Introduction

Crisis Narratives, Institutional Change, and the Transformation of the Japanese State

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From Crisis to Crisis Politics

Crisis is a conjuncture in which the old simply cannot be preserved.[1]

Crisis is the moment in which the unity of the state is discursively renegotiated and, potentially, reachieved and in which a new strategic trajectory is imposed upon the institutions that now (re-)comprise it.[2]

While East Asia's and especially China's economic growth has become a major driving force of global change, many developed countries struggle to readjust their social, economic, and political institutions to the challenges of financial crises, shrinking populations, and the rising costs of social welfare. These contrasting trajectories led to the notion of a "power shift" and rekindled speculations about an impending "Asian Century." As an economically and technologically highly advanced society, Japan finds itself at the intersection and forefront of these regional and global transformations. Thus, understanding the challenges that Japanese policymakers face and the choices that they make is not only critical for understanding the future of East Asia, it also provides a clue about the post-modern future of the global economy and of international politics.

Converging with the abrupt end of Japan's economic miracle, drastic geopolitical changes rekindled public and elite perceptions that Japan was stuck in consecutive "lost decades."[3] This sense of crisis and decline was exacerbated when China replaced Japan as the world's second-largest economy in 2010; when the March 11, 2011, triple disaster shattered the belief in Japan's technological superiority; and when policymakers in Washington warned Japan that it would be downgraded to "second tier nation" status unless it stepped up "burden-sharing" in the US–Japan alliance.[4] Scholars articulated these anxieties not only by arguing that Japan was "in crisis,"[5] but increasingly also by noting that it had passed its "peak moment,"[6] and predicted a "precarious future,"[7] even collapse.[8]

These anxieties deepened over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the political leadership had been mobilizing the nation and centralizing executive power—ostensibly to prepare for such scenarios—for more than a decade, fears of the healthcare system's impending collapse and realization that Japanese research failed to play a role in the global race for vaccines added to the sense of national crisis. Thus, discussions about the COVID-19 response increasingly resembled the debates in the wake of the 2011 triple disaster. Once more, scholars and the public questioned the resilience and crisis management capabilities of the postwar state.[9]

To stop the slide toward the abyss, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), upon regaining power in 2012, had renewed their pledge to create a "beautiful" and "new" Japan.[10] Strong leadership and an innovative political agenda promised to "take back Japan" (*Nippon o torimodosu*) from the constraints of postwar institutions and overcome the economic stagnation of the lost decades. Indeed, Abe's second stint restored remarkable political stability. His tenure coincided with the postwar era's second longest period of economic growth, and a series of electoral victories made him the longest-serving prime minister of modern Japan. However, electoral politics continued to reflect a deep sense of "national crisis" (*kokunan*). The crisis rhetoric suggested that there was "only one road" (*kono michi shika nai*) for bringing the nation back to prosperity and international standing: the neoliberal economic reforms known as "Abenomics" and the revamping of the national security system, including revising the constitution. Only these, LDP exponents argued, would enable Japan to play an active role alongside the United States in protecting the "rules-based international order" and lead to the country's "rebirth," "renaissance," and "rejuvenation."[11]

Yet academic debates about rising China, and declining and eventually rejuvenating Japan, remain imprecise if not contradictory regarding the questions as to what this decline actually entails, and which social and political institutions are in crisis. This ambiguity is deeply problematic. On the one hand, adequate policy responses depend on the clear identification of causal chains. On the other, the absence of clarity opens space for political entrepreneurs to promote their parochial interests by deliberately blurring and conflating "real" failures with subjectively narrated or entirely manufactured crises.

