

Historical origins of a welfare-state regime: Unemployment protection in Japan, 1919–1949

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Abstrak

Although Japan since the 1920s witnessed unemployment, no system of unemployment insurance existed in Japan until after the end of World War II. Historians of welfare and labor have taken this to mean that the prewar Japanese government deviated from international standards of welfare policy, an argument that ties into notions of Japan as a liberal welfare state in the literature on varieties of capitalism and welfare-state regimes. The present paper confronts this type of argument from two angles. First, the type of unemployment that Japanese society faced in the 1920s was substantially different from that the advanced industrialized countries in Europe, North America, and Oceania had to deal with, as can be shown by analyses of the structure of the work force. Second, the main problem actually posed by unemployment in Japan, i.e. the situation of day laborers, was addressed, albeit not by the central state, but by municipal governments who installed local relief associations. If one acknowledges the potential of historical studies to contribute to social science typologies, the results of the present paper show that the claim that Japan is a liberal welfare state regime is difficult to sustain.