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Background paper

Current topics of social science research in Japan

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Research Topics tackled by Japanese sociologists from the 1970 to 2008

by

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The research topics tackled by contemporary Japanese sociologists can be roughly divided into two major groups. On the one hand, research has been carried out on questions *internal* to Japanese society; on the other, Japanese sociology has long been integrated in international debates and, as such, has opened itself up to *external* questions and references. As will be shown, the difference between “internal” and “external” topics must be put into perspective for the divide is often blurred. In this paper it will nonetheless be used heuristically in order to introduce the general patterns of the sociological field.

Since the 1990s, Japan sociology has focussed on a set of new topics coined as “problems” or “challenges” currently faced by Japanese society (i.e. topics internal to this society), for example “ageing” and the “youth” to take only the most striking examples. One of the most rapidly ageing societies in the world, Japan started to tackle the issue at the end of the 1980s (73 articles on the topic, see figures below), but it is nevertheless only in the 1990s and 2000s that the question has become a major issue for researchers (respectively 260 and 291 articles). In comparison, the number of articles devoted to youth may appear more modest (87 articles in the 2000s), yet the number of publications has shown a constant and strong progression since the 1980s. Issues such as the generation gap and the consequences of educational pressure – which are commonplace in public discussion in Japan – may explain this recent interest.

Of all the internal topics, it is nevertheless the questions of “women” and “gender” which has attracted the greatest sociological attention. Already in the 1980s, 210 articles had been published on the question of “women”; in the next decade, this number amounted to 453. Interestingly, in the 2000s, fewer articles have been published on this topic (408), but at the same time, the question of “gender” has aroused an always increasing interest (from 23 to 452 articles). The shift of paradigm between “women” and “gender” is significant. One may think, here, that the first sociological investigations on this issue were fuelled by the strong Japanese feminist movement of the 1970s; yet, in the 1990s, probably due to the greater influence of US universities, they were progressively replaced by gender studies. This prompted the same methodical changes as in American universities, with a shift from research on “women” to research on “gender”, the latter concept being nowadays considered more accurate. As such, the study of women/gender underlines the importance of this question for Japanese sociologists and for Japanese society by and large. But it also shows how the divide between internal and external issues must be used carefully: if the question of women has been a key issue inside Japanese society from the 1970s up to today, international sociological trends have nevertheless impinged on the way the problem has been addressed in Japan

One last topic needs further comment. Relatively few articles are devoted to questions of “economic sociology”. In the 2000s, 31 and 52 articles tackled, respectively, the problems of “poverty” and “inequality”; only 9, in the same period, looked into the problem of unemployment. One may argue that these questions do not have the same dramatic consequences in Japan as they have in other countries, but that would lead to an underestimation of the effects of the economical crisis of the 1990s¹. This is an issue that

¹ This article was first written while the effects of the 2008-2009 financial crisis were not fully known. Japan has been severely hit since. Socio-economic problems like unemployment and poverty (re)appeared at a scale unknown for decades and contributed to worsen the inequalities brought by the 1990s economic crisis.

requires further examination, especially if one keeps in mind the huge influence of German economic sociology on the foundation of Japanese sociology.

In addition to these internal topics of research, Japanese sociology, as said before, is also situated at the crossroad of international trends. For two reasons: First, as the second economy in the world, Japan has experienced many changes due to its global position². This explains partly why questions such as “migrations” and “globalisation” became new research topics in the 1990s and 2000s. Until the end of the 1980s, the few articles dealing with migrations (33) were devoted only to internal migrations. In the 2000s, more than 100 articles were written on the topic but, this time, with a focus on international migration. Unsurprisingly, questions such as the development of migrations to Japan, as well as return migrations from 3rd generation South American-Japanese, predominate. As for articles related to the current processes of globalisation, they amounted to 130 in the 1990s and to 352 in the 2000s. It is likely that both the international position of Japan and her special place in Asia, close to China, account for this new sociological attention.

