Abstract: This paper examines the attempts of Japanese business groups to destabilize the discursive hegemony of Japanese-style management and replace it with a new neoliberal order advantageous to management interests. Japanese-style management (Nihon-teki keiei) can be seen as a key element of Japanese social identity, which interpellates both workers and management into performing particular institutional practices. Altering these practices requires not only deregulatory reforms to the labor market but also a powerful discursive intervention to undermine and replace sedimented positions. Through an analysis of public policy documents, this paper shows how Japanese business groups have been carrying out such an intervention through the articulation of two keywords – “diversity” (tayōsei) and “independent-style employee” (jiritsu-gata jinzai) – which are used ambiguously to structure a controversial deregulatory agenda into existing discourses of globalization, creativity and social values.

Keywords: Japanese-style management, discourse intervention, keywords, hegemony, labor reform

1 Introduction

During Japan’s period of high economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s, much attention was paid to the human resource management strategies of Japanese firms, which were said to provide them with significant competitive advantages over their Western counterparts. These strategies were exemplified by the so-called Three Sacred Treasures (Yakabe 1977) of lifetime employment (shūshin koyō), seniority wages (nenkō jōretsu chingin) and enterprise unions (kigyōbetsu kumiai), which were discursively structured around the term “Japanese-style
management” (Nihon-tekki keiei). Japanese corporations were regarded as extended families, where workers were given long-term security and stability in return for their loyalty, hard work and firm-specific expertise (Dalton and Benson 2002).

In contemporary Japan, however, two decades of economic stagnation coupled with the impact of globalized competition have put severe pressure on this model. Where the tendency of workers to remain with the same firm throughout their careers was once seen as a strength of the Japanese economic system, now it is often regarded as detrimental to the ability of Japanese firms to adapt, innovate and improve their productivity in fast-changing market conditions (Sakikawa 2012). Under this neoliberal view, worker mobility is held back by an inflexible labor market, rigid wage systems and highly regulated employment practices that make it difficult to lay off redundant full-time workers (Witt 2006). At the same time, further stress is being applied to the Japanese economy by the twin demographic pressures of a low birth rate and an aging population, leading to severe worker shortages in several sectors of the economy and to fears that Japan’s pension and welfare system will collapse through a lack of tax revenue. This has brought calls for more women and/or foreign workers to enter the workforce and fill the gaps (Chiavacci 2014).

The deregulation of the labor market is, however, extremely problematic in Japan. As well as institutional barriers to reform, there are strong discursive factors that work in favor of maintaining the status quo. As Kotaro Tsuru, the chairperson of the deregulation council established by Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, remarked in 2013, “It’s like a tax increase. Anyone who talks about labor flexibility faces a public bashing. It’s a taboo topic” (Wall Street Journal 2013).

This paper argues that the reason for such resistance is more than a simple desire to retain long-established rights, which have actually been available only for the minority of Japanese workers employed by large corporations (Mouer and Kawanishi 2005). The supposed rights of workers to lifetime employment is enshrined in the discourse of Japanese-style management (Nihon-teki keiei), and to explicitly remove or weaken this right is to potentially disavow the entire Japanese socioeconomic system. Moreover, Nihon-teki keiei itself can be seen as an integral part of the wider discourse of Nihonjinron (‘theories of Japanese-ness’), which for many years has formed the dominant identity discourse of the Japanese nation as a whole (Befu 2001).

To effect changes to the labor market, therefore, requires a powerful discourse intervention – “an effort to change our social reality by altering the discourses that help constitute that reality” (Karlberg 2005: 1) – which can rearticulate Japanese-style management into a new form. For a discourse intervention to be successful, it must be able to “disrupt and displace existing be-
liefs and practices, introduce new beliefs and practices, and then stabilize these within a new regime” (Faber 2003: 393). One strategy by which discourse intervention can proceed is through the articulation or re-articulation of important concepts, commonly referred to as “keywords,” that are demonstrably representative and performative of a particular discourse (Williams 1985; Leitch and Davenport 2007).

This paper argues that a discourse intervention is currently being attempted by representatives of big business in Japan, notably the Japan Business Federation (Nippon Keidanren) and the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (Keizai Dōyūkai). With seats on the highest policymaking councils in government, these two groups possess significant influence in many areas of policy, including the economy, education and foreign relations (Schoppa 1991; Nitta 2008). They have been championing the cause of labor deregulation since 1995, driving the policy agenda at both government and workplace level while limiting the involvement of unions in the process (Imai 2011). The paper looks at the policy statements of Keidanren and Keizai Dōyūkai on the subject of labor market reform.

