Discourses of Urban Community and Community Planning: a Comparison between Britain and Japan

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Abstract
This paper examines the evolving discourses of urban community and community planning, both Western (and more particularly, British) and Japanese. It traces the path of the sociological concept of ‘community’, from its origins in a pre-industrial past, through its ‘loss’ in the city of modernity, to its ‘rediscovery’ in the guise of community action and community planning in the contemporary city. The origins and characteristics of contemporary Japanese community planning - machi-zukuri (a key concept in recent years) - are analysed to illustrate the distinctive break with orthodox town planning (toshi-keikaku). However, it is acknowledged that machi-zukuri remains a complex and contested concept.

Discussion
‘Community’ as a sociological term has a long history. In the late nineteenth century, German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies drew a distinction between gemeinschaft, or community, and gesellschaft, usually translated as ‘society’. The former denoted relationships which were characterized by their intimacy and durability, where status was ascribed rather than achieved. Conversely, gesellschaft gave rise to relationships which were impersonal, fleeting and contractual, and status was based on merit and was therefore achieved. He was primarily interested in the loss of gemeinschaft
relationships due to the effects of industrialization and urbanization, and the consequent breakdown of traditional society. For Tönnies, *gemeinschaft* was a symbol of the past and a better age (Elias, 1974: xi). Although Tönnies was mostly concerned with change over time, he also made a point of locating *gemeinschaft* in village and small town life, and *gesellschaft* in that of cities and metropolitan areas (1955: 265-6). This spatial dimension of the concept of community has remained a source of contention ever since.

Nineteenth-century intellectuals generally “shared a belief in the ‘eclipse’ of community in [contemporary] Europe and America” (Agnew, 1989: 14), due to the ascendancy of society - something they saw as an inevitable process accompanying modernization. Already by this time, the idea of an earlier idyllic past of rural communities had been mythologized, and the anti-urbanism so typical of the Anglo-Saxon world was well developed (refer to Williams, 1985). Such thinking was very influential, for example, in the ideals of Ebenezer Howard and the Garden City Movement of the early twentieth century.

‘Community’ and ‘society’ were major interests of the Chicago School of urban sociology. For Robert Park, ‘community’ represented the ‘biotic’ level of social life, and ‘society’ the cultural level, and he argued that “It is when, and to the extent that, competition [between communities] declines that the kind of order which we call society may be said to exist” (1952: 150). Relatively close-knit ethnic communities could be seen just outside the campus gates of Chicago University, but sociologists such as Louis Wirth believed that such communities or ghettos were residual features of a city that, due to the effects of urbanism, would in time wither away to be replaced by the modern ways of urban society. In a 1933 essay, entitled ‘The Scope and Problems of the Community’, Wirth criticizes the efforts of local community organizers, and asserts that “Some believe that the hope of our social order lies in the return to the local ties of neighborhood. The trend of our civilization, however, has generally been sensed to lead in the opposite direction. There can be no return to the local self-contained neighborly community” (1964: 176).

His views would have been supported by the architect Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier’s idea of community was that of the entire city. Modernist architecture glorified the utilitarian and the uniform. In the city of modernity there was no place for localism and community. From the 1930s, and particularly after the Second World War,
the modernist project of rational comprehensive planning became the contemporary orthodoxy. Wholesale slum clearance and urban renewal dramatically changed the face of large cities in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere. Nowhere was this more evident than in New York, where the ‘renewal’ of the Bronx in the early 1960s was masterminded by Robert Moses, who once likened his task to that of the wielding of a ‘meat ax’ (cited in Berman, 1984: 294).

The early 1960s also marked the genesis of a critique against rational comprehensive planning, and a reassessment of the value of the urban community. The withering away of community-based ties in cities as expected by Wirth had not happened, or at least not everywhere. Instead such communities lived on as ‘urban villages’, as shown in two famous studies: Young and Willmott’s *Family and Kinship in East London* (first published 1957), and Herbert Gans’ portrayal of the West End of Boston - *Urban Villagers* (1962). Young and Willmott demonstrated that in Bethnal Green, “There is a sense of community, that is a feeling of solidarity between people who occupy the common territory, which springs from the fact that people and their families have lived there a long time” (1962: 113).

