

Anti-Masochism

[Note: version submitted (as “**The best start in Life**” _ before being edited to fit the space that the Review had to publish it.)

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.

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