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## Article

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# Economic sociology in Japan

Tsutomu Nakano, Masaru Karube, Yoshimichi Sato and Naoki Wakabayashi

## Introduction

**E**conomic sociology is an established field in the Western tradition of sociology. Departing from the instrumental rationality of neoclassical economics (Weber 1968), it has made a breakthrough with its foundational conception that economic action of individuals constructs social structures and these social structures heavily influence decision-making of individuals as the economic transactions are embedded in society. Since the rather sensational emergence of economic sociology in Western academia in the late twentieth century, it has been legitimized as a subsection of the American Sociological Association and has evolved into a loosely integrated discipline with its rapid global expansion. Attracting disciplinary variations and complexities of approach, it has been much discussed in American and European academia ever since, with flagship concepts such as norms of informal groups and organizational dynamics (Homans 1950), relational structures of networks (White, Boorman, and Breiger 1976; Burt 1992), Japan has its own local, original version that has evolved historically since the early twentieth century, if not earlier, and is not widely known outside the country, in part due to the fact that findings and results have been published mainly in Japanese. As a matter of fact, many Japanese academics have been detached from the global expansion as they were too busy writing in Japanese to deal with their domestic stakeholders and colleagues, or too independently

self-sustained to cater to the needs of the audience in the economic system. The macro economy however lost its prime status in the global arena in the post-“bubble economy” age after the 1990s, whereas new economic competitors emerged globally, transforming the power dynamics in the new digital age. Under the circumstances, it is high time that we should review an array of unknown literature from the point of view of both traditions: one imported from the West especially after the 1970s, and the other that evolved locally over the course of a century.

The objective of this article is therefore to introduce to the global audience economic sociology in Japan as it has evolved especially after the high economic growth period in the 1960s up to the present and largely influenced by American and European social sciences. The article aims at producing a comprehensive review of the local development and evolution, including theoretical undertakings, disputes, and empirical research content. We present to readers commonalities, differences, and similarities compared with the Western tradition, clarifying uniquely distinctive approaches from the Japanese construction, application, and contribution.

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Our review project addresses how economic sociology in Japan started and developed over time; how Japanese studies employed and applied American- and European-born theories, conceptions, and methods to the local contexts; and how imported and original endeavors interacted to produce unique contributions.

Following this introduction, we begin our discussion with the local origin and development of economic sociology since World War I, which is indispensable to explain its economic success and prosperity. We will review the literature of social transformation with institutionalization of the stylized facts in respect to the Japanese management system and labor and mobility in corporate business, and in other social areas of inquiry such as consumption, family, local community, and culture. We will then specifically focus on two major empirical areas of economic sociology in Japan: embeddedness and institutions related to the Japanese management of organizations, and social structure and mobility for stratification. We will conclude our discussion by briefly summarizing distinctiveness, contributions, and possibilities, and extrapolating these to foresee the future.

## The local context and evolution of the field

### A brief history of economic sociology in Japan: Its origin and early development

After World War I, economic sociology in Japan gradually developed as an academic discipline to discuss the growing tension between the developing field of economics and the modernization of society. Japanese society was then faced with various social problems regarding economic disparity, social class and mobility, and poverty and conflict in the accelerating processes of industrialization along with the modernization of society.

Yasuma Takata from Kyoto University was one of the first economic sociologists and raised questions about relations between the economy and the nation-state to discuss poverty, social class, and social power by introducing sociological theories of Max Weber as regards economy and society (Takata 1989). To tackle the existing problems, Hisao Otsuka (1969), Hideo Aoyama (1948), and several other academics studied patterns of Japanese industrialization and modernization, applying the Weberian model of capitalism in the West (Weber [1905] 1958; Weber 1968) as a point of reference to analyze historical formation.