Therefore, the authors in this volume revisit the prevailing notions of "decline" and "crisis." For this purpose, they apply methodologies in line with the critical sociological approach that political scientist Colin Hay[12] suggested for the examination of state transformation. The authors analyze both the real failures of the Japanese social, economic, and political systems and the subjectively perceived and narrated interpretations of decline or crisis. This includes efforts on the part of political entrepreneurs to embed these various representations into politically actionable meta-narratives. Taken together, the chapters in this volume show how discourses of crisis and decline have been a crucial force for the restructuring of social, political, and economic institutions. Unlike much of the existing scholarship, which reverts to the conventional diagnosis of stasis, the contributors to this volume find that the state and society have been undergoing profound change. This suggests that research focusing on specific formal institutions has largely missed seeing and explaining the deep and incessant transformation of the Japanese state as a whole. A hundred fifty years after the Meiji Restoration, at the closure of the lost decades associated with the Heisei era (1989–2019), crisis narratives continue to spur policy lines that advance decisive social and economic restructuring. These aim to make Japan great again, ostensibly as great as it had been during its industrialization in the Meiji era (1868–1912).[13] Yet it remains to be seen which ideas ascribed to that period can serve as guides to peace and prosperity. And the actual outcomes of this agenda will likely differ from the envisioned future.

In the following section, we provide a brief overview of the political, social and economic changes as they have stimulated debates over national crisis and decline. We then build on this discussion and outline the theoretical approach for connecting crisis discourses to dynamics of institutional change and state transformation.

Debating Crisis and Change in Japan

The Socioeconomic Crisis: The Collapse of "Japan Inc."

Despite the impact of two global economic crises in the 1970s, Japan's political-economic institutions have shown considerable resilience. This is a consequence of the introduction and expansion of mostly corporate-based welfare systems for the broad redistribution of the benefits from the postwar industrial growth. While the Japanese state faced brief phases of contestation when conservative elites renegotiated the terms of the security alliance with the United States in the late 1950s and in the 1960s, the generally increasing affluence demobilized civil society and stabilized the LDP's position in power.[14] The political settlement of the "1955 system"[15] characterized by a powerful conservative one-party government, an interventionist state bureaucracy, and a highly protected corporate sector—influential observers traced the roots of this state back to wartime industrial modernization under the "1940 system"[16]—constituted the very fabric of "Japan Inc."[17] By the 1980s, three decades of sustained growth and prosperity had given rise to the hegemonic narrative of a Japan boasting an inclusive "one-hundred million people new middle class" (*ichioku sōchūryū shakai*)—the first and only East Asian country, and possibly the only non-Western country, with one.[18]

However, the end of the Cold War with the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union, and the simultaneous end of Japan's growth "miracle" with the equally sudden burst of the "bubble economy," intensified contentions about the present condition and the future of the economy, society, and the state. Consequently, debates about reform went far beyond questions of macroeconomic management.[19] In 1999, for instance, Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō set up the Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21st Century. With a sense of urgency in view of the nation "heading for decline," a group of eminent persons pointed out that the past "catch-up and overtake" paradigm that the country had been following since the Meiji era was no longer suitable, and that the world no longer offered any ready-made models.[20] Still feeling the impact of the state's dismal failure to respond to the devastating 1995 Kobe earthquake, the report embraced the neoliberal paradigm and called for the overhaul of the entire system of governance and the reform of social welfare, education, immigration, and science and technology policies. However, Japan's sluggish post-bubble economy, epitomized by the collapse of major credit houses under the heavy weight of non-performing loans,

shattered public trust in the country's economic superiority and in the elites' capabilities to bring back sustained growth.

As David Chiavacci shows in this volume, among the numerous diagnoses of crisis in post-growth Japan, the notion of an economically "divided society" (*kakusa shakai*) has been most powerful in undermining the myth of an ever-expanding affluent middle class.[21] The emergence of a new cohort of young people who found it increasingly difficult to emulate their parents and enter the job market in positions promising life-long employment and steadily increasing wages amplified this narrative of widening socioeconomic discrepancy.[22] Following several rounds of labor market deregulations in the 1990s and 2000s,[23] precarity, poverty, and high suicide rates emerged as symptoms for "a society that lacked human bonds" (*muen shakai*).[24] In late 2008, Japan's social malaise was put into even starker relief after day laborers who had been disposed of in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, were forced to camp *en masse* in Tokyo's Hibiya Park.[25]