Taking insights from the field of critical discourse analysis on the relationship between discourse and social change, I argue that the two business organizations are attempting to reconfigure the meaning of Nihon-tekki keiei to suit the current interests of management. It identifies and elucidates two keywords currently circulating in Japan that are frequently articulated by business groups. These are “diversity” (tayōsei) and “independent-type employee” (jiritsugata jinza). This paper will show how business groups use these keywords to paint an idealized vision of Japan in which workers are free to pursue their own goals and careers without interference. In reality, however, they may be seen as discursive masks for a neoliberal agenda that aims to deregulate the labor market and remove protections from workers.

Having given a brief outline of the relationship between discursive and social change, the paper will show how Nihon-tekki keiei should be viewed within the context of wider Japanese identity discourses. Following the work of Gordon (1998) and others, I will sketch how the meaning of the term was repeatedly formulated and reformulated by business elites in Japan for their own benefit before being sedimented in the modern era. Section 3 will analyze policy texts produced by business elites in Japan in the contemporary era and show how they articulate the keywords of “diversity” and “independent-type employee” in order to challenge the current hegemonic order that, to a significant degree, they themselves produced. The paper ends with a discussion on the insights that can be gained from the analysis, both in terms of discourse intervention and the specific case of business practices in Japan.
2 Discourse intervention, social change and keywords

The central role played by discourse in the shaping of social identities, practices and beliefs has been well-documented in many academic fields including business and organization studies (cf. Fairclough 1992; Gee et al. 1996; Faber 2003; Boden and Nedeva 2010). Following the tenets of critical discourse analysis, this paper sees discourse as a “way of talking about and acting upon the world which both constructs and is constructed by a set of social practices” (Candlin and Maley 1997: 202). This dialectical relationship between discourse and practice implies that written or spoken texts do more than simply reflect the beliefs of their creators; they possess an ontological hardness that actively contributes to the creation and transformation of social reality.

A plurality of discourses, each structuring reality in a different way, compete to define what is “true” within a particular domain of the social world. People’s understanding of these domains is contingent upon an ongoing struggle between discourses, with perceptions of society and identity open to new representations as meanings are constantly altered and reconfigured through contact with competing discourses. Discourses that achieve dominance within a domain may be termed as being “hegemonic” (Gramsci 1971). Hegemony is social consensus achieved without recourse to violence or coercion. When discourses become hegemonic, the social practices they structure can appear so natural that we fail to see that they are the result of discursive struggles. They reach the level of “commonsense,” in that their origins and intrinsic contingency are forgotten (Deetz 1992).

No discourse, however, is capable of complete or permanent hegemony. As Mouffe (2008: 4) puts it, “every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices which attempt to disarticulate it in order to install another form of hegemony.” Such counter-hegemonic practices may occur naturally through day-to-day communicative practices which challenge or transform existing discourses, or they may be instigated in a deliberate and strategic act by interest groups as “an overt or covert struggle for discursive dominance” (Grant et al. 1998: 7–8). When change-making is deliberate or ideological in this way, it may be termed a “discourse intervention” (Karlberg 2005).

In the Western business world, it has been argued that such an intervention was made in the discursive construction of Post-Fordism or the so-called “New Work Order” (Gee et al. 1996), which has had a profound impact on how work is characterized in contemporary capitalist systems. In the New Work Order, firms push responsibility lower and lower down the hierarchy, requiring their
workers to “learn and adapt quickly, think for themselves, take responsibility, make decisions, and communicate what they need and know to leaders who coach, supply, and inspire them” (Gee et al. 1996: 19). While the discourse of the New Work Order is often egalitarian and empowering, it carries with it the implication that workers must continually prove their personal worth to the firm in order to maintain employment (Iedema 2003). Mouffe (2008: 4) describes the transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism as “a process of discursive re-articulation of existing discourses and practices, allowing us to visualize this transition in terms of a hegemonic intervention.”

One strategy by which intervention can proceed is through the articulation or re-articulation of discursively powerful concepts, commonly referred to as “keywords.” As the most salient notions within a discourse, keywords have the semantic power to configure or reconfigure meanings of other concepts within a particular discourse (Williams 1985; Leitch and Davenport 2007). Frequently, they are also words that possess multiple meanings, which allow them to be employed by the producer of a text to further his or her specific interests. Keyword analysis involves the linking of individual words in texts to a macro-level analysis of major debates and conflicts within societies. For instance, Urciuoli (2009, 2010) has analyzed the discursive appropriations of keywords like “culture,” “diversity” and “race,” while Leitch and Davenport (2007) investigated discourses of “sustainability.” In an analysis of government policy documents in New Zealand, they found that “sustainability” was employed with “strategic ambiguity” (Eisenberg 2007) in order to blur the conflict between business and environmental interests.

