

PRECARIOUS JAPAN

by

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ONE. PAIN OF LIFE

The story grabbed the nation's attention. The body of a fifty-two-year-old man, "mummifying" already, was discovered one month after starving to death. Not yet old and a former public official, the man was ordinary. But he died from lack of food in the apartment building he'd called home for twenty years. A welfare recipient ever since disease kept him from work, he was suddenly told funds would be cut off. With no one to turn to, the man was dead in three months. All alone, he kept a diary, pondering—page after page—what the country was doing for citizens like him who, struggling to live, have no recourse but to die. By the end, though, his thoughts were only on food. This last entry was what shocked people the most— "[All] I want is to eat a rice ball" (*onigiri tabetai*) (Yuasa 2008a).

A man dies alone craving the crudest of Japanese meals—a plain rice ball, a symbol of life and the cultural soul of Japan or, when lacking, of

death, desertion, the utter soullessness of the times. The story was chilling. But, occurring in July 2007, it came at a moment surging with news similarly pinned to the collapse of mundane everydayness—of lives at once obsessed with and then left unfulfilled by food, human connection, home. Only one year earlier, for example, another case of a mummified body had been reported in the same city—Kita Kyūshū City. The circumstances were similar: a middle-aged man starved to death all alone at home. This man had also been denied welfare but, in his case, had never been granted it on the grounds that he had family—two adult sons—who could feed him. But familial relations were strained and only one son, who worked at a convenience store, gave his father food. And this, as the media reported it, never amounted to more than an occasional bread roll. Unable to work and (twice) denied welfare, the man lived in an apartment he couldn't maintain; all utilities had been cut off and rent hadn't been paid for months when he died (Yusasa 2008a, 43).

Life, tenuous and raw, disconnected from others and surviving or dying alone; such stories cycle through the news these days and through the circuitry of information, communication, and affect that so limn everydayness for people in a postindustrial society like Japan. A memoir about a homeless junior high school student (*Hōmuresu chūgakusei*) became a national bestseller when released in December 2007. Written by a famous comedian (Tamura Hiroshi),¹ it told of how, at age twelve and after having already lost his mother to cancer, a boy comes home one day to a boarded-up apartment and a father who tells his children simply to “scat” (*kaisan*). Deciding to fend for himself rather than burden his siblings, Tamura heads to his neighborhood park (nicknamed “shit park”) and lives, as he says, like an animal: sleeping inside playground equipment, scavenging for coins near vending machines, eating cardboard and pigeon food (Tamura 2007). What readers (in chat rooms and on talk shows and websites) remarked upon most were the corporeal details of a “normal kid” reduced to scraping by in a park. That, along with the tragic story of family dissolution and fatherly abandonment: what made this, as Tamura's editor called it, an entertaining story of poverty (Shimizu 2008:29). Comic book, television, and movie versions followed in 2008 and Tamura's so-called “shit park” is now a tourist site. As one commentator put it, “we couldn't imagine a story like this ten years ago, but now, in every Japanese family, there is some unhappiness (Shimizu 2008:112).

The anguish of everyday life for those who have “socially withdrawn”—

a condition said to affect at least one million Japanese today—has been taken up by pop culture. These individuals, called *hikikomori*, often withdraw and remain in a single room they rarely, if ever, leave. Hikikomori are socially disconnected and detached from human contact: “homeless at home,” as one hikikomori described it (Tsukino 2004). More often male than female and most commonly young adults, this is the depiction given to hikikomori in *NHK ni yōkoso*—the story of a university dropout who is entering his fourth year of isolation. Written by a self-avowed hikikomori as a way to make money by never leaving home, *NHK ni yōkoso*² is vividly brutal. Zooming in, as does Tamura, on the graphic details of a tortured existence, the story is said to be realistic in capturing the everyday rituals, nagging obsessions, and paralyzing delusions of a hikikomori. At the same time, this too—first as a novel (2002) and even more in the manga (2004–7) and anime (2006) versions³—has been heralded as edgy entertainment. With a storyline that jags between netgames, erotic websites, suicide pacts, and pyramid schemes, *NHK ni yōkoso* was promoted, rather oxymoronically, as “non-stop hikikomori action.”

