

Klemen SENICA

A city at a turning point

Title: *Creativity in Tokyo: Revitalizing a mature city*

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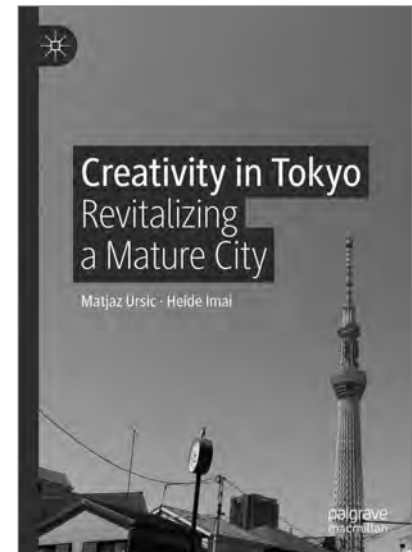
Tokyo is a megacity that, in the seemingly distant pre-Covid-19 era, was globally considered a metropolis of haute cuisine, as well as a global hub in many other respects, thus attracting people from around Japan and the globe for shorter or longer stays. As a result, Tokyo is also a megacity that, due to ongoing development, is changing so rapidly that its transformation often surprises even the locals if or when they manage to get off the beaten track of their everyday lives. In their book *Creativity in Tokyo: Revitalizing a mature city*, the spatial sociologist Matjaž Uršič and the cultural studies scholar Heide Imai discuss how Tokyo residents (creatively) respond to the rapid changes and the fact that, in the race to become a major global financial center, the city is being flooded by non-places.

In the spirit of modern scholarly volumes, each of the book's nine chapters can be read as an independent and complete whole, as implied by the decision to provide references at the end of each chapter. Chapter one presents the theoretical and methodological research premises, the authors articulating their substantial analytical challenge as follows: "We attempt to connect both bottom-up (local community) and top-down (creative class) approaches for a more holistic, albeit still limited, insight into how creativity is formed in Tokyo" (p. 7). In studying creativity,

they do not focus on "the output, or the creative product, but rather on the process that either ignites or obstructs urban creativity" (p. 6). They combine this analytical approach with the ethnographic method of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and narratives, providing fresh insight into Tokyo's recent urban development.

Chapter two first highlights the pressing social issues of contemporary Japan, a country that continues to stagnate economically after the burst of the real estate and stock market bubbles in the early 1990s. As a result, both the country and the city are dealing with a decline in birth rates, population ageing, a labour force shortage, and other issues. In this respect, the authors point out that Tokyo's creative ecosystems cannot be entirely explained with international hub theories as these ecosystems are defined by specific local features. One such special feature is that, despite considerable investment in the development of innovative technologies, Japan has found itself struggling to sell its products in the global market despite their quality.

In chapter three, Uršič and Imai discuss the relocation of the inner Tsukiji Fish Market, a once popular tourist site and a cultural institution that "symbolically, historically, and socially represented one of the most important local con-



sumption spaces in the city" (p. 62). However, because Tokyo's Ginza district, where this market was located, is subject to substantial transformation (i.e., gentrification), the central and best-known part of the market was relocated to Toyosu Island in Tokyo Bay, not without opposition from the locals.

Chapter four raises the issue of precarious work, although without a broader critical examination of the neoliberal economic model, which has predominated in Japan since 2000 and is the legacy of the extensive structural reforms of Junichiro Koizumi's governments and his political-economic philosophy of "no pain, no gain", which still deprives many young creatives of social and economic security and subsequently forces them into insecure forms of employment. Nonetheless, the authors argue that the official discourse that advocates the need for employment flexibility of creatives today actually "mystifies the upsides of flexibilization, while neglecting or ignoring the collateral damage found in the precarization of the working and living conditions of small creative actors" (p. 91). Even though, in the big picture, the Japanese economy seems to be largely composed of multinational corporations, its actual structure is different. In addition to

external factors, the rapid economic development and expansion into foreign markets, especially in the automobile and electrical engineering industries in the second half of the twentieth century, were also or primarily facilitated by small and medium-sized enterprises. Over the past two decades, these have been much more exposed to the “invisible hand of the market” than before.

In chapters five to eight, the authors focus on the Tokyo neighbourhoods (e.g., Ichigaya, Okachimachi, Koenji, etc.) where they have conducted their field research during the past decade. The districts of Hikifune and Kyōjima are particularly interesting, having undergone many changes in recent years, whereas some of their parts still preserve the spirit of times past, specifically the Shōwa period (1926–1989). Kyōjima is one of the few areas in Tokyo that was not destroyed by the heavy American air raids at the end of the Second World War. Hence its many wooden buildings now cause headaches for the municipal and local administrations in this highly earthquake-prone city. Between 2008 and 2018, many young artists and entrepreneurs were drawn to this area, where they started renovating and transforming the old buildings for their creative purposes. Through interviews, the authors succeed in portraying the vibrant life of the area, to which a wide variety of creatives in the broadest sense of the word have moved from around and beyond Japan to pursue their creative ambitions. One of them is a Norwegian woman named Britt, who, together with Yamato-san, designs unisex denim yukata. According to the interviewees, their business is thriving.