In the hugely influential *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (first published 1961), Jane Jacobs strongly criticizes the contemporary planning orthodoxy for ignoring the vital roles played by the existing, often vibrant, inner-city neighbourhoods, in favour of large scale, utopian planning developments that left more social problems in their wake than they solved. In David Ley’s words, she argued for “the preservation of community and the personalizing of space” (1989: 56).

From the second half of the 1960s in Britain, there was a rapid rise in the number of community action groups in many towns and cities, with campaigns against comprehensive redevelopment and the forced breaking-up of long-established residential communities, mirroring similar protests in the United States. By the 1970s, local community and residents groups had become a fixture on the urban scene in Britain, increasingly seen as one actor within the playing out of urban policy.

Public consultation in the drawing-up of plans became obligatory for planning authorities for the first time in 1968, and the following year the Skeffington Report advocated the setting-up of community forums for this purpose. However, despite some high-profile successes such as the blocking of the redevelopment of Covent Garden...
and the Inner London ring road, such initiatives proved to be mostly an empty gesture, and citizen participation in planning never reached the heights it did in the United States at this time, where the Federal Government-funded Model Cities program, neighbourhood activism, and advocacy planning all contributed to a normalizing of community involvement in city planning.

The 1980s saw a sea change in Government urban policy and, in the newly created Urban Development Corporations in particular, such as the London Docklands, residential communities were all but ignored in favour of a property-led approach to regeneration. Such Corporations were run by appointees, and were strongly criticized throughout their existence for their consequent lack of local accountability. It was not until the beginning of the 1990s, that the excesses of property-led regeneration were reversed, and attempts were made once again to promote community involvement in local regeneration as part of the City Challenge initiative. This trend of a substantially increased role for local communities in the regeneration of urban areas - a veritable ‘rediscovery’ of community - has continued during the 1990s with the Single Regeneration Budget, culminating in the launch of the New Deal for Communities in 1998, which has seen community-based groups now in a stronger and more visible position vis-à-vis local urban governance than probably ever before.

Next, I will turn to the case of Japan. Despite Japan’s different historical circumstances and its very different society, there are some similarities to the trends outlined for Britain. One important difference about Japan that should be noted at the outset, however, is that industrialization and urbanization in the country as a whole came somewhat later than in Britain, and hence rural/urban dichotomies were more apparent until more recently.

The communality of (now disappeared) traditional village life is almost universally acknowledged in Japan, and the pre-industrial rural community (kyôdô-tai) tends to be idealized as a model of harmony and cooperation. Rice cultivation has been the mainstay of Japanese agriculture, and this requires a great deal of cooperation between individual farming households, exemplified by the shared interest in the maintenance of the irrigation system essential for wet-rice cultivation. Consequently, the ubiquitous village associations (buraku-kai) have been perceived as playing a very important role in village life.
In the cities, meanwhile, there has been a tradition of urban neighbourhood associations (chônai-kai) during the twentieth century, that have played important roles in the everyday lives of the residents of most urban districts. Already by the late 1920s, for example, the majority of Tokyo’s residents were members of one. Most researchers consider that such associations were spontaneously created from below, with the primary initiative coming from local merchants, essentially as “a means of sustaining local community solidarity in the face of rapid population turnover” (Smith, 1978: 66). There may also have been some local government involvement in their regulation, however.

During the Second World War, the government made membership of such associations compulsory, seeing them as an effective way of controlling the population. After the War, they were banned by the American occupation administration, but many were surreptitiously re-formed under different names, and with more limited roles. In any case, when the Americans left in 1952, the ban was quickly rescinded, and most soon did re-form.

In the early post-war period in Japan, there was a earnest spirit of democracy. Neighbourhood associations were strongly criticized by intellectuals and left-wingers for being ‘feudal’ and undemocratic. They were considered, as they are to a large extent still now, to be conservative bodies, both socially and politically, dominated by the old middle class, and with no democratic procedures for the election of officials. Moreover, membership was virtually obligatory, and on the basis of households rather than individuals. Many former neighbourhood associations re-formed using the term ‘self-governing association’ (jichi-kai), as it sounded more democratic. Amongst intellectuals, both Marxists and ‘modernists’ agreed that in order for Japanese society to achieve modernization, community (both in its institutional form and as a sociological construct) needed to be rejected. Marxists argued on the grounds that community blinded the individual to the importance of class, and modernists because it left no room for individual identity or autonomy (Sakuta, 1978: 223-4).

