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Citation: Samuels, Richard J. "Japan's Rhetoric of Crisis: Prospects for Change after 3.11." The Journal of Japanese Studies 39, no. 1 (2013): 97–120.

As Published: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jjs.2013.0016>

Publisher: Muse - Johns Hopkins University Press

Persistent URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/85862>

Version: Author's final manuscript: final author's manuscript post peer review, without publisher's formatting or copy editing

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Japan's Rhetoric of Crisis: Prospects for Change after 3.11

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On March 11, 2011 Japan moved eight feet closer to North America, the earth's axis shifted by nearly ten inches, and the world turned upside down for 128 million Japanese. Each of us watched in horror as 20,000 people were washed away by a tsunami just minutes after a 9.0 magnitude earthquake shifted the sea floor off the Tohoku coast. And then, in slower motion, we witnessed the meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactor, the displacement of 110,000 residents, and the spread of an invisible radioactive terror (real even if only imagined) across the archipelago. This quake, tsunami, and meltdown — a triple catastrophe with no precedent—formally the Great Eastern Japan Disaster (*Higashi Nihon Daishinsai*), soon became known simply as “3.11.”

Change

The weeks and months after 3.11 were filled with calls for (or anticipation of) wholesale change across a very broad institutional horizon. Google searches in Japanese more than nine months after 3.11 that paired “Rebirth” (*saisei*) with “Great Eastern Japan Disaster” (*higashi nippon daishinsai*) generated nearly 27 million hits. Substituting “Change” (*kaikaku*) for “Rebirth” yielded ten times more (261 million) hits, suggesting that a deep yearning for (or at least a heightened expectation of) change undergirded the national conversation. And indeed, there emerged a widespread optimism on both the left and the right that a stagnant nation was in the midst of a sort of Schumpeterian moment of “creative destruction.”

Japan would “put it in gear,” and 3.11 would be the trigger for a long sought national recovery. On the right, a retired defense official said there would be a reawakening of Japanese hearts after a period of excessive materialism, and predicted that “the 3.11 disaster will be seen as a big shock that led a declining Japan to revival.”¹ Conservative Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō went him one better, arguing that 3.11 was an opportunity to “wash away the greed” that had become central to Japanese national identity.² On the left, a group of activist scientists and engineers insisted that 3.11 marked “the beginning of a new chapter in Japanese history,” one that would be more transparent and that would put an end to the “spell of deceit”

¹ Sasa quoted in Otabe, ed., 2011.

² Ishihara cited in Duus, 2012, p.176.

engineered by elites in Tokyo.³ Abe Tomoko, the policy committee chair of the Democratic Socialist Party, insisted that “all of Japan, not just Tohoku—needs a recovery.”⁴ In the center, a former prime minister spoke of 3.11 as an opportunity for Tohoku to become the model for 21st Century Japan, insisting that “unless we resolve to reset and be reborn, we will never recover”; a senior member of the Cabinet’s Reconstruction Design Council (*Fukkō Kaigi*) spoke of the “geriatric diseases” afflicting Japanese institutions and expressed hope that 3.11 would “generate a new nation.”⁵ Some of the discourse was not so much hopeful as openly hyperbolic—as in the statement by one veteran political journalist who insisted that 3.11 “changed everything” by creating “a new political paradigm.”⁶ Professor Wada Akira of the Tokyo Institute of Technology saw 3.11 as “an opportunity to change our thinking, our civilization.”⁷ Even the otherwise analytical Mikuriya Takashi, vice chair of the Reconstruction Design Council, proclaimed in the first sentence of his memoir that “3.11 will change Japan and the world.”⁸

After observers and political entrepreneurs had caught their breath, however, it was clear that change was not first on everyone’s agenda. A range of discourse—from “accelerating” to “sustaining” to “returning” to better days past—was actively in play. In addition to those calling upon Japan to “put it in gear,” there were others who insisted Japan should “stay the course.” In the energy sector, for example, stakeholders insisted that “if we change too fast, the situation will become more chaotic. We need to be prudent.”⁹ Japan must not write off the enormous sunk costs of its nuclear power program, for doing so would increase energy costs, destroy jobs, slow growth, result in power shortages, pollute the environment, and result in higher taxes. Japan would be worse off than before.¹⁰ In the area of national security policy, the performance of the Japanese military and of the U.S. Japan alliance demonstrated that the institutions proved their value and should be reinforced and enhanced, but not transformed.¹¹

³ See www.f-pj.org/e-index.html .

