

**Spaces of Autonomy in Modern
Japan: Q&A**

Tessa Morris-Suzuki

Comments by Johannes Rehner

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Spaces of Autonomy in Modern Japan: Q&A

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Comments by Johannes Rehner

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

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Resumen:

El 3 de septiembre del año 2018, la profesora Tessa Morris-Suzuki dio una charla titulada “Espacios de Autonomía en el Japón Moderno” en el Centro de Estudios Asiáticos de la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, la cual fue comentada por el profesor Johannes Rehner, director del CEA UC. En su presentación, la profesora Morris-Suzuki describe cuatro distintas formas de política informal, una forma particular de “política desde abajo”, que se dieron en Japón durante la primera mitad del siglo veinte, que el profesor Rehner complementó con aportes principalmente del ámbito de la geografía. A continuación, se presenta un resumen de la charla de la académica, seguida de los comentarios del profesor Rehner, y por último, la respuesta de la profesora. Se e

Palabras clave:

Japón, siglo XX, política desde abajo, autonomía

Abstract:

On September 3rd, 2018, Prof. Tessa Morris-Suzuki held a presentation titled “Spaces of Autonomy in Modern Japan” at the Centre for Asian Studies, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, which was commented by Prof. Johannes Rehner, director of the Centre. Throughout the presentation, Prof. Morris-Suzuki describes four different cases of informal life politics, a different kind of grassroots politics, in Japan during the first half of the twentieth century, to which Prof. Rehner added inputs mainly from the field of geography. Here we present a summary of Prof. Morris-Suzuki’s talk followed by Prof. Rehner’s comments and questions, and finally, Prof. Morris-Suzuki’s reply.

Key words:

Japan, 20th century, grassroots politics, autonomy

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On September 3rd, 2018, Prof. Tessa Morris-Suzuki gave a talk titled “Spaces of Autonomy in Modern Japan” at the Centre for Asian Studies, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago. Her presentation was commented by Professor Johannes Rehner. Here we present a summary of Professor Morris Suzuki’s talk followed by Professor Rehner’s comments and questions and finally Professor Morris-Suzuki’s reply.

Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s presentation:

In this paper, I want to take you on a journey in search of spaces of autonomy in modern Japan. This journey emerges from a project which I have been engaged in with a group of colleagues for the past five years: a project exploring what we call ‘living politics’ or ‘informal life politics’ in East Asia. Our project, in other words, examines alternative notions and practices of politics in everyday life. Its focus is on non-governmental forms of self-help politics: efforts by non-state groups in East Asia to re-imagine politics and to address pressing social problems by non-state means.

Many of the examples of ‘living politics’ that I will talk about today come from towns and villages in the mountains of Nagano Prefecture, a place which has provided particularly fertile soil for grassroots political experimentation, though other examples come from rural Kyushu, from north-eastern Japan, and even from Brazil. Central to this ‘living politics’ is the idea that many of the key problems that humans face (not simply as individuals but also as communities) cannot be solved at the level of formal state politics. In fact, these problems are often caused or aggravated by the actions of governments. So ‘politics’ in its broad sense – meaning the search by a community of people for a physically sustaining and morally virtuous ‘good life’ – requires the creation of ways in which groups of people can come together to pursue that search directly and autonomously in their everyday life. This does not necessarily imply a rejection of states and governments. Those who engage in informal life politics often accept the need for the state to play an important role in some spheres of human activity, and may actively engage with the institutions of government (local, national or international) in various ways. But at the same time, they also focus on finding other forms of politics embedded in the everyday life of social groups.

Informal life politics, then, is part of the larger realm of grassroots political action, but it differs from other forms of grassroots politics in one crucial respect: it does not lobby or campaign to persuade governments to change policies or make new laws or regulations. Instead, it seeks to change reality directly, from the bottom up. It is in this sense ‘do-it-yourself’ politics.¹

The White Birch Teachers

There are many points at which we could begin our journey, but let us start in 1918, in Togura: a very small rural town in Nagano Prefecture, best known for its hot springs. Togura would seem like an improbable place for radical action, and the story of the 1918 ‘Togura Incident’ is not widely remembered, even in Japan, but it is of interest because it was an attempt by a group of young teachers to create a type of education completely at odds with the educational system promoted by the Japanese state, and to use this as a stepping stone to the creation of a different sort of society.

