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Density as urban affect: the enchantment of Tokyo's crowds

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ABSTRACT

Are crowds merely detrimental to the livability of cities? This commentary considers the impressions of two people living in Tokyo for whom crowds comprise a key element in what makes big city life enchanting. Density, seen as urban affect, brings the material organization of compactness, the patterning of urban moods, and social difference in city spaces into simultaneous view.

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Introduction

Is there anything redeeming about the crowded trains and teeming rail stations of megacities? For the most part, Tokyoites react with bafflement when asked to respond to this question about everyday commuting in the city: You've seen the sheer number of people on these trains, right? You've felt the crush of bodies while traveling on them. Haven't you been inundated by the endless flow of commuters, the grime of summer days, made dizzy by the maze of exits and platforms, and the incessant announcements at these train stations? What positive attribute of the crowds can we possibly identify?

While such reactions to dense commuter crowds might seem to strengthen inherited associations in urban theory between city life and anomie – especially in daily commuting, which is often regarded as enervating – this article suggests that compactness of cities also makes them sites of re-enchantment. The city, after all, is simultaneously a site of modernity and magic (Pile, 2005). The cold rationality of the modern city coexists with magical urban encounters, as urbanites attempt to find meanings in city life, improve the conditions of their present, and strive for a better urban future. The revitalization of city life as a space of belonging often derives from magical urban encounters (Watson, 2006): happenstance, the surprising and the unexpected, the sense of the novel which, though routine, may seem mysterious because it remains unprocessed. The interplay between proximity and distance in navigating city crowds is fundamental to the phenomenology of urban density and the sense of the city as a shared space (Rao, 2007). The discussion in this article, of city crowds in Tokyo's busiest transport hub, identifies density as an urban affect that envelops sites of compression in cities in specific ways. It reads commuter crowds as the enactment of an urban theater that enchants by distilling the unexpectedness, the intrigue, the serendipitous joy, and the somber meditation provoked by city life. Set alongside the weariness of inhabiting crowded spaces, the enchantment of city crowds

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captures the affectual significances of density and how these affects are differently patterned within and across dense urban sites.

Taking a train in Tokyo

In Tokyo, trains remain the primary mode of transportation used by residents and visitors, accounting for as much as 95% of trips to central Tokyo and for approximately 70% of commuting trips through the 23 wards that make up the city (Enoch & Nakamura, 2008). There are a set of historical reasons for the centrality of the train system in urban Japan. The railways were built before WWII and cities were designed around them at a time when car ownership was low. Poor road infrastructure at the time meant that suburban residents who needed to commute to the city center to work, needed reliable means of transport to make these trips. Consequently, there was a massive demand for railway services which began to be developed speedily. Following the War, urban development in Japan came to be centered on the railways system (Sorensen, 2002).

Today, Shinjuku Station – which is Tokyo’s primary transport hub, connecting the inter-city rail, commuter rail, and subway lines – sees some 3.53 million people pass through it every day, a figure that approximates the population of Yokohama (nippon.com 2018). The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism in Japan calculates a “crowdedness rate” for train usage. This figure is calculated by comparing the number of people using a train with the carrying capacity of the line, in a certain time period. A 2015 report by the ministry (nippon.com 2019) which documented the crowdedness rate of train lines in Tokyo between 7:30am and 8:30am on a weekday, detailed the real feel of commuting in this way: a) 200%: You are squeezed but can read small books or periodicals held close to your body; b) 180%: You can read a folded newspaper with difficulty; c) 150%: You can easily spread open a newspaper to read; d) 100%: You’re able to find personal space near the door. The crowdedness rates for the 5 most crowded train lines – all of which pass through Shinjuku Station – ranged from 188% to 199%.

The integration of train stations in the life of urbanites in Tokyo connects passengering to a wider world of advertising and different media forms, from hand-held devices, to television broadcasts, suspended advertisements inside carriages, radio, and the internet. Train commuters in Tokyo often seize the abundant supply of advertisement images on the walls of train compartments to shift themselves imaginatively away from the material confines of the crowded carriage to a desired elsewhere (Negishi & Bissell, 2020). Indeed, for most commuters, the crowded train environment is something that you try to escape or – when that is not possible – endure. The high urban density that commuters encounter in train stations in Tokyo, is therefore, not only a density of human bodies, but also of objects, media, and atmospheres.

