

**John Torpey 00:00**

Hi, my name is John Torpey, and I'm director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Welcome to the International Horizons podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute that brings scholarly expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. Today we explore the complexities of immigration and race in contemporary Japan, where Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has just recently announced that he will be stepping down after a long tenure in the Prime Minister's Office. We're fortunate to have with us today Michael Sharpe.

Michael Sharpe is Associate Professor of Political Science at York College of CUNY, as well as an adjunct research scholar at Columbia University's Weatherhead East Asian Institute. His research looks comparatively at the politics of migration, immigrant political incorporation, and political transnationalism in the Netherlands, Japan, and around the world. His first book, *Postcolonial Citizens and Ethnic Migration: The Netherlands and Japan in the Age of Globalization*, offers a cross regional investigation of the role of citizenship and ethnicity in migration, exploring more specifically the political realities faced by Dutch Antilles in the Netherlands, and Latin American Nikkeijin, that is people of Japanese descent in Latin America, especially in Brazil, when they go back to Japan. Professor Sharpe has been a Mansfield Foundation and Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership, US Japan Network for the Future Program scholar. He's a member of the Association of Asian Studies, and Northeast Asia Council Distinguished Speakers' Bureau. Thanks so much for being with us today, Michael Sharpe.

**Michael Sharpe 02:09**

Thank you very much. It's an honor and a pleasure to be here.

**John Torpey 02:13**

Great to have you with us. So, when you and I first met, you told me an interesting story about your background, and I thought it might be useful to start there because I think it probably had a lot to do with shaping how you came to study Japanese politics and the Netherlands, and more specifically to focus on immigration and discrimination to Japan. Can you tell us a little bit about that and how it's shaped your scholarly work?

**Michael Sharpe 02:43**

Sure. So this is a bit of a long story, but I'm gonna try. So I'm the first born in the United States to immigrant parents from the Dutch Caribbean island of Aruba and the Dominican Republic. Now Aruba is still formerly a part of the Dutch kingdom. So that means I'm a dual citizen of the US and the Netherlands. And so my immediate and extended family have been immigrants over generations in various parts of the Caribbean, and in Europe, including the Netherlands. So, these multiple identities and legal citizenships, they've always intrigued me with questions of the politics and determinants of membership and belonging, as well as inclusion and an exclusion.

So while I was a master's student at Columbia, I discovered that I had to move to the to the Dutch kingdom, including the islands or the European Union, in order to to continue my Dutch citizenship, so I left Columbia and continued and moved to the Netherlands. And I happened to be there in the 90s, during the time of mass migration from the islands to the Netherlands, and I became very fascinated

with the dilemma of language and culture and discrimination, impacting the Antillean community and the self-described multicultural, super tolerant Netherlands. And so while doing research in graduate school there, I came across an NGO called a IMADR, International Movement against All forms of Discrimination and Racism. And IMADR is the brainchild of the Buraku Liberation League, which is a of a minority facing caste discrimination in Japan. So, so I came across these references, and I was moved to learn about the Buraku people and the multi-generational systematic discrimination that they are facing.

So here's a personal story. My fellow graduate student and future wife was actually is actually from Japan. And so when we decided to get married, and I thought it best that I get to know Japan. So I followed her from the Netherlands and emigrated to Japan, got married, obtained a Spousal Visa, and started taking a Japanese course. And it's during this time that I experienced the mass migration of Latin America, Nikkeijin, these are Japanese and descendants in Latin America, moving to Japan. And I was very intrigued by this. I speak Spanish as well. Many of them spoke Portuguese, because they're from Brazil, so I became intrigued with this and also the barriers that they've faced to their own inclusion, despite the fact that they were up the same blood.

While in Japan, I was very fortunate to get very good employment, and I ended up working for the IMADR as a project coordinator for the Asia campaign of the 2001 World Conference on Racism in South Africa. I was so I was very fortunate to do that. And this these experiences have shaped my interest in Dutch and Japanese politics. So my family background, immigrant experience in Japan, and work in anti-racism and social justice, and later I was employed with the Japanese consul in New York. This made me fascinated with Japanese politics, a good prospect of Japan, as a new or late comer comes country of immigration.