Discourse intervention can, in theory, be attempted by any social actors. However, in reality not all social groups have equal access to the key discourse genres that make hegemonic intervention possible. Successful interventions require the concerted effort of powerful interest groups who “warrant voice” within a particular domain (Potter and Wetherall 1987). Because of this, any analysis must include not only a description of how discursive change is attempted but also who is responsible for the attempt and for what motives. This requires looking behind the text itself into the context (historical and immediate) in which the text is produced.

In the next section, this paper will show how powerful business interests created the discourse of Nihon-teki keiei as a keyword within Nihonjinron in a way that would protect their own interests over those of their workers. I will argue that they successfully made Japanese-style management an integral component of national identity.
3 The articulation of Japanese-style management

*Nihonjinron* has been called “Japan’s dominant identity discourse” (Befu 2001: ix). In its heyday from the 1960s to the 1990s, well over a thousand books and many more articles were written on the subject in Japanese and other languages (Befu 2001). While some of these were serious scholarly studies, the vast majority were populist works designed for mass public consumption. Although the loss of national confidence induced by two decades of recession has reduced the appetite for such books, titles still continue to be produced today, with some – such as Masahiko Fujiwara’s (2007) *The Dignity of the Nation* (*Kokka no hinkaku*) – achieving bestseller status.

*Nihonjinron* portrays the Japanese as “uniquely unique” in the world with a homogeneous, group-oriented and harmonious society that is diametrically opposed to an equally homogeneous Other in the form of the West. Despite studies that have shown that Japan is not the homogeneous society presented in such texts, minorities such as people of Ainu, Korean or Chinese descent are rendered invisible under the banner of Japan as “*tani’itsu minzoku*” (‘single race’). Befu (2001: 66) argues that *Nihonjinron* as a cultural model of Japan is “ideologically hegemonic – that is, it is normatively all-encompassing, and with official sponsorship, attempts to control rather than merely describe reality – and thus has policy implications.”

Japanese-style management has been regarded as a natural product of the group-oriented and harmony-seeking culture that *Nihonjinron* promotes. Gotô (1983) argued that Japan’s management philosophy could be described as agrarian (*nōkō minzoku gata keiei*), with employees showing a debt of loyalty (*giri*) in return for the physical and emotional security provided by the firm. Tsuda (1979: 248) saw the Japanese firm as an extension of the family group (*ie*), in which “members express their desire to be loved, to be intimate with others, to respect others, and to fulfill” their egos. Even today, the idea that Japanese management arose from unique and ancient cultural practices still persists:

Teamwork is one of the strengths of the Japanese. Teamwork is thought to be incorporated into our DNA and originated in the harvesting operations of an agricultural people. (*Keizai Dōyūkai* 2009: 4)

A closer examination of articulatory practices, however, reveals Japanese corporate characteristics to be largely “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), constituted and reconstituted over the years by capitalist management
as a response to threats to their power and privileges. The notion of “warm-hearted” and “harmonious” workplace relations was first articulated in the 1890s when, as a reaction to shop floor conditions that were in fact highly strife-ridden and chaotic, the government attempted to introduce regulations to improve worker conditions. Factory management fought the regulations by coining neologisms such as *kazoku-shugi* (family-ism) and *onjō-shugi* (warm-heartedness) to describe Japan’s “beautiful customs” (*bijū*) of paternal workplace obedience and loyalty, the awkward addition of the suffix -shugi (‘-ism’) betraying the fabricated nature of the new terms (Gordon 1998).

As Gordon (1998) describes, the government was noticeably skeptical of the capitalists’ appeal to “beautiful customs,” arguing that Japan had no tradition of labor–management relations and was in danger of descending into what they termed the “British disease” of extreme social upheaval caused by strikes and protests. In the 1920s, faced by the prospect of trade union legislation, the capitalists changed their strategy, arguing against regulation not on cultural grounds but pragmatic ones, in that it might jeopardize Japan’s fragile economic growth. They tied even this argument though to opaque references to Japan’s “national feelings” (*kokujō*), maintaining an ambiguous link to the discourse of the 1890s. In the 1930s, when Japan’s militarization suddenly made discourses of loyalty and harmony advantageous to the state, they were conveniently taken up by both state and corporate interests in the process of mobilizing for war.

