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Disaster Experiences in Tokyo: Reconsidering Center–Periphery Relationship

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SPECIAL ISSUE : DISRUPTED TOKYO

The March 11, 2011 earthquake, later named “The Great East Japan Earthquake,” greatly impacted ordinary life and social systems in Tokyo. Immediately following the earthquake, all trains were stopped and many people became “one night refugees” at their offices or other public facilities. The next day, a hydrogen explosion occurred at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant, which had supplied electricity to the Kanto Region. This event horrified Tokyo residents, many of whom fled the city. On March 14, rolling blackouts began under the management of the Tokyo Electric Power Company.

Despite the significant impact this disaster had on life in Tokyo, few social scientists have analyzed how the city’s residents experienced “disrupted Tokyo.” In this special issue, we started with the standpoint that greater consideration of the experiences of Tokyo’s residents is indispensable for understanding the meaning and influence of the 2011 disaster in Japan.

Junko Ueno, a member of the Study Group on Infrastructure and Society (SGIS) at Momoyama Gakuin University, edited this special issue. Her article is an extended version of the presentation she gave during a workshop held on January 24, 2012 at Hitotsubashi University. The featured guest at that

workshop was Stephen Graham, Professor of Cities and Society at Newcastle University, UK. The basic tone adopted in this issue reflects his infrastructural perspective (see DIS, No.3).

In her article, Ueno observes that experiences in “disrupted Tokyo” give social scientists an opportunity to visualize and problematize two types of center–periphery relationships. The first is a hierarchical relationship between Tokyo and the northwest region, which was developed as a supplier of food, labor, and energy for urban economic growth during the modernization of Japan. This process also imposed socially created risk on this marginalized area. The nuclear disaster in Fukushima and its impacts on the whole metropolitan area revealed how much Tokyo’s growth depended on the northwest region and how hierarchical center–periphery relationship had become during the post-war era.

The second type of hierarchical center–periphery relationship is evident within Tokyo itself. Urban redevelopment policies, adopted in the context of economic globalization after the 1980s, have dramatically transformed the social geography developed during the post-war growth and urban welfare periods of the late 1960s and 1970s. Urban redevelopment policies have created a large precariat class and widened class-based spatial segregation within the city (Ueno 2010; Hashimoto 2011). The fact that the rolling blackouts did not include

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the urban center reminded Tokyo residents of the spatial (and social) hierarchy of center–periphery relationship as embedded within urban society.

Ueno also considers how geographical center–periphery relations relate to the uneven distribution of power between central and local (i.e., peripheral) political agencies.

In order to explore the issues Ueno raises, social scientists must identify appropriate theoretical perspectives and methods to understand the links between “disrupted Tokyo” and the northeast region in the aftermath of the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident.

Takefumi Ueda describes the roles of professional groups to bridge “disrupted Tokyo” and the northeast region by monitoring “reality” in the disaster stricken area. The engagement of these professional groups has played an important role in constructing peoples’ perceptions of reality within the northeast region. Ueda investigates whether the mobilization of scientists has promoted democratic decision-making or enhanced a neo-technocratic tendency during reconstruction. This critical point must be established in order to determine the future of post-disaster social change.

Naofumi Suzuki collected SGIS members’ personal experiences of the March 11 earthquake and its aftermath. We collected more than 11,000 events related to the earthquake, utilizing newspapers, magazines, websites, and other materials to develop the “The Great East Japan Earthquake Chronicle,” published as DIS, No.1 in December 2011. Ueno’s analyses are based on this database.

A comparison of the personal records collected in Suzuki’s article with Ueno’s description of the disaster and its aftermath, one can yield a deeper understanding of what people actually “experienced.” Furthermore, these articles provide a critical perspective from which to view the prevailing images of the recovery effort presented by the mass-media and in other scientific research.

The articles collected within DIS, No. 4 challenge social scientists to focus on Tokyo’s disaster experience as the backdrop to post-disaster social change. Ueno’s introductory article details the structure and goals of this special issue.

ARTICLE

Yutaka Iwadate’s article is about a theoretical approach to post-disaster situations. It focuses on a classical work, Manuel Castells’s *La Question Urbaine*, which was about interactive relationships among urban systems based on material conditions and social change. In Iwadate’s creative reading, a dynamic process of theory production is helpful in learning to invent new theories and research methods in the context of post-3.11 change.

RESEARCH

This section, named “Key Organizations of the Post-Fukushima Accident Civil Society,” reports on the responses of civil society organizations to the Fukushima accident. Keiichi Satoh provides the preface to this section and also reports on female farmers’ projects in Fukushima prefecture. Reeya Komoda describes an anti-nuclear power social movement in Kyoto prefecture. The research presented in this section is based on interviews that the SGIS working group conducted with key organizations during the summer and fall of 2012.

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