CHAPTER ONE

TRAUMA, EMPOWERMENT AND ALTERNATIVE SPACE

Freeter activism has often revolved around empowerment, i.e. how best to bring about a strengthening of people's self-confidence as political actors. Especially in its early years, freeter activism was unable to rely on existing political organisations or a large existing pool of activists, and often had to try to reach out to a constituency with no experience of and little enthusiasm for political struggle. To understand the rise of freeter activism is to understand how the idea of a collective movement “subject” could be forged in which students, young irregular workers and many others could recognize themselves – a process that is traceable through the various labels used by activists to designate themselves, from “freeters” and “young workers” to “good-for-nothings” and “precariat”. It is also to trace the process through which activists have engaged in a work of cultural innovation and expanding existing means of expression in order to struggle with socially dominant values and yardsticks. Finally, it is also to look at how this discursive work has gone hand in hand with praxis, and how the experience of participating in movement activities has furthered people’s trust in their ability to make a difference in the world.

Two concepts of particular importance for understanding these processes are those of collective trauma and alternative space. In this chapter I will try to clarify these concepts and to indicate how they can be brought together in a way that furthers an understanding of how freeter activism has developed in Japan. Both concepts are related to the issue of empowerment. As I will show in the book, empowerment in freeter activism has happened through a trial-and-error process through which activists have tried out ways of positioning themselves in relation to past historical traumas – in particular the perceived failure of the New Left in the 1970s. Empowerment has also involved negotiating distance to the mainstream public sphere, sometimes participating in it and sometimes orienting itself to alternative arenas outside it. I start by clarifying the concept of collective trauma before briefly discussing the relationship between empowerment and alternative spaces.
Collective Trauma

It has become customary to describe the 1990s in Japan as a lost decade plagued by widespread social malaise and an oppressive feeling of deadlock. Alarming reports of a declining economy, rising unemployment, corruption, rising suicide rates, violent crimes by teenagers, earthquakes and doomsday sects followed in quick succession during the decade, while Japanese polls showed a precipitous fall in the levels of confidence felt for politicians. Starting in the wake of the post-bubble recession, the spread of neoliberal reforms accelerated the pace of destruction of established systems and provoked a sense of frustration and grievance. There was no shortage of intellectuals and critics who framed post-bubble Japan through concepts of “trauma” or “defeat”. The famous critic Yoshimoto Takaaki, for instance, referred to the collapse of the bubble economy as a defeat for the “national project” of the Japanese state and as a repetition of the defeat in the Second World War (Yoshimoto 1992:37f, 41). To many, the lost decade signalled the failure of the country’s once so celebrated model of economic development – characterised by tight cooperation between bureaucratic, political and corporate elites, by paternalistic employment relations and by the mobilisation of broad popular support for the national goal of high growth.

However, while the 1990s proved to be a traumatic period of excruciating self-reevaluations for many Japanese, to understand the dynamics of protest we need to take account also of a second trauma, namely the experience of the protest movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. The process of working-through their perceived negative legacy has, I argue, been essential to the development of freeter protest. By this, I do not mean to suggest that economic factors are unimportant. Freeter activism today is impossible to understand except by paying attention to both economic and cultural factors. Thus the magnitude of the perceived failure of the New Left in Japan is hardly a matter of culture alone, but needs to be understood in the light of economic factors, such as the country’s economic “miracle” and spectacular success in catching up with the West during the 1960s, which resulted in a sense of affluence that increasingly made the New Left appear out of touch with the general populace.

The dynamics of change in contemporary Japan is to a considerable extent shaped through, and complicated by, the lingering and interlocking effects of these and other traumas in recent Japanese history. All traumas have not been national in the sense of affecting the entire population equally and in the same manner, but some have clearly been national in