

# Japan at a crossroads

**CONTEMPORARY JAPAN.** *Journal of the German Institute for Japanese Studies Tokyo. Mind the Gap: Stratification and Social Inequalities in Japan.* Editor Florian Coulmas. Volume 22. Number 1/2. De Gruyter, 2010, 221 pp., (hardcover)

Reviewed by Jeff Kingston

The launch of this journal is cause for celebration by anyone interested in Japanese studies. "Contemporary Japan" (CJ) is a biannual, peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal that provides a valuable forum for leading specialists to publish their findings.

The plan is to have individual volumes focus on particular themes. The German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ) in Tokyo deserves kudos for revamping their journal "Japanstudien," principally an outlet for German scholars who published in German.

By switching to a mostly English language format, and focusing on modern Japan, the DIJ has greatly broadened both its audience and potential pool of contributors. This is an invaluable resource for libraries and readers interested in what is happening in Japan.

In his editorial introducing CJ, Florian Coulmas points out that Japan is in the

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midst of far-ranging changes involving population decline and aging, globalization and ideology that can only be adequately explored from a cross-disciplinary perspective. He writes, "Only by observing and investigating how society, the economy, government and culture adjust to these changes can we hope to gain a sense of where Japan is headed."

The journal also welcomes unsolicited

contributions in the social sciences and humanities with a focus on empirical research and theory. The main theme of the volume under review is stratification and inequality in Japan. There is vigorous debate concerning poverty, the extent of income disparities, marginalization of youth, a growing precariat (class of nonregular workers) and Japan's future prospects. The articles presented here offer a variety of methodologies and conclusions and vastly deepen our understanding of Japan's current malaise.

Yoshimitsu Sato, Director of the Center for the Study of Social Stratification and Inequality at Tohoku University, explains that there is growing bifurcation in the labor market. Favored employees in the core workforce enjoy security, better pay and benefits while the growing number of nonregular workers, now one-third of the workforce, is disproportionately young and female. Poorly paid and with little job security, they are helping firms lower costs and gain greater flexibility while subsidizing the privileged core workers.

Sato finds that higher education confers significant advantages on job-seekers and has become a major factor in creating a self-perpetuating elite. It is also significant that young job seekers who begin with a nonstandard job have little chance to shift into the core workforce, meaning they will remain trapped on the periphery with implications for widening income disparities.

Shinji Kojima, a doctoral candidate at the University of Hawaii, examines the sudden easing of dismissal regulations and how the risks and the costs thereof have been shifted from companies to workers. Dispatched workers have become especially vulnerable due to legal reforms enacted between 1999 and 2004, with devastating results since the 2008 Lehman Shock. Dismissed contract workers gathered in Hibiya Park at a tent village in early 2009, focusing national attention on their plight and the inadequacies of Japan's social safety net.

Labor outsourcing proved a boon to firms adjusting to the consequences of globalization, but suddenly Japanese workers came to understand the true meaning of Koizumi's deregulation-ratifying mantra of *jiko sekinen* (self-responsibility): When you are in trouble you are all on your own.

David Chiavacci's superb article examines the political consequences of public concerns about growing disparities and insecurity, arguing that these factors played a key role in the Liberal Democratic Party's thrashing in the 2009 elections. As architect and beneficiary of the "universal" middle class society, the LDP also became the target of public anxieties about the



**Bleak future: Young job-seekers in Japan who begin with a nonstandard job have little chance to shift into the core workforce, thus trapping them on the periphery and on the wrong side of a widening income gap.** AP

sudden sharp rise in risk and disparities.

The rural-urban cleavage, and over representation of rural voters, helped sustain LDP rule since it was established in 1955. However, in 21st-century Japan, the political landscape shifted and the LDP found itself on the wrong side of the divided society debate.

Chiavacci notes that the problems of a divided society are overstated from a comparative perspective and that growth of disparities preceded Koizumi's deregulatory policies, but voters punished the LDP anyway.

Chiavacci credits Ichiro Ozawa with developing a Democratic Party of Japan campaign designed to tap into these anxieties and repositioning the party to convince voters that it was best able to mitigate the problems of a divided society.

Alas, it has not been able to deliver fast enough to convince impatient voters, explaining the resurgence of the LDP in the 2010 elections.

The examples I discuss above do not do justice to the intellectual cornucopia on offer; there are other intriguing essays on art, film, *burakumin* and Okinawan and *zainichi* literature.

This impressive first volume of "Contemporary Japan" generates high expectations for future issues and is well worth checking out.

Jeff Kingston, director of Asian Studies at Temple University Japan, is the author of the book "Contemporary Japan" (Wiley, 2010), which explores many similar themes.