



# Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan

By Mary C. Brinton

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Lost in Transition tells the story of the "lost generation" that came of age in Japan's deep economic recession in the 1990s. The book argues that Japan is in the midst of profound changes that have had an especially strong impact on the young generation. The country's renowned "permanent employment system" has unraveled for young workers, only to be replaced by temporary and insecure forms of employment. The much-admired system of moving young people smoothly from school to work has frayed. The book argues that these changes in the very fabric of Japanese postwar institutions have loosened young people's attachment to school as the launching pad into the world of work and loosened their attachment to the workplace as a source of identity and security. The implications for the future of Japanese society - and the fault lines within it - loom large.

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## Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan By Mary C. Brinton Bibliography

- Rank: #1288748 in Books
- Brand: Brinton Mary C
- Published on: 2010-12-31
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.98" h x .51" w x 5.98" l, .85 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 228 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Mary Brinton's book tells a fascinating story of high school graduates who get lost in the transition from school to work. It provides a compelling account of an important failing in the Japanese system. Yet this is more than just a book on contemporary Japan. The book also reveals the tensions that any society faces when an economic structure changes. Brinton's book will be of great value to anyone interested in labor market adjustments in advanced industrial democracies. Brinton's first-rate scholarship combines rigorous empirical analysis with vivid personal narratives. This book sets a new standard for studies of labor market adjustments."

Margarita Estévez-Abe, Syracuse University

"In this volume, Mary Brinton gives us a penetrating analysis of young Japanese who are "lost" in transition to adulthood. Her extensive research skillfully uncovers how they have lost "social locations" called "ba" and vividly reveals what it means in the context of their lives. The book enables us to accurately grasp the deep turmoil, anxiety, and social dislocation that has swept through Japan over the past two decades."

Takehiko Kariya, University of Oxford

"Brinton, who is well known for her earlier work on women in the Japanese labor market, brings the same compassion and insight to her analysis of how young men are faring as they navigate their transition into a post-industrial job market that has made the institutions that helped their parents' generation increasingly dysfunctional and irrelevant. Her data-rich depiction of how this old system used formal ties between schools and employers to help young people quickly find a new corporate home, or "ba", combined with her profiles of several young men coping with a much more fluid labor market today, shows how the cultural context in which people live can complicate the process of institutional change."

Leonard Schoppa, University of Virginia

"Mary Brinton's study of Japan's lost generation of young people is a must-read for Japan specialists and will also help other social scientists understand the social and cultural context that has shaped Japan's response to the economic challenges facing all post-industrial societies. Brinton traces a broad social and historical context to show how the rigidity of some existing institutional structures and social expectations, coupled with the unraveling of others, suddenly reduced the ability of ordinary, non-elite young Japanese men to find stable employment after high school graduation, with profound ramifications for their lives. Using a broad array of both qualitative and quantitative data, informed by sound sociological theory and a sympathetic understanding of Japan, she explores the deep changes that are reshaping the Japanese society we thought we knew."

Patricia G. Steinhoff, University of Hawaii

"Mary C. Brinton's *Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan* focuses on one of the most important social changes of the beginning of the 21st century in Japan ... Long envious of Japan's famed social stability and its assumed relation to economic success, the international community had been for the most part unaware of the highly orchestrated nature of this stability, including the complex relationships and political-economic contexts that made it possible. What the author of *Lost in Transition* brings to our attention in excellent quantitative and qualitative detail is how this system functioned and the effects upon the "nonelite" student population most disadvantaged by its unraveling."

Andrea G. Arai, Journal of Sociology

#### About the Author

Mary C. Brinton is Reischauer Institute Professor of Sociology at Harvard University. She has also held professorships at the University of Chicago and Cornell University. She is the author of *Women and the Economic Miracle: Gender and Work in Postwar Japan*, the editor of *Women's Working Lives in East Asia*, and the co-editor of *The Declining Significance of Gender?* Her work has appeared frequently in journals, including the *American Journal of Sociology*, the *American Sociological Review*, and *Sociology of Education*.

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