But the international dimension of Japanese sociology is however not only linked to recent events. It has deeper roots in that the Japanese sociological tradition was built through early and critical exchanges with European, then North-American, sociologies. Interestingly, and in spite of the huge impact of US universities, European, and especially German, sociologists have remained very influential to the theoretical debates of the 2000s. The number of articles devoted to Luhmann (64) and Weber (110) had been constantly rising in the previous decades. If Durkheim’s work has been discussed to a large extent, significantly less articles have nevertheless been published on it during recent years (66) than in the 1990s (117). Bourdieu prompted a sudden interest in the 1990s (from 0 article in the 1980s to 55/56 in the next two decades), reaching an influence which, for North-American sociologists, can be compared to Parsons’ (68). The various and elaborate uses made of these theoreticians cannot be summed up here. One shall only indicate that they are very likely linked to the attempts to find alternative patterns to the previously (i.e. until the 1980s) dominating Marxist theory (Marx’s influence has incidentally shrunk in the 2000s: only 30 articles, compared to 50 in the 1990s).

The figures in tables 1 to 16 below were calculated from the comprehensive bibliographical database of the Japan Sociological Society. (Note that all books and papers published in the current decade (from 2000) have not been fully listed yet). It is therefore difficult to make a firm empirically-based claim on the data available for the period 2000-2008. As a matter of fact, they amount to a number significantly *lower* than the one given for the previous decade (1990-1999), whereas other figures, such as those quoted in the paper, tend to indicate that the whole number of publications in social sciences has *increased* during the 2000s. In order to avoid any bias due to the discrepancy between *actually published* and *already listed* works, the figures below provide two different numbers for the 2000-2008 period. In red, the number of publications on various topics as listed by the Japan Sociological Association. In blue, the rectified number, calculated on the assumption that the total number of publications in the 2000s will remain equal to those of the 1990’s. It is therefore important to keep in mind that the actual number of publications for the 2000s may be different from the estimates included here. All the figures for the 2000s must therefore *only* be regarded as *hints* of general trends, to be corroborated when further data are available.

² This paper, once again, was first written as Japan ranked 2nd in the world economy, behind the United-States, a position now occupied by China.

The data was gathered according to the keywords given in each article, except for the articles on Weber, Marx, Simmel, Parsons, Durkheim and Bourdieu. In these cases, only the articles embarking on a theoretical discussion were included in the sample. This means that we did not take into consideration the numerous articles which used these authors simply as methodical references.

Below, tables 1 to 9 capture figures on research topics tackled by Japanese sociologists, and tables 10 to 16 capture figures on theoreticians who have influenced Japanese sociology.