The above raises the question of whether the Tokyo-based examples of good practice presented by the authors (e.g., p. 126) can also be applied to Slovenia. Instead of having the centres of even the largest Slovenian cities greeting visitors with vacant display windows covered

in tattered “for rent” notices, surely the local political elites could seek to revive vacant spaces by offering them to creatives, artists, young entrepreneurs, and the like, charging only token rents. These would not only lend a new (artistic) character to the city centres, a move at least some of the locals would welcome with great enthusiasm, but also gradually begin attracting visitors and tourists from near and far, with positive implications for both the local and national economies. As highlighted by the authors, such regeneration of derelict urban areas usually also stimulates large chain stores – which in Slovenia tend to be concentrated in large malls on the urban outskirts – as well as others to return to urban centres. Although Slovenia certainly has the knowledge, skills, and creative ideas to achieve this, the parochialism of urban policymakers that gravitate toward flashy but ephemeral urban regeneration solutions seems to be an insurmountable obstacle. However, in the long run, such instant solutions developed without discussion with the wider local community and well-considered links with other places and stakeholders, at least at the regional level, only rarely provide added value to the (tourist) products and services that cities offer.

Despite its laudable focus on ordinary Tokyo residents, this book also has some weaknesses. What stands out in the introduction (pp. 1–2) is excessively apologetic self-reflection – inevitable in this field of study – which leads the reader to believe that, at a certain point in the process of writing the book, the authors (temporarily) yielded to the idea that only the Japanese can understand and objectively interpret Japanese culture. However, as many anthropological and sociological studies published since the 1990s demonstrate, Japan is not a culturally monolithic entity. Therefore even a native researcher might succumb to an ideological explanation of Tokyo’s urban creativity or gain unconventional

insight into the research question. Ultimately, in the globalized academic community, even native researchers usually employ Western theoretical approaches to explain typical elements of Japanese culture. Would the authors also have felt the need to question their foreignness if they had written about urban creativity in some other global city, such as London?

In addition, what may bother the reader somewhat is the book’s Tokyo-centricity – which, on the whole and given the book’s title, is understandable, but a somewhat broader analytical perspective would nonetheless have been an advantage. Tokyo is a vast and densely populated post-metropolis, but the claim that it has a population of 38 million (p. 22) is incorrect. The population of the administrative unit itself, officially known as the Tokyo Metropolis, which comprises twenty-three special wards (*tokubetsu-ku*), is officially just under 14 million, whereas the figure provided in the book is, according to the latest data, roughly the population of greater Tokyo. However, this area also includes neighbouring Yokohama (Japan’s second-largest city), an administrative part of the Kanagawa prefecture. In their field research, Uršič and Imai also focus exclusively on the neighbourhoods under the jurisdiction of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. Moreover, it seems that the myriad of problems Tokyo is facing (p. 23) are nonetheless smaller than those of many other Japanese provincial cities and rural areas in general. The latter are affected by strong depopulation, resulting from the fact that young people in particular are moving to the metropolis and other megacities along Japan’s Pacific coast in search of better education and employment opportunities. Even a brief visit to the interior of another nearby prefecture, Saitama, reveals the multi-layered social and economic impacts of this negative trend. Although the Covid-19 pandemic has slightly

halted it, it would be premature to conclude that it has also reversed it.

Despite the above, *Creativity in Tokyo* is highly useful and interesting read for spatial sociologists and anthropologists on the one hand, and for urban planners, architects, and specialists in Japanese studies on the other, helping them understand the fluid urban character of this city.

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Biography

Matjaž Uršič is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology and a research consultant at the Centre for Spatial Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. He has worked at several East Asian universities, including Tokyo Metropolitan University, the University of Seoul, Soongsil University, and National Cheng Kung University. He is involved in various international research and development programmes to revitalize and change the role of urban centres, including H2020, RISE, the NRF Joint Research Program, Smart Urban Futures ERA-NET, and ERDF.

Heide Imai is an associate professor in the Faculty of Intercultural Communication, Senshu University, Japan. She has taught at universities in Japan, the UK, and Germany. She is currently engaged in several research projects on urban problems and policies in Japan, Korea, and China. Her publications include *Tokyo Roji* (Routledge, 2017) and *Asian Alleyways* (with Marie Gibert-Flutré; Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

Information about the book

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