JAPAN'S "LOST GENERATION"

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF FACTS AND DISCOURSES

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article abstract

SOCIAL REALITIES IN JAPAN HAVE BEEN CHANGING FOR ROUGHLY TWO DECADES AND THOSE YOUNG JAPANESE DIRECTLY AFFECTED BY THE „HIRING ICE AGES" HAVE BECOME KNOWN AS A „LOST GENERATION." THE MEDIA DISCOURSE CONCERNING THIS PHENOMENON HAS BEEN DIVERSE, PUTTING FORWARD A NUMBER OF EXPLANATIONS FOR THIS DILEMMA, WHILE OFTEN YOUNGER GENERATIONS HAVE BEEN BLAMED FOR THEIR SITUATION. THIS PAPER CRITICALLY EXAMINES THE FACTS AND DISCOURSES SURROUNDING THE EMERGENCE OF THE „LOST GENERATION" IN THE 1990S IN JAPAN, HIGHLIGHTING POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS WITHIN THE DISCOURSE.

keywords

LOST GENERATION, PRECARIAT, JAPAN, NEET, EDUCATION, UNEMPLOYMENT, POSTGRADUATES, LABOR MARKET

From the 1990s onwards, Japan has experienced dramatic social and economic shifts that have changed the outlook on Japanese society significantly. Prolonged periods of low economic growth and recessions paired with structural change – meanwhile dubbed as the "lost 20 years" – coincided with a rapidly aging population and led to a pluralization of employment patterns, family structures and gender relations. These phenomena are interrelated in their causes and consequences, while especially the issues of social disparity and precarity have become focal points of social and economic research, consequently attracting significant media coverage and meanwhile leading to a sustainable shift in the self-perception of many Japanese.

WHAT IS THE SPECIFIC BACKGROUND IN JAPAN?

Within the logics of a globalized marketplace and an ever-present need for more flexibility and profit, the basic mechanisms that lead to precarious lifestyles are generic and occur in many nations. Japan is no exception in this regard, but the social structure and institutional frameworks in which these developments are taking place are indeed particular. During the post-war era of high economic growth and general prosperity, Japanese society has come to be seen as "homogenous middle class society." Though not at all a universal social reality, this image of an equal society was nevertheless largely accepted as a positive collective self-image, which in turn was perpetuated by politicians and journalists. The outlook on Japanese society and social roles was and is moreover shaped by a general belief in meritocracy, self-responsibility (*jiko sekinin*), and the pursuit of financial prosperity. Having said that, Japanese society still works as a rigid circular model comprising the distinct spheres of education, employment and family.[1]

The cornerstone of the Japanese social structure is an ideal standard life course where social tasks and roles are allocated according to a highly institutionalized and gendered pattern. Generally speaking, such an ideal life course for men includes attending a prestigious university, subsequently entering civil service or a larger corporation as white-collar employee with a job guaranteed for life and seniority-based wages, as well as becoming the sole breadwinner of a family; for women, education is equally important, whereas her post-graduation life should focus on marrying an "ideal-type" husband, becoming a full-time housewife and raising their – ideally one or two – children in an equally "ideal" fashion. This implicit "standard life course" has significantly shaped the aspirations and experiences of Japanese post-war generations. Following such an institutionalized life course and becoming

1 Honda 2011.

a *shakaijin* – or full member of Japanese society – implies a guarantee for well-being, stability and happiness; for Japanese society as a whole it meant more than half a century of social, political and economic stability and prosperity. On the downside, there is an immense invisible pressure to conform to these "middle-class" values, and becoming and functioning as a *shakaijin* does not leave much leeway, as deviances in terms of employment, life courses and lifestyles are not exactly encouraged in Japan. It is interesting to note that despite an apparent pluralization of values and lifestyles in recent years, the above mentioned "middle-class ideals" are still attractive for many Japanese, and persist even though social realities have been changing.

Comparative studies have long shown that Japan is not an exception in terms of social homogeneity and mobility, or economic equality in international comparison with other developed nations.[2] One of the indicators of this actual inequality is the Japanese economic system, where large-scale corporations dominate the Japanese market. These are supported by an intricate network of SME[3] subsidiaries, which are excessively dependent on their client corporations. As a consequence, there is a definite duality in terms of working conditions, as larger companies offer their employees superior remuneration packages with extensive fringe benefits, better working conditions, and oftentimes a lot more prestige as compared with those of SMEs. Moreover, there is a fundamental duality between the standard, full-time employees (or *seisha'in*), who work in unlimited employment contracts, and non-permanent, part-timing or free-lancing non-standard workers (*hiseisha'in*). In the Japanese case, there is a strict delineation between these two types of employment, where only a standard employment is perceived as "ideal" in terms of the gendered, normative "standard life-course."

