

HUMANIZATION OF WORK - IN JAPAN AND IN GERMANY

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The Japanese-German Cultural Exchange Seminar, organized by the two German Professors of Economics Karl Hax (who died in 1978) and Willy Kraus (Bochum University), has gained a high reputation over a period of about 12 years. The proceedings of two of the conferences held in Germany were published in 1970 ("Industriegesellschaften im Wandel") and in 1975 ("Krise des Wirtschaftswachstums")¹. The third volume, edited by Willy Kraus, is now available, presenting with some delay the proceedings of the conference held in Düsseldorf in October 1977². Whereas the first conference was stamped by "growth-mania", and the second by "the limits to growth", the third conference was directly oriented towards a qualitative concept: "Humanization of Work in Japan and in Germany - Ways and Means for Concept Implementation".

Economists as growthmen with a long lasting tradition of quantitative thinking are rediscovering qualities; and the two outstanding growth societies, Japan and Germany, seem to be seeking economic reorientations and a better quality of life. The subject matter of the book in hand, therefore, is most up to date and adequate for indicating those changes in professional thinking and in social aspirations.

If those changes and aspirations are taken seriously, then the underlying hypothesis of a respective analysis should most certainly be in the direction that economic growth per se is no guarantee of the quality of life, and that hard and efficient work is not synonymous with conditions of work. To put it into the empiric framework: while in the cases of Japan and Germany no one can dispute the remarkable success of a market-oriented, socially modified capitalist economic system in quantitative terms, the question can be disputed as to whether these same systems do allow for enough structural changes and qualitative improvements and for what has to be done to provide for such changes. What

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else is the discussion on humanization of work and the quality of life about? Unfortunately, not all of the papers included in this volume adopt such hypotheses or take such questions seriously.

The opening essay by Otmar Issing, declared to be an introduction to the theme of the book, in reality speaks for conservative liberalism and against structural policies. Apart from the highly abstract and fairly general nature of the essay - nothing is said about Japan and not much about Germany either - the author implicitly denies that "humanization of work" is a public issue. He even calls into question basic concepts of the welfare state: "I think the welfare state offends against the principle of justice" (p. 22). Is then the quality of life to be supplied through the market-place? And is any government action in favour of humanization of work a violation of the constitution - in Japan or in Germany?

Fortunately, the work presents diverging positions. E. g. Karl Hax, in his paper on the income situation of older people in Germany, states the following: "Given the political and social conditions of our time, in a liberal market economy welfare policy is indispensable" (p. 309).

Kiyoshi Tsuchiya sails round the theme of the book in a different way. He deplores the slowing down of the growth rate of the Japanese economy, and declares that the demands of the industrial and developing countries in the field of foreign trade policies impede the growth process in Japan. Is then growth in itself a guarantee of better conditions of work? To put it differently: is the humanization of work really possible as long as quantitative economic growth is the dominant goal of society?

Not much is to be found on quality in the third paper of the book either. Christian Watrin describes the economic developments in Germany between 1974 and 1977, confirms the critical changes that have taken place in the 70's, but ends up with an appeal to history: "The German example of the 50's and 60's shows that a market economy whose dynamic potential is promoted . . . can grapple with employment problems much more serious than the recent ones" (p. 56). This appeal to the 50's and 60's is - in view of the totally different national and international economic conditions (in Germany as well as in Japan) - most certainly the false therapy for the sickness of the economy of the 1970's.

Haruo Shimada's paper on public and private vocational training in Japan is the first that comes close to the theme of the book. The factors that have brought about changes in the Japanese labour market and the industrial relations system in recent years are analysed in some detail. He shows where and for whom the working conditions have worsened or improved. He makes clear that public vocational education in Japan is still marginal in its ability to improve the conditions of work,

Probably the most valuable contributions to the theme of the book, to my mind, are Kazutoshi Koshiro's paper on production technology and labour practices in Japan, and Theodor Ellinger's paper on humanization of work in industry in Germany. Koshiro, on page 126, gives the first conclusive definition of what might be understood by "humanization of work"; he presents indicators of work satisfaction in Japan (e. g. absenteeism and fluctuation rates, etc.), describes the innovations in the field of work organisation (substitution of hard work, work security, job enrichment, re-education and training, small group activities, etc.), and examines the efforts for qualitative improvements of the working place in Japan. Except for the traditional principle of a life long employment guarantee (which by itself may contribute to better conditions of work, at least when work security is concerned), he believes that there is still much to be done; especially with regard to extending the relative privileges of the permanent workers to the non-permanent workers.

Ellinger comes to the point right at the start, i. e. that "humanization of work" collides with economic and technological goals, on the one hand, and social and humane goals, on the other. The way in which such conflicts can be rationally discussed is illustrated by a case study on a repair shop of the German national railways. Unfortunately, however, as with all the case studies in this book, none of the empirical details on the respective firms are published.

The next two papers are on environmental policies in general, and no direct relationship is established to the theme of humanization of work. Of the five remaining papers the one by Taishiro Shirai can claim to be innovative in this respect.

Shirai deals with the current state and future development of workers' co-determination (*Mitbestimmung*) in Japan. After giving a survey of the very young discussion on this kind of social reform, he describes the special features of the Japanese management-labour relations which make co-determination in the European sense of "workers' control" (England), "*Mitbestimmung*" (Germany), or "autogestion" (France) fairly unlikely for Japan. Accordingly, Shirai concludes on a most sceptical note. Up to now only a few union leaders have demanded co-determination in industry; co-determination has never been demanded by the masses of the unions: "When regarding the power of the Japanese working class and the relations between labour and management, co-determination is nothing but a diffuse concept, whose potential is rather unknown ... The labour class in Japan lacks the ideological and organisational means for successfully pursuing the goal of co-determination in managerial decisions. The labour unions and the political labour parties lack the power to bring co-determination through the legislative, or to push for reforms that really change the foundations of the economic constitution

of the country" (pp.255-256). It's a pity that Shirai did not analyse the experiences made with co-determination in other industrialized countries³. As there is no thorough analyses of the German experiences and intentions in this field in the following chapters of the book, one may conclude by saying that the special value of this book lies in the papers on the Japanese economy.

No author attempts a comparative analysis, and this reserve is the main shortcoming of the book. This the more so, as an exchange seminar with a tradition of more than a decade could easily go beyond an exchange of individual statements. Humanization of work is also too important a question that Germans and Japanese should not learn from their respective achievements as well as deficiencies. Perhaps such comparative analysis was undertaken during the conference discussions. Unfortunately, however, the results of these discussions are not included in the book and, therefore, do not reach those interested readers who at the end of the book may be anxiously awaiting the outcome of the seminar on "humanization of work". The reviewer would, therefore, like to suggest that the central theme of this book again be put on the agenda of one of the Japanese-German seminars.

Footnotes:

- 1) Both publications were reviewed in this journal. Cf. Internationales Asienforum, Vol. 7 (1976), pp.182-183; and Vol. 9 (1978) pp.313-314.
- 2) Willy Kraus (ed.): Humanisierung der Arbeitswelt. Gestaltungsmöglichkeiten in Japan und in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Tübingen und Basel: Erdmann, 1979, 337 pages.
- 3) Scholars specially interested in industrial relations systems should study the report prepared by a multi-national study group and published by the OECD: The Development of Industrial Relations Systems. Some Implications of the Japanese Experience, Paris: OECD, 1977.