Neoliberalism

Definitions

Neoliberalism has a plethora of definitions which may muddle and obfuscate our understanding of the term. It is often defined as an ideology which argues for the "desirability" of a society organized around self-regulating markets, and free to the extent, from *social* and political interventions" (italics mine for emphasis) (Cypher and Dietz qtd in Gregory). Barclay and Koh in their abstract of a study on Japanese long-line tuna fishing defines neoliberalism as a 'pol*itical economy' term that refers to a *public policy* mix that is market oriented, pro trade liberalization and advocates minimal state intervention in the *political economy* (italics mine for emphasis) (Barclay and Koh, Abstract). Peck and Tickell portrays a more blunt depiction of neoliberalism by defining it as the "'jungle law that tends to break out [. . .] when economic growth slows and when social compromises collapse.' (319). To Peck and Tickell, the rise of neoliberalism is then seen as a vacuum and the result of privations of a 'new institutional fix' and it 'contributes to the crisis' (Peck and Tickell, 320).

Amongst all these different definitions, what is certain is there is no single term which can sufficiently describe what the term 'neoliberalism'

Understanding Neoliberalism in the Japanese context

From all the different definitions including the ones mentioned, there are several commonalities we can notice. A salient aspect behind all these definitions is that there is supposed to be a lack or minimal political intervention from political actors and entities. I will like to stress a caveat, the 'neoliberalism' as we understand here is primarily an economic concept and not a political concept, this is so people won't confuse this with the political concept of the same name. In the Japanese economic context, many people have seen neoliberalism as the structural solution to the Japanese economy. George Mulgan in his book on Koizumi's economic and political reforms has noted that Koizumi came to power promising a 'raft of changes designed to drive the economy in a more market-liberal direction' (4). Such an economy direction has led to various policies, such as the attempts to reduce subsidies for tuna fishing fleets (Barclay and Koh, 20). An important legislation is the implementation of the *haken* law in 1988 which allowed the hitherto labour-leasing businesses that were banned in the postwar period to operate again. The haken law was revised in 1999. The original haken law worked by a 'open-list method' which meant dispatch workers could only work in approved industries. The 1999 revision changed it to a 'negative-list method', meaning that workers could work in all industries save for the blacklisted ones (Shinoda). Another important labour policy was the removal of the 'white-collar' exemption which was the removal of the stipulation that certain workers would receive guaranteed overtime pay if they work past a certain number of hours (Shinoda).

The consequences of Neoliberalism?

Neoliberal economic reforms, in particular labor deregulation, has arguably led to the rise of new forms of work as noted by Fu Huiyan's article on the *haken* industry (Fu 19). Some people have lauded this as "labor mobility", even as something that facilitates the unfettered flow of young people to pursue options and develop non-corporate identities (Galbraith and Slater). This discourse and image has been affixed on the 'freeter' in particular where they have been seen as free-spirits who reject the conventional career path and life-course (Fu, 22). Yet Slater and Galbraith in their article on the Akihabara massacre notes that these neoliberal market reforms have unintended consequences on society. Using the term *ren'ai kakusa* (love gap) they describe a large underclass of marginalized young males who are unpopular with the opposite gap because they are not perceived as 'masculine' at least not in the traditional way. The word *kakusa* can be applied on society, a _kakusa shakai_ (????), a society where people are falling under the gaps, where they are ironically left alone because of the absence of institutions such as strong labor unions which might have offer them succour and aid. In the Japanese society and economy which has experienced great upheaval and change, it appears that the very fix known as neoliberalism has instead exacerbated and caused new issues for Japan.

References


