

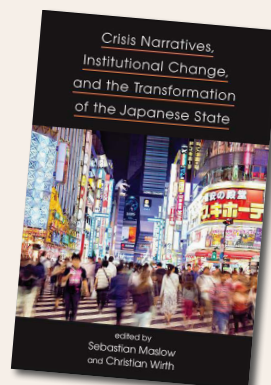
BOOK REVIEW

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

Edited by Sebastian Maslow and Christian Wirth

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xxvii + 375 pages.

Reviewed by Ian NEARY



Essays in collections like this often end up with little in common beyond having been first presented at the same event. This is not the case here, as the editors have insisted that each of their authors use Colin Hay's concept of crisis to frame their contributions.¹ Drawing on Hay's understanding, a crisis is defined in the collection as a "politically mediated moment of decisive intervention and structural transformation" (p. 266). This would seem to suggest that if there is no decisive intervention, or if no transformation results, then no crisis can be said to have taken place. So what do these authors conclude?

The contributors in the first section examine social crises. David Chiavacci focuses on a crisis narrative emerging in the last two decades that highlights increasing social inequality (*kakusa shakai*) and regional disparities. His data suggests that these claims are overstated, and also that the Abenomics policies which purported to address them failed to deliver much growth, or to distribute equally what little there was. Hiroko Takeda locates Abe's family and gender policies in the context of what she calls the LDP's authoritarian populism. This, she argues, seeks to "strengthen the moral framework of the family from the nationalist/statist perspective" (p. 71). However, despite trying to mobilize a sense of crisis, in his family policy Abe was only able to make minor adjustments. Similarly, universities in Japan have faced a number of critical challenges since the 1990s, not least a halving in the number of eighteen-year-old applicants. Jeremy Breden reviews the policies devised to deal with this, but also concludes that while they address the crisis narrative, they fail to resolve the underlying issues that sustain it.

Part II moves on to political and economic crises, beginning with a review of energy policy before and after the Fukushima meltdown. Koichi Hasegawa finds that despite the traumatic experiences of those living close to the nuclear facilities and clear evidence of "misconduct, malfunctioning and delay[s]" (p. 114), no fundamental change in policy has taken place—unlike in Germany, Taiwan, and South Korea, which are all now committed to phasing out nuclear power. In chapter 5, Iris Wiczorek examines policies that aimed to overcome Japan's Galapagos-like isolation from the global scientific community. Discourses of crisis and economic decline in the 1990s resulted in a shift from industrial to science

1 Hay 1995.

and technology policy, and as Abe took over in the 2010s, the focus was on how and where to nurture a Silicon Valley ecosystem in Japan. Wiczorek reviews Abe's promises to bring about the "rebirth of Japan" through the creation of a "world leading 'super-smart society' (Society 5.0)" (p. 147). It is not clear whether the author thinks this amounts to a decisive intervention but the view that Japan has lost its global scientific edge remains common. Other chapters in parts I and II address particular dimensions of the Abenomics policy package, but Saori Shibata examines Abenomics more holistically, and concludes it proved unable to provide an alternative growth model. Rather, it remained simply another example of Japan's "inertial and reactive system" with no evidence of "reflective, strategic and decisive transformation" (p. 186).

The final section, Part III, addresses crises in Japan's foreign policy. Paul O'Shea examines the three policy "failures" that damaged the DPJ's reputation and underpinned Abe's claims, when he took office in December 2012, that there was a crisis facing the security of Japan. O'Shea, like Christopher Hughes and others, argues that DPJ foreign policy was not an outright failure. In combining a more independent foreign policy with a conciliatory attitude to Japan's neighbors, it strengthened the fundamental pillars of the U.S.-Japan alliance while loosening the normative and constitutional constraints on Japan's military. Although Abe described his foreign policy as setting Japan off on a new path, it is possible to see clear strands of continuity. Raymond Yamamoto looks at a single instrument of foreign policy, Official Development Assistance (ODA), to illustrate the rise of LDP reform entrepreneurs. ODA policy commanded wide support until the 1990s, when critics within the LDP, many of them supporters of Nippon Kaigi, began to point out that its recipients—especially in Asia, and particularly China—showed neither gratitude nor support for Japan in the international arena. This criticism resulted in 2003 in a toning down of the philanthropic principles espoused through Japan's ODA policy, and a later shift towards mandating that ODA projects contribute to Japan's security and economic growth.

The DPRK has been launching missiles at regular intervals into or over the Sea of Japan since 1993, while in 1997 the government recognized that at least six Japanese citizens had been abducted by North Korea. Japan-North Korea relations have thus been in a state of crisis for nearly thirty years, with no prospect for detente in sight. Ra Mason and Sebastian Maslow argue that Abe was able to use this crisis to justify the redesign of security institutions. In the final substantive chapter Shogo Suzuki reflects on the "crisis of confidence" in Japan as it discovered it was no longer number one. Japan's response to this was to claim some kind of moral superiority, at least within Asia, on the basis of having a liberal political system and notional adherence to democratic values. This is clear in Free and Open Indo-Pacific discourse, for example. More broadly it has seen the reemergence of references to cultural attributes supposedly unique to Japan, whether these be *wa* (harmony) or the spirit of *michi* (proper conduct). Suzuki suggests that these are effective in terms of delaying the emergence of a sense of crisis that would demand decisive interventions.

Collectively, these ten chapters contribute to our understanding of the post-Abe political economy in Japan. However, in none of these chapters does the crisis narrative result in a "decisive intervention" which resolves the issue, and thus none of the chapters should be regarded as "Crises" using Hay's criteria. At best these are "small-c" crises. So is Japan heading for what Hay calls a "catastrophic equilibrium" (p. 61), where the old cannot die and the new cannot be born? Some thought that the triple disasters of 2011 would shake

Japan out of its path-dependent (non) solutions and force it to embark on fundamental reform. The conclusion to be drawn from this important set of essays is that this has not happened, nor is it likely to.

REFERENCE

Hay 1995

Colin Hay. "Rethinking Crisis: Narratives of the New Right and Constructions of Crisis." *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economic Culture & Society* 8:2 (1995), pp. 60–76.