In 1966, followers of Takada organized the Society of Economic Sociology (*Keizaishakagakkai*), consisting of old-school “institutional economists” studying social aspects of the Japanese economy and sociologists studying economic phenomena embedded in Japanese society. The Society has grown to approximately 300 members (as of 2020). This tradition to focus on the local context of natural and societal envi-

ronments, mechanisms of economic activities, and existing economic institutions in Japanese society still lingers on in the academic association. Moreover, some members had a keen interest in discussing economic and sociological thought and non-Western models of economic action and social systems, while others paid attention to existing economic problems, capitalist society, social policy, and modernization theories. They commonly found a distinctiveness of formation of the Japanese system and recognized a different economic system from the advanced Western systems to theorize, one which is under the strong influence of cultural traditions and economic thought existing in Japanese society.

From the tradition, Ken'ichi Tominaga, a leading economic sociologist, explained peculiar features of the Japanese economy and its development, proposing “plural evolution theory.” One of his main research topics was to build a unique theoretical model of modernization of non-Western societies, especially focusing on the Japanese experience. Later, Tominaga (1991) found that many non-Western societies were subject to economic, technological, and cultural influences from the advanced Western economies on their modernization stages, but they were substantively different and varied, or not as “Westernized” as they seemed to be. While modernization in advanced Western societies generally started from social, political, and cultural areas to make changes later in the economic area, in non-Western societies industrialization or development of the economic system preceded the modernization of political, social, and cultural systems due to the local resistance from conservatives and leaders, if not the public.

### Later development and empirical research of actions embedded in the social

Researchers in this domestic academic group also shifted their interests to empirical research. In the following section, we illustrate four major topics of empirical investigation: social welfare and security, regional and community development, consumer society, and business networks of markets and firms.

First, in the area of social welfare and security, Adachi et al. (2003) compared varieties of systems, policies, and practices of social welfare in major countries to show that they depended heavily on local social conditions, institutions, politics, and cultures, whereas social welfare is mainly about public support. Focusing on the fact that social welfare service is provided by voluntary organizations in Japan, Miyagaki and Fukazawa (2001) studied substantial processes and structures of voluntary organizations in detail and argued that their actions and social structures are not

formalized much, and their ways of providing services often change flexibly and inconsistently.

Second, as regards community development, several researchers studied regional movements in the institutionalization of community currency and circulation patterns from the point of view of development of social capital and community building. From social capital theory, Nakazato and Lin (2017) found in their case study that the community currency movement provides toolkits to revive local communities. Moreover, it helped local communities in the huge aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 to generate support networks in the communities.

Third, with the advent of consumer society and its rapid expansion in modern Japan, Mamada (2007) offered a view that Japanese society has become an affluent society where consumers seek high-quality products and services for cultural consumption, changing patterns from mass market consumption, as a new orientation of post-materialism.

Fourth and last, the emergence of textbooks on networks and organizations in Japanese (Wakabayashi 2009; Nakano 2011) provided an environment for young researchers of the Academic Association for Organizational Science (AAOS; *Soshikigakkai*), which has approximately two thousand members as of 2021, to apply network concepts and analytical methods to investigate business organizations and markets after the 2010s, although still only a relatively small number of members are keenly interested in pursuing academic approaches from economic sociology. With the growing academic interest in social networks within and between business organizations, many researchers published research papers on the process, structure, and effect of organizational networks in Japan. For instance, Yasuda and Toriyama (2007) examined email communication networks in Japanese business organizations, analyzing structures of communication networks including linguistics of words and expressions. Their findings show that high performers tend to play key roles in brokerage ties, and managers in high-performing departments tend to develop networks within and across departments. Moreover, regarding the Japanese film industry, Wakabayashi et al. (2014) studied growth and effects of alliance networks in film-making as a production consortium. They argued that temporary, small interfirm networks were formed to rewire sequentially behind the major, high-performing commercial films.

In summary, a review of the above listed studies suggests that economic sociology in Japan, which originated from the domestic tradition of academic groups, has been influenced by Western-originated concepts and theories of economic sociology to produce empirical results, sometimes involving compara-

tive empirical investigations, that show its distinctive features.