⁴ Interview, 2 November 2011. See also the headline of the 4 November 2011 *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*: “Recovery is Nation Building” (*fukkō wa kunizukuri*).

⁵ Former Prime Minister Hosokawa is cited in *Asahi Shimbunsha*, ed., 2011, p.136-143. Professor Iio Jun is cited in *Oriental Economist*, May 2011, p.7. See converging views by others in *Asahi Shimbunsha*, ed., 2011. See also Hirayama, 2011.

⁶ <http://www.tokyofoundation.org/en/articles/2011/post-quake-politics>

⁷ Wada cited in *Los Angeles Times*, 11 April 2011.

⁸ Mikuriya, 2011b, p.7, reproduced from his OpEd column in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 14 March 2011.

⁹ Interview, senior manager Tokyo Electric Power Company, 26 January 2012.

¹⁰ This was argued by Imai Takashi, chairman of the Japan Atomic Industrial Forum, an industry group representing utilities and vendors at its annual meeting in June 2011. See: http://www.jaif.or.jp/english/news-images/pdf/ENGNEWS02_1309841709P.pdf See also *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 12 July 2011 for the claims of Yosano Kaoru, who was Minister for Economic and Fiscal policy on 3.11.

¹¹ Sakurabayashi, 2011, p.94.

There were also influential voices arguing for a return to better times in the past. Perhaps the most distinguished advocate of this (decidedly minority) position was Kyoto University philosopher (and Tohoku born) Umehara Takeshi. Umehara, who served as a special advisor to the Reconstruction Design Council, is widely known as a proponent of Japanese essentialism—the much maligned *nihonjinron*.¹² Umehara considered 3.11 a “cultural disaster” (*bunmeisai*) and insisted that Japan must “return to coexistence with nature” (*kyōzon ni kaerō*).¹³ In his view, the quake and tsunami were natural disasters, but the nuclear meltdown signaled the limits of enlightenment thinking—the mistaken belief that humans can control nature. In a widely read New Year’s Day debate with the chairman of Keidanren, Umehara insisted that it is arrogant (*omoi agari*) to imagine that humans can harness the power of the atom, adding: “Compared to the western view that humans can conquer nature, we Japanese believe that all animals and plants and minerals are Buddhas.” Now is the time, he asserted, for Japanese to abandon their lives of “excessive consumption” and waste, and build a new civilization based on “spirituality consistent with Japanese tradition and to give thanks for the blessings of nature.”¹⁴

Change, or resistance to it, was the principal motif of 3.11. It was more contested and was applied more widely than any other. But it was only one of four elements that came to dominate the post-disaster discourse. Change was joined in a crowded and confused rhetorical landscape by Leadership, Risk, and Community. We examine each of these other tropes—and their villains and heroes—in turn.

Leadership

It is difficult to find many observers who were satisfied with the quality of Japanese leadership after 3.11. Japan’s leadership deficit—long recognized as a serious shortcoming—was widely viewed as the single greatest impediment to an effective response to 3.11, let alone some sort of transformation of Japan.¹⁵ In early April, an *Asahi Shimbun* editorial writer, Soga

¹² Befu, 2001; Dale, 1986.