Accelerating demographic decline and its ramifications for social welfare, particularly in rapidly depopulating rural areas, fueled concerns about a deep social crisis.[26] The Japanese population seemed to shrink unstoppably. Marking its peak of 128 million in 2010, it decreased to 126.4 million in 2017 and is projected to fall below the 100 million mark by 2040.[27] The working-age population is forecast to decline to 45 million by 2065, with the elderly composing almost 40 percent of the population. In what has prominently been labeled "a state on the brink" (*genkai kokka*),[28] recent reports suggested that the current Japanese pension system is unsustainable, that many villages and cities in Japan's countryside are bound to become "extinct" in the near future, and that corporations will struggle to sustain their productivity and employment levels in the face of global competition.[29]

Indeed, many municipalities lack the infrastructure required for taking care of their rapidly aging populations' welfare. And, as Jeremy Breaden illustrates in this volume, this social crisis both catalyzes and is catalyzed through the crisis of the education system. Japanese universities' international rankings deteriorate while many fail to attract sufficient tuition-paying students, and a growing number of students fall into debt. It is thus easy to see how the phenomena of societal and economic change, taken together, created the meta-narrative of Japan's "lost decades," of a nation in seemingly irreversible decline. The following chapters will show in more detail how these developments prompted a host of political leaders to come up with their own visions for an entirely new Japan.[30]

The Political Crisis: The Eclipse of the 1955 System
and Failed Reforms

Academic studies have explained the above trends mostly as a recalibration of Japanese economic and political institutions in response to increasing pressures of globalization and post-Cold War international security problems. Sociologists such as Takahara Motoaki have convincingly shown how the crisis of Japan's welfare institutions bred anxieties that gave rise to new nationalisms among Japan's youth. Predominantly voiced on the internet, these currents contributed to the destabilizing of Sino-Japanese and Japan-Korea relations.[31] As Shogo Suzuki shows in this volume, conservative elites in particular embraced various cultural coping strategies. They increasingly harnessed idealized traditional values to bolster Japanese soft power and thereby underlined their nation's exceptional qualities. While officially mediated foreign threat perceptions also propelled incremental but deep-rooted changes in national security policies, it is Japan's political system that facilitated them.

Arguably, the revision of electoral laws and the decline of the political left represented by the Socialist Party played a critical role in opening new spaces for political discourse and overhauling policy-making processes, thereby altering the country's trajectory. Following the seeming collapse of the 1955 system in 1993 and the realignment of the party-political landscape, elites pushed for electoral reforms to end nearly four decades of LDP dominance. Hence, the introduction of a mixed single-member non-transferable vote/ proportional representation system was believed to nourish policy-oriented two-party competition and to resolve endemic corruption.[32] With the ideal of the British Westminster system in mind, political scientists have argued that Japan will, at the end of political realignment, witness a more policy-oriented and competitive democracy with the alternation of governing power between the LDP and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), newly established in 1996.[33] However, despite a decade of electoral and administrative reforms and economic restructuring, observers have continued to lament policy stasis, going so far as labeling Japan "arthritic"[34] due to powerful veto players' obstruction of structural reforms.[35]

This seeming stasis notwithstanding, the ongoing economic and political crises, compounded by the deepening social crisis, have not only propelled the rise of authoritarian populism but also further entrenched patriarchal family politics, as Hiroko Takeda shows in this volume.[36] At the same time, it provided an opening for the epochal victory of the DPJ

