

# **Searching for the Theories and Realities of Urban and Rural Societies in Japan: a Message to World Sociologists from Japan Association of Regional and Community Studies**

## **Japan Association of Regional and Community Studies**

### **1. Objects and Approaches of Regional and Community Studies**

In terms of disciplinary genealogy, the origin of Regional and Community Studies (RCS) can be traced back to rural sociology in the pre-WWII period. After WWII, RCS have also been influenced by urban sociology, which followed the tradition of the Chicago School. RCS and urban sociology were competing but, at the same time, complementing one another. For a long time, RCS has constructed several research frameworks such as “state and local government,” “city and countryside,” and “everyday life and community,” presuming that the existing form of nation-states is pre-given. RCS has also adopted structural analysis (*Kozo Bunseki*), community power structures, and theories of resident self-governance as its unique approaches. We can recognize the deep influence of Marxist social theory, non-Marxist and modernist political science, and polemic discussions from the time over the course of its development.

However, as globalization deepens, the role of nation-states has been radically shaken, and the basis of territoriality and social relationships were reexamined accordingly. The New Urban Sociology (NUS) and the spatial theory derived from NUS have led to the “spatial turn” of social science, and have made and continue to make a great impact upon RCS. However, while the long-standing influence of Marxist theory and modernist political theory have started to recede, the spatial turn of RCS is still a work in progress.

On the other hand, as globalization reinforces the importance of locality, cultural traditions and ethnicity, which form the foundations of local society, have made new advances. There is a sharp contest between those who inherited the communitarian traditions that rural sociology often embraced, and those who advocate the argument of the ‘public sphere’ claimed by Jürgen HABERMAS and Hannah ARENDT. Also, instead of the usual division between ‘public’ and ‘private,’ the concept of ‘common/civil society’ has emerged as a crucial focal point of discussion in creating a new civil society.

The two branches of thought discussed above, however, have had little communication and exchange until today. Amidst this stalemate, the research topics for RCS have greatly extended to the extent that, to put it in extreme terms, any social phenomenon can be a legitimate object of this

academic discipline under the name of 'region' and 'community.' As a result, the gap between the object of study and the approach it adopted has further widened. In any case, regional and community studies in Japan have revealed rich potential, but at the same time, they are in deep chaos.

## **2. Establishment and development of the Japan Association of Regional and Community Studies (JARCS)**

### 1) Japan Research Society of Regional and Community Studies

The Japan Research Society of Regional and Community Studies, the predecessor of JARCS, had a preliminary meeting on March 17, 1975 with 41 members. The society was formally inaugurated in its first conference on April 24-25, 1976 with 119 members. It was formed around the following common concern in a particular social and historical context. Post-war Japanese society was undergoing drastic changes. On the one hand, rapid economic growth created various local social problems which prompted public policy measures. On the other hand, urban and community social movements and reformist local government had emerged. Against this backdrop, social scientists were expected to analyze real social problems and devise solutions. Because the problems were common in both urban and rural society, the framework of region and community was adopted to organize the Research Society, with these cutting across both urban and rural societies.

In terms of organizational management, the Research Society decided to have a board, to hold an annual conference every spring and a few seminars a year, and to publish newsletters regularly.

### 2) Marxist social theories and regional and community studies

Back then many leading members of the Society were Marxist and came from a rural studies background. Though most Japanese urban sociologists followed the tradition of the Chicago School, Marxist-influenced community studies were developed in competitive/complementary relations with them. The Marxist scholars were divided into a few groups led by SHIMAZAKI Minoru, FUSE Tetsuji, and HASUMI Otohiko (later succeeded by NITAGAI Kamon), and they competed with each other in research.

As was discussed in the previous section, they adopted structural analysis as a main research framework, which was concerned by local (municipal) economic structures, social class and stratification, community organization, and political structures. Their focus was often on the relationship between structure and agency (in this case local social movements), particularly the way structure defines and reacts to agency, in the expectation of social reform in the local community. They conducted numerous empirical studies on urban problems, local problems, and

local development policies such as the National Comprehensive Development Plan. The main case studies in the 1970s and 1980s were the study of local residential movements (*Jumin Undo*) by Nitagai (1976), the study of Yubari (a coal mining town in Hokkaido) by Fuse (1982), the study of Fukuyama City by Hasumi and Nitagai (1983), the study of Muroran (an industrial city in Hokkaido) by KAMADA Toshiko, and the study of Kawasaki (known for its concentration of heavy and chemical industries plants) by Shimazaki (1987). (They include the work of industrial/labor sociology.)

