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Moorehead, Robert. 2012. Review of *Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan*, by Mary C. Brinton. *Contemporary Sociology* 41:320-321.

Lost in Transition: Youth, Work, and Instability in Postindustrial Japan, by Mary C.

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Robert Moorehead

Ritsumeikan University

The poor employment prospects of Japanese youth have produced debates, research, and parental hand-wringing. Amid this concern, Mary C. Brinton offers clear analysis of the impact of Japan's economic downturn on "educational non-elite" Japanese men who entered the workforce after completing high school. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, Brinton details the history, structure, and recent restructuring of Japan's employment system, which uses high schools as an intermediary hiring proxy between employers and graduating students.

Prior to the 1990s' economic downturn, young Japanese men who did not continue their education into university relied on the connections between high schools and employers to successfully transition to a stable, well-paying, and relatively permanent job. As Brinton notes, this system has largely excluded young Japanese women, leaving them on the periphery of Japan's economy. Brinton does not delve into this gender disparity, instead focusing on the young men the system was designed to serve.

The downturn, and the concomitant postindustrial restructuring of the Japanese economy, prompted employers to reduce costs by hiring fewer young workers,

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particularly those who had not gone to college. Brinton's interviews capture the sense that these young men had the rug pulled out from under them when the connections their schools had long used to put graduates in jobs suddenly disappeared. Instead, the young men were forced to find jobs on their own, without the protection their schools afforded from changing work assignments, longer hours, no overtime pay, and other problems.

With fewer jobs available, many young Japanese are continuing their education into college. These graduates, in turn, present the "educational non-elite" with even stiffer competition for jobs. Compared to previous cohorts, the 1990s' high school graduate men were less likely to be employed, and when employed, often had lower-paying and less permanent jobs. They also tended to move from job to job, and to suffer from depression as they blamed themselves and not the system for their problems.

A key insight that Brinton offers is that this story is about more than insecurity, unemployment, and low wages. Rather, this "lost generation" has failed to successfully make a critical transition from the social location of high school to the social location of work. These locations, or "*ba*," provide important identities. The transition from the "*ba*" of school to the "*ba*" of work is about becoming company men and following the normative path to full citizenship that includes work, marriage, and a family. Further exacerbating this situation is the fact that the system these youth were trained to participate in did not provide them the self-promoting, job-seeking skills that American youth are taught to develop and that Japan's graduates now need.

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Part of the brilliance of this book is Brinton's ability to guide readers through the maze of Japanese practices. Readers who were previously unfamiliar with Japanese economic history, business or educational practices, will walk away with a clear understanding of these complex, interconnecting issues. This is no small feat. Brinton further enables the connection between this case and those outside Japan by providing links to relevant literature published in English.

Brinton clarifies the statistics on school-to-work transitions, and makes important contributions in noting their shortcomings in overstating the proportion of students who successfully find a job. Brinton insightfully notes that government statistics miss the fact that many students stop their job search before graduation, and instead attend college or vocational training rather than risk unemployment.

Brinton also offers keen insight into the ways in which the choice of high school plays a decisive role in shaping students' future educational and work prospects. However, it would have been helpful to know more about the winners and losers *within* each school. That is, among each school's graduating class, what forces are at play in determining which students get the more prime job prospects? While professional norms encourage teachers to treat students equally and to offer each student similar opportunities, surely there must be some pattern to the within-school sorting, beyond the gender bias of reserving career-track jobs for men.

Another shortcoming is the absence of Japan's minority populations. Brinton contends that the consequences of Japan's economic restructuring are "most severe for Japan's least educationally elite young people" (13), however that definition includes many

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of Japan's minority youth, about whom Brinton says almost nothing. The Burakumin and Zainichi Koreans, for example, have historically been over-represented among the "educational non-elite," and have worked not for the larger employers, who tend to hire through formal school channels, but instead for smaller employers and family businesses. Now it seems mainstream Japanese are facing similar employment constraints. This begs the question as to how minority group members are being impacted by the economic restructuring. Given the relatively small size of Japan's minority populations, it may be that the number of minority students in Brinton's sample was too small to allow for much analysis. However, noting this detail would have been helpful. Instead, readers are left to wonder the fate of such minorities, as they are almost completely absent from Brinton's book.

Lastly, the lessons from this book raise important questions for South American, second-generation immigrant youth in Japan, a group that is now coming of age. Many of their immigrant parents lack the cultural and social capital necessary to guide their children in selecting a Japanese high school. Making an uninformed or poorly informed school choice could have dramatic impacts on future job prospects, especially in a poor economic climate. That Brinton's work raises questions for this, and other, populations reflects her book's broad applicability.

This book is appropriate for upper-division undergraduate classes, graduate classes, scholars of Japan, and anyone interested in the how non-elites are faring in Japan's transition to a post-industrial economy.

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