## Embeddedness and institutions: Empirical studies of Japanese management in economic sociology

The postwar history of economic sociology for Japanese firms and the economy has been characterized as a “co-evolutionary pendulum” between two contrasting perspectives: relational and transactional. We use the term “co-evolution” here to imply that the former has gained currency over time in parallel with the latter as the influence exerted by the two academic approaches changed. The relational perspective of social structures regards individual actions as profoundly and extensively influenced by norms emerging from social groups or relationships with others. In contrast, the transactional perspective assumes that individual actions are independent of existing norms in society and rather guided by economic calculations or instrumental rationality of atomized individuals (Cheng and Miller 2011; Gupta 2011). Although most Japanese economic and management studies do not explicitly argue for economic sociology as their disciplinary foundation, they have been influenced to a certain extent by the tradition of “new economic sociology” as coined with the concept of embeddedness of economic transactions (Granovetter 1985). At the same time, they have also been affected by the “new institutional economics” under the banner of transaction cost economics, or the “market and hierarchy” thesis (Williamson 1975, 1985, 1986).

The history of economic sociology in Japan began with the unparalleled, rapid growth of Japanese firms and the macro economy after World War II. The Japanese economic “miracle” then widely received scholarly attention from Western economic sociologists. They investigated issues to answer puzzles such as how management and organizational practices within a firm are constrained or promoted by the local social relations beyond the boundary of each firm (Abegglen 1958; Dore 1973; Lincoln and Kalleberg 1985). Abegglen (1958), one of the earliest leading economic sociologists, recognized the extremely high commitment of Japanese employees based on the lifetime employment system as an important source of competitive advantage. Later epitomized by the quote “a firm was seen as one family” (Hazama 1960, 5), Japanese management studies regarded the business organization as a nexus of social relations like a “family”

group. By the late 1970s, the relational approach, emphasizing the national orientation of culture collectivism, had become mainstream or a dominant understanding of Japanese management practices in local academia (Hazama 1960; Iwata 1977). In effect, the peculiarity of social relations of Japanese firms received recognition as stylized facts or distinctive characteristics of institutionalized management practices (Dore 2000).

The emphasis on the positive influence of distinctive Japanese national culture in the 1970s was mitigated by the global expansion and spread of two new streams of research in the 1980s: “new institutional economics” from economics (Williamson 1975, 1985, 1986), and “new economic sociology” from sociology (Granovetter 1985; Smelser and Swedberg 2005; Swedberg 1997). These approaches later had decisive and lingering impacts upon Japanese academics. The former offered a canon for the transactional perspective, which led Japanese scholars and researchers to examine mutual dependency between economy and society, assuming under-socialized, atomized, and self-centered actions of individual transaction. The latter, later crystallized as the relational perspective, provided theoretical foundations on which to investigate economic actions from the social, with the assumption that socially constructed embedded ties matter a great deal in the economic action of individuals. In other words, while both perspectives stand on a shared understanding regarding the bounded rationality of individuals in economic transactions, the two differ to the extent of how much individual actions are embedded in the social ties or norms of the groups in their decision-making. Employing these two perspectives in combination enabled some researchers to study economic transactions not as a dichotomous but as a continuous variable between two extremes as atomized, rational actors on the one hand, and as members of an embedded community on the other.

As a result, a series of empirical studies on Japanese management practices and institutions later shed light on the multifacetedness of social relations and their permeation into economic actions. The embeddedness of the Japanese management system, or an infusion of market exchange with the entangled social relations of a non-economic nature, has been examined in the context of borrower-lender relationships known as the “main bank system” (Aoki, Patrick, and Sheard 1994; Arikawa and Miyajima 2015; Miyajima 1995), the horizontal *keiretsu*, or business groups with interlocking relationships by cross-shareholdings (Nakatani 1984; Lincoln, Gerlach, and Ahmadjian 1996; Lynn and Rao 1995), and the vertical *keiretsu*, or industry-based manufacturing business relationships that link suppliers, manufacturers, and distributors