> "MIDDLE-CLASS IDEALS" ARE STILL ATTRACTIVE FOR MANY JAPANESE, AND PERSIST EVEN THOUGH SOCIAL REALITIES HAVE BEEN CHANGING

While the former type of employment usually is associated with a white-collar male employee, females, as well as junior and senior workers overwhelmingly fill the latter type[4] One should also keep in mind one of the peculiarities of the Japanese hiring system, where the yearly formalized and intensively competitive job-hunt for fresh graduates is the integral step

2 See e.g Chiavacci 2008.

3 SME: Small and Middle-sized Entity. (Editor's note – JVdB)

4 JILPT 2011

towards the Japanese "standard life course." Those who miss this one-off opportunity for securing employment will face repercussions throughout their working life, as mid-career transfers are – at least in larger corporations – rare.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE "LOST GENERATION"

After the 1990s burst of the asset bubble, and when Japan was affected by fallout from the Asian financial crisis and the "Dot-com Crisis," prolonged periods of economic stagnation and recession followed suit. The ongoing process of deindustrialization moreover aggravated the Japanese crisis, which was also intensified by global competition, the excessively rigid and dualistic labor market paired with a very unfavorable demographic development, as well as an insufficient public welfare system.

From the mid-1990s onwards, these socioeconomic developments in connection with the Japanese employment structure led to the emergence of a "lost generation," when fresh graduates were amongst the first casualties of the crisis, falling through the cracks of the Japanese hiring system. This "lost generation" (or *rosu jene* in Japanese) is not a clearly defined scientific term, but rather a social category produced by recent discourse. It usually comprises those age cohorts born between the late 1970s and early 1980s, who were trying – but often failing – to get a foothold into the Japanese employment system after the mid-1990s at the height of recession.

Even those who came from renowned schools and colleges, and previously had been recruited already during their senior years, saw their chances of becoming *shakaijin* greatly diminished. The smooth transition from school to work for young graduates faltered because corporations had resorted to a hiring freeze, which was later dubbed „hiring ice age" (*shūshoku hyōgaki*). This hiring freeze hurt young jobseekers most, as the structural particularities of the Japanese system of "lifelong employment" prevented the corporations from laying off their senior workforce. As a result, the jobless-rate amongst those aged 15–29 years rose much steeper than that of older age cohorts during the years 1994 to 2004. The peak of joblessness of new graduates in the age bracket between 20 and 24 was reached in 2003 when it hit 9,8 %, which is nearly double the overall unemployment rate.[5] Since then, the Japanese job market for graduates has experienced repeated slumps,

5 MIC 2012.

while the post-"Lehman-Shock" era has even been called "super ice age of hiring," which only recently has shown some weak signs of thawing.[6]

Under these circumstances, most of those searching for jobs however had to significantly downgrade their expectations to less prestigious – and less secured – posts in smaller companies, while some graduates even completely exited the labor market and became *NEET* (short for Not in Education, Employment or Training), of which in 2011 roughly 600.000 persons were counted.[7] In fact, even for those who bridged the gap with other temporary jobs – roughly comparable to the phenomenon of the *génération précaire* in France and Germany – their prolonged period of "job-hopping" put them at a strong disadvantage in competition for standard employment. What aggravates their situation is that even when the general employment situation temporarily relaxes, the available posts are usually filled with fresh graduates, and *not* with those who have waited for one or several years. Only as recently as in 2010, an "ethics charta" to address this problem was drafted by the Japanese Business Federation, which stipulates the inclusion of recent graduates from the past three years in the yearly pool of applicants.[8] Still, as a consequence of the employment "ice ages," the number of young males who are nominally underemployed rose disproportionally and has remained high ever since.[9]

The process of this "casualization of labor" was further facilitated by the gradual neo-liberal reforms by the ruling conservative LDP between 1996 and 2007 (and most famously under Premier Koizumi Jun'ichiro after 2001), which have had a lasting impact on the structure of the Japanese labor market. Initially devised as a measure to bring Japan on par with global competition in a climate of rapid economic change, these reforms led to a growing deregulation of employment in the private sector. As relevant labor laws were relaxed significantly in order to open up new industries for the systematic use of non-regular staff, the number of non-regular employees soared in Japan especially after 1999, amounting to nearly 34% of the total workforce in Japan in 2009.[10]

This category of irregular or atypical employment in Japan can further be subdivided into a number of official and unofficial categories, like

6 MHLW 2011.

7 For a thorough discussion of problems concerning this social category, its publications and quantitative aspects, see: Toivonen 2012.

