Not a day goes by that the press in Japan is not reporting on something related to social stratification, and it has been like that for the last several years. It is particularly the term *kakusa shakai* that has received massive media and public attention. Created in 2004 by Yamada Masa-hiro and variously translated as “unequal society”, “difference society”, “disparity society”, “stratified society”, “society of widening gaps”, and “polarized society”, the term obviously caught the spirit of the times. It quickly became a powerful — but at the same time increasingly empty — signifier for all sorts of empirical as well as perceived inequalities, such as in regards to regional, medical, gender, and educational inequalities, to name just a few of the most frequent usages (*keizai kakusa*, *chi‘iki kakusa*, *iryō kakusa*, *jojo kakusa*, *kyōiku kakusa*, *kibō kakusa*, *jōhō kakusa*, *kakusa kekkon*, even *sekkusu* (sex) *kakusa*).

Japan thus appears as a highly unequal society — and in fact, the OECD has attested that Japan had a rising poverty level already in 2006, a comparatively high one among the OECD countries. The national poverty rate stood at 15.7 percent in 2006, and the child poverty rate at 14.2 percent. More recently, the global economic crisis, which began in fall 2008, resulted in an increasing number of people losing their jobs, be they contract, temporary, or even full-time employees. Young people about to enter the labor market are seeing dire times and increasing difficulties in securing employment. A surge of non-regular employment still keeps the unemployment rate fairly low in comparison to other countries. But many of these non-regular employees are so-called working poor. Young people are disproportionately affected by this trend, making it difficult to start, let alone support a family. As discussed by Annette Schad-Seifert in this volume, the seemingly passive acceptance of such poor prospects has in recent years given rise to the notion of an emerging “low-stream society” (*karyū shakai*). Whereas this term coined by Miura Atsushi is not primarily used in an economic sense, we are also
witnessing increasing rates of homeless people and those suffering from clinical depression that can be partially attributed to employment problems. All in all, a growing sense of uneasiness about the future can be observed, triggering a decrease in the level of happiness and subjective well-being, as a recent nation-wide government survey in Japan has shown.

Yet this is not to say that social stratification and inequalities are new to Japan. Rather, the now inflationary use of the term *kakusa* is indicative of how deeply rooted the belief in the socially homogeneous all-middle-class society (*ichioku sōchūryū* or middle class of one hundred million) actually was until recently. During the decades of economic prosperity in the postwar era, the promise of capitalism of continuing progress seemed to be coming true. With ever rising standards of living, social inequalities and poverty attracted little interest in public discourse. However, the bursting of the economic bubble in the early nineties brought about many significant changes, some of which are epitomized in the term *kakusa shakai*. Now with *kakusa* having become such a popular topic, the very belief in an egalitarian past is slowly being subjected to scrutiny as well. With academic as well as general publications on *kakusa shakai* in Japanese reaching confusingly large numbers, it is, perhaps, a matter of surprise that six years after its coinage, outside of Japan the topic still remains understudied. Also, a generally accepted English translation for *kakusa shakai*, as described above, has not been settled on.

Coupled with Japan’s many other social problems, such as the aging of society and the continuously low fertility rate, Japan has seen major political challenges for the government to battle with in recent years, and a rapid change of prime ministers is a fairly common phenomenon in Japan. However what Japan witnessed in 2009 is what David Chiavacci calls a “political earthquake”: Japanese have turned away from 50 years of almost uninterrupted LDP-led government to elect the DPJ. Chiavacci argues that the new self-perception in Japan as a stratified and unequal country is something so radically new that it is this change that has been accompanied by a fundamental political refocusing. It remains to be seen how effective the government will be in tackling the issue of *kakusa shakai* in the years to come.

