particular *ba* for their identity and well-being and more on the individual characteristics they carry from place to place.

The Japanese high school teachers with whom I spoke clearly viewed the purpose of their assistance in students’ job searches as finding a social location or *ba* for graduates. The process was not fundamentally about what these young people wanted to do in their lives. Rather, it was about the *ba* they would become members of. In a sense, this *ba* would be the organization that would turn them into full-fledged members of society. The *ba* would turn them into adults, or *shakaijin*.

This idealized process whereby Japanese young people move out of the status of full-time student and into the status of worker or adult has been heavily predicated upon the availability of full-time jobs in *shokuba* or workplaces (note again the *ba* built into the term). What happens, then, when fewer and fewer employers recruit new graduates into full-time jobs and thereby bestow upon them the status of full-fledged membership in the workplace? What happens when schools are no longer the important *ba* that help connect young people to this next stage in their lives? In broader terms, what happens when social institutions falter in their ability to help young people make the transitions that society tells them are the principal ones they must successfully pass through in order to become adult members of society?

In 1990s Japan, all of this came up for grabs. But the most immediate manifestations of the breakdown of Japan’s finely-tuned mechanisms for moving young people from school into the labor force at first belied the deep underlying systemic changes. What was most visible instead were the new lifestyles of young people: greater movement across jobs

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and a greater propensity to move in and out of the labor force; an ever-lengthening period of time, often into one's late twenties or early thirties, residing in the parental household; and a seeming lack of interest in getting married and having children – the two hallmarks, along with full-time employment, of “responsible” Japanese adulthood.

FURITĀ AND “PARASITE SINGLES”

Social concern over changing lifestyle patterns among Japan's youth was fueled by the publication of sociologist Yamada Masahiro's *Parasite shinguru no jidai* (*The Age of Parasite Singles*) in 1999. Yamada argued that Japanese young people hold fundamentally different values and preferences from their parents' generation. In his view, young people can afford not to take work seriously because they are able to rely on their parents financially while continuing to reside with them. His book portrayed a symbiotic and unhealthy relationship between two phenomena (although unfortunately providing little hard evidence for either of them): young people's loss of the “unique” work ethic that had characterized postwar Japan, and the parental generation's tendency to pamper youth and permit their selfish twenty-somethings to remain economically dependent far into adulthood. Particularly at fault, according to Yamada, were young Japanese women, whom he portrayed as selfish and materialistic, valuing luxury goods and foreign vacations over marriage and motherhood.

As with any stereotype, Yamada's portrayal of dilettantism among young Japanese contained some grains of truth, though these grains had scattered by the late 1990s. During the “bubble economy” of the late 1980s to early 1990s, labor demand soared and many young people – especially university graduates – had their pick of jobs. The term *furitā* came into common usage, denoting a young person who moved in and out of jobs and even in and out of the labor market in order to pursue a fulfilling lifestyle. *Furitā* as a term came from the combination of *furī*, the *gairaigo* (defined as a foreign word with Japanese pronunciation) for “free” and *arubaito*, the *gairaigo* for the German word *arbeit* (labor or job).⁴ High levels of labor demand made it possible for some university

⁴ The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) defines *furitā* as individuals aged fifteen to thirty-four who are not in school and who are either working as part-time or temporary employees, are unemployed and searching for part-time or temporary employment, or are not working but are willing to accept part-time or temporary work. In the

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graduates to move in and out of work and to experience a more mobile and free lifestyle than the one their parents had entered at a similar stage in their lives.

In the late 1980s the Japanese media trumpeted fanciful stories of *furitā* who worked for several months, quit their jobs, and then used the wages they had earned (generally while living with their parents) to indulge in such adventures as three-month long surfing trips in Australia. After such frivolities they would return to Japan and begin another job in order to garner the savings for their next adventure. Beneath such stories lay a mixed discourse describing the freedom, boldness, and irresponsibility of the young. Yamada's "parasite singles" rhetoric fed into this latter stereotype of irresponsibility and frivolity, characteristics foreign to an older generation raised in an era when such lifestyle options were the stuff of pure fantasy, to be entertained only at the risk of near-certain social ostracism. At the same time, *furitā*'s apparent snubbing of the stable but plodding lifestyle of Japan's postwar *sararīman*, the full-time male employee who was at once the symbol of the country's phenomenal economic growth and the symbol of conformity to company dictates, was taken by a minority of observers as a refreshing sign of youthful creativity.

