



Waseda University Brussels Office
早稲田大学ブリュッセルオフィス

Youth, Precarity and Political Engagement in Japan

WORKSHOP
SERIES

Thursday 11 September 2025

ULB, WBO meeting room, Av. A. Depage, 1 – 1050 Bruxelles



WASEDA
University



Youth, Precarity and Political Engagement in Japan

this workshop addresses a set of terms whose interrelations are frequently misunderstood. When politics experiences something new (and often undesirable), young people and precarious living conditions are often blamed as the cause. A typical example is the rise of the far-right Sanseito in Japan's 2025 Upper House election, in which media emphasized internet-savvy youth and lower-middle strata facing precarity as the party's support base. However, empirical research on these phenomena questions the validity of such popular beliefs. In this workshop, social scientists conducting empirical studies of Japan examine the relationship between two of the three key terms — youth, precarity, and political engagement. Concrete topics of study cover various aspects of Japanese society "in crisis," as indicated by the theme of each presentation: political ideology and behavior of the self-employed; activism of the female precariat; the relationship between school-to-work transition and the wellbeing of young people; the gap between objective and subjective conditions of youth precarity; social inequality and populism; the class basis of left-wing populism; and the ideological similarity and dissimilarity of supporters of traditional left-wing parties and the left-wing populist party. These presentations will examine common misconceptions about youth, precariousness, and political engagement and provide an accurate understanding of the state of the art.





SCHEDULE

THURSDAY SEPTEMBER 11th

09:30	Welcome coffee
10:00 - 10:10	Naoto HIGUCHI (Waseda University) Opening remark
10:10 - 11:00	David CHIAVACCI (University of Zurich) <i>'Not only Old, Doomed and Forgotten, but also Angry? Voting Behavior of Japan's Old Middle Class in the Lower House Election 2024'</i>
11:00 - 11:50	Saori SHIBATA (University of Sheffield) <i>'Women digital agency and beyond gendered domination: Women activism in the digital economy in Japan'</i>
11:50 - 12:10	Coffee Break
12:10 - 13:00	Steve R. ENTRICH (University of Zurich) <i>'Youth in Contemporary Japan: From School to Work to Frustration?'</i>
13:00 - 14:00	Lunch
14:00 - 14:50	Yuki ASAHINA (University of Manchester) <i>'Objective and Subjective Modes of Precarity in Contemporary Japan'</i>
14:50 - 15:40	Axel KLEIN (University of Duisburg-Essen) <i>'Social Inequality and Populism in Japan's Party System'</i>
15:40 - 16:00	Coffee Break
16:00 - 16:50	Aram KWON (Osaka University of Economics), Yuki HIRAHARA (Waseda University) & Naoto HIGUCHI (Waseda University) <i>'A Rebellion of the Impoverished? Social Class, Social Mobility and the Support for Japan's Left-Wing Populist Party'</i>
16:50 - 17:40	Yuki HIRAHARA (Waseda University), Aram KWON (Osaka University of Economics) & Naoto HIGUCHI (Waseda University) <i>'The Rise of Left-Wing Populism? Attitudinal Dispositions of Supporters of Reiwa Shinsengumi'</i>
17:40 - 18:00	Naoto HIGUCHI (Waseda University) Concluding words



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Speaker



David CHIAVACCI (University of Zurich)

Bio David Chiavacci is Professor in Social Science of Japan at the University of Zurich. His specialization is political and economic sociology of contemporary Japan in a comparative perspective. The focus of his current research is on social movements, social inequality and Japan's new immigration and immigration policy. Recent publications include "Japan's Melting Core: Social Frames and Political Crisis Narratives of Rising Inequalities" in *Crisis Narratives, Institutional Change and Transformation of the Japanese State* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021, pp. 25-50), "Social Inequality in Japan" in *Oxford Handbook of Japanese Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. 451-470), "China's and Japan's Winding Path to the Refugee Convention: State Identity Transformations and the Evolving International Refugee Regime" in *Modern Asian Studies* (2023, 57/4: 1415-1447), "Tokyo Olympics 2020: Between Dream and Contention" in *Contemporary Japan* (2023, 35/1: 3-15), and "Dam Break in Japan's Immigration Policy: The 2018 Reform in Long-term Perspective" in *Social Science Journal Japan* (2025, 28/1: 1-41).

