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LOST IN TRANSITION: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan. *By Mary C. Brinton. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xxi, 203 pp. (Tables, graphs, figures.) US\$27.99, paper. ISBN 978-0-521-12600-7.*

This book describes how and why a disproportionate share of Japan's non-elite young men have been lost in the transition from school into the workplace. Through a careful analysis of Japan's school to work system, Mary Brinton demonstrates how the bursting of Japan's financial and real estate bubble in the early 1990s, economic recession and employment restructuring have unevenly altered the employment opportunities for the younger generation. She suggests that the experience of this "lost generation" mirrors the nation's broader transition to a mature postindustrial economy with a labour market characterized by insecure employment that contrasts markedly with what workers faced in the high-growth period of the 1960s to the 1980s.

Brinton employs a comparative sociological perspective and set of methodologies from both the labour economist who argues from numerical data and the ethnographer who does intensive fieldwork. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, she analyzes how Japanese schools and firms have become disconnected from one another and the consequences of this for young people trying to move from school into the workforce. The result produces a powerful and persuasive argument that is as profoundly penetrating as it is methodologically rigorous. Brinton is a researcher interested in how institutions structure individuals' opportunities and constraints and lead to patterns of inequality across social groups. As such, she carefully examines the process of how Japan's school to work system is unraveling and suggests that its breakdown reflects a deeper transformation in Japanese society away from the pivotal role social institutions played in transitioning individuals from one life stage to another. These life stages are deeply rooted in Japan to "social location" or "*ba*" that provides individuals with security and a sense of identity.

Brinton adds her voice to the plethora of opinions on the causes of economic uncertainty facing Japanese youth by honing in on the crucial

role played by institutions. While she acknowledges that young peoples' work and lifestyle preferences are changing, she emphasizes that the most significant changes are occurring in the institutions in Japan that once supported the move from school to work, and from youth into adulthood. Today, young people face a labour market that has changed through significant structural transformations that make their choices and opportunities fundamentally different from those faced by their parents. The breakdown in the school-work institutions, in combination with a considerable reduction in employers' capacity to guarantee secure employment to large numbers of new graduates, has produced a generation in which many youth are unable to begin their adult lives from a stable economic base.

For youth moving into the labour market, the possibilities of entering an economically secure *ba* are disappearing. This reflects a major realignment and reorganization in the way institutions develop the skills and abilities of individuals in Japan. This shift is altering the implicit assumption that even the least educationally elite who graduate from school and move into the workforce can earn a spot in the Japanese middle class. The consequences of these changes include both economic and employment problems for youth, in addition to psychological problems related to identity and young people's ability to trust society. These problems extend beyond youth, as they become difficulties for Japanese society.

However, Brinton does suggest that Japan's "lost generation" is not entirely lost. Despite the increasing inability of the school-work system to move non-elite men from the secure *ba* of school into the secure *ba* of work, these youth have had to develop greater initiative and different types of skills in searching out employment in comparison to their parents' generation. In the process, more Japanese young people are learning how to maintain a sense of identity and self-reliance as they move across workplaces. The development of such flexibility is significant since Japan is a society that has been based on an individual's secure attachment to a *ba*. As such, it requires people to have a different interpersonal orientation than a society where people move across multiple settings throughout their lives, carrying their skill-set with them. The challenge, Brinton suggests, is for Japanese society and employers to figure out ways to utilize and nurture the skills and capabilities of young people, including those in the lost generation—since they are, after all, Japan's future.

Brinton's research on youth, work and instability in postindustrial Japan is a thoughtful and sensitive treatment of the subject. For anyone seeking to gain a deeper perspective on the challenges facing Japanese youth—such as *kakusa* (economic inequality), *NEET* (young people not in education, employment or training), *furitā* (youth who drift from

job to job), *parasaito shinguru* (young people who remain financially supported by their parents), *hikikomori* (social isolates), *wākingu puā* (working poor), *net-café refugees* (homeless people who live in Internet cafés) and *shōshika* (declining birthrate)—this book is a must-read.

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