

THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF JAPAN¹

by Bernard Karsh

In this paper, "the sociological study of Japan" is defined to mean the product of professional sociologists who have studied Japan and published their materials in English. This definition is limited by the problem of identifying sociologists and distinguishing them from writers who operate with what may be called a "sociological perspective" but are not proper members of the academy. Three kinds of writers who have contributed to the sociological study of Japan were identified: (1) scholars trained as sociologists (Ph.D. in sociology) who are members of the American Sociological Association and who work as professional sociologists (employed in teaching or research in a university department of sociology); (2) contributors to the literature on Japan who are members of the American Sociological Association but have identified themselves as working professionals in disciplines other than sociology; and (3) writers who have published in sociological journals and, accordingly, address audiences of sociologists but are neither members of the professional association nor identify themselves as professional sociologists.

My inventory omits materials published by sociologists before 1946 since I assumed that little if any research was done before World War II. In addition to the published output of American sociologists, this survey includes references to publications by Japanese nationals who are sociologists.

Seven major sources were used: (1) Various headings (e.g., Japan, Labor and Laboring Classes—Japan, Politics—Japan, etc.) of the *Social Sciences and Humanities Index*; (2) similar headings in the *Bulletin of the Public Affairs Information Service*; (3) the annual bibliographic volume of the *Journal of Asian Studies*; (4) the cards under the heading "Japan" of the University of Illinois Library card catalog (approximately 15,000 cards); the *National Union Catalog* of the U. S. Library of Congress (under subject heading—Japan); (5) University Microfilms' *Dissertation Abstracts* (subject heading—sociology); and (6) the following journals: *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *Asian Survey*, *Far Eastern Quarterly-Journal of Asian Studies*, *Pacific Affairs*, *Social Forces*,

Sociology and Social Research, *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, *Social Problems*, and *Journal of Social Issues*. The 1958 and 1967 Directories of the American Sociological Association and the 9th, 10th, and 11th editions of *American Men of Science: The Social and Behavioral Sciences* were used to identify the contributors. Undoubtedly some items and some authors were missed and some may have been inappropriately included. Nonetheless, it is not likely that the following assessment is very wide of the mark, if at all.

The Inventory

As we might suspect, American sociologists have had relatively little to say about Japan. Nineteen Ph.D. dissertations in sociology have been written since 1947 with titles suggesting that the research had something to do with Japan. Seven of these were by students with names which could be identified as Japanese, Korean, or Chinese. The inference, of course, is that almost one-third of the total output of Japan-oriented American sociologists in the past twenty-two years has been done by students who had an initial advantage in being able to speak Japanese. Probably no more than eight or ten Ph.D.'s did their work after first learning Japanese.

Grants and awards from the Social Science Research Council and under the Fulbright program are important resources which might be available to sociologists already competent in Japanese studies or for their training. Between 1961 and 1966, only *one* Fulbright grant was awarded to a graduate student in sociology for study in Japan and only *two* awarded to postdoctoral scholars for research in Japan. During the same period, more than forty Fulbright awards were made to other social scientists for study in Japan, not including American Studies awards. I have no reason to believe that this situation has changed since 1966. Clearly, sociologists are far under-represented in the Fulbright program, and I have been assured by the Japan Fulbright Secretariat that this results from the absence of applicants. Since 1946 the Social Science Research Council has awarded almost eighty grants for research in Japan. These include fellowships, and travel, area training, and faculty research grants. Sociologists, both pre- and postdoctoral, have received *five* of these awards.

Altogether, 161 publications in English, including books and journal articles, were written by professional sociologists or by authors who could not be clearly identified as sociologists but who published in American sociological journals. Forty-eight of these publications were written by two men, one an Englishman (who is a member of the American Sociological Association), and the other an American scholar formally trained as an anthropologist but employed, presumably as a sociologist, in a university sociology department. The third most prolific contributor to

to the sociological understanding of Japan is more properly identified as a demographer than a sociologist.

All told, only 34 writers on Japan could be identified as Americans who hold the Ph.D. in sociology, are members of the professional society, or are sociologists who identify themselves as such and work in departments of sociology. In the aggregate, they have produced about 80 books and articles on Japan over the past 22 years. More than half the publications were produced by about a dozen "fully qualified" sociologists, two of whom may be identified as demographers. Furthermore, fewer than one-third of the 19 persons who have written dissertations on Japan since 1946 have later published anything at all on that topic.

Such is a reasonable depiction of the "state-of-the-art." Undoubtedly, these data overstate the case; not only sociologists produce sociological knowledge. It is interesting to note, by contrast, the output of economic studies in Japan. A recent survey of the current status of research on the Japanese economy in the United States reveals that since 1955 about 60 books and more than 300 articles have been published. Though the definition of economic contribution as used in the survey may have been stretched a bit, and the inventory included some writers who probably cannot properly be identified as economists, nonetheless the output is prodigious as compared with sociology.

What are the directions which sociologists have taken? Titles suggest that the bulk of the sociological literature may be arranged in five categories and the remainder is scattered about the whole field of sociology. Demographic and population studies constitute the largest single grouping and, for the most part, are the product of two writers, Irene Taeuber and Thomas Wilkinson. Another cluster of studies seeks to explain the particularities of Japanese social structure, particularly the individual in relation to the group. Family studies constitute another dominant concern. Many of these are addressed to the effects of modernization, Westernization, industrialization, and urbanization upon the Japanese family and kinship systems. A few writers have been concerned with the peculiarities of the Japanese employment and reward systems and some others have studied social or institutional change in an historical dimension (Jacobs, Bendix, Passin, Dore, and Bellah) with a focus upon those elements of Japanese social structure which were or were not conducive to or affected by Japan's transition from "feudal" to "modern."