Though these kinds of Marxist-oriented studies constituted the mainstream of RCS, we cannot ignore the works of those who are based on non-Marxist liberal traditions. They include OKUDA Michihiro who was based in the Chicago School of community studies, AKIMOTO Ritsuo who applied community power structure, and FUJITA Hiroo who applied comparative urban sociology based on the tradition of Max WEBER.

### 3) Establishment of JARCS

The Japan Research Society of Regional and Community Studies was re-named the Japan Association of Regional and Community Studies (JARCS) on April 22, 1984. In terms of its decision-making structure, the position of president and a board was created on May 21, 1994 and took over the responsibilities of the then steering committee. It was originally agreed that the presidency was an honorary position with no real power. The Society had been publishing its own journal, *Annals of Regional and Community Studies*, since 1979, but it became an annual publication starting from Volume 6 in 1994. Research seminars have been regularly held four times a year since 1984, and the membership reached 240 people in May 1996.

### 4) New urban sociology and the “spatial turn”

New urban sociology caused debates and controversy in the academic community around the time when the society was renamed. The society took this approach seriously and held a series of heated discussions starting in December 1983. Manuel CASTELLS was invited and gave a presentation in 1988. The discussion among those who advocated NUS as well as Marxist and non-Marxist scholars was mainly concerned with several key ideas and concepts such as the Marxist state theory perspective, the meaning of ‘space’ and ‘collective consumption’, and how the theory could be empirically verified. Later on, the discussion moved to the sphere of ‘spatial theory’. The Society hosted a special lecture by David HARVEY for the 20th anniversary event in 1994. The Society also organized ‘Tokyo seminars’ between 1990 and 1992 to discuss the implications of the world city hypothesis and the over-concentration of Tokyo, which was then seen as a major social problem.

#### 5) Issues of citizenship under globalization

The Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, in which the Kansai region was hit with disaster, occurred on January 17, 1995. Accordingly, the Annals in 1998 (Vol. 10) had a special issue titled “Community Regeneration and Citizenship” against the background of the regeneration of Kobe City. This is because on the one hand the reconstruction of local communities after the earthquake was a critical and urgent topic to which society had to respond. On the other hand, the citizenship of non-Japanese people became a common research theme in the society as the number of foreign residents and workers started to rise in the 1990s.

JARCS published 100 issues of its newsletter in September 1999, and invited Alberto MELUCCI as a guest speaker for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary event in May 2000. Its membership reached 269 by the end of 2000.

### **3. Research focus for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and present condition of JARCS**

#### 1) Research trends since the 2000s

Rapid globalization and the spread of neoliberalism have required the reorganization of state systems and, as a result, the local community faces increasing difficulty such as poverty and disparity. Since the 2000s, JARCS has collectively examined the new reality of local communities in which contradictions became apparent and existing social systems had to be reconstructed, from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. The following three areas of study can be identified as major research foci.

The first area concerns a re-examination of the public sphere and the way governance should be organized, including the crisis of public finance and the devolution of state power required of new governance structures, which had previously been dominated by the national government. Today’s local communities, however, consist of a variety of agents who have stakes in the local community. Thus, their partnership and coordination became crucial in re-conceptualizing of what the public sphere means in Japan. In particular, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake had a huge impact on local communities and community studies. It raised the important issue of how the government sector; market sector; and civic sector such as volunteers, NGOs, and NPOs, can form a partnership at the local level.

The second area focuses on inequality and disparity at the local level, which was apparently growing due to globalization and neoliberalism. The long-lasting economic slump and stagnation and the neoliberal government reforms since the 1990s have created many problems such as a schism between full-time and part-time workers, an increase in the number of women and people of the young generation who stay poor, and the formation of a low-paid labor market consisting of foreign workers.

Many members of the society examine how inequality and disparity affect urban space and social class formation, and how they accumulate over the years through the examination of particular case studies not only in Japan but also at the Asian scale. Inequality and disparity have become apparent not only in metropolitan areas but also in disadvantaged districts in the countryside and provincial cities, which makes it increasingly difficult to understand the reality. In this sense, it also poses challenges to the existing methodology and approach of regional and community studies.

