
SOCIAL CONTRACTS UNDER STRESS

The Middle Classes of America,
Europe, and Japan at the Turn
of the Century

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Contents

Contributors		ix
Acknowledgments		xi
Introduction: Social Contracts Under Stress	<i>Olivier Zunz</i>	1
Part I NATIONAL PATHS TO MIDDLE-CLASS FORMATION		
1 From Divergence to Convergence: The Divided German Middle Class, 1945 to 2000	<i>Hannes Siegrist</i>	21
2 Individuality and Class: The Rise and Fall of the Gentlemanly Social Contract in Britain	<i>Mike Savage</i>	47
3 The Middle Classes in France: Social and Political Functions of Semantic Pluralism from 1870 to 2000	<i>Christophe Charle</i>	66
4 Could Postwar France Become a Middle-class Society?	<i>Patrick Fridenson</i>	89
5 The Short Happy Life of the Japanese Middle Class	<i>Andrew Gordon</i>	108
6 Inflation: "The Permanent Dilemma" of the American Middle Classes	<i>Meg Jacobs</i>	130
Part II CONSTITUENCIES IN CONFLICT		
7 Public Policy and the Middle-class Racial Divide After the Second World War	<i>Ira Katznelson</i>	157

CONTENTS

8	The American Middle Class and the Politics of Education	<i>Margaret Weir</i>	178
9	Changing Gender and Family Models: Their Impact on the Social Contract in European Welfare States	<i>Chiara Saraceno</i>	204
10	At the Limits of New Middle-class Japan: Beyond "Mainstream Consciousness"	<i>William W. Kelly</i>	232
11	Twelve Million Full-time Housewives: The Gender Consequences of Japan's Postwar Social Contract	<i>Mari Osawa</i>	255
Part III VANISHING BORDERS AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT			
12	Disinflationary Adjustment: The Link Between Economic Globalization and Challenges to Postwar Social Contracts	<i>Nobuhiro Hiwatari</i>	281
13	Globalization and the Squeeze on the Middle Class: Does Any Version of the Postwar Social Contract Meet the Challenge?	<i>Leonard Schoppa</i>	319
14	Europeanization of Social Policy: A Reopening of the Social Contract?	<i>Bo Öhngren</i>	345
15	Europe from Division to Reunification: The Eastern European Middle Classes During and After Socialism	<i>Maurice Aymard</i>	362
16	Upsetting Models: An Italian Tale of the Middle Classes	<i>Arnaldo Bagnasco</i>	379
	Statistical Appendix: Income Inequality in Seven Nations—France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States	<i>Derek Hoff</i>	401
	Selected Bibliography		411
	Index		421

At the Limits of New Middle-class Japan: Beyond "Mainstream Consciousness"

William W. Kelly

It was one paradox of class in Japan through the second half of the twentieth century that class consciousness was high among academic social scientists but seemingly low among officials and the public. In this regard, class talk in Japan has the same standing as in the United States, the other advanced industrial society that is equally unwilling to formulate structured social inequality in the idiom of socioeconomic class. In both countries, social scientists share a central and sophisticated concern with class analysis, but public officials and ordinary people are disinclined to talk about themselves and others in terms of class position.

Middle Class or Mainstream? Class Structure Without Class Talk

As observed by many analysts, from Tocqueville through Veblen to present-day commentators, the "American Way" is to dissolve class into the vagaries of consumption tastes and lifestyles.¹ Americans commonly use the term "middle class" to talk about such matters as individual identity, community type, lifestyle, and voting patterns, but we also use the term much more frequently to indicate our consumption orientation or position ourselves morally than to specify economic location. Since the 1930s Depression, upward of eight out of ten Americans have located themselves within the middle class when asked in many different kinds of polls to choose between lower, middle, and upper locations. Poll self-identification has remained in-

variant in spite of widening income and asset inequalities since the late 1970s.

A similar pattern, although a different dynamic, holds true for Japan. Class has been a prominent topic of social science research for the last fifty years, and it is still deployed by intellectuals and what remains of the organized labor movement. In the first postwar decade, scholars like Tsurumi Shunsuke debated about how independent "popular culture" was from "mass culture."² By the late 1950s, scholars had divided sharply on how to interpret the first Social Stratification and Mobility (SSM) survey, which was undertaken in 1955 by the Japan Sociological Society and whose design was greatly influenced by survey programs in American sociology. One of the contested findings of the first SSM survey was a growing new middle class.³ Social scientists continued to dispute the survey findings through the 1960s; for example, Odaka Kunio and Yasuda Saburō argued over the mobility and class identification issues that arose from the second SSM study.⁴ In the following decade, both scholars and journalists took up the question of whether the annual Prime Minister's Office poll demonstrated a broad middle "class"-ness or middle "mass"-ness.⁵ Then, as a speculative "bubble economy" overheated in the 1980s, controversy centered on whether the expansive postwar middle, however defined, was now fragmenting into widening differentials between what some warned were the "new rich" and "new poor."⁶ The sustained recession of the 1990s at least reined in many of the new rich and defused the commentary about "kakusa," or a wealth gap. Academics have instead turned to other kinds of stratification debates, such as that between the sociologists Tominaga Ken'ichi and Imada Takatoshi, who propose modernist versus postmodernist interpretations of stratification and status perception.⁷

These debates about class and mass, and the research agendas behind them, have significantly influenced academic formulations of contemporary Japan. Despite their often sharp differences, they collectively demonstrate that socioeconomic inequalities have persisted, in one form and degree or another, and that class continues to be a salient analytical distinction. There is broad agreement, for instance, that from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, aggregate economic growth and state policies to enhance personal income and expand welfare significantly equalized income, assets, and educational attainment across the Japanese population. But since the mid-1970s, there has been an equally significant widening of income, asset, and education differentials. Ishida Hiroshi, in a rigorous test of several competing hypotheses about class structure and status hierarchies, found strong support for the importance of firm size in explaining differen-

tial benefits and status. Income and prestige were more closely correlated with the size of one's company than with one's occupation or education.⁸

However, the purpose of this chapter is not to join this sociological literature but rather to unpack a term of more popular than academic currency, one that has denoted social inclusiveness rather than categorical differentiation. This term is "chūryū." Its usual English gloss is "middle class," although we should understand it more accurately as "mainstream." Its most frequent compound, "chūryū ishiki," translates as "mainstream consciousness." The significance of this term and its compound, I argue, is in signaling the ways in which the Japanese population has generally assented to the post-1960s societal order.

