



# Peripheralisation of small towns in Germany and Japan – Dealing with economic decline and population loss



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## ABSTRACT

Small towns in the rural periphery are often seen as the chronic patients of regional policy, constantly in need of care but never getting well. Even in highly developed and densely populated countries, such regions and settlements are scarred by economic decline and demographic shrinking, leading to a spatial form of inequalities that can be described as “peripheralisation”. The discourse on peripheralisation processes is relatively new. It was introduced by the German sociologist Karl-Dieter Keim (2006), who identified the socio-spatial decoupling of rural areas from the dominant processes of centralisation and the weakening of economic potential as central features of peripheralisation. In this paper Keim’s approach is applied to analyse and to compare the current situation in two small towns that have experienced serious population decline from about 10,000 (1965) to about 4000 inhabitants (2015): Johannegeorgenstadt in Germany and Ōya in Japan. Although the course of regional policy in the two countries has differed to some extent, processes of peripheralisation have been similar in the two towns, including tendencies of economic downturn and a loss of original functions. Against this backdrop, the main finding of the paper is that market-oriented strategies like neoliberal austerity policy or a Keynesian approach have not yielded the expected positive results in the past and cannot be viewed as the remedy for small towns in decline as seen here. Since endogenous development approaches also did not play a major role in either case, it is concluded that strategies negating quantitative growth like Slow City and Life Beyond Growth, which focus on quality-of-life factors, well-being and deceleration, could be a viable alternative. However, more cross-country comparative research on peripheralisation processes and their connection with socio-economic decline in small towns amidst demographic change seems to be necessary.

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## 1. Small towns in the periphery as chronic patients – an introduction

Small towns are vital elements of settlement systems in all developed parts of the world. They provide services, goods and jobs, and offer access to public transport not only for the inhabitants but also for the hinterland (e.g. Lintz and Wirth, 2008). Traditionally they perform a range of functions as social, cultural, administrative, communication, shopping and business centres (Vaishar et al., 2015; Heffner and Twardzik, 2015; Visvaldis et al.,

2013). The catchment areas depend heavily on the ability of these centres to fulfil multiple societal tasks, in particular acting as “networking ‘nodes’” (Courtney and Errington, 2000: 297), rural “growth poles” (Courtney et al., 2007: 1220), or “growth engines” (Giffinger and Kramar, 2012).

In the past few decades, many small towns have encountered a series of opportunities as well as challenges to their economic, social and political roles. As a result we can observe two contrasting development scenarios (see also Fulton and Shigley, 2001). On the one hand there are towns which have prospered and grown, often situated near large cities or within metropolitan regions and thereby profiting from urban sprawl effects. With their close proximity to city regions, such towns can take part in the social and cultural life of urban centres while offering good living conditions.

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In some cases we can also find this type of town in rural regions due to the special functions they perform as centres of tourism, cultural heritage or health, often in combination with good transport connections (Vaishar et al., 2015; Giffinger and Kramar, 2012; Lazzeroni et al., 2013; McGranahan et al., 2010). In contrast to this positive development trend, many small towns are undergoing a process of decline and shrinkage. They suffer from dwindling job opportunities and ever-decreasing social and cultural attractiveness. Many inhabitants are forced to commute to bigger centres far away or have to move to find work elsewhere, and education opportunities are scarce. Due to demographic shrinkage and ageing, these towns suffer from social erosion and a lack of the human capacities required to develop knowledge-based local communities. Many of them are situated in peripheral areas with poor accessibility. Latterly trends of peripheralisation have also been seen in relation to the weak network-building capacity of actors. Small towns of this type seem to be chronic patients of regional policy, constantly in need of care but never getting well. Summarising, these contrasting development perspectives represent the winners and losers in a polarisation process in the sense of Müller (2002), Erickcek and McKinney (2006) and Ehrlich et al. (2012).

The focus of this article is on the situation in Germany and Japan, two highly developed countries with basically stagnating populations and widening spatial disparities. Although the two countries are situated on opposite sides of the globe and have different social traditions and forms of government (a federal system in Germany, a centralised state system in Japan), there is a close degree of convergence in many aspects of economic and demographic development and the spatial repercussions of this development. In particular we can observe that there are small towns where state policies intended to strengthen the local economy have largely failed in the past. We therefore ask what medicine could be appropriate for the chronic patients.