in the lower house election of August 2009, the first complete transfer of power since 1955. The success of the heterogeneous group of politicians was based on an election platform of comprehensive reform and breaking with basically everything that stood for the LDP-led 1955 system. The list of reform projects in their 2009 manifesto "Putting People's Lives First" resembled the Obuchi report of 2000. Rather than prioritizing certain policies, it was a call for the refashioning of the Japanese state and society as a whole.[37] Prime Minister Kan Naoto, in a January 2011 address to the World Economic Forum, promised an "opening" (*kaikoku*) reminiscent of Japan's modernization through the Meiji Restoration, and asked for reinventing "social bonds" (*kizuna*) to temper the impact of the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade agreement.[38] As a consequence of the DPJ's ambitious agenda, however, struggles over a number of cardinal issues soon ensued not only between the ruling and opposition parties, but also within the DPJ. Moreover, the DPJ's offensive to curb bureaucratic influence backfired.[39] The national crisis became narrated as a crisis of leadership. And, as Paul O'Shea shows in this volume, influential US policymakers' general mistrust of the DPJ reinforced this narrative.[40] This was the state of affairs when on March 11, 2011, an earthquake of unprecedented magnitude occurred about seventy kilometers off the coast of Miyagi Prefecture.

The 3.11 Triple Disaster and the Resurgence of "Japan Inc."

Prime Minister Kan declared the tsunami's devastation and the subsequent nuclear meltdowns at the Fukushima power plant the worst crisis that Japan had suffered since its defeat in World War II.[41] Indeed, the Great Eastern Japan Disaster has, with reference to the disruptive impact of the "9/11" terrorist attacks, also become known as "3.11."[42] The catastrophe's impact on the national psyche certainly warrants this analogy. Most importantly, 3.11 disaster politics revealed how the postwar power structures, previously known as the "iron triangle" of bureaucrats, politicians, and big business—the elites at the heart of the developmental state, forged for and through the promotion of economic growth—have been operating.[43] As Koichi Hasegawa shows in this volume, these vested interests returned to the stage in the form of the "nuclear village" (*genshiryoku mura*).[44] And despite being widely seen as the prime source of the problems that caused the nuclear meltdowns and hampered crisis management, the establishment's overwhelming discursive power meant that the crisis narrative turned against the very people who sought to overhaul the failing institutions of the postwar state.

In a remarkable twist, vested interests managed to put the blame on Prime Minister Kan—ironically one of the few politicians without elite pedigree and known for his strong advocacy of public health issues during a stint as health minister in the mid-1990s—for deficiencies in the management of the unprecedented triple disaster.[45]

The DPJ subsequently changed prime ministers and, reminiscent of the Obuchi Report of the year 2000, came up with an innovative and comprehensive strategy to bring about the "rebirth of Japan,"[46] but it was to no avail. Hopes of establishing a functioning parliamentary representation akin to the United Kingdom's Westminster system quickly gave way to soul-searching diagnoses of a malfunctioning Japanese democracy.[47] When the DPJ-led government came to the brink of collapse in mid-2012, Ishiba Shigeru, bidding for LDP leadership and the office of prime minister, accurately framed the public mood as "national crisis."[48] The well-known ex-bureaucrat Koga Shigeaki noted the "collapse of Japan's center."[49] Others, such as the prominent historian and advisor to the Abe government Kitaoka Shinichi, went even further and saw a "collapse of Japanese politics" in the wake of "Japan's third defeat."[50] Facing a disillusioned and distrustful public, the "strong leadership" that the electorate and the establishment craved could only be provided by someone offering simpler, more convenient, and quicker fixes for restoring a "beautiful" (*utsukushii*) or "new" (*atarashii*) Japan. Prescribed by a politically resurrected Abe Shinzō, the recipe for bringing about Japan's "rebirth" (*saisei*) turned out to be a recalibration rather than fundamental rethinking of the policies which had produced the problems in the first place.[51] In other words, 3.11 exacerbated the already entrenched crisis narrative of the lost decades while betraying the hopes for fundamental change.[52]

