

WHITHER STUDIES OF URBAN JAPAN

by Ezra F. Vogel

1. *Knowledge for Whom?*

Western social scientists often conduct research for its own sake, without considering the uses to which this research might be put. This enhances the objectivity of research and facilitates professional identity but creates moral problems, as epitomized by government use of social science research in the pursuit of a tragic policy in Vietnam. In the complex post-industrial society, the work of intellectuals will be used increasingly as a basis of policy which will have an impact on society. Although we should not abandon our pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake, we should give more attention to the ends to which our research is put. In our role as humans with a sense of responsibility to society we should consider the following:

a. *Relevance.* More work needs to be given to the pressing problems of urban disorganization, poverty, pollution, noise, ill-health, and to sources of personal alienation and disaffection.

b. *Humaneness.* We need to concentrate more attention on the public interest. In studying political problems, for example, we need to give more attention to understanding the groups that do not have an effective voice for their concerns as opposed to those who do have an effective voice.

c. *Modesty.* We must be cautious in stating the results of our studies, pointing out the particular circumstances in time and place that may make our studies unique. We should be cautious about overgeneralizing and even more cautious in suggesting possible action which is implied by our studies.

d. *Non-exploitation.* The question should always be raised as to whether a particular study is going to be more of a nuisance to local scholars and the people being studied than a contribution to knowledge or to the solution of pressing social problems.

Those who specialize in the study of Japan are usually more humane than "comparativists," who come to "test" general principles, since they have done more homework before invading Japanese offices, take a deeper interest in their hosts, offer more non-material rewards, and become involved in more genuinely reciprocal assistance than those who hit and

run. The "comparativists" often prepare surveys that are either meaningless or unnecessary because the information is already published in Japanese. They form conclusions about Japan and general social processes that vary from nonsense to arrogant over-simplifications. They or their assistants, sometimes partially competent Japanese opportunists looking for income from abroad, impose on the overly kind Japanese hosts. Their work often advances neither knowledge nor the solution of social problems, but only the publications and career of the Western author.

The problem does not lie, as some young radicals would have it, in the source of funds for research, but lies in the ethos of the academic community which gives such value to "comparative research" without considering our academic hosts and our objects of study. Although the problem is not so bad in Japan as in other parts of the world, it is becoming worse as more foreigners go to Japan.

We must not only discourage support for "comparativists" who have made an inadequate investment in the study of Japan, but must think of bold, new, positive programs. We need to make money available for Western scholars to work on projects in Japan sponsored by Japanese, especially projects concerned with basic problems of relative deprivation, social disorganization, inadequate housing, and the like. Young Westerners with specialized technical competences can genuinely assist their hosts in solving such problems, and those with knowledge of comparable Western problems can provide useful perspectives. Their experience will then be useful in solving similar problems when they return to the West. We also need to bring more able young Japanese here to study Western problems.

We should expand our services to Japanese scholars. Although many Japanese are now very sophisticated in Western survey and computer techniques, we should continue to assist them in their acquisition of these techniques and knowledge of Western literature. We can assist Japanese scholars in arranging for publication of their works in English so that they will gain the international recognition they deserve.

2. Toward a Broader Meaning of Research

Most of us who have gone to Japan have been primarily concerned about a specific research project. We wanted to do a neat study that was either original or took advantage of some new techniques or concepts so that we could illustrate our originality, stylishness or au courantness, and show up the foibles of some of our predecessors. However, many studies by Japanese and Westerners already exist that will answer many of our questions without bothering Japanese subjects in the field. Today, with the large existing body of literature, an intellectual specializing in Japan should spend more time absorbing the available literature and less time doing his original research.

I plead guilty along with the rest. Our generation of social scientists specializing on Japan has picked up enough spoken Japanese to do interviews, but most of us do not read fluently enough to have read all the Japanese studies we should have. The next generation of Western social scientists studying Japan must be trained to read Japanese fluently so that they can take advantage of the many important studies done in Japan. The required Ph.D. thesis should be shortened, and a much higher level of general competence and understanding of Japanese society required before a student begins a thesis. Those who specialize on Japan must by definition be generalists; we must know about Japan in general. We cannot rely exclusively on interviews and social studies for our understanding, but must take advantage of the Japanese popular press and other mass communication; we must become familiar with broad intellectual currents and public events.

