

Strategies of Dissociation: A Mimetic Dimension to Social Problems in Japan

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Introduction

In the course of discussing Freud in his lecture series *The Gift of Self*, Gil Bailie (1994) points out the mimetic nature of “hysteria”:

[T]he hysteric is one who is being influenced by another, who resents and rebels against the influence. And the hysteric has two arch ways of warding off this influence. One is to become autistic, in a sense—an emotional dissociation. So the hysteric goes blank as a way of trying to ward off the influence. And the other [way] is histrionics, to “act out,” to try to exorcise the other, and to demonstrate that the hysteric is, in fact, the real subject. . . . Hysteria is clearly the self pathologically entangled with another.⁽¹⁾ This seems to me a useful encapsulation of some basic mimetic realities, and one that could be extended to situations that are both more normal and more extreme. If the “hysteric” can be either catatonic or histrionic, the better adjusted person, when faced with mimetic entanglement—that is, interpersonal struggle—can likewise choose simple non-participation or antagonistic engagement. And the more profoundly afflicted can choose extreme social withdrawal or pathological violence.

The *dissociative* response to mimetic entanglement is of particular interest, since it is not usually given much attention in mimetic theory. In fact, Bailie’s brief exposition above is the only instance I can recall it being directly mentioned at all. Yet, if Girard is right about the effects of social leveling in a progressively desacralized ethos, namely, that it inflames and exacerbates mimetic desire (*Things Hidden* 307-308, *Resurrection* 58-59, *Deceit* 135-137), then dissociative tendencies should be at least as much in evidence as antagonistic ones. And indeed, much of the “malaise” that currently permeates the developed world can be seen as comprising greater or lesser degrees of social disengagement, whether it be from

romantic commitment, from marriage, from child-rearing and family, or from school, work, communication, or everyday interaction. Even the much-discussed demographic decline in developed nations might be understood as a mimetic “opting out”-the reduction or elimination of fraught relationships that marriage or child rearing would necessarily entail.

Japan is a nation that seems to be experiencing most of the characteristic “malaise” of other developed countries, along with a severe demographic decline (Hisane 2006). Of particular note is a growing cluster of social problems in Japan which exhibit both the “passive” and the “aggressive” characteristics noted in Bailie’s observation above-the “two arch ways” of warding off interpersonal influence. It is the “passive,” or dissociative trends that will be the focus of this paper, but the two are by no means unrelated, and it might be useful to get an overall glimpse of both in the following table:

Social Problems in Japan

Dissociative “*Makeinu*”

(“losing dogs”)
 Women who reject marriage/motherhood
 “Parasite Singles”
 Young single adults who continue living with parents
 “*Furita*” (“free Arbeiters”)
 Temp workers; serially underemployed young people
 NEET
 “Not currently engaged in Education, Employment or Training”
 “*Futoko*” (“school refusal”)
 Children who refuse to attend school
 “*Hikikomori*” (“pull inside”)
 Shut-ins; teenagers, young adults, or adults into their 30s-40s who will not leave their home or room

Antagonistic/Violent

Incivility in Public Places
 (Train manners, mobile phone manners, etc.)
 “*Gakyuu Houkai*” (“classroom collapse”)
 Out of control classrooms in secondary and elementary schools
 “*Ijime*” (school bullying)
 Including threats, slander, humiliation, physical attacks, extortion, driving victims to suicide
 Juvenile Crime
 Abuse, Domestic Violence
 Stalking, Assault, Rape
 Suicide, Suicide Pacts
 Murder
 (Thrill killings, stalking victims, classmates, peers, playmates, teachers, students, family members, partners, own children, others’ children)

The table lists most of the social problems which have become prominent in Japan, particularly in the past five to ten years (though some, like school bullying, have a much longer history). The left column lists social problems that are dissociative, roughly graded

top to bottom from basic life choices in which people are disengaging from conventional social roles (top), to extreme social incapacitation in which almost any interpersonal interaction is painful or even impossible (bottom). The right column lists antagonistic or violent trends, roughly graded top to bottom from relatively innocuous forms of incivility to stunningly cruel acts of violence.[\(2\)](#)

These problems are, naturally, a source of considerable concern for the Japanese, and many have attracted notice outside of Japan. That the problems seem linked in some way can be sensed from the fact that the discussion of one almost invariably leads to the discussion of some or several others. In the public mind, at least, they seem sometimes to comprise a single social crisis, a crisis in human relations. There has been no lack of causative factors proposed to account for this crisis, including materialism, consumerism, the collapse of the economic bubble, economic restructuring ("*risutora*"), the influence of Western "individualism," a stressful and rigidly competitive education system, nuclear families, the decline of extended families, smothering mothers, absentee working parents, decline of parental and other authority, non-transmission of normative values, lack of socialization, lack of outdoor activity, urbanization, spatial isolation, media prurience, or solitary absorption in electronic media, particularly electronic games or the Internet.

I would not discount any of these factors as being implicated somehow, and some seem quite plausible. Yet, at a more basic level of explanation, human relations, before they are "caused" by anything else, are caused by human relations. If they are in crisis, it would be useful to consider which specific relations are in crisis. The dissociating people we will consider in this paper are making choices about what personal relations *not* to have. Therefore, at a minimum, we should examine what relationships are being excluded and what it is about the relationships that makes them difficult or unbearable.

In fact, dissociative strategies in Japan are sometimes rational and even wise, and even in psycho-symptomatic cases they are often to some extent realistic responses to agonizing interpersonal realities. Taking all the dissociative trends together, it appears that many of the dissociating people are responding to psychosocial distress in connection with their most definitive social roles (for children, school; for women, the milieu of the housewife; for men, the workplace). Furthermore, in the case of school refusers and *hikikomori* (shut-ins), the distress is clearly connected with school bullying, and less overtly brutal forms of group pressure may factor into the milder forms of disengagement as well.

In this paper I will overview the problems of social dissociation in Japan listed above in the left column, specifically in terms of the relationships which are being excluded, and consider these trends in the context of the patterns of social life in post-war Japan, as well of current developments in Japanese society. Mimetic theory will be for the most part assumed rather than explicated in this paper, though it will come in for explicit discussion toward the end, where I will discuss the place of social scapegoating.