Shortly after his election as head of the LDP and (re-)inauguration as prime minister, the hereditary politician Abe Shinzō traveled to Washington and assured the US that "Japan is back" in terms of both military and economic power.[53] The former would be achieved by overcoming the constraints of the pacifist constitution and making the "alliance of hope" "even greater" through allowing Japan to join the United States in its mission to uphold global security and stability.[54] The latter objective called for forceful macroeconomic interventions in what would, reminiscent of the Reagan presidency, become known as Abenomics.[55] Indeed, as Saori Shibata discusses in this volume, the subsequent introduction of an ultra-loose monetary policy combined with the annual dispersion of massive stimulus packages and neoliberal reforms of the labor market brought back some

growth.[56] At the same time, as Iris Wieczorek shows in this volume, Abe's emphasis on science and technology innovation as national growth engines led him to promote structural change into the direction of an idealized Silicon Valley model. By way of referring to Japan's national crisis, moreover, Prime Minister Abe rekindled populist rhetoric that portrayed his reform approach as "the only possible way forward."[57] In his move to transform the Japanese state, Abe has been supported by a strengthened neoconservative movement around the Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference).[58] Yet, despite occasional waves of purposeful optimism, the Abe administration's failure to implement significant structural reforms and tactical reluctance to steadily increase the consumption tax against the background of a ballooning public debt, soured people's confidence in the future. At the same time, the Abe government less and less subtly resorted to the China and the North Korea threats as tools for pushing constitutional revision and making Japan "normal" again. As Raymond Yamamoto shows in this volume, the China threat was mobilized to centralize decision-making on the crucially important Official Development Assistance foreign policy tool in the hands of the LDP. And Ra Mason and Sebastian Maslow illustrate in their contribution to this volume how Prime Minister Abe, in particular, had been fanning and successfully instrumentalizing North Korea–related threat perceptions throughout his political career. Embattled by several scandals, he explicitly referred to the October 2017 parliamentary snap elections as a means to renew his mandate in times of severe national crises, and pledged to "make sure the Japanese public is safe, and safeguard our nation [against the North Korea threat]."[59]

In other words, irrespective of the changes in government, most Japanese policymakers, bureaucrats, and analysts, and also a majority of the general populace, have been perceiving Japan as declining, and see no end to the general national crisis. These developments induced scholars like Kaneko Makoto and Kodama Tatsuhiko, who have been investigating the "dynamics of Japan's long-term decline," to diagnose a "Japanese disease."[60] Others such as Mikuriya Takeshi and Motomura Ryōji observed a "vulnerable Japan" that, in the absence of overdue course corrections, would be ultimately bound toward "collapse."[61]

Yet, despite the generally held view that there is something deeply wrong with the direction in which Japanese society, economics, and politics are moving, the participants in the crisis discourse disagree not only over what is going wrong, but, perhaps more fundamentally, also about what the crises' root causes are. Diverse perspectives and advanced scholarship notwithstanding, most analyses of the causes and remedies for Japan's lost

decades remain hamstrung by their ontological and epistemological assumptions.[62] For instance, even studies that take into account the fundamental and predictable shrinking of the population rarely follow through with the discussion of the social, economic, and political consequences. And also authors who, rather narrowly, attribute much of Japan's doldrums to the fluctuating nature of policy-making leave us with the question of why a post-developmental consensus on how to advance society and state could not yet emerge.[63] What is more, analysts' preoccupation with GDP growth rates as indicators of prosperity often brings them close to advocating neo-authoritarian developmental policies. It is for these reasons that a geographically and theoretically broader perspective provides valuable insights.

Conceptualizing Crisis and Change in Politics

Global Change and Post-Modernity?

Where is the transformation of the Japanese state heading, and how does it relate to trends in Europe and elsewhere? In his seminal work, Manuel Castells argued that, in the Information Age, states were caught between and called into question by the opposing trends of globalization on the one hand and powerful expressions of local collective identity on the other.[64] According to him, this compels states to decentralize power to local and regional political institutions. Pointing to the negative social and environmental consequences of industrialization, as well as the dissolution of old certainties in the present times of the second modernity, the prominent sociologist Ulrich Beck argued that, paradoxically, states must denationalize and internationalize in order to fulfill their national interests.[65] Echoing Castells, Beck's reasoning boils down to recommendations for regional integration at supranational levels and simultaneous devolution of autonomy to subnational levels.