After the defeat in 1945, such discourses were once again dismissed, as corporations were urged to take on the “enlightened practices” of American capitalism, including quality control, wage grievance procedures and enterprise union negotiations – practices regarded today as aspects of Japan’s supposedly innate corporate culture. Imai (2011) shows how the principles of seniority wages and lifetime employment arose out of disputes between labor and management in the deprived post-war period.

From the 1960s, however, Japan’s economic boom and burgeoning self-confidence revivified the ideology of *Nihonjinron*, and corporate and academic commentators, with the tacit support of the state, argued that Japanese workplace practices came from a direct and unbroken tradition leading back to the feudal age of the samurai (Yoshimatsu 1972). Corporate practices such as lifetime employment and the seniority system came to be seen as integral parts of this community-based corporate – and, by extension, national – culture.

Lifetime employment, seniority wages, enterprise unions, group loyalty and harmony within the workplace are terms whose meanings are configured through their association with *Nihon-teki keiei*. As a keyword, *Nihon-teki keiei* structures their meaning into one identifiable discourse, which – by its very
naming – defines its frontier against an Other, almost invariably the West. So sedimened is its position that it becomes impossible to discuss Japanese business practices without reference to it. Use of the very term *Nihon-teki keiei* automatically validates and reinforces its “truth,” disguising the articulatory hegemonic practices that have created it. Competing discourses that might challenge the hegemony of this conception of the Japanese firm are forced to do so within the terms set by the keyword; they can struggle not for what the Japanese firm is, for this is already defined, but only what it should become. Furthermore, that argument can only take place under the powerful presupposition that the Japanese firm is indeed distinct from any other type of firm in the world.

What this means is that bringing change to Japanese business practices is a hugely difficult task, requiring a fundamental reconfiguration of the discourses that underpin them. *Nihon-teki keiei* does not just interpellate Japanese workers into particular subject positions (manifested, for example, in voluntary overtime, long working hours, avoidance of conflict with management, acceptance of one’s position and role and so on), it also interpellates management. In an era of deep recession and the pressures of globalized competition, the introduction of more flexible labor policies can become critical for a firm’s long-term survival. But it is difficult for Japanese companies to bring in such reforms without destroying the very edifice of what the Japanese firm is purported to be. If Japanese firms are, after all, no different – and perhaps less advanced and less enlightened – than those of the West, then the entire hegemony of *Nihonjinron* is potentially put at risk. What then can be used to bind employees together and keep them working long hours willingly? Without adept and fundamental discursive change that redefines conceptions of the Japanese firm, labor reforms are likely to be met with substantial resistance at all levels of Japanese society.

### 4 Destabilizing *Nihon-teki keiei* through new keywords

This section presents an examination of policy proposals on the topics of Japanese labor management and labor market reform produced by the Japan Business Federation (*Nippon Keidanren*) and the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (*Keizai Dōyūkai*), the two most influential business groups in Japan. Sixteen proposals of varying lengths were retrieved from the websites of each organization covering the period 1995 to 2014. 1995 marked an important shift
in the rhetoric of business groups with the publication of a major report by Nikkeiren, the forerunner of Keidanren, entitled “Japanese-style Management in the New Era” (shinjidai no Nihon-teki keiei; Nikkeiren 1995) after the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s.

From the analysis of the reports, most, but not all, of which are available with an official English translation, two concepts emerged as keywords that structure their own powerful discourses: “independence” (jiritsu), as used in the phrase “independent-type employees” (jiritsu-gata jinzi), and “diversity” (tayōsei). The neologism jiritsu-gata jinzi appeared in business policy statements for the first time in 2006. Tayōsei, a term of more general meaning and usage, appeared in non-controversial senses prior to 1995; however, it was not until 2002 that business groups began to emphasize it as a concept related to labor market deregulation. The following subsection will present a critical discussion of these two keywords, grounded in the 16 proposals produced by the two business groups. From there, it will show how Keidanren and Keizai Dōyūkai have been attempting to re-define “Japanese-style management” to suit the current interests of corporate management.

