

Book Review

David CHIAVACCI/Free University Berlin

‘Freeter’ und ‘Generation Praktikum’—Arbeitswerte im Wandel? Ein deutsch-japanischer Vergleich (‘Freeter’ and ‘Generation Internship’—Changing Work Values? A German-Japanese Comparison), by Carola Hommerich. Munich: Iudicium (Monographs of the German Institute of Japanese Studies, No. 45), 2009, 293 pp., €35 (ISBN 978-3-89129-856-5)

doi:10.1093/ssjj/jyp025

Labor markets are changing. In recent years, non-regular employment is significantly increasing in many advanced economies. Young workers, especially, increasingly have to put up with atypical employment. The consequences of this trend are hotly debated in nearly all affected countries. Still, the public and academic discussions in Germany and Japan have been especially fierce. In Japan, the discourse has centered on *furītā*, or ‘freeter’, a term used for an increasing number of young workers in non-regular employment. The term was originally used in the 1980s in a positive sense, describing a new generation of young Japanese that are not submitting to the highly standardized life of regular employees. Still, it has gained a clearly negative connotation in recent years because of economic insecurity and social exclusion from regular work and life. In public discussions and the mass media in Germany, the term ‘generation internship’ has been in vogue since 2005. It describes a rising number of university graduates who do not get a regular job and, instead, go through an unstable transition period from education to work, filled with often underpaid internships. These trainees have been regarded as an indicator that even highly qualified young people nowadays are increasingly confronted with problems in finding regular employment in Germany.

Carola Hommerich addresses these new trends in the labor market and public discourses in Germany and Japan in her study by investigating their impact on work values. Have these changes led to new work values among young workers in Germany and Japan? And have similar trends occurred in both countries, which would support a convergence thesis? Her main findings are that in Germany as well as in Japan sociostructural changes in the labor market have resulted in value changes among young workers. However, clear differences are identifiable in the direction of value change and in the dimensions of work values among young workers in regular and non-regular employment in Germany and Japan.

The study begins with a discussion of the research and theories on social values and value change. Hommerich concentrates her discussion on the well-known theory of value change by Ronald Inglehart and his critics. While Inglehart suggests a change in advanced economies from materialist values preferring economic security to post-materialist values of self-fulfilment, critics of his theoretical approach contend that value systems are not simply one dimensional (materialist versus post-materialist) but multidimensional. Moreover, according to Inglehart’s critics, these different dimensions in the value system are independent of each other and, hence, social values of different dimensions can follow diverse evolutions. The next section of the book gives a short overview of socioeconomic

changes in the labor markets in Germany and Japan and outlines recent debates concerning these issues in both countries. In view of the structural changes in the labor markets and increasing non-regular employment, and based on a theoretical perspective of multidimensional value systems, Hommerich develops seven hypotheses of value change to test among German and Japanese workers born between 1975 and 1985: (1) *financial security* is more important than among workers born from 1955 to 1965; (2) *self-fulfilment* at work is at least equal or more important than among workers born from 1955 to 1965; (3) *a synthesis of both value dimensions*, i.e. financial security and self-fulfilment are both important; (4) *a priority of financial security*: self-fulfilment will become secondary to financial security if financial security is otherwise not realizable; (5) *a decoupling of work and self-fulfilment*: if self-fulfilment is not realizable at work, young workers increasingly try to realize it outside of work; (6) *similar value dimensions*: work values of young workers have similar dimensions in both countries and (7) *similar patterns of work values*: hypotheses 1–5 are confirmed among young workers in both countries.

The main part of her study consists of empirical tests of these hypotheses based on quantitative and qualitative methods. On the one hand, Hommerich conducts a secondary data analysis of several large data samples from surveys concerning work values of young workers in both countries in order to test hypotheses 1–3. On the other hand, the more complex hypotheses 4 and 5 are tested through an analysis of qualitative interviews that she conducted with young workers in non-regular employment in Germany and in Japan. A conflict between financial security and self-fulfilment is expected, especially among young workers in atypical employment. Due to limited space, it is not possible to do justice to the differentiated analyses and results of Hommerich's study in this review, but the following are her main findings in a nutshell. In Germany, hypothesis (1) *financial security* is supported, especially among university graduates. But hypothesis (2) *self-fulfilment* is not supported. In Japan, hypotheses (1) *financial security* and (2) *self-fulfilment* are supported, and hypothesis (3) *synthesis of both value dimensions* is also supported. However, according to Hommerich's qualitative interviews, subgroups can be distinguished among young Japanese workers in non-regular employment that clearly favor different value dimensions. Hence, hypothesis (3) *synthesis of both value dimensions* is not supported for all non-regular young workers in Japan. Hypothesis (4) *priority of financial security* is supported among non-regular young workers in Germany, but it is not supported for the majority of non-regular young workers interviewed in Japan. Hypothesis (5) *decoupling of work and self-fulfilment* is supported for some non-regular workers in Japan, but not for non-regular workers in Germany. Overall, these different results for Germany and for Japan clearly show that hypotheses (6) *similar value dimensions* and (7) *similar patterns of work values* are not supported. Moreover, differences in work value dimensions between young people in Germany and Japan are also confirmed by quantitative analysis. Despite the increase of non-regular employment in both countries, a convergence in work values among young people of both countries is not discernable.

