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Tokyo and the Social Aftershocks of March 11: Our Experiences of the Earthquake and its Aftermath

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The earthquake not only completely devastated the northeast region of Japan but also “rocked” the whole nation. This article retrospects to the experiences of the SGIS (Study Group of Infrastructure and Society) members, mainly based in Tokyo, who were relatively “unaffected.” In the end, it was quite a traumatizing period for all of us, and may still be for some...

1. The moment—3.11 14:46

The earthquake hit the country at about 14:45 on the afternoon of March 11, 2011. Nobody could have foreseen the level of devastation that was to follow. Not at that moment, at least.

Ueda was in the project room in the Kodaira campus of Hitotsubashi University. The University was on spring break, but that did not bother a postdoctoral fellow like him. The earthquake was big enough to make Ueda fear that the much anticipated “Tokyo Metropolitan Inland Earthquake” or “Tokai Earthquake” had finally occurred.¹ However, such was his dedication to his research project that he continued working, fighting the distraction from incident updates received via the Internet, which were not quick enough to report the scenes of devastation happening in Tohoku as yet....

Iwadate, a postgraduate student, was on his way out of his office and to the library in another campus in Kunitachi.

“I was holding the doorknob when the earthquake hit. I couldn’t do anything but hold on to it so I wouldn’t

fall down. Some other students came out from their rooms as well. We all waited together till it stopped shaking. And then, most of us went down outside. I stayed there for a few minutes and went to the library. But when I just got in, the librarian was shouting, “The library is now closed!” and I had to go back out again.”

Thus, he went back to the office and stayed there until 16:30, when he went out again.

“I had an appointment in central Tokyo that evening, so I went to the station, but the train wasn’t moving. So I went back to the office again, logged on to the Internet, and that’s when I first got to know what was happening in Tohoku. I just didn’t know what to do. I was in panic. What am I supposed to do in this situation? You know?”

After all, it was not just him; we all, more or less, wanted to proceed as normally as possible even under such abnormal circumstances. Terada recalls that what he felt resembled a sense of festivity as he walked around in his neighborhood, where people, who presumably did not know each other, were sharing their joy and relief at not being hurt. Suzuki also admits that he somehow “enjoyed” the unusual circumstances as he walked through and looked around west Tokyo. He was on a Chuo-line train, which was slowing down at the time of the earthquake while approaching Mitaka station.

“I soon found out that the train was not going to

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restart anytime soon and got out of the station. There was already a big queue for taxis, and no bus seemed to head in the direction to help me get home. So, I quite quickly made up my mind to start walking. I was going to attend a seminar that afternoon in central Tokyo, but there was no way I could get there in time, and chances were, it would be canceled anyway because obviously a lot of other people must have been in similar situations. So I thought, ‘why don’t I make the most of this rare opportunity, and see what it looks like?’ You know, ‘what’s the level of impact?’ I was curious, and it was quite interesting to see people’s reactions and some surreal sights as well, like a train stuck at a bridge over the road. I know it sounds inappropriate, considering what was actually happening in Tohoku, but there was no way I could have known it at that time. So I wasn’t taking it too seriously at first.”

2. The Tsunami

Thus, for many who were in Tokyo, it was not until they saw the TV footage showing the devastating impact of the tsunami that they realized the level of the damage and the scale of the tragedy. Kei-ichi, who was at home with his sister, recalls,

“I was sort of curious what was going on after such a big earthquake, and so went out to a gym for a workout. But the janitor came, saying ‘I’m gonna shut the gym early. You should leave now,’ and I got kicked out. And then I went back home and turned on the TV. It was absolutely horrifying. And I was like, ‘Geeeee. Was it that big?’”

Many say that those scenes looked “unreal.” It was obvious that an uncountable number of people had had their lives taken abruptly. Some were drowned under the water and some caught in fires. Suzuki

recalls,

“I was just walking through Shinjuku. There were those big screens, all showing the scenes of floods, floating cars and houses, or a whole village on fire. It was absolutely surreal. I prayed for the people to escape and survive, but at the same time, it seemed really hopeless, and I was chilled thinking what the death toll would be like.”