(Asanuma 1989; Asanuma and Kikutani 1997; Takeishi 2001). In parallel with these empirical studies, Imai and others identified common characteristics of these organizational forms as “intermediate organizations” or a hybrid of the spot market and the hierarchy (Gerlach 1992; Hamilton and Biggart 1992; Imai, Itami, and Koike 1982; Imai and Itami 1984). This concept of networks as a governance mechanism through informal peer pressure, which emphasizes the interpenetration of market exchange with the embedded social relations, was later applied to industrial clusters in Japan to explain economies of agglomeration (Itami, Kikkawa, and Matsushima 1998; Nishiguchi and Tsujita 2017; Seki 2001; Nakano and White 2006; Nakano 2007). Moreover, it is argued that the relational market concept of embeddedness coexists with a “family logic” of longevity, high commitment by employees, and good brand recognition, in the study of family-owned firms (Asaba 2013; Mehrotra et al. 2013; Saito 2008).

These empirical studies on Japanese management practices are an important part of economic sociology in Japan. As contributions, they provided rich empirical evidence for the upside of the role that social relations could play in economic transactions, suggesting that embedded ties could reduce agency and transaction costs by promoting trust and collaboration as interfirm networks for a longer term. Furthermore, these sociological inquiries into Japanese management practices had an impact on global academia, inducing a revision of transaction cost economics for a more refined conception of interorganizational governance mechanisms of relational structure as a continuum between the spot market and the hierarchy.

At the same time, however, it was also pointed out that these embedded relationships could cause suboptimal lock-ins, competitive disadvantage of closures, and unfairness and exclusivity of market access by the incumbent members (Gupta 2011). From this standpoint, researchers also focused on the negatives or the downside of embeddedness in Japan (Karube, Numagami, and Kato 2009; Numagami, Karube, and Kato 2010).

## Labor market and social structure for stratification from economic sociology

Social stratification has been a major research topic for accumulating important findings on Japanese society. Research on the topic has mainly focused on individuals’ social mobility with the help of path models and log-linear models and has therefore paid attention

to individuals' characteristics such as family background (parents' occupation and education), education, first job, and current job (e.g., Blau and Duncan 1967, and Featherman and Hauser 1978).

Although this line of research has produced important findings regarding how social stratification emerges and is maintained, it has missed a crucial factor in the creation of social stratification: social structure. This section shows how social structure functions in the labor market to create social stratification and inequality, focusing especially on the Japanese context.

## Entry to the labor market regulated by institutional linkages

From the point of view of economic sociology, the labor market in Japan has unique practices that can affect the entry process for college students. Kariya and Rosenbaum (1995) named this "institutional linkages," and Kariya (1991) referred to "implicit recruitment contracts" after their empirical studies of the stylized Japanese management system that was institutionalized during the postwar high-growth period. These studies found that the concept of institutional linkages and implicit recruitment contracts pointed to a stable, long-term relationship between schools and firms in Japan. Guidance counselors at schools and recruiters at firms exchanged information extensively and actively on students and job openings to avoid mismatches between students and jobs.

The first job on entry to the labor market has been one of the most important career choices in life in Japan. This was (and still is to a certain extent) because changing jobs often led to worse work conditions under the old Japanese employment system, which consisted of long-term, if not lifetime, employment practice, a seniority-based wage system, and cooperative labor unions (Abegglen 1958). Most Japanese people were expected to enter a firm immediately after graduation from high school or university and work for the firm until their retirement. If they changed jobs mid-career, they mostly ended up getting worse positions with lower social status or salary because their previous experience in their career was not fully evaluated or appreciated in the tradition of the Japanese employment system.

In the system, therefore, guidance counselors scrutinized job openings because they understood the importance of the first job entry in students' life. They sought information on job openings especially through institutional linkages with corporate recruiters. In response to their demand for the information, recruiters

provided them with details of their job openings, expecting they would recommend students suitable to fit their job expectations in the long run. Guidance counselors, in return, carefully chose students fitting recruiters' needs and preferences. Thus, recruiters and guidance counselors were in a self-reinforcing relationship, which made the institutional linkages stable and long-standing as critical, professional networks.

