

Anti-Masochism

Abenomics, Kristin Surak writes (Letters, 6 June), 'may have boosted the profits of big exporters, but it has shrunk real household incomes in a country that is now one of the most unequal in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Nearly every country in Europe has a more equal income distribution than Japan, where one in six children now grows up in poverty.' But one in six is low compared with many countries in the OECD, and Japan is not one of the most unequal. The policies of Abe Shinzo may not be good for Japan, but as Sagiri Kitao and Tomoaki Yamada explain in a report issued in May, 'rapid and massive demographic ageing is the driving force of the aggregate trend of inequality.' In all societies people tend to be paid more equally when they are young; the disparities are widest between those nearing retirement. However, the report also found that 'income inequality of households above age 65 has declined sharply since the 1980s' as a result of the 'more comprehensive coverage of the public pension system'. In other words, the rise in inequality is owed to ageing within the working-age population, not ageing overall.

Kitao and Yamada use the National Survey of Family Income and Expenditure, issued every five years. The OECD comparisons to which Surak refers are based on the Comprehensive Survey of Living Conditions, conducted every three years by the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare, which is known to give misleading results in international comparisons.

A comparison between Japan and the UK may be instructive. In February this year the UK's Office for National Statistics reported that the share of household equivalised disposable income received by the richest 1 per cent of individuals in the UK in the financial year ending in 2018 was more than seven times the average, and had risen since the previous year. The share taken by the best-off 1 per cent of UK households is even higher than for individuals. In Japan, the top 1 per cent of households receive between 4.4 and five times the average.

In May, it was reported on the basis of data gathered by End Child Poverty, a leading action group, that roughly one child in three is now living in poverty in the UK – twice as many as in Japan. You have to go back several decades to find child poverty figures as low in the UK as they are today in Japan. Earlier this year British social scientists estimated that the proportion of adults starving in the UK was around 3 per cent. They also found that between 2004 and 2016 food insecurity among the least well-off almost doubled.

Danny Dorling

Oxford

Longer version submitted before being edited to fit the space: **“The best start in Life”**

In Japan, I once met a man who was starving. He was proud and he was dying. He told me that he had not been able to launch his fishing boat in three months because of the price of fuel. Japan has an acute problem of poverty, but it has low inequality.

Kristin Surak [letter LRB 6 June 2019] suggests that in Japan ‘Abenomics ... has shrunk real household in a country that is now one of the most unequal in the OECD. Nearly every country in Europe has a more equal income distribution than Japan, where one in six children grows up in poverty’. One in six is low, and Japan is not one of the most unequal of OECD countries.

The policies of Abe Shinzō do not help Japan, but as Sagiri Kitao and Tomoaki Yamada in their comprehensive report of May 14 2019 explain, ‘ongoing rapid and massive demographic aging is the driving force of the aggregate trend of inequality’. In all societies people tend to be paid more equally when they are young with disparities being widest between those nearing retirement.

Kitao and Yamada use the National Survey of Family Income and Expenditure (NSFIE) which is released every five years. The latest data will be collected in September, October and November of this year; but only October and November for one-person households. One-person households are now very common in Japan. However, despite their rise, the May 14 2019 report found that in Japan ‘income inequality of households above age 65 has declined sharply since 1980s [and that] this is accounted for by a more comprehensive coverage of the public pension system’. In other words the rise is due to ageing within working ages, not ageing overall.

The OECD comparisons to which Surak refers are based on the Comprehensive Survey of Living Conditions, conducted every three years by the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare which are now known to give misleading results in international comparison. The OECD itself explains that for these ‘Another source of official data, the National Survey of Family Income and Expenditure conducted every 5 years by the

Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, [which] shows a higher median income and lower poverty and inequality...'

A report on the most reliable survey in Japan, as reported on 14 May 2019, finds that 'Households in the highest quintile receive 1.9 to 2.1 times the average income. The top 1% receive 4.4 to 5.0 times the average. ...Unlike in the U.S., where the income grew the fastest among top earners since the late 1980s until the financial crisis of 2007-2008 ..., the share of the top earners in Japan remained almost unchanged during the post-bubble period.'

In February 2019 the UK's ONS reported that the share of household equivalised disposable income received by the richest 1% of individuals in the UK, in the financial year ending 2018 was over 7 times the average and had risen as compared to 2016/2017. The share of the best-off 1% of UK households is much higher than for individuals, much more than twice as high as their 5% take Japan.

On the 14th of May, on the same day that we learnt that inequality in Japan was so much lower than in the UK, the CBBC Newsround programme told children that child poverty was becoming the "new normal" in many parts of Great Britain and that around 1 in 3 children were now living in poverty, set to rise to 37% by 2023-24. You have to go back to the era when a young John Craven was presenting Newsround to find child poverty figures as low in the UK as they are today in Japan. A government spokesman told Newsround that the authorities in the UK now 'provide free school meals to more than one million of the country's most disadvantaged children to ensure every child has the best start in life'. Free food for the few is not the 'best start in life'.

Last month, just before Philip Alston, the United Nations rapporteur on extreme poverty released his report, Human Rights watch revealed that 'pupils at Orchard Meadow and Pegasus primaries schools in the Blackbird Leys area of Oxford are among those receiving leftover fruit, vegetables, bread and dried goods from supermarkets and wholesalers delivered by the Oxford Food Bank'. The budgets of those two Oxford schools are no longer sufficient to pay for free school meals, so both now use food banks.