The third area concerns such issues as inter-city competition at the global scale, the regeneration strategies of local communities in their various forms, and the state rescaling of spatial planning and strategy. The society paid special attention to the struggle of “shrinking communities” which are suffering from a loss of population and economic vitality, and from inter-city competition and growing disparity between the regions.

Moreover, as globalization shook the institutional framework of the state and its inter-governmental relations, state rescaling has emerged as an important issue. A series of mergers by the municipal government, called “The Great Mergers of the Showa and Heisei Period” have taken place since 1995 when the Special Act of Municipal Merger was amended by the Devolution of Power Act. This was carried out in order to give more power to the basic unit of local governments. In reality, in the name of devolution the number of local governments was reduced and the state budget shrunk. State investment was carried out through the principle of ‘selection and concentration’, which led to further inequality between the regions. The society discussed a scalar reorganization of governance structures at global, national, and local levels at its annual conference.

## 2) Organization today

The membership of the Society exceeded 400 people in July 2012. They come from diverse backgrounds including urban sociology, rural sociology, and environmental sociology. In terms of executive function, the society has a board that consists of a president, a secretary general, a treasury, and other trustees. The society also has several committees such as a research committee that decides on the theme and speakers for the annual symposia, an editorial committee for the annals, an award committee to give prizes such as the best book prize, and a committee to encourage international exchange among the members.

The society has an annual conference that attracts many participants. Moreover, it holds a research seminar four times a year in which the research committee assigns a theme and two speakers and lively discussions take place after the presentation. The newsletter is published four times a year to report the contents of the presentations and the following discussions. The *Annals of Regional and Community Studies* (Harvest Press, Nishi Tokyo-shi) publishes peer-reviewed research articles, as well as book reviews. Furthermore, the society issued several publications for its anniversary, such as “Keywords in Regional and Community Studies” (Harvest Press, 2000) for

the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, “Readings in Regional and Community Studies (3 volumes)” (Toshindo, Tokyo, 2005), the revised edition of “Keywords in Regional and Community Studies” (Harvest Press, Nishi-Tokyo, 2010) for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and the re-printed newsletter (*Kingendai Shiryou Kankou Kai*, Tokyo) in 2012.

Table 1: The title of special issues in the Annals of Regional and Community Studies since 2000

2000	Life, the Public Sphere, and Community Formation
2001	Citizens and Local Communities: Autonomy, Cooperation, and Agency
2002	Restructuring of the Public Sphere in Locality
2003	Transformation of the Public Sphere and Local Communities
2004	Devolution, Mergers, and Local Governance: Diversifying Regions
2005	Reexamining Locality
2006	Inequality, Disparity, Stratification, and Local Communities
2007	Regional Implications of Social Class Disparity
2008	Shrinking Society and Local Community Today
2009	Community Regeneration in the Shrinking Society
2010	The Actualities of the Community Regeneration in the Local Area
2011	Perspectives on Regional Revitalization and Regional and Community Studies
2012	State, City-Region and Community under Rescaling
2013	Rescaling Theory and its Japanese Context

#### 4. After 3.11 – Aftermath from the Great East Japan Earthquake and Fukushima Nuclear Accident

3.11 revealed severe contradictions embodied in the developmental regime of post-war Japan, and posed radical questions for hierarchical governance systems and the quasi-colonial regional structure within Japan. The nuclear accident also exposed the fragility of the nuclear promotion regime within Japan which had been based on blind faith in nuclear technology. The vulnerabilities of the risk society and individualistic lifestyle, which were made possible by the excessive use of energy and thus a part of the nuclear regime, were also brought out into the light of day.

Moreover, the accident brought about a serious division between those who lived in the 'benefit zone' and 'victimized zone,' and between the present generation and future generations, which even prompted ethical questions. As the disaster-stricken area generated a large number of refugees who have fallen into the institutional vacuum in the existing system, their legal status became precarious in cases such as with temporary towns and dual resident's cards. Moreover, there emerged various kinds of divides between and within the refugee community based on the different degrees of damage they suffered and their different reactions to the reconstruction process. Thus there is persistent anxiety, mistrust, and despair in the community, which makes it even more difficult to form an effective governance for reconstruction. Furthermore, efforts for community regeneration are facing a new kind of problem that has little relation to the reality of community lives before 3.11. In particular, in contrast to the snail's pace of reconstruction in traditional local communities, how to recognize the new digital network community, such as through SNS, became an important issue. Therefore, it has become a critical issue to consider how to make a sociological intervention into the disaster-stricken community and its reconstruction process.

