

Yoshimichi Sato (Tohoku University) x Noa Berger (EHESS)

Could you tell us a little bit about your current research projects?

I've been working on social stratification, social mobility, and social inequality studies for the last two decades. I've been heavily involved in statistical analysis of data, for example as part of the SSM¹ (social stratification and social mobility) project, launched in 1955. Since then, I became more interested in theoretical explanations of social inequality, social stratification and social mobility.

For example, female workers are likely to quit jobs earlier than male workers in Japan. Statistical analysis will give us some information regarding this issue. However, I'd like to know *why* women quit jobs much earlier than male workers. This is when we need a theory. Supposedly, If an employer is being rational, he won't need to segregate against female workers if the female and male workers have the same capital. However, we do see a lot of segregation against female workers. So economists argue that based on their experience, employers believe female workers are more likely to quit than male workers because of child rearing or baring and so on. And so employers hesitate to invest money and time in female workers. But this can't be justified by economic theory. In fact, there is a vicious cycle: female workers tend to quit upon marriage and childbearing because they can not balance work and family due to the lack of institutional support. So as a sociologist, I want to develop a social theory that analysis the relation between morals, history and institutions that create the segregation against female workers.

During my series of lectures in France, I looked back at the history of Japan's labour market in order to understand why we see inequality between men and women or regular or non regular workers. The Japanese employment practice (that consists of seniority employment scheme), corporate unions and the male single breadwinner model are reinforcing each other and lead to the exclusion of women from the core of the labour market. As a result of various tax schemes and policies, married women tend to work less than men, because if their income goes beyond some criteria they have to pay their own pension and health insurance. It therefore often makes more sense for some women to work less and to continue to be a dependent family member. Again, we see a kind of vicious cycle at work. The single bread-winner model encourages the husband to become a regular worker and to work long hours, while also discouraging the wife to work limited hours so to not to go beyond the criteria of the income.

¹ The SSM (Social Stratification and Social Mobility) project has surveyed Japanese people's social status, social mobility, and consciousness on class and inequality, with national representative random samples. In 1955 the first survey was conducted by the [Japan Sociological Society](#). After that basically similar surveys are repeated at intervals of ten years by temporary organizations of volunteer sociologists. The 5th survey was conducted in 1995 by the 1995 SSM Research Group, supported by Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research by Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture.

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Anticipating that outcome, Japanese companies then hire male workers as regular workers and female workers as non regular workers. This vicious cycle is supported by some institutions such as the tax scheme or the pension system. Nobody created these systems or policies to exclude women intentionally from the labour market or push them towards the periphery of the market. But, once these systems are introduced in Japan, people react rationally to them rationally. People tend to react to policies and institutions in a rational way: once they react to the institutions, they become stable and difficult to change. So I try to analyse how the self reinforcing cycle between the family and the labour market has evolved over the years in Japan.

I have not yet come up with a good solution on to break the cycle. Global forces such as globalisation or demographic forces may change people's mind: the need to have more women in the work force to compensate for the loss of labour force. We therefore witness new policies and laws that are introduced in Japanese society which lead to the entry of more married women into the labour market as full time workers.

Did any of your your experiences in France shed a new light on the questions you've mentioned? did you gain a new perspective during your visit?

Before coming here I checked some statistics about France. The fertility rate is much higher than in Japan, which is a good signal for maintaining a sustainable society. But I've been concerned about the high unemployment rate of young people and the rise of precarious jobs. So even though Japan's economy is bad, we see that the unemployment rate of young people is much lower in Japan than in France. Once young people are trapped in the precarious employment sector or the non regular employment sector, it will be difficult for them to accumulate human capital to advance professionally.

I'm very concerned about the future of young people in France as well as about that of French society, because if young precarious workers can not accumulate the human capital and secure regular or more stable jobs the French society would become unstable. If young people can not work, the social security system would eventually become unstable, so even people of old age would not be able to enjoy a stable pension system or health insurance system in the future.

How do you feel about Japan's future in terms of inequality, employment markets and precariousness?

As I said, Japan's unemployment rate is much lower than that of France, but the mechanisms that creates the situation are similar. My hope is that inequality in Japan is currently not as serious as in Europe or the United States. This would be due to the family structure. But

«*Questions for Yoshimichi Sato* »

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this is changing: some non-regular workers live with their parents, who provide them with a house and meals. But what happens when these parents pass away? Some middle aged unemployed people in Japan do not report the death of their parents because they want their parents' pension to be continued. We then witness many people older than a 100 years old on paper, although many of them passed away many years ago. Their children did not report their death because their parents' pension was their only way for them to make ends meet. What will happen to such middle aged non-regular workers?

Do you have any advice that you would like to share with young scholars?

My advice is to get unplugged: as social scientists, we live inside the society but also in its borders. We are a part of society, however, we observe the society, interpret the society, explain the society. As a social scientist, you need to unplug yourself from the society. To do so, I often advise two strategies to my students: one is to compare. By comparing France with Japan, for example, many things that you thought were given in France will not be so in Japan. The second strategy is to look back at history. If you compare today's France with France of the 1950s, you will also see a huge difference, and you will note the things that are given now and that have not been so 50 years ago. It's by doing this that you can apply yourself. Don't assume anything is obvious or given: you should tend to think of everything as socially constructed over the years. Then you can come up with a nice research question as to why we see such differences. This differences will need to be explained: a good way to open the door to a new theory.

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