Table 1

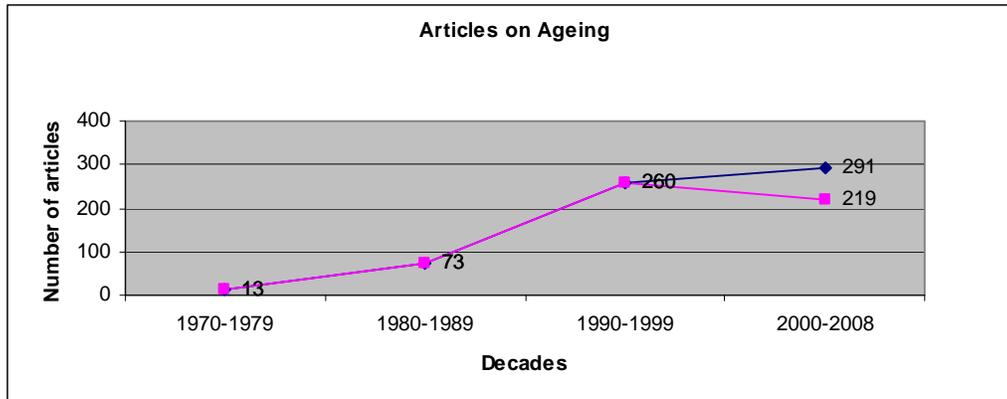


Table 2

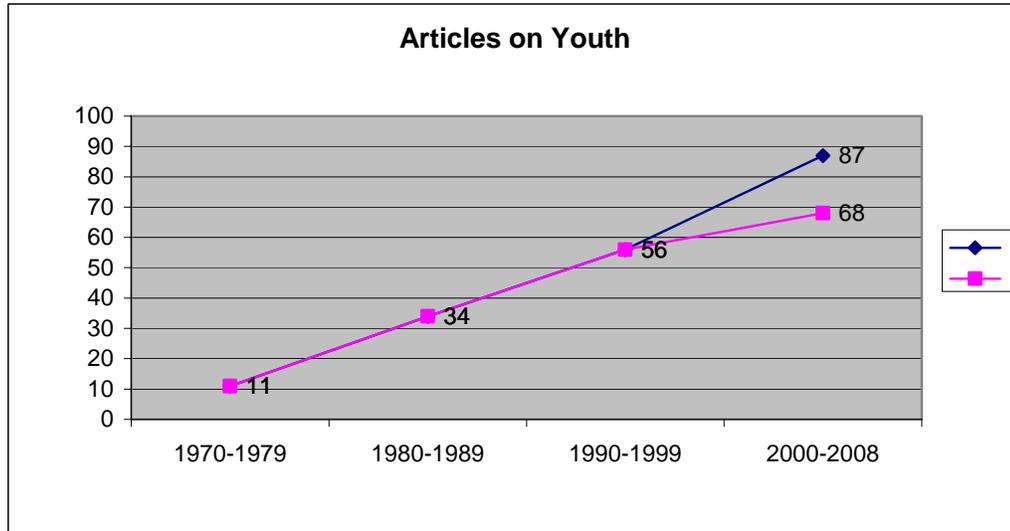


Table 3

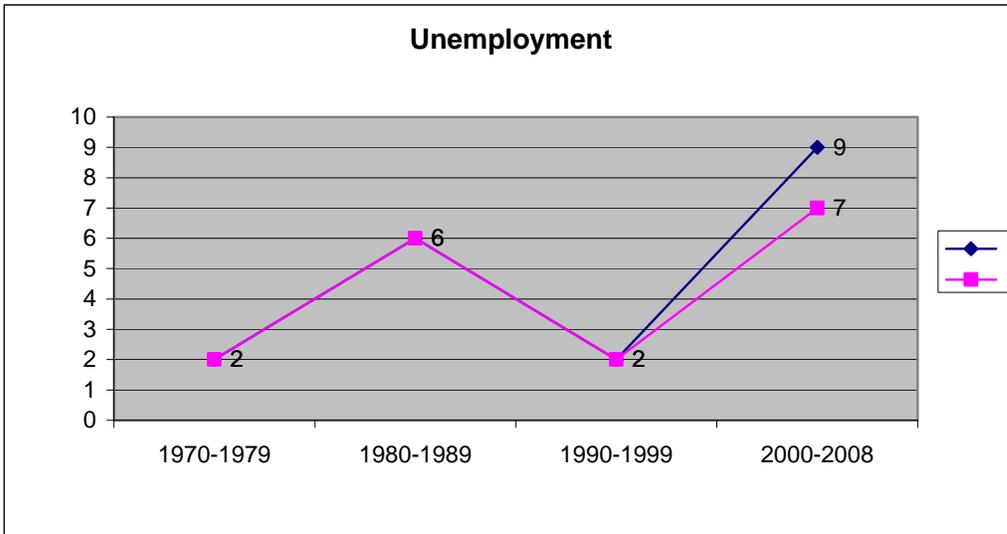


Table 4