¹³ For Umehara’s ideas about *jōmon* culture, see Umehara, 1983 and www.goipeace.or.jp/english/activities/award/award3-1.html. For a glimpse of how his views of 3.11 and a return to traditional culture resonated with the general public, see the blog of Komeito politician, Akamatsu Masao at: www.akamatsu.net/index.php/wp/2011/07/02/3014.html Chairman Iokibe said he found Umehara’s repeated calls for a return to *jōmon* culture “distracting.” Interview, 26 January 2012.

¹⁴ *Asahi Shimbun*, 1 January 2012. For a post 3.11 conversation between the 87 year old Umehara and the 90 year old novelist and Buddhist priestess, Setōchi Jyakuchō, see www.kodokawakugei.com/topics/special/teidan37

¹⁵ A surprising exception was the acknowledgment by Kyoto University Professor Nakanishi Hiroshi who, in an otherwise very critical column, acknowledged that “it is unlikely anyone else would have handled it any faster or better.” See *Sankei Shimbun*, 4 May 2011. Kingston, 2012, argues that Kan was “scapegoated” by political opponents. See also the report by the independent Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation, which characterizes Kan as

Takeshi, declared that “our political leaders have yet to offer a single convincing statement about the disaster that strikes an emotional chord in the hearts of the people.” Instead, he said, politicians and bureaucrats fight among themselves, while “our nation is waiting to hear the voice of a great orator.”¹⁶ This view was widely embraced in the Japanese media across the ideological spectrum. *Jiji Press*, for example, opined in late March that the prime minister “has not given sufficient explanation to dispel the people’s fears nor has he displayed leadership.”¹⁷ Three days earlier, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* insisted that “the prime minister is not showing vital leadership,” and a few days later the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* reported that “criticism is mounting” over Kan’s “unseen face.”¹⁸ There was a widespread yearning for a contemporary Gotō Shinpei, the visionary mayor of Tokyo who moved vigorously to rebuild the capital after the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923.¹⁹

Plenty of shots (cheap and otherwise) were fired at Prime Minister Kan by opponents both within and outside the DPJ.²⁰ But the larger problems of leadership were expressed with particular gravity by those who most depended upon it. A great many local public officials declared the government to be “insensitive” to the victims. Mayor Toba Futoshi of Rikuzentakada, for example, threw up his hands in frustration, declaring that nothing changes for the people on the periphery. Local victims, he said, are treated as distant objects by politicians, none of whom made sufficient efforts to assess their needs or to appreciate how those needs evolve.²¹ His colleague Fukushima Kenji, mayor of Rokkashō mura in nearby Aomori prefecture, asked incredulously “does the premier know the hardship that we at the site are going through?”²² It was the localities’ frustration with ineffective responses from the central authorities that led to their exercise of local autonomy and translocal solidarity, one of the most immediate—and likely consequential—policy innovations after 3.11.

As problems of leadership moved front and center, a motif of leadership villainy evolved in which the center-left government of Kan Naoto became the lead rogue. On this account,

having displayed presence of mind and urgency during the early hours of the crisis:

<http://bos.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/02/29/0096340212440359.full.pdf+html>.

¹⁶ *Asahi Shimbun*, 7 April 2011 (online English edition). Note that the next day’s Japanese language editorial in the *Asahi* actually praised the prime minister for his decision to mobilize the SDF.

¹⁷ *Jiji Press*, 27 March 2011.

¹⁸ *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 24 March 2011 and *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 29 March 2011.

¹⁹ A symposium on the relevance of Gotō after 3.11 was held in Tokyo in mid-July 2011 across the street from the iconic Tokyo Institute for Municipal Research that he built: <http://goto-shimpei.org/>. See also the *Los Angeles Times*, 11 April 2011. For an examination of the constraints Gotō faced, see the contemporary account by U.S. historian Charles A. Beard in Beard, 1924.

²⁰ See Kingston, 2012 for a list of Kan’s successes and for his supposition that much of the negativity in the narrative was owed to “malicious” initiatives by TEPCO to discredit the prime minister. For a lengthy report on Kan’s mishandling of the crisis, see *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* 14 April 2011.

²¹ Toba, 2011.

