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Special Issue

Disrupted Tokyo

Introduction

Urban Experience of Disaster: Situating the Great East Japan Disaster in Regional Contexts

Junko UENO

INTRODUCTION

“What did you do on March 11, 2011?”—This is a question that all Japanese can answer immediately. Since the devastating disaster that hit northeastern Japan in spring 2011, March 11 has become an unforgettable day for the Japanese, much like September 11 for the Americans. The tragedy of the Great East Japan Disaster (hereafter, the disaster) and the nuclear accident in Fukushima that followed served as a catalyst for Japan to question the meaning and sustainability of a “prosperous life.”

This special issue, “Disrupted Tokyo,” investigates Tokyo’s experience of the disaster by focusing on the infrastructure. Though the physical damage of Tokyo was minor compared with what occurred in northeastern Japan, the disaster shook the foundation of urban life by causing disruptions in infrastructure and left deep scars in the hearts of the urban residents. Tokyo was disrupted both physically and socially as a result of the disaster, and the city has still not fully relaxed, even though the physical damages have been repaired.

The extent of social shock caused by the disaster

varied according to the strength of people’s connection with the disaster-stricken areas. People living in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area generally felt that their everyday lives worsened following the disaster, and they tended to change their lifestyles to save energy more than the people in the Keihanshin Metropolitan Area of western Japan.¹ After the disaster, anti-nuclear protests grew, which were centered in Tokyo. The number of anti-nuclear events such as demonstrations, sit-ins, symposiums, workshops, and movie screenings peaked in June 2011, when 297 events were held across the country, of which 80 took place in or around Tokyo.² The social shock and reaction in Tokyo was caused partly because Tokyo was a large city located closest to the disaster-stricken areas. Moreover, Tokyo became the center of the clash on nuclear power policy and the post-disaster reconstruction because it is the national capital, where political decisions are made.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND CENTRICITY

To understand the uniqueness of Tokyo’s experience, it is important to consider two aspects

of the relationship between Tokyo and the disaster-stricken areas: the urban-rural connection and central-local relationship. The disaster occurred as Japan's regional structures were changing. Due to the demographic, economic, and political shift in recent decades, the urban-rural connection became invisible, the relationship between the central and local governments destabilized, and these changes inevitably affected the central positions of Tokyo in Japan.

Tokyo as a Privileged Center of Infrastructure Networks

The case of a "disrupted Tokyo" is a great example to examine the invisible interconnectedness between regions. Urbanites gradually lost a sense of connectedness with rural areas, as the metropolitan-native living in metropolitan areas was increased by the progress of urbanization. In the 1960s, the net migration from northeastern Japan to the Tokyo Metropolitan Area was over one million in that decade and declined to around 300,000 in the 2000s.³ As a result, people born in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area accounted for nearly three quarters of the population there in 2006.⁴ These demographic changes accompanied political realignment in Japan. Since the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which had represented the interests of both urban secondary and rural primary industries for years, lost its political power in 1993, domestic politics is realigned along with the urban-rural cleavage (Shiratori, 2009). While urbanites lost social and emotional ties to rural areas, the invisible urban-rural connection strengthened through nationwide supply-chains and infrastructure networks. The disaster revealed that metropolitan life deeply depended on the surrounding rural areas. The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant accident, which is more than 200 km away from the center of Tokyo, led to rolling blackouts and disruptions in infrastructure

in Tokyo. A disruption in the power grid instantly cascaded to other elements of the infrastructure such as the water, transport, communications, and banking systems. Through these cascading failures in the infrastructure, urban residents became aware that Tokyo has flourished by exploiting resources from its surrounding areas, especially northeastern Japan.

The case of Tokyo also reveals local differences in the degree of damage, recovery, and burdens after the earthquake. The central area of Tokyo was exempted from the rolling blackouts that were planned to avoid unexpected large-scale blackouts, because it is home to the central administrative function of politics and economics. The exempted area was gradually extended to the rich residential areas. As Stephen Graham indicated, the construction, maintenance, and operations of infrastructures tend to privilege certain more powerful spaces and users over others (Graham, 2010: 12).

The disaster did not overturn the existing socio-spatial structures. Instead, it seemed to reinforce socio-spatial disparities between regions and among the city areas through the process of restoring and operating infrastructure networks. However, urban residents realized that they were not only victims of the disaster and infrastructure disruptions but also the victimizer who imposed the risk of radiation contamination on northeastern Japan. The latter annoyed them and prompted them to change the uneven regional structure.

Tokyo as a Center of Disaster Reconstruction

Tokyo played a central role in rebuilding the devastated areas in northeastern Japan, even while it was in a state of post-quake chaos. In addition to the Japanese government, the various actors and organizations in Tokyo, such as local governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), universities, and experts, participated in the reconstruction support.

Japan is known as the developmental state (Johnson, 1982) because its national government has strong leadership to achieve national economic growth. Under the developmental state, the regional planning policy that includes the development priority, location of infrastructure project, and allocation of budget was centrally coordinated by the national government, though central coordination has been weakened by the neoliberal reform originating in the 1980s (Saito, 2012). Then, how will the varied actors involved in the reconstruction support affect the centralized political structure? Will the influence of Tokyo be increased or reduced?