The teachers involved were members of a group known as the ‘White Birch Teachers’, or *Shirakaba Kyōin*, who derived their vision of the world from *Shirakaba-ha* or White Birch literary movement. This *Shirakaba-ha* was a coterie of Japanese novelists and art critics which flourished in the 1910s and 1920s, and whose members espoused humanist and idealistic visions of society. The White Birch Group sought social alternatives which would liberate the human spirit by reintegrating manual labour with artistic creation.

The group embraced an eclectic range of imported ideas with an enthusiasm that sometimes seems naïve, and their ‘breathless language’ leads art critic Edmund de Waal to observe that ‘in this world of metropolitan salon life, the habitual way of communication often comes across as pompous and aphoristic rather than considered’.² The White Birch philosophy was certainly loosely formulated, fluid and interpreted in different ways by different individuals, but a closer look at its history suggests a different and more complex story. The White Birch Teachers were mostly children of moderately well-to-do farm families from relatively remote rural areas, and they put White Birch principles to work in

¹ See Trapese Collective, *Do It Yourself*.

² De Waal, *Bernard Leach*, 15.

settings far removed from the literary salons of the metropolis: settings where material social realities and oppressive politics of early twentieth century Japan were harder to ignore. Their local and much less well-known activities had an impact that was in some ways more long-lasting than that of their famous and prestigious counterparts. To me what is also particularly interesting is that their ideas continue to have an influence on practices of informal life politics in some parts of Japan today.

White Birch teachers abolished formal daily morning assemblies, but opened up the school in the evenings for informal gatherings where children could take part in games and choral singing. Given the political climate of Japan in the 1910s, it is not surprising that the Togura experiment was short-lived. Many of the children reportedly responded with enthusiasm to the transformation of school life, but some adults – and particularly members of the village administration – viewed the goings on at the local school with alarm. Early in 1919, two of the teachers involved and the school's vice-principal were dismissed from their teaching posts, while six other teachers were suspended or forced to move to other schools. Togura's experiment in White Birch education came to an abrupt end.³

New Villages

Also in 1918, four days after the end of the First World War, leading members of the White Birch movement gathered at the home of the novelist Mushanokōji Saneatsu at Abiko, on the outskirts of Tokyo, to celebrate the official founding of the New Village (*Asahi Shimbun*, 17 November 1918). The notion of the New Village was a response to the very rapid industrialisation of Japan, which was leading to an outflow of the young from rural society, and to a landholding system which created profound divisions between landlords and peasant farmers. In this utopian village (which Mushanokōji had been planning for the past year or more) inhabitants would live as brothers and sisters, combining farm labour with spiritual and artistic creativity, sharing wealth in common and determining their future through mutual agreement.

Those who commit themselves to a life in the New Village pool their resources, and in return are guaranteed houses, clothing, food, education and health care, as well as a small

³ Shiomi, 'Taishō 13-nen no Jikan Tsūchō', 73.

monetary payment which is the same for all villagers. The working day is designed to allow time for education, artistic creation and the sharing of ideas. The result, it was hoped, would be a community of love, sharing, creativity and mutual aid, in which people would lead a truly human life [*ninengerashii seikatsu*].⁴ The village acquired its own flag and anthem, celebrates its own annual holidays, and also has its own a literary magazine, which is still published on a monthly basis today.

In 1918 Mushanokōji, his wife, and fourteen other villagers assembled in a remote corner of Kyushu, where the novelist bought six-and-a-half hectares of land for his village. (In the late 1930s the main village was to move to Saitama Prefecture, much closer to Tokyo). By the late 1920s some proponents of the New Village movement were developing almost imperial aspirations. In 1929 one of the founding members of the New Village, novelist Mera Shigeho, announced a movement to create an international network of ‘Love Villages’ [*Ai no Mura*]. Members of his group were reportedly already identifying suitable spots for Love Villages in Brazil and the Shan States of Burma. (*Asahi Shimbun*, 18 April 1929). Nothing seems to have come of these ambitious schemes, but in the early 1930s a group of young Christian socialist Japanese emigrants did create a cooperative farm, *Comunidade Yuba* in the Aliança region of São Paulo, Brazil based on Tolstoian principles and partly inspired by Mushanokōji’s New Village.⁵ The commune still exists today, and is well known in Brazil for its success in combining spheres of human creativity that are not generally seen as connected: farming, orchestral music and ballet.