The contraction of life into a tenuous existence spurred action of a different kind in the summer of 2008. A string of violent attacks, all random and conspicuously public, plagued Tokyo starting in June. The first took place in Akihabara (Tokyo’s electronics and *otaku* [fandom] district) on a Sunday at noon when the streets had been closed for pedestrians. Driving his truck into the crossing and then jumping out to stab more victims, a twenty-five-year-old man killed seven people within minutes. A temporary worker who feared he had lost his job, Katō Tomohiro lived a solitary, unstable life estranged from his parents and lacking—as he complained in the long trail of postings he left on a website—everything of human worth, including a girlfriend. Without anything to live for and no place to call home (*ibasho*), Katō went to Akihabara to randomly kill. His act triggered a series of copycat attacks in public settings like malls. The perpetrators shared certain life circumstances with Katō: solitude, job insecurity, familial estrangement, precarious existence. And while most were young, the last attack of the summer was committed by a seventy-nine-year-old homeless woman who, stabbing two women in Shibuya train station, said her motive was to be carted to prison where she would find shelter and food.

This violence was notable for how impersonal it was. Random attacks on strangers by people desperately disconnected themselves. But stories

of more intimate violence are common as well. Those most spectacularly newsworthy have taken place within families—that unit assigned, by society and the state, the responsibility of routine caregiving and even sociality itself. In the same month of the Akihabara killings a seventy-seven-year-old man in Tokyo entered his kitchen and killed his wife with a hammer. Apparently enraged that she had called him a nuisance, the man then proceeded to kill the rest of his household—a son, daughter-in-law, and grandchild: his entire orbit for not only care but human contact. As it was reported, this “dangerous old man” (*abunai ojichan*) thought he’d be happy once his family was dead. It was immediately after she had come to visit, cooked him a meal, and cleaned his apartment that a teenage boy killed his mother a year earlier in May. In what has been the more persistent trend in familial attacks—children against parents and particularly mothers—this one was especially gruesome. Decapitating her, the seventeen-year-old then carried his mother’s head with him to a karaoke club and later an internet café. Hours later—and still carrying the head—the boy confessed to the police but could give no motive for killing a mother he claimed to bear no grudge against. As the media reported it, the youth had stopped going to school about a month before and was taking medication for anxiety for which he had been briefly hospitalized. Before that, however, he had been a good student. In fact, it was in order to attend a highly ranked high school that both the boy and his younger brother were living together in an apartment away from home.

STORIES FROM THE everyday where death stalks daily life. Unease crimps the familiar and routine. A disquiet brushing the surface where the all too normal can turn deadly. Mothers beheaded, strangers killed, children abandoned, adults starved. These cautionary tales get told, and retold, at a moment of mounting insecurity—material, social, existential. But what precisely do they caution against? And, more to the point, (how) does one gain protection?

THE JAPANESE ARE certainly not alone in experiencing precarity these days. This condition has become ever more familiar and widespread in the world of the twenty-first century. I write in the aftermath of Arab Spring, in the face of Greece leaning ever closer to leaving the EU, and in the midst of a never-ending economic crisis that has only exacerbated what was already a rising demographic of global citizens at risk—from poverty, dis-

ease, unemployment, war. Everywhere people are suffering, caught by the instabilities and inequities of neoliberal globalism run amok. In the acceleration, and spread, of a market logic that has privatized more and more of life and deregulated more and more of capitalism's engine for extracting profits, the struggle—and often failure—of everyday life has become an all too common story for all too many people around the world.