The institutional linkages worked well in contributing to the low unemployment and turnover rates among Japanese youth when the economy was very strong in the period of rapid growth. But it has become weaker since the "bubble economy" burst in the early 1990s (Honda 2005; Brinton 2008; Brinton and Tang 2010). The importance still remained to a certain extent as a smaller number of schools maintained this channel of linkage with firms (Sato 2010). The research study implied that some inequality existed for the students in their probability of achieving good first job entry due to the strength of embedded ties and trust relationships. Social networks matter in the process, the studies indicate.

## Social structure in the labor market

As regards the study of labor markets in economic sociology, Mark Granovetter (1973, 1974) provided the revolutionary insight from his empirical fieldwork that weak ties, not strong ones, between job seekers and their contacts would lead to better jobs for job seekers, with higher salaries in general. Nan Lin (e.g., Lin 1990, 1999) later contributed by introducing the notion of contact status. A simple interpretation of his argument is that if A has a tie to B of a high status and C to D whose status is lower than that of B, A would be likely to be promoted to a higher-status position than C, given the same levels of human capital for A and C.

Granovetter and Lin made a great impact on scholars in the field by emphasizing the effects of relational structural properties on intragenerational social mobility or career development in the labor market. Japanese sociologists conducted the following investigations: Watanabe (1991) reported that strong ties have a positive effect on the amount of information on jobs, and also have a positive effect on job changes, by analyzing data of male job-changers in metropolitan Tokyo in 1985. He conducted a follow-up survey in 2002 and, surprisingly, found that using weak ties leads to jobs at larger firms and with higher annual income generally (Watanabe 2014). He insisted that the inconsistent findings from 1985 and 2002 were due to structural changes in the Japanese labor mar-

ket, such as an increase in the unemployment rate and in the number of non-regular workers.

Sato (1998) also studied job changes from a different perspective, comparing the impacts of social ties and institutional linkages as regards job changes in Japan. Studies on institutional linkages, as mentioned above, focused on networks at the time of first entry to the labor market. However, graduates sometimes kept ties to their former teachers/professors as mentors to seek inside information on job openings. He also found that male professional job-changers use those institutional linkages more often than non-professionals. In contrast, female job-changers did not use the linkages, regardless of their professional level in the previous job. Furthermore, regressing occupational prestige of the current job position to explain job change results, his analysis showed that the institutional linkages increased prestige for male job-changers only. These findings from a relational approach in economic sociology indicated a gender segregation in the labor market in Japan.

## Conclusion and discussion

Our review and discussions presented here clearly indicate that economic sociology in Japan has been heavily influenced by Western academic trends and fashions, especially after the 1970s, and that there are commonalities, similarities, and differences compared with the Western tradition.

At the same time, economic sociology in Japan has uniqueness and distinctiveness. It originated from early studies of social problems and tensions that emerged in the process of industrialization of the economy and modernization of society in the early twentieth century. It started from an attempt by a

group of Japanese researchers to apply Weberian sociology to theorize different patterns of capitalism from the Western model. Later, especially after the 1980s, researchers of economic sociology both from Japan and abroad actively employed imported concepts, theoretical undertakings, and advanced methods from the West, including embeddedness and informal organizations, network structures and social capital, new economic sociology, and new institutionalism.

To be specific, our review of empirical literature shows that those trained mainly in the US and Europe and those who had a keen interest in the advance of the field in the West produced a rich stock of empirical literature on the Japanese management system and organizations, social structure and labor mobility, networks and markets, family and community affairs, consumer society, and culture and structure, among others. Many of these contributions were not widely recognized in Western academia previously, or not understood in an organized manner as presented here. We hope that our review of those endeavors and challenges sheds light on the unknown projects, new findings, and unconventional interpretations for readers of economic sociology in the global community.

As for future discussions and possible directions to explore, there are emerging empirical topics among Japanese economic sociologists including COVID-19 and digital transformation, markets in the digital age and consumption, business startup ecosystems, and actor network theory and performativity, to name only a few. We hope that concepts, insights, knowledge, theories, and thoughts from the past will guide researchers for the advancement of economic sociology in Japan to investigate these uncharted areas and to then contribute to the global community of researchers and scholars more actively.

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