Free Universities

While the New Village movement was linking farm labour to artistic creativity and the White Birch Teachers were rethinking childhood education, another self-help experiment was also challenging official approaches to knowledge, culture, and human autonomy. The focal point here was the little silk producing community of Kangawa, on the fringes of today’s Ueda City, Nagano Prefecture, which in 1921 became the birthplace of the Free

⁴ Mushanokōji, *Atarashiki Mura no Seikatsu*; Mushanokōji, *Atarashiki Mura no Setsumei*.

⁵ Kimura, ‘Yuba Nōjō no Gairyaku’; Burajiru ni okeru Nihonjin Hattenshi Kankō Iinka, *Burajiru ni okeru Nihonjin Hattenshi*, 620-629.

University (*Jiyū Daigaku*). The Ueda Free University was not an educational establishment created by the government to enlighten the masses, but rather a project that began in the community, when local residents decided to invite scholars to provide them with education and to share the process of knowledge making within their village. The initiative came from two local men, Kanai Tadashi (1886-1955) and Yamakoshi Shūzō (1894-1990) – both members of relatively well-to-do silk farming families.

Classes were open to all local people and were taught as intensive units in the winter: the agricultural off season, when most farmers could find some free time for study. The focus was on the humanities – culture, philosophy and the study of society, which the university's founders saw as essential to the creation of active citizens. In the context of the university, the word 'free' meant 'autonomy' and 'free enquiry', not free of cost. Tsuchida Kyōson, the key academic involved in creating the university, was particularly emphatic about the importance of the 'autonomy of education', which meant avoiding all reliance on the state. As a result, it proved necessary to fund the university by charging a fee of 4 to 5 yen per course. This proved to be an ongoing dilemma. Within a couple of years of its establishment, Ueda Free University had inspired a rapidly expanding movement. Free Universities were set up in Fukushima, Uonuma (in Niigata Prefecture), Yakai (Yamanashi Prefecture), Gunma and elsewhere. In 1924 a national Free University Association (*Jiyū Daigaku Kyōkai*) was established, and the following year saw the launch of the *Free University Magazine* (*Jiyū Daigaku Zasshi*).⁶

The global recession, which hit the rural silk producing districts of Japan particularly hard, was the final nail in the coffin of the university, which held its last classes in 1930.

But the ideas lived on. In the postwar era, some of those associated with Ueda Free University began new movements which re-animated and developed its vision. After the start of the postwar occupation of Japan, social activist and literary theorist Takakura Teru briefly revived Ueda Free University, but this reincarnation lasted only from December 1945 to November 1946.⁷ Meanwhile, though, similar experiments emerged in many parts of the

⁶ Yoneyama, 'Ueda Jiyū Daigaku no Rinen to Genjitsu', 13.

⁷ Kodaira, Nakano Akira and Murayama *Ueda Jiyū Daigaku to Chiiki no Seinen*, 50.

country. Academics who had evacuated to rural areas during wartime created classes for local students, and the self-study groups known as ‘circles’ became a vibrant feature of Japanese culture from the late 1940s into the 1950s.

Saku Hospital: Reinventing Cooperative Medicine

A large, hierarchical, state regulated system of cooperatives emerged in Japan in the early twentieth century, but also, as scholars like Sho Konishi have recently emphasised, there was another strand of cooperative history, in which people with alternative visions of society created workers’, consumers’ and medical cooperatives in an effort to promote greater social equality and self-reliance.⁸ In the postwar era, cooperatives of all types blossomed in Japan, making the country internationally known as ‘the land of cooperatives’. Here I want to look at the story of Saku Central Hospital, just one postwar example of a medical cooperative which shows the potential of cooperatives as ‘spaces of autonomy’ in the Japanese context.