Title 'Not only Old, Doomed and Forgotten, but also Angry?
Voting Behavior of Japan's Old Middle Class in the Lower House Election 2024'

Abstract The old middle class is disappearing from our eyes in Japan. While the self-employed and family employees still made up about a third of the workforce in 1980, they have now shrunk to less than one tenth. Since the mid-1990s, the growth of the lower working class of low-skilled non-standard workers and the shrinking of the old middle class of self-employed have been the two main transformations of the social class structure in Japan. While the increase in non-standard workers (so-called *furikata*) has been extensively researched and is a central element in public and political debates about Japan as gap society (*kakusa shakai*), the implosion of the old middle class does not play an important role either in academic research or in public discourse and political narratives. This paper attempts to fill this research gap. It analyzes the voting behavior of the old middle class in the lower house election of 2024, which can be described as historic as the conservative ruling coalition under LDP leadership lost its parliamentary majority. The results of our own quantitative survey (n=3000) of self-employed people in Japan are used as data basis for the analysis. The old middle class was long regarded as a safe core constituency of the LDP, but the survey results documented an abandonment of the conservative establishment. More self-employed voted for the progressive opposition parties than for the conservative ruling parties and a quarter of voters from the old middle class voted for new populist parties of the right and left. The paper discusses influencing factors and the implications of this voting behavior.



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Speaker



Saori SHIBATA (University of Sheffield)

Bio Dr Saori Shibata is a lecturer at the University of Sheffield. Her research focuses on Japan's political economy, including the changing nature of work, the digital economy and how Japan's model of capitalism is transforming. This draws on institutionalist approaches to capitalism and critical political economy. She has published on these topics in journals such as *New Political Economy*, *Review of International Political Economy*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Economy and Society* and *Competition and Change*. She is the author of *Contesting Precarity in Japan: The Rise of Nonregular Workers and the New Policy Dissensus*, published by Cornell University Press.

Title 'Women digital agency and beyond gendered domination: Women activism in the digital economy in Japan'

Abstract This paper proposes a feminist dialectic approach to analyse the interplay of control and agency for women in the gendered digital work space. While acknowledging the pervasive domination and limited opportunities women often face, it highlights their simultaneous capacity for creative survival through acquiring digital skills and contesting digital domination. The digital era, despite its precarity, offers avenues for creative exploitation, particularly in the platform economy and sex industry, demonstrating that resistance and opportunity can emerge even within systems of domination. The paper emphasises that domination and resistance are not mutually exclusive but exist in dynamic tension. Using Japan as a specific context, it examines how women, especially those in non-regular employment and poverty, leverage digitalising labour markets, often supported by organisations and NPOs. It also explores instances of women rejecting mainstream labour for alternative entrepreneurship. The analysis considers the socio-economic backdrop of Japan's patriarchal family structure, which places women in peripheral workplace roles and limits their financial support and union advocacy, shaping a reality where both vulnerability and agency are present.



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Speaker



Steve R. ENTRICH (University of Zurich)

Bio

Dr. Steve R. Entrich holds a PhD in educational sociology and currently works as co-head of the SNSF-project JTEPS ("The Japan Transnational Education and Career Panel Study") at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. He received a Magister's degree in history and education on «Educational reforms in post-war Japan» (2010) and a PhD with honors on «Shadow Education and Social Inequalities in Japan» (2016) at the University of Potsdam. Since 2010 he worked in the fields of Comparative Sociology & Education, Teacher Education and Japanese Studies at the University of Potsdam, Freie Universität Berlin, University of Zurich, University of Innsbruck, and University of Duisburg-Essen. Further research was conducted abroad, at Dōshisha University (Kyoto), the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ), Tokyo, Pennsylvania State University, the University of Tokyo, the Education University of Hong Kong, among others. Major research interests lie in comparative educational sociology, focusing on social inequalities in educational attainment, educational decision-making, returns to education, life course research, and implications of transnational, supplementary, and inclusive education in Germany, Japan, the United States, and in cross-national comparison. Publications include "Youth in Times of Crisis" (2025, Springer); "The role of institutional contexts for inequalities in study abroad intent and participation" (2024, Higher Education 88); "Shadow education: new areas of inquiry in teaching, learning and development" (2023, Sage); "New Horizontal Inequalities in Japanese Education?" (2022, Research in Social Stratification and Mobility 81); "Shadow Education and Social Inequalities in Japan" (2018, Springer).

