

Critique: Toward a Revision of the Concept of “Reconstruction”



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In the past few years, there has been a growing call to rethink the concept of “recovering” from disasters. At the center of this effort is a search for a new view of “revitalization” that corresponds to this social transformation, based on a head-on acceptance of the end of “growth societies” premised on expanding populations and economies. It is striking that the issue of the “dignified shrinkage” (Tomohide Atsumi and Katsuya Yamori) of aging and depopulating communities was raised at the September conference of the Japan Society for Disaster Recovery and Revitalization. It seems that the necessity of “shifting the axis of affluence,” an issue raised after the Chuetsu Earthquake (2004), is now widely and concretely recognized.

As one can sense from the blandness of the term “Reconstruction Olympics,” the word “reconstruction” still clings tightly to a conventional growth-and-expansion orientation. The focus has primarily been on infrastructure investment and urban and regional redevelopment to support the illusion of regrowth and redevelopment in affected areas, with the rehabilitation of the lives of individual disaster victims remaining a secondary goal. Although the Great East Japan Earthquake Reconstruction Basic Act (2012) includes some new perspectives, the center of gravity of reconstruction is “not merely disaster recovery, but the revitalization of a

vibrant Japan.” The UN's Sendai Framework for Disaster Reduction (2015) touts “Build Back Better” as the catchphrase for reconstruction. It has been pointed out that such growth-and-expansion-oriented reconstruction has often brought disappointment due to its lack of realism and has invited criticism and skepticism due to the inadequate rebuilding of the affected people's lives (e.g., “reconstruction disaster”).

With its declining and aging population and stagnant economic growth, modern Japan is no longer a “growth society,” but it is not a “mature society” either. This is because “maturity” for a society should mean not only the end of quantitative growth and expansion but also the beginning of qualitative enrichment and deepening. The original meaning of the term mature society is “a world that gives up growth in population and material consumption but not in quality of life, a society at a high level of material civilization, peaceful, and compatible with the nature of humanity” (D. Gabor, *The Mature Society*). It is also a cultural welfare society that does not grow and expand but instead moves toward the qualitative enrichment and spiritual richness of each individual's life. Even though we are far from such a mature society in the positive sense, we are certainly at least on the threshold of searching for it.

When we review the concept of reconstruction in light of the possibilities of such a mature society, our eyes are opened anew to the perspective of “human reconstruction,” which arose as far back as a century ago, at the time of the Great Kanto Earthquake. “Human reconstruction means the restoration of opportunities for survival that have been destroyed by catastrophe. ... Roads and buildings are merely instrumental in maintaining and defending this milestone. Even if we reconstruct them, it will be for nothing if we do not restore the main body of the economy and real opportunities for living” (Tokuzō Fukuda, *The Principles and Problems of the Reconstruction Economy*). In contrast to “imperial reconstruction,” the primary goal here is to restore the lives and livelihoods of those affected by the disaster, and infrastructure investment and urban redevelopment are positioned as “tools” for this purpose. Fukuda's emphasis was on rebuilding the economic lives of the disaster victims, but the fundamentals of his thinking seem to be connected to what is today called the “right to the pursuit of happiness” and “human security.”

The re-examination of the concept of reconstruction for a mature society requires a deeper and more expansive, contemporary concept of human reconstruction. For example, we will deepen the meaning of “rebuilding the livelihoods” of disaster victims and extend it to the restoration and rehabilitation of their quality of life, which includes not only economic aspects but also the social and cultural aspects of their lives. While taking into account the growing importance of economic aspects in today's society of increasing inequality, future disaster reconstruction should focus on rebuilding people's lives in a broad sense, including not only economic life but also social interaction, cultural creation, and the restoration of purpose and

dignity in life. It is also important to note that for this reconstruction, the qualitative and subjective assessment of the affected people themselves regarding the reconstruction of their lives will be more important than the objective indicators of population and GDP increases or decreases in a region or city.

Natural disasters are also an opportunity to bring out the ingenuity of various people to participate in society and rebuild their lives (“a recovery springboard”). Grassroots social and cultural creativity can be carefully applied to enhance the quality of life that lies right beneath people’s feet, particularly in a mature society that is not oriented toward growth and expansion. It is important to note that even in discussions about the reconstruction of aging and depopulated areas, the emphasis is not on mere shrinkage but on its dignified nature.

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