Given the extremity of deprivation experienced by so many of the world's inhabitants today, Japan would seem more notable for its vast wealth and what some say is the most advanced consumer culture in the world. Even today, almost two decades after the bursting of its highly engorged bubble economy, Japan boasts the third strongest economy in the world (having lost the second position recently to China). And any visitor who has recently been to Japan will know that department stores still do a brisk business even for pricey brand-name goods. Yet Japan also has the second highest level of poverty among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries. Calculated as the number of people who fall below half of the mean income, Japan—with a rate of 15.3 percent—is second only to the United States, which has a rate of 17.1 percent. In 2007 this constituted twenty million Japanese: one out of six. (This compares with an average of 10.7 percent in OECD member countries and 4.5 percent for welfare countries like Norway.) Further, for a country that once prided itself on lifelong employment, one-third of all workers today are only irregularly employed. Holding jobs that are part time, temporary, or contract labor, irregular workers lack job security, benefits, or decent wages. A surprising 77 percent earn less than the poverty level, qualifying them—by the government's own calibration—as “working poor.” The situation is even worse for women and youths; one-half of all young workers (between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four) and 70 percent of all female workers are irregularly employed (Yuasa 2008a).

Poverty, a word seldom spoken in Japan since the country's “miraculous” recovery after its devastating defeat in the Second World War, has returned. Not across the board, of course. But the ranks of the poor are growing (14.6 percent of children; 20.1 percent of elderly), as is an awareness that they actually exist. Few deny that a seismic change in the body politic has taken place in recent years: from a society with a vast (and materially secure) middle class to one that is now, as it's variously called, downstreaming, bipolarized, and riddled by class difference. As activist Yuasa Makoto (2008c) puts it, the reserves (*tame*)⁴ that people were once

able to count on—whether savings in the bank, families one could turn to in time of need, or educational credentials—are drying up. Japan is a society no longer of winners and losers, just of losers. But, as Yuasa points out, poverty (*hinkon*) is more than material deprivation alone. It also is a state of desperation, of panic over debt collectors and rent, a life lived on the edge. And, by this definition, Japan is becoming an impoverished country. A society where hope has turned scarce and the future has become bleak or inconceivable altogether.

Oddly, or not perhaps, the mood was strikingly different in the years of deprivation following the war. Then, as novelist Murakami Ryū has noted, no one had anything but hope. Today, by contrast, hope is the only thing people don't have, as Murakami wrote of the boom years of the bubble economy in his bestselling book *Kībō no kuni no ekosodasu* (The Exodus of a Country of Hope, 2002). People had become so consumed by materialism by the 1980s that drive and hope for anything beyond private acquisition was ebbing away. But things only worsened. When the bubble burst in 1991, triggering a recession that lingered on (and on), people began to lose not only their ability to consume but their jobs, homes, and future plans. For better or worse, the materialist dreams of postwar Japan are coming undone.

PRECARITY IS A WORD of the times. Picked up first by European social and labor movements in the 1970s,⁵ *precarité* indexes shifted in late stage capitalism toward more flexible, contingent, and irregular work. At its base, precarity refers to conditions of work that are precarious; precarious work is “employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker” (Kalleberg 2009, 2). By this definition, most work for most workers around the world has been historically precarious, which makes precarity less the exception than the rule (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). Half of all workers in the world today work in the informal economy that is, by definition, precarious (Standing 2011). And in the United States most jobs were precarious and most wages unstable until the end of the Great Depression. But, in the case of the United States, the government stepped in, bolstering social protections and creating jobs with the New Deal. And as Fordism took hold and unions (and workers' rights to collectively bargain) strengthened, regular full-time jobs—and access to the middle class—became the norm by the 1950s (Kalleberg 2011).⁶ In those developed countries that, like the United States, enjoyed a period of

postwar Fordism that accorded its worker citizens (in the core workforce at least) secure employment, it is the deviation from this norm that the term *precarity* (and the “precariat” as the precarious proletariat of irregular workers) in large part refers. Precarity references a particular notion of, and social contract around, work. Work that is secure; work that secures not only income and job but identity and lifestyle,⁷ linking capitalism and intimacy in an affective desire for security itself (Berlant 2011). Precarity marks the loss of this—the loss of something that only certain countries, at certain historical periods, and certain workers ever had in the first place.