8 MHLW 2011.

9 Kosugi 2006, JILPT 2011.

10 JILPT 2011.

part-timers (*pāto*), so-called *Freeters*[11], freelancers, day-laborers (*hiyatoi rodōsha)*, contract workers (*keiyaku sha'in*) or dispatched workers (*haken sha'in*). It must be noted that not all of these forms of employment structurally lad to precarious living conditions, and especially the Japanese service sector has smoothly relied on (female) non-regular staff for decades.

Still, what seems to be the problem now is the ongoing deregulation and opening of further branches for this type of employment, from which the employers benefitted unilaterally: they gained more flexibility with much less financial responsibility in the long run, while simply passing the entrepreneurial risks on to the individual employee. In order to ameliorate the situation for such employees, the government has amended the Worker Dispatch Law in 2006, which however in some cases led to adverse effects: the new legislation maintained that all temporary workers must be transferred to a regular, unlimited employment contract after three full years of working for the same company. But instead of offering a chance for upward mobility, this legislation prompted some employers to terminate temporary staff immediately when their three-year employment period expired. This practice of the so-called *haken-giri* first came to light in late 2008, when a large number of temporary workers in the manufacturing industry were laid off, conspicuously exactly three years after the 2006 legislation came into effect. In order to close these loopholes, a further amendment of the legislation has been passed in late 2012, whose effects are still to be seen.[12]

Facing the above described rigid dual employment system, being underemployed or employed with a temporary contract can prove as a real poverty trap. Most such non-standard forms of employment do neither offer pay rises nor bonuses, paid leave nor holidays, nor access to training nor other fringe benefits. Moreover, many irregular employees do not participate in the state pension scheme (voluntarily or involuntarily), while they receive only little – if any – unemployment assistance.[13] Thus compared to the standard white-collar contracts, non-standard employment in Japan often spells lower security, lower chances on upward career mobility, as well as the danger of immediate social decline in case of contract termination. Especially workers with a low level of skills and little social and cultural capital have slim chances to hedge against the risks of unemployment and social decline.

11 One very distinctive group of irregular workers in Japan are the so-called Freeters, who are officially defined as 15–34 year old workers, who regularly switch from job to job; many of these posts are on a temporary basis and paid on an hourly basis. While the work done does not neccessarily have to be unskilled, a large proportion of Freeters can be found in the tertiary sector, working in Japan's restaurant industry or at convenience stores.

12 MHLW 2012.

13 Obinger 2009a.

Relying on public welfare for these irregular employees is not an option: the current system of social security stems from times of austerity in the mid-1970s, when an emphasis was laid on the "traditional" informal Japanese family-centered welfare (*zaitaku fukushi*), which held citizens responsible for helping themselves and their next of kin. Moreover, this system was based on the then prevailing standard model of a nuclear family with a male breadwinner in full-time employment, where much of the social security was actually provided by employers: with a seniority-based pay-system, generous bonuses and jobs virtually guaranteed for a lifetime, added to subsidized health insurance and pension schemes which often included the employees' family, an extensive national safety-net seemed unnecessary. Within this logic, only minimal public assistance was granted if either the family safety net was insufficient or failed, or the head of a family became *physically* unable to earn an income. While this system might have worked well in past times of virtual full employment and ongoing economic growth, it clearly does not account for those who are today structurally excluded from the labor market or have no familial or corporate safety net to rely on.[14]