By the early years of the twenty-first century a discourse emphasizing the adventurous though spoiled nature of young Japanese began to give way to the sober recognition that it was the 1990s decade of economic recession and employment restructuring – not youthful exuberance and disregard of social norms – that was responsible for rising youth unemployment and part-time employment. With the publication of Genda Yūji's *Shigoto no naka no aimai na fuan* (*A Nagging Sense of Job Insecurity*) in 2001, government bureaucrats, the media, and scholars started to pay greater attention to the ways that employment restructuring had pushed young people to the periphery of the labor market.⁵ Meanwhile, in-depth research by Kosugi Reiko of the Japan Institute of Labour Policy and

case of women the MHLW applies this categorization only to the unmarried; the implicit assumption is that a married woman is supported mainly by a male breadwinner and therefore is not considered to be at economic risk to the same degree as male or unmarried female part-time or temporary workers.

⁵ Genda is widely credited for reorienting the discourse on young people toward a focus on how employment restructuring and job loss affected their behaviors. *Shigoto no naka no aimai na fuan* received the prestigious Suntory Prize for Social Science and Humanities and the Nikkei Economic Book Award. An English translation of the book was published in 2007 as *A Nagging Sense of Job Insecurity: The New Reality Facing Japanese Youth*.

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Training (JILPT) documented the dwindling full-time employment options for young people and the younger generation's concomitant struggle to establish satisfying work lives.⁶ Honda Yuki of Tokyo University's Institute of Social Science added her voice as well, first through her analysis of the historical roots of Japan's high school-work system and then through several books on the contemporary breakdown of the traditional system and the consequent difficulties for youth.⁷

Spurred by the dissemination of research by Genda, Kosugi, Honda, and others, the recognition grew in Japan that many young people who came of age during the severe economic downturn of the 1990s faced labor market conditions that rendered stable employment a mirage they couldn't bring to life even if they wanted to. *Furitā*-hood increasingly took on a hollow meaning. As I will show later in this chapter, increasing numbers of young people fell into standard categories of disenfranchisement such as the unemployed and the marginally employed. Moreover, new ways of categorizing young people's attachment or lack of attachment to paid labor emerged as well. The possibilities of entering an economically secure location or *ba* have simply been disappearing.

INSTITUTIONAL EQUILIBRIUM, DISEQUILIBRIUM, AND SOCIAL GENERATIONS

My original goal for this research was to analyze Japan's high school-work system and to better understand how Japanese high schools and employers historically came to participate in a well-articulated process of matching the educational nonelite into jobs. As mentioned in the preface, Japan's unusual school-work process was widely praised by scholars and policy analysts in countries such as the U.S. where the movement from school to work was anything but smooth for high school graduates. But the ground was shifting under my feet from the very start, with the system unraveling in the late 1990s even as I conducted my initial fieldwork on it. What began as an analysis of a distinctive institutional solution in Japan to a problem faced by all societies – how to help young people, especially the least-educated among

⁶ Kosugi's work has appeared mainly in Japanese with the exception of several articles in the *Japan Labor Review*, the quarterly journal of the Japan Institute of Labour Policy and Training, and a recent English translation of *Furitā to iu ikikata* (*Escape from Work: Freelancing Youth and the Challenge to Corporate Japan*, 2008).

⁷ In English, see Honda (2003), Honda (2004), and Honda (2005a). In Japanese, see especially Honda (2005b).

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them, to make the transition from school into work – became a much larger analysis of how and why Japan’s particular institutional solution was no longer working.

As my empirical research progressed I realized that I was studying an example of the problem that sociologist James Coleman regarded as being at the heart of what sociology should most concern itself with: how the macro-level context affects individual motivations and behaviors and, more importantly, how individual behaviors subsequently transform the macro-level context.⁸ Coleman’s strong belief was that this endeavor was best attempted with the assumption that individuals are purposive, goal-directed actors. In my particular project I was observing how the social actors involved in placing Japanese young people into the workplace – schools, employers, and young people themselves – were responding to the pressures of economic recession and employment restructuring. The responses of these sets of actors were then shaping a new macro-level landscape, a new institutional equilibrium, with a structure of employment opportunities and constraints quite different from the ones that had existed before. The challenge for young people was to figure out the strategies and resources that could help them navigate this changed landscape.