Hommerich's well-grounded comparative study based on qualitative and quantitative data analysis is a welcome and rich contribution in work value research. Her study is important for anybody interested in labor market issues and changing work values in recent years in advanced economies, especially in Germany and Japan. Her empirical investigation is constantly accompanied by differentiated deliberations and considerations of possible methodological problems and shortcomings. For example, she carefully discusses the German and Japanese wording of the questions used in the surveys for her secondary data analysis and identifies several problematic or ambiguous formulations. While this very careful approach is a major strength of her work, it may also be identified as a weakness. What readers may miss in her study is a bold generalization and overall evaluation of her results. Tellingly, the final remarks summarize the main findings carefully and end with some proposals for further

improvements of the survey methods in intercultural value studies. However, Hommerich's findings suggest some very interesting overall and differing trends in work value change in Germany and Japan, which are not fully discussed in her book. While young workers in Germany are moving back to more materialist values (to use Inglehart's terminology), at least some young workers in Japan are combining a materialist and post-materialist value system. So much for the cultural clichés of Japanese 'worker bees' and Western individualism! 'Individualistic' young people of Germany seem to be quite one-dimensional à la Herbert Marcuse. Highly qualified young German workers, in particular, not only increasingly prefer economic security, but according to Hommerich's findings, they are also unable to imagine self-fulfilment beyond work. Their identity is still very strongly defined by their status at work. However, at least some of the 'group-oriented' and 'work-centered' young Japanese are pursuing self-realization even in the midst of increasing economic insecurity. Work seems to no longer be the central value in their life.

From a perspective beyond research on value change, two general points can be raised. The first is the question about the relationship between public debates and academic research. Hommerich takes up the dominant public discourses concerning young non-regular workers in Germany and Japan. This puts her study in the centre of public debate and gives it a high degree of relevance outside the academic ivory tower. However, one may ask if a comparison between members of the so-called 'generation internship' in Germany and of the so-called 'freeter' in Japan is really meaningful. The group of young German workers in non-regular employment includes only university graduates, while its Japanese counterpart consists primarily of middle school and high school graduates. As Hommerich points out herself (p. 205, pp. 228–229), a direct comparison between the two groups is difficult because of these differences in educational backgrounds. Still, in her discussion of hypothesis (5) *decoupling of work and self-fulfilment* based on her in-depth interviews, Hommerich is de facto directly comparing German and Japanese workers with different education levels (pp. 231–233). Hence, the differences identified between Germany and Japan concerning a decoupling of work and self-fulfilment could be due to different education levels instead of national differences. It is therefore part of the general question of whether it is really meaningful to compare national samples concerning work values in view of the high degree of heterogeneity in national societies of advanced economies.

A second general point, from a perspective beyond studies on value change, is that a full explanation of the identified differences in work value change in Germany and Japan is missing in Hommerich's book. Her study is very data rich, but the reader is left wondering why a convergence in the work values between young workers in Germany and Japan is not taking place. The theoretical model used by Hommerich in this aspect is very simple (pp. 84–85). Following Inglehart's argumentation, it is assumed that the influence of socioeconomic change on work values is mediated by cultural tradition. Hence, non-convergence is due to the persistence of differences in cultural tradition. In such an argument culture is used as a kind of black hole. All variation which is unexplainable by socioeconomic change is attributed to cultural tradition. However, such an explanation is theoretically very dissatisfying. It completely ignores any possible reciprocal relation between labor market institutions, public discourses and work values. Although both Germany and Japan are regarded as prime examples for coordinated economies, in contrast to liberal, Anglo-Saxon economies, their labor market institutions and work values clearly differ. However, it would be too simple to criticize Hommerich on this point. Her study is, in this context, not an exception, but follows the general rule in social sciences. It is another example of the duality in labor market studies as well as in social sciences in general. We have today, on the one hand, very sophisticated studies about social values and value change. On the other hand, our understanding of the labor market in an institutional perspective has also been increased

with important new contributions in recent years. Still, what is still lacking is a combination of an institutional perspective with a perspective of work values. Simply argued, studies on work values often use a microperspective and concentrate on empirical investigations of the changing attitudes of workers. Arguments about institutional change normally focus on the macro level, often simply ignoring value orientations. Both perspectives are often theoretically unsatisfying as they seldom cross the division between structure and agency. However, a fuller understanding of the labor market and other social systems is only possible by incorporating institutional setting, social values and public discourses into one theoretical framework.