These views align with ideas that have been circulating in East Asia. The international relations scholar Amitav Acharya has highlighted processes of regional integration spurred by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and argued that diverse regional arrangements give rise to a multiplex world characterized by multiple modernities.[66] Albeit with a greater emphasis on culture and tradition, the historian and sociologist Prasenjit Duara also sees new sources of authority emerging from regional institutions and from networks of civil society such as campaigns for the protection of natural and cultural heritage.[67] These historicized conceptions are useful in

describing and explaining social change in Northeast Asia.[68] The politics of 3.11, in particular, can be seen as an epitome of Beck's risk society and second modernity thesis. The Japanese sociologist Ōguma Eiji, for instance, understands nuclear power politics as a microcosm of the social structure of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s and symbol of the moribund "Japanese style industrialized society."[69] And, indeed, if the Fukushima crisis has not put in doubt the very purpose of the state and its institutions by undermining trust in the systems of modern governance, what else would? Yet the political consequences of profound socioeconomic change, and the conceptions of emerging network states and cosmopolitan states in particular, remain tenuous.[70] As the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argued, new structures have yet to emerge from the "liquefaction" of earlier social, economic, and political certainties.[71] Accordingly, the findings of many chapters in this volume suggest a trend toward the accumulation of power in centralized state institutions. As Richard Samuels noted in his analysis of Japan's post-3.11 disaster politics, however, more often than not, the call has been "for recovery, not for change."[72]

Crisis as a Narrated Moment of Intervention

The questions of what precisely is being recovered and whether this recovery is sustainable remain to be answered. Here, Hay's conception of crises and their function in defining the state is insightful. He argues that the state, comprising "a diverse array of specific, but none the less interdependent, agencies, apparatuses and institutions," lacks a clear and substantive unity.[73] The modern state, he emphasizes, "displays, at best, a partial and latent unity."[74] The fact that state agencies and institutions "claim their authority and legitimacy to intervene within civil society and the economy" shows that the state itself has very little capacity to behave as a coherent, singular actor; its unity must first be accomplished. According to Hay, it is precisely in phases of institutional transformation that this relative unity is greatest. Hence, the very form of the state resides in "the crystallization of past strategies" of structural transformation.[75]

For students of Japanese society and politics, this conception and its consequences are not new. For one thing, political scientists have long observed the fragmented decision-making processes in the otherwise very strong postwar state, and lamented the silo-style structure of bureaucratic processes (*tatewari gyōsei*). Moreover, historicized critical accounts have consistently pointed to the roots of the modern Japanese state in the social

mobilization of the Meiji period and found considerable institutional and ideational continuity between the pre- and postwar periods.[76] The phenomenon that contemporary conservative elites, despite the great success of postwar reconstruction and modernization, remain captive to the Meiji state ideal[77] confirms Hay's proposition that "the internal structure of the state reflects a series of formal/institutional boundaries defining a number of policy fields and corresponding policy communities" in ways that reflect former projects of structural state transformation.[78]

According to Hay, inertia due to fragmentation can be transcended to produce new directions in times when the territorial integrity of the state is threatened by war, or the social and political stability of the state is threatened by internal unrest, or the structural continuity and legitimacy of the state is threatened by state and economic failure.[79] In each of these scenarios, public perceptions of crisis are crucial for influencing the "trajectory imposed on the state in the post-crisis phase."[80] These perceptions are subjective constructions of the social reality, and the ways in which crises are narrated is decisive for determining the moment when an intervention can and must be made, by whom or on whose behalf it occurs with what objective, and how it will be implemented. The transformation of the state may succeed when a new projection of a future state regime is constructed, a single *agency* is forged from the collective agencies of its constituent institutions, and when a new trajectory is imposed upon the state *in transition*.[81] In this context, Hay also points to the necessity that not only the public but also those agents who are capable of responding have to see the need and opportunity to effect change. Moreover, these agents can only intervene at the particular "level at which the crisis is identified" through the crisis narrative.[82] Importantly, then, crisis is not only the property of a given system; it is lived experience.

