If Japan Is the Future, Why Aren't We More Upset?

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Abstract: *Japan as fetishized object of popular culture or prognosticative warning for the Global North are popular positions that betray a collective scholarly failure. Drawing on autobiographical reflection and ethnographic engagement, I argue that Japan's bubble-era exuberance, subsequent economic stagnation, and persistent demographic decline have been mobilized to reproduce growth and market-centered logics rather than challenge them. While we must acknowledge the material reality of demographic change, the persistent "crisis" framing obscures deliberate political decisions that preserve an inequitable status quo and foreclose emancipatory alternatives. My intent then is to critique scholarly and policy responses that rely on superficial reforms, techno-solutionism, and selective invocations of transformation, while neglecting questions of human dignity and systemic structural change. In doing us, I hope to challenge us all as Japan scholars, as well as academics more broadly, to reject complacent critique and engage provocatively with possibilities for meaningful social transformation intent on dignity-ensuring futures.*

Keywords*: Scholarship and responsibility, crisis, Japan as prediictive, harbinger, critical*

Japan, when I first became meaningfully aware of it, was at its bubble era peak of exuberant excess. I was born in 1978 and spent my comfortably upper-middle class childhood in the suburbs outside Seattle, Washington. Meaning by the time I was reasonably cognizant of global events in the later years of the 1980s, lingering animosity of Japan as wartime adversary was largely a vestige of the past. Instead, Japan was simultaneously a source of envy and antagonism. A place impossible to understand that was also to be emulated. The possible future world superpower frequently mocked in vulgarly racialized depictions and practices. A tendency evident in the media enticements that abounded with the era's imagined techno-futures of Japan's eventual domination. *Back to the Future Part II* (1989), *Rising Sun* (1992), and *RoboCop 3* (1993) were formidable, and retrospectively embarrassing, early and now problematic touchstones in fostering my interest with Japan that also offered a consistent and particularistic interpretation of the nation and its role in the future.

Coinciding with my budding Japan interest was the nation's increasing internationalization, the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, and the seeming global triumph of American-led capitalism. Perhaps challenged only by Japan's purported ability to out capital the quintessential capitalists. As former Massachusetts senator Paul Tsongas infamously quipped during his failed campaign to be the Democratic party's presidential candidate in 1992, "The cold war is over; Japan won." That same year my high school began offering Japanese as one of four possible foreign language options, alongside French, German, and Spanish. Offered not because the school wanted to move away from a Euro-centric curriculum but because Japanese was the future, what young Americans would need to compete in the business meetings to come.

But then the bubble burst. Or, we on the outside became belatedly aware that the bubble had burst, as Japan slipped from future world-dominating superpower to economically stagnant yet wealthy site of niche and fetish fascination. Since then, broad popular thinking on Japan has largely oscillated between pop culture infatuation (*Cool Japan!*) and the nation

as an imagined barometer (a precarious harbinger, perhaps?) of the concerns to come for the rest of the Global North, in particular. Descriptions of demographic crisis enveloping an aging and shrinking population, an apathetic and disillusioned citizenry, and ineffective offered solutions from governing elites are now long-standing Japan-tied talking points said to elicit relevance in a growing array of national contexts.

But what are we missing when we readily accept or even rely on such narratives? Is there a deliberately maintained reality that we are trying to reproduce?

I am not disputing the existence or consequences of such now long-established demographic patterns. Instead, my immediate points of critique are two-fold. First, this "crisis" as it is so often framed, now transcends a generation yet anything resembling a coherent and meaningful solution has somehow failed to emerge. Instead, to the second point, offered proposals to ameliorate this trend have relied steadfastly on maintaining the particular practices of growth-oriented, market-facilitated solutions that brought about such a reality.

My position then is that something obvious is undeniably ignored in this conventional narrative. A narrative that as academics, we have done far too little to challenge or dismantle. If the 1980s are now cast as the heady peak of bubble era exuberance, excesses, and handwringing around the reactionary necessity of emulation in the United States, and if the "employment ice age" and lingering impacts that followed from the 1990s onward was the global warning of what is now foretold, little it would seem has been heeded. America's feverishly speculative late 1990s and early 2000s wrought the great recession of 2008, with nary a lesson learned or crisis averted. Unless the goal was never about addressing capital's systemic frameworks of crisis displacement amidst pending catastrophe, but instead an attempt to preserve an increasingly dysfunctional social order no matter the human toll it exacted.

Revealingly, tendencies to cry "crisis" while simultaneously offering little in the way of substantive change that addresses systemic causes are infrequently framed as the disingenuous, status quo preserving acts that they are. And without initial recognition of what fuels these persistent social issues, a powerful bulwark against consideration of how contemporary crisis could shift to affording possibilities for articulating new forms of social arrangement is erected. A bulwark determined to occlude the deliberate decisions by governing powers to perpetuate

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capital's dehumanizing tendencies, thereby rendering in so many a bleak reality against a future of diminished possibility.

