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The shrinking city in comparative perspective: Contrasting dynamics and responses to urban shrinkage

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ABSTRACT

In the preceding papers, we have examined the characteristics of shrinking cities in Germany, Japan and the United States, and described the distinctive features of how both the discourse and the policy response to the shrinking cities phenomenon emerged in each country. In this paper, we build on that description to offer a comparative analysis of the phenomenon and the response. We organize this discussion around the same three elements that have animated the preceding work: conditions, discourse, policy and action. While there are significant differences, we find significant common ground between the three countries; in particular, we find that for discourse to lead to action, three steps are required: First, the condition must be identified, second, it must be problematized, and third, the problem must be de-contextualized. Finally, in addition to these steps, a critical element in the movement from discourse to policy is the existence of conditions adequate to create the political will to address the problem. These underlying factors cut across national differences in culture, governmental structure, and policy.

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In the preceding papers, we have examined the characteristics of shrinking cities in Germany, Japan and the United States, and described the distinctive features of how both the discourse and the policy response to the shrinking cities phenomenon emerged in each country. In this paper, we will attempt to build on that description to present a comparative analysis of the phenomenon and the response. We organize this discussion around the same three elements that have animated the preceding work: conditions, discourse, policy and action. Before beginning the direct comparison, however, we will offer a few observations to place the subject in context.

Every cross-national comparison must be pursued within a larger cultural and political framework. It is generally recognized that different societies – which may be national, multinational or sub-national – exhibit different cultural patterns (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Those patterns are likely not only to affect the structure of the national discourse on issues of importance, but the manner in which that discourse leads to action. One example is the distinction between individualism and collectivism in a culture, which affects entrepreneurial behavior (Tiessen, 1997); on this particular measure, Japan is often cited as a distinctly ‘collectivist’ culture, and the United States as a

distinctively ‘individualist’ culture, with Germany somewhere in between. While we will not explore cultural differences directly in this paper, the existence of those differences should be recognized as a fundamental subtext that underlies any observations about the different discourses pursued and actions taken in the three countries.

A second, perhaps less fundamental, framework is provided by the differences between the three national political systems. While all three countries have representative democracy as their basic form of government, there are significant differences between them, particularly in the relationship of the central government to sub-national governmental units. Japan is a unitary system, in which the nation's prefectures are clearly subordinate to the national government, within which neither prefectures nor municipalities have broad powers or substantial sources of locally-raised revenues. Both Germany and the United States are federal systems, in which the states (in Germany *Länder*) have inherent powers under their national constitutions; the nature of those powers is more clearly spelled out in Germany, while in the United States it has undergone, and continues to undergo, a process of evolution reflecting not only legal, but political and ideological conflict. In contrast to Germany, however, in which local government autonomy, within bounds, is constitutionally recognized, local governments in the United States have no such status, and are considered, in the famous phrase, “creatures of the state” (Frug, 1984). At the same time, many generations of political and cultural practice have given them a

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considerable degree of de facto autonomy, which, however, varies from state to state. In the opposite direction, German policy is affected, in ways that are often subtle but nonetheless significant, by its membership in the European Union, something which has no counterpart either in Japan or in the United States. These distinctions are significant, both with respect to the distribution of participants in the shrinkage discourse and with respect to the policies which flow from the national discourse. They form an essential part of the context of this discussion.

1. The context of urban shrinkage

While urban shrinkage is common to all three countries, it is a different phenomenon in each country. While the underlying drivers of shrinkage are in all cases both demographic and economic, there are significant differences in which demographic and economic factors have been most significant, and how they have manifested themselves in the different countries; as Großmann, Bontje, Haase, and Mykhnenko (2013, p222) have written, “recent comparative research has revealed an astonishing plurality of shrinking cities’ pathways”. The diversity of those pathways has strong implications for how which shrinkage is both perceived and addressed.

Urban shrinkage in Japan is first and foremost a product of demographic change. Low birth rates, a rapidly aging population, and a national trend of pronounced population decline (see Fig. 1) would in themselves create a large number of shrinking cities independent of any other factors. Political and cultural considerations, moreover, dictate that there is little prospect of the population decline trend being mitigated through immigration. Not all Japanese cities and regions are shrinking equally, however; increasing concentration of population in major centers, characterized by greater declines in rural areas and small peripheral cities, and in the outer suburbs of major cities, is creating growing spatial disparities. That said, the presence of regional disparities is secondary to the fact that shrinkage in Japan must be seen as both a national and a gradual phenomenon.