This assent was neither predictable nor passive. The assertion of a social contract frequently emphasizes the efforts of political and economic leaders to incorporate and accommodate broad segments of a national population. The Japanese establishment in particular is often seen to have been particularly successful in co-opting people as citizens, workers, and consumers into a national compact. The initiative, however, may well have come from below, especially if we begin, with Kent Calder and others, from a premise of official equivocation and establishment uncertainty:

Across the long decades of growth, an increasingly stable and affluent Japanese society confronted a fractious political system, the unsettling pluralistic heritage of occupation, and an economy with little tolerance for political instability, due to its ambitious, risky, and highly leveraged economic growth strategies.⁹

Identification with a societal mainstream took place in spite of, and not in terms of, objective differentials that sociologists and economists continued to recognize and register as those of social class. Chūryū has been a potent construct for organizing life and valuations of life in Japan over the last several decades, and any effort to understand the real differences in socioeconomic position and life chances that have existed and continue to exist in Japan must take this term seriously.

Significantly, chūryū does not feature prominently in sociological surveys such as the decennial SSM, but it has been the key term in the annual Survey on the People's Life-Style that the Prime Minister's Office has conducted since 1958. The poll asks respondents to place themselves in one of five positions relative to the wider population ("much above," "just above," "the same as," "just below," and "much below an average well-being"; see figure 10.1). Since at least

AT THE LIMITS OF NEW MIDDLE-CLASS JAPAN

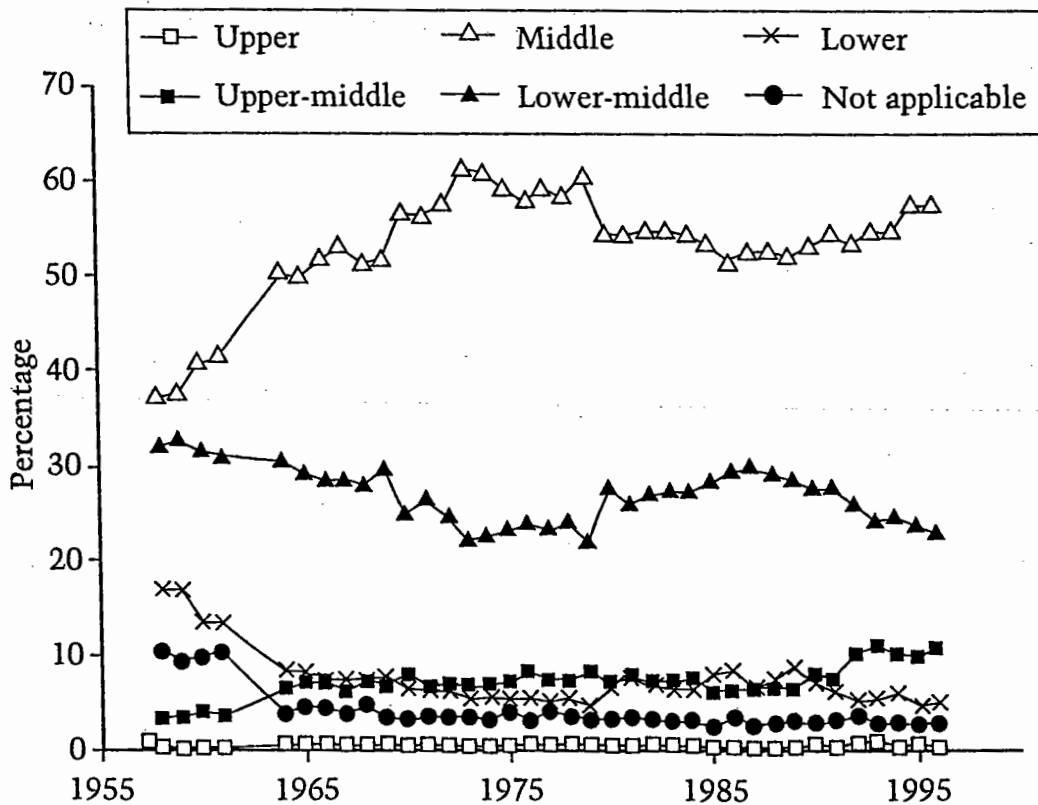


Figure 10.1 Mainstream Consciousness in Japan, 1958 to 1996 Source: Prime Minister's Office, Survey on the People's Life-Style.

the late 1960s, about 90 percent of the respondents have placed themselves in the middle, upper-middle, or lower-middle stratum, leading government white papers and media commentary to interpret the results as demonstrating that contemporary Japan has a broad mainstream population. Japan as a "90 percent middle-class society" has been the consistent claim for three decades, although the real effect of this "mainstream" identification has been to "declass" and "massify" the debates about social stratification.

Mainstream consciousness became a popular phrase in the 1960s as the domestic economy was heating up, corporate managers were trying to defuse leftist labor unions, and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party tried to be more inclusive. For example, the media of the decade made much of what was termed "the mass mainstream of 100 million people" (*ichiokunin sōchūryū*), which resonated for most Japanese adults of the time in powerful and prideful contrast to the phrase that had been the national self-characterization just after World War II: *ichiokunin sōkyodatsu* ("100 million people in a state of trauma").¹⁰ It is not hard to imagine how establishment interests were served by this rhetoric of mandarin planners and commentators.

A Japanese sense of exceptionalism became a cultural nationalism of homogeneity and hard work. Economically, such an image both promoted and responded to new patterns of saving as well as spending. Politically, it restated societal consensus at a time of student unrest, environmental protest, the "oil shocks," the "Nixon shocks," and other serious perturbations.

Yet an orientation toward the mainstream had also deeply conditioned everyday life by the 1960s. It is true that it was only in that decade that middle-class occupations (conceived expansively as not only managers and professionals but also white-collar employees and the old urban middle classes) increased rapidly, though they have never engaged a majority of the working population to this day. Nonetheless, it was in the 1960s that certain key elements of middle-class life and location became nationalized into a model of "mainstream" life that has since powerfully represented designs for living.

Like the term "middle class" in post-World War II America, then, the Japanese use of "mainstream" does not refer to a class category but to a category that works to transcend class. It is this notion of mainstream life or consciousness that is often said to have had hegemonic force over the last thirty years, at least symbolically from the Tokyo Olympic year of 1964 through the death of the Shōwa emperor in 1989 and into the 1990s. And it is this folk term, "mainstream consciousness," and not class structure per se that is the focus of my concern in this chapter.