**John Torpey 06:36**

Well, it's quite a story and it reminds me It reminds me a little bit of the political scientist Ken Zhao, who at once described North Korea playing on Stalin's notion of socialism in one country. He said it was socialism in one family in north. Yes, various sorts of globalization in one family. You got it all right there at home. That's a terrific story. Thank you very much for explaining that for our listeners.

But of course, you know, it gets into a lot of very serious issues about what happens in Japan and Japan's orientation to foreigners into immigration. And that really has been the focus of your work, as you kind of hinted. So let's talk about that. Japan officially bans unskilled foreign labor and says it's not a country of immigration, just as Germany did until relatively recently, a couple of decades ago. It just was a fiction in Germany, one that they pretend it was real and took pretty seriously until they decided it was kind of untenable so to say. Japan has the world's longest life expectancy, but it faces demographic decline and labor shortages, shortages as a result of an ageing population and low birth rates, which threaten fundamentally the collapse of the pension system. And in recent years, they've begun to allow significant numbers of foreign nationals into the country, including Prime Minister Abe's creation of a new visa to allow half a million low skilled foreign workers into Japan through 2025, all the while insisting that it wasn't an immigration policy.

So what's going on with the Japanese government? You know, what is their stance really about this? I mean, I've spoken to not a scholar now, but a former member of the Japanese foreign ministry who said, 'Look, we're gonna have to abandon this fiction, because just our social welfare system is simply not going to survive unless we start to admit more foreigners.' So how do you understand this? What's going on?

**Michael Sharpe** 09:00

Well, it's funny I knew that it's a little ironic because actually, you see migrants actually very visibly at least in the Tokyo area. They're visible as servers in restaurants of Narita and Haneda airports, the large airports in Tokyo, as clerks in convenience stores - almost every clerk in a convenience store is a foreigner. Very often of Chinese origin. You'll see them in family restaurants, on farms, harvesting vegetables sold in Tokyo supermarkets in food processing plants, also some undocumented workers at construction sites as well as the as high skilled foreign workers in the IT, finance, and also the education sector. In popular culture, you see foreigners, as sumo wrestlers, like Akebono, from Hawaii or from Mongolia, some of wrestlers from Egypt, to J-pop to Enka traditional music to TV personalities, the fashion industry, to most recently the crowning of a biracial Miss Universe and Miss Japan. So, the reality is not consistent with actual policy.

The rationale for the new visa is to support the labor shortage, and several targeted areas such as agriculture and construction. And it's also a training program to allow foreigners from developing or less developed countries to repatriate the skills that you learn in Japan. That's the that's the premise. But in fact, many of these workers are exploited and there have been violations of human rights. So there are important political, ideological, and practical reasons for a prime minister to make an obvious statement on non-immigration.

First, many of Prime Minister Abe's supporters are right wing and ultra nationalist, and so he cannot be openly supportive of immigration. Secondly, there is a persistent notion of the uniqueness of Japan as a homogenous society. And so there is something about increased diversity through acceptance of more foreign workers will disrupt society and lead to friction and crime and threats to public security that they imagine occur in Europe and elsewhere where there are sizable immigrant communities. Third, others question the capacity of foreigners to learn the Japanese language and culture and integrate into society. And so foreigners have been asked to stay for a limited period of time so the government will not have an outright immigration policy.

The new visa category does not allow workers to bring their families. But, others contend that one can change status to a skilled labor category, providing they fulfill certain criteria. And that would allow them to bring their families and renew the visa. So the significance of this new policy, which is quite dramatic, is really another step to Japan, opening to immigration, right where foreign workers are necessary for the maintenance and growth of the economy. And this rapidly ageing society with, as you said, one of the world's lowest birth rates, so, the new visas are targeted to specific industries where there are labor shortages. As Japan's baby boomers retire, there will not be enough young people to support the social welfare system, which heightens concerns about labor about tax revenue, about health care, pension systems and long term care, productivity. The UN claims that Japan will need 17 million foreign foreigners by 2050 to address worker scarcity and avoid a possible collapse of the of the pension

system. So this is a possible way to a piecemeal remedy; and something else I'd like to say, many of Japan's measures for foreign workers have been incremental and piecemeal.