3. *Perspectives for Urban Research*

What are the most fruitful perspectives for urban research? The view of urbanism as a way of life (with impersonality, increased individual mobility and freedom, looser and less-closed social networks, and so on), and the perspective that cities are simply more intense concentrations of population, are interesting truisms but not very promising as guides to research. The following are suggested as more fruitful perspectives for urban research: the central place system, the municipal area system, and the city government system.

a. *The central place system.* The cities throughout Japan can be viewed as nodes in a network, each of the nodes connected with its respective hinterland and belonging to a hierarchy of nodes going up to Tokyo. In an oversimplified model, one large national city is surrounded by a number of medium-sized cities, and each medium-sized city is surrounded by smaller cities, which in turn are surrounded by towns, villages, and countryside. With this basic framework, it is possible to examine the various spheres of activities that are concentrated in each node (city) throughout the system. The model calls attention to the relations a city has with the territory it serves, and with the next city up in the hierarchy. For example, the largest cities in the Kanto and Kinki areas support the more specialized satellite cities which function as residential communities, ports, and manufacturing communities. As transportation and communication develop, the population becomes more concentrated, and political power and economic controls are centralized in higher-level nodes; the smaller nodes and the countryside have less independence.

Economically, for example, it is possible to examine the nature of the markets in each of the nodes. In financing, securities, bonds, and many basic products such as grain, there is clearly a national market. Although

some of the larger regional cities may serve as the actual physical locus for the markets, the forms of the exchange at the market are in these areas determined by national conditions. Furthermore, when foods can be exchanged over a large marketing area, local production can become highly specialized. On the other hand, for some local handicrafts and other products as well as fresh vegetables and fish, there is a more limited regional market so that smaller regional cities may serve as the node for the exchange of these products with at least a limited amount of autonomy as far as the terms of exchange are concerned. As products increase in durability, size, and standardization, they are more likely to become part of the national market. As markets become more specialized, there needs to be a larger geographical area and population in order even to support a market, to say nothing of the conditions of exchange. For example, in various kinds of technical instruments and implements, specialized kinds of books, and highly specialized kinds of skills, only fairly large-sized cities supporting a wide population base can support the market.

Not only are the terms of exchange of local markets often determined by national conditions, but in many cases a single company handles products throughout the nation so that the product and the services in the smaller nodes are essentially the same as in larger ones. Although the location of certain industries, mining centers, and ports is determined more by physical factors than by the location of the node in the hierarchy, even the activities of these localities must be coordinated at higher-level nodes in the system.

Politically, there tends to be a certain degree of fit between the size and importance of a community and its position in the administrative hierarchy. In general, provincial administrative offices tend to be located in the larger and more important cities, and even the smaller cities tend to be the locus of government activities. As power becomes increasingly centralized in Tokyo, the national government offices tend to increase relative to local government offices at all levels of the hierarchy; important decisions are increasingly made by the national government rather than by the local government.

One question to consider is the existing and optimal balance of power between the national government in Tokyo, the national government branch in the local community, and the local government. Another concerns the appropriateness of administrative boundaries. Another basic question concerns the extent to which the administrative boundary corresponds with the natural area which requires coordination. For example, the municipal area of Tokyo covers a much broader area than New York; in recent years Tokyo has grown so rapidly that the metropolitan area covers much of Saitama, Kanagawa, and Chiba. Despite the existence of adjustment boards that coordinate activities between Tokyo and the surrounding

areas—transportation, communication, taxes, and schooling—some urban functions that spill over into other areas are not coordinated by the Tokyo government. Regardless of the difficulties of rural areas in adjusting to the community consolidation (*choson gappei*) since 1953, the consolidation is in accord with the greater needs of coordination over a larger geographical area. The effect of this consolidation is to concentrate more power in the communities which were already the center for many rural activities.

The centralization of political power is in part a result of natural processes of economic development, transportation, and communication, but these natural processes were greatly accelerated by the centralization of power during World War II, and the military occupation after the war, as well as community consolidation.

The hierarchy of nodes is evident in the national and provincial educational institutions, the community control of high schools and middle schools, and the neighborhood control of grade schools. It is possible to look at the links between the political structure and the educational institutions at various levels in the hierarchy; it is also possible to look at the flow of talent in and out of the universities. For example, from how broad a geographical region does a university in a given city recruit its talent? To what extent do the graduates of that institution remain in that urban area after graduation and to what extent do they return to lower nodes? To what extent are the elites in the local communities at lower nodes oriented to higher nodes because of their educational experience in the larger cities? One might also compare sources of recent mobility for private and public educational institutions.

One can analyze the extent to which the local elites are oriented to the local community or toward higher levels of the system. For example, the power of independent local elites was greatly reduced as landowners lost their land during the land reform and as local industrialists had to subordinate themselves to larger national firms or join them in order to retain economic power. In the very smallest cities it is possible for some of the old local elites to retain independent power. However, in middle-sized and larger cities, the leading elites are members of national government offices and national firms. Although they have very high social status in the regional cities, they remain heavily oriented to their home offices in Tokyo. Even local rural elites are oriented to the next higher city in the hierarchy from which they receive social status and prestige.