Especially the living conditions and future outlook of the "lost generation," whose chances of ever becoming a regular employee (or *seisha'in*) are slimming, are subject to much concern. Not even speaking of the consequences for private consumption or loss of tax revenue, their low income leaves them fewer possibilities for accumulating savings or for contributing to the Japanese pension system. Their financially precarious situation moreover triggers a fundamental insecurity, feelings of social exclusion and deprivation. The unfortunate amalgam of a financially weak situation, paired with bleak prospects and personal insecurity also has had a significant influence on the likelihoods of marriage and parenthood within these groups. While the recent delay of marriage and growing numbers of singles can be attributed to a variety of causes – some of which are wholly unrelated to economic factors – irregularly employed males are apparently not exactly sought-after marriage partners: they are more than twice as likely to be unmarried by the time they reach 39 that their regularly employed peers.[15] It is needless to say than in an already rapidly shrinking society like Japan, the refusal to marry and have children (births out of wedlock are still very rare in Japan)[16] spells out further demographic disaster.

14 Obinger 2009b.
15 Butkiewicz 2012.
16 OECD 2012.

THE "PRECARITY-BOOM" AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Economic recessions, neoliberal reforms, irregular employment entered public discourse via (semi-) academic publications and intensive media coverage, and many Japanese have become more aware of social and personal risks and the difficulty in fulfilling a "standard" life course.

The debate on social change emerged roughly by 1998, with the buzz-word of an "unequal society" (*fubyōdō shakai*) created by economist Tachibanaki Toshiaki (1998). Later key words are for example "underclass society" (*karyū shakai*),[17] "inequality society" (*kakusa shakai*)[18], "society of unequal hopes" (*kibō kakusa shakai*)[19] as well as "society of new hierarchies" (*atarashii kaikyū shakai*)[20] and "slide society" (*suberidai shakai*).[21] Social categories like the "lost generation", consisting of "working poor", "Freeters" and "NEETs" were formed and stigmatized along with an explicit polarization of Japanese society into groups of "winners" and "losers". Such statements were put forward by pundits with quite diverse agendas that reflect their various viewpoints on economic, social, political and cultural aspects, both on a macro and micro level; but they are united in their declaration of a new social order after the dissolution of the "homogenous society."

> "SOME OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS PATHOLOGIZE THE YOUNGER GENERATIONS' PERCEIVED INACTIVITY AS A SIGN OF "APATHY" AND "PASSIVITY," AND PUT FORWARD CERTAIN SOCIAL TRENDS THAT THEY INTERPRET AS DEVIANT AND SOCIALLY DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR

While some of the public accounts – especially those which were brought forward by persons affected – were sympathetic and acknowledge structural causes, others attested younger Japanese a mere "unwillingness" to make an effort. They pathologize the younger generations' perceived inactivity as a sign of "apathy" and "passivity," and put forward certain social trends that they interpret as deviant and socially destructive behavior. Symptoms of this behavior are for example lack of interest in educational attainment and achievement, a collective consumption aversion, a deliberate "gender-bending" as well as a general lack of interest in relationships, marriage, and

17 Miura 2005.
18 Tachibanaki 2006.
19 Yamada 2004.
20 Hashimoto 2007.
21 Yuasa 2008.

child-bearing.[22] Western scholars additionally decry the lack of a typical "social destruction" and sense of innovation on the part of younger Japanese: "There is no discernible, anti-establishment' political movement among young people, no organized efforts to create a better society; young people tend to accept without protest their apparently diminished prospects in life."[23] According to Mathews (2004) social structures are de-facto transformed by precarious groups like the Freeters, but not in an organized fashion. Rather, they take the role of "unwitting victims," who initiate social changes only through their unintended precarious lifestyles. These assertions mirror a growing concern with younger generations who do not fulfill the expectations attached to their social roles. Thus, I argue that this "precarity boom"[24] which focused on the lost generation of young adults, overlaps with a more general and long-term youth discourse. Within this strand of the discourse, commentators hold the younger generations jointly responsible for their own distress; those who are unable – or unwilling – to reach the mainstream ideals are thus portrayed as rightful "losers" in Japan.

Moreover, what is conspicuous about the corpus of Japanese coverage of this "new" poverty is the lack of a historical perspective: in contrast to the only recently popularized discussions, the *fact* of precarity is absolutely not new to Japan. In fact, marginal groups like the homeless, day laborers, ex-convicts, or illegal immigrants, thus those possibly living under the most precarious conditions in Japan for two decades, are hardly ever subject of these newer mainstream media reports. Rather, the accounts focus on those who recently and unexpectedly experienced a social decline, and whose lifestyles are outrageously precarious in light of their expected social status, like the "highly educated working poor" (*kōgakureki wākingu pua*) or the "internet café refugees" (mostly young people who are unable or unwilling to rent an apartment on their low-wage jobs and spend their nights in small internet café cubicles). I thus argue that it was not the presence or emergence of poverty in itself, or the social deprivation and inequalities that shocked the Japanese public; rather, it was the advent of a fundamental uncertainty, the seemingly complete overhaul of existing paradigms, as well as the lasting effect on middle-class life course models. While a general precarity of marginal groups has tacitly been accepted for many decades, the shift in affected groups has led to anxieties within the Japanese public.

