

The symposium “Labor Market Policy and Political Participation in France, Germany and Japan” will be held at the JDZB on 19 June 2019, in cooperation with the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ, Tōkyō) and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS, Paris). Below is an interview with the Chair of East Asian Economic Studies / Japan and Korea from the University of Duisburg-Essen and JDZB Vice President, Prof. Werner PASCHA.

*Increasing inequalities in income and the labor market and their consequences were topics of the German-Japanese-French workshops in Paris 2017 and Tōkyō 2018. What are the inequalities in the labor market in concrete terms? What insights did you gather from the first two workshops in a three-country comparison?*

The workshop series was an exciting experiment bringing together thoughts and opinions from very different national discourses. With bilateral dialogues between Japan and Germany, for example, the discussion often revolves around the same subject areas. The participation of a third “party” tends to break up these occasional somewhat worn-out lines of thoughts, offering alternative perspectives and, in the best case scenario, generating new “aha experiences”. In this regard, we can already say that an expansion of bilateral formats to a trilateral level can occasionally make a significant contribution to discussions and, hopefully, to the resulting insights. Inequality in income and wealth has in fact significantly increased in all three countries. Japan was once known to be a prime example of a more egalitarian distribution. Those days are over. According to various indicators, Japan is now the most unequal society among the three. In the labor market, this is sometimes different. Nevertheless, precarious employment conditions have significantly increased everywhere. In France, for example, there is a clear rise in the form of short-term employment contracts and increases in the number of freelancers and independent contractors. We asked ourselves if the global financial crisis in 2008/09 was a kind of turning point for these processes, but in the end we were rather skeptical. Technological change, globalization and a change of policy from the 1990s to less regulated labor markets seem more significant.

*Would it be possible to say that the interaction between labor market policy and political participation, the inequalities and upheavals in the labor market can lead to political marginalization and anti-mainstream resentment, and even mistrust of democracy in general?*

Of course growing inequality has political consequences, which in some cases are astonishingly different in each of the three countries. Interestingly, a paper based on a rather elaborate quantitative survey concluded that the problems did not necessarily lead to a greater preference for solidarity, perhaps a little, but only relatively slightly in Germany. It is generally assumed that increasing social tensions predominantly benefit right-wing protest movements. There are also clear indications for this in Germany and France, but in Japan no noteworthy populist force has been able to establish itself to the right of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. We could see this as pleasing. However, on the flip side, participation in election processes has reached historic lows and, according to surveys, many young people no longer feel that politics and democracy addresses their concerns.

*What would labor market policies look like that could compensate for the increasing social inequities in the labor market or at least mitigate their consequences? And what would that mean in terms of political participation?*

What should be done? That, of course, is the question that ultimately drives us all. It would be presumptuous to say that we managed to formulate a reliable answer in Paris and Tōkyō. We can also only formulate the question around the possibilities of government action per se. Most of the speakers held reasonably different positions. Some took a more pessimistic position. It is important to consider the scope for action in the nar-



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rower area of labor market policy, or to see these issues embedded in the wider context of economic growth and income development, future trends in increasing productivity, or even as an holistic problem of the economic and social system. The further you think you have to dance around the edges, the greater the skepticism about what can be targeted to be improved.

An interesting discussion arose from a paper based on an original data collection showed that the steps towards “deregulation” in the three countries are by no means a one-way street. For example, in Japan there are indications that the dominant, but not only, direction to increase productivity is still regulation, whereas social security is more likely to be deliberalization. One paper also asked directly whether the time for liberalization in Germany and Japan has not actually passed. Political participation via elections and protests can have an impact – of course there was a lot of talk about the yellow vests movement – but it does not necessarily have to be that way, let alone determine what the direction is.

To be certain, these sorts of questions cannot be answered conclusively. It makes good sense to have the opportunity on 19 June to discuss these topics further in Berlin at the JDZB and to draw even more pointed lessons from the first two workshops. We want to focus now on discussing key aspects of the more academic debate, such as those in Paris and Tōkyō, with a wider circle of commentators and discussants from politics, business and society. The JDZB is the ideal place for that, and everyone involved is looking forward to it.