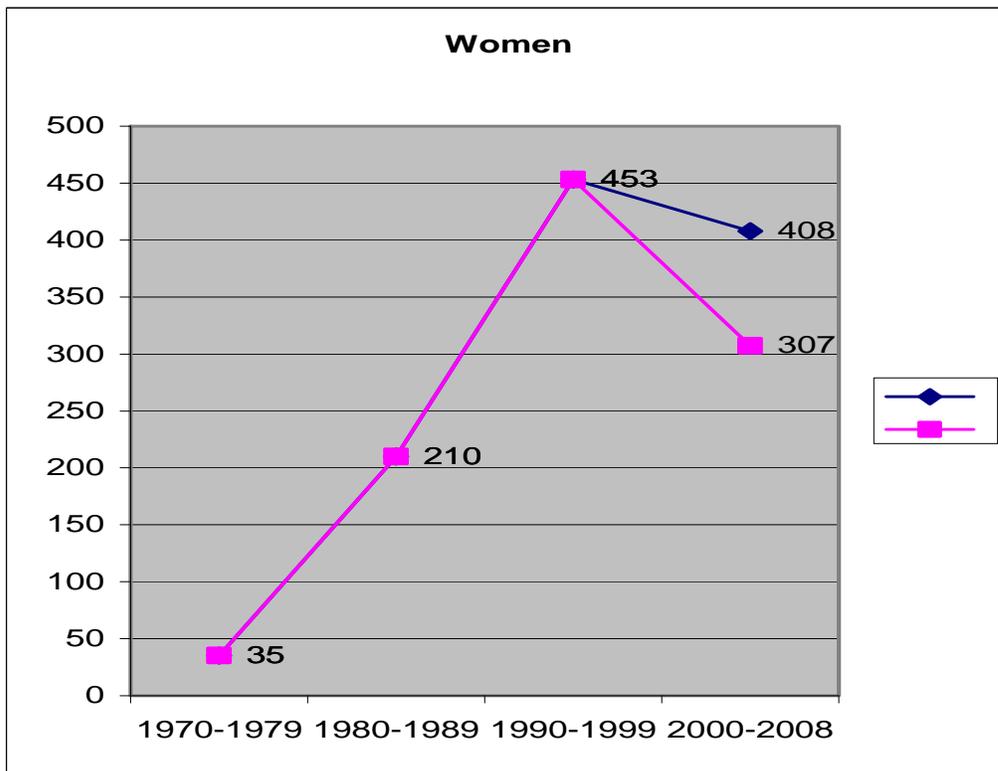


Table 5

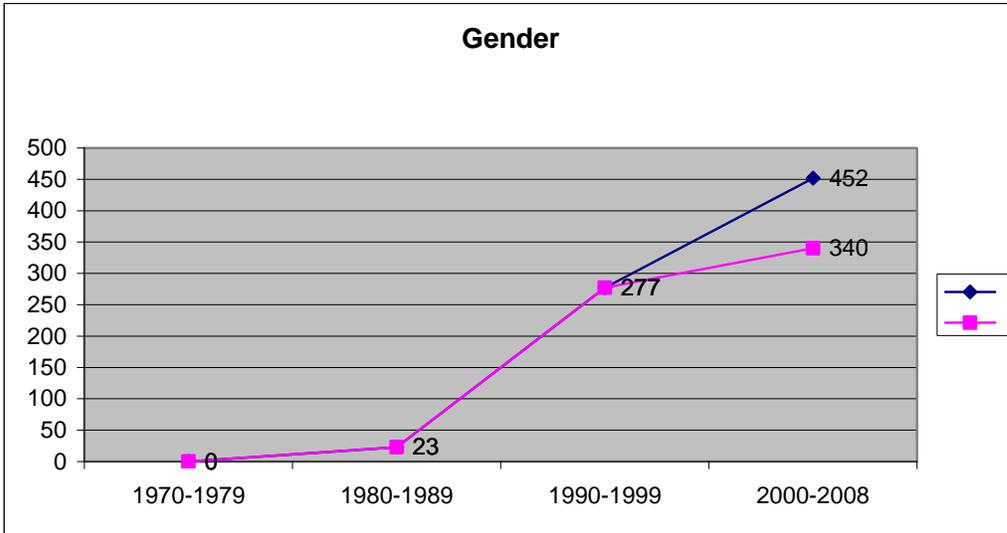


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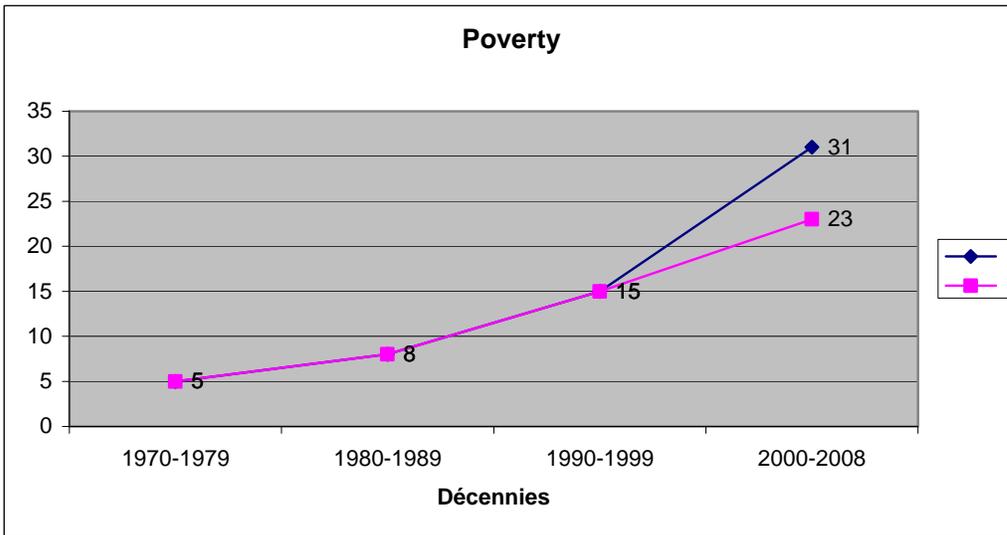