By the 1980s, demand for cheap foreign labor was supplied by South Asians and Iranians, and this triggered side doors for unskilled foreign labor. One measure that was created in a 1990 reform that established a visa for overseas Japanese descendants on the premise that they're coming to see their ethnic homeland. But really, it was a way to attract unskilled foreign labor that might be possibly even be more acceptable to the Japanese, which they found out that these Latin American Nikkeijin were Latin Americans. And so, in the wake of the 2008 financial world financial crisis, they actually created a program to send back, to pay new American Nikkeijin specifically to go back to Latin America on the promise that they don't return under the same visa status. During the 90s, a trainee program was created to attract foreign workers from developing countries. By 2012, there's a point-based immigration system launched with fast track permanent residency after just one year of residence to attract high skilled foreigners. And a new foreign registration system was established, extending the maximum stay for foreign residents from three to five years. So, so we're seeing this policy is significant, but it's in line with other kind of piecemeal and incremental Japanese measures to increase unskilled labor and stave off the collapse of the pension system, and of course to feed the labor shortages.

**John Torpey** 15:31

Fascinating. And I have to say this raises issues that I've wondered about a lot about, you know, the way the term race is used and how it should be understood in many different parts of the world. And your work is, you know, really right on target as far as kind of being able to say something comparative about how race is dealt with and thought about in what we call the West. And so I wonder, I mean, this reminds me also of a comment I saw, I can't remember who it was, but writing about Chinese society and saying this was somebody who had lived in China for a long time, spoke Chinese, etc., but who said 'unless you look a certain way, you will never be Chinese.' So, so I wonder if you could say a little bit about how does this differ in the Netherlands and Japan in how this concept is employed, used, and thought about. I would be very interested to hear what you have to say about that.

**Michael Sharpe** 16:50

Okay, well, I guess I can say quite a bit about that. So the Japanese story is really one of race and modernity as a non-white power, right as the first as the world's first really non-white power that defeated the Russians. African Americans are actually very much inspired by that people like Dubois and Garvey, and also Japanese intellectuals also were inspired by African-Americans. So let me start with that. So we know that with the Meiji Restoration in the late 19th century Japan, the Meiji reformers came to embrace this idea of ethnic homogeneity. But Japan has always had indigenous people, Okinawans and also the Buraku minority that I mentioned before, and they trace their origin to well before the 17th century or Early Edo era. So like Germany, Japan's late development means it forms this modern state with this late 19th century Meiji restoration from a rather disparate populace, and so they promote a common ethnicity as a kind of as a kind of a national glue. As you can say that they learned this from Otto von Bismarck and his notion of Blood and Iron about an ethnic conception of nationhood.

So with the promotion of the Japanese Empire, though, there was expansion via colonialism into Asia, and the Japanese actually use racism and ethnic hierarchy. And so this was actually a multi-ethnic Empire, where Asian peoples were regarded as racially inferior and backwards. So Korean and the Chinese minorities in Japan, they trace their origin to through this period where they were used as essentially slave labor. So with Japan's defeat at the end of the Empire, it is a kind of unmixing of Japan and a reembrace of ethnic homogeneity, which is the 1954 San Francisco peace treaty. Right there colloquially colonial subjects lost a Japanese nationality. The US occupying forces also were very concerned about the Korean and Chinese minorities being communists instigators, so the very tight immigration controls were implemented and this idea of ethnic homogeneity was promoted.

So back to the race thing. Japan as a non-Western power saw itself as actually a champion of the darker races. Right. In fact, Dubois and Garvey actually use this language; the politician Makino Nobuaki actually use Jim Crow and lynching as a wedge issue to embarrass the United States. And Japan actually proposed a racial equality bill at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. So, in contemporary Japan, race is often thought of as a black-white issue. An issue that doesn't apply to the Japanese, right? That's a black-white thing. So racism in Japan has a similar function as colorblind racism, the kind of racism you might see in the Netherlands.

