

A Call for Comparative

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A Call for Comparative Studies

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Looking back over the several years of living and studying in Japan, I have become more and more convinced of the need for a greater emphasis on comparative studies. As foreigners studying Japan, we have tended far too often, to conduct our research on various Japanese topics, as though the nation and the topics existed in a vacuum. While studying Japan and its culture is a very valuable experience in itself, it is time to shift at least part of our emphasis to the comparative approach. More comparative studies are needed not only in the social sciences, including geography, but also in the humanities.

A greater emphasis on comparative Japanese studies would accomplish two objectives: firstly, a better understanding of Japan as one of the truly modern urban-industrial societies, and secondly, a greater opportunity for Americans to look to Japan for help in solving some of our most pressing problems. Among the more apparent are: public transportation, urban planning, including financing and administration, and law enforcement. The United States is obviously faced with major problems in all of the above areas. A successful resolution of these problems will require an enormous investment of time and energy and, hopefully, some answers may lie in comparative studies of other societies, including Japan. As Americans, we have spent too little time in the investigation of similar problems and remedial programs and policies in other countries, even one as close to us as Canada. Given differences in the history and cultures of nations, no single solution will suffice for all, but partial solutions at least may be available through cross-national comparative research.

Based on the assumption that there is much that we can learn from Japan, a few specific suggestions for profitable comparative study would include the following. In the area of public transportation there is no doubt but that Japan is far in advance of the United States. And, while it is unlikely that the U.S. will soon give up individual ownership of cars, much help is needed in developing a rational and workable system of public transportation. Detailed comparative studies of U.S. and Japanese transportation systems and policies would be most valuable at this time. Too few Americans are, for example, aware of the Shinkansen, as the world's foremost super-express rail system. Most American college students are simply unaware of its existence, or at least of its size and unparalleled record in terms of efficiency, speed and safety. Given the fact that the U.S. rail system,

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especially its passenger service, is totally inadequate and antiquated, the Shinkansen would seem to be the most viable model for an overhaul of the U.S. rail system. The U.S. AMTRAK program has not been successful, and new programs and advanced technology and equipment are desperately needed.

As in the case of inter-city and trans-continental passenger service, the U.S. system of mass urban transit is also far behind that of Japan. The situation is already bad enough and with the growing numbers of older people who will not be able to drive their own cars (to say nothing of the present congestion of highways and the threat of continued oil shortages) it may be that we will finally move to develop workable public transportation. Again, Japan is one of the most advanced models (along with Western Europe) to which we can look to for the rationalization of our mass transit systems. Much can be learned from Japan not only in terms of inter-urban and subway systems, but also in terms of its unique combining of public terminals with business and recreational sub-centers so successful in Tokyo and other Japanese cities. Conditions are different in the two countries and systems are probably not transferable as whole systems—but components or modified systems from Japan could well be viable models for the U.S.

Another major area where Japanese experience could be of help is that of urban development and administration. This is a more complex set of problems than in the case of transportation, and direct transfer of programs and policies from one society to another would, of necessity, be extremely difficult and complicated. Some specific lessons from the Japanese experience for the United States might well be in the areas of public administration and law enforcement.

The creation of separate political entities for the cities of Tokyo and Osaka may have future relevance to several large metropolitan centers in the United States. There have been, for example, suggestions that New York City be separated from the rest of New York State and organized as a separate political entity with radical changes in taxation and finance. A comparative study of Tokyo and the New York City Metropolitan Area might suggest some possible lines of development for a more flexible and autonomous organization for New York City.

Another area of comparative study lies in the field of law enforcement. Tokyo has one of the world's lowest crime rates, New York one of the highest, Why? What are the differences? Are there solutions from the Tokyo experience for American cities? There are obviously great cultural differences and Japan (including Tokyo) has a much more homogeneous population with fewer ethnic and racial problems. Nevertheless, comparative studies of police training programs, communication systems and other factors might shed some light on the law and order problems of U.S. cities.

In the field of urban planning a more comprehensive comparative approach may be of greater value than a bi-lateral approach. It would appear that both the United States and Japan have many unresolved problems and could learn much from other countries such as the Netherlands, Switzerland or West Germany in terms of building more gracious and liveable cities. While some studies with a comparative dimension such as those by Peter Hall—*The World Cities* are of great value, more detailed comparative studies of specific cities would be major contributions to planners around the world.

There are some specific aspects of Japanese cities that may be of special interest to American planners. Japanese cities do often have the variety and diversity as well as closer neighborhood networks that Jane Jacobs calls for in American cities in her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. The use of land (vertical space) under the highway in the central part of Tokyo is another case in point. The multi-layered stores, shops, coffee houses and other commercial establishments below the highway is a very unique and ingenious way of using scarce space in a tightly packed and expensive high tax area.

As mentioned earlier, the recent development of major urban sub-centers such as Shinjuku in Tokyo is worthy of careful study by American geographers and urban planners. While these centers have some parallels with larger U.S. suburban shopping plazas with their supermarkets, department store branches, banks, movie theaters, bowling alleys, restaurants and other establishments, there are also major and significant differences, especially in terms of transportation facilities. The large American shopping plaza, such as "North Town" in Detroit, depends almost entirely on private automobiles and vast parking areas to get shoppers to and from the suburban centers. The Japanese centers, on the other hand, are generally served with excellent, though often crowded, public transportation. This coupling of mass transit with commercial and recreational facilities that now nearly rival the old Central Business Districts may well have valuable inputs for future U.S. urban planning.

In Rochester, New York, for example, one of the largest department stores in the CBD has closed its doors, and others may follow. While there are many and complex reasons for the continuing decay of the CBD, the inconveniences and costs of parking have worked to the detriment of inner city businesses. For many U.S. cities, especially in the northeast, the future and very survival of downtown stores is now an open question. The lack of adequate public transportation (often coupled with inadequate law enforcement) continues to turn people away from the downtown and out to the suburban shopping malls. In the case of Japanese (and European) cities both public transportation and law enforcement are far superior to that of most American cities. Given a probable continuing decline in

the attractiveness of the old CBDs, more and more shoppers will spend most of their shopping time in the outer malls. In the case of Rochester, there are already a half dozen large malls and three or four more planned or actually under construction. All are located several miles out from the city and they are almost totally dependent on private automobiles for their accessibility. A public transportation system like that of Japan should lead to major increases in business for these malls.

Another aspect of Japanese urban life style which is worthy of study is the department store. Studies show that Japanese department stores turn over a much larger volume of goods than do its American counterparts. Again, the Japanese store is invariably directly on or close to public transportation terminals both in the CBD and in the outer sub-centers. The Japanese store also offers a much wider range of attractions and services than American stores. Roof top playlands for children – a variety of restaurants and coffee shops – art exhibits – small theaters and gracious service have all contributed to one of the world's most successful merchandising operations. Again, worthy of study by U.S. planners as the suburban plazas or malls and branch stores continue to grow in scale and volume of sales at the expense of the old main stores in or near the CBDs.

In conclusion, the United States has too long ignored models and lessons available from other cultures and societies in developing plans and policies for the solution of American problems. This inward orientation has been very costly, and hopefully the nation will be more willing and able in the future to learn from other's successes and mistakes. While Japan continues to offer a rich field for research, in an of itself, there is much that can be gained in research which is truly comparative, and, there is much that the United States can learn from Japan. Cities, city life styles, regional and urban planning, transportation and law enforcement are but a few of the research topics that would benefit from the comparative approach. Such studies have the potential of building full fledged two-way streets with lessons and rewards for both nations.