²² *Kyodo*, 14 April 2011.

the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) was a group of “amateurs” who were insufficiently aggressive in implementing the changes they had promised in their 2009 Party manifesto and too slow to respond to the crisis itself.²³ Prime Minister Kan, who went to Fukushima the day after the quake and tsunami, was roundly criticized for trying to micro-manage rescue and relief operations, thereby delaying an effective response.²⁴ He had no command authority, in part because he had neutered the bureaucracy upon which crisis management had to depend.²⁵ As a result, it was said, “the government’s move was always one step behind ... caus[ing] the damage to spread.”²⁶

A tale of grossly incompetent leadership was being spun, and the same villain was in everyone’s crosshairs. In what took on the characteristics of an echo chamber, Kan—and the public—began hearing the same criticisms from every corner. According to some, Kan was an anti-professional who governed the nation as if it were a citizen’s movement; to others, like former Prime Minister Nakasone and Keidanren Chairman Yonekura, Kan lacked crisis management skills.²⁷ Even Abe Shinzō, whose own premiership had crashed and burned just four years earlier, wrote an article entitled “If it Were Me, This is What I’d Do,” in which he declared that Kan was an emperor with no clothes.²⁸ A deputy news editor of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* asked rhetorically: “Is Kan going to be the worst premier in history?”²⁹ A weekly magazine spoke of “Kan’s meltdown” and “slapstick theater” at the prime minister’s office.³⁰ Even the judicious public servant Ogata Sadako, who was director general of the Japan International Cooperation Agency during 3.11, has said that the prime minister “did not understand what he was doing. The people were good, but their leaders were poor. It was clear that the most responsible people were simply not capable.”³¹

The critiques of government were inconsistent: too much consultation versus too little, too much on site presence versus too much distance, too much elite direction versus too little, too much political control of the bureaucrats versus too little, too much “presidentialism” versus too little, too much micro-management versus too much detachment, too much speed versus too much lethargy, too many snap decisions versus too much caution. But they were

²³ “Amateurs” is a term used by Professor Iwai Tomoaki of Nippon University, quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*, 9 April 2011.

²⁴ *Wall Street Journal*, 9 April 2011; *New York Times*, 15 April 2011.

²⁵ This critique from Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō in *Seiron*, June 2011, p.122.

²⁶ Inoue Tadao, Chair of the Institute for Nuclear, Biological, Chemical, and Radiological Defense, quoted in the *Japan Times*, 12 April 2011.

²⁷ Nakasone is quoted in *Mainichi Shimbun*, 19 April 2011. Yonekura is cited in *Mainichi Shimbun*, 26 May 2011. See also *Wall Street Journal*, 9 April 2011. Even Iokibe Makoto, Kan’s own appointee, spoke to the press of “the limits of a civic activist turned-politician having been revealed.” See *Mainichi Shimbun*, 28 August 2011.

²⁸ Abe, 2011, p.36.

²⁹ *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 5 May 2011.

³⁰ *Shūkan Bunshun*, ed., 2011, 27 July Special Edition, p.16.

³¹ Interview, Ogata Sadako, Tokyo, 15 May 2012.

relentless, and the Japanese public accepted them. Although the prime minister's support seemed to increase when he acted presidentially, he did so too rarely and saw his public approval ebb away.³² Poll results varied, but it soon became clear that the criticisms were eating away at what remained of Kan's popularity. Although he enjoyed some support in general terms a month after the disaster, the public came to be overwhelmingly dissatisfied with his handling of the nuclear disaster. Nearly three quarters of respondents in one poll found the disclosure of information regarding the nuclear crisis to be "unsatisfactory," and fully 70% said they did not support the prime minister because "he has no leadership capability."³³ Within a month, more than three quarters of the public reported that Kan was "not exercising leadership."³⁴ Leadership, the holy grail of Japanese governance and the equal of any post-3.11 national concern, requires trust. For Kan, trust became a rapidly wasting asset. But there was another theme competing for space in the public imagination, one centered on vulnerability and risk that identified an even more imposing villain-- TEPCO.