Japan was one of those places. What it had before, and what has become of this in the precaritization of labor and life in the last two decades, is the subject of this book. Precarious Japan, a country struck by a radical change—in socioeconomic relations in post-postwar times—that conveys, and gets commonly interpreted as, a national disaster. And this even before the Great East Japan Earthquake and accompanying tsunami pounded the northeast coast of the country on March 11, 2011, rendering it a gooey wasteland of death and debris. This crisis oozed mud that literalized a muddiness existing already. But not only mud. The tsunami triggered a meltdown in the Daiichi Nuclear Plant in Fukushima that sped radiation. It was a nuclear disaster reminiscent of the dropping of the atomic bombs that ended the Second World War and killed upwards of one hundred forty thousand at Hiroshima and eighty thousand at Nagasaki in August 1945—a reminder of Japan’s unique history as the first, and only, country to be the victim of nuclear warfare. Atomic bombs left an unbearable wound but also ended Japan’s militarist ambitions to render East Asia its imperial domain. And in “embracing defeat” under the occupation of Allied (mainly American) forces,⁸ Japan entered its postwar period of astounding reconstruction, achieving high economic growth and astronomical productivity in record time.

Nuclear radiation and mud. A strange combination that mixes histories as well as metaphors. For if the disaster at the Daiichi nuclear reactor in Fukushima provoked memories of Japan’s victimization and vulnerability at the end of the Pacific War—and the eerie risk of an unknowable, invisible contamination—the sea of mud that pummeled what had been solid on the coastline signaled something else: a liquidization in socioeconomic relations that started in the mid-1990s (but actually before) with the turn to flexible employment and its transformation of work and the workplace. This is called *ryūdōka* in Japanese—the liquidization or flexi-

bilization of work and life. In liquefied Japan a change in the logic of work seeps into everyday relationality: relations once valued for their sturdiness in space (staying in the same company or neighborhood for decades) and durability over time (lifelong marriages, group memberships, and jobs). Sociality today has become more punctuated and unhinged. Along with replaceable work and workers is the rhythm of social impermanence: relationships that instantaneously connect, disconnect, or never start up in the first place. One-third of all Japanese live alone these days and the phenomena of both *NEET* (not in education, employment, or training) and *hikikomori* (social withdrawal) are well known among youths. As I've learned in the process of fieldwork in summers since 2008, many Japanese feel lonely, that they don't belong (anywhere), and are struggling to get by. A recent special on public television encapsulated current conditions of social life with the label "*muen shakai*"—the relationless society. Social precarity. Liquefied Japan.

Japan had been rumbling long before the recent disaster of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear reactor accident. Tremors underfoot, a sense of imbalance, the premonition of water turning everything into mud. The events of 3/11 spawned a crisis of unimaginable intensity. Over eighteen thousand are missing or dead; three hundred fifty thousand displaced; almost unimaginable and ongoing damage to businesses, property, livestock, and everyday life; and trillions of yen in clean up, reconstruction, and compensation. Beyond those killed, it has made life even less safe than it was before for so many: precarity intensified. It has also thrown into relief aspects of life that were precarious already; the fact, for example, that so many of the workers in the Fukushima nuclear plants were, both before and after 3/11, part of the precariat (close to 88 percent)—disposable workers for whom the safety of other Japanese (as in cleaning up and containing the spread and exposure of radiation) are now so intimately intertwined. News reports on precarious employment (dispatch, contract, day labor) are much more common these days, and the precariat have assumed greater recognition and sympathy in the public eye. Sensibilities of the Japanese across the country have also been raised to the politics of the "nuclear village": to the location of so many nuclear reactors in the region of Tōhoku where—because of its depressed economy and aging population—residents had accepted the dangers in order to secure revenues and jobs. Sentiments against nuclear energy and the nuclear industry have soared (I protested alongside of fifteen thousand in June 2011, but another protest staged in

Tokyo three months later drew sixty thousand), as have disgust and suspicion against the owners of the nuclear plants and the government for their collusion of interest, and for their mismanagement of safety regulations, clean up, and withholding, even lying about, information regarding radiation exposure.