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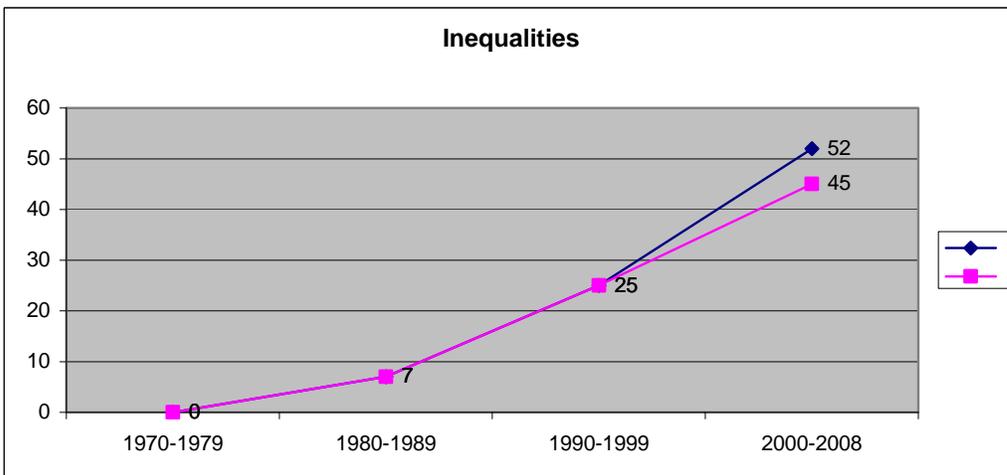


