

MULTIVALID

Values in politics. A comparison between Europe and Japan

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SHORT PRESENTATION OF THE PROJECT

Our collective research analyses the fresh salience of values in European and Japanese politics. In both cases, the increasing references to values in the competition for and legitimization of power challenge established practices and hierarchies based on consensus and technocratic expertise.

The project explores different arenas: party politics and elections; public action and law; uses of religion, identity and memory in the public and media spheres. The outcome is an edited volume presenting contributions by an international team of scholars and discussed in two workshops organized in Brussels (March 2019) and Tokyo (September 2019).

Conceptual outlines

The purpose is to make sense of the resurgence of “values’ politics” in Europe (with a focus on the European Union) and in Japan. In these two polities, policy-making is largely driven by technocratic expertise and consensus and the legitimacy of public authorities is based as much on outputs offered to the population as on direct participation through the usual channels of representative democracy. The reassertion of normative issues on the agenda has then come as an element likely to challenge established practices and hierarchies of actors.

We understand “values’ politics” (Foret and Calligaro, 2018) as debates where values frame political issues in a way that transcend the competition of interests in a specific public policy to oppose different worldviews defined in moral terms. The consequence is a dramatization of a choice between good and evil, between loyalty or betrayal and/or between identity/sovereignty and alienation. “Values’ politics” may deal with intrinsically normative issues such as life-and-death matters (abortion, euthanasia, death penalty, commodification of the human body, sexual orientations, gender) but also with identity and memory or with material stakes (austerity conceived as a violation of human dignity or a moral responsibility towards future generations; security and emergency vs respect of privacy, fundamental rights and rule of law).

According to scholarship in political science and sociology, values are deeply cultural in a double sense. They are mental representations of what is worth being appreciated and not facts of nature; they are collective representations that cannot be reduced to individual opinions. They vary constantly across time and space, and the purpose is to measure these 2 variations. Values illustrate both the consensual and conflictual dimension of social life: they unite members of a social group in the sharing of a common axiological repertoire but

divide them through divergent implementations and distinguish them from other social groups (Heinich, 2017).

Values are tackled mostly in their political dimension, as factors driving political participation of individuals and the formation of collective preferences expressed by voting; as ideological components of party manifestos and communication in electoral campaigns; as political issues to be dealt with in policy-making; as ideational material working as incentives and resources for the mobilization of civil society and the media.

The comparison between the EU and Japan is justified by both their similarities and differences. Both polities are mature capitalist democracies facing crises of institutional legitimacy due to contested outputs, limits of the usual technocratic governance and weaknesses of electoral representation. Both are considered here as systems of multi-level governance: the EU is analysed through its national, supranational and intergovernmental arenas; Japan through its national and provincial/local arenas, the latter having taken a fresh importance in recent years. Of course, Japan is a much more politically and culturally integrated system than the EU. The purpose is precisely to understand how, against different but commensurable backgrounds, the rise of values politics alters (or not) the political game, for which purposes and with which effects.

Background and resources

The core team of the project includes researchers from the ULB and Waseda, two universities linked by a “strategic partnership” and with a rich track record of joint achievements. This core team is completed by invited specialists bringing their relevant expertise. The ambition is to combine up-to-date theoretical discussions with non-normative and empirically-based case studies.

The association of two local teams in Brussels and Tokyo and the addition of their respective networks is the guarantee to offer a first-rate access to data and the ability to disseminate the findings towards academia, policy circles and the interested public in Europe and in Japan.

The project is supported by a FNRS-JSPS grant financing the organization of workshops in Brussels and Tokyo.