Thus, if the direction is now to cast Japan as prognosticative prelude of what's to come, should not the scholarly impetus be on finding, and enacting, substantive societal alternatives and transformations to dismantle the existing pattern of speculative excess that then feeds inevitable catastrophe? Because rendering Japan as predictive harbinger of broad global patterns has done little to generate meaningful demand for considerations of substantive alternatives to the existing social order to date. Particularly considerations and alternatives that take measures of human dignity and fulfillment as the relevant indicators of legitimacy.

It has become irrefutable that more scholarly attention and substantive action must be directed towards enacting not policy tweaks or articulating the minutiae of preserving transnational continuities but instead demanding recognition of the expanding necessity for transformative societal changes. As scholars, do we desire to be part of the existing status quo, to take whatever benefits are held out in exchange for not sowing disruption, while offering in response flaccid critique that does little to nothing in terms of challenging established structures of power and privilege? Or should not our purpose, channeling inspiration from Tosaka Jun's astute critique of the fascism enveloping Japan in the 1930s that resulted in his lengthy and eventually deadly term in prison, be toward provocation with the societal machinations that are intent on maintaining the existing inequities that have brought Japan and the globe to the brink of demographic, environmental, and democratic devastation?

Because what benefit has come to scholars of Japan or elsewhere for not more forcefully challenging the prevailing logics of growth, wealth, and other market-based metrics? The academy at large is being dismantled. We fight each other over shrinking pools of funding. And, perhaps like me, sometimes teach to accommodate the interests of the students—I have little business leading a course on manga, anime, and other popular culture outputs, yet I do so—in order to hopefully placate administrations often eager to cut our programs. As Japan scholars we must now persistently justify why Japan matters as an area of intellectual attention. Acts of justification rooted fundamentally in views of what does or does not *matter* being inherently tied to metrics of financial capability or influence. One needs only consider contemporary popular media framings of China, often reliant on the same racialized tropes and little more than cut and paste versions of articles and coverage on Japan from the 1980s, reflecting not just the superficiality of such coverage but the deliberate organizing of what and where matters in fundamentally economic terms.

My adulthood, benchmarked by recessionary crises of predictable regularity, retreating opportunities, and debilitating cost of living increases, mirrors an increasingly desperate cycle of diminishing scholarly possibilities. Cynical resignation and vulgar duplicity are too often the drivers of political discourse. Insularity born of denigration, bigotry eager to destroy efforts at equity, and authoritarian impulses as desirable are now casually displayed. In confronting such a frightening contemporary reality, I share the disheartening prospects for the future they impart with my middle-aged contemporaries in the United States, Japan, and far too many other places. Realities that demand we, as scholars, address our responsibilities and confront so much that we already recognize yet tolerate.

Distressingly, the pattern of refusal to acknowledge human-centered concerns and act in a manner that takes emancipatory engagement as more relevant than advocacy for policy tweaks or acquiescence to the militaristic tendencies of the established order remains entrenched and without meaningful challenge. Japan's population continues to be locked in its now long established trajectory of steady numerical decline, yet Tokyo is awash in new consumerist development projects targeting a young and affluent customer base that demographic realities tell us is a population segment in increasingly short supply. The nation's defense spending seems poised to reach record levels, despite the now fatalistically amusing constitutional mandate committing the nation to pacifism. Japan's national government has rhetorically embraced a program of societal transformation through the UN Sustainable Development Goals that calls for aggressive action on poverty affiliation, climate change, and dismantling systemic forms of discrimination but, as I and my co-authors argued in a recent article in *Social Science Japan Journal*, enacted only as a selectively superficial mechanism for

justifying a litany of status quo sustaining projects. The proposed and implemented policy hypocrisies are as galling as they are numerous, yet vocal scholarly opposition demonstrating the compromised intention of such proposals remains far too muted.

My lived experiences, the media of my era led me to believe, would coincide with national feelings of triumphant certainty. While the bubble was still in the process of over-inflating in Tokyo, Margaret Thatcher was telling the world "there is no alternative" to market capitalism and Ronald Reagan was helping assemble the foundations of neoliberalism's ascendency to hegemonic ubiquity. The opposing ideology was collapsing. Seemingly all that remained was to sort out the abundant spoils of capital's triumph. Yet such spoils, illusionary even then, remain more so today. Instead, Japan's new prime minister, Takaichi Sanae, garners laudatory global coverage as the first woman to lead the state. Coverage that sometimes references her affinity for Margaret Thatcher but neglects mention of the policies the UK leader wrought upon her nation and the world more than a generation ago. The more, it would seem, things change the more entrenched and determined the forces of the status quo are to do anything but consider how the prevailing logics of the contemporary are failing.