My argument is that this orientation toward mainstream definitions of lifeways and life chances has had directive force not because it has been touted rhetorically by officials and the media, but more significantly because it has been embedded in a particular matrix of public discourse and institutional fields. It is this embeddedness that has given wider salience to certain social forms and cultural meanings of middle-class location. To demonstrate this argument, the next section outlines how societal development since World War II has been a process of restructuring and standardizing differences around new axes rather than homogenizing lifestyles and equalizing life chances.

If the postwar social contract has been shaped and sustained by the conditioned and conditioning participation of the population, this same population can effect systemic change. This is indeed the importance of several trends of the last decade that portend a serious weakening of the lineaments of this social contract. The final section identifies three such vectors of change that signal turbulence in the mainstream.

"Mainstream Consciousness" and the Restructuring of Difference: The Social Formation of New Middle-class Japan

The force and meaning of mainstream identity must be understood as mutually conditioned by several other rubrics of public talk and by a particular institutional grid that was characteristic of post-1960s Japan. In my own writings, I have used the term "new middle class" social formation to characterize structurally and situate historically the Japan of the four decades from the early 1960s through the 1990s. There are of course other constructs for these decades—such as "managed society," "company-ism," "the educational credential society," and "information capitalism." Each has been valuable in permitting a line of analysis that is often more complementary than alternative to the others.¹¹

For me, new middle-class (henceforth NMC) Japan is a distinctive "social formation" in the sense, for example, that Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron use the concept to mean a two-dimensional "system of relations of power and relations of meaning between groups and classes."¹² More than class structure or society, the concept of social formation captures some of the fractious dynamism of autonomous but linked fields. It more clearly problematizes the degree and nature of integration, and the term itself is constructively ambiguous. ("Formation" connotes simultaneously "forming," "formed," and "formative".) A social formation is a concatenation of discourses and institutions through and by which lines of power are drawn and certain propositions and values are endowed with a naturalizing authority.

Analytically, then, NMC Japan has emerged in the decades since the early 1960s as a reticulation of certain thematics of public talk and several central social fields. In earlier papers, I have outlined at least six such loosely bounded sets of public talk and three such institutions, which collectively serve to both incorporate and differentiate the population, by discursive location and social position. Here I sketch them only cursorily.

The first thematic of public talk centers on *culture*. It is much remarked that, after Japan's defeat in World War II, official and mainstream versions of the national identity shifted from the explicitly Shintō religious foundations that had underwritten the prewar imperial doctrine of "kokutai" to more overtly ethnic bases of "Japaneseness." By this sanitized mono-ethnic nationalism, Japaneseness became a matter of psyche, not politics. A Japanese "culture" was imagined by the stereotypic extension of personal traits to unique na-

tional "character"; thus, "treatises on Japanese culture" (Nihon bunka-ron), "treatises on Japan" (Nihon-ron), and "treatises on the Japanese people" (Nihonjin-ron) have been virtual synonyms of the media and popular literature. This move had the clear advantage of personalizing and naturalizing membership in the national community for a state whose own political character has been accused of everything from aggression to ineptitude. At the same time, by further associating culture as character with culture as heritage, this public talk exacerbated the dichotomies of modernity and tradition as they were mapped onto genders, regions, and neighborhoods.¹³

Japanese cultural exceptionalism not only offered a broad channel for notions of a mainstream but also mitigated some of the frictions of another contemporary discourse, that of the *center and the regions*. The concentration of population, resources, and influence in metropolitan Tokyo is a long-term process, but it was greatly accelerated in the mid-1950s. Japan now has a unipolar geography akin to that of a number of European nations, and the ladders of success and opportunity in education, media, politics, and corporate employment all tip upward toward Tokyo. The subordination of much of the rest of Japan as "regional" has been ideologically offset by the grounding of much Japanese culture as "tradition," which is sentimentally felt to remain vibrant in the rural heartland. Regional Japan is valorized nostalgically as it is depleted economically.¹⁴

Modern Japan has had a special fascination for typologizing and stereotyping historical "generations" in a way that we might more precisely consider to be *cohort talk*. The focal point of commentary in the postwar decades has been the so-called Shōwa hitoketa, the "single-digit Shōwan" cohort born in the first nine years of the era (that is, 1926 to 1934). This cohort has been a point of departure and a measure for much of the subsequent generational talk, even more definitively than its rough U.S. equivalent, "the children of the Depression," defined postwar America age-grades.¹⁵ The single-digit Shōwans are the cohort whose childhood and youth spanned the "dark valley" of the Depression and the war. It is the generation that was old enough to have suffered but young enough not to have inflicted suffering. It managed the psychological divide and social chaos in the war's aftermath, becoming the bedrock of postwar recovery and boom. In the early postwar decades, the single-digit Shōwans became, in the popular imagination, the "workaholic company men" and the "education mamas" whose selfless efforts on behalf of corporation and children ensured present and future prosperity. They are now poised as Japan's first mass senior-citizen cohort, the first wave of an aging society. Throughout their lives, then, they have stood at the

peak of an age-graded moral cline, by which judgments of the postwar population are often cohort-stratified. For decades, commentators have wrung their hands anxiously over each succeeding youth cohort, among whom they always find dangerous portents of weakening social commitment and rising personal indulgence.

Finally, a focus on *life cycle*, or "life course," gained widespread currency in the 1970s, somewhat later than the other elements of public talk, although the rhetorical normalizing of life transitions had already been a part of public talk in modern Japan. (For instance, there were public conventions about an "appropriate age" for marriage ["tekireiki"].) From political, economic, and social motivations, however, a more comprehensive discourse was elaborated around the notion of the "eighty-year life span," which periodizes the life course according to institutional position (as student, worker, spouse, parent, and so on).¹⁶

Not surprisingly, the rhetoric of life cycles is strongly gendered; indeed, *gender* inflects each of these public discourses and has constituted its own discursive field.¹⁷ In contemporary Japan, the discourse of gender has privileged an obligatory marital heterosexuality and a mutual social dependency at home, at work, and at play. The male and female life cycles have been structured in a way that emphasizes differential natural endowments and limitations that channel normal energies toward separate sets of complementary commitments in both public and domestic spheres.¹⁸

Thus, projections and claims of "mainstream consciousness" have only gained currency and definition in relation to these and other thematics of public talk.¹⁹ Even this is not sufficient, however; mainstream consciousness has required social grounding as well as the mutual conditioning of these ideologically potent discourses. This social grounding has been found in the key institutional sectors of the NMC social formation. By this, I mean that the reorganization and wider reach of certain institutions have patterned lifeways in the last four decades, especially in the three key sectors of work, family, and education.