Risk

The risk motif was officially introduced by the Reconstruction Design Council at the beginning of its June 2011 report: "The disaster revealed in one fell swoop the inherent vulnerability of modern civilization."³⁵ Vulnerability, a hoary trope in Japanese discourse, is often captured in the "small island nation" (*shimaguniron*) explanation for contemporary life that many Japanese invoke to remind themselves that they are an endangered people in a fragile land.³⁶ So it is no surprise that this fragility became a leading element of national discourse after 3.11. As one senior Defense Ministry official explained with reference to the themes of change and leadership introduced above: "The quake highlighted the country risk of Japan. Without leadership and a better political system, Japan will not be good at managing crises—and there is more danger ahead."³⁷ Anticipation of future danger was everywhere after 3.11. On the four month anniversary of the disaster, Japan's leading booksellers displayed titles such as: *The Meltdown of Japan*; *Japan's Third Defeat*; *What Will Happen to the Japanese Economy after the Disaster?*; *Japan's Nuclear Crisis Zone*; and *A Manual to Deal with Nuclear Power Accidents*. And on the six month anniversary, the pairing of the terms "*fuan*" (insecurity

³² *The Economist*, 24 May 2011.

³³ *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 18 April 2011.

³⁴ *Kyodo*, 1 May 2011. U.S. government officials, for their part, credit Kan with effective leadership. One asked rhetorically: "Who knows what would have happened if Kan hadn't screamed at TEPCO?" Interview, Tokyo, 7 October 2011.

³⁵ *Higashi Nihon Daishinsai Fukkō Kōsō Kaigi*, ed., 2011, p.2.

³⁶ Dinmore, 2006.

³⁷ Interview, Takamizaka Nobushige, Ministry of Defense Policy Bureau Chief, Tokyo, 7 July 2011.

or anxiety) and “3.11” in a Japanese Google search surfaced 131 million hits, while “*anzen*” (safety) and “3.11” yielded 524 million.

There are a great many ways to express concerns about risk and vulnerability in Japanese, including a term borrowed from the English: *risuku*. But the one that came to dominate the post 3-11 national discourse along with change, leadership, and community was the slightly more oblique—and, as it turned out, the far more incendiary—term “unimaginable” (*sōteigai*). *Sōteigai* cannot be translated directly as either risk or vulnerability, but perhaps because the greatest threats to a people are the ones that are unanticipated, its use by government and TEPCO as an explanation for their failure to prepare for a 3.11 scale disaster evoked both, and soon dominated the national discourse.

Sōteigai was used both by those who advocated putting Japan in gear and by those who insisted that Japan should stay the course. For the latter, it was often used as a “masking” argument, a common rhetorical device that shifts responsibility for a performance failure.³⁸ TEPCO vice president Fujimoto Takashi, for example, insisted that it was not TEPCO’s failure to anticipate such a calamitous natural event, but the nation’s: “To what extent can we burden ratepayers to prepare for disasters that occur only every several hundred years and that considerably exceed in scale what the nation has foreseen?”³⁹ He was joined by a TEPCO general manager who insisted that “the accident at Fukushima Daiichi was caused by a tsunami far beyond the design basis.” It was, he says, an “unforeseeable accident.”⁴⁰ Former TEPCO Vice President and influential member of the House of Councilors Kanō Tokio rejected the idea that the nuclear power industry might have been too complaisant about risk and further widened the circle of responsibility for 3.11:

“It is a shame, but it was not only TEPCO and the nuclear power industry that found it convenient not to imagine these possibilities. [The failure to foresee] emerged from a democratic debate and from government established safety standards. It was on these standards that nuclear power plants were built and operated.”⁴¹

These stakeholders were joined by an occasionally sympathetic media. The *Yomiuri Shimbun*, for example, reminded readers that the Jōgan earthquake, the last temblor and tsunami on this

³⁸ See Hart, 1993, p.44 and Boin, et al., 2008, p.4. The notion of *sōteigai* as “evasion” and “concealment” has been remarked upon by Japanese intellectuals as well. See, for example, Hatamura, 2011, pp.86-88, 92.