In order to adequately assess the nature of a given crisis, including its root causes, severity, and effects for the designing of effective policy responses, it is crucial to analytically distinguish between "objective" failures—Hay defines these as non-reproductive properties of a system—and the "subjectively" felt and narrated crisis, that is, a widely perceived condition in which systemic failure has become politically and ideationally mediated.[83] In other words, the occurrence of crises presupposes the existence of certain failures or contradictions, but the ostensibly objective crisis narratives, more often than not, tell stories that misrepresent the actual nature of the problems and their root causes.[84] Consequently, not only may actions based on crisis narratives fail to address the underlying causes, they also have significant potential for worsening the contradictions while deepening perceptions of crisis.

These discrepancies stem from the fact that crisis narratives are a product of human efforts to make sense of a great variety of disparate policy and system failures. Crisis narration "operates through the discursive 'recruiting' of policy failures, and the lived experiences to which they give rise, as symptoms of a crisis of the state."[85] The discursive construction of a crisis can be understood as a process in which a number of contradictions become selected as being "newsworthy," are portrayed as a symptom of crisis through a primary narration, and finally become assimilated into a single meta-narrative.[86] The latter final move is only possible through the abstraction of the individual events or symptoms. Hence, the success of crisis narratives depends not on their accurate description of the underlying failures and their causes and effects, but "on their ability to provide a simplified account sufficiently flexible to 'narrate' a great variety of morbid symptoms *whilst unambiguously attributing causality and responsibility.*"[87] Crucially, crisis narratives serve to mark the political arena for the contest between those elites that are seen as incapable and the political leadership to be trusted in managing state transformation. This is particularly evident in the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis when crisis narratives have become central in the rise of populism across advanced industrial nations.[88]

Importantly, the political battles over the future trajectory of the state are "won and lost *not* in the wake of the crisis moment, but in the very process in which the crisis is constituted."[89] These insights warrant asking the following questions: What structural—that is, "real"—societal, economic, "domestic" political, and international changes have been challenging what institutions of the Japanese state from the late 1980s onwards? How have these challenges become framed in crisis narratives? Who succeeded in pushing through their narratives? What institutional changes have these narratives provoked? If no change is to be found, who staged resistance with what counter-narrative? What is the potential of the (envisioned) institutional changes to alleviate the original causes of the crisis—the structural "real" challenges identified at the outset? Finally, what are the implications of these findings for the respective policy area, and for the future of Japan as a whole?

Taken together, lived experiences of decline, narrated in the form of the nation's lost decades, have deeply impacted politics, economy, and culture.[90] Yet, while Japan is not "number one" anymore, "decline" is also a "diversion," as not all is lost.[91] During the last decade Japan has seen sustained, though slow, growth. The country's living standards remain high, cities are run well, and crime rates are low. Higher education and businesses increasingly internationalize, civil society—though relatively weak—has

flourished after 3.11, and political stability remains relatively strong.[92] Japan is setting new trends in consumption and fashion and remains an important site of technological innovation. Moreover, in what some have described as a "quiet social revolution,"[93] the country is (though slowly) opening up for migration. Narratives of crisis and decline are, therefore, justly accompanied by stories of hope informed by Japan's impressive postwar development as a source of optimism for the future.[94] Thus, the emerging "science of hope" (*kibōgaku*) and a "social science of crisis thinking" (*kikitaiōgaku*) have attempted to provide counter-narratives to the prevailing mode of decline.[95] Yet we argue that it is precisely the compound of narratives of hope and the politics of decline and crisis that reveal the transition of the Japanese state. Understanding this complex process is the aim of this volume. The evidence put forth in the following chapters will help us to identify the trajectory of this state-in-transition.

