“This country has everything. The only thing missing is hope” (Murakami 2002:314). This line in Murakami Ryū’s 2000 novel Kibō no kuni no ekusodasu (Exodus to the land of hope) is emblematic of the mood of impasse and deadlock (heisokukan) that is often said to have been produced by Japan’s “lost decade” of the 1990s. The mood was widely shared. “The prolonged recession has given rise to a stifling feeling of being locked inside a box with no exit in sight, and has cast a dark shadow on the national psyche”, an economist stated (Yoshikawa 2001:2). Expressive of this mood was also a survey from 2006 among 25–34 year olds that showed that 64 percent felt that Japan was not a society in which they could feel hope for the future (Asahi Shimbun “Rosuto jenerēshon” reporter team 2007:185).

The central argument I will make in this chapter is that much of what we associate with the late 1990s, such as the sense of deadlock, must be understood not only as a result of the economic recession but also against the backdrop of previous traumas – especially the trauma of the New Left’s defeat in the 1970s. Below I will provide a brief background on developments following the burst of the bubble economy in the early 1990s before moving to a discussion of how these interacted with the legacy of the New Left to set the stage for the development of freeter activism.

**The End of the Bubble and the Arrival of Precarity**

The changes brought on Japanese society with the onset of the post-bubble recession in the early 1990s and the ensuing neoliberal reforms and deregulations that gained force from the mid-1990s onwards have been important factors shaping freeter activism. The sense of affluence during previous decades had played an important role in pacifying social unrest. Trademark elements of the “Japanese model” of employment and management such as the seniority system and lifetime employment, although never available to all employees, had helped secure a large measure of legitimacy for the system. When this model came under pressure in the 1990s, the crisis of work sent repercussion through the entire social
fabric. The previously commonly held idea of Japan as a “middle-class society” (sōchūryū shakai) started to give way in public awareness to the idea of an “income-gap society” (kakusa shakai) (Chiavacci 2008; Tachibanaki 2006). Towards the end of the decade, indicators of social malaise became increasingly evident. The number of suicides jumped to above 30,000 per year, a level where it has stayed since. Poverty rates increased to become one of the highest in OECD countries. Unemployment reached over 5 percent in 2002 (compared to slightly more than 2 percent in 1991), while the rate of irregular workers climbed to over 35 percent of the workforce in 2011 (up from slightly above 18 percent in 1990).

Young Japanese were hard hit by the changes. To many of those who entered the labour market during the years following the burst of the economic bubble – the so-called “ice age of employment” – regular jobs were simply not available. Being known as the “lost generation”, this was the first postwar generation in Japan to experience a decline in living standards (Asahi Shimbun “Rosuto jenerēsyon” reporter team 2007). It has been argued that this generation, having grown up during decades of unprecedented affluence, probably experienced more frustration and feelings of “betrayal” than later generations, who had few hopes to begin with (Honda 2007:40). During the 1990s, unemployment among those aged 20–24 more or less doubled, reaching nearly 10 percent by the early twenty-first century. Since the 1990s an increasing number of workers, especially younger workers, have been forced to accept badly paid temporary jobs, becoming freeters in a wide sense. The rate of young people (aged 20–24) working as irregular workers almost quadrupled between the early 1980s and 2007 (Brinton 2010:123, 2011:39–28; Hommerich 2012:209f; Tarōmaru & Kameyama 2006:4f).

To understand the deprivation experienced by freeters, it is important to recall that they earn far less than regular employees. According to a 2004 estimate, the average earnings of regular employees are 3.7 times those of non-regular employees. These lower wages in turn mean that male freeters are often unable to marry, since Japanese society still looks to men as the family’s breadwinner (Ishiguro 2008). Freeters also suffer the insecurity of being easily dismissed, having few acquaintances at the workplace, and lacking prospects for upward mobility. Due to the lingering seniority system in Japanese companies, employers prefer fresh graduates from university as regular employees, meaning that once a person becomes a freeter the hurdles to gaining a regular employment are extremely high (Honda & Hirai 2007:14–18; Tarōmaru 2006). In contrast to the popular image of “lazy” or “spoilt” freeters, statistics from the Labour Ministry from