It should be stated that this paper is not, nor does it substitute for, a rigorous sociological or psychoanalytically informed treatment. It is a broad characterization of an evolving cluster of social trends, which the other kinds of analysis might either confirm or correct on any point. My “expertise,” if it could be called such, comes from over two decades of living, working and raising a family in Japan. I have watched most of these social trends develop over this time, and experienced (directly or indirectly) some of the social tensions described herein. I have encountered in particular, usually in the classroom, certain people who seem “beaten”: subdued, impassive, unresponsive, driven inward, profoundly inhibited, diminished, and socially isolated. These cumulative encounters are no doubt a major motivation for this paper.

“*Makeinu*”

The first social trend to consider is the choice of an increasing number of Japanese, notably working women, not to get married or have children. This is also part of a more general trend of women and men rejecting marriage, delaying marriage, or of married couples having fewer children or none at all (Curtin 2002). For women, it is a marked change even from very recent times, when getting married by one’s mid-twenties was a nearly universal aspiration among Japanese women. The term “*makeinu*” (“loser,” or literally “losing dog”) reflects this stereotypical expectation, that a woman would be a social loser if she remained single into her thirties. Yet the term has begun to be used, both self-denigratingly and defiantly, by “30-something” single women themselves, most notably Junko Sakai in her best-selling book *Makeinu no Toboe (The Howl of the Losing Dog)* (Shoji 2004, “Who’s the Loser?” 2004); Yoko Haruka wrote a similar defiant manifesto, *Kekkon Shimasen (I Won’t Get Married)* (Doi 2003, Phung 2005).

The voluntarily single woman is the most practical and clear-sighted of the social actors we will consider, and it should be said at the outset that this is not a social “problem” at all (except for Japan’s troubled demographic future, about which more below) but a reasonable and arguably wise life choice. A characteristic image of Japanese women in the work force has been that of “office ladies” whose unglamorous duties included serving green tea to the men, and who were expected to leave the company after a certain number of years, when they got married (the workplace itself often being something of a marriage market). Equality in education and gradually increasing opportunities (as yet very far from equal) in the workplace make it possible for Japanese women to live in financial independence, and that such opportunities exist is obviously an excellent thing.

Yet the majority of the women who reject marriage and motherhood, unlike authors like Sakai and Haruka who speak for them, do not have glamorous careers in media but are typically clerical workers hired at a level where meaningful promotion (though not steady rise in salary) will never take place. That a substantial number of women are rejecting lifelong companionship and motherhood in favor of a dead-end career of desk drudgery is a

profound indictment of male-female relations in Japan and of the social cost of Japan's postwar "economic miracle." A few words should be said about the boom years in terms of their influence on social roles and interpersonal relations.

The national resolve to build Japan's economy after the war established the pattern whereby husbands worked long hours (including work-related entertainment after work) and often commuted long distances to and from home, while the wife stayed at home and ruled the roost, characteristically rearing studious, academically competitive children who would fill these same roles when they grew up. This arrangement was detrimental as much for the lack of "patriarchy" (the absence of the husband and father) as for the imposition of it (gender roles both rigid and artificial), and within a few generations has produced many overly mothered children unwholesomely focused on cramming for entrance exams, while turning Japanese men and women into what sometimes seem like two alien and mutually incomprehensible species.

In this context, a Japanese woman's choice of freedom and independence begs the question, freedom and independence *from what*? Being a wife and mother until recently carried a certain assurance of social standing and a solid basis for identity in Japan, but it has increasingly become a social burden, as the marriage rejecting women must know from having observed their own mothers. The decision not to get married (I would contend) is not simply a career decision but a decision to forgo a great number of difficult social situations.

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Japanese housewives must often manage, usually unaided, demanding sets of interactions: with husbands (often emotionally remote and unsupportive), with critical in-laws who may have spoiled their son from childhood, with academically stressed children, with teachers (including instructors for a great many private lessons), with the mothers of children's classmates, with the polite but insinuating street corner clutch of neighborhood housewives, and the like—all of this in the context of a gruelingly competitive education system where a child's success (or lack of it) is shared by the mother. Housewives must also manage virtually all household affairs and related business transactions, but these, the most depersonalized of human interactions (or, to the extent that they are not depersonalized, the most obliging and deferential to the housewife) are for that reason perhaps the least demanding.

The career-centered, voluntarily single Japanese woman is essentially choosing a narrow, comparatively limited set of business and working relationships—difficult though they may be—over a much larger, much less clearly delineated, much more difficult set of social relationships, which a decision not to get married neatly eliminates. Her time off work will be spent alone, perhaps with a romantic partner, or with friends. The network of friends, in fact, is often the most important and stable social aspect of her life. Friendships among

young women in Japan are exceptionally warm, ebullient, intimate, supportive, relaxed, active and carefree (Tolbert 2000). The woman may not need men very much, and as her lifestyle becomes more habitual, she may not need men at all. Yet, were she to get married and have children, she would have to give up or sharply curtail activities with this network of friends and exchange them for the demanding and stressful sets of personal interactions enumerated above.

My emphasis on interpersonal factors risks overlooking more straightforward socio-economic ones. When my writing students choose the topic of Japan's demographic decline, they point out that many working women in Japan *do* want to get married and raise children, but do not want to lose their jobs. In this view, limited or nonexistent support for working parents (*e.g.*, generous and flexible paid leave) lowers the incentives for marriage and child rearing. That the government and business sectors in Japan ought to be doing much more to support working parents is not in question, and interpersonal factors should not be emphasized at the expense of denying economic realities. In contrast to the boom years, even a prospective husband's job would not necessarily be secure, and it is important for women to hang on to jobs in the "post-bubble" era. Yet I would maintain that support for working mothers, however necessary and welcome, would not be enough in itself to reverse the trend of marriage-and-motherhood-rejecting women, who are responding to relationships, patterns of interaction, and a host of negative social possibilities that such reform would not be sufficient to alleviate.