3. One-night refugees

While watching those chilling TV footages, Suzuki was also witnessing another aspect of the disaster that the earthquake had brought to Tokyo. Shinjuku, arguably the busiest center of business, transport, and entertainment in Tokyo, was flooded by people who were leaving town to go home on foot because no trains or subways were available.

“There was a sea of people. They were trying to get out of Shinjuku. Pavements were full of people, and cars were stuck at the crossroads while the big screens were showing the scenes of the tsunami. It was quite amazing to know how massive the capacity of Tokyo’s transport system is, which usually carries all those people invisibly.”

The earthquake was so massive that all tracks had to be inspected before the railway companies could restart their services. Indeed, millions of people struggled to get home that night. The number of people who could not get home and had to find temporary shelters was said to amount to hundreds of thousands.² Of those who managed to get home, a majority had to walk for many hours.³ Suzuki and Ueda were among them. Suzuki says,

“I wouldn’t have thought, though, I would walk all

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the way home. I was going to catch a bus or a taxi halfway through. But then, all the buses were really full and taxis occupied. I ended up walking five and a half hours. I was exhausted when I got to the nursery to pick up my daughter. At the end of the day, it wasn't a laughing matter, but I was also glad that I started early, so my daughter did not need to wait too long. She must have been scared and anxious."

Unlike Suzuki, who walked all the way, Ueda's account might illustrate the kind of confusion that many people in Tokyo experienced that night. He left the project room with two colleagues just before 18:00, but it took him four hours to get home, a journey which would usually take only half an hour.

"We could only take buses. At Hitotsubashi Gakuen Station, we found out that no train was moving, and went to a bus stop. Several men in suits were already waiting there, and a young woman came after us. We waited over 30 minutes, as the bus delayed, and when it came it was pretty full already, but we managed to squeeze in. But people still kept coming on at the following stops as well. Then we arrived at Kokubunji station. All the electric signs were off. Obviously, no train was moving there, either. Nor did we see any light in the surrounding buildings. We went to the rotary square and tried to take another bus, but there were hundreds of people there, waiting for taxis and buses. Many people looked astounded and were wandering about, not knowing what to do. Some were asking directions at the police box. I checked the signboard. No bus was going to Kunitachi Station, but there was one route going to a hospital near there. So we joined the queue, which was very, very long. We wondered if we might as well walk home. It turned out we should have in the end, but we waited there for an hour or so. The crowd in the square kept bigger and bigger, which

reminded me of the word 'refugees'. We finally got on a bus, but it was really, really slow, as we were stuck in a jam. After all, it would have been so much faster if we had walked. Passengers looked nervous. The sounds of alarm, alerting us of aftershocks, kept coming from all the mobile phones, which made us more nervous. Some women were chatting about whether their kids were all right. They probably didn't know each other. But anyway, the bus got to the hospital after another hour or so, and this time we decided to walk rather than wait for another bus from there. We parted there and I popped by the office at the Kunitachi campus. Everything was all right there. I went to a local shop and tried to eat something, but couldn't eat much. Then I walked all the way home to Hino. It was well beyond 10 o'clock when I finally got home."

While Ueda and Suzuki were fortunate enough to get home that night, it was a challenge to provide shelters for all those who could not. A thousand places, including public buildings, universities, high schools, and offices of various public organizations, were made temporarily available for them.⁴ Some even slept in train stations.

The confusion affected Osaka as well. Ueno, who lived there, had a meeting in Tokyo the next day. She reached Shin-Osaka station around 10:00, but had to wait for over an hour to buy a ticket for a bullet train. When she arrived at Tokyo station around 14:00, she saw two men clearing up the blankets supposedly provided for those who had slept there the night before.

"I didn't see so many signs of damage. I was relieved to see there was neither collapsed building nor rubble around Tokyo station at least. It was only those blankets that reminded me of the earthquake."

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In fact, the train services recovered very quickly. They resumed gradually from 21:00 on March 11, and 90% of the system was restored by noon on March 12. However, we did not know that another disaster was to follow, which horrified not only Japan but also the rest of the world.