Saku Central Hospital was established in the rural mountain town of Usuda, now part of Nagano Prefecture’s Saku City, as a medical centre controlled by the local agricultural cooperative. The Hospital director was Wakatsuki Toshikazu (1910-2006). Following Japan’s defeat, Wakatsuki’s ideas interacted with the longing for a better life felt by many local residents in Usuda and surrounding areas as they recovered from the disasters of war and faced the massive tasks of rebuilding their community. From this interaction, Saku Hospital emerged as a pioneer of cooperative social medicine, both within Japan and beyond.

The hospital, whose slogan was (and still is) ‘Together with the Farmers’ [*Nōmin to tomo ni*], was literally sustained by the support of the local farm community, particularly after a fire destroyed much of the hospital compound in 1949. Farmers and hospital staff worked together to study and find responses to the many occupational injuries and illnesses which resulted from the back-breaking agricultural labour still carried out on Japanese farms in the 1940s and 1950s. The funds for reconstruction of the hospital after the 1949 fire were raised by local residents, and local farmers and the hospital together worked out a system to deal with the poor living conditions which often led to patient’s suffering relapses after they

⁸ Konishi, *Anarchist Modernity*, particularly 194-196.

were released from hospital: the farmers contributed part of their produce, which hospital staff then cooked into nutritious meals to be delivered to recuperating patients. So hospital staff, patients and local residents developed a view of social medicine which integrated hospital and community, transforming the conventional image of the role of a hospital as an island of technical expertise in a sea of potential patients. ‘Health’ from their point of view, was not just a matter of the treatment of disease, but a matter of life as a whole. Saku Hospital became the site of a monthly informal discussion group including medical staff, young farmers and others, and ranging over a wide spectrum of social and political issues.

To the present day, despite radical changes in the whole environment of medical treatment in Japan, the hospital remains part of a vibrant local network of ‘bottom up’ development projects to which we shall now turn.

Spaces of Autonomy Across Borders

The cases we have looked at here are just a very small sample of some of the creative ways in which people in modern Japan have carved out spaces of autonomy where they can explore alternative modes of existence. In our collaborative project, my colleagues and I have looked not only at Japan but also at other East Asian countries – China, Taiwan, Mongolia, South Korea and even North Korea – and in all of them my co-researchers have found similar intriguing examples of grassroots efforts to change life from below.⁹ Of course, the way these informal life politics actions unfold in the various countries are in some respects very different, shaped by the diverse formal political systems of each nation state. But one of the significant findings of our project has been the discovery of important networks linking these spaces of autonomy in various different countries. For example, the Japanese New Village movement of the 1920s had a major impact in China, where it inspired similar movements and even had an influence on the agrarian ideas of some leading pre-war Communist figures. In the twenty-first century, the ideals of the New Village movement have been rediscovered by some Chinese activists, who incorporated them into agrarian

⁹ Cliff, Morris-Suzuki and Wei, *The Living Politics of Self-Help Movements*.

experiments such as the Bishan commune in Anhui province, created in 2011 by art curator Zuo Jing and artist and film maker Ou Ning.¹⁰

In an age when important sections of mainstream politics have been captured by populism, and when there are fears, as Arundhati Roy has put it, that democracy is being ‘hollowed out and emptied of meaning’¹¹, discovering these spaces of autonomy and their cross-border linkages may be a way of rethinking the meaning, and reimagining the possibilities, of political action in twenty-first century East Asia and beyond.

Johannes Rehner’s comments and questions:

Thanks to professor Morris-Suzuki for the very inspiring presentation of four different cases of “spaces of autonomy” referring to the field of education, to which belong the cases of the “White Birch Teachers” and the case of the “Free University”; to the field of agriculture and rural life (“New Village”) and finally health services (“Saku Hospital”). These were very clear examples for what Tessa considers *spaces of autonomy*. It has also been particularly helpful for understanding her perspective on spaces of autonomy: she clearly highlights that such initiatives do not question government’s authority per se, but they emerge recognizing that the government itself is not going to solve daily life problems, or in some cases, that it may even be part of the problems. Therefore, there is an explicit need for “grassroots” efforts. Morris-Suzuki makes it clear, that what the cases presented here have in common is that they differ from other grassroots initiatives in one fundamental aspect: such groups do not campaign to influence on national politics, but are rather aiming to effectively obtain change in their daily life through direct action. Thus, they should be understood in the tradition of self-aid and mutual aid.

