

Japanese Welfare State in Comparative Perspective: An Overview

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The aim of this article is to analyze the Japanese welfare state from a comparative political economy perspective. It reflects on how various theories accumulated in Western comparative political economy have been applied to Japan and how they have been used to analyze Japan's contemporary reforms. By studying the case of post-war Japan, this paper aims at developing the existing theories of comparative political economy of the welfare state.

First, this paper summarizes the debate over a characteristic of the Japanese welfare state. The welfare and employment systems in Japan have been categorized in various ways, e.g., "corporatism without labor," "pluralist state," "successful corporatism," "familialist welfare regime," and "East Asian welfare regime." After indicating the insufficiencies in these arguments, this paper identifies Japan as a hybrid model that combines elements of both liberal and conservative regimes. When examining it through a power relationship between employers and employees, Japan could be understood to be close to a liberal regime. However, this relationship is mediated by party politics. As the conservative party (the Liberal Democratic Party) has controlled Japanese politics for nearly a half century, Japan possesses a nature close to that of a conservative regime.

Second, this paper examines the period since the 1990s. Reforms of the welfare state in developed countries has been explained largely from two perspectives: New Institutionalism and strategic behaviors of political leaders. The main strategies taken by political leaders are the centralization of the decision-making process and the discourse strategy. By using these strategies, most countries were responding to the "new social risks" manifesting in the 2000s. When compared with them, a response to the new social risks was not systematically undertaken in Japan, despite its attempt at political centralization. Reflecting the reforms of the welfare state in Japan, this paper concludes that the insider-outsider divides theory is most compatible with the Japanese case. Thus, the principal issue of the welfare state reform in Japan is not to centralize the political decision-making process, but to rebuild a democratic process that will absorb the interests of outsiders.