The twin images of *work* in the late Shōwa economy were those of a uniquely "Japanese company" model of lifetime commitment, bottom-up recruitment of school-leavers, promotion and pay primarily by years of service, and enterprise unions, on the one hand, and the "dual economy" of a modern, large-firm sector dominating a traditional, small-firm sector, on the other. However, it is more accurate to say that the workplaces of these decades have girded the double hierarchies of an industrial structure of large and small firms and regular and nonregular employment statuses. The former is actually a

continuum from large corporations and government bureaucracies to subcontractors, entrepreneurs, independent artisans, and small retailers. The latter occupational hierarchy ranges from male white-collar managers (the "salarymen"), professionals, and skilled blue-collar workers down through female clericals and part-timers to seasonal and casual labor.

The hierarchies intersect at their higher ends with the privileged, permanent, and mostly male regular employees of the large firms and ministries. The Japanese company model originally suggested that a bedrock of traditional values upheld the organizational features of this core. Labor historians, however, have taught us that the elements of large corporate organization were forged during several contentious periods of struggle in the twentieth century. One result has been a considerable white-collarization of male blue-collar workers in large firms. At the same time, to protect this core and minimize corporate exposure to downturns, these companies remain flexible by externalizing their expansion and contraction with nonregular workers and chains of subsidiary affiliates.²⁰

Legal reform (the postwar constitution and new civil code), demographic changes (rising longevity and declining fertility), and economic transformations (employment shifts, urban expansion, consumer marketing) combined in the postwar years to promote and valorize the Japanese *family* as a conjugal couple and nuclear household organized by the strict role complementarity of a rice-winner husband-father and a caregiver wife-mother. What is important to emphasize is that the family has not become a "haven in a heartless land," a refuge from social engineering. Rather, its roles and routines have been reorganized in ways that lend critical support to the more "public" institutions of schools and workplaces.²¹

For virtually every Japanese born after World War II, twelve years of formal *education* have become the link between home and work, childhood and adulthood. Postwar Japanese education has managed to combine the mass schooling of a literate citizenry with a rigorous culling for elite positions in society.²² The rigor and quality of the broad, uniform curriculum and the equitable funding of the overwhelmingly public elementary and secondary school system have been rapturously described by journalists and academics alike. At the same time, the funnel of the school credential society narrows quickly. Late Shōwa Japan quickly became a rather strict meritocracy, largely measured by educational achievement. Educational prestige has come to be determined by school reputation, which is now indexed by entrance exam competitiveness. And increasingly, exam

success has required extracurricular private study in the shadow sector of the infamous cram schools and prep academies.

What I am emphasizing here is that these dominant yet shifting constructs formed unifying frames for people's experience but also created new categories of distinction among the population. The institutional fields that came to reorganize lifeways in the decades after World War II standardized but did not homogenize patterns of life. What was produced was thus a structured differentiation of workplaces, family forms, and school outcomes. This is the sense in which "mainstream consciousness" could come to represent both a broadly inclusive and sharply stratified sense of social identity.

At the same time, it is imperative to understand that these ideologies and institutions, which frame much of everyday life and consciousness, are themselves structured over time. How did they come to take shape, how have they been reproduced, and what is the potential for their transformation into something else?²³ Ideologies and institutions, in distinct ways, have a powerfully directive ability to co-opt alternatives and make people complicit in structuring their lives. And even as they set limits and "normalize" lives, they depend precisely on those actors, who move within, through, and sometimes against these boundaries of the feasible and the desirable. Subject positions shape but are also reshaped by positioned subjects.

Much of the anthropological literature of postwar Japan can be read as ethnographic representations of the emergence and reproduction of this social formation.²⁴ Our many studies show that this sense of the differences-that-standardize lies at the core of folk notions of the contemporary "mainstream." And it is this discursive and institutional formation, not the broadening and contracting of a middle-income stratum in straightforward socioeconomic terms, that is essential to appreciating the postwar social contract in Japan.

Such a formulation of the sources and nature of public support for societal arrangements also suggests how such arrangements may be challenged. In the final section of this chapter, then, I turn to possible ways out of and beyond the NMC social formation. What are the kind of actions that are both intelligible within the logic of NMC but identifiable as reforming its patterns and loosening the hold of "mainstream consciousness"?

Beyond "Mainstream Consciousness"

Events over the decade of the 1990s surprised most Japan analysts at every turn. We all witnessed—but few had foreseen—the decomposi-

tion of central elements of both the international system and the domestic arrangements that had sustained Shōwa Japan through its postwar decades. The breakup of the Soviet Union, the death of the Shōwa emperor, the collapse of the 1980s bubble economy into a prolonged recession, the continuing disarray of the post-1955 political system—these and other developments present us with a far more chastened and anxious object of contemplation than the confident Japan of the late 1980s.

Retrospectively, it is widely argued that postwar Japan was dependent on a special and now-defunct hothouse international political economy that included: an undervalued yen in a dollar-denominated world economy; a U.S. security umbrella in a bipolar superpower struggle; and an edge in high-value manufacturing technologies in an era of industrial capitalism. I find these observations undeniable and consequential, but I prefer to locate my own speculations within three other general claims about the present moment.

First, NMC Japan was ideologically marked by a historically unique generation (the single-digit Shōwans), and it was dependent on a particular demographic profile (a youthful age structure together with low but stable and sustainable fertility). For fifty years, Japan was a distinctive combination of a generation rooted in but not responsible for the prewar past and a society made youthful by the immediate postwar baby boom. As this generation begins to die off and the demographic profile ages, we can expect serious repercussions.

Second, in important respects the NMC arrangements and inducements that were consolidated by the mid-1960s have, ironically, proven too successful for their own good. They have produced what William Steslicke once called the "dilemmas of success."²⁵ The educational arms race (that is, the continuing escalation of parental investment and student effort to gain an edge in school admissions) and the hyper-concentration of resources and population in metropolitan Tokyo are two examples of the fatal attraction of certain values and standards in drawing more seekers of success in their terms than can be accommodated.

Finally, in part for this very reason, many argue that NMC Japan is quickly exhausting itself through its own contradictions and resentments. The population has had enough of "rich Japan, poor Japanese," and the decade of the 1990s produced much skepticism and cynicism about the official sloganeering: "raising the quality of life," "expanding leisure," "promoting privatization," "a dawning age of culture," and the "internationalization" of Japan.