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Title

'Youth in Contemporary Japan: From School to Work to Frustration?'

Abstract

Since the 1980s, Japan has undergone dramatic demographic, economic and social change, which has had a lasting impact on young people in particular. The lost decade following the burst of the bubble-economy in the early 1990s was accompanied by rising youth unemployment, an erosion of job security and widening inequalities. Japan became soon known as kakusa shakai or "gap society". Young people born in the 1980s and 1990s, who have never experienced the booming Japanese economy, started questioning the traditional path towards "happiness": It seemed as if the arduous path to one of the high ranked universities did no longer guarantee men well-paid, secure jobs in major companies, whereas significant labor market barriers and gendered family expectations continue to restrict women's opportunities to pursue men-equivalent careers despite having high educational credentials. In this talk, I will discuss how and why the sweeping educational reforms that were intended to reduce competition and inequality between students have not had the anticipated results. Worse still, related problems of bullying, delinquency, truancy, and student suicide resulting from the rigid, uniform school system, its multiple rules and the highly competitive exam culture (and the resulting "exam hell"), as well as the high use of private supplementary lessons (at juku/yobik) have by no means disappeared.

Drawing on national panel data for youth in Japan, this paper theoretically and empirically examines the question: What are the challenges youth face on their way to (un)happiness in present Japan? Results are discussed with regards to gender and social inequalities.



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Speaker



Yuki ASAHINA (University of Manchester)

Bio Yuki Asahina is a lecturer (assistant professor) in Japanese Studies at the University of Manchester. Trained as a sociologist, his research interests include social inequality, cultural sociology, and political sociology, focusing on Japan and South Korea. Yuki has recently completed his first book manuscript, *Meritocracy's Children: How Inequality Leaves Young Adults Angry or Resigned in Seoul and Tokyo*. Together with Dr. Naoto Higuchi, he is also working on an edited volume, *The Digital Rise of the Far Right in Japan*, to be published by Manchester University Press in 2026.

Title 'Objective and Subjective Modes of Precarity in Contemporary Japan'

Abstract Discussion concerning precarity in Japan presents a conflicted picture. As economists and some sociologists suggest, Japan's long-term employment system is alive and well, and the objective level of job insecurity has not shown a marked increase. Meanwhile, as anthropologists argue, Japanese people appear more insecure today than in the past. How can we account for this disconnect between the changes in the Japanese labor market (or lack thereof) and people's perception of them? Drawing on interview-based research on the sense of precarity among millennials in Tokyo, this paper offers insight into the relationship between different dimensions of precarity, which I call the objective and subjective modes. Empirically, it demonstrates the complex nature of people's subjective understanding of their own economic situation, such as how regular workers experience greater feelings of instability than non-regular workers, and examines how broader discourses about precarity reported in the media and actual changes in the labor market affect these understandings. In doing so, this article calls for a shift in focus from measuring the extent of insecurity to understanding the ways people experience it in the ways they do.



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Speaker



Axel Klein (University of Duisburg-Essen)

Bio Axel Klein is a political scientists and professor of Modern East Asian Studies and Japanese Politics at Duisburg-Essen University (Germany). Before taking his present position, he worked as Senior Research Fellow at the German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tokyo (2007-2011), focusing on election campaigning, demographic change and the relationship of politics and organized religion in Japan. Among others, he has produced a documentary film on Japanese elections (“Pictures at an Election”, 2008, available on Youtube), conducted extensive field research in the country and is an expert on the political party Kômeitô. Since 2019 he has been working on the project “Populism in East Asian Democracies”.

Title ‘Social Inequality and Populism in Japan’s Party System’

Abstract Populism is a contested concept and depending on its definition, Japan is either untouched by it or features specimen both on the right (Sanseitô) and the left (Reiwa) of the party system. In my presentation I will take a deeper look at the two parties and discuss what it may take for populism in Japan to grow (further). Among the “fertilizers” of populism, this talk will highlight social inequality, how it is woven into the campaigns of both parties, and how they try to create new forms of political communication and activism. The Upper House election 2025 will serve as a very recent object of investigation, providing up-to-date data on voter behavior and political opinion. In conclusion and based on the concept of “transgressive populism”, I will suggest a few indicators which may be helpful in sketching out a potential path political change might take in Japan.