These views had softened somewhat by the beginning of the 1960s, as the idea of neighbourhood associations being seen as ‘village-like organizations within the city’, in a similar way to the ‘urban villages’ identified by Gans and others, had become more popular in the light of the problems brought about in the wake of the extraordinarily rapid
urbanization of the time (Okuda, 1987: 59). However, by the end of the decade, the focus of urban sociological research had turned to the new suburbs that had sprung up at a phenomenal rate. These suburbs were dominated by the sarariman (white-collar workers) and their families - the ‘new’ middle class - and, according to Okuda Michihiro, himself a pioneer in this field, the suburban komyuniti (the ‘new’ word for ‘community’) represented a new paradigm in Japanese urban sociology (1987: 59). This model saw these new urban communities as comprised of people with a modern ‘citizen-consciousness’. Such people tended to join interest-oriented associations, rather than neighbourhood associations in which membership has traditionally been automatic. These communities could be called ‘communities of limited liability’, or alternatively as the beginnings of a civil society.

The second half of the 1960s, and the early 1970s, witnessed the appearance of a large number of citizens’ movements (or residents’ movements) throughout Japan. These were protest movements, usually territorially de-limited, of an environmental nature against, for example, the siting of industrial facilities or road-building projects, that for a while acted as a real force of opposition to the ruling government’s ethos of economic growth at any cost. For the communalists amongst Japan’s intellectuals, the residents’ movements demonstrated how the values of the traditional Japanese community could be a force for reform in Japan. However, for modernists, the goal remained the cultivation of the ‘modern individual’, and attachment to local community was the antithesis of this (Koschmann, 1978: 27-9).

At the opening of the 1970s, government policy shifted to actively encourage what it called ‘community-building’ (komyuniti-zukuri), particularly in the newer urban areas, to counter what it saw as the potentially damaging effects of rapid urbanization on society. This led to the building of community centres, and attempts by local governments to instil a sense of belonging amongst residents of these new urban areas (Kurasawa, 1990).

In the 1970s, partially as a consequence of the necessarily anti-government nature of the citizens/residents movements, so-called ‘progressive’ opposition political parties came to power in most of Japan’s big cities for the first time. One of the main campaign promises on which they were elected was to establish citizens participation in local planning, and in the government process more generally. Effectively, this marks
the beginning of community planning, or *machi-zukuri*, in contemporary Japan. There were other important wider social and policy trends at the time that were significant. One important such shift was the so-called ‘era of the regions’ in the late 1970s and early 1980s - a consequence of the slow-down in economic growth and urbanization that followed the Oil Crises of the mid-1970s. With a brief cessation of migration to the Tokyo region, there was a reassessment of the values of non-metropolitan Japan and a reaction against the standardization of contemporary orthodox urban planning.

During the 1980s and 1990s, *machi-zukuri* became a key concept within contemporary Japanese town planning, and urban sociology. The phrase literally means ‘town-building’, but the implicit meaning is more that of ‘community-building’ or, as I have elected to translate it, ‘community planning’. A dictionary of town planning terminology defines it thus,

> It refers to a variety of activities where local residents, working together or in cooperation with the local government, make the place where they live and conduct their day-to-day business into one that is attractive, pleasant to live in, and appropriate for the area. (Toshi-keikaku Yôgo Kenkyû-kai, 1993: 347)

As an ideal-type contemporary planning tool, I think four main principles of *machi-zukuri* can be identified. The first is that of residents’ participation in the planning process. Whereas conventional town planning (*toshi-keikaku*) can be described as a strongly ‘top-down’ process, *machi-zukuri* emphasizes ‘bottom-up’ processes. This shows the influence of the citizens’ movements and the citizens’ participation initiatives of the ‘progressive’ local governments of the 1970s.

The second main principle is a decentralization of planning focus and decision-making, with a consequent re-evaluation of local area individuality. There are strong resonances here with the earlier ‘era of the regions’ discourse.