³⁹ *Asahi Shimbunsha*, ed., 2011, p.182.

⁴⁰ Kawano, 2011, pp.5, 21.

⁴¹ *Asahi Shimbunsha*, ed., 2011, p.173.

scale, occurred in the year 869 and asked a familiar question: “How do we prepare for something that happens once in 1,000 years?”⁴²

For those who deployed *sōteigai* as a call to action, discussion of “unimaginable” and “unanticipated” events was merely a useful foil against which to argue for better preparation, larger budgets, better government, and stronger leadership—that is, improvements across the board.⁴³ But few experts accepted TEPCO’s *sōteigai* defense. To the contrary, many protested what they considered the misappropriation of the term by the nuclear power industry and its allies in business and government. Even the head of the Nuclear Safety Commission testified before a special Diet panel and excoriated his own staff and utility officials for their insouciance vis-à-vis safety. He suggested that they ignored international guidelines, instead “spending their time finding excuses” for not taking adequate safety measures.⁴⁴ Professor Nakabayashi Itsuki of Meiji University distinguished different kinds of accidental events—those that are fully within human imagination and that can be mitigated by prior planning (*sōteinai*), and those that are imaginable but which cannot be fully mitigated ahead of time (*sōtei ijō*). For truly unimaginable events he considers “resilience” the only response available, and he suggests that 3.11 was not in this category.⁴⁵ Clearly, the invocation of the *sōteigai* defense failed to protect its promulgators and served instead to embolden their critics.

There was certainly no shortage of critics. If Kan became the whipping boy in the discourse on leadership, TEPCO became the consensus villain in the one on risk and vulnerability. It was an easy target.⁴⁶ TEPCO has a long history of falsifying safety reports and covering up violations, and in this instance its managers reportedly withheld information from the public and hesitated to cool the crippled Fukushima Daiichi reactors with seawater in order to avoid compromising its capital investment.⁴⁷ TEPCO’s alleged deceits were captured most luridly in a nine story compendium in an early April issue of a major Japanese weekly with the headline: “TEPCO’s Crimes and Punishment.”⁴⁸ The August 2011 issue of *Sekai*, a leading progressive monthly, contained an article titled “TEPCO as a Social Problem.” Prime Minister Kan was among the first to demonize TEPCO, demanding its executives tell him “what the hell is going on”

⁴² *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 16 December 2011. The *Yomiuri* seems to have been conflicted on the *sōteigai* argument. An earlier editorial bore the headline: “We Must Never Again Allow the ‘Unimaginable.’” See *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 18 April 2011. A successful *sōteigai* defense was particularly critical for TEPCO, as the size of its ultimate liability depends on acceptance of the argument that 3.11 was a natural disaster, not a man-made one.

⁴³ See, for example, Nakanishi, 2011 and Nishio, 2011.

⁴⁴ Professor Madarame Haruki, quoted in the *Japan Times*, 16 February 2012.

⁴⁵ See his analysis in *Nippon Seisaku Tōshi Ginkō*, ed., 2011, p.34.

⁴⁶ The *Yomiuri Shimbun* (22 April 2011) reported that the Japanese public regarded TEPCO and the government as equally culpable for the nuclear accident.

⁴⁷ *Wall Street Journal*, 17 March and 19 March 2011; *Financial Times*, 19 April 2011.

