

# 1 *Japan and the Crisis of Democracy*

This book is a journey: a circuitous voyage through time and space in search of new understandings of politics. Though centred in one region of modern Japan – the Chikuma River valley in Nagano Prefecture – it also weaves its way more widely through Japan, at times crossing borders and venturing as far as China, India, Britain and elsewhere. The purpose of the journey is to catch glimpses of an elusive flow of ideas and actions which took its modern form in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and which (in quiet ways) has continued to influence the world ever since. Other itineraries might be chosen, but the route we follow will, I hope, give a sense of the confluences of the local and the transnational in the history of something that I call ‘informal life politics’.

The phenomenon of informal life politics cannot quite be described as a ‘movement’, for ‘movement’ suggests something coherently organized, with a clear ideological platform. The very essence of the history traced here is its fluidity and eclecticism. At its core is a particular way of thinking about, and acting in, the world. Acting and thinking here are integrally connected, for amongst the common threads that link the transnational web of people whom we shall encounter along the way, the most important is a shared commitment to *enacting* political change in everyday life. This emphasis on everyday practice resonates with recent writings on the notion of ‘prefigurative politics’, through which groups of people ‘act out’, on a small scale, their vision of a more egalitarian and democratic world.<sup>1</sup> But prefigurative politics assumes that groups already possess a clear vision of the political world that they seek to foreshadow by their actions. The type of action that we trace here, on the other hand, is more experimental and exploratory. It is a search for a future in which

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Dixon, *Another Politics*, ch. 3.

the vision of a better world is created through notions drawn from literature and the arts as much as from political theory and in which the goals to be pursued are clarified through the experience of action itself. This practice of living politics emerged and evolved alongside the familiar modern ideological streams of liberalism, conservatism, socialism, communism, anarchism, and fascism, intersecting with them at times and yet having crucial elements of difference which have largely been neglected in the history of political ideas but are worth rediscovering in the context of today's crisis of democracy.

### Japan as Point of Departure

Japan might seem an improbable place to begin a search for grass-roots political thought and action. Not 'Western' but 'Westernized', Japan appears to sit on the margins of modern democracy. Its hesitant moves towards parliamentary democracy in the early twentieth century were thwarted by the rise of 1930s militarism and by the ensuing disastrous descent into war and defeat. Post-war Japan emerged as an equivocal polity, at times extolled as a 'bastion of democracy in Asia' but just as often seen as a stunted or dysfunctional democracy.<sup>2</sup> Free speech flourished but was haunted by the shadows of media self-censorship; free elections prevailed, but party structures and low voter turnout ensured that a single political force – the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) – has dominated the political landscape for almost the entire period since its formation in 1955. In the words of one recent study, Japan is a democracy but a 'malfunctioning' one, in that the wishes of its voters 'are not reflected in politics'.<sup>3</sup>

The landscape of Japanese civil society is equally uneven and ambiguous. Those who search for that elusive being 'civil society' in Japan reach very divergent conclusions about its existence and prospects. Simon Avenell has shown how the notion of the *shimin* (citizen, in the sense of the autonomous individual 'beyond the outright control of the state') has 'fueled and invigorated key civic movements in Japan since the 1950s'.<sup>4</sup> Yet many analyses of civil society in Japan continue

<sup>2</sup> Brown and Cottrell, *Uncertain Order*, 316; Bowen, *Japan's Dysfunctional Democracy*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Kobayashi, *Malfunctioning Democracy in Japan*, 186.

<sup>4</sup> Avenell, *Making Japanese Citizens*, 2–3.

to highlight limitations and unfulfilled possibilities. Even William Andrews's study *Dissenting Japan*, which eloquently challenges the stereotypes of Japanese social conformity by exploring the rich history of post-war protest and radicalism, places Japan's dissenters within a framework of 'the nobility of failure', where Japanese radicals

persevere with surely impossible crusades, never surrendering an inch to the might of the state. Past defeats . . . are worn like badges; historical struggles and traumas are treasured as vindicating laurels, and no concession is made to reality or constructive strategies.<sup>5</sup>