By contrast, the population of the United States has grown steadily since World War II, and continues to grow fueled by immigration (Fig. 1). Shrinking cities in the US are shrinking *despite* positive national demographic trends, reflecting two powerful migratory trends, one being the national movement of population from Rustbelt to Sunbelt, or from the north and east to the south and west; and the second being the suburbanization of metropolitan areas after World War II. In marked contrast to Japan, shrinking cities are very much a regional phenomenon, disproportionately located in the older industrial regions of the nation, the Northeast and Midwest, while the decline has been far more precipitous, particularly in cities like Detroit, Cleveland or Youngstown, which have lost well over half of their peak population.

As with culture, Germany falls somewhere between the other two countries. While long-term demographic trends are negative, albeit

slightly mitigated by immigration, inter-regional migratory patterns have been a more powerful driver of urban shrinkage, particularly with respect to the pronounced westward movement of population in the 1990s and 2000s from the states of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Since around 2010 the disparities are increasing between a few growing regions and large towns on the one hand, and an urban shrinkage that affects the majority of small and medium sized cities in structurally weak regions that are still omnipresent in the eastern part of the country, on the other.

As the German and United States experience shows, deindustrialization is a major factor in urban shrinkage, but to different degrees; deindustrialization has been a significant driver of shrinkage in the United States since the 1970s, but played only a regionally restricted role with scattered exceptions in Germany until after 1990 (Hannemann, 2003). While deindustrialization has been taking place in Japan since the mid-1990s (Uemura & Tahara, 2014) even today it is only a secondary factor in urban shrinkage. Finally, each country has experienced distinctive conditions that have affected the urban shrinkage discourse. Particularly notable in this respect are the extent to which the problematization of urban shrinkage in the United States emerged only slowly from the “urban crisis” narrative of the 1960s and 1970s, and the extent to which in Germany it emerged after 1990 as a distinctive phenomenon associated with out-migration and housing vacancies in the former GDR, and thus as a by-product of unification.

2. Elements of the shrinkage discourse

Before a discourse can emerge, there must be some shared sense that an issue or question exists that needs to be discussed; moreover, the issue must not only be seen to exist, but must be problematized. What is notable in that respect that evidence that cities were shrinking, in and of itself, was not sufficient to prompt the emergence of an explicit shrinking cities discourse in any of the three countries studied. It is not that knowledgeable people in each of these countries were not aware that cities were shrinking; as each of the three papers suggests, however, specific triggers were needed to turn that relatively unfocused awareness into a coherent discourse around a problematized condition; this reflects the insight of Bernt et al. (2014, p1752), who wrote “only when at least two of the streams (stream of problems, stream of policies, stream of politics) come together at a critical moment in time that an issue has a chance to be transformed from a mere ‘systemic’ topic into concrete policy”.

In the United States the trigger appears to have been, somewhat counter-intuitively, the revival of urban areas that began around the end of the millennium, which allowed the shrinking cities issue to be distinguished from the longstanding urban crisis discourse; in Germany, it appears to have been the collapse of the unrealistic expectations that followed unification, and the recognition of the problem posed by the massive accumulation of vacant housing units. Notably, the massive outflow of population from Eastern cities had been recognized for some time, and discussed under the rubric of “transformation”, “catch-up modernization” and “adaption to demographic change” during the 1990s, but was largely seen as a transitional phenomenon rather than a systemic issue (Häußermann & Neef, 1996).

In Japan, a distinct shrinking cities discourse is still very much a work in progress. While discussion of the critical demographic issues affecting the country, such as the low fertility rate and increase in elderly population, has been taking place for decades, it is only recently that the discourse has begun to focus on urban shrinkage as such, suggesting some parallels with the manner in which the shrinking city discourse emerged in Germany. The rise of the shrinkage discourse to the surface in Japan appears to be largely a result of a concatenation of events, including the bankruptcy of the shrinking city of Yubari in 2007, the extent of the evidence of shrinkage found in the 2010 census, and most recently the publication of Hiroya Masuda’s controversial book

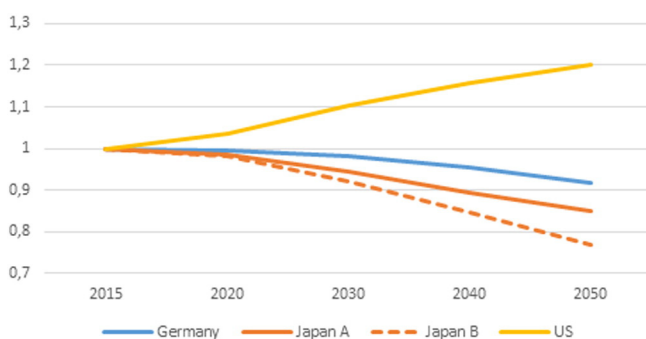


Fig. 1. Population projections for three countries (2015 = 1).

Source: World Bank (Germany, US, Japan A); Japan National Institute for Population and Social Security Research, medium variant projection (Japan B).

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