⁴⁸ *Shūkan Bunshun*, 7 April 2011. These stories covered TEPCO’s discharge of radiated water, cosy relations with its regulators, questions about its commitment to compensate victims, etc. In an earlier issue, it spoke of TEPCO as “the black monopoly firm.” See *Shūkan Bunshun*, 27 March 2011.

in the first days after the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi reactors.⁴⁹ Arguing that “people would be arrested if gas tanks explode or if a fire breaks out in a department store,” Saitama Governor Ueda Kiyosha insisted that TEPCO officials should be held criminally responsible for the nuclear crisis.⁵⁰

The demonizing critique had even sharper teeth when it came from Fukushima itself. Sakurai Katsunobu, the mayor of Minami Soma who lost more than 650 of his neighbors and who became internationally known for his plea for assistance on YouTube, called out TEPCO as the chief villain of 3.11.⁵¹ He insisted that the utility reverted to old patterns of lying and falsifying data in its interactions with victims. Residents who were forced from their homes near the crippled reactors left their evacuation centers and came to Tokyo to protest in front of TEPCO’s corporate offices and demand compensation.⁵² Even before the end of March, just 20 days after the accident, TEPCO actually submitted plans to add two more reactors to the Fukushima Daiichi complex—an act of hubris that was not lost on the general public.⁵³ The public finally learned in late May—more than two months after the disaster-- that TEPCO had known that three of its four reactors had melted down within days of the tsunami.

TEPCO was the arch villain on this account, but government regulators—many of whom were in line to enjoy a post-retirement sinecure in the electric power industry—were cast in the roles of abettors and attendants. On this account, members of a collusive “nuclear village” overestimated safety and underestimated risk because the regulators and the regulated had been in a conspiratorial embrace for decades. The press was full of stories about METI regulators who allowed TEPCO to draft their regulations and, more salaciously, of officials demanding compensation in the form of entertainment.⁵⁴ The two are often joined at the hip in accounts of 3.11 that routinely touch on “slipshod” regulation and cover ups and record tampering after previous accidents.⁵⁵ Former Fukushima Governor Satō Eisaku, for example, decried TEPCO’s and METI’s “malign concealment” of past mishaps. A wounded veteran of Japan’s nuclear power politics, Satō referred to METI as the “root of all evil” and concluded that 3.11 was a “manmade crime of omission by the government and TEPCO”—a “betrayal” of the people of Fukushima.⁵⁶ The public concurred. In May 2011, nearly three quarters of those

⁴⁹ *Financial Times*, 15 March 2011.

⁵⁰ *Japan Times*, 15 February 2012.

⁵¹ Sakurai, 2011, p.141. Mayor Sakurai’s YouTube appeal is at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70ZHQ--ck40>

⁵² *Associated Press*, 13 April 2011.

⁵³ *Asia-Pacific Journal*, 4 April 2011.

⁵⁴ The weeklies report that officials demanded and received taxi rides, alcohol, and the services of women from the utilities. See *Shūkan Bunshun*, 17 April 2011, p.30.

⁵⁵ *Shūkan Bunshun*, 17 April 2011, p.30; Onuki, 2011, p.2; Kingston, 2012.

⁵⁶ Satō, 2011, p.100-1, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 10 April 2011. As governor in the early 1990s, Satō had stopped operation of 17 TEPCO plants in Fukushima. See Onuki, 2011, p.1. Also see the editorial in the *Mainichi Shimbun*, 2 January

surveyed by the *Asahi Shimbun* said that they “cannot trust TEPCO” for information about the nuclear crisis.⁵⁷

Sōteigai was used to construct heroes as well as villains. On the three month anniversary of 3.11, for example, the *Mainichi Shimbun* issued a collection of 300 photos to celebrate the rescue and relief services performed by the SDF. An opening two page spread shows the drowned wreckage of a doomed coastal town, its land flooded and its fuel depot afire. Above the photo is the headline: “There is No Word for ‘Unimaginable’” and below the photo is an explanation:

“The SDF has no word for ‘unimaginable.’ It is an organization that must immediately confront any nation or entity that attacks Japan’s sovereignty. There is no ‘unimaginable’ condition. At 2:46pm on March 11, 2011, at the very moment of the disaster, the Northeast army, very near the epicenter, set up a command headquarters...From that moment, the SDF began its battle to protect the lives and properties of the people in response to every kind of condition.”⁵⁸