Of course, it is indispensable for RCS to present a critical perspective together with other disciplines against the neoliberal logic that is dominating the reconstruction process. On top of that, it is inevitable for RCS to revise its traditional research frameworks such as 'state and local government,' 'city and countryside,' and 'everyday life and community', because they regarded the existing nation state system as a prerequisite. The neoliberalism-led reconstruction, however, disregards the nation state in one sense, but at the same time, it deeply exploits it. Thus, RCS is obliged to question the neoliberal nature of the reconstruction regime, which is denying and replacing the nation state, and to present an alternative vision.

In this connection, one way of making a sociological intervention is through field surveys. So-called 'investigation nuisance,' however, often becomes a problem in the disaster-stricken areas. People there do not accuse the social surveys in general, but rather the particular way they are conducted based on the epistemological premises of a subject-object dichotomy. Such epistemological assumptions naturalize the supremacy of the investigator, and thus should be questioned. An alternative approach should be sought after in which the researcher and the researched face each other ontologically as "existence in the world" (Martin HEIDEGGER).

Another way for sociological intervention in the post 3.11 world is to present concrete steps towards new social visions. As the philosophy of growth, which has driven modernity, and hit a dead-end, it deserves to have a paradigm change, which is a prerequisite for a new social vision. After 3.11 the question of how to construct sustainability and a way of co-living in order to strike a balance with a risk society is now a central concern for regional and community studies. Needless to say, in this case social visions need to be conceived upon the imagination and critical perspective of the social reality. In any case, it is a time for regional and community studies to get back to where they started and reexamine their standing positions.

## 5. Message to World Sociologists

Though Japanese society attained a general level of affluence thanks to the rapid economic growth in the post-war period, we can observe some shortcomings such as regional economic disparity and the loss of local characteristics in terms of the mode of production, lifestyles, and local culture. Both depopulation and over-population became major issues between the 1950s and 1980s. On the one hand, the concentration of industry and population to a few metropolitan regions such as Tokyo has taken place, while on the other hand peripheral cities and the countryside experienced outgoing population flows. Since the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, problems such as regional disparity, falling birthrates, and aging population have worsened, and social and regional contradictions have grown deeper.

At the same time, since the mid-1990s globalization and the neoliberal economic order have forced the manufacturing industry to shift their production sites to other Asian countries for cheap labor, which led to the hollowing-out of local industry, a rising unemployment rate, and impoverishment (the so-called “Lost Two Decades”). Only global city regions, such as Tokyo, and a few metropolises have accumulated jobs and wealth at the expense of the peripheral regions.

In order to sustain the life and industry of large metropolitan regions such as Tokyo, big cities exploited the rest by absorbing the young labor force and natural resources. In turn, the poorest periphery has to endure the burden of having nuisance facilities such as nuclear power plants and military bases with the financial help of the national government. However, the over-concentrated metropolis has reached its own limit for sustainability, and the system of regional inter-dependence failed after the 3.11 earthquake and nuclear accident.

In the meantime, the national and local governments accumulated financial losses of over 100 billion yen due to the overspending in public investment to compensate the peripheral regions, which has become a huge national burden. The national government forced municipalities to merge with their neighbors to reduce administrative costs. As a result, their number was reduced from 3,200 in 2000 to 1,700 in 2013, but this often causes hardship for the local communities that lost reliable local public services.

Against this general background, RCS in Japan has to focus on two areas of inquiry. The first is to understand the problems and contradictions brought about by regional development (or the failure of such policies) based on the growth-oriented philosophy of the 20th century, which prioritizes material wealth. The second is to seek out ways for sustainable development by reorganizing local communities and rectifying the imbalances between the center and periphery, or cities and countryside.

To this end, it is necessary to reduce the over-concentration in the Tokyo region and spread the development to other areas. We need to make sure that multi-national corporations are socially responsible under international and local regulatory regimes. We also need to present a way for achieving a fairer redistribution of wealth, both in private capital and public finance, and for

approaching power in democratic means. It is necessary to devise a policy for reinvigorating locally-based industries, keeping the diversity in local communities which has been historically and topologically created, and creating a new mode of cooperation between cities and countryside by regenerating the peripheral regions. We need to promote sustainable development because of the topological conditions of Japan, which is particularly vulnerable to natural disasters such as typhoons and earthquakes.

This future vision has to be developed by working together with sociologists in other fields, social scientists in general, and through international exchange with researchers outside Japan.

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