Although the paper starts with a focus on “politics”, from a geographer’s perspective, obviously the use of the concept “space” is particularly intriguing and calls for some remarks looking for an interdisciplinary dialogue on this topic.

¹⁰ Ou, ‘Social Change’; Morris-Suzuki, ‘Beyond Utopia’.

¹¹ Roy, ‘Democracy’s Fading Light’.

First of all, there seems to be a historical link to some thoughts of the Russian anarchist geographer Piotr Kropotkin –also considered one of the important representatives of anarcho-communism–, especially related to the idea of mutual aid. Therefore, perhaps a link to his work or its current interpretation, for instance by Simon Springer (2016) may be of interest for further discussion of these cases, perhaps also considering Elysée Reclus, another classic anarchist geographer.

Second, it seems relevant to consider possible inputs rising from the tradition of the Geography School at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, particularly Yi Fu Tuan's work, but also contributions from Nicholas Entrikin (at UCLA) and currently Keith Woodward (at Wisconsin-Madison) may offer interesting lights on the cases discussed here. They developed a concept of geography deeply rooted in humanistic perspective, thus linking the tradition of a phenomenologist approach to space. In this tradition the main spatial category of analysis is “place”, which contains affective dimensions in individual's relation to space and is based on the daily life experience of space – in this sense the present paper could perhaps be linked to the concept of place rather than to “space”. This notion has recently been enriched by a critical perspective, with roots in the anarchist literature and the concepts of “site” and “flat ontology”, contesting the privileged and hierarchical view of space with a locally situated experience of daily life (Woodward et al 2012: 204-205). Politics of autonomous space are discussed from such perspectives of “ontology of **site**” by the mentioned school from Madison-Wisconsin (for a brief discussion of such perspectives see Woodward et al 2012). In this regard further important inputs can also draw on the work of feminist geographers (Gibson-Graham 2008).

Finally, the cases discussed in this paper also have a clear relation to the issue of **scale** and exercise of power through scale. This may be completed for example by some aspects of the work of David Harvey and Neil Smith (1985) who are concerned with scale in capitalism from a Neo-Marxist perspective. They are linking scale to the aspect of hierarchy, thus putting attention on the exercise of power and the legitimation of authority. They particularly refer to how capital is jumping scales and places and thus, as Harvey (2012) puts it, moving the crisis around unable to solve it.

Based on the presented paper, and with the particular geographic perspective in mind, four main questions come into my mind:

How to treat a certain air of “elite” in such initiatives in terms of the interpretation and implications of the cases? It became clear that at least some of the initiatives are based on a privileged background of their key members – for instance the White Birch Movement. The importance of networking among different initiatives and the role of key persons is sustaining this critical perspective. Also, examples of contemporary initiatives that recover the idea of new villages for instance in China sustain the need for questioning the role of (cultural) elites in such initiatives and their relevance for daily life of rural communities. The current case of Bishan village in Anhui Province, an initiative of the Chinese artist Ou Ning that is integrating intellectual activity and education into a farming context, reminds of Miyazawa Kenji.

How to consider “scale” and its relation to governance and authority when discussing these cases? Here, the locally situated experience and its closeness to anarchist geography contrasts in a certain degree with the Neo Marxist concern with capital and scale suggesting the central role of hierarchy, and thus need for considering domination in this discussion (Neil Smith, David Harvey).

Is there a relation of these examples of autonomous spaces to the idea of “civil disobedience”? Or should they be rather understood as linked to the anarchist “direct action”? Or, perhaps these cases are different from both, and should be regarded separately by adding the humanistic approach.

Finally: to what degree there are specific cultural aspects of the Japanese cases of spaces of autonomy that make them different from western experience (e.g. the case of Christiana; see Coppola and Vanolo 2015) and thus call for an adapted or perhaps completely different theoretical approach? In some of the cases, it became clear that in a certain degree such initiatives have been confronted with the fear of external influences, particularly “western” or “anarco-communist” tendencies. Therefore, a question is if they have a particular Japanese dimension or are they rather presenting an international or “transcultural” aspiration. For example, you made the point that the New Village movement has been

important for the young Chinese Republic (in the 1920s) and had impact on a Japanese community in Brazil.