In pre- and now post-3/11 Japan, multiple precarities—of work, of sociality, of life (and death), as the recent crisis has both exacerbated and exposed—overlap and run together like mud. But that doesn't mean that everyone is situated similarly or affected the same way. Certain workers are more prone to belong to the precariat, for example: those without post-secondary education and who come from households that are single parent and working class (or working poor). And, even during the boom period of the bubble economy, women were overly representative in the peripheral workforce as part-time workers (which they remain today with 70 percent of female workers employed in irregular jobs and with 80 percent of temp workers being female) (Gottfried 2009). That precarity is differentially distributed is seen in the aftermath of 3/11 as well. Those up north, already living in a region economically depressed and overly populated by elderly, have been hardest hit by both the damage of the Great East Japan Earthquake (and tsunami) and the deadly threat of radiation—a threat that has forced thousands to evacuate their homes with no assurance of ever being able to return. Those who have lost everything—family members, the boats or tractors used to make a living, the very village one has lived in since birth—straddle the precarity of life in a particular dance with death. An early story emerging from Fukushima reported how a farmer who had lost his wife and home was happy to see that his cabbages, at least, had survived. When these were then banned from sale because the radiation level was found to be dangerously high, the man committed suicide.

Though it may start in one place, precarity soon slips into other dimensions of life. Insecurity at work, for example, spreads to insecurity when paying bills, trying to keep food on the table, maintaining honor and pride (in one's community or head of household), finding the energy to keep going. It is not only a condition of precarious labor but a more general existential state—a state where one's human condition has become precarious as well (Lazzarato 2004). But the relationship between labor and life, job security and everyday security, depends on where one lives and where one is situated in the socioeconomic landscape of nation, workplace, and

home. Workers in countries with good social protections are less vulnerable to labor market insecurity than they would be otherwise. In Denmark, for example, workers' security in life is not tied to a specific job; if a worker loses a job he can either find another one or expect support (in maintaining a basically decent life) from the state. Even with increased precarity in the labor market, local politics—or workers' relative power—can produce “post-market security”: what is called “flexicurity” when flexible hiring and firing for workers is combined with a robust social security system for workers (Kalleberg 2011, 15). How to balance flexibility (for business, industry, employers) against security (for citizens, residents, employees) is a perennial problem for modern, industrial states. Different states, at different historical times, resolve it differently—through socialism, corporate capitalism, neoliberalism, state welfare, neoliberalist socialism (China's “neoliberalism as exception” [Ong 2006]). And, according to Polanyi, countries have swung historically in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from one end of the spectrum to the other in a “double movement” between privileging market and economic growth to—when destitution and unemployment spike, spurring worker protests and populist rage—attending more to the needs (for security) of its citizens (Polanyi 2001).

During the 1970s and 1980s, Japan achieved a remarkable balance between high economic growth and a high level of job security for (male) workers. Under “Japan, Inc.,” the country was considered a “super stable society” (*chō antei shakai*): one with a low crime rate, no war or military engagement, and an environment of long-lasting jobs, marriages, and social connections. Security—of a kind—was at once expected and desired: what one traded for diligence and compliance in a social contract that registered as the norm. Different from the post-market security of flexicurity, when workers are protected less by a specific workplace or job than by the state-sponsored social security system, Japan, Inc. operated through the market. Or, more precisely, it ran by collapsing the market into the workplace, which collapsed into the social factory of the family and home. Japan wasn't a welfare state and the government allocated little in the way of social provisions (which is still true today). Rather, it was the corporation and the family that figured as the de facto welfare institutions. Given a family wage to have and support a family, workers were taken care of but also wedded to the workplace—a dynamic that extracted labor from male workers and also their unpaid wives in managing the household, the children, and any attached elderly so that the breadwinner could give all to his job. Japan's “super stable society” depended on this knot of dependencies, labors, and attachments. And, as it unraveled in post-postwar Japan, a very particular kind of precarity and precariat has emerged in its place.