The theoretical framing I had crafted during twelve years of collegue-ship with Coleman at the University of Chicago deeply shaped the direction in which this project moved – or had to move, because of the fact that my project on institutional stasis had transformed into one on institutional change. But viewing individuals as rational and goal-directed was not quite sufficient to understand the interplay between individual choices and the institutional landscape in which they played out. Why? Because institutional change occurs not only in a structural context but in a cultural context as well. Individuals respond to new opportunities and constraints against the backdrop of cultural templates of what is appropriate or even imaginable behavior. This is not typically the stuff of which rational choice theory is made. To be sure, the cultural appropriateness of particular choices or behaviors can to a degree be analyzed through an understanding of social norms, and Coleman along with other rational choice theorists in sociology and related disciplines have considered norms to be an important arena for rational choice theory. But it is harder to find within a rational-choice approach the tools with which to analyze why some choices may not even occur to individuals or why, even if they

⁸ See Chapter 1 in Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (1990) and also Coleman’s “A Vision for Sociology” (1996).

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do, individuals may not have the necessary psychological or emotional resources to act on such choices.

Understanding how institutional change impacts individuals' motives and behavior and how these in turn help construct a new institutional landscape requires an understanding of the cultural valences of preexisting institutions and an appreciation for how the range of possibilities for individual actions and reactions is constructed by these cultural valences. Individual strategies of action may be theoretically possible without being empirically thinkable or practicable when it comes to everyday behavior. But the analyst cannot understand this without knowing what went before – that is, without knowing what behaviors were facilitated by the preexisting institutional landscape.

In thinking about the issue of “what went before,” it is helpful to refer back to what Mannheim referred to nearly a century ago as the problem of generations. Mannheim discussed the significance of individuals in a generation sharing a common set of social circumstances as a result of the timing of their biological birth (Mannheim 1952). This biological fact gives rise to individuals' shared location in social structure and shared predisposition for modes of thinking and experience. In Bourdieu's terms several decades later, the individual's *habitus* stems from growing up in a particular social-structural environment (Bourdieu 1977). While Bourdieu's central project was the analysis of class relations and reproduction, such dynamics occur within the larger historical context, a fact to which Mannheim drew attention. (Class dynamics enter into the story of the present book in terms of the differences in how young Japanese men from elite versus nonelite educational backgrounds have navigated the changed institutional environment of the 1990s and beyond. This is broached in Chapter 6.)

Mannheim's early articulation of the shared social-structural location and common experiences of members of a generation or birth cohort has had an enduring effect on the use of “cohort” as an analytical category by demographers and social scientists who study the life course. Sociologists of the life course have increasingly turned their attention to how the transition to adulthood is patterned by social institutions such as the educational system, the labor market, and the state welfare regime.⁹

⁹ See Breen and Buchmann's article in a special issue of *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2002). This issue of the *Annals* was devoted entirely to the comparative analysis of the transition to adulthood across a range of Western postindustrial societies, particularly in Europe. In 2007 the *European Journal of Population* also

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This is a rich and vibrant literature, but has two limitations with respect to the aims of this book.

First, the empirical literature on the transition to adulthood is almost entirely centered on the countries of Europe and North America, making only occasional reference to Japan as one of the countries that Gösta Esping-Andersen categorized as a “hybrid” welfare system situated between the conservative Southern European type and the liberal market regimes characterized by the United States (Esping-Andersen 1997). Second, demographers and life course researchers tend to focus on the structural conditions in which members of a cohort are born and experience the transition to adulthood. Less well-developed is the extension of Mannheim’s idea that cohort members’ access to particular cultural resources and tools is also influenced by the historical and social-structural circumstances in which they were born and were socialized.¹⁰ This is expressed well in his concept of “social generations,” a term that has been picked up more readily by European than American demographers and has been developed in particular by the French sociologist Louis Chauvel in his analysis of the generational divide in France (Chauvel 2007).

Chauvel points out that American sociologists and demographers tend to restrict their use of the term “generation” to discussions of kinship, preferring the term “cohort” to refer to individuals born in the same year or experiencing an event (e.g. marriage) in the same year. In contrast, the term “social generation” is more commonly used in European scholarship and refers to groups of cohorts experiencing a common period of social or economic change. Unlike members of a “historical generation,” who by definition share a collective identity by virtue of having been born during a specific historical period, members of a social generation may not necessarily recognize their collective interests or identity. They are nevertheless all socialized during a particular time period distinct from the one before. They are raised by parents who may not ultimately recognize the changed contingencies, constraints, and opportunities of the current period but instead refer implicitly to the conditions in which they grew up as the basis for instructing their children on how to live.

devoted a special issue to the comparative study of the transition to adulthood. See also the work of Karl Ulrich Mayer, especially Mayer (2004).

¹⁰ This is not unlike the concept of “cultural toolkit” that the sociologist Ann Swidler developed in a now-classic article (Swidler 1986).