In retrospect, it seems that the impact of new social problematics as presented by scholars and popular writers were largely amplified by

22 See e.g. Kotani 2004; Miura 2009; Yamaoka 2009; Yamada 2009; Matsuda 2009; Marx 2010.

23 Mathews, White 2004: 6.

24 Gebhardt 2010; Ida 2008.

the intensive media coverage, which presented personal accounts of the "new poor," and made the issues more tangible for average Japanese. Soon, not only news reports, but also literary works, TV variety shows and even popular drama series picked up these new social developments. Poverty and precarity paradoxically became popular items, leading to a proper "precarity boom." Against this background, it is hardly surprising that the idea of a transformation of Japanese society and social realities became ingrained in the minds of many Japanese, who readily accepted the seeming unraveling of social structures as a new paradigm.

This is to say that the self-perception within Japanese society drastically changed during the course of only a few years from an "equal and homogenous society" to a "disparate society," as the *awareness* of inequality and increasing personal risks within society rose significantly. Even though there was no empirical (economic) evidence to support this perception, official and academic surveys after the 1990s document how the self-attribution to the middle classes continuously decreased, while that to the lower social strata increased. Moreover, a growing number of Japanese declare to be dissatisfied with their current living conditions and the situation of Japanese society as a whole, and feel anxious about their future.[25] While these very general assessments obviously grossly neglect the more nuanced realities, it is important to point out that even the intangible *feeling* of being at risk can have implications for Japanese society as a whole, leading to less interest in social participation.[26] In fact, not only the working poor themselves feel the consequences of their precarious conditions, as also the reproduction of poverty is becoming an ever increasing problem in Japan.

REALLY A GENERATION LOST?

It goes without saying that – in comparison to previous decades – social cleavages in Japan indeed have been widening, social risks are mounting, while living conditions are deteriorating. However, there hardly is a complete and utter collapse of all social structures – or a mass precarization of Japanese society as feared by some – underway. Yet, concepts of "precarity," "poverty" or "deprivation" have different connotations according to each individual, depending on factors like age, social background, political alignment, and social and cultural capital. Moreover, the national and regional context, in

25 See e.g. Tachibanaki 2006a; ISM 2008; Ida 2008; Hommerich 2011.

26 Hommerich 2011.

which an image of precarity, deviance and "normalcy" are defined against a certain set of values, traditions, political system and individual beliefs play also an important role.[27]

In the Japanese context, due to the seeming lack of viable alternatives for a lifestyle outside of the mainstream, many young adults now more than ever try to hedge against the increasing risks. They aspire to the security that the "standard life course" of their parent generation promises, and strive to attain best possible educational credentials in order to enhance their personal portfolio and overall life chances.

Still, not all young Japanese aspire to the past ideals of the *shakaijin*, and neither do they feel threatened by possible social exclusion. Instead, as sociologist Furuichi Noritoshi (2011) points out, many young adults are coming to terms with their seemingly diminished prospects on social mobility, security and participation. While the former ideals of a "normal" mainstream life course and lifestyle are no longer attainable for them, they also find them excessively constrictive and increasingly *unattractive*. He thus argues that many feel rather content with their current lifestyle, exactly because they have given up hopes for future improvement. Instead of harboring ambitions for future achievements, which they might not be able to realize anyway, they instead shape their current lifestyles according to their wants and needs. Cultural anthropologist Miura Atsushi draws a similar conclusion in his famous book on the „underclass society" (*Karyū Shakai*, 2005): in his view, belonging to a lower stratum of society not necessarily has to result in discontent or feelings of social exclusion.