Consider the fact that the single Japanese woman has available to her all the social facts represented in the table presented above, which are the subject of frequent and depressing news presentations. In the case of child-rearing alone, the single woman can ask herself a number of highly pertinent questions. Would the child be safe from kidnapping or murder, by random psychopaths ("Sho-ichi Danji Gekouchu ni" 2006), by classmates ("Child Violence Raises Concern" 2005), even by mothers of classmates ("Woman Held in Slaying" 2006)? Would the child be safe from the mother herself, if she turned out to be one of the growing number of insecure and inexperienced young parents who abuse their children (Tatsuno 2006)? Could the child do well in an increasingly chaotic classroom environment (Murakami 1999)? Would the child be bullied (Taki 2001)? Would the child become a *futouko* who refuses to go to school? Would the child become one of the enraged co-dependent teenagers who attack their parents? Would the child grow up to be a *furita* who will not seek a salaried position, a NEETer who does not work *at all*, or a *hikikomori* (shut-in) who will not even leave the house or bedroom—a grievous burden to the mother into old age and death?

There are many things that could go catastrophically wrong, in other words, and relatively few that might go right. Marriage and child rearing, in this light, hold comparatively little promise of companionship and social fulfillment and may in fact represent a bleak threat of strained interactions, helplessness, catastrophe, and isolated misery. The decision not to get married or raise children (whatever other socio-economic factors are involved) neatly

eliminates a number of devastating possibilities that the woman will never have to experience.

This social development is of course a dire one for the demographic future of Japan, with a total fertility rate of 1.29 in 2003-2004 and an even lower figure expected for 2005 (Hisane 2006). Japan's demographic decline might be usefully understood in terms of the choices many young people are making about human relationships, namely, the choice not to have certain kinds of human relationships at all. A larger issue is how *any* advanced, secularized democracy with a consumer economy (of which Japan is perhaps the ultimate exemplar) can regenerate itself. As with Marxism, such a society seems to establish "perverse incentives" that undermine the whole project. If the "worker's paradise" produced people who don't like to work, the "consumer paradise" eventually produces people who like to work, and like to consume, but don't like to produce workers and consumers.

But again, it is not about labor and goods, but human relations. The demographic crisis in Japan is in this sense a mimetic crisis. Many naturally shrink from marriage and motherhood, which represent a host of negative social possibilities, and fall back on relations that are known, or reliable, or pleasant, or narrowly defined: co-workers, friends, or parents.

"Parasite Singles"

The "parasite single" is another social category that should not necessarily be considered a "problem" at all. "Parasite singles" (a denigrating stereotype popularized by sociologist Masahiro Yamada in a best-selling book) are men or women who continue to live with parents past the time when they are expected to have moved out and become independent (Curtin 2001). No neurotic tendencies need be imputed to the choice, and it may indeed have a number of practical motivations: low starting salaries which make independence difficult, saving money for marriage in the future, being able to spend more money on carefree pleasures, or being free of household chores that independent living-without the benefit of a long-suffering mother-would entail. The arrangement may, after all, be temporary.

There are legitimate objections that the term "parasite single" downplays or overlooks genuine hardship for young people who cannot find good jobs, or any jobs, since the collapse of the economic bubble (Ashby 2000). Indeed, "parasite single" is a term that should be taken very skeptically—an opportunistic bit of editorializing on "selfish, spoiled young people." Yet the stereotype, however unfair, describes a genuine social trend which is important in the context of this paper. Many of the marriage-rejecting women examined above also belong in this category, and so do the majority of the more troubling cases we will describe below. Two key descriptors of dissociative disorders in Japan are the reduction or elimination of social relations with everyone except one's parents, and an unhealthy co-

dependency with the latter. This pattern is at least minimally present in the “parasite single” phenomena.

Let us guardedly accept the term “parasite single” for what it might reveal about the social situation, and let us take as paradigmatic the very stereotype it was designed to denigrate. This would be the young, single working woman who delays or rejects marriage, lives with her parents, and uses all or most of her income for luxury goods (*e.g.*, an ensemble of ridiculously expensive designer bags), entertainment, and overseas trips with her friends (Tolbert 2000). Friendship networks among young Japanese women were touched upon above and I would contend that they are one of the most important factors in the choices of the stereotypical “parasite single.” Indeed, much of the consumer economy in Japan (mobile phones, restaurants, karaoke studios, shopping outlets, travel agencies, etc.) is geared to this highly lucrative demographic: teenage or young adult women and their friends, who shop together, eat together, carouse together, travel together, take pictures together, and communicate constantly by cell phone when they are not together.

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The stern eye of social commentary naturally alights on the conspicuous attributes on display here: materialism, consumerism, selfishness, frivolity, and the like. Yet what is overlooked in such critiques is both the dreary, mannered conformity that will otherwise define these young women’s lives, and the fact that the frivolity exists to service the relationships. The “parasite single” does not want to live a gorgeous, fun-filled life for its own sake; she wants to live a gorgeous, fun-filled life *with her friends*. To consider the heartbreaking cases mentioned above, the increasing cases of child abuse in Japan by frustrated, isolated, inexperienced young mothers, these women are in some ways the precise counterparts to the “parasite singles,” who represent the kind of lifestyle that the newly isolated and stress-filled young mother had to give up. Scolding young Japanese women for their selfishness or immaturity overlooks the terribly unattractive reality of the “mature” social roles that the young woman has been expected to dutifully evolve into. In Japan, a good case can be made for “prolonged adolescence,” at least for women. For men, the social cost is more exacting.

“Furita”

“Furita” is a reduced hybrid compound combining the borrowed words “free” and the German “Arbeit” (for “part-time job”). The compound “free Arbeiter” was eventually reduced to *furita* (“freeter”). The term describes something between a drifter and a temp worker. The characteristic *furita* starts out as a carefree young person who may or may not have finished high school or college, and delays or rejects the search for a steady, salaried position, opting instead for a series of temporary, easily obtainable, low-skill service sector jobs (either part-time or full-time), usually making only enough money to live and pursue

any number of recreational pursuits. The *furita* may also be, and often is, a “parasite single” (Honda 2005).

As with “parasite single,” “*furita*” has become in many instances a denigrating stereotype that ignores harsh economic realities (namely, the difficulty of finding a good job, or any steady job at all, in a competitive, “restructured,” post-bubble economy) and fixing the blame on the “character flaws” of “today’s young people.” To be sure, some *furita* have failed to find salaried jobs at the level or status they think they deserve (usually measured by their university) and will not be “demeaned” by searching for lower positions, however stable. And, taking a cynical view, *furita* are certainly advantageous for the “restructured” business sector inasmuch as they supply a fluid, adjustable, temporary labor pool that relieves companies of having to shell out the normal benefits and systematic raises they would to regular full-time employees. At any rate, being a *furita* may not always be much of a choice, and the analysis here only applies insofar as it is one—the choice not to play the game, not to search in a serious or concerted way for a steady, full-time job.