Political scientist Robert Pekkanen views the problems of Japanese civil society from a different angle, arguing that state policy has deliberately encouraged the growth of small local groups while making it difficult for large professionalized civil society organizations to flourish. The result is a mass of dispersed civil society groups with weak links to the formal political system, lacking the capacity to translate demands into practical political programs.<sup>6</sup> This assessment of Japan's political environment contains an implicit image of the nature of 'normal' democracy or civil society. Pekkanen is not (of course) suggesting that perfectly functioning democracies or civil societies exist elsewhere in the world. But he does ask why 'Japanese civil society is distinctive in the international community': a question that invokes a spectre of an international standard from which Japan diverges. He goes on to praise Japanese civil society groups for their role in building social capital but argues that they 'very seldom influence the public sphere compared with groups in other countries'.<sup>7</sup> Others are harsher in their comparative assessments. Scholar of corporate governance Yoshimori Masaru, for example, observes:

Contrary to most Western nations where democracy was won by the grass-roots through the painful process of centuries-old struggles, . . . Japanese democracy was imposed from above after World War II by the Occupation forces. What the Japanese have implemented, however, is not a democracy in spirit and reality but one that remains largely on paper.<sup>8</sup>

Such comparisons (perhaps inevitably) evoke counter-comparisons, one of the most emphatic being advanced by Mary Alice Haddad, who

<sup>5</sup> Andrews, *Dissenting Japan*, 305.    <sup>6</sup> Pekkanen, *Japan's Dual Civil Society*.

<sup>7</sup> Pekkanen, *Japan's Dual Civil Society*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Yoshimori, 'The Japanese National System of Corporate Governance', 173.

insists that ‘Japan has a legitimate, functioning, and complete democracy. It also has a democracy that is different from that found in the United States or other early democracies because Japan’s democracy is an amalgamation of Japanese and liberal political values, institutions and practices.’<sup>9</sup> Japan’s democracy, in other words, is not dysfunctional, just distinctive. Its civil society groups ‘are not merely imperfect copies of similar groups found in the West but rather contribute in important ways to the creation and re-creation of Japanese democracy’. In fact, Haddad’s portrait of the Japanese system seems to invert the more common comparative assessment. After acknowledging a variety of challenges confronting Japanese democracy, she concludes that the

Japanese have achieved an extraordinary accomplishment. They have found ways to preserve many of the most important aspects of their traditional political culture while at the same time adopting democratic values, institutions, and practices. In the end, they have created their own type of democracy. In this democracy equality is found in a context of differentiated relationships where all are included and treated fairly, although not necessarily the same.<sup>10</sup>

These strikingly divergent assessments of Japanese politics have commonalities. They share a sense of Japan as exceptional, and they also share a crucial assumption about democracy itself. This assumption is developmentalist: its premise is that nation states move along a trajectory towards an ever more complete realization of democracy (albeit with obstacles and sometimes reversals along the way). Writers like Haddad differ from others in stressing the need to recognize diverse forms of advanced democracy which emerge from disparate cultural traditions. But the sense of a developmental trajectory remains as powerful as ever. The momentum is ever upward. Like many writers on democratization, Haddad evokes the notion of ‘democratic transition’, after which, through a process of struggle and setbacks, democracy (according to the developmentalist story) normally matures and is consolidated. The definition of mature or advanced democracy varies in details, but there is broad agreement over its essentials, which include freely elected representative government, freedom of speech, separation of powers and space for active civil society.

<sup>9</sup> Haddad, *Building Democracy in Japan*, 182.

<sup>10</sup> Haddad, *Building Democracy in Japan*, 195.

Underlying this vision is a powerful belief in democracy as destiny – and democracy as desirable. This is not surprising. The academic environment in which we live, and the political environment of many of the world's richer countries, is suffused by a pervasive 'belief that liberal democracy is the only just end state possible under modern conditions'.<sup>11</sup> But as I write, at the end of the 2010s, that belief faces deepening challenges.