In fact, there are commentators who see a certain trend towards emancipation from oppressive career- and lifestyle norms and conformity, as well as a trend towards a pluralization of life courses. This might point to an ongoing process of social innovation, catalyzed by the subjective changes in self-assertion within Japanese society. Cassegard (2010) for example describes how for the past two decades Japanese intellectuals have interpreted the sociopolitical changes as a "fracturing of incrusted elitist circles," and the end of the "blind trust" in Japan's post-war social and political order. Leheny (2006) states that certain structural and institutional characteristics of Japanese society like seniority-based promotion and gendered employment practices have for decades hindered creative development, while the partial breakdown of these structures should induce a much needed innovation. While many graduates have come to realize that even the best of educational credentials no longer warrant professional success, more and more young Japanese often aspire towards role models that achieved success outside of institutionalized

27 Götz, Lemberger 2009.

structures; one evidence for this argument is the slight increase of members of the "lower class" Japanese, who start their own enterprise – a traditionally rather risky endeavor in Japan.[28] At this point, it must be made very clear that such accounts and apparent trends cannot (yet) be verified by solid empirical evidence.

Against the earlier assessment of the "apathetic" Japanese youth, there is tangible evidence for further potentials within the current socioeconomic vicissitudes: as early as in the mid-1990s, some young temporary workers and *Freeters* founded loose networks, where they experimented with new forms of collective activities, or, as Mōri (2005: 21) puts it, a "new class relation under a post-modern condition, a new political consciousness and a new way of life." There are a number of innovative examples of such urban groups, amongst which *Shinjuku Cardboard Houses Village* (1994–1998), *Dame Ren* (1992 –) and Amateurs' Riot (*Shirōto no Ran*) are perhaps the most well-known.[29] While their agenda is often unclear and not easy to grasp with the framework and vocabulary of conventional political and social movements in Japan, they must nevertheless be acknowledged as a form of social participation. Some of these actors and networks have specifically formed in order to support their peers in precarious situations, like the "Network against Poverty" (*Han Hinkon Nettowāku*). Founded in 2007, it includes, amongst others, a single parent organization and a Freeter Union.[30] Moreover, activists of this small but vibrant scene have branched out and now engage in a number of direct actions concerned largely with precarity, and constitute the Japanese representation of the Global Justice Movement, the Euro-Mayday-Movement, or the Occupy Movement.

"WHILE MANY GRADUATES HAVE COME TO REALIZE THAT EVEN THE BEST OF EDUCATIONAL CREDENTIALS NO LONGER WARRANT PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS, MORE AND MORE YOUNG JAPANESE OFTEN ASPIRE TOWARDS ROLE MODELS THAT ACHIEVED SUCCESS OUTSIDE OF INSTITUTIONALIZED STRUCTURES

While this is only a brief snapshot of a larger issue, it is striking that precisely those young Japanese who – at least partially – live and work outside the existing norms and structures emerge as actors of radically new forms of political, social and cultural participation. This can be attributed to the fact that these groups see little point in engaging within institutions that have

28 Sakai 2005.

29 Mōri 2005; Fukui 2012; Obinger 2013a.

30 Amamiya 2007, Anti Poverty Network 2012.

long written them off as a "lost generation" and would not accept them as "full" members.

CONCLUSION

Japanese society is facing a number of dramatic changes in recent years. These concern not only the economic situation or the demographic development, but also the general outlook on life among different generations. As the numbers of non-regularly employed young Japanese are rising and the so-called "lost generation" is coming of age, the formerly deeply engrained sense of security and equality, interlinked with an ideal of a "standard" life course is vanishing, while a new awareness on a social stratification, precarization of living conditions are proliferating. Increased media coverage, both nationally and internationally, reflects such growing awareness, while some pundits claim that members of the "lost generation" themselves are responsible for their plight and focus on the perceived "apathy" by younger cohorts.

At the same time, we must not overlook the numerous projects initiated by these very members of the "lost generation," who fight for more recognition and legislative changes. Thus, I would like to put forward the notion that it is not proliferation of precarity in itself, but the paradigm shift in public perception will open up new avenues of thinking, especially in the field of social and political participation.

It is however questionable whether this gradually rising awareness among the Japanese will lead to a fundamental change in attitudes and – even more importantly – to a sustainable change in recruitment and social security policies. Only if the structural obstacles are eliminated, can the Japanese precariat hope for a real and long term improvement in their situation. In this context, it is unclear how the return to the conservative LDP government with its agenda of *Abenomics* and further deregulation will have impacts on the issues brought forward in this paper.

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