When it is a choice, it becomes much less of a choice after a certain number of years, when the *furita* will simply be unemployable for any steady job that requires accumulated skills, collaborative ability, endurance, discipline, reliability, forbearance, deference to superiors (many of these being characteristic Japanese virtues), and, perhaps most importantly, a respectable employment record. Eventually, even the temporary work of the *furita* will be harder to find as the person advances toward and into middle age, and a younger crop of *furita* are available to employers. In short, to be a *furita*, if it is a choice, is an unwise one. The *furita* will have a low income (especially as the income gap widens with years in comparison to non-*furita* counterparts), no health or retirement benefits, and usually no station in life to attract women for marriage (Ashby 2004). The *furita* introduces a troubling new class of single, low income, unskilled, under-employed, and increasingly unemployable *lumpen* quasi-bohemians into a society that in the post-war years prided itself (not completely without justification) on being egalitarian and universally “middle class,” at least in general principle.

Furita may be male or female, but it is the male who interests us here, because the emergence of a group of males who are not steady or salaried workers is the most notable aspect of the trend. Like *makeinu*, *furita* are rejecting social roles and expectations, in this case of the male. *Furita* are the anti-salarymen, one of the clearer instances of Japanese consciously adopting some form of Western “individualism.” It is a strained form insofar as it lacks an element of idealism. As one Internet commentator laments about *furita* and *hikikomori* (shut-ins), “This Japanese generation doesn’t tune in, it doesn’t turn on, it only drops out” (Brown 2003). But while “hippies” in the West could reliably draw on an implicit social prestige garnered by their mystique, *furita* can count on no comparable reverence for their lifestyle, and the Japanese are considerably less forgiving to men in this instance than to women.

The characteristic male *furita* (again, insofar as it is a choice and not an economic necessity) is, like the cases considered above, making a choice about what relationships to have and not have. He chooses a series of limited, temporary relationships with employers and co-workers, and perhaps with a semi-stable cohort of fun-loving fellows. He will not have to be berated or humiliated by a boss who has any real power over him, nor will he have to forge or sustain long, demanding relationships with co-workers.

The slowly increasing gender equity in the Japanese workplace does not change the fact that, for a Japanese man, *as a Japanese man*, the workplace is still a man's world where he has to be tempered and tested as a man and make a place for himself within a tightly knit male cohort with a strong company identity. Japanese men, unlike women, do not have the option of forging a socially acceptable identity apart from their job, which defines adult manliness. Economic developments have not changed this social imperative for the male, but they have given it something of a nastier edge. Lifetime employment used to be, although certainly not a universal norm, at least the theoretical one in larger companies, with promotion proceeding along the escalator of seniority. Even an unproductive worker was able to claim a place (though not a respected one) within the *madogiwazoku*, or "window watching gang." The *risutora* ("restructuring") which Japanese companies undertook to make themselves more competitive demolished this social contract. No one is irreplaceable or invulnerable, and promotion is based on some demonstration of merit.

The burden for a Japanese man, who, more than a woman, has to prove his social worth through his job, is that the company identity and the gang ethos among the cohort of male co-workers is just as strong, but obviously less reliable, more treacherous. That is, just as much is asked of a man as before, namely that he in effect surrender his identity to his company, yet if a worker is in principle expendable, it is no longer a reciprocal exchange of identity for a secure sense of belonging.

The male *furita* may after all be a sensitive young man insecure about whether he can fit into this intimidating and treacherous world, whether he can prove himself as a man. Alternately, he may be a "victim" of Japan's affluence to the extent that, over-indulged by parents who make relatively few demands on him and provide him with the money he needs for recreation, he doesn't feel the overriding compulsion to make a living that was felt by earlier generations, when families were poorer and Japan was a struggling country. In either case, the voluntary *furita* preempts the possibility of failure or rejection within the male world by his own rejection of the possibility. Unlike the case of the voluntarily single career woman, however, his choice is not simply passive and eliminative but structurally passive/aggressive, and without a "manly" identity defined by a secure job, however humble or elevated it may be, he is putting himself further out of the circle of acceptance of the wider society. A hostile relationship to society is implicit in his choice, however faint this may be initially, and may grow more marked as his choice becomes irretrievable and his marginal status permanent.

Here we approach another stereotype that has to be treated sensitively. The vast majority of *furita* are neither criminal nor violent, but where certain kinds of crimes increase (stalking, assault, rape) a *furita* is relatively likely to be the perpetrator, in comparison with men from other categories. No one is surprised when a suspect apprehended for such crimes turns out to be a *furita*, and indeed, many people watching the news may form such a profile in their minds before a suspect is apprehended. Though the income of *furita* may be comparatively low, these are not crimes motivated by desperate need but by a hostile social relation that hardens into retributive aggression, moreover, one that has to do with some sort of manly dignity denied by society and reclaimed through violence. A woman is likely to be the victim.

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What these kinds of criminal pathology among *furita* mean, on one level, is that the *furita* *does*, finally, demand attention, recognition, retribution from the social web whose intimidating and treacherous demands his rejection were supposed to put out of reach. The relationship was not eliminated; he carries it with him. He can run, but he can't hide, which in one way or another will apply to all of the dissociated people we will consider next.

NEET

Another term of recent vintage is "NEET," an acronym originating in the U.K. and transplanted to Japan, meaning "Not currently engaged in Education, Employment or Training" ("NEET," *Wikipedia*). Since there is no lack of part-time or temporary full-time work to be found in Japan, young people must be "NEETers" by choice, but the reasons vary widely (Nakamura 2004). NEET overlaps most other categories of dissociation considered in this paper. Some NEETers, like some of the *furita* described above, could not succeed in getting a salaried position at the level they think they deserve within the restructured economy, and will not demean themselves with *any* other kind of work. Some may be over-indulged young people, also described above, who have *never* made a serious effort to continue their studies or find work. Some may be *furita* who slip down to NEET status because they could not get along with bosses or co-workers and gave up working altogether. Others may be excruciatingly shy and withdrawn people, like the *hikikomori* we will consider below, for whom the social interaction involved in work, education or training would be torture.