Japan’s rail system is both carefully orchestrated and a social space where urban commuters learn and practice social rules of co-inhabiting public space. A component of this social engineering in the spaces of train commuting has to do with the management of affective atmospheres of mass transit systems. A range of design innovations, for example, gently nudges the train traveler to adopt appropriate commuter behavior in

Tokyo. Brief departure melodies, known as *hassha* tunes, have been introduced with the objective of notifying commuters of departure times while assuaging anxiety (Richarz, 2018). To discourage commuters from committing suicide, blue LED panels have been installed at train platforms with the understanding that these shades of lighting have a calming effect. The static mobility of bodies – cramped while moving collectively in a commuter train carriage – depends on urbanites observing codes of conduct suitable for that urban social space. In the course of their transits, commuters learn how to eke out personal space on the train, while respecting the body-space boundaries of fellow commuters. They find ways of snatching a modicum of comfort while not appearing unseemly to co-passengers. Passengers' behavior in the shared spaces of Tokyo's trains is often based on purportedly essential ideas about what it means to conduct oneself as a Japanese, especially in the company of others. The diagnosis of uncivil conduct in dense transit zones and establishing of appropriate ways of navigating co-presence proceed in response to valued qualities of "Japaneseness". While the premium placed on politeness in Japanese culture is often seen as facilitating sociable co-presence in a dense urban environment, national cultural expectations may also inhibit marginalized social groups, such as women, from protesting abusive behavior such as sexual assault on commuter trains. Experiences of urban density in Japan are, therefore, refracted through discourses of *Nihonjinron*, the genre of texts and popular ideas that seek to delineate the distinguishing characteristics of Japanese people and culture.¹

How density matters for cities

Social scientific literature on urban densities displays an opposing pull. One thread connects high density in cities to a range of problems, from violence and conflict to health and disease. (McFarlane, 2016). Thus, while density – together with size and heterogeneity – has historically been a definitional marker of what makes a human settlement a city, when urban density exceeds a certain threshold, it begins to endanger city life; the city's future is put under serious threat. De-densification is, therefore, deemed necessary to prolong the survival of cities. The other cluster of writings on this matter inverts the link between high density and urban well-being to identify a series of benefits that accrue to compact city living. In this framework, urban densities are conducive to economic rationales by making available concentrated labor and consumer markets; they come to be environmentally valuable in reducing resource use; they also potentially lead to a set of social advantages by enhancing everyday interactions and even safety on city streets through mutual policing by urban residents (Tonkiss, 2014).

Adjacent to this second thread in the conversation on density – the idea that high urban density is valuable – it is worth considering in what ways crowds might enhance the appeal of urban living. Cities are social spaces from which urban residents derive mundane joys of everyday life and construct individual biographies of belonging and isolation in relation to the strange and the familiar. Against the ready assumption that commuter crowds merely diminish the quality of urban life, this article offers a reparative reading of the affectual significances of density in the quotidian city. Through July and

August 2019, I interviewed residents of Tokyo who use Shinjuku Station about their experience of inhabiting a highly dense transport environment. The following subsection documents two narratives that convey a sense of the allure of city crowds and capture a specific affective register of urban density: the enchantment of a bustling city life.

Observing urban life

Ritsuko, a woman in her late 60s, has been operating a makeshift lottery stall 50 meters from Shinjuku Station for 37 years. She says that she finds observing the heavy flow of people in the area very enjoyable and thinks that the crowds endow this neighborhood with an energy that she finds appealing. And, of course, the crowds are good for business! She remembers Shinjuku always being this crowded. But the architecture of this place has changed over the years. As more and taller buildings were built, the sky – she says, in a moment that captures the optics of urban density – became smaller and smaller, seen from inside her tiny lottery store.

Something that she finds particularly thrilling is noticing the evolving sense of fashion among Tokyoites. People wear clothes that those from her generation would certainly shy away from. She registers amazement and awe at the sartorial styles she sees around her, how they have changed from the Showa period, through to the Heisei period. The Showa style, she explains, was dark and gloomy. As the Heisei period set in and the years passed, the mood and colors got lighter and more experimental, and people became a bit crazy, she says with a chuckle. More people started dying their hair in bizarre colors; it's all very fun to watch!

For 31-year-old Toru, the crowds of Shinjuku capture something of the essence of Tokyo life. Hundreds of people walking in opposite directions. People's faces register great stress. He sees sadness and exhaustion in these faces, which makes him think that this country is materially wealthy, but the mind of the Japanese person is mired in worry. Everyone is so lonely. Somehow, he senses the loneliness of the urbanite most acutely when he is in these crowded places. These crowded city environments push him to reflect on what it means to be fully alive.