The papers by Yoshimichi Sato and Shinji Kojima cover the most widely discussed aspect of Japan’s growing inequality and social stratification. They focus upon the world of labor and particularly its fluidity and the difficulties of temporary (*haken*) workers in the manufacturing industries. Whereas Sato looks at it from a quantitative macro-perspective taking into account changes of the education system, Kojima pre-
sents a micro-level analysis on the basis of his fieldwork in and around the Haken Mura event of New Years 2008/2009.

Groups at the fringes of society tend to be particularly vulnerable to economic downturns. This has certainly been the case with the burakumin, Japan’s largest minority group. Based on his fieldwork in two buraku communities, Christopher Bondy explores inequalities as seen in education, occupation, and living conditions and analyzes differing strategies to overcome them. Urs Matthias Zachmann focuses upon people with disabilities, another marginalized group. He analyzes the debate on disability and social inequality sparked by new legislation introduced in 2005. Whereas disability organizations and service providers have scorned these laws as a retreat of the welfare state, Zachmann shows that not all of their arguments are as altruistic as it might seem. Rather these organizations’ fight for survival in an increasingly competitive welfare market has shaped the debate.

Needless to say, perceptions of Japan as a society of widening gaps are shaped by mass media, including both factual reports and fictional representations of socio-economic change. Popular culture offers a range of interpretations of trends that go beyond empirical data, making them more accessible to a wide audience. Yet, even though popular cultural products are a part of, and, at the same time, a catalyst for social discourses, to date this area is very understudied in regards to social stratification. With his analysis of Kurosawa Kiyoshi’s highly successful film Tokyo Sonata (2008), Roman Rosenbaum helps to fill this gap.

Looking across all the papers, it is interesting to note the many different stakeholders involved in the discourse on social stratification and inequalities. There are of course the everyday Japanese, with a supposedly thinning middle class, and an increasing rift between rich and poor. We learn in the papers presented here about the role of government and politicians, the role of social movement organizations (such as in the case of burakumin or for disabled people), the role of the employees, temp agencies, unions, but also the side of employers. Taken together, the papers represent a range of methodologies and analyze social stratification and inequalities from different disciplines. We get micro and macro perspectives, qualitative as well as quantitative, discursive and also more historical accounts. Our goal for this issue is to show the many implications of social re-differentiation. And even though the papers accumulated here show already the breadth of this topic, we would like to reiterate the fact that kakusa shakai is an even much wider area, which cannot possibly be covered from all angles in one issue. One such area for example is that of gender, as the whole debate on Japan as a “society of widening gaps” only came up when a substantial number of male university graduates proved unable to secure jobs as corporate workers.
and increasingly had to put up with badly paid non-regular employment and deficient social securities. In other words, an increasing number of men were subjected to working conditions that had long been common for women. That the work and income of a woman was traditionally regarded as merely “supplementing” her husband’s income also becomes obvious from the definition of the freeter (furītā), which only includes single women whereas men are categorized according to their form of employment rather than their marital status. This exclusion of married women from the definition implies that non-regular jobs are regarded as the norm rather than an exception in the case of married women. Women and men therefore experience inequalities very differently, and employ different strategies in dealing with them, partially because they have different positions on the labor market or in families.

This first volume of Contemporary Japan is published as a double-issue. Whereas future volumes of Contemporary Japan will feature two separate issues per year, here you find both issues together. The first part of this journal is therefore issue 1 with the topic on stratification and social inequalities in Japan. Issue 2 is not focused on a specific topic. However interestingly, the three papers selected for this issue also loosely relate to stratification, touching upon regional disparity and revitalization (Susanne Klien) and upon other minorities and their cultural self-expressions: Okinawans and zainichi Koreans (Ina Hein, Elise Foxworth). Even though these three papers do not discuss kakusa shakai or stratification or inequalities in particular, in a wider sense, they are equally fitting into our main topic of discussion.

We hope that the papers of this volume contribute to a better understanding of the multifaceted aspects related to social stratification and inequalities, and growing social problems in present-day Japan. We further hope to spark more interest in this research area and thus lead to more subsequent research and discussions among scholars on a global scale.

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