The literature touches upon many other topics—politics, rural-urban differences, bureaucracy, race and ethnic relations, crime and deviance. A very few studies explore in some social-psychological dimension the attitudes of Japanese toward a number of different social variables.

A standard "Specialties List" is used by the American Sociological Association (and the National Science Foundation) to designate the

special fields and areas of sociology. Fifty-five special areas are grouped into eight category headings. Though it is difficult clearly to assign each of the sociological publications on Japan to one of these fifty-five special fields, it appears that the total sociological output represents not more than a dozen or fifteen of the listed fields.

Implications

Certainly it is not to be expected that sociologists will dominate the study of Japan. Nor would one expect that Japan offers so little of interest to sociologists that they ignore it. One might expect, in fact, that somehow American sociologists would have made a larger contribution to our knowledge of Japan. Our evidence, however inadequate, suggests that both the effort and the product have been very meager.

Contemporary Japan represents a magnificent laboratory for studying social change. Hardly an aspect of Japanese society is immune from tensions between the "old wine and the new bottles" or the "old bottles and the new wine." The subject of social change is one of the central concerns of sociologists and such change has long been apparent everywhere in Japan. The research opportunities offered by Japan nevertheless seem not to be known to sociologists. Achieving competence in the language certainly presents a substantial problem. But somehow, acquiring language and other necessary training appears to be far less formidable a task for historians, political scientists, anthropologists, and economists than for sociologists.

In my view, the relative ethnocentrism of American sociology accounts in great part for our failure to explore and exploit opportunities for training and research in Japan as well as elsewhere. In recent years, this intellectual ethnocentrism has been supported by a market demand for sociologists which encourages students to follow the shortest and easiest route to the Ph.D. For example, it is very difficult to convince a promising student that he should pursue his interest in Japan (or perhaps any foreign country) when he defines the alternative as staying with a topic or a place which offers easily accessible data, can be handled in English, and can be supported by a faculty member who has an ample training grant, all of which means that the student will probably acquire professional certification two or three years earlier than the experience in Japan would permit, however rewarding it might otherwise be.

The "socialization" of sociologists has not included any serious effort to test our propositions and generalizations against the historical experience of cultures as different from our own as is the Japanese. Indeed, the training of American sociologists includes very little systematic exposure to any materials which are not American (I am tempted to say "un-American"). This was not always so but appears to have become a particularly strong tendency during the past two or three decades, when the content of

sociological study, as it has evolved in the United States, has turned increasingly toward the analysis of social problems.

Several prescriptions may be offered to remedy the situation, assuming, of course, that the situation is so defined as to require remedial effort. Social change has again become a fashionable study among sociologists who are grappling with the subjects of the black revolution in the United States, the crisis of decay and crime in our cities, the suburbanization of white middle-class culture, and the impacts of automation and other kinds of technologies on our institutions and people. Clearly, there must be substantially more involvement of sociology and sociologists with current domestic problems induced by change. But there must also be a major effort to involve sociology and sociologists in the study of change *generally*, and in relation to economic change specifically. It is my understanding that a main conclusion reached very recently by a New York meeting of economists was that economic studies of Japan, though abundant, suffer from paucity of knowledge of the social context(s) for understanding Japan's economic development. Simply, there has not been sufficient sociological underpinning to evaluate properly the contributions of economic studies. For more than ten years I myself have had a continuing debate with an economist colleague over the meaning of what is presumed to be knowledge of Japan's economic growth and change. Both my colleague and I have come to the agreement that there simply are not enough sociological bench marks available to justify either his or my claim that some body of data has "this" meaning rather than "that." We both need far more sociological knowledge in both an historical and a contemporary context to order properly our understanding of Japanese development.

One may argue, of course, that sociological resources (that is, both sociologists and what is needed to support them) are, like everything else, limited. Therefore, there must be some special case made for devoting resources especially to Japan. The case can be made on at least two counts: (1) Japan offers a magnificent laboratory for developing generalizable propositions regarding social change (and in some important ways, a laboratory more manageable than the United States), and (2) Japan remains the only example of large-scale industrialization and modernization that is non-Western, and we know almost nothing of the implications of that for the contemporary "third world."

In my view, the study of social change in all dimensions should have the highest priority for sociology and social science. My special interest lies in cross-national comparisons of social (and socioeconomic) institutions under conditions of change. Again noting the special opportunities which Japan offers, I urge that the Conference make some special effort to remedy the situation.

Several specific remedial steps may be suggested. Funding agencies might

be persuaded to earmark grants for predoctoral training of sociologists in Japanese studies. Such grants would have to be sufficiently attractive to induce promising students to make the necessary investment of time. In addition, funds might be sought to enable young scholars who are already established to "tool" or "retool" themselves with the language and other knowledge necessary to develop or pursue a new interest in Japan. At a minimum, it seems appropriate that either the Joint Committee on Japanese Studies or this Conference undertake the task of thoroughly and completely summarizing and appraising the current state of sociological studies on Japan in the United States.

It is clear that the sociological knowledge of Japan produced by Japanese sociologists is increasingly rich. A great deal is being done by our Japanese colleagues and we are hardly aware of its existence, let alone its content. I suggest that the Joint Committee make a special effort to identify the work of Japanese sociologists (at least representative, major contributions) and to make this work available to an English-speaking audience. This is no substitute for the development of our own resources. However, it might stimulate such development as a long-run gain, and, in the short-run, yield some specifics of more immediate use. In any event, solutions will not be found to problems which are not identified. In my view, this assessment has indeed identified a problem.

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NOTES

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