Then again, the crowds of Shinjuku bring together different kinds of people. He sees in these crowds the gathering of diverse cultures and ideas and styles of expression. Sitting on a ledge near the station, he overhears conversations that keep him engaged. A “foreigner” might be talking about Japanese pop culture: animation or manga or music. He finds it intoxicating to witness this mix of cultures in Tokyo, people's eagerness to experience elements of an unfamiliar culture. And hence he returns to Shinjuku Station, lured by the reflective mood that the bustle of the train station almost inevitably inspires in him. Since being laid off from his job as an office administrator, Toru spends a fair bit of time in the vicinity of Shinjuku Station.

Reflections: the enchantment of city crowds

Literally “a place where many people come together”, sakariba refers to amusement quarters in Japan. Historically, in the Edo period, sakaribas were where people of disparate social ranks gathered for various kinds of entertainment, food, and drinks;

they were typically located in open spaces, on temple grounds, or near bridges (Cybriwsky, 2011). Two key characteristics of sakariba in contemporary Tokyo and its connection to modern urban life in Japan are that it is crowded and bustling (Linhart, 1998) and it is in the vicinity of train stations (Traganou, 2003). Sakaribas, since they represent a social zone between home and work, developed in tandem with processes of suburbanization that lengthened physical distance between living space and working space. Sakaribas provided a venue to both shed the social expectations from work and family life and a physical site to mediate the increasing distances between home and work in Tokyo. Major train stations in Tokyo, certainly a massive transport hub like Shinjuku Station, not only facilitated the development of sakaribas in their vicinity but also function like sakaribas themselves (Traganou, 2003), in the sheer volume of people who pass through them and the array of leisure and commercial activities that they assemble. Significantly, urban commentators in Tokyo often linked the very definition of what it means to live in a big city to the sociability of sakaribas. As the sociologist Nozomu Ikei explains, the pleasures of socializing in the company of large crowds is the peculiar draw of the sakariba and big city living (cited in Linhart, 1998). In his “Shinjuku Sketch”, the writer Ryūtanji suggests that Shinjuku embodies a “modern tempo” that is engendered by the mass movement of crowds during the busy commuting hours of the day (cited in Tipton, 2013).

The two vignettes documented in the sub-section above suggest that crowds are stifling, but they also make the city come alive; they are exhausting to navigate but simultaneously invigorate the city dweller. In terms of the narrative logic of these vignettes, the positive attributes of high urban density derive from urbanites being at some physical remove from crowds but near enough to observe their rhythms. Crowds enchant the observer with their cultural heterogeneity, the mix of sartorial styles which they showcase, and the thrill of the new and the unexpected which they engender. Even when crowds exemplify the atomized aspects of urban life, the loneliness of city living, the urban dweller may find themselves returning to such sites for the affective states and contemplative moods which the act of observing crowds from a distance provokes in them. The enchantment of city crowds is, therefore, as much about joyful delight as it is a somber wonderment about the meanings of urban life. From an observable distance, a throng of biographical strangers going about their everyday business in the city is no longer an obstacle to surmount; rather, their collective presence coheres into narratives of sense-making through which the urbanite unravels for themselves what it means to inhabit the city as a shared space.

Urban densities variously make possible and disallow forms of sociality in cities. An empty, dimly lit, quiet street at night may generate fear in some social groups and produce a calculus of safety and danger in relation to that urban space. The same urban site – silent, sparsely inhabited, with low visibility – may be experienced as zone of freedom by another social group, to be enjoyed with abandon. The crowd – which is merely one kind of dense urban formation – also manufactures urban socialities. By inhabiting Tokyo’s crowded train compartments, commuters forge an interaction order with co-passengers and with the atmosphere of the carriage and station. But crowds in

the city are not only navigated by urbanites but also witnessed at some remove. The act of witnessing crowds produces other forms of socialities in cities, one of which is a relation of enchantment with collective urban life. The spectator's sense of enchantment with a populous urban theater, captures a lived aspect of high urban density that often passes unremarked: the pleasurable optics of sociality in city crowds. In bearing the gaze, the urbanite who stands apart from the commuter crowd observing its movements, releases themselves from the rhythms of transit life but enters another affectual relation with it. This affectual relation of enchantment with urban crowds signals a sense of wonderment with social difference in the urban outdoor that is generated in mundane encounters with density. Density, seen as urban affect, brings the material organization of compactness, the patterning of urban moods, and social difference in city spaces into simultaneous view.

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Note

1. For a discussion of Nihonjinron see Sugimoto (1999).