

## Community as a Reflection of Local Democracy

journal or publication title	International Journal of Social and Cultural Studies
volume	2
page range	1-6
year	2009-03
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2298/28767">http://hdl.handle.net/2298/28767</a>

# Community as a Reflection of Local Democracy

*Hironori ITO*

*Kumamoto University*

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to clarify the transformation of the local community and the participation of citizens in local politics.

In Japan, local communities have been in the spotlight several times after WWII. Among them, especially, I would like to focus on the era of high economic growth. In the era, environmental pollution and the collapse of local communities became central issues. It is needless to say that the environmental pollution and the collapse of local communities are closely related. The living standards of Japanese people advanced rapidly at the expense of the environment. The resulting environmental pollution had serious negative effects on the society and on the health of people, animals and plants. On the other side, local communities, which had been involved in developmental policies in their areas, abandoned their traditional life style and the rural landscape to become modernized. However, when we look at it from the viewpoint of civic participation, we can see a different face. It is this different impact on civic participation that I would like to focus on, in this presentation.

## 1.Modernization and Civic Movement

I would like to start with the development policies and environmental pollution. There were various types of pollution, for example, air pollution (including noise from airplanes), water contamination (For example Minamata disease, caused by mercury contamination), and the destruction of the landscape for infrastructural development such as airports, factories, dams, etc. For example, the Shimouke Dam here in Kyushu or Sanrizuka (Narita) airport in Chiba Prefecture).

With the background of environmental destruction and pollution, the civic movements of this age focused on defending their living space. Local communities, as living spaces, were the backbone of these opposition movements against the state, which was promoting the development policy. At that time, the environment and peace were the main watchwords of the anti-state movements. The main feature of the

movements was the emphasis on the place where they lived. People resisted the state to protect their living world. Local democracy meant, therefore, to protest against the state and protect their lives.

From the viewpoint of civic participation, this age was the first highlight of the increase in civil activities, especially resistant-type movements. This shows the importance of the living space and the relationship between citizens and self-governance. Some literature state that we cannot live if we are uprooted from nature and if we lose the sense of belonging to nature or the local community.

These anti-state type movements, however, have diminished, if not extinguished. Instead, especially after the 90s, new movements appeared, which were inspired by the theories of public space, for example, by Hannah Arendt, and were locally-based in many cases. Their aim is not only to criticize the state but also to form a new public space which should be shaped by ordinary people not by the government. They do not have the dichotomy of "public" vs "private", which was the case for the anti-state movements.

Among them, we have "community building" movements. "Community building" means "those beliefs and types of political behavior that contribute to positive attitudes by residents about their neighborhood and encourage a willingness to work cooperatively on its behalf." (1) In Japan, community building movements have appeared from the mid 70s.

Those movements aimed at not only self-governance of local communities and creating a sense of belonging in the residents, but also a new type of economy which supports autonomy of local communities. (In the process of development, some of these movements gradually lost their anti-state characteristics and become more cooperative.) For a few years, the merger policy of municipalities was the issue for community building activities.

Besides the community building movements, we should also pay attention to the anti-development movements, especially from the 90s, which have resisted the destruction of the landscape and big projects, such as dams, reclamation, atomic plants, plants for industrial waste, etc. People wanted to express their own opinions about those projects and to have direct influence in decision making and appealed frequently to local referendum. In some referendums, the people's opinions had a decisive impact on the government's decision.

These movements are examples of the increase of civic participation. People resisted development-oriented policies which destroyed the local communities. To make the movements more effective, people demanded

local referendum or used the courts. Because of these movements, these days the central government cannot carry-out big projects without the consensus of the residents. This is the positive side of the history of people's movements concerning the local community. But we also have to look at the negative side. If we only look at the positive side, we are prone to overlook the decline of civic engagement in local communities.

## **2.Modernization and Political Apathy**

The negative side was brought about by the same process which brought about the positive side, that is, modernization and development. Because of the modernization of life styles, there was an expansion of individualism and political apathy spread widely. Furthermore, the tremendous development of the telecommunication sector brought a new dimension into people's lives. People could make a community with unknown people beyond their borders. The spread of motorization opened and widened our horizons. From these, the "geographical community area" lost its importance. Our sense of belonging diffused and the meaning of community became ambiguous. As Delanty pointed out (2), the possible meaning of community is only the communicative community, that is, to belong to the communication process not to a particular place.

If political activities need a sense of belonging to a particular place, it is truest for local democracy, because the bond of the neighborhood and the interest in the community constitute the base of local democracy. Therefore modernization and urbanization undermine our base of local democracy. We can no longer find such a community which is different from others and offers a sense of identity to the residents. To people without a sense of community, neighborhoods are just temporary residences. Under these conditions, people become indifferent to any changes in the landscape of their neighborhood or town, or to the destruction of the beautiful countryside. This indifference deprives the community of local democracy.