The more conservative *Yomiuri Shimbun* reinforced this message by pointing out that when there is a crisis, the nation does not hesitate to mobilize the SDF, adding that “when the existence of the nation is at stake, we cannot put up with excuses about ‘unimagined’ [threats].”⁵⁹

Community

If the national sense of failed leadership and the overwhelming (and understandable) sense of vulnerability generated more villains than heroes in post-3.11 Japan, the crisis also generated a lively discourse about community. Social solidarity is hardly a new tile in the mosaic of Japanese national identity, but social solidarity is always tested in a crisis, and if it passes, it is always reinforced. 3.11 was no different. The people of Tohoku were repeatedly (and by all accounts deservedly) applauded for their selflessness and resolve. They were widely admired—almost to the point of essentialist caricature—for their patient and persevering nature (*gaman zuyoi*) and for their acceptance of what had befallen them. Japan and the world were told that the people of Tohoku suffered, but they suffered together. It would be from that social fabric that they would rebuild their communities (*machizukuri*) and their region

2012 that questions why Yasui Masaya, a METI official who had once ordered a cover up of unflattering safety data, was put in charge of reform of the nuclear power safety regulations by the Noda government.

⁵⁷ *Asahi Shimbun*, 27 May 2011.

⁵⁸ Otabe, ed., 2011, p.1.

⁵⁹ *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 15 January 2012.

(*kōikizukuri*), and in so doing, that they would lead the way in the rebuilding of the nation (*kunizukuri*). An article in the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* connects two motifs: change and community. Under the headline “Toward a New Japan: The Recovery is Nation Building,” the editors devoted a half page to analysis of how community building in Tohoku would lead to “an entire national regeneration...”⁶⁰

On this account, the people of Tohoku embodied what it meant to be Japanese—they formed a community (*komyunitei*), connected (*tsunagu*) by bonds (*kizuna*) and human contact (*fureai*) that sustain solidarity (*renkei*) through common struggle (*ganbarō nippon!*). Each of these terms was familiar—some stirringly so—and each enjoyed a renaissance after 3.11. Virtually overnight, the exhortation to persevere together embodied in “*ganbarō nippon!*” could be found on posters, social media, advertisements, bumper stickers, and hand written missives of every kind. A Japanese language Google search for the expression yielded 18 million hits in March 2012, a number that surely understates its ubiquity.⁶¹ Paired Japanese language Google searches for “connection” and “Great Eastern Japan Disaster” surfaced nearly four million hits in December 2011. Substituting “bonds” for “connection” generated more than three times that many, and the borrowed term *komyunitei* paired with the disaster generated nearly 42 million hits. Nor was social solidarity limited to the people of Tohoku. The entire nation applauded itself for the outpouring of material and human support for displaced and distraught neighbors to the northeast.

Still, one of the most intractable problems for post 3.11 reconstruction—and for the appeal to community—was the shallowness of local identities. Many of the region’s municipalities were of recent vintage, created during a wave of administrative consolidation in the early 2000s when more than 3200 municipalities were reduced to just over 1700 nationwide.⁶² The city of Ishinomaki, for example, was created out of seven towns and villages in 2005. Minami Sōma was created in 2006 through the amalgamation of three separate towns. The idea was to rationalize the provision of public services, but some of these new cities were so sprawling—Minami Sōma, 20km from north to south, is a good example—that some residents found themselves cut off from first responders on 3.11.⁶³ The consolidation seems to have weakened the capacity of localities to respond to citizens at just the moment when they were in greatest need. Just as important, few residents felt allegiance to the newly constructed localities. Instead, they were connected to their original villages and counties, communities that were difficult to reconstruct in temporary shelters. Reports of distrust among the new

⁶⁰ *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 4 November 2011.

⁶¹ After all, the expression “*ganbarō Tohoku*” surfaced an additional 11 million hits, and neither of these