In the Netherlands, there's a stress on "well, you're formally equal so there is no racism" but of course, there's racism and the denial of racism is actually reinforced with it. So you see this very much in denial. Like I give an example, you've heard of the Zwarte Piet, Black Pete right? Where white folks and black folks actually dress up in very in in minstrel like fashion in blackface? It's part of the Dutch Christmas tradition. And this is very offensive to black people. And but Dutch people will say – well, white Dutch people will say – "well, there's nothing racist about it. It's simply our, our tradition. And this is Santa's helper, he goes down the chimney, and he becomes dark". But when you look at it, it's very much an exaggerated caricature of blackness with large earrings, large big lips, and an afro wig. It's quite disturbing, but so the two places that are actually similar when it comes to this denial of racism and reinforcement of it in Japan.

The Netherlands will say, "well, we're so equal. We're so tolerant. We suffered under the not the Nazis, there's no way we can be racist look at us". And in Japan, there's something kind of similar but the other way around, it will say, "well, race is viewed as something foreign. And so there is no racism". Right? Because of this notion of being ethnically homogenous, even in the Japanese Constitution, which was written by the Americans, for the most part, there actually is a clause in there to talk about racism. But the thing is, by using the word racism, they also forget about, about the ethnic minorities, like the Koreans and Chinese who actually face quite a bit of racism.

Now I'd like to talk a little bit about visible foreigners though, because this distinction between Asian foreigners (also from East Asia) and visible foreigners. Racism against visible foreigners very much in contemporary Japan often takes the form of country of origin and level of development. So, we know in ancient Japanese art, there's a there's a preference for pale skin, right as darker skins probably associated with field labor. The more recent doctrine of white supremacy converges with this, and by virtue of Japanese colonialism and development, you see this in later pop culture and influence and things in skin lightening and whitening all over East Asia. What you see for these reasons, some argue

that white Americans and white Europeans are at the top of the food chain of visible foreigners, in Japan with Africans and South Asians towards the bottom.

There is a fascination with African-Americans. Culture, right? And especially pop culture. So, for a variety of reasons, some African-Americans in Japan may actually feel freer and more empowered than they do in the United States. But this preference for African-Americans means that Africans are kind of, you know, regarded as, as lower on the food chain. And what you'll see in some neighborhoods, which is which I find quite fascinating, in some trendy neighborhoods, you'll see Africans do caricatures of like hip-hop African-Americans, because the Japanese can't distinguish. But you and I would be able to distinguish because of their accents.

I've also heard quite a bit about South Asians and Africans and other black and brown people being stopped and harassed by police, denied housing, relegated to certain types of employment, and also exploited. And in 2017, the government released the results of the first national survey on racial and ethnic discrimination, reports that include employment discrimination, racist taunts, and that there's a lot of racism when it comes to housing, discriminatory speech, rights, etc.

**John Torpey 25:44**

Well, I don't want to interrupt your train of thought, but it sounds like in a certain sense, some of your comments are bringing us to the contemporary scene. I'm wondering, like many countries, I think the Japanese are fascinated with the United States. And it sounds like they have been moving to some extent towards their own sort of reckoning with race, if that's the way to put it. So maybe you could talk a little bit about that and how Japanese society and Japanese government are responding to what's been happening in the United States since the killing of George Floyd.

**Michael Sharpe 26:24**

Sure, sure. I could definitely talk about that. But before that, I would like to also say that racial hierarchy can be relational and based on context. So when I moved to Japan, I was able to gain employment, very good employment, where my wife was not actually because quite a bit of gender discrimination as well. On the other hand, even if you live in Japan for decades and speak the language fluently, you may actually be offered forks instead of chopsticks in restaurant and treated like permanent guests. But on the other hand, you have many biracial athletes and stars like Naomi Osaka, and others. And the crowning of a biracial Miss Universe and Miss Japan, this does say something about the changing self-perception of Japan.