As the meaning of community became ambiguous, civic involvement in local affairs decreased. Without social capital, it is difficult to revitalize the local community and encourage civic participation. We have moved farther from the image of township as illustrated by Toqueville, that of a community with close ties between the inhabitants. Some people insist that we need common interests in a community in order to increase civic participation in solving community problems and improve local

democracy. However, the current situation shows that such close bonds have since disappeared from local communities.

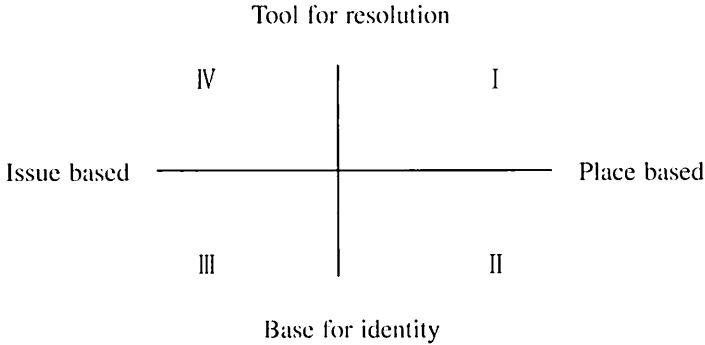
In Japan, especially because of the municipal merger policy and the escalation of neo-liberalism, local communities have lost the bond between residents. The merger policy creates larger communities. Although the larger communities may have a wider range of economic activities, they also lose their cultural identities in the process. This situation brings local democracy to a head, resulting in the collapse of the local community and ultimately, to political apathy. If someone could only write a Japanese version of "Bowling Alone." !

Of course, the problems caused by the collapse of the local community are not only limited to political apathy but also to an increase of isolated lives and the erosion of social trust. Since the late 60s, the Japanese government has been trying many different policies of community building to buffer the impact of modernization. Unfortunately, these policies have not been able to override the negative effects of modernization. Again, this highlights the tension between the positive and negative sides.

### **3.Various Communities**

The question is, "Can local democracy be revitalized without social capital?" I cannot answer this question at the moment. From this paper, we can see that there is tension between the disappearance and the revitalization of the local community. Suburbanization, mobility, individualism, globalization have taken out the geographical community from the scene. However, many people, some with the support of the government or local municipalities, are striving to revitalize their local communities in order to solve local problems or to generate bonds between people. We cannot say whether they are being successful, or not, in holding back the spread of indifference among the residents. Others have embraced the new communication technologies and are trying to create a new type of community, beyond their geographical boundaries, for example, cyber communities.

The complexity of the local community can be presented as follows;



The vertical lines express what people expect from a local community and the horizontal lines indicate whether the community has its own particular place or not. "Tool" means that the community is a kind of instrument and it is exchangeable while "base" means that it is essential for human identity. Horizontal lines express whether the community is issue-based or neighbor-based. For example, local community as a tool for problem-resolution covers social issues like garbage disposal, disaster prevention or crime prevention etc.

In the box I, there are various groups that engage with crime prevention activities in the neighborhood or take care of old persons. In the diagram above (box II), the Japanese traditional neighborhood organization is also included. This organization has been criticized because it was a tool for oppression for a long time. But it is also true that we need some organizations with deep roots in the society especially for the benefit of young people who can learn about the interrelationship between an individual and the society. The problem is whether the present neighborhood organization can be such an organization or not.

Box III contains various associations based on the same kind of work or characteristics. In Box VI, there are NPOs with expertise or volunteers who help people or municipalities in trouble. In most cases, these communities or groups are also called "voluntary associations".

As mentioned above, the target of recent movements has often been locally-based issues with a positive drive to form public spaces. So when such issues appear, various communities are involved. Place-based communities are supported by issue-based communities. Communities sometimes become tools for conflict resolution.

The complex relationships within communities constitute public spaces. The variety of the communities is indispensable for the public

spaces. People can create public spaces through belonging to these communities.

### **Conclusion**

I would like to stress that various communities express various types of civic participation. So, if each community could cooperate to resolve the issues instead of protecting their own organization, or, if they could become mediators to convey public opinions to authorities and relay back to the people, they would be able to contribute to the creation of a public sphere and civil society. Communities are expected to provide a base of identity at one time, and to become mediators at another. It remains an unsolved dilemma as how to attract people who are indifferent to the community. What can the community do to overcome the social isolation and political apathy? What kind of community can connect people to society and generate ties between them? That is our current problem.

### **Reference**

- (1) Bob Edwards, Michel W. Foley, and Mario Diani ed., *Beyond Toqueville: Civil Society and the Social Capital Debate in Comparative Perspective*, Tufts University, New England, 2001, pp.70-96.
- (2) Gerard Delanty, *Community*, Routlage, London, 2003.