That NEET is defined in the negative ("not") is highly indicative of the nature of so much of Japan's social crisis, yet the keywords (Education, Employment, Training) are somewhat misleading. It is not these *activities* that the person is typically rejecting, but the *relationships* they entail. The negatives, I think, can all be restated relationally: *not* in relation with fellow students, *not* in relation with teachers, *not* in relation with bosses, co-workers, clients, customers, trainers, fellow trainees, and so on. In other words, I would suggest that what NEETers are doing in many cases is eliminating a vast number of

difficult, painful, humiliating, or unbearable human relations. Why these relationships are being avoided may become clearer when we examine futoko, or “school refusal,” below.

Futoko

Futoko or “school refusal” describes a parallel situation with NEETers, but involving children in elementary or secondary schools: children who cannot or will not go to school (Gordenker 2002). *Futoko* is not truancy or dropping out, since the children remain enrolled, and typically advance through terms and grades, and graduate with the other students. This is a typically Japanese accommodation between parents, teachers, administrators, and the concerned child that preserves the problem and the institutional situation that may have brought it about, while deferring positive action to address either.

With *futoko*, we have a social problem defined, again quite tellingly, as a negative (“refusal”) but somewhat misleadingly in terms of the activity or institution (“school”). The school refuser is not refusing either a building or scholastic activity but personal relations and social situations: scolding and humiliation by teachers, unstable friendship cliques with their possibilities of rejection and betrayal, rowdy and increasingly out of control classrooms (*gakyuu houkai*, or “classroom collapse”) (Murakami 1999), and especially, the very real possibility of vicious, even physically threatening bullying—a very old and endemic problem in Japanese schools (Taki 2001, Dumouchel 1999).

The perils of school life, including bullying, have been taken up in *manga* (comic book) series and television dramas, often with brutal honesty. Recent television treatments have included *Jou no Kyoushitsu* (*The Queen’s Classroom*, 2005), set in elementary school), *Kids’ War* (1999-2003), set in elementary and junior high school, and the hugely popular *Nobuta wo Produce* (*Producing Nobuta*, 2005), set in high school. The title character in the latter series possesses all of the distinguishing marks that both mark a student out for scapegoating and are the result of it: hunched shoulders, downcast face hidden under unstylish bangs, grimly set unsmiling mouth, stiff, awkward gait, and halting, tortured speech—the very picture of a dissociated Japanese teen. Yet the premise of the story is wildly improbable; two handsome boys (played by pop idols) befriend the girl and vow (with the help of unlimited financial resources) to make her the most popular person in school. In the end, everyone can appreciate that she is a pretty, compassionate, unique, imaginative, and very special individual.

The drama resolves a paradox of Japanese high school, namely, that it is the scene of nakedly brutal scapegoating for some, but a golden age for everyone else. The almost overpowering sentimental mystique of Japanese high school is thereby preserved at the expense of complete honesty with regard to the scapegoats; for bullying victims, school can clearly be traumatic and emotionally devastating, with no such happy ending. As with *futoko*, the most extreme cases of dissociation, *hikikomori*, which we will consider next,

often emerge as a result of school bullying.

Hikikomori

A “*hikikomori*” (roughly, “pull inside”) is a teenager, young adult, or sometimes an adult into his or her 30s and 40s who will rarely or ever leave the home or even the bedroom for an extended period (months, years, or indefinitely). Most *hikikomori* (apparently around eighty percent) are male. However, the extent of the problem in terms of hard numbers is unknown since families tend to keep the situation discrete. A report by Rees for the BBC (2002b) gives an often-heard estimate of over one million. This is an astounding figure and in fact one that is difficult to justify. Michael Dzieszinski (2003) traces the unsubstantiated figure to Tamaki Saito, a psychiatrist who coined the term “*hikikomori*” and has authored a number of books on the subject. More cautious estimates put the number at 100,000-320,000 (Jones 2006) or as low as 50,000-100,000 (Dzieszinski 2005), yet the “missing million” *hikikomori* appears to have been accepted and then repeated in several media accounts. The *hikikomori* problem is certainly real, and nearly everyone in Japan will be one or two degrees of separation from some *hikikomori*-like case, yet perceptions of the problem have been badly warped by this looseness with data and, Dzieszinski also argues (2003, 2005), by the promulgation of stereotypes based on a few shocking cases.

Hikikomori cases often develop directly from ongoing experiences of bullying in high school. One *hikikomori* case reported by Rees (2002b) is more extreme than most, but shows key characteristics of many cases: a genesis in school bullying, a dissociation from all social interaction, sometimes even with parents, and a tortured accommodation made by the family, rearranging the world around the afflicted person, who sits at its center:

6

I knew him only as the boy in the kitchen.

His mother, Yoshiko, wouldn't tell me his name, fearful that neighbours in this Tokyo suburb might discover her secret.

Her son is 17 years old. Three years ago he was unhappy in school and began to play truant.

Then one day, he walked into the family's kitchen, shut the door and refused to leave.

...

Since then, he hasn't left the room or allowed anyone in.

The family have since built a new kitchen—at first they had to cook on a makeshift stove or eat take away food.

His mother takes meals to his door three times a day.

The toilet is adjacent to the kitchen, but he only bathes once every six months.

Yoshiko showed me pictures of her son before his retreat into isolation; he was a plump, cheerful young teenager, with no symptoms of mental illness.

...

Then a classmate taunted him with anonymous hate letters and scrawled abusive graffiti about him in the schoolyard.

The *hikikomori* distills and intensifies the dissociative tendencies that we have been examining throughout. Personal relations are systematically eliminated until in some cases, the person hopes to eliminate *all* of them, even with parents. Yet it seems clear that the interpersonal struggles that drove him or her into isolation persist, embedded in the anti-social solution itself, and tend to emanate back outward again in a passively sullen demand that the world *do something*, rearrange itself to accommodate his or her affliction. Whether *hikikomori* should be seen as a uniquely Japanese problem is an open question. As is clear in the documentary *Crumb* (1994), the eldest brother of underground comic pioneer Robert Crumb was for all descriptive purposes an adult *hikikomori*, and had a similar experience of merciless bullying in high school.