Each of these three claims is a compelling predisposing condition for expecting an incipient punctuation of the existing social forma-

tion. Still, they do not specify the shifts in people's actions that foreshadow such a restructuring. What I would like to outline in this section are three tendencies of the present that seem to challenge seriously the social order of NMC Japan: the increasing tendency of the elderly population to live alone or only with a spouse; the rapidly rising percentage of women who are postponing marriage; and the growing percentage of entrants to elite public universities who have graduated from private and national schools with six-year middle and high school programs rather than from public high schools. These three diagnostics hardly exhaust the possible shifts that have the potential to restructure NMC Japan, but each poses alternatives and exposes contradictions that cannot be easily contained by present arrangements. They suggest the waning power of a "mainstream consciousness" to channel aspirations and effort.

Old Age and Elder Care

We have heard so much about Japan as an "aging society" that the phrase itself is a bit long in the tooth. Still, preemptive crisis-talk has proven an effective technology of power in postwar Japan, and visions of an aging society may rank among the most effectively preemptive of all. Official talk about aging began in the early 1970s, when Japan still had the most youthful population profile in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Only in the 1990s did Japan's broad-base population pyramid become a tall, thin rectangle (see figure 10.2).

Geometric images are backed by a barrage of arithmetic. The number of youth age ten to nineteen declined 25 percent in the 1990s. The number of people over sixty has increased 35 percent. The year 1995 marked the first-ever decrease in the total labor population (that is, the number of workers age fifteen to sixty). By 2013, about one-quarter of the population will be older than sixty-five, making Japan the "oldest" nation in the world, and it is estimated that pensions, social insurance, and medical costs will require 23 percent of GNP. (Over half the elderly population at that point will be older than seventy-five.)²⁶ The birthrate in metropolitan Tokyo is projected to fall to 1.1, pushing the "dependency ratio" of workers to nonworkers to unsustainable heights.

Japan's aging society is envisioned as resting on the twin pillars of private care and public resources, and both are already showing signs of having reached the limits of personal and political tolerance. Now in their seventies, the single-digit cohort Shōwans are graying into Japan's first "mass longevity" elders. For the moment, the moral stat-

SOCIAL CONTRACTS UNDER STRESS



Figure 10.2 Japan's Population Pyramid: 1920, 1985, 2025 Source: Author's compilation.

ure of this particular historical generation is extremely significant in mitigating resentment about the escalating costs of an aging society. As these "honorable elders" pass, however, it becomes much less likely that public entitlements and private caregiving will be extended adequately.²⁷

Two features of the present Japanese situation are distinctive. The first is the relatively high rate of employment for Japanese men (and for women to a lesser extent) over sixty-five, some of whom want to work but others of whom must keep working after mandatory retirement to remain financially independent. The second is the government effort to promote three-generation families and privatize elder care. (In Japan, privatization refers to the family, not to the marketplace!) The fruits of this effort are borne out statistically. About 60 percent of Japanese over the age of sixty-five live with their children (and two-thirds of those households also include their grandchildren); one in four elderly live as a spouse couple, and only 15 percent live alone. Thus, Japanese elderly live with their children at four to five times the rate in the United States, and eight times the rate in Great Britain. Their roles include caring for grandchildren, cooking, housework, laundry, and home repairs.

These two features seem to be at cross purposes—high rates of working to remain financially independent and high rates of living with children. However, they are very possibly the distinct patterns of the young-old and the old-old; that is, the high rate of elderly employment reflects the need of the young-old to supplement limited pension income and their strong desire to remain financially and residentially independent of their children—for as long as they remain healthy. The high rate of living with children reflects the lack of public- and private-sector long-term care facilities and the legal and ideological presumptions of family responsibility.

Together, these characteristics of Japan's elders have kept the burden of responsibility on individual and family means, with public facilities and resources providing only backup. Yet neither independent living nor family care is accomplished easily, and both test the often subtle distinctions between preference and necessity, as well as the different perspectives of the younger and older generations.

The arguments that flare up around what David Plath called the "intimate politics of co-residence" are much more frequently concerned with social relations than financial abilities.²⁸ For that reason, I think an important diagnostic is the rising rate of elderly who live alone or with only their spouse. In 1980 these numbered only 6 percent of all households, but by 1992 the figure had risen steadily to 11 percent of all households (and fully 40 percent of the over-sixty-five population). I do not know what threshold would portend a fundamental challenge to the uneasy balance of public and private responsibilities, but it has already reached a level that threatens to open a chasm between the two.

Women and Marriage: Crisis and Resistance

Two developments of the 1980s have been frequently assessed for their subsequent effects on marriage, family, and gender relations in the 1990s. First, for much of that decade, the growing labor shortages for a broad spectrum of blue-collar, clerical, and low-level technical positions opened up opportunities for women as companies sought to avoid hiring foreign guest workers. The heated controversies surrounding the 1986 Equal Employment Opportunity Law and the divided evaluations of it were significant, but the law had only an indirect impact on the majority of working women, who were choosing or constrained by *jobs*, not *careers*.

Second, it was much ballyhooed by the end of the decade that Japan's men faced a marriage crisis and that society at large faced a fertility collapse. Indeed, the numbers in the cohorts of marriageable men exceeded those of marriageable females (in both absolute num-

bers and regional distribution), and for that reason and others, the fertility rate, which had stabilized around the replacement rate for much of the previous three decades, fell steeply to 1.57 in 1990. In this year of what the media tagged the "1.57 shock," the title of Tanimura Shiho's best-selling novel, *Kekkon shinai ka mo shiranai shō-kōgun*, was appropriated to express a broad syndrome: the title can be translated as "Maybe I won't get married after all!"²⁹

This proved to be more than just media hype, as it became evident around that time that large numbers of women in the thirty- to thirty-five-year-old cohort were in fact remaining unmarried. By 1995 a stunning 48 percent of women and 67 percent of men age twenty-five to twenty-nine were unmarried, and in metropolitan Tokyo well over half of women were turning thirty without having married. Even those who married were delaying having children; in 1997, 40 percent of couples married for four years did not yet have children. In that year, the fertility rate dropped below 1.40.³⁰

The postponement of marriage and the correlated sharp decline in the fertility rate have provoked some government response, such as the four-ministry "Angel Plan," which took flight in 1994 to great fanfare but with few funds. There has also been much chauvinistic hand-wringing by (male) bureaucrats about female obligations and maternal urges, but what was "crisis" for men was read as "resistance" by women. Countless talk shows, magazine columns, and books have been fueled by debates about the motivations of such resistance and whether it represents procrastination or refusal. Perhaps the most common interpretation is that more tertiary education and expanding employment opportunities for metropolitan women that have not only offered them goals and satisfactions that would be compromised by marriage responsibilities but provided them with the income to pursue these goals. Polling data continue to report a desire by women to marry eventually but a preference to wait for the right circumstances.³¹