One possible future is that the centralized political structure will be reinforced and Tokyo's influence will increase for two reasons. First, under fiscal deficit pressure, the Japanese government has advocated involving multiple actors in the decision-making process as a matter of policy. In 2008, the LDP government introduced the concept of a "New Public (新たな公)," defined as the partnership between governments, businesses, citizens, and NPOs, expecting this partnership to take the responsibility for regional planning. This concept of a "New Public" was inherited by the government of the Democratic Party of Japan with little change in Japanese (from Arata-na-ko (新たな公) to Arata-na-kokyo (新たな公共)). The involvement of multiple actors in reconstruction support might be a product of the "New Public" policy promoted by the national government. Second, a significant number of organizations based in Tokyo supported the affected areas. Some international NGOs based in Tokyo were well-financed, had budgets comparable to that of a small-sized local government, supplied massive support services that the affected local governments could not provide, and had a great presence in decision-making processes (Nihei, 2012). Tokyo-based CSOs overwhelmed local CSOs based in the affected areas

in terms of both numbers and scales, and this might prevent them from reflecting the opinions of local residents in the reconstruction process.

However, another future is possible. Some actors supporting disaster reconstruction have tried to bridge regions within and outside the affected areas. Their activities have the potential to transcend the existing centralized political structure and to create a new geography of civil society.

MANY SUFFERERS, LITTLE RESEARCH

There are few documents or research on Tokyo in the post-quake chaos, though a large number of people in Tokyo suffered from the earthquake and the disruptions of infrastructures.⁵ Before the crucial damage in northeastern Japan, the experience of a "disrupted Tokyo" was ignored as inconsequential. Academic papers that focused on the Great East Japan Earthquake amounted to more than 12,000 as of December 31, 2012.⁶ Among them, topics on the damage and restoration of Tokyo were rarely documented or analyzed. The record of the disaster in Tokyo (The Tosei Shimpo, 2012) and research on stranded commuters (Hiroi et al., 2011) were two exceptions. Detailed information of the place and time for implementing rolling blackouts in spring 2011 remains unavailable today, nearly two years after the disaster.⁷

Recording and analyzing the experience of a "disrupted Tokyo" are necessary, not only because the case is worth examining as an example of urban infrastructure disruptions that were caused by multiple disasters but also because it significantly changed the behavior and consciousness of the citizens of Tokyo. The suffering experienced in Tokyo served as a trigger to question the "city-first thinking," participate in anti-nuclear movements, and

support reconstruction in northeastern Japan, which, together, resulted in a comprehensive review of Japanese regional structures.⁸

This special issue contains three articles. In the first article, Ueno described the story of “disrupted Tokyo,” through which people noticed the uneven spatial structures in the city and in Japan. The historically strong relationship between the Japanese government, bureaucrats, and business community did not yield cooperation that was effective enough to cope with the city’s chaotic aftermath of the earthquake. In the second article, Ueda focuses on the organizations of academic scholars and professionals in civil engineering as key actors to determine the method of disaster reconstruction. Though the specialized knowledge and skills supplied by academic or professional organizations are crucial to the decision-making of governments and the activities of other CSOs, studies or research on them are rare. Ueda reveals Tokyo’s central role in controlling material infrastructures by examining how the academic or professional organizations of civil engineering based in Tokyo became involved in the process of reconstructing the affected areas. In the last article of this special issue, Suzuki organizes the experiences of the members of the “Study Group of Infrastructure and Society” in the disaster and its aftermath. The disaster gave us, as well as the other scholars, the momentum to reconsider the meaning and necessity of our research. Obviously, Tokyo’s experience depicted in this special issue was different from that of northeastern Japan, where many refugees still drifted away from home, and that of western Japan, where people “experienced” the disaster through TV screens. Even in Tokyo, the experiences after the disaster were greatly diversified according to each person’s living and working place, gender, age, class, and family structure. Before hastily forming conclusions about the impacts of the disaster on the

Japanese society, let us start by carefully examining Tokyo in the aftermath of the earthquake.

Notes

1 The research was conducted by Hakuho from April 15-18, 2011 for the people living within 40 kilometers of Tokyo and those living within 20 kilometers of Keihanshin Area (Hakuho, 2011).

2 Based on the “anti-nuclear event calendar” (脱原発系イベントカレンダー) (<http://datugeninfo.web.fc2.com/>).

3 Northeastern Japan here refers to six prefectures, Aomori, Iwate, Miyagi, Akita, Yamagata, and Fukushima Prefectures, which include the Sea of Japan side that were not damaged by the tsunami in 2011. The Tokyo Metropolitan Area includes Tokyo, Saitama, Chiba, and Kanagawa Prefectures. The number was calculated based on the “Report on Internal Migration in Japan” (Statics Bureau of Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, each year).

4 National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2008, *The 6th Research of Population Migration*.

5 More than 5 million commuters in Tokyo were unable to return home on March 11, the day the earthquake struck (Cabinet Office, 2011). The scheduled blackouts that started on March 14 were implemented over a 10-day period and affected 70 million households total (The Denki Shimbun, 2011).

6 Based on the CiNii articles database (<http://ci.nii.ac.jp/>).

7 Kim’s (2012) survey of western Tokyo is a clue to the picture of scheduled blackouts and the local response to them.

8 Akasaka and Oguma (2012) re-examined the relationship between Tohoku (northeastern Japan) and Tokyo from the viewpoint of “periphery” areas.

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