In the larger cities, the social network is less integrated and family residence is separated from place of work. This trend has not gone so far in Japan as in many other Western countries, since small shopkeepers in *shitamachi* areas tend to live in or near their shops and many companies provide housing near their factories.

b. *The city government system.* Anyone interested in municipal operations must concentrate on the city government and the local branches of the national government. Since this field of study is well developed, there is no need to elaborate on the topics that one might study. Such topics include the nature of the bureaucracy (including unitism, cliquishness, hierarchy, and pressures for effectiveness), the mechanisms for representation of interests (for example, the ability of local politicians to offer favors to certain groups such as protection from possible legal problems, and the ability of certain groups to buy political favor), the nature of pressures for reforms (opposition, journalism and mass communication, intellectuals, etc.), the nature and organization of interest groups, and the relation of politicians and bureaucrats. It is also important to consider the relationships of various levels of government within the city: the greater power and prestige of national government offices, the weakness of ward government, the reliance of neighborhoods on local community action for solutions to problems of local welfare and living conditions, and the relative lack of involvement of labor unions, bigger companies, and larger organizations in local and neighborhood organization. One can see, for example, that small shopkeepers and independent businessmen participate more in local government than white-collar workers who are oriented to larger geographical areas.

c. *The municipal area system.* It is important to consider the extent to which the entire municipal area operates as a system. This would include questions of natural spatial distribution, transportation, communication, distribution of status within a community, and so on, which involve processes not specifically related to the government. Although some communities still reflect in some part their origin as castle towns, trading towns, travelers' rest stops, and temple gates, most municipal areas are no longer so specialized and perform many government, economic, educational, and social functions. Urban sociologists in Japan and the West have investigated the spatial distribution of businesses, residences, and parks within the municipal area; in addition to the purely economic competitive market forces of cost, distance, and time, there are also historical values, social integrative, and other symbolic factors which determine location of these sectors.

One may also consider questions of transport and the relationship between work and residence, recreation, and purchasing, in both space and time.

One may also consider the stratification of a given municipal area and the dynamics operating to preserve or change the stratification system. For example, the largest proportion of migrants to the cities come for jobs rather than education. Those who come to the city for higher education generally come from white-collar families in the regional cities or from

upper-class families in the smaller cities in the countryside. Most of these students who come from the regional areas will remain in the large city as white-collar employees in large business and government offices. Those who come to the city not for education but to work as laborers in small and middle-sized enterprises or as shop employees generally come from farm families or regional city working families, but once in the city they have great difficulty in climbing the social ladder. They are more likely to aspire to independent ownership of small shops than to rise to white-collar or even working-class positions in large firms. Second generation or older urban residents are likely to find these more desirable jobs in larger firms and government offices more accessible.

4. *Suggestions for Research*

The following research topics indicate general problems in urban society and provide background for some pressing human problems now confronting the cities.

a. *Employees of small and middle-sized enterprises and small shops.* Welfare conditions among these groups are known to be inadequate. What is not known are the social connections on which these people rely when confronted with difficulties. What happens when they lose a job? What happens when someone becomes sick or when a woman is widowed? How does the new young couple find housing? Not only will answers to these questions help solve the pressing problems which these people face, but they will give insight into the nature of social relationships in an urban setting and how social structures are modified in problem situations.

b. *Recent migrants.* The migration process deserves further study. We know that the *dekasegi* (migrant labor) pattern is declining and that young people who come to the cities are more likely to stay. We also know that although the vast urban migration which prevailed for a period of time is finally beginning to slow down, there is still a sizeable amount. We also know that some families are beginning to sell their farms to factories, shops, or other farm families. What happens to those people who leave the farms as they come into the city communities? How do the new migrants develop social connections? What is the extent of their social network and to what extent can they rely on these social networks for welfare or assistance in finding jobs? How are their interests represented?

c. *Experiments in broadening social participation.* One of the key problems in Japanese governmental, economic, and other organizations is a cliquish quality that prevents groups excluded from decision-making from even marginal participation. We are beginning to have more cases of broadened social participation. For example, in universities students have increased power, and in larger factories more opportunities are available for workers to make decisions. These new experiments raise interesting

practical and theoretical problems.

d. *Planning*. The above projects are useful in providing information and calling attention to problems which somebody in a position of authority may be able to pick up, but the most direct contribution to social change will come from social scientists working with planning boards, using such information to plan new housing and other community projects. The results of these studies (for example, the differential adjustments of different kinds of families to different kinds of projects) may then be used to guide further planning.

The above are illustrations of significant intellectual problems, the results of which could potentially benefit our hosts as well as social science.

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