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Seminar
Organizer



Naoto HIGUCHI (Waseda University)

Bio Naoto Higuchi is Professor of Sociology at the Waseda University, Japan. He holds a PhD in sociology from Hitotsubashi University. His research draws on sociology of migration and social movements to examine migration systems, ethnic businesses, integration of the second generation of Latino migrants, migration policies, xenophobia, and social mobility of migrants to Japan. His main focus was ethnic migration of Japanese South American to Japan. Since 2021, he has been conducting fieldwork on Peruvian and Bangladeshi migrants in Italy. He has written extensively on immigration of Latinos to Japan and Japan's far-right movements. His publications include Japan's Ultra-Right (Trans Pacific Press, 2016) and 'What Is New about Japan's New Migration Policy?' (Social Science Japan Journal, 2025).
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<https://scholar.google.co.jp/citations?user=yTYgCfQAAAAJ&hl=ja&oi=ao>

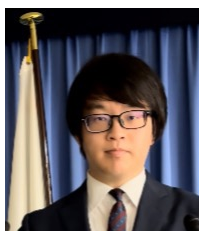
Co-author



Aram KWON (Osaka University of Economics)

Bio Aram Kwon is a Lecturer at Osaka University of Economics in Japan. She holds a Ph.D. in Human Sciences from Waseda University. Her work focuses on social stratification and social consciousness, with particular emphasis on how social mobility and reference groups shape perceptions of social class and subjective well-being. Her recent projects explore the impact of intergenerational and intragenerational mobility, as well as the effects of residential environments on individual well-being and subjective social status. She employs quantitative methods and national survey data in Japan to analyze these relationships.

Speaker



Yuki HIRAHARA (Waseda University)

Bio Yuki Hirahara is an Assistant Professor at Waseda University in Japan. He holds a Ph.D. in Human Sciences from Waseda University. His research focuses on urban sociology, utilizing data and social maps to examine changes in Japan's urban spatial structure and income distribution. In his recent project, he analyzes the relationship between socioeconomic status and voting behavior at both regional and individual levels. Additionally, he explores the relationship between populist attitudes and voting behavior. His publications include Inequality and Urban Space (Routledge, 2025).



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Title 'A Rebellion of the Impoverished? Social Class, Social Mobility and the Support for Japan's Left-Wing Populist Party' (Kwon, Hirahara & Higuchi)

Abstract The rise of Reiwa Shinsengumi (Reiwa), often regarded as a left-populist party, has introduced new dimensions to the study of Japanese politics in the 2020s. While clearly aligned with the political left, the party distinguishes itself from left-wing parties by prioritizing redistribution over (anti-)nationalism. This paper aims to examine the class basis of left-wing populism in Japan through an analysis of data from a 2022 survey, in which 570 out of 43,820 respondents indicated support for Reiwa. We investigate how intergenerational mobility, attitudes toward poverty and inequality, and personal experiences of impoverishment shape support for the party. Our findings suggest that Reiwa supporters are socioeconomically characterized by the following: (1) an underrepresentation of university graduates, (2) lower household income and subjective social status, and (3) a tendency to attribute poverty and inequality to structural factors, often accompanied by personal experiences of economic hardship. These findings align in many respects with studies on left-wing populism in Europe. However, unlike European cases, neither upward nor downward educational mobility significantly predicts support for Reiwa. Nevertheless, we observe substantial effects of the origin class. Our results indicate that both their origin and destination class influence support for Reiwa, whereas non-mobile, university-educated individuals are less likely to support the party. The emerging base of left-populist support in Japan is closely associated with the lived experiences of poverty and past class background.

Title 'The Rise of Left-Wing Populism? Attitudinal Dispositions of Supporters of Reiwa Shinsengumi' (Hirahara, Kwon, Higuchi)

Abstract Populism is a contested concept and depending on its definition, Japan is either untouched by it or features specimen both on the right (Sanseitô) and the left (Reiwa) of the party system. In my presentation I will take a deeper look at the two parties and discuss what it may take for populism in Japan to grow (further). Among the "fertilizers" of populism, this talk will highlight social inequality, how it is woven into the campaigns of both parties, and how they try to create new forms of political communication and activism. The Upper House election 2025 will serve as a very recent object of investigation, providing up-to-date data on voter behavior and political opinion. In conclusion and based on the concept of "transgressive populism", I will suggest a few indicators which may be helpful in sketching out a potential path political change might take in Japan.



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