Table 8

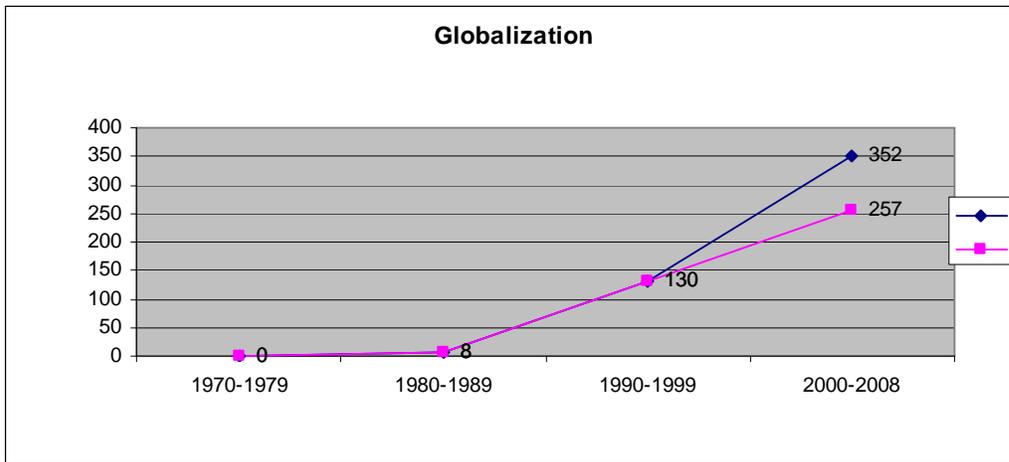


Table 9

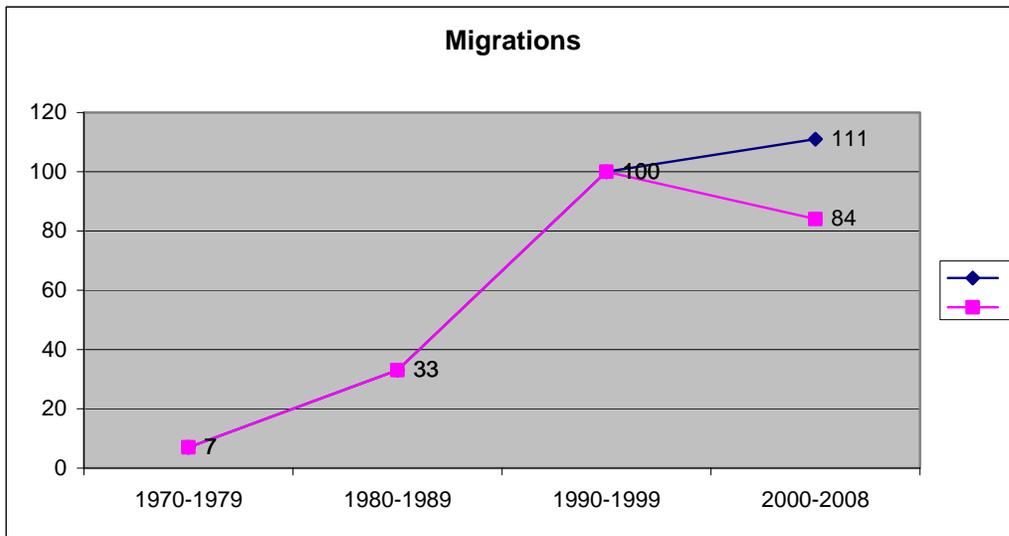


Table 10

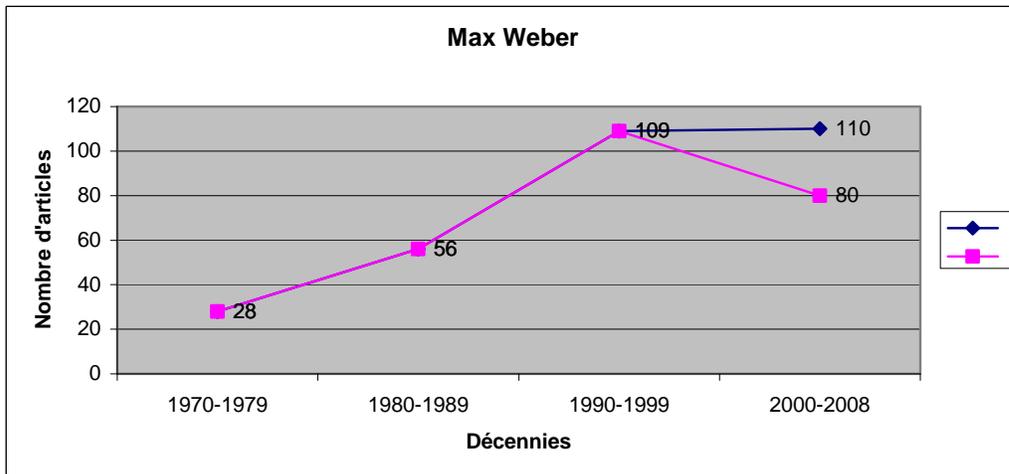


Table 11

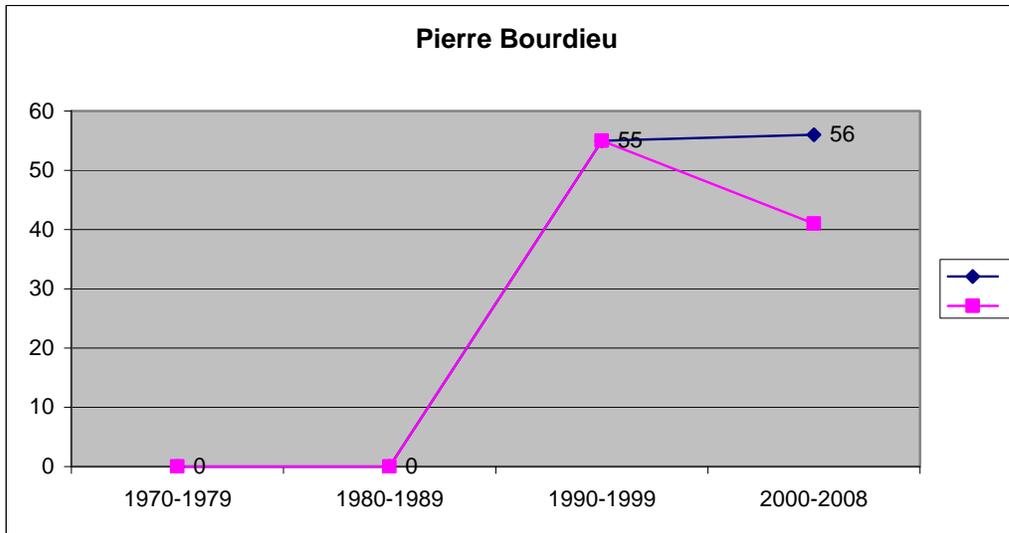