However, I am dubious that the pull factors are so decisive. No doubt, metropolitan women have been delaying marriage because they have found the job front to be improving and the home front *not* improving, but I suspect that they are more frustrated by the latter than encouraged by the former. Their "resistance" may be less the pursuit of opportunity than escape from constraint. I find support for this notion in the extended depressed economy of the 1990s. It is women—and especially university-educated women—who have been the first to feel the job freeze and the workforce reductions. And yet these workplace frustrations have not driven them down the aisle into the arms of waiting husbands. Age at marriage has continued to

climb, and fertility continues to fall. It is not so much an attitude of "I don't want to get married" as "I don't want to get married just yet," or, "I don't want to get married until I find the right guy."³²

The larger point for me about female marriage resistance is that women who postpone marriage appear to have understood that the most effective way to beat the social logic of Japan's boom decades, by which the home was caught between work and school, is simply to avoid (re)entering one—that is, to "exit" the system, or else to linger outside the domestic door long enough to create panic within, before going back in.

I suspect too that a good part of the motivation is the aging population. Even more than in the United States, care for those elderly who cannot care for themselves is overwhelmingly treated in Japan as the responsibility of a female relative. Indeed, surveys frequently find that the major concern of women over forty in Japan is aging—not their own but that of their parents, their parents-in-law, and their husband. It is often said that a woman experiences three old ages: in her fifties, she must care for her parents (and sometimes her spouse's parents); in her sixties and seventies, she must care for her husband; and in her seventies and eighties, she must finally care for herself. Marriage, many fear, involves sole responsibility for managing a household with an absentee husband, for raising the children, and for elder care of parents and in-laws.

These responsibilities have never been easy, and they are only exacerbated by the factors discussed here: mass longevity, state efforts to keep primary care a family responsibility, more nuclear households, and rising female workforce participation (now well over 50 percent for all married women, and about 70 percent for women in their forties). These factors ensure that a substantial number of Japanese women will face the dilemma of Akiko, the middle-aged woman in Ariyoshi's immensely popular 1972 novel *Kōkotsu no hito*.³³ Akiko is pressured by her family to quit her legal secretary position to care for her father-in-law when he becomes senile. She accepts her caretaking duties with doleful resignation and, by the novel's end, expresses satisfaction with the nurturing role she has played in her father-in-law's last days. More than twenty years later, she remains a sympathetic figure—and the book continues to sell—but skepticism about such quiet resignation is strong among younger women.

In short, for Japan as a self-designated aging society, the increasingly public tensions between the genders are potentially even more significant than those between the generations. Women's organizations in Japan are far larger and more assertive than its national associations for older citizens. It is likely that future public policies and

programs for older Japanese will have to accommodate the private choices that individual women are now making about marriage and children as much as they seek to address the needs of the burgeoning elderly population.

School Competition and the Education Arms Race

The severe recession throughout the 1990s intersected with a shifting population profile to pose serious threats to tertiary education and the school-to-work transition. As any reader of the Japanese press knows, the entry-level hiring scale of major corporations shrank dramatically in that decade. The papers were full of anecdotes of elite graduates in "job shock" (*jobbu shokku*) accepting ever-lower entry positions to gain entrance to first-tier corporations, or resigning themselves to less prestigious company openings, with ripple effects down the educational ladder. At the same time, the number of eighteen-year-olds in the population was declining sharply, from 2.05 million in 1992 to 1.51 million in 2000, placing enormous pressures on the already shaky finances of lower-tier private universities and junior colleges.

Declining job opportunities and a shrinking college-age cohort have combined to exacerbate the competition for elite universities. The consequence may well be the collapse of the tense balance between public- and private-sector secondary education that has held for the last three decades. A complement to public high school education thought to be sufficient for elite university entrance was a heavy dose of after-school private cram academy, supplemented if necessary by a postsecondary year in a private exam prep school. Very quickly—that is, in the last five years or so—the more assured route has become an emerging tier of elite private high schools that offer six-year secondary programs. Symptomatically, in 1993 the percentage of applicants who were admitted to the various faculties of Tokyo University from private high schools reached 50 percent (1,984 of the 4,010 accepted). Of the top thirty placement high schools, twenty-one were private institutions, led as usual in recent years by 171 successful students from the elite Kaisei Academy.

After admitting their students by highly competitive exams at the end of their sixth-grade year (somewhat analogous to the fateful "eleven-plus" exams in Britain), these schools, in effect, combine the three years of junior high school and the three years of high school. They move their students through the Ministry of Education secondary curriculum in four and a half or five years, leaving the balance for specific preparation for university entrance exams.

The particular school-to-work transitions of contemporary Japan

have depended on the tight calibrations of school and work prestige hierarchies.³⁴ For several decades, the widely discrepant outcomes of the individuals moving through school into workplaces have been accepted without widespread public outcry or collective resistance (though certainly with much private frustration and grievance and occasional personal tragedy). In large part, the successful have claimed legitimacy, and the failures have been mollified through the publicness of the process—the ostensibly equal funding of secondary facilities, the national curriculum, and the rigid entrance exam criterion. If private high schools continue to attract more and more of the top university-bound students, this talent drain will clearly threaten the rationale of the entire present school-to-work complex.

The sociologist Ishida Hiroshi has shown—conclusively, to my mind—that elite higher education did not have a statistically significant social mobility effect in the last thirty years.³⁵ Government policies, teachers' union agitation, public opinion, and private expectations notwithstanding, children of advantaged parents were consistently overrepresented in elite universities. Moreover, private secondary graduates have disproportionately filled the postwar entering classes at Tokyo University at least since the early 1970s, an effect of the 1967 Tokyo metropolitan educational reforms. Clearly, misrecognition of meritocracy has been pervasive, and it is possible, I suppose, that a thoroughgoing privatization of the upper tier of secondary education will neither fundamentally shake the institutional linkages nor challenge the legitimacy of school outcomes or workplace destinations. I doubt it, however. If indeed present tendencies become future trends, a very different public-private tension will develop, and the stage will be set for a whole new educational arms race on much more transparently unequal class and regional terms.

Final Contentions

It is certainly not my contention that these changes in the status of the elderly, women, and students are the three most decisive statistical indicators of societal change in late-twentieth-century Japan. But I do believe that they are measures of the fundamental social restructuring now occurring in Japan. And their significance is dual—for both social structure and social action.