There is a quite unjustified tendency to impute violent tendencies to *hikikomori* as a group. Certainly, where there is violence, particularly against parents, a codependent *furita*, NEETer or *hikikomori* may be the perpetrator. Sometimes the violence is two-way, as in a recent local case (Iwasaki 2006) in which a mother and father killed their abusively violent twenty-eight year old daughter, previously an active and personable girl who developed both *hikikomori* syndrome and borderline personality disorder in her early 20s, after a year spent abroad. Rees (2002a) reports on the case of a father who needs to carry a can of pepper spray to protect himself against further attacks from his *hikikomori* son. Teachers like myself know of similar cases anecdotally from talking to students who have an adolescent brother at home terrorizing the household, particularly the parents.

However, these brothers tend not to be *hikikomori* but *furita* or students—perhaps the very kind of student that terrorized most *hikikomori* into isolation. In one recent case, a teenage girl slowly poisoned her mother (who survived but is now comatose) and recorded the results on her Internet blog (Lewis 2005). She was a regular attendee of high school, not a *hikikomori*. There seems to be no real basis for attributing attacks on parents primarily or

even prominently to *hikikomori*, though a stronger case can be made that the co-dependency relation itself—whether it involves parasite singles, *furita*, NEETer, *hikikomori* or high schoolers—can become extremely fraught, confrontational, and sometimes violent.

In a similar way, a few of the astoundingly cruel murders of kindergarten or elementary school children over the past two decades have been committed by *hikikomori* or people with *hikikomori*-like tendencies, but are not at all indicative of a group trend. The first nation-stunning case was in the 80s. The perpetrator was Tustomu Miyazaki, an unemployed young man who lived alone, self-isolated and absorbed in his massive collection of pornographic, pedophilic, occult, and violent videos. He was Japan's first famous *hikikomori* killer a decade before the word had gained currency, a serial killer who kidnapped, abused, and murdered four four-year-olds (Rider 2006, Whipple 2006). Mamoru Takuma, a violently anti-social man entered a prestigious elementary school in Osaka with a knife in 2001, killing 8 children and wounding 13, as well as two teachers (“Memorial Held for School Slaying” 2003).

However, the murder of innocent young victims by pathologically disturbed people is a quite unjustified stigma to lay at the feet of *hikikomori*, since there have increasingly been high profile incidents, every bit as shocking, that have not involved *hikikomori* at all. The Kobe killer who murdered two elementary children in 1997, decapitating one victim and leaving the head in front of the gate of a junior high school, was himself a bright and promising junior high school student (“Sakakibara” 2006, *Wikipedia*). A junior high school boy threw a kindergartner off a parking building in 2004 (“12-year-old Admits to Killing Boy” 2003) and there was a similar case the next year in which the victim, thankfully, survived (“Girl, 13, Held for Pushing Boy Off Building” 2004). A sixth grade girl stabbed her classmate and friend to death in school in 2005 (“Online Message Feud Led to Girl’s Murder” 2004). Recently, a Chinese national killed two kindergartners in front of her own child while she was driving them all to school (“Woman held in slaying of two 5-year-olds” 2006), apparently distressed by social tensions with other mothers. Still more recently, an unemployed husband and father hurled a nine year old boy (no relation) from the thirteenth floor of a condominium (“Man Says He Threw Boy from 15th Floor” 2006). And at this writing, the second of two children in Akita Prefecture (close neighbors) has now been found murdered within a month of the first, and no suspect has yet been apprehended (“Sho-ichi Danji Gekouchu ni” 2006); there is no statistical reason to conclude a *hikikomori* was the perpetrator.

Clearly, *hikikomori* should not be considered pathologically violent as a group, any more than should junior high or elementary school students, housewives, husbands, or fathers. To encourage such a stereotype is to some extent to perpetuate the basic misperception that attributes the systematic dysfunctions that produce dissociated people to faults or deficiencies in the dissociated themselves. Yet this stereotype of the excluded misfit exacting violent retribution is significant in itself and will be examined further below in

connection with scapegoating.

Labels, Variations and Gradients

7

Three of the dissociative trends considered above (“*makeinu*,” “parasite single,” “*hikikomori*”) were labeled and publicized by social commentators in their best-selling books. “*Furita*” is a stereotypical characterization arising out of slang and disparaging media attention. The other terms, NEET and “*futoko*,” describe conditions with broad accuracy but strictly in terms of education or employment rather than the more salient (at least in my view) interpersonal aspect. Overall, it is difficult to disentangle the true extent and nature of these problems from the *perceptions* of them, some of which involve no small degree of panicked sensationalism, opportunism, and media hype. The labels we have been dealing with may themselves have fixed the problems in the public mind in an unhelpful or inaccurate way.

The terms for dissociative phenomena are somewhat like place-markers hastily slapped down on a fluid gradient, wherein social trends and social dysfunctions are swiftly expanding and evolving, but are not very well understood. People can slide from one condition to another and back again (*e.g.*, from *futoko*, to *hikikomori*, to NEET, to *furita*, to *hikikomori*). They can be in several conditions at the same time (*e.g.*, “parasite single,” NEET, and *hikikomori*). Anecdotally, I know of Japanese people, once socially sparkling or with a pleasant school life in their backgrounds, who are overcome by dissociative torments after they are well into their adult life or career. In recent conversations with other university instructors in Japan, I hear an increasing number of stories about emotionally sensitive students who cannot get out of bed on some days, or when they do manage to make it to school cannot work up the courage to enter the classroom. Directives from administrators increasingly alert teachers to emotionally sensitive students like these, who are to be handled with tact and understanding.

Should we consider such cases as *futoko* extending into adulthood, or comparatively mild and intermittent cases of *hikikomori* syndrome, and to what extent does it matter? It seems that any of these dissociative behaviors can overcome nearly any person, in almost any combination, at any period between childhood and middle age, and for any length of time.

Scapegoating in Japan

In his mimetic reflection on *ijime* in *Contagion*, Paul Dumouchel (1999) notes that school-bullying episodes in Japan possess all the key indicators of scapegoating, minus the divinization (82-83). This “missing link” in the scapegoating process might seem a mere academic quibble for mimetic theoreticians, but it becomes something of more than

academic interest when we consider the case of *futoko* or *hikikomori*, whereby bullied children develop their anti-social solution and establish it as a painful rent in the social fabric. The *hikikomori* in particular may illuminate the pathway by which such social victims begin to acquire something like a quasi-divinized status both in traditional and contemporary settings, and, more importantly for present purposes, how scapegoating structures social existence in Japan and may be implicated in one way or another in *all* dissociative behaviors.