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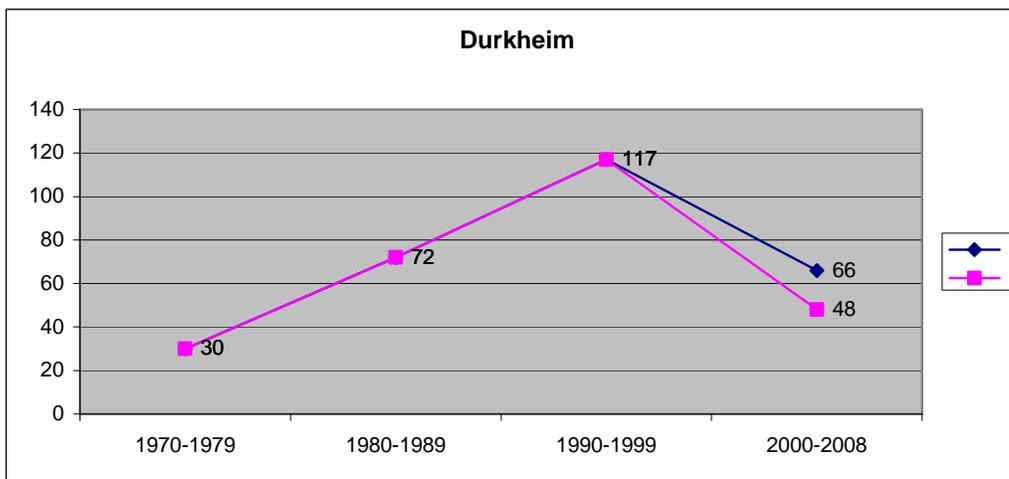


Table 13

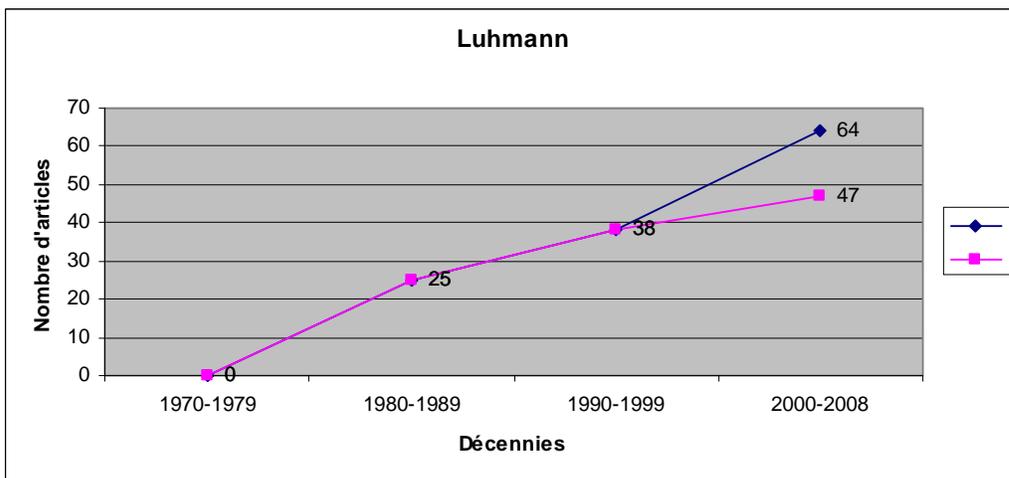


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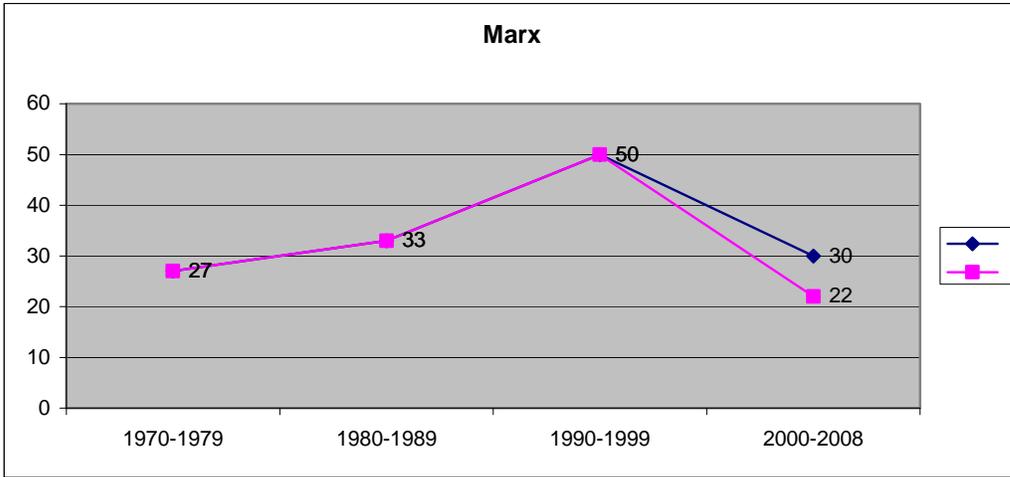