Structurally, it is ironic that generational cohorts, gender roles, and stratified educational outcomes are among the axes of difference that are helping to unbind Japan's postwar social contract here at the beginning of the new century. After all, the moral force of the single-digit Shōwans, the complementarity of gendered role dichotomies,

and the fairness of educational outcomes were key ideological tenets of the "mainstream." These are now becoming structural fault lines that expose the tenuousness of the mainstream arrangements.

The other point is the formulation of social action that underlies my approach. Each of these three social diagnostics represents a point where private action rubs against and begins to unravel the delicate skein of ideologies and institutions. And there need not be organized activism to collectivize such individual decisions. Indeed, in all three dimensions, structural change is resulting from the cumulation of disparate, parallel, personal actions—those of middle-aged and elderly generations as they distance themselves from one another, those of women in delaying marriage, and those of youth and their parents as they move entirely to private-sector education.

This is not a claim premised on a rational choice voluntarism, which takes individual intentionality as the independent causal agent of structural outcomes and a universal rationality as the presumed basis of that intentional choice-making. I presume rather the recursive structuring of individual agency, cultural meaning, and institutional form, as well as the multilayered consciousness of actors, who act under varying constraints and with subtle degrees of reflective knowledge, discursive articulation, and tacit understandings—but who act effectively nonetheless.

High school students and their parents, the elderly and their children, and the metropolitan marriage resisters of the late 1980s and 1990s are positioned subjects who are maneuvering within and around that which they find meaningful, desirable, and/or necessary. They may act with only partial and contingent understanding of their own actions, and these actions may be private and pragmatic. However, those qualities make the effects of their actions no less consequential. Most public commentary, domestic and foreign, about Japan at the millennial turning point paints a dark portrait of a nation adrift, plagued with social malaise, political sclerosis, and economic stagnation. The trends on which this chapter has focused would seem to lend further support to such pessimism. However, authors who fire off national obituaries and revolutionary manifestos shoot themselves in the foot as often as they penetrate the intended target. One can safely conclude, however, that whatever the shape of the emerging social formation, it will be a transformation, not a reproduction, of the New Middle-class Japan of the last thirty years.

Notes

Japanese names appear with last name first, even in English-language publications.

1. Recent examples include Benjamin DeMott, *The Imperial Middle: Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Class* (New York: Morrow, 1990), and Brackette F. Williams, "A Class Act: Anthropology and the Race to Nation Across Ethnic Terrain," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18(1989): 401-44.
2. Tsurumi Shunsuke, *A Cultural History of Postwar Japan, 1945-1980* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1987).
3. Odaka Kunio, "Nihon no kaikyū kōzō wa dō kawatta ka: Chūkansō no ugoki o chūshin to shite" (How has Japanese class structure changed?: Focusing on movements in the middle class), *Jiyū* 7(June 1960): 131-54. An English version appeared as "The Middle Classes in Japan," in *Class, Status, and Power: Social Stratification in Comparative Perspective*, 2nd ed., edited by Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset (Glencoe: Free Press, 1996), 541-51.
4. Yasuda Saburō, *Shakai idō no kenkyū* (A study of social mobility) (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1971).
5. A brief English-language summary of their differences can be found in Murakami Yasusuke, Kishimoto Shigenobu, and Tominaga Ken'ichi, "Debate on the New Middle Class," *Japan Interpreter* 12(Winter 1978): 1-15.
6. Hakuhodo Institute of Life and Living, *Bunshū no tanjo* (The birth of the micro classes) (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shimbun sha, 1985); Ozawa Masako, "Consumption in the Age of Stratification," *Japan Echo* 12(Autumn 1985): 47-53; Watanabe Kazuhiro, *Kinkonkan* (Tokyo: Shufu-notomo sha, 1984).
7. Compare, for instance, Tominaga Ken'ichi, "Hoshuka to posuto-modan no aida" (Between growing conservatism and the postmodern) *Sekai* 525(March 1989): 233-48, and Tominaga Ken'ichi, *Nihon kindaika to shakai hendō* (Japan's modernization and social change) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1990), with Imada Takatoshi, *Modan no datsu-kōchiku: Sangyō shakai no yukue* (Deconstruction of the modern) (Tokyo: Chūō kōron sha, 1987), and Imada Takatoshi, *Shakai kaisō to seiji* (Social stratification and politics) (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku shuppankai, 1989). A useful and judicious English-language overview of these postwar debates can be found in Kosaka Kenji, ed., *Social Stratification in Contemporary Japan* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1994).
8. Ishida Hiroshi, *Social Mobility in Contemporary Japan: Educational Credentials, Class, and the Labor Market in a Cross-national Perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). On the early postwar trends toward equalization, see Margaret A. McKean, "Equality," in *Democracy in Japan*, edited by Ishida Takeshi and Ellis S. Krauss (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 201-24. The diverging fortunes since the mid-1970s are analyzed in Kosaka Kenji, "Aspects of Social Inequality and Difference," in Kosaka, *Social Stratification in Contemporary Japan*, 34-53, and also in Tachibanaki Toshiaki, *Nihon no keizai kakusa: Shotoku to shisan o kangaeru* (Economic differentiation in Japan: Considering incomes and assets) (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1998).
9. Kent E. Calder, *Crisis and Compensation: Public Policy and Political Stability in Japan, 1949-1986* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 442.
10. For a powerful evocation of that period, see John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: New Press, 1999), especially ch. 2, "Kyodatsu: Exhaustion and Despair."