### **What Have We Done to Democracy?**

The challenges do not simply come from those who reject the fundamental ideals of democracy. They are also expressed by those who enthusiastically embrace those ideals while at the same time being increasingly appalled by the realities of the political systems that claim the title of 'advanced democracies'. This sense of despair was perhaps most eloquently voiced by novelist Arundhati Roy, who wrote, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall:

[W]hat have we done to democracy? What have we turned it into? What happens once democracy has been used up? When it has been hollowed out and emptied of meaning? What happens when each of its institutions has metastasized into something dangerous? What happens now that democracy and the Free Market have fused into a single predatory organism with a thin, constricted imagination that revolves almost entirely around the idea of maximising profit? Is it possible to reverse this process?<sup>12</sup>

Roy's dark reflections on the fate of democracy were written particularly in the context of India, where (she argued) the formal trappings of democracy were combined with the frenzied pursuit of market-driven economic growth and widening inequalities of wealth.<sup>13</sup> Since she wrote her lament for democracy's fading light, though, her words have been given added force by the rapid international spread of new forms of populist politics, stimulated and amplified by online social networks. Even the US political monitor Freedom House, whose underlying perspective is far removed from Arundhati Roy's vision, entitled its 2018 survey of global freedom 'Democracy in Crisis'.<sup>14</sup> New forms of populism, including 'digital populism' (which some refer to as

<sup>11</sup> Costopoulos, 'Introduction', xv.    <sup>12</sup> Roy, 'Democracy's Failing Light'.

<sup>13</sup> Roy, 'Democracy's Failing Light'.

<sup>14</sup> Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World 2018'.

‘postdemocracy’<sup>15</sup>) and its variant elite populism, have become the most visible element in a profound international political crisis which calls for a rethinking of many of our political presumptions.

A perceptive analysis of the upsurge of a new populism came from Italian economist Lapo Berti following the surprising electoral successes of the anti-establishment *Cinque Stelle* (Five Stars) movement in the Italian general elections of 2013. Berti saw the appeal of populist groups like *Cinque Stelle* in Italy, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in Britain or the Dutch Freedom Party – with their denunciation of ‘elites’, their fear of outsiders and their sweeping but simplistic solutions to social problems – as emerging from flaws in the system of representative democracy which evolved during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Economic globalization, combined with successful efforts by corporations to roll back the mixed economy of mid-century, did not lead to an undermining of state power (as some had prophesied they would) but rather created an alliance between political and economic elites, where both embraced the same overarching neo-liberal vision of market, society and polity. As manufacturing jobs were automated or moved from higher-wage to lower-wage countries, the class basis of political parties in many of the world’s richer democracies was also undermined. Parties increasingly offered a narrow range of policy options which failed to meet the demands of many in the electorate. One result was popular ‘estrangement from a voting system that is more and more perceived as useless, if not ridiculous’.<sup>16</sup>

Widening wealth gaps and changing economic and military structures also led to phenomena such as large-scale international migration and the globalization of war (just one facet of which is the phenomenon of terrorist attacks in the richer countries of the world). The spreading sense of insecurity that accompanied these changes created fertile soil for the rise of populism:

When people don’t feel in control of their lives anymore, when they feel threatened by external forces, and when the world seems to be becoming complex, a collective need for simplification emerges. And here again populism appears, with its intriguing selection of shortcuts, with the illusion of being able to delegate to someone else the solution to all the problems . . .<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Obsolete Capitalism Collective, ‘The Explosion of Digital Populism’.

<sup>16</sup> Berti, Interview, 45. <sup>17</sup> Berti, Interview, 46.

The urge for simplification was encouraged by the spread of new social media. These promoted the rapid dissemination of short, uncomplicated messages – the punchier the better. They also restructured the forums of public debate, bringing together large masses of people whose only common attributes were shared desires and fears. Search engines such as Google collect data on Internet users and feed back to users the information that they want to hear.<sup>18</sup> Thus we become grouped, not into online *communities* but into anonymous online *crowds* (or even *mobs*), sharing echo chambers which play back to us our amplified desires and fears, whether these be the desire for a Caribbean holiday or the fear of Islam. The impact on politics has been profound. As Berti puts it in the Italian context, ‘political debate and political reasoning – which together with the ability to mediate and compromise are the essence of politics – have been replaced by a stream of invective. The sacrosanct right of free speech, substantially enlarged by Social Networks, gave rise to a political Babel without resolution.’<sup>19</sup>