Organization of the Volume

The present volume is organized into three parts that move from the social to the economic and the political. The authors of the following chapters shed light on how competing narrations of crisis effect institutional change, and may co-constitute a transformation of the Japanese state.

In part I we account for socioeconomic developments and the pertaining discourses that, usually, display a loss of orientation and prescribe a return to Japan's postwar trajectory of economic growth and social stability. Looking at rising economic inequality (David Chiavacci), shrinking population (Hiroko Takeda), and structural problems of universities as leading institutions of higher education (Jeremy Breaden), the contributions problematize the idea of social crisis. These chapters illustrate the discrepancy between Japan's ostensibly ongoing *national* crisis and the reality of the relatively safe country, the increasing societal problems, and deepening individual hardships.

While economic doldrums have been continuing ever since the burst of the bubble in 1991, the fallout of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis created a "new normal" for the world economy, and the triple disaster of March 2011 created a "new normal" for Japan. Thus, the chapters in part II examine the societal and political responses to the 3.11 disaster (Koichi Hasegawa), efforts to restore scientific and technological leadership (Iris Wieczorek), and the deepening of contradictions in Japan's political economy (Saori Shibata). These accounts reveal how crisis narratives spurred reforms such

as Abenomics that not only failed to resolve, but also entrenched, structural impediments to the decisive reforms that would remove systemic failures.

In part III, we shift our focus towards Japan's foreign and security politics and look at responses to the perceived crises caused by instability in the US–Japan alliance under the Democratic Party of Japan's rule (Paul O'Shea), the instrumentalization of fears about rising China for politicizing Official Development Assistance (ODA) policy-making (Raymond Yamamoto), the framing of the North Korea threat for restructuring Japan's national security system (Ra Mason and Sebastian Maslow), and the mobilization of ethno-centric nationalism to alleviate anxieties about Japan's declining status in international society (Shogo Suzuki). In summary, these chapters illustrate how defense strategists, alliance managers, and policymakers have used the meta-narrative of a national crisis to undermine political opposition and bring about incremental changes for moving Japan's foreign and defense policies away from their postwar pacifist orientation.

In the concluding chapter, we argue that Japan's various crises are in many respects not as severe as portrayed and often resulted from fears about unprecedented societal and economic changes in the context of irreversible global transformations. Yet, we also note that dominant crisis narratives often framed actual failures in ways that limited the range of politically acceptable interpretations and, as a consequence, precluded effective responses to the problems at hand. Thus, paradoxically, the strong leadership that the Japan-in-crisis meta-narrative demanded resulted in the deepening of the national sense of crisis. While the powerful leaders it produced effectuated more institutional change than is generally acknowledged, these entrenched elites also failed to think and act beyond their long-standing modes of doing politics. As a result, Japan is not heading toward a decentralization of power such as macro-sociological scholarship has been predicting, nor has the decidedly stronger center been able to steer the country toward an entirely new path into the future. In this vein, Japan, can serve as a basis for describing a Northeast Asian form of post-modernity, and as a reference for how developed countries struggle adjusting to post-modern conditions.

Notes

1. Colin Hay, "Rethinking Crisis: Narratives of the New Right and Constructions of Crisis," *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 8, no. 2 (1995): 60–76, here 63.

2. Colin Hay, "Crisis and the Structural Transformation of the State: Interrogating the Process of Change," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 1, no. 3 (1999): 317–344, here 331.

3. Yoichi Funabashi and Barak Kushner, eds., *Examining Japan's Lost Decades* (London: Routledge, 2016).

4. Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, "The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Anchoring Stability in Asia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2012.

5. Bong Youngshik and T.J. Pempel, eds., *Japan in Crisis: What Will it Take for Japan to Rise Again?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

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