So just going to the to the George Floyd killing and to the Black Lives Matter movement, which has been quite interesting. So, there was an incident in Japan recently around the Black Lives Matter Movement. NHK, which is a national broadcaster, they actually they put out a kind of a kind of cartoon trying to explain Black Lives Matter and the video was decried internationally and domestically for its stereotypical racist depiction of African-Americans. This video actually speaks again to the denial and consequential reinforcement of racism in Japanese society. The Japanese may argue naivete, but naivete is an argument often made by some in Japan and European countries to disavow anti-black racism, with the claim that there's never been slaves on the territory, or there's never been a significant black population. But of course, there have been Africans in Japan since the 16th century. The US

when Commodore Perry came to open up Japan he actually brought the minstrel show with him and whites performing in blackface with the demeaning characteristic of blacks to justify their subordination.

Similarly, the NHK video portrayed African-Americans in kind of stereotypical characters, a looting man with a man in a sleeveless purple suit and Fedora playing guitar in sandals and a single overly muscular African-American narrator in a tank top speaking in very crude Japanese about the impact of inequality and the Coronavirus as a source of the protests instead of talking about the systematic killing of black people, by police and racism in the US. The video failed to address the issues that Black Lives Matter has brought to bear. The US Embassy actually condemned the video, NHK apologized and now said it's retraining its staff.

But this may also have something to do with what's going on in Japan, with police brutality against some foreigners in Japan. Just a few days before that occurred, this man had an incident with the police that people regard as discrimination. Some argue that maybe NHK was trying to avoid that issue altogether. But sometimes you will see in Japan actually performers put on blackface. I know it's the 21st century, but still. There was an incident a few years ago of the comic, Hamada, who appeared in blackface to impersonate Eddie Murphy, and the movie Beverly Hills Cop. And while there might be criticism of this, and other incidents of racial insensitivity, the Japanese defense offered is often naive or an attempt to pay homage. And sometimes even Caucasians are impersonated by with Japanese wearing blonde wigs and long plastic noses. There were ads put up on the Japanese airline Toshiba and they had to pull these ads and apologize, so there is there is certainly racism in the Japanese media, this denial of racism. I think what we can say, is that white supremacy and systematic racism has to be addressed in every part of the world, including Japan.

**John Torpey 31:51**

Indeed, and you know the protests that the killing of George Floyd sparked initiated has been followed up by people around the world. Yes, certainly in Europe. And I wonder, you know, aside from what happened at the NHK, the broadcaster, what's been going on among the Japanese population? Have there been protests in the street about any of these issues?

**Michael Sharpe 32:22**

Absolutely. It's actually very, very encouraging. There have happened a Black Lives Matter movement also in Japan. There've been demonstrations and big places, such as in Shibuya, which is kind of the Times Square of Tokyo. There have also been demonstrations in Osaka, where there's a large Korean minority discriminated against, and so, this has definitely been raised particularly, particularly by young people. And I think it's very, very encouraging. It's being well attended by young people in Tokyo and Osaka, in solidarity with those in the US and internationally, but also raising the issues of racism and discrimination in Japan. So I think there's a lot of potential there for change.

**John Torpey 33:23**

And we started out by mentioning that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has just announced that he's going to step down from his office after eight years. Actually his second period as prime minister, and he's now the longest serving prime minister postwar. What do you foresee coming down the road for immigration and race issues with the new government coming in?

**Michael Sharpe** 33:54

Well, okay. With the new government, as you said, Prime Minister Abe was the longest serving prime minister in Japanese history. So, he carries a great deal of political weight and influence through his continuity. But I don't think much will change with by him resigning. Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), one of the world's longest ruling parties, has dominated since, with very little exception, for a majority of its postwar development. The major inter-party factions within the LDP have agreed to rally for another politician, Yoshihide Suga, hoping that Suga will become Prime Minister. He actually served as Abe's cabinet secretary for many years. His supporters hoped that that he will give them ministerial positions in return for their support.

With regard to immigration policy, I don't think there'll be much of a difference. Suga has a ruthlessly, if you don't mind me saying, pragmatic approach to politics combined with very ideologically conservative inclinations. And that's been evident in his loyalty to Abe. And this suggests that immigration policy will follow along the lines of Abe's; that is, with no interest in an integration policy. But he will be keen to answer to the demands of employers who need new labor. So, so there won't be much of a hesitation to continue the new visa policy.