Yet Berti, though he expressed the deepest misgivings about the implications of rising digital populism, also saw some grounds for hope in the mood of some of the supporters who gathered around the *Cinque Stelle* banner. For all their problems, such movements (he suggested) might stimulate the energies of people – particularly young people – who have become sceptical of ‘representative rituals’ and in this way might serve as a starting point for new types of ‘re-appropriation’ of democratic life.<sup>20</sup>

By the time Berti’s reflections on the phenomenon of digital populism were published, though, events in Japan were indicating another direction in which this phenomenon could evolve. As a number of observers have noted, aggressive forms of populism led by social outsiders have had limited success in Japan,<sup>21</sup> but, in the words of Ian Buruma, this is partly because ‘elements of right-wing populism are at the heart of the Japanese government, embodied by a scion of one of the country’s most elite families’.<sup>22</sup> The second Abe administration,<sup>23</sup> which was swept to power with a large majority in the Japanese elections of December 2012

<sup>18</sup> See Obsolete Capitalism Collective, ‘The Explosion of Digital Populism’, vii–viii.

<sup>19</sup> Berti, Interview, 49.   <sup>20</sup> Berti, Interview, 51.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Funabashi, ‘Japan, Where Populism Fails’.

<sup>22</sup> Buruma, ‘Why Is Japan Populist-Free?’

<sup>23</sup> Abe had first held power more briefly from September 2006 to September 2007.

and was re-elected in 2014, shares many of the hallmarks of digital populism, including (as Buruma puts it) 'right-wing populists' hostility to liberal academics, journalists and intellectuals'.<sup>24</sup> It offers simple, catchy and nationalistic solutions to the complex problems which Japan faces in the twenty-first century, particularly to low economic growth and anxieties caused by the rise of China. It is successful in using online media to appeal to voters, both directly (through the Facebook and Twitter accounts of politicians) and indirectly (through other online groups which echo its message).

Central to the appeal of this variant of populism is the notion of 'Abenomics', which promised a radical departure from the policies of low government spending pursued by other recent Japanese administrations. The promise of national growth and prosperity through spending is also central to other populist political movements, including the US presidency of Donald Trump. But the irony of Abe Shinzō's populism – like that of Trump and of Britain's Boris Johnson, but unlike that of *Cinque Stella* founder Bepe Grillo – is that this is a populism that emerges from the heart of the establishment itself. Abe and his political associates evoke identification with 'ordinary people' through their skilful use of homespun analogies to explain complex political issues.<sup>25</sup> Trump's catchphrase 'make America great again' echoes Abe's often-repeated call to make (or bring back) a 'Japan that is proud of itself' (*hokori aru Nippon o tsukiageru / torimodosu*).<sup>26</sup> Yet, just as the 'anti-elitist' Donald Trump is heir to a business fortune, 'anti-elitist' Abe Shinzō is heir to a political dynasty that has played a dominant role in Japanese public life for more than seventy years.

The contemporary crisis of democracy in many countries including Japan, then, lies not simply in the rise of digital populism but in the success of some political groups in combining the rhetorical techniques of digital populism with access to the existing machinery of entrenched party establishments. It reflects, in other words, the triumph of that strange phenomenon, elite populism. Abe's early success in cementing

<sup>24</sup> Buruma, 'Why Is Japan Populist-Free?'

<sup>25</sup> A good example is Abe's argument for his plans to expand the power of the Japanese armed forces take part in overseas military missions, where he likened such military cooperation to the act of going to help a neighbour whose house is on fire; see *Asahi Shinbun* 23 July 2015, 4.