Tessa Morris-Suzuki' reply:

It is nice to have a conversation with a geographer because I think that there are really interesting things going on in geography, and unfortunately, we do not have a very strong geography school in our part of ANU. I am glad you brought in Kropotkin, because he was a very big influence. I'd like to mention that one geographer that we have, Katherine Gibson, is giving us very interesting feedback on what we've been doing.

I think that the questions that you have raised are really important ones and quite closely interrelated. The issue of place and space and how we think about these places or spaces has been something that we've talked a lot about over the course of the project. I'm not sure that we've come to any real conclusions, but I think that what we have found in all the case studies that we have looked at is there is an interesting sort of combination going on here – almost all of them being very local in a sense, being very much place-based, but at the same time extending outwards, so all of them involve networks, and they involve outsiders and insiders coming together, and they really wouldn't happen without that insider-outsider networking, which sometimes extends over very long distances and sometimes extends over smaller distances. There is a sort of complex intermingling of different scales going on.

And as you mentioned, that does link closely to the question of the social hierarchies, and the social power relationships, and I think that what we found in the case studies that we looked at in Japan and elsewhere is that all of them have this networking between a particular place and a wider network of outsiders, or semi-outsiders (you know sometimes outsiders come and live in the community for a long time, or whatever). But the degree to which it's a relatively flat network or a more hierarchical network varies from place to place. So, in some cases it's the more intellectual elite members who have a very large influence, and I think for example in New Village it's all a matter of the scale – Mushanokōji was very much personally

influential in the village, I mean he was among the better-known more intellectual members who shaped the village very extensively, and to some extent still do today.

Whereas with other examples that we have looked at, even the Free University, and also Saku Hospital, they seem to be much more horizontal in a sense. It is local farm people, maybe not the poorest of the poor farmers, but nonetheless very much people engaged in local agriculture production who have played a key role in the creation of the project as well as the way it operates. So, there is not a simple answer. It also touches on another very big issue that we have been looking at throughout the project, which is the light and shade involved, the good sides and the bad sides. This kind of small-scale, self-help project can have wonderful results and be very inspiring, but it can also become very dominated by a small number of people with a grand vision that other people may not necessarily buy truthfully, so it can be quite problematic in terms of hierarchies.

Going on to the question of civil obedience and the links to Indian thinkers, and also to your final question about the peculiarities of Japanese culture, one of the things that I have also learned during the project is something about the way ideas are transmitted over time and space. When you look, for example, at the way that these groups in Japan related to Gandhi and Tagore, and so on, it strikes me that it is not simply that they learn from what people outside of Japan are doing. It is a more complicated process where they pick up particular ideas: they get their frames from Gandhi, and then they interpret it in a way that may be totally different from what Gandhi was thinking of. But it sparks something in them. I found myself using the term 'resonance' to talk about how ideas travel, so, ideas resonate across space, but they turn out somewhat different at the place where they resonate.

In terms of what they did with the ideas of people like Tagore and Gandhi, they did not really develop the civil disobedience practices that Gandhi was talking about, but I think that they did take up his ideas about what an ideal rural society would look like. And they also took up his ideas about the way that a country cannot be changed just from the top; it is only when, and if, things happen at the bottom that anything can be transformed. It is a very selective process of borrowing of ideas, and also an interesting process of borrowing ideas and then using them up differently in their own society.

So, relating it again to the question of Japanese culture and what is different, clearly there are things that are just intuitive, driven partly by culture and tradition, but also by this specific form of politics; by this environment in which they're working. When we look at the cases that we have been studying, for example, China, Japan and North Korea (where, interestingly, there are informal forms of politics going on), there are differences. They are very different in the degree to which they can, for example, act openly without repression. In Japan in the 1910s and 1920s, and in the post-war period, they were quite able to do that. So, there are distinctive things; these sorts of experiments would not have worked in the exact same way in Korea or in China, let alone in England or Chile or the United States.

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