Instead of triumph then, looking out on the world at the contemporary moment is a largely dispiriting activity. For Japan scholars it now demands that we acknowledge a nation with a burgeoning enthusiasm for a political right that borrows gleefully from the sordid and well-established global template, that is habitually framed as mired in a seemingly intractable demographic disaster, and that is most positively regarded through a fetishized popular culture and its sometimes salacious products that often aim to stultify and distract on a mass scale. But why can't such a reality be reframed through collective recognition of the responsibilities that scholars carry, regardless of the topical thrust of our work?

More than fifty years ago Noam Chomsky famously articulated his views on "the responsibility of intellectuals," arguing that: "Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us." Collectively, have we lived up to our responsibilities as pertains to our work, focus, and inquiry on Japan or anywhere else? Or, as I am certainly guilty of, have we placated for funds, access, or audiences in a manner that renders us supplicants to the very things we are tasked with challenging? How might we refocus our efforts on challenging ineffective policies, often reliant on violently maintaining inequities, that ensures little change of a meaningful and emancipatory variety occurs? Is this not, above all else, our principal charge as scholars?

At the very least, our collective scholarly voices can do better than reactionary takes. For example, we may consider: How are Japan's demographics an opportunity to enact degrowth policies and practices? How might the extremes of Japan's urban/rural imbalance invite substantively new thinking on what it means to enact renewal? Why are efforts to build dignified lives, communities, and practices infrequently given the same amount of attention as narratives of inevitable demise? Why can we not demand that Japan's persistent societal issues, if they are the precarious harbinger of what awaits, serve as argumentative evidence for how we must seriously articulate what substantively different and emancipatory alternatives could be alongside how they are to be enacted?

I have tried to orient my recent scholarly work around these questions. In various places including APJJF and my forthcoming book, I ask that we take depictions of the future seriously. In particular,

official, often state-orchestrated, renderings of the future do little more than occlude, if not denigrate, the work of contemporary groups invested in enacting societies that take individual levels of human dignity as the appropriate measure of broadly-conceived societal success or failure. The persistent techno-solutionism of such depictions does little more than ensure sustained denigration of marginal and vulnerable populations through a largely performative series of official proclamations and renderings of a future that is impossible to enact without substantive change to the organizing principles of society. It is my hope that such efforts encourage other scholars to also take seriously the myriad ways in which efforts are made by powerful social actors to deliberately thwart meaningful, emancipatory social change.

To close, I ask that we consider what comes of scholarly association with a particular place? How does one become a "Japan scholar" or, in my case, a "Japan anthropologist?" More pointedly, should we not reject such associations as limiting in ways that sometimes demand reverential deference to our sites of expertise? Tying one's intellectual labor to a location undoubtedly fosters empathetic connection. Does it also inhibit how much and the manner in which we are willing to challenge?

Elements of my early life helped make it possible for Japan to feature as a location of prominence and potential interest, but in particular ways indicative of larger and too-often uncriticized societal dimensions. Such experiences, no doubt part of the formidable years for others in building interest along their own intellectual paths, shaped how I came to invest myself in Japan and how I am now made to feel it necessary to justify such decisions. Here, I have wanted to challenge how we think about such pathways, and how we now confront realities which demand we be more invested and castigatory in our conclusions.

Is our role as scholars to offer contextual analysis and interpretation? To position events within the fluctuations of theoretical trends? To quickly produce reactionary takes that generate attention but do not disrupt the status quo enough to get us in trouble? Or, and what I find too-often insufficiently stated, do we need to challenge existing arrangements in a manner that hopes to foster something new by calling out the systemic failings of the current order so that a more just and dignity-affirming future can be articulated? As scholars indelibly tied to Japan, or any other particular place, should not our objective be to foment the changes we feel are necessary in order that emancipatory possibilities can be realized, instead of regurgitating the existing positions of those responsible for the current order? Undoubtedly this can be challenging, particularly for those of us who, like me, came to Japan in a meaningful way as a young adult and continue to reside largely outside its borders. Yet I would reiterate at the end that failing to bring the critical scrutiny scholarship demands is a larger betrayal of our professional obligations, particularly if it comes from a desire for more ingratiated integration.

In a posthumously published volume, the late anthropologist David Graeber left us with a simple yet provocative assertion: "The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently." The time for scholars to forcefully confront how Tokyo, Japan, and too much of the world has been deliberately made in ways intended to sow harm, sorrow, and suffering is long overdue.

About the author

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