The starving old fisherman man I met by the docks will now be dead; but the Japanese, thanks to their low level of income inequality, are today amongst the longest lived people in the world. In contrast, life expectancy in the UK is low for Europe, and falling. Twice as many children are growing up in poverty in the UK as in Japan, and that is rising. Unless we act, a child growing up in Oxford today is more likely to die homeless in the city than to attend one of its two universities – but that is the least of their worries.

Earlier this year British social scientists estimated that the proportion of adults starving in the UK was around 3%. They also found that between 2004 and 2016 food insecurity among the least well off almost doubled. In Japan 98.4% of elementary school children receive a free school lunch. It is just seen as lunch. Despite Abe Shinzō, children in Japan still have the best start in life.

Danny Dorling, Oxford.

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Written in response to: “Anti-Masochism” *London Review of Books*, Letter, Vol. 41, No. 11, June 6th: **Kristin Surak** School of Oriental and African Studies University of London <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v41/n11/letters>

Anti-Masochism

I had to check I hadn’t mistakenly picked a copy of the *National Review* when I read Edward Luttwak’s recent encomium to Japan’s prime minister (*LRB*, 4 April). Abe Shinzo is anything but a progressive, as Luttwak would have it, driving through a programme of positive transformation. His signature policy initiative, Abenomics, may have boosted the profits of big exporters, but it has shrunk real household incomes in a country that is now one of the most unequal in the OECD. Nearly every country in Europe has a more equal income distribution than Japan, where one in six children now grows up in poverty. Abe’s ‘Womenomics’ programme is hardly the identifying mark of a crypto-feminist. It’s just more of the same lip service that his party, the Jimintō, has paid to women’s career advancement for more than twenty years. And with the same paltry results. He promised to see women placed in 30 per cent of leadership positions in government and business by 2020, but after the media fanfare died down, he quickly revised it to a mere 7 per cent in government and 5 per cent in business – figures so low that it’s hard to believe they haven’t been achieved already.

To call Japan’s relationship to the US now a ‘true partnership’ is to follow the lead of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank, where the ‘Japan handlers’ regularly issue reports on the directions they would like to see the country take. Read those, and you will acquire a pretty good sense of what the Jimintō will do. Washington supports a

more militarised Japan because a large part of Japan's forces are 'interoperable' with American ones – a cost-effective and expedient way for the US to maintain military power in the Pacific. Abe's new National Security Council brings Japan further into alignment with US interests.

Luttwak is simply wrong to assert that Japan, uniquely among states, cannot legally defend itself. Japan's constitution has been interpreted by the Ministry of Justice and held by the country's Supreme Court as permitting the country to maintain a 'self-defence force' to protect it against external threats. It's true, as Luttwak points out, that until recently Japan could not defend its allies in time of need. Abe 'fixed' this by reinterpreting the constitution through his new National Security Council. The dubious reason he gave was that Japan should be able to come to the defence of the US – a country whose military is larger than those of China, France, the UK, Russia, Saudi Arabia and India combined. The Japan Federation of Bar Associations declared that Abe's interpretation was unsupported by the constitution, and he was hard-pressed to find a constitutional lawyer willing to assert its legality. Far worse – and more indicative of his style – was how Abe got it through. Rather than relying on the legal system to interpret the country's constitution, he did it through his own committee.

Luttwak is silent on the most ominous of the changes Abe has introduced – many of them rammed through the Diet after truncated debates. The State Secrets Act of 2013 enables the government to label just about any kind of information a state secret, effectively removing it from public scrutiny. Dubbed an 'anti-whistle-blower' law, it serves a reporter with as many as five years in prison for exposing corruption, threats to public health or even environmental data if designated 'secret'. But dangling a sword over the media was hardly necessary in any case: in 2013 Abe installed one of his cronies as the head of the national broadcasting agency. Within two years, pressure on the media – which had among other things exposed the mismanagement of the Fukushima nuclear disaster – resulted in a string of resignations among the country's top anchors and reporters. Both the UN and Reporters without Borders have voiced concerns about the decline of freedom of the press in Japan. Recently, a new State Terrorism Act has criminalised more than 250 behaviours, including sit-in protests and copying music.

Luttwak brushes aside the Nippon Kaigi as an unthreatening medley of conservatives and rightists. In fact the organisation is more ominous than that. It calls for a return to structures that undergirded Japan during its era of imperial expansionism: a large and vigorous military, reverence for the emperor as the centre of the polity, a culture of heightened patriotism, a state-based Shinto religion, and a reinforcement of traditional gender roles. The association's greatest success has been in the revision of schoolbooks to eliminate 'masochistic' views of history, ridding all mention of the Nanjing Massacre or the 'comfort women' trafficked into sex slavery under Japanese colonial rule.

Luttwak praises this 'Tory' in the East for his attempts to revise Article 9 of the constitution, which forbids Japan from engaging in war. In fact, Abe doesn't want to stop there: he aims to revise nearly all of the document's 103 articles. The general thrust is to attenuate the protection of individual rights, raise the maintenance of public order above the preservation of basic freedoms, and reinscribe the centrality of the emperor to the nation. The Jimintō's proposals make clear that they want a document that more closely tracks its predecessor in the Meiji Era, when the Japanese were dutiful subjects rather than rights-bearing citizens.