The goal of the paper is to characterise the development options of small towns in the periphery under conditions of structural change in Germany and Japan. In this context the article is intended as a contribution to the international discussion on the spatial repercussions of structural change and regional development alternatives from a long-term perspective. On the one hand, we investigate the impact of change on small towns experiencing processes of peripheralisation, and on the other hand we discuss policy options to deal with the challenge of local development under conditions of economic and demographic decline. We would like to explore the following questions: What are the common development patterns in declining small towns? Which framework conditions matter, particularly regarding national economic regional policies in the relevant countries? What development options do small towns in the peripheral regions of highly developed countries have against this background? What is the role of the state and how is state responsibility related to self-responsibility at the local/regional level? The study is informed by the English-language literature and numerous sources from Japan and the German-speaking countries.

Section 2 presents some theoretical considerations about peripheralisation and small towns. The following section focuses on the determining political factors and past development strategies in regional policy in Germany (3.1) and Japan (3.2). At the end of Section 3.3 four strategic options are derived for rural peripheries and their small towns to deal with decline. Section 4 provides the context of the two case studies and presents the materials and methods of empirical research. Two case studies are described in Section 5: Johannegeorgenstadt in Germany and Oya in Japan. Both of these small towns have suffered from serious economic decline and population loss since the 1960s, and today are still in a process of adaptation. In Section 6 the findings of the case studies are

compared in order to highlight differences and similarities as well as alternative development options. Finally, Section 7 provides some conclusions on how small towns can best adapt to structural change. Furthermore, the contribution of this article to the international discussion about small towns in the periphery is highlighted.

## 2. Theoretical considerations

### 2.1. Recent considerations on peripheralisation

This article draws on the theoretical framework provided by the growing body of research on peripheralisation (also: peripherisation) following the notion of the German sociologist Karl-Dieter Keim (2006: 3–4) that peripheralisation should be seen not as a static concept but as a dynamic socio-spatial process. This constitutes a new approach, as it is based on the preconception that the periphery is “made” and evolves due to processes of peripheralisation (Bernt et al., 2010), which means that being peripheral is not a structural feature of space that cannot be altered. In contrast to other theoretical frameworks, it offers a dynamic perspective that opens up a means to explain how peripheral spaces evolve and change (Naumann and Reichert-Schick, 2012: 29). It is an approach that transcends the prevalent understanding that peripheral areas are normally islands, mountains, borders, former industrial sites, rural and structurally weak areas (Ehrlich et al., 2012), an understanding that sees the periphery primarily as a spatial concept that can be quantified in terms of the distance from and accessibility of urban centres, or in terms of location in a rural or remote area. Instead it is based on an aspatial notion of periphery, focusing on the network building capacity of actors (Copus, 2001). In addition, it assumes that peripheralisation is reversible (Kühn and Weck, 2012: 21).

As peripheralisation is a complex concept, opinions differ on its distinguishing features, but considerable accordance nonetheless exists. It can be characterised by a gradual weakening of economic potential with regard to production and employment (Keim, 2006: 3–4), decoupling, out-migration, dependency and negative self-perception (Bernt et al., 2010: 2), depopulation, a lack of integration in the globalisation of markets, cultures and values, continuous economic underperformance and a shortage of investment capital (Ehrlich et al., 2012: 79), or by regional socio-economic decline and demographic shrinking (Naumann and Reichert-Schick, 2012: 27). Peripheralisation is generally considered as a form of uneven spatial development, leading to fewer opportunities for people who live in peripheralised areas. It constitutes a distinct and increasingly relevant dimension of social inequality that differs from the usual class-based interpretations in sociology (Barlösius, 2009).

The current debate on peripheralisation shows parallels with and is partially informed by the theory of regional polarisation of the 1950s, a theory that stressed that imbalances in regional development are not gradually equalised by the market mechanism but tend to intensify over time (Myrdal, 1957; Kühn and Weck, 2012: 14). This hypothesis is important for our discussion of strategies for peripheralised areas, as it offers an explanation for the failure of market-based statutory regional policy. There is evidence that the periphery is not well served by mainstream regional policy (Danson and de Souza, 2013: 5–6), insofar as it is implicitly treated as the laggard in a competition with urban areas that it can never win. As the selection of analytical tools used for the evaluation of development in the periphery is moulded by the discourse reflecting the urban-rural power divide, the parameters used tend to disregard the strengths of peripheral areas.

This common bias towards stressing quantitative economic indicators has to be considered when discussing possible policy

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