As far as racism probably, I think there's a growing consciousness in Japanese society to fight – despite the fact that there's this little really to address or educate the public about – about racism. More since 2006, there have been these anti-Korean anti-Chinese protests in Japan's big cities by right wing extremist groups, calling Koreans criminals and cockroaches, and even calling for their killing. And so the Japanese Diet, their parliament, passed an anti-hate speech legislation in 2016. But the law has no penalties, and so many see as ineffectual. And there is a right-wing organization that has been identified by the National Police Agency as a hate speech organization, and places like Osaka, Japan, has ordinances against hate speech. There is some education but very little, mostly around Buraku issues. In the Japanese school system, there is something called moral education, which some I've argued has really been used as a means for a patriotic, kind of nationalist impulse. So, I think as far as immigration policy, I don't think much will change. As far as integration policy I don't think much will change in that direction. The recognition, though, of racism is growing. And even though you have this these anti-Korean, anti-Chinese hate groups, on the other side, you also have a growing anti-racist movement in Japan as well that's being staffed by young people and actually from old timers from the new left of the 1960s and 70s.

**John Torpey** 38:02

Interesting. You know, it occurs to me, from thinking about some of the comments you've made, to ask you to compare this to the situation in Europe. That is, on the one hand, you have kind of increasingly nationalist, sometimes called populist movements that are about saying our country for people like us, whichever country that might be. But at the same time the social democratic European welfare state faces some of the same kinds of problems that Japan faces in terms of life expectancy and labor shortages. And there's a push in a different direction from what I've just described, that kind of says, well, whether we like it or not, we have to have more of these people who are not like us if our welfare state is going to survive.



I'm reminded of something Brzezinski said in one of his books about Europe being the world's largest, most comfortable nursing home. Or that was it's greatest aspiration. He was being critical, but the remarks stuck with me. So, I wonder if you could talk about how these two parts of the world are thinking about these issues? I mean to some degree, they're just reacting to them, I suppose. But I wonder, are there different approaches? Do you see different kinds of consequences? Is Japan going to be more resistant than Europeans have been seemingly of late to opening up to non-Japanese others? Your comments on that?

**Michael Sharpe** 40:01

Well, it's interesting, because, on the local level, the integration is happening already in Japan, and people are relating to your comments on the kind of nursing home idea. There's a huge issue because it is the world's oldest population. There's a huge industry around caregiving in Japan that's being staffed by foreigners, for the most part. And I've read some studies that say that, actually, caregivers are seen in a different light than other types of foreign workers just simply by virtue of the intimacy of that kind of work. So I don't know if you get that that same sort of outcome in Europe. I think that, I mean, for Japan, this is really a matter of life and death. Right?

It seems that what is going on in the politicians' minds, it's different from what's going on in civil society. In the politicians' minds, there seems to be a real fear and avoidance of this issue of immigration, because they think that there will be a negative backlash. That might not necessarily be true, until there's an avoidance of it, and instead of attacking it head on, you get these piecemeal measures that have started in the 90s and continue. But in my view, this is inevitable. And I do think that Japan, it's really a country that's reinvented itself, several times over. And this immigration regime, whether they like it or not is expanding, simultaneously denying that it's a country of immigration. Japan is also very organized, incredibly orderly society. And I think that the way in which immigration is framed and managed, could actually go in two directions. It could be a model of acceptance and democratic inclusion. Or an exemplar of illiberal intolerance and exclusion for the region and the world.

So I really see this as a litmus test of its liberal democracy. And in Europe, I see it as well. But there is difference in Japan to it. I think there are legal mechanisms that are missing in Japan that you have in Europe to combat racism and discrimination. Also the phenomena in Europe, at least I can speak for the Netherlands, is really framed around anti-Muslims. It's anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic. And that's something that is changing of culture by virtue of the expansion of the Muslim population vis-à-vis the white Dutch popular population. That's a phenomena that we don't see in Japan.

**John Torpey** 43:35

Fascinating. Well, thank you very much for joining us today. That's it for today's episode of International Horizons. I want to thank Professor Michael Sharpe of CUNY York College for taking the time to discuss the issue of immigration race in Japan today. I also want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us again for the next episode of International Horizons.

**Michael Sharpe** 44:06

Thank you very much.