4. Explosions

It happened around 15:30 on March 12. Despite some damage, such as fallen ceilings, scattered office furniture, liquefaction of soil along the reclaimed coastal lands, etc., most of us in Tokyo tried to proceed as normally as possible. But then, everything changed. Ueda says,

“I heard about the first explosion in Fukushima when I was attending a seminar. But I thought, ‘it’s probably gonna be all right. If not, I can’t do anything, anyway.’ So I was half hopeful and optimistic, and half powerless and helpless.”

4.1. Radiation

The news of the hydrogen explosion at the nuclear power plants in Fukushima was totally unexpected and caused a real sense of emergency. All kinds of media, including normal TV channels, the Internet, and Twitter, were reporting constantly on the developments and providing technical information as to what might be happening in the nuclear reactors, whether any radioactive substance would leak out, and when it became apparent that there was a leak, how we could protect ourselves from it, what was the acceptable exposure level, and other related information.

The influx of information demanded a high level of media literacy from us. The information was abundant, but it was hard to distinguish trustworthy sources from others. Therefore, we all responded

differently. Kamiyama recalls,

“I saw on a train a middle-aged lady dressed completely in black—a black raincoat, black rainboots, and a black rain-hat. She looked very normal otherwise, so I felt strange. But now I understand she wanted to avoid the radiation. On a first look, it looked normal, but in fact everyone appeared somewhat awkward. It was the anxiety of not knowing what was going to happen next, that was making us all somewhat depressed and distressed.”

4.2. Evacuation

One common reaction was to evacuate from Tokyo to the west. Ueno was on the way back to Osaka on March 13.

“I got on the bullet train and saw the first three rows occupied by mothers with babies and toddlers. Normally, I very rarely see even one baby or toddler in a carrier. That day, there were about ten of them. It must have been that they were trying to flee. On the way back, I was worrying about my family and friends in Tokyo.”

The waves of evacuation continued after several days. Suzuki joined them, though unwillingly, on March 16.

“We decided to take our daughter to my wife’s parents in Hiroshima. It was a decision that I took against my heart. OK, it sounded completely rational to take her away from the potential risk of radiation to a place where it was 100% safe. In fact, the bullet train we took was very, very full, with people who were supposedly getting out of Tokyo just like us. It wasn’t just the nuclear substance. Earthquakes just kept hitting east Japan after nearly a week from the first one, and they were big ones, too, with M6 or

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something like that. We wouldn't have been surprised if it had triggered another massive one, maybe the Tokai Earthquake. So there should have been nothing to be ashamed of sending our daughter to Hiroshima. But I wasn't comfortable at all. I probably didn't want to join the hysteria."

It was ironic that they evacuated to Hiroshima, the very place that strongly reminds us Japanese of the tragedy that nuclear radiation could inflict.

"But my wife was so upset. She's the second generation of Hiroshima atomic bomb victims. Her father directly experienced it, and had told her many times when she was young, about the horrible things he had seen. Thus, however small they claimed the amount of radiation was, it was enough to scare her off. I believed it was fine to stay in Tokyo, but to be honest, I was nervous, too. Everyone was, I think. So naturally, my daughter looked nervous as well, with her parents not being very reassuring. So in the end, it was probably a right decision, so as not to traumatize her too much..."

He brought back his daughter to Tokyo after several weeks; however, he knew a few friends who had permanently shifted farther west, seeking "safe food" for their families.

5. Planned blackouts—3.13

The accident in Fukushima also meant that electrical power shortages were highly probable. While urging people to save electricity as much as possible, TEPCO announced a plan of rolling blackouts on the day after the explosions. Kei-ichi experienced the first series of planned blackouts in Kodaira on March 14.

"My sister and I went out for a walk to Kokubunji Station, looking around the town. It was a full moon that night. I didn't know those shadows I had assumed were made by the street lights were actually made by moonlight. It was bizarre we only saw lights here and there, like the convenience stores, which had their own generators, and train stations. I was texting a friend of mine who I was supposed to see the next day, whether we should meet up or not. My gut was telling me it wouldn't be a problem, but we canceled it because blackouts were planned the next day, too."

6. Panic buys

Another reaction was the hoarding of particular goods because people feared supply shortages. On the eve of March 13, Kamiyama saw a few people purchasing a lot of bottled water and toilet rolls at a supermarket.