4.1 The independent-type employee

The precise origin of the term jiritsu-gata jinzi is hard to place; however, it gained prominence with the publication of a report by Keidanren in 2006 (Keidanren 2006a; available in Japanese only) entitled shutai-teki na kyaria keisei no hitsuyōsei to shien no arikata (‘The Necessity of Independent Career Formation and How to Support it’; my translation). In this report, Keidanren (2006a: 1–2) set out a vision of a new kind of employee, dubbed the jiritsu-gata jinzi, who they claimed would be an indispensable resource in the rapidly changing conditions of global competition. Independent-type human resources can “think and act on their own accord” (mizukara shutai-teki ni kangae kōdō suru). Whereas employees in the past might have been expected to “steadily carry out the tasks and objectives assigned to them” (ataerareta kadai ya mokuhyō o chakujitsu ni jikkō suru), new-style workers must have the ability to “demonstrate originality and find and solve problems by themselves” (dokusōsei o hakki shi, mizukara kadai o hakken shi kaiketsu suru nōryoku).

This idea of workers who can think for themselves and act independently is uncontroversial; and it is doubtful that the stereotype of the passive, drone-like Japanese worker was ever really true in the first place (Tolich et al. 1999). However, Keidanren’s vision of the independent-type employee contains a second aspect that poses a direct challenge to the discourse of Nihon-teki keiei.
This is that workers must be willing and able to forge their own careers without relying upon long-term tenure at one particular firm. Furthermore, they should be paid according to their abilities rather than the length of their service:

In order to adapt to the diversification of customer needs, firms need to develop independent-type human resources who are always aware of problems. Also, in light of the diversification of individual values and views on work, employees must be able to take charge of their own careers independently. At the same time, in the transition towards developing diverse human resources, we should move away from the seniority wage system that places undue emphasis on age and length of service to one which is based on skills, responsibilities, roles and achievements. (Keidanren 2006a: 3; my translation)

In the above extract, the need for independent-type employees is presented not only as a response to the “diversification of customer needs” but also to the “diversification of individual values and views on work.” Job and wage security are rights, therefore, that Japanese workers are willing to surrender as part of their personal value sets.

In other documents, Keidanren ties the concept of independent employees to proposals to abolish the system of overtime payments to white-collar workers:

And with more self-directed employees [jiritsu-teki na shain] whose hours are difficult to supervise, Nippon Keidanren advocated adopting a white collar exemption system, where most white-collar workers are exempt from regulation of working hours. (Keidanren 2004a: 5; official translation)

Again, overtime pay is presented as a right that more and more Japanese workers themselves do not seek: “More white-collar workers wish to be remunerated based on results achieved, irrespective of hours worked” (Keidanren 2006b: 5).

Keidanren frames the concept of jiritsu-gata jinzai within a neoliberal discourse of individual autonomy and choice. In its major report Japan 2025, for instance, it presents an idealized vision of Japanese society in which people have the freedom to make their own decisions and choices:

Japanese society in the postwar era has been shaped by companies and the roles they play in people’s lives. As Japan moves forward, though, it will have to shift society’s center of gravity from the interests of corporations to the lives of individuals. The Japanese will identify themselves less with the companies for which they work and more with their own personal talents and interests. (Keidanren 2003: 6; official translation)

In this society based on self-reliance and individualism, the government will play less and less of a role in people’s lives:
Self-reliant people will be aware of the markets through which society operates. [...] Japanese government in the past has been a defining force for the lives of the people; this will change as individuals become more empowered and assertive. (Keidanren 2003: 7)

In essence, the concept of jiritsu-gata jinzai is an attempt by business interests to fundamentally reconfigure the identities of Japanese white-collar workers and two of the principal tenets of Japanese-style management – lifelong employment and seniority wages – into a neoliberal ideology of self-reliant and deregulated labor. Its power as a keyword is in combining one positively connoted demand for workers with creativity and initiative (a discourse of skills) with a far more controversial call for labor market reform (a discourse of deregulation), both aspects cloaked in the language of empowerment and free choice and presented as an inevitable response to both globalization and societal value change.

4.2 Diversity

Closely associated with the discourse of the independent-type employee is the discourse of diversity and diversification (tayōsei and tayōka). Frequently “independence” and “diversity” appear side by side in reference to Japanese firms enhancing their ability to innovate in the global marketplace. In this sense, diversity usually refers either to the hiring of more non-Japanese workers or to the hiring of more women, elderly and disabled people, or to both. Diversity is said to be necessary for bringing new viewpoints and values into Japanese organizations in order to stimulate creativity and innovation:

People with a similar sense of values and background can produce similar ideas only. If diversity has been promoted, people with a different sense of values will discuss and trade opposing viewpoints. (Keizai Dōyūkai 2009: 42; official translation)

