

Crisis of the Everyday/Everyday Crisis: Across Time in Japan

Introduction

Anne Allison, Harry Harootunian, and Christopher T. Nelson

In Japan, as anywhere, the everyday pulses with rhythm. It repeats in the movement of trains from station to station, planes landing and cargo ships unloading, elevators ascending and descending. It surges along with the cars and trucks that choke the nation's highways. From the measured beat of factory machinery to the frenzied vibration of electronic signals racing through optical fibers, cadence subsumes everything. It shadows the movement of night to day and the passage from season to season. And everywhere, the rhythm of capital, all encompassing and endlessly demanding. Acting on and enacted by labor. The beat of fingers across keyboards, of hands fitting parts, of feet racing to catch trains, of voices in the marketplace, of eyes surveilling neighbors and coworkers. Struggles to get by, produce livelihoods, make profits. A cacophony of affect and labor. The political inscribed in the rhythms of daily life.

Life and death are rhythmic as well. There are demands made (of one kind or another) and actions taken (or not) that organize the cadences of living—and dying—in various ways. Sometimes there is an accommodation to the insistence of tempos that demand obedience and compliance.

In a Japan described as postwar, postmiracle, or postcrisis, some cling to a time and place that promises security. Others find themselves ground down by a cadence that slows their life, strips them of value, and distances them from their dreams. Unable to keep pace, they are abandoned in a space of failure, brought to a place of death. Still others learn to be sensitive to the discordance that is always at the heart of capital's rhythms—the teeth-gritting harmony that Louis Althusser so vividly described—and to act on these variations. Out of crisis and catastrophe, in the immanence of death, they seek out new possibilities. In their actions—beyond failure—new rhythms emerge, beating against the cadences that dominate the everyday.

Today, the nature of crises and the ways in which they disrupt and resume the rhythms of everydayness differ from those of the recent past. The catastrophe that struck northeastern Japan on March 11, 2011, was a portent of this change: a natural disaster colliding with the spread of capitalism. In so doing, it demonstrated that eventfulness can no longer be limited to a specific locale. While such a collision echoes an older conviction that natural disasters and peasant uprisings inevitably signify a failing political order, we know today that such crises invariably derive from conjunctural configurations on the global stage. Configured in space, global spatialization entails and demands a respatialization on local terrain. In this regard, there are no local crises any longer, nor crises that can be localized.

The other effect of this globalizing of space has been to diminish the role of time by reducing its temporal force to the primacy of space. When under the promptings of neoliberal promise, nation-states become proxies for globalization; they forfeit not just their own claims to local autonomy but also a putative democratic commitment to placing the interests of people above all other considerations. What we face now is a situation where the economic and political have become virtually indistinguishable. What has befallen us today is no longer local crises that threaten to spill over but rather an immense failure in every sector of the social formation. This makes what is a local crisis of capital into (also) a world historical event: an overdetermined plurality of crises.

As the event of 3/11 has made manifest, the routines people have had and the temporal rhythms that have marked their patterns of subsistence have changed, perhaps forever, under this form of crisis regime. In place of the vanished rhythms of a familiar daily pace, the everyday has become the site of struggles invested with the task of simply getting through one day at a time. By the same measure, however, the everyday remains our most basic temporal unit—and the most basic unit of social life. In the strate-

gies and practices people concoct to survive crises or precarious times, the everyday escapes total assimilation to state bureaucratic exemplars or even capture by dominant ideology. Because of this, everydayness bears a political potential: it offers an alternative to the globalization of space in the very specificity of a—specific—here and now. The temporalities—of a farming village in one spot, dense urban living in another—are different here, but they also differ from the homogeneous empty time at work in globalized brands or media tropes that circulate the world in the same consumable forms.

In interrogating the reality, and political potential, of the everyday in crisis, it is important to observe the temporal regimes by which people construct and inhabit life on a day-to-day basis. But it is equally vital to address the collision between a habitual and settled everyday on the one hand and, on the other, its imminent disappearance in the face of a disaster and the uncertainty this introduces of something—or nothing—else. Crises evoke different responses in the everyday: the attempt to restore some semblance of everyday rhythms that once anchored a familiar life; the impulse to see in the everyday the promise of regaining time by conjuring the memories, revenants, and remnants from the reservoir of its pasts; or the possibility of living a present that will lead to a not yet known future (or, possibly, no future at all).

The essays collected here focus on the diverse ways that temporalization is rescued, remade, or renounced in everyday crises. As a rhythm analysis of both crisis and the everyday, we draw on the work of Henri Lefebvre and what he called “qualitative moments.” In recalling forms of memoration, residues, remnants, and reminders of the past, such embodied specific temporal tenses can be put to work repairing breaks in the rhythms of daily life and constituting the building blocks of a renewed sense of everydayness.