The third key element is establishing a balance between ‘soft’ aspects of planning, and the traditional objects for planning of roads and other physical infrastructure. ‘Soft’ here refers to initiatives to increase local welfare provision, particularly for the elderly, and efforts to foster feelings of local identity and community spirit by reviving local festivals, and so on.
The fourth principle would be a gradual, phased approach, rather than abrupt or radical change - trying to revitalize an area without uprooting the local community.

However, this ideal-type representation disguises the fact that the concept is somewhat more ambiguous and contested than this makes it appear. It tends to be appropriated for all manner of situations. I feel that there are at least three different ways of looking at the concept of machi-zukuri in contemporary Japan. Firstly, it can be considered simply as community participation in local town planning. This can be seen as a natural extension of the earlier residents’ movements, and of the citizen participation measures introduced by progressive local governments. The lead has generally been taken by individual city governments, such as that of Yokohama and Kobe. It is only in recent years, that central government has passed legislation to promote decentralization and community participation in local planning.

Secondly, some critics (for example Cibla, 2000) consider that machi-zukuri is often used merely as a kind of politically correct rhetoric for schemes where local governments are effectively co-opting residents’ organizations for their own ends, or where community participation is window dressing only, and effectively it is top-down planning as usual. In my research, I found this to be generally the case in much of the planning for reconstruction after the 1995 Kobe Earthquake.

Thirdly, it can be seen as an indication or manifestation of a nascent civil society in Japan. Japanese sociologists consider that Japan has a very undeveloped civil society, as a consequence of its particular historical development. Until recently, the voluntary sector in Japan was almost non-existent. Many social commentators see citizen participation in voluntary groups, such as machi-zukuri councils, as an important step in the realization of a more developed civil society (for example Matsuno, 1997: 114-5) - something considered all the more essential with the recent decline in public confidence in the competence of the State.

In conclusion, I will outline a few similarities that I have identified between Japan and Britain in the way that the concept of urban community has been viewed and in the development of community planning. Firstly, there is the similar idealization of the, now disappeared, traditional village community, and the communality of life within it.

Secondly, from the second half of the 1960s to the 1970s, in both countries there was an upsurge in locally-based campaigns of a broadly environmental nature,
principally anti-pollution in Japan, and in opposition to redevelopment and road-building schemes in Britain.

Thirdly, in the urban policies of both countries during the 1970s, local communities figured quite significantly in both - there were community-based government initiatives aimed at resolving inner-city problems in the UK, and there was ‘community-building’ and citizen participation in local government in Japan.

Finally, in the 1990s, in both countries, the importance of the local community has probably never been greater in urban policy. UK government policy now requires community participation in all urban regeneration schemes, while in Japan, recent government legislation has aimed at encouraging the participation of local residents in the drawing-up of local master plans.

However, as a final word, I should say that the object for community participation in local planning is rather different in the two countries. In Britain, the biggest single aim of current urban regeneration schemes tends to be job creation and strengthening the local economic base by encouraging investment, and so on. In Japan, priorities are very different. As a consequence of the lack of any significant planning that often characterizes the older parts of Japan’s cities (and of the relatively stronger local economies of Japan’s inner-city areas compared to Britain), it is more a matter of aiming for basic physical and environmental improvements, as well as the provision of community facilities.

References


Notes

1 According to Hiroshi Matsuno, the term *komyuniti* tends to be used as an idealistic concept to indicate local cooperation, a use that the English term ‘community’ also has (1997: 16-7). A better translation of ‘community’ in its geographical sense is *chiiki shakai* (literally, ‘local society’). This also has a range of uses, but the most common is to indicate a small-scale spatially-bounded community, such as at the neighbourhood association level.

Neil Evans has very recently been awarded his PhD in the School of East Asian studies at Sheffield University. His dissertation was entitled ‘Community Planning in Japan: The Case of Mano and its Experience in the Hanshin Earthquake’. His principle research interests include community planning (*machi-zukuri*) in Japan, reconstruction after the Kobe Earthquake, and comparisons between community involvement in urban regeneration in Britain and Japan, and is currently looking for a suitable post at a university in either the UK or Japan.  
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