To remain competitive in international markets, Japanese enterprises will require constant innovation, so they must cultivate a corporate culture that emphasizes creativity. We need companies replete with diversity that bring together people with various values and points of view who can respect and stimulate each other. (Keidanren 2002: 2; official translation)

In terms of the hiring of non-Japanese, the discourse of diversity can also be used to justify large-scale immigration to fill labor shortages caused by Japan’s shrinking population:

Global competition for top-rate human resources is becoming increasingly intense while Japan’s socioeconomic composition is changing with lower birthrates and a graying
population. These changes must be countered by bringing the dynamism of diversity into Japan from outside. (Keidanren 2004b: 1; official translation)

Indeed, it is sometimes hard to know what Keidanren’s priorities truly are when they speak of diversity. In some documents they write openly of labor shortages in areas like construction, healthcare and nursing, plaintively noting that “accepting non-Japanese workers into the country is not yet being considered as a viable option for filling this gap” (Keidanren 2004b: 1). At other times, they are at pains to protest that innovation rather than demographics is their principal concern:

Japan’s population has started to decline, but Nippon Keidanren’s aim in calling for Japan to admit more non-Japanese workers is not to fill the gap caused by the drop in population. [...] Nippon Keidanren’s basic position is that non-Japanese people should be admitted to introduce different cultural ideas and sense of values into Japanese society and corporations and to promote the creation of a new added value, as this would accelerate innovation. (Keidanren 2007a: 5; official translation)

The issue of immigration is a hugely sensitive topic in Japan. Concerns over the country’s demographic crisis are countered by fears, real or imagined, that foreigners will threaten Japan’s social stability and low crime rate (Chiavacci 2014). Many of these fears are focused upon low-skill workers, often called “simple workers” (tanjun rōdōsha), whose admission into the country is severely restricted. It is perhaps workers in the “highly qualified” or “skilled” categories that Keidanren is referring to when it speaks of the “dynamism of diversity.” However, it is a sufficiently polysemous term to be used to refer to any group of workers Keidanren is concerned about at any given time.

As with the articulation of jiritsu-gata jinzi as a discourse of creative skills, “diversity” is a policy difficult to oppose. To reject it is to risk being regarded as discriminatory. Business organizations, however, take advantage of the term’s polysemy to promote a quite different form of diversity in the workplace. That is, employing workers on different kinds of contract: permanent employees (seiki-jugyōin), non-permanent employees (hiseiki jugyōin), temp workers (ha-ken) and part-time workers (pāto). Only permanent employees in Japan enjoy employment rights, such as long-term tenure, insurance and pensions. After the use of non-permanent workers was partially deregulated under the Koizumi administration a decade ago, their numbers have grown substantially in Japan, reaching 37% of the workforce in 2013 and growing by almost a million from 2012 to 2013 (Morioka 2013).

Keidanren, however, aims to have restrictions on hiring lifted entirely, along with the rights of permanent employees to lifetime employment. To push this policy, they began to use diversity in a strategically ambiguous way:
Diversity in employment and working patterns is also important not only for creating and expanding employment opportunities and making labor cost administration more efficient, but also for creating a corporate culture rich in creativity to ensure enterprise survival and growth. (Keidanren 2004a: 3; official translation)

Companies are finding there is a stronger need to have a more diverse work force now, in order to respond quickly and flexibly to rapidly changing and increasingly complex business conditions. (Keidanren 2007b: 3; official translation)

In these two extracts, diversity is used to unite a discourse of labor cost efficiency, a discourse of employment opportunity and a discourse of creativity. The discourse of creativity links it conceptually to diversity in the sense of hiring more women, non-Japanese nationals, etc., but here it refers to the deregulation of the labor market, spelled out in detail within the same documents. Deregulation is not presented as a choice made by company management, but as an unavoidable response to market conditions.

In other documents, diversity in working patterns is portrayed as a choice made by workers themselves from their personal set of values:

The working styles, values and lifestyles of individuals are diversifying, and we need to create a system and a diverse working environment that enables people with talent and drive to succeed. (Keidanren 2006a: 4; my translation)

Given the inherent insecurity of non-permanent employment and its lack of fundamental benefits, it is very unlikely that the move toward having greater and greater numbers of part-time workers comes from changing values within Japanese society. The deregulation of the Koizumi era came about from pressures applied by business interests, who are now applying the same pressures on the current administration of Shinzō Abe. “Diversity” acts as a keyword to unite several discourses that serve the current interests of Japanese management.