As noted earlier, there is a terribly unjust imputation concerning *hikikomori* that some sort of monstrous violence lurks in their hearts (though they are typically painfully withdrawn people who are likely to have been *ijime* victims). The stereotype suggests a projection, a troubled corporate conscience about scapegoating, or at least uneasiness about the resentment that might be expected to accumulate in the heart of the social reject. That is, even if the victimized person is *not* full of vindictive rage, logically (the tormentors or passive enablers think) he or she *should* be. Such demonization may initiate a process that ultimately becomes a sort of quasi-divinization, traces of which can be detected in traditional Japanese folklore as well as in contemporary media.

To elaborate, the psycho-symptomatic cases of dissociation in Japan are surprising mainly for their burgeoning numbers and for the particular modes of self-isolation that have developed, yet the behavior traits themselves, and the image of the excluded or self-excluded person teetering on the edge of indiscriminate retributory rage, are familiar in Japan, even somewhat “archetypal.” Many traditional Japanese ghost stories are terrifying exactly because the ghost is filled with sullen rage, having been victimized in some way in his or her mortal life. This can be seen in contemporary horror movies like *Ringu (The Ring)* (1998) and *Ju-on (The Grudge)* (2003) as well as their sequels and Hollywood remakes. Interestingly, the bullied misfit in the teen drama *Producing Nobuta*, discussed earlier, is in a few scenes mistaken for a pale, sullen apparition right out of a traditional Japanese nightmare.

As demonstrated in the study of Herbert Plutschow in *Anthropoetics* (2000/2001), a quasi-divine scapegoat legacy has been present in Japan since ancient times. Plutschow notes that the threat of retribution from a powerful scapegoated figure was an abiding concern, and that any destructive misfortune from Japan’s generous menu of natural disasters (earthquakes, typhoons, floods, famines) could be attributed to such retaliatory rage. It seems likely that the *less* powerful scapegoats have been given correspondingly less potent forms in some of Japan’s traditional ghosts and sprites. In fact, many of stone monuments and Shinto shrines that dot the landscape in Japan were erected to appease the spirits of such wronged victims (Dorson 1973: 32, 96).

The latent retaliatory rage presumed to reside in excluded and dissociated Japanese is hauntingly captured in Hayao Miyazaki’s brilliant animated movie *Sen to Chihiro no*

Kamikakushi (Sen and Chihiro's Hidden Gods) (2001) (re-titled *Spirited Away* in the English language release). A spectral secondary figure in the story is Kaonashi (No Face), who floats about draped in a dark cape, and wears an expressionless oval mask. Kaonashi half materializes at the fringes of scenes to watch the protagonist Chihiro, but can only communicate to her in tortured grunts. Kaonashi embodies key features of the *hikikomori* and the dissociated Japanese teenager in general: chokingly inarticulate, emotionally impassive, insubstantial, both excluded and self-excluding, looking in from the outside both longingly and resentfully. Later in the film, he changes into a raging demon, attacking the staff and tearing through the walls of the inn for the gods (by day part of an abandoned theme park). Finally, rather romantically, a pacified Kaonashi is restored to a polite boy who quietly sips his green tea in the home of an eccentric witch.

Here again we can see a “mythical” assumption—in a film steeped in Japanese mythology—of latent violence in the heart of the social reject. The disfigured and diminished personality of the dissociated Japanese needs to be accounted for, but the straightforward explanation that he or she has been singled out and systematically brutalized will not do. There must be some raging demonic spirit that has to be identified and exorcised, so that the social order can be both acquitted and reaffirmed. However sympathetically done, the demonization of *hikikomori*—who are essentially physically or psychologically brutalized Japanese—suggests the pathway toward divinization that Dumouchel finds missing in cases of school bullying; sooner or later, in one way or another, some sort of quasi-divinization *will* take place: in a ghost story, in an urban legend, or in some vindictive entity in the next installment of *Ringu*.

Scapegoating, whether mythically treated, historically established in social strata, nakedly enacted in bullying episodes, or latently implied in countless ordinary social settings, permeates Japanese life. Historically, Japan has had classes of outcastes, most notably the *burakumin*, associated with tanning and the funeral business. Lafcadio Hearn, writing in the nineteenth century, actually described four distinct classes of outcaste in the region around Matsue (1972: 327-331). A Korean minority has held a similar place in society: socially and economically marginalized, and sometimes violently persecuted. Social barriers for these marginalized groups have substantially eroded, though their struggles have been long and bitter.

8

But in Japan, much more than in the West, scapegoating is also an everyday affair, an ongoing enforcer of social consensus that effects nearly everyone in their ordinary modes of being. No one can live and work in Japan without seeing how this enforcement operates in neighborhood associations, street-corner cliques, business meetings, faculty meetings, and the like. In fact, such scapegoating may be more widespread in the West than is usually appreciated, as research in “mobbing” at the workplace and in academe is beginning to suggest (Gravois 2006). In Japan, one should probably multiply this “mobbing” factor

several times to get a sense of how intense and pervasive it is. As noted previously, school bullying is clearly a primary factor in dissociative behavior such as *futoko* and *hikikomori*. Yet for *makeinu* and *furita* as well, their dissociation may also be a calculated disengagement from social roles (for women, the milieu of the housewife, for men, the workplace) in which the implied threat of ostracism, less overtly brutal but still potent, defines everyday interaction.

In other words, I would contend that with all groups of dissociating people (men, women, children) there is likely to be a rejection of the system of “belonging” in Japan which is structured by social scapegoating from childhood and maintained in less overt forms into and through adulthood. The withdrawal from expected social roles—pupil, housewife, salaried worker—is a withdrawal from the very situations in which scapegoating, or the implied threat of it, is most intense, and most intense because these roles are the primary hold the person has on social identity; an attack here is an attack at the core of the person’s self-definition. Better, then, to reject the role itself.