<sup>26</sup> For example, NHK News 25 May 2006; *Mainichi Shinbun*, 29 September 2012, 2; *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 9 July 2013, 4; *Sankei Shinbun*, 3 October 2018, 5.



this powerful alliance of populism and the established political machinery relied heavily on his economic strategy. This was genuinely novel in that it broke the taboo on high deficit spending as a means of trying to revive flagging economic growth. For this reason, it has sometimes been called 'Keynesian', but Abenomics lacks the redistributive element of 1950s Keynesianism and in fact tends to work in the opposite direction, particularly since it is accompanied by reductions in corporate tax.<sup>27</sup>

In economic terms, then, elite populism appeals to voters by offering the promise of a silver bullet to fix problems of employment insecurity and declining competitiveness. At the same time, for many corporations it presents opportunities for short-term profits that outweigh their concerns about its long-term risks. Rather than harnessing the discontents of alienated voters to challenge the economic status quo, it succeeds in fusing key elements of the alienated and the establishment together into an unlikely, and potentially unstable, alliance. In offering the electorate a quick fix to widespread fears and disappointments while offering sections of the business world the promise of quick profits, elite populism abandons the attempt to solve the long-run problems which beset contemporary society: problems of environmental destruction, rising economic disparities, declining social infrastructure, ethnic and religious prejudice, and rising international military tensions, amongst others. It therefore raises profound problems for the future functioning of the democratic system as a whole.

### The Search for Another Politics

The deepening crisis of representative democracy in many countries of the world has encouraged a quest for alternative approaches to politics: other ways to sustain the values of openness, freedom and justice that democracy is supposed to ensure. The end points to which these quests lead are predictably very diverse. Writers like Chris Dixon and John Holloway seek ways of strengthening the international networks of 'the anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist, nonsectarian left'.<sup>28</sup> Their approaches to the task, though, are subtly different. Dixon emphasizes the importance of prefigurative politics, creating and linking

<sup>27</sup> Inoue and Mizohata, 'Inequality and Precarity in Japan'; surveys by the Bank of Japan also show increasing income inequality between 2012 and 2015: see Fujioka, 'BOJ Survey Data Reveals Signs of Growing Inequality in Japan'.

<sup>28</sup> Dixon, *Another Politics*, 2.

movements which try to ‘manifest and build, to the greatest extent possible, the egalitarian and deeply democratic world we would like to see through our means of fighting in this one’.<sup>29</sup> Holloway, meanwhile, looks for a wider range of more random ‘cracks’ in the capitalist system which may be widened until the entire system is forced to fall apart or be fundamentally reconstructed. His ‘cracks’ include formal political actions and movements as well as the very small personal actions of local groups or individuals who are determined to ‘take a space or moment into their own hands and shape their lives according to their own decisions’.<sup>30</sup> Berti, on the other hand, seeks ways to change and humanize the market from within: ‘through the viral spread of small individual choices from within the market – not against or outside of it – an alternative model can affirm itself’.<sup>31</sup>

Some writers have found possibilities in a rediscovery of elements of anarchist thought and practice, using what James Scott calls a ‘process-oriented’ anarchist view or ‘anarchism as praxis’ as a means to rethink currently dominant approaches to politics.<sup>32</sup> Similar ideas are developed by radical geographers like Paul Chatterton, who draw on anarchist/autonomist ideas in their search for ‘geographies of hope and survival in an age of crisis’.<sup>33</sup> Their response to the failures of state policy is to seek solutions in popular action at grassroots level: ‘Anarchism is pragmatic – there’s no big plan waiting in the wings. People will come together to figure out what needs to be done – as they always have.’<sup>34</sup> Chatterton is at pains to distinguish anarchism (which he sees as practical and grounded in the here and now) from utopianism, which projects a better world beyond the horizon.<sup>35</sup> But his ideas of autonomous action in fact dovetail with a new interest in utopianism as a response to political crisis. Davina Cooper, for example, draws attention to the power of ‘everyday utopias’, which are not focused on imaginings of a better future world but act to transform small corners of ordinary life in the here and now:

Everyday utopias don’t focus on campaigning or advocacy. They don’t place their energy on pressuring mainstream institutions to change, on winning

<sup>29</sup> Dixon, *Another Politics*, 6.    <sup>30</sup> Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, 21.

<sup>31</sup> Berti, Interview, 52.    <sup>32</sup> Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, xii.

<sup>33</sup> See Trapese Collective, *Do It Yourself*; Castree, Chatterton et al., eds., *The Point Is to Change It*.

<sup>34</sup> Chatterton, ‘Against the Green State’.

<sup>35</sup> Chatterton, ‘Against the Green State’.