4.3 Japanese-style management

So, where does this leave the discourse of Japanese-style management with its three treasures of lifetime employment, seniority wages and enterprise unions? It is clear from the extracts above that, in the view of Japanese business representatives, lifetime employment and seniority wages no longer suit the current economic environment Japan finds itself in. In that sense, the discourses of diversity and the independent-type employee make a direct challenge to the hegemony of Nihon-teki keiei.
Moreover, as we saw above, the discourse of *Nihon-teki keiei* is predicated upon the premise that Japan is a group-based society that values cooperation, harmony and teamwork over individualistic pursuits. The firm is a kind of extended family that has at its heart the interests of all its members. Collectivism is the central aspect of *Nihonjinron* identity, articulated as a polar opposite to the individualism of the Western Other. The discourses of *tayōsei* and *jiritsu*, however, are based explicitly on the individual, who is regarded as the primary unit of both the workplace and society:

Enterprises need to create systems where people with different values and ideas can choose the employment patterns that suit them best and that remunerate them according to their contributions. In other words, they should be respected as individuals rather than treated uniformly as members of a group. (*Keidanren* 2004a: 3; official translation)

Diversity fundamentally challenges the assumption that Japan is, and should be, a homogeneous society. The independent-type employee, meanwhile, challenges the notion that Japanese organizations function as a team of like-minded workers treated fairly and equally in return for their loyalty and hard work.

In the face of the fundamental incompatibility of Japanese-style management with the neoliberal ethos of “diversity” and “independence,” *Keidanren* has tried to reconfigure the meaning of *Nihon-teki keiei* in an attempt to meld these disparate discourses together. This involves defining Japanese-style management in much vaguer terms than the vaunted Three Treasures:

In a radically changed economic environment, some have said that the ideas of Japanese-style management have collapsed. However, the basic philosophy of Japanese-style management, which emphasizes people-centered management and management from a long-term perspective, should be retained even as economic activity becomes increasingly globalized. (*Keidanren* 2006b: 7; official translation)

The term “people-centered management” is sufficiently opaque that it can be taken to mean virtually anything *Keidanren* wishes, including treating employees as individuals rather than as a group and rewarding them on the basis of performance rather than seniority. Likewise, “management from a long-term perspective” can be seen in purely strategic terms as a decision to pursue long-term market share rather than short-term profits, something that Japanese firms have indeed been noted for (Mouer and Kawanishi 2005).

The same terms are used in other *Keidanren* documents, such as the report entitled New Directions for the Japanese-Style Employment System produced in late 2007:

Enterprise management and labor are the complementary halves of a whole. The people-centered ethos of Japanese-style management has won broad public trust, and the Japa-
nese employment system, characterized by management from a long-term perspective and in-house labor-management relations, generally works well. (Keidanren 2007b: 1; official translation)

Here, the only element from the Three Treasures that survives is the enterprise union system, which, with the associated absence of industry-wide or occupation-based trade unions, has worked in favor of management interests by its general disavowal of strike action. Keidanren has no intention of reforming this aspect of Nihon-teki keiei, explaining in the same report that “enterprise-based labor unions have greatly contributed to stable management” (Keidanren 2007b: 4).

What is also noticeable throughout the documents produced by Keidanren is the bald demarcation between management and labor. They are seen as two clearly different sides, often with opposing objectives, and many of the reports can be read as messages to labor organizations, as well as to management or to government, not to expect concessions in wage negotiations. When Keidanren says, “Relations between management and labor in individual enterprises will become even more important for maintaining and strengthening competitiveness, and enterprises are taking steps to improve communication between the two sides” (Keidanren 2007b: 4; official translation), they are speaking the language of old-fashioned industrial capitalism. This, perhaps, can be viewed as a reflection of the invented tradition of Nihon-teki keiei, which was created as a way to deflect government regulation of labor practices, and a mirror to the true motivations of the executives that form Keidanren’s leadership.