This is paradoxical in the sense that the dissociating people are taking on more thoroughly the role of social outsiders by rejecting their expected station in life, in order to spare themselves the ongoing pain of ostracization or bullying if they *did* participate in these expected roles. Yet it is quite rational; the escape from tense or fraught social situations is effective, at least in the short-term, and the social burden that would normally fall on them alone is distributed; it becomes a problem for other people to deal with (parents, teachers, administrators, government ministries, policy analysts, nervous social commentators). In fact, the role of the traditional social scapegoat in Japan shows that this kind of arrangement has been embedded in communal existence for ages.

Girard has noted in his address to the 2002 COV&R meeting that Japan has no word for “scapegoat.” Girard is presumably speaking here about cultural consciousness regarding victimization—the modern connotation of “scapegoat”—and his point is valid. Nevertheless, Japan does not lack words for sacrificial victims. *Hitobashira* (human pillar) describes victims who were buried alive as part of large construction projects as an offering to the relevant god to ensure the projects’ success (Dorson 1973: 211-220).⁽³⁾ My own inquiries among the Japanese have yielded another word, *murahachibu*, for permanently marginalized members of the community. The word is socially and not religiously derived, and cannot be meaningfully translated apart from the total situation that it rather ingeniously captures.

Mura means village, and *hachibu* connotes something like eighty percent, or eight parts out of ten. A village had ten major events that defined communal life, and a person (*murahachibu*) who was difficult to get along with was excluded from all but two of them: fires and funerals. Fires were a catastrophe that demanded total participation from everyone, including the excluded individual, and funerals were likewise an event in which

even the excluded person had to be a participant. But in normal times, the *murahachibu* returned to the habitual status of being excluded (the minus eight components of village life) yet somewhat accommodated, of belonging and not belonging.

Thus, the traditional social scapegoat in Japan is something vaguely akin to a “village idiot” (though the *murahachibu* was not perceived as feeble-minded but as irascible, anti-social). In family therapy, an equivalent role is that of the “identified patient,” the family member in a dysfunctional family who, by tacit consensus, becomes the locus of all its problems (“Family Therapy” 2006). In mimetic terms, the best model for the *murahachibu* might be provided by Girard’s exegesis of the Gospel episode (Mark 5:1-20) where Jesus heals the Gerasene demoniac (*Scapegoat* 165-183). Jesus’ healing upsets a warped but relatively stable arrangement that the community has worked out; the violent and self-torturing man is maintained in a limbo between exclusion and inclusion, and the multiple demons that Jesus drives out Girard identifies with the collective will of the community that both “tolerates” the man and also keeps him in (routinely broken) chains.

This ambivalent role of the traditional “resident scapegoat” seems important in understanding the dissociated people we have considered and the social micro-systems that surround them. If there is one constant factor in the more psycho-symptomatic dissociative cases, it is exactly this kind of preservation of the situation through structural accommodation. The dissociated person, like the *murahachibu*, is defined and self-defined as the disharmonious element in an otherwise smoothly functioning social setting. The dissociated person, like the *murahachibu*, more or less accepts or perhaps even seeks this onus as the price of being free from the torment of actually having to get along with everyone in this “harmonious” setting. And the community has neutralized the element that would throw this “harmony” into doubt. Everything “works out” for everyone involved, except that it doesn’t at all: the odd man or woman out is falsely defined as the problem, the “harmony” is rigid and strained even in the best of times, and the critical element that might alter things for the better is neutralized.

The non-symptomatic types of dissociation represented by the *makeinu* or “parasite single” are revealing in this context. Bluntly, they show that one doesn’t have to be crazy or anti-social to find that communal life in Japan can be difficult, hypocritical, intolerable. When there is a viable alternative, many rational people will pursue it, excising as many problematic social relations as practicality permits. Yet, sadly, such dissociation is always to the detriment of society. With every calculated disengagement, society loses more of its capacity for positive correction or (literally, in the case of marriage and parenting) for renewal. It is not impossible to imagine a Japan in which, finally, nearly everyone is a *murahachibu*, a dissociated person operating at the fringes of communal existence.

Conclusion

It seems to me that dissociative trends in Japan indicate the breakdown of both traditional and postwar social orders. The traditional maintenance of social harmony in Japan has always exacted a price in terms of nervous attention to neighbors, peers, superiors, and the like, yet it did deliver a sense of belonging, an organic community, and a dense, rich and highly articulated culture. In the successful postwar push to develop Japan's economy and raise its national stature, the same mechanisms of social harmony persisted, but in sharply eviscerated contexts (work, family, neighborhood, classroom) where the social payoff was exceedingly unclear, if indeed any existed at all. After two or three generations of this, many of the relationships that are most vital to society (spouse, parent, child, peer, co-worker, neighbor, schoolmate) no longer necessarily make sense, and the slightest perturbation to the total system (the burst of the economic bubble, economic restructuring, etc.) can reveal their unreality and fragility, precipitating this startling dissociation from social roles and everyday human interaction.

9

Each of the major components of Girard's mimetic thesis seems relevant to the understanding of dissociative trends in contemporary Japan: 1) the "interdividual" or interpersonal constitution of the self, 2) the role of the scapegoat in the constitution of the social order, and 3) the exacerbation of mimetic effects in a post-sacrificial or "secular" ethos where scapegoating loses socially cohesive or legitimizing force. Girard's scapegoat thesis is important because Japan has yet to come to terms with the psychological cost of its social scapegoating, which remains relatively unchanged as the routine mechanism of social consensus, despite Japan's tremendous and highly successful push to modernization. School bullying is perennially discussed and fretted over in Japan, yet as seen with the case of school refusers, it seems that nearly every accommodation is made to work around it rather than address it. As for scapegoating in the milieu of the worker or housewife, it is simply not perceived as such at all, but as the normal environment that an adult is expected to evolve into and endure ("*gaman*"). Yet many continue to find these environments unbearable and increasingly vote with their bodies and souls: to disengage.

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Notes

1. The excerpt is on the B-side of tape four. For what is probably the best mimetic treatment of hysteria, see Oughourlian’s *The Puppet of Desire*, pp. 145-187. ([back](#))
2. For an overview and comments on negative social trends in Japan, see pp. 390-394 of “Drowning in Desire,” by Michael Cholewinski and myself. ([back](#))
3. I am indebted to Jeremiah Alberg (personal communication) for bringing *hitobashira* to my attention. ([back](#))