

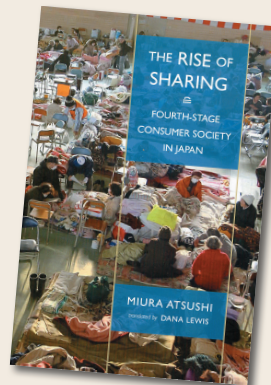
BOOK REVIEW

*The Rise of Sharing:
Fourth-Stage Consumer Society
in Japan*

By Miura Atsushi; translated by Dana Lewis

LTCB International Library Trust/International House of Japan, 2014
xxiv + 350 pages.

Reviewed by Jan SÝKORA



Most economic and social historians agree on the simple argument that consumption can generate economic prosperity and that the rise of the modern state, at least in the West, has been closely related to mass consumption that has penetrated almost all parts of everyday life. Modern economics is based on the assumption that individuals increasingly experience life as consumers, who spend their lives in a consumer environment, and identify themselves through consumer culture. Although some economists vehemently point out that the deeply rooted idea about consumer spending as a driving force behind economic growth is the greatest fallacy in modern economic theory, one can hardly deny the obvious fact that consumption and consumerism, the concept which refers to the consumption of branded, mass-produced goods and services, have become the key concepts in analyzing modern social and economic history. In the most developed countries the idea of consumerism has even been interpreted as an ideology which actually triumphed in the twentieth century, since “the belief that goods give meaning to individuals and their roles in a society, was victorious even though it had no formal philosophy, no parties, and no obvious leaders.”¹ Indeed, since what you buy and consume is increasingly defining who you are or who you would like to be, a study of the changing patterns of consumption offers us fascinating insights into the substantial metamorphosis in the material and intellectual life of any society, and provides us with the answer to the most profound questions of where we came from and where we are headed.

The Rise of Sharing is, without any doubt, a perfect road map for travelling through the undulating landscape of Japanese consumerism, and Miura appears to be the most competent guide for such an adventurous journey. After graduating from university, he joined Parco, the leading chain of department stores and one of the symbols of Japanese consumer culture, where he spent eight years as chief editor of the influential marketing magazine *Across*. His rich experience in various research activities, including not only an analysis of consumer behavior and forecasts on changing consumer values but also a comprehensive analysis of demographic and social trends, inspired him to write more than twenty-five books on a variety of topics related to Japanese consumer society.

1 Cross 2000, p. 1.

In this, his first book translated into English, Miura narrates an absorbing story of the emergence and the blossoming of consumer society in Japan from the early-twentieth century to the dawn of the third millennium. He advances the concept of four distinct stages of Japanese consumerism and demonstrates, through an analysis of the main social and demographic phenomena, value systems, consumer aspirations, and other key characteristics, how Japanese society had been shifting from prewar national/state interest-driven consumption, via postwar family-oriented mass consumption, to individualized and diversified consumption in the eighties and nineties. Finally, he envisions a new type of consumer society based on a social network in which people will own less and share more. His lively discussion on where Japanese society is headed is backed up by many charts, graphs, photos, posters, and advertisements that he carefully collected over many years. The final part of the book is devoted to interviews with influential architects, designers, and entrepreneurs including Tsujii Takashi, a highly respected intellectual, businessman, and the founder of the Muji chain store.

Despite the innovative nature of the book, however, it contains some shortcomings and controversial points. The first one relates to the lack of a distinct methodological framework. Although Miura warns in the preface that “it is all but impossible to write a thoroughly comprehensive overview of consumer society itself” (p. xv), a curious reader would definitely welcome a simple methodological tool for easier navigation in the opaque waters of consumer society in Japan. Indeed, some of his arguments are anchored in sociology, demography, or labor economics, while others relate to psychology or gender studies. The lack of a methodological root is obvious, particularly with regard to the concept of sharing *per se*. The author provides many vivid examples of how the Japanese are giving up the possession of things to pursue new meanings in life, but he does not strive to put them into the context of the current discourses on whether the sharing economy has the potential “to serve as an umbrella concept that may bring together and re-frame older and recent alternative forms of economic activity and their academic conceptualization.”²

The second issue in dispute consists of the tricky question of what forces actually lie behind the acclaimed rise of sharing. Despite the obvious fact that the principle and the practice of sharing can be found to some extent in any society, the question arises as to whether today’s shift in the patterns of consumption results from the deliberate decision of mature citizens who have become aware of the blind alley of a (post)modern society and are trying to find a way out of it, or is nothing more than making a virtue of necessity in the situations when sharing seems to be more effective or—to put it in extreme terms—the only way of living. In this context, the photograph on the book jacket—namely the picture of people staying overnight at the evacuation site after the Tohoku earthquake—is the most telling demonstration of such doubt.

The last but not the least question coming to a reader’s mind relates to the potential contradictions between the key factors of a sharing society (such as personal happiness or a shift “from money to people”) and the iron logic of capitalism which is based primarily on economic efficiency. A vision of a society in which human relations are “organized without using money” (p. 137) seems to be an appealing idea, but the problem is how to make such a

2 For current discourse, see Jackson 2005, Mont 2004, and Princen 2003. For the citation, see Heinrichs 2013, p. 230.

dream come true in the world where the only instrument for the measure of value is money. The Net Economic Welfare (NEW) proposed by Nobel Prize winner Paul Samuelson is one of the best known, but almost completely unadopted, attempts to incorporate such noneconomic phenomena as happiness into the economic system.

Despite the aforementioned controversial issues, the *Rise of Sharing* is an absorbing, eminently readable, and thought-provoking case study of relatively new and almost undiscussed social phenomena that definitely require deeper investigation. The book is, without any doubt, an effective *vade mecum* not only for eager students of Japanese consumerism, but for anyone interested in contemporary Japanese affairs.

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