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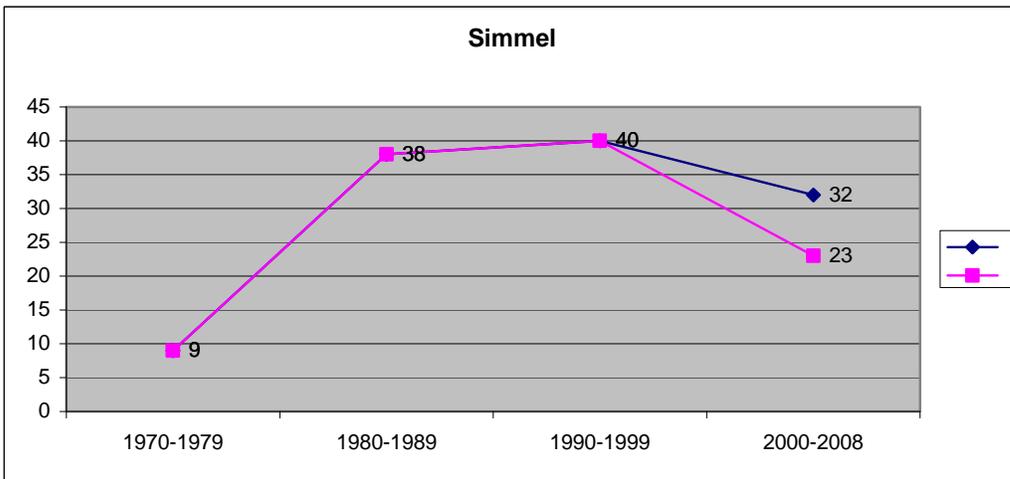
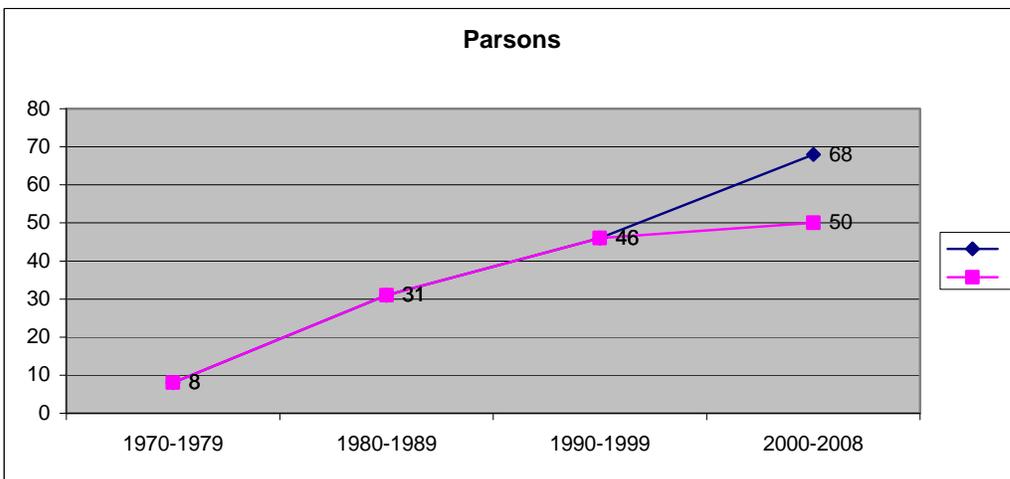


Table 16



About the Authors

Thomas Brisson is Assistant Professor in Sociology at Tsukuba University (Japan) and has specialized in the study of scientific migrations and international academic exchanges.

Koichi Tachikawa is Professor of History at Tsukuba University (Japan) and has specialized in modern and European history.

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Numerous works have been published in Japanese on the history and recent developments of Japanese social sciences. Here, we shall give only a few titles in English, to which our paper explicitly or implicitly refers.

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