Indeed, a week after the earthquake, hoarding necessary supplies had commenced even in west Japan. In Osaka, Ueno, to her surprise, saw no bottled water on the shelf, and there were only half as many toilet rolls as usual in a drug store. Shortages extended even farther west. Mori was doing her fieldwork in a rural town in Kumamoto, a thousand kilometers away from Tokyo.

"We heard the news that a level of radiation higher than the safety standard was detected from tap water somewhere in Tokyo. We had some people who had fled Tokyo and stayed with us. One of them said she wanted to send her friend some pure water, and so we went out to a local store. We found only three half-dozen cases of two-liter bottles there, whereas they would usually have a lot more. The shopkeeper said they had run out of stock. It didn't feel right to buy up the three cases, but my roommate said 'we can't stop people from caring for their friends and families, can we?' After we bought up all the packages, an old

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lady came in asking for water. She was saying her son in Tokyo asked her to send some. So, ‘buying up’ was going on even in such a distant, small rural town, which really surprised me. I mean, I might have done the same thing if my family or friends asked me. But it just didn't feel right.”

7. Thereafter

These stories by SGIS members illustrate the psychological impact of the earthquake and its aftermath on Japanese citizens. The fight to prevent the power plants from causing further crises continued for days; however, radiation leakages were apparently inevitable. The Government and TEPCO's handling of the matter came under severe public scrutiny, which later developed into a nationwide debate over the vision for national energy policy, which is still ongoing. Meanwhile, after the accident, people kept hoarding supplies for several weeks, although the exodus of people to the west settled down after a while. However, the sense of distress continued. In April, a number of universities, including Hitotsubashi, delayed the beginning of the academic year for several weeks. Countless volunteers worked in the affected areas in Tohoku. Fukushima, though, suffered the stigmatizing effect of people trying to avoid visiting or buying agricultural products from there.

Nearly two years later, Tokyo might seem to have returned to normal, but problems still hang in the air, and the sense of distress never seems to disappear. Terada's frustration over a year ago still sums up our shared feelings. He says he was depressed from constantly listening to all the media hype.

“I was fed up with it. The earthquake was appalling enough, and then there was the problem in Fukushima, which looked unlikely to be resolved any

time soon. It became clear that the planned blackouts would not affect our daily life too much, and there was no need to try to stock a lot of goods. However, there was no sense of security yet. I felt as if there was no way back to the normality we used to enjoy before the earthquake. It was the end of east Japan, the end of Tokyo, I felt. On top of that, I heard the news people were buying up things in west Japan as well. It was really sickening. Where is the sense of solidarity? Who says Japan is a unified nation and socially integrated? It's nonsense!”

On a final note, these statements and experiences, of course, are not representative of Tokyoites on the whole. Given the location of Hitotsubashi University, the base of SGIS, and the fact that many members live in west Tokyo, these experiences may well be at least geographically biased toward the west. For instance, those who lived in east Tokyo might have felt more strongly the risk of nuclear radiation because of their relative proximity to Fukushima. That said, this essay has attempted to convey the kind of impact Tokyo has experienced. Tokyo may appear to have returned to normal now, but we should not forget those initial emotions and feelings; Japan as a nation is still at the beginning of the process of recovering from catastrophic devastation.

Notes

1 Both types of earthquakes are among those that were thought of as highly probable to occur within a few decades. The magnitude of Tokyo Metropolitan Inland Earthquake is expected to be around 7.0, which would cause about 5.3 to 11 thousand deaths (Cabinet Office, 2005). The magnitude of Tokai Earthquake is expected to be around 8.0, and the death toll estimated at 9.2 thousand (Japan Meteorological Agency 2012).

2 Hiroi et al. (2011) report that one fifth of questionnaire respondents (n = 2026), who live in Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, or Chiba and were away from home on that day, did not go home. It is estimated that there are about 7.9 million

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commuters who commute by train in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area (MLT 2012).

3 According to Hiroi et al. (2011), the main means of transportation were on foot (36.3%), by car (30.6%), train or subway (14.8%), and bicycle (10.5%).

4 See Hiroi et al. (2011).

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