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Q&A – Florian Coulmas

David McNeill talks to Florian Coulmas, director of the German Institute for Japanese Studies, Tokyo.

Japan's population began falling in 2004 and is ageing faster than any other on the planet. Over 22% of Japanese are 65 or older, a figure set to hit 40% by mid-century. At the other end of the population pyramid the nation is running out of babies: Japanese women now have roughly 1.3 children in a lifetime, well below the level needed to maintain the population of 127 million. That inverted pyramid spells a national crisis, says Florian Coulmas, who heads the Tokyo-based German Institute for Japanese Studies.

Why the particular interest in ageing?

This is Japan's biggest problem. It affects every aspect of the country's society, economy, culture and polity. Japan is ahead of the rest of the world. The issue has come about because this is an enormously successful society, especially since World War II. Ageing means that people don't die until they are elderly, and if there is any measure of a society's success, it is that. But it brings huge problems, as we are experiencing now. The demographic equilibrium is out of kilter.

Specifically, what kind of problems?

There are two. The first is Japan's huge government debt. Who is going to pay it off if you only have pensioners? The second is population decline. The population will shrink by a quarter within 20 to 30 years. That's huge and means Japan's position in the world will diminish. That requires adjustments that no other country has had to make in the absence of war, epidemics or famine. But Japanese politics is totally incompetent. The politicians haven't woken up to the fact that this is a national crisis.

You study national comparisons, particularly with European countries. What has that taught you?

In all countries, an increase in female participation in the workforce has the immediate impact of lowering the birth rate. But eventually this turns around and translates into higher birth rates once structures have settled and people make a cultural change. You can see this very clearly in the Nordic countries. So that's important. Also, immigration is an obvious solution. Between 10% and 20% of the German population has a non-native background. How much immigration can you absorb without destroying your social order? Japan is at the lowest of the low end (about 2%).

Will Japan follow either of those routes?

The Japanese government really has no policy. Bureaucracies are responsible for tiny little segments: the budget for 1,000 childcare facilities in one specific region, say. That's a drop in the bucket. Nobody has the big policy stick, and nobody cares about family policy. The elderly go to the polls three times more often than the young, and there are more of them! Japan could reduce pensions and take away money from the elderly to give more to young families, or it could take money from United States bases. But that's not going to work.

The conservative Minister of Justice is strongly opposed to immigration, whereas the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is more liberal and permissive. They've had their [immigration] loopholes for many years, which everyone knows, and which everybody knows is an abuse of the law, but nobody does anything about it.

These don't commit the government to an immigration policy, which they need. I asked Koichiro Gemba [DPJ policy chief]: "Are you going to do anything on immigration", and he said a flat "No. We have too many problems and we don't need another." [Yet,] he is an extremely open-minded, liberal and bright guy.

Doesn't Japan also study European policy to find a way forward?

Yes, Japanese bureaucrats say: "We have studied German policy. You have shelled out money for new kindergartens, tax incentives, everything, but Germany's birth rate is still as low as Japan's. Why not save your money?" What we say is, "you don't know how low Germany's birth rate would be without those policies" (laughs).

What's your view?

The Japanese rely less on the state than the Germans – and the birth rate is about the same. I'm at a loss to say which is the better model. It's very difficult to compare social policies because they're all embedded in social systems. On paper, maternity provisions, parental leave, financial provisions and so on are not that different here. But the reality is different. Just 2% of Japanese fathers take parental leave. If you work in a company and take leave, your colleagues will suggest you're a sissy. And corporate leave in Japan is for the upper-income range.

I shy away from advocating policies, but I think the country must change its work culture and encourage a more family friendly environment. We're living in a society where typical potential fathers, aged 30 to 50, are working 60 hours a week. It's very hard to combine that with a congenial family life. And it seems that women are really fed up; 30% of women of marriageable age say they never intend to marry. That's amazing.

Will that happen? What we can say is that the Japanese are waking up to the fact that increases in material wealth do not increase their happiness, and this is a grave threat to capitalist societies.

Text: David McNeill Photos: Benjamin Parks