11. I use "new middle class" in, for example, "Finding a Place in Metropolitan Japan: Ideologies, Institutions, and Everyday Life," in *Postwar Japan as History*, edited by Andrew S. Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 189–216. "Managed society" is a term given currency by Kurihara Akira, *Kanri shakai to minshū risei: Nichijō ishiki no seiji shakaigaku* (The managed society and popular reason: The political sociology of everyday consciousness) (Tokyo: Shin'yosha, 1982). Osawa Mari prefers "company-ism," which she has formulated in "Bye-bye, Corporate Warriors: The Formation of a Corporate-Centered Society and Gender-Biased Social Policies in Japan," *Annals of the Institute of Social Science* 35(1994): 157–94. See also Osawa (this volume). Takeuchi Yō has developed Japan as an educational credential society in 1995 in *Nihon no meritokurashii* (Japan's meritocracy) (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1995). Tessa Morris-Suzuki wrote earlier of Japan's "informational capitalism" in *Beyond Computopia: Information, Automation, and Democracy in Japan* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1988).
12. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), 5.
13. William Kelly, "Japanology Bashing," *American Ethnologist* 15(May 1988): 365–68; John Lie, "The Discourse of Japaneseness," in *Japan and Global Migration*, edited by Mike Douglass and Glenda Roberts (London: Routledge, 2000), 70–90.
14. See William Kelly, "Japanese Farmers," *Wilson Quarterly* 14(Autumn 1990): 34–41; William Kelly, "Regional Japan: The Price of Prosperity and the Benefits of Dependency," *Daedalus* 119(Summer 1990): 209–27.
15. Glen H. Elder Jr., *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).
16. David W. Plath, "The Eighty-Year System: Japan's Debate over Lifetime Employment in an Aging Society," *The World and I* 3(May 1988): 464–71; Inoue Shun et al., eds., *Raifu kōsu no shakaigaku: Gendai shakaigaku* (Sociology of the life course: Contemporary sociology), vol. 9 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1996).
17. Anne Allison, *Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996); Osawa Mari, *Kigyō chūshin shakai o koete: Gendai Nihon no jendaa de yomu* (Overcoming the corporate-centered society) (Tokyo: Jiji tsūshin sha, 1993).
18. See, for example, Walter D. Edwards, *Modern Japan Through Its Weddings: Gender, Person, and Society in Ritual Portrayal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).
19. Although I have been referring to these thematics as "discourses," to be more precise we must understand them both as discourses—the procedures for and substance of the situated talk that fashions social identities—and as ideologies—representations of knowledge and experience that articulate interests in a way by which compliance may be both secured and contested.
20. On this twentieth-century history, see Takeuchi Yō, "Sarariiman to iu shakai-teki hyōchō" (The social symbol of the salaryman), in *Nihon bunka no shakaigaku: Gendai Shakaigaku* (The sociology of Japanese culture: Contemporary sociology), vol. 23, edited by Inoue Shun et al. (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1996), 125–42; Andrew Gordon, *The Evolution of Labor Relations in Japan: Heavy Industry, 1853–1955* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985); Andrew Gordon, *The Wages of*

- Affluence: Labor and Management in Postwar Japan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Gordon (this volume).
21. Osawa Mari discusses this in detail in her contribution to this volume. See also Kathleen S. Uno, "The Death of 'Good Wife, Wise Mother?'" in Gordon, *Postwar Japan as History*, 293–322.
 22. A recent useful characterization is Okano Kaori and Tsuchiya Motonori, *Education in Contemporary Japan: Inequality and Diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
 23. It is important to note that however closely articulated these institutional arenas had become, their emergence was uncertain, fitful, and distinct. For instance, the rapid drop in fertility, from over four children per family to two per family, took place quickly in the first half of a single decade, the early 1950s, underwriting a family form that would persist for forty years. See Yamamura Kozo and Susan B. Hanley, "'Ichi Hime, ni Taro': Educational Aspirations and the Decline in Fertility in Postwar Japan," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 2(Winter 1975): 83–125. Subsequently, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the concessions in self-determination that workers traded for more secure work conditions and wages eroded union autonomy but promoted mainstream allegiance among blue-collar workers (Gordon, *The Wages of Affluence*). Simon Partner has shown that the consumer revolution that embraced the electrical goods industry was not complete until the late 1960s, while the participation of youth in secondary and tertiary education did not reach high levels until the mid-1960s. See Simon Partner, *Assembled in Japan: Electrical Goods and the Making of the Japanese Consumer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); on education, see Thomas P. Rohlen, *Japan's High Schools* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
 24. William Kelly "Directions in the Anthropology of Contemporary Japan," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20(1991): 395–431.
 25. William E. Steslicke, "The Japanese State of Health: A Political-Economic Perspective," in *Health, Illness, and Medical Care in Japan: Cultural and Social Dimensions*, edited by Edward Norbeck and Margaret Lock (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 24–65.
 26. The United Nations defines an aged population as one in which at least 7 percent of citizens are sixty-five or older. It took the United States seventy years for the percentage of elderly to climb from 7 percent to 14 percent; the same increase took forty-five years in Great Britain and Germany, eighty-five years in Sweden, but only twenty-five years in Japan. These and other statistics are drawn from Ministry of Public Welfare, ed., *Shōshi shakai o kangaeru* (Thinking about a society with few children), Ministry White Paper for Heisei 10 (Tokyo: Ministry of Public Welfare, 1998).
 27. John Creighton Campbell, *How Policies Change: The Japanese Government and the Aging Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Hashimoto Akiko, *The Gift of Generations: Japanese and American Perspectives on Aging and the Social Contract* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Susan Orpett Long, ed., *Caring for the Elderly in Japan and the United States: Practices and Policies* (London: Routledge, 2000). John Campbell does, however, take an optimistic view of the potential of the new long-term care insurance program instituted in 2000. John Campbell, "Changing Meanings of Frail Old

SOCIAL CONTRACTS UNDER STRESS

- People and the Japanese Welfare State," in Long, *Caring for the Elderly*, 82-97.
28. David Plath uses this phrase in "The Age of Silver: Aging in Modern Japan," *The World and I* 3(March 1988): 505-13.
 29. Tanimura Shiho, *Kekkon shinai ka mo shiranai shōkōgun* (The I-might-not-get-married-after-all syndrome) (Tokyo: Shufu-no-tomo sha, 1990).
 30. Ministry of Public Welfare, ed., *Shōshi shakai o kangaeru*. The 1999 rate dropped even further, to 1.34.
 31. *Ibid.*, 37, 59.
 32. In a 1997 survey by the Prime Minister's Office, two-thirds of female respondents delaying marriage cited their increased economic resources through employment, and over half also cited the freedom of independent living. In another government survey that year, over half of unmarried female respondents age twenty-five to thirty-four cited not having yet met an appropriate potential spouse as their reason for remaining single; the second most common reason was an unwillingness to give up the freedom and pleasures they were currently enjoying. See *ibid.*, 37. "Independence" is apparently more a measure of personal disposable income than a mark of independent living. Fully 80 percent of unmarried women in their twenties still live with their parents; even for those in their early thirties, the figure falls to only about 70 percent!
 33. Ariyoshi's novel was translated into English by Mildred Tahara as *The Twilight Years* (Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1984).
 34. James E. Rosenbaum and Kariya Takehiko, "From High School to Work: Market and Institutional Mechanisms in Japan," *American Journal of Sociology* 94(May 1989): 1334-65.
 35. Ishida, *Social Mobility in Contemporary Japan*.