5 Discourse intervention through keywords

This paper has examined how business groups in Japan have sought to subvert traditional discourses of Japanese-style management to suit the current interests of management in large firms. It began by describing how Nihon-teki keiei has been articulated historically by Japanese management to discursively oppose the threat of government regulation of labor practices. During Japan’s economic rise from the 1960s to the early 1990s, it was imbued with cultural, almost spiritual, meaning, becoming a fundamental aspect of Nihonjinron, the dominant identity discourse of modern Japan. Despite the pressures imposed by two decades of economic recession, the articulation of Nihon-teki keiei as a cultural phenomenon continues, and thus any attempt to reform the practices it is associated with is forced to confront the deeply entrenched position it holds within Japanese identity.
This paper has argued that Japanese business groups have been performing a discourse intervention based on articulating or re-articulating keywords. This paper identified two keywords employed by Japanese business groups: “diversity” (tayōsei) and “independent-type employee” (jiritsu-gata jinzai). The use of these concepts illustrates two different strategies by which discourse intervention might proceed on the level of individual keywords. In the first strategy, promoters of a discourse attempt to appropriate an existing keyword into a new discourse, destabilizing its current meaning and filling it with new meanings advantageous to the promoters’ interests. Ideally, the inherently polysemous nature of the keyword permits it to be appropriated without generating controversy or attention.

This is the case with “diversity.” By using the term to refer not only to the inclusion in the workplace of women, elderly and disabled people (an existing and uncontroversial use of the term) but also to large numbers of non-Japanese immigrants and, furthermore, to the hiring of non-regular/non-permanent employees, business groups are hijacking existing discourses of diversity and injecting them with new ideological meanings. All of these policy objectives, meanwhile, are placed in the same context of globalization and economic and social change. Opponents of the proposals are potentially forced into a narrow discursive space in which opposition to labor market reform can be equated with opposition to equal opportunity and/or free choice. Diagrammatically, we might express this discursive strategy in the way shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual map of “diversity” (tayōsei) as polysemous keyword.
The second strategy by which discourse intervention might proceed is by the creation of entirely new keywords, as in the case of the “independent-type employee.” *Jiritsu-gata jinzai* is a neologism created and defined by business groups with the objective of changing behavior within Japanese firms and the labor market as a whole. The use of the word “type” (-*gata*) hints at the artificial nature of the term. It has even generated another concept – “dependent-type employee” (*izon-gata jinzai*). While *Keidanren* and *Keizai Dōyūkai* do not seem to employ *izon-gata jinzai* in their official reports, it has appeared in business magazines, blogs and seminars, contrasted explicitly with its conceptual opposite and filled up with negative connotations. The discourse of *jiritsu-gata jinzai* has penetrated deeply and widely in Japan. In one simple measure, it generates over half a million hits on a basic search on Google Japan, appearing not only in business contexts but also in university mission statements, training programs, government websites and job advertisements (see Rear 2013).

In pushing for deregulatory reforms to the labor market, the present Japanese government under Prime Minister Shinzō Abe has framed their proposals in the same terms as those employed by business groups. In the summer of 2014, plans were made to submit a bill to significantly expand a new form of employment called “limited regular employment” (*gentei seiki koyō*), which would place employees on a contract system, offering them the right to avoid duties like overtime and forced transfers but potentially making them more susceptible to dismissal (North 2014). Abe promoted these reforms as a way to create “a society with flexible and varied ways of working” (quoted in North 2014: 1). In 2015, Abe set out the government’s intention to remove more restrictions from the Worker Dispatch Law (*Rōdōsha haken-hō*), allowing for even greater use of part-time and temporary workers by stating that “the options available for employees will be expanded to allow for flexible and diverse work arrangements” (Abe 2015: 6).

Furthermore, there is evidence that even in arguing against deregulation, opposition groups have begun to employ the same terminology as *Keidanren*. The Japanese Trade Union Confederation, or *Rengo*, referred to the “diversification of employment” (JTUC Rengo 2010: 1) and “the diversification in the employment patterns” (JTUC Rengo 2011: 2), tacitly accepting the premises of the term while seeking assurances about wage practices.

That said, the meaning of a keyword cannot be fixed in place permanently nor can promoters of a particular discourse, even powerful organizations like *Keidanren*, guarantee that a keyword will be articulated in the sense they aim for. “Diversity” and “independent-type employee” are open to differing ascriptions of meaning, negotiated and altered through day-to-day articulatory practices. “Diversity,” for example, is still used in the more common sense of inclusiv-
ity in employment without the added connotation of employment contract type. “Independent-type employee,” meanwhile, can be articulated in the narrow sense of a worker who takes initiative and generates original ideas, irrespective of job security and wage structure.

It would be going too far to suggest that Keidanren's vision of a new style of Japanese management has become hegemonic. Unlike Nihon-teki keiei, there is not yet a consistent and positive vision of how Japanese firms should operate in the present environment. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the old conception of Japanese-style management has been weakened, and the keywords of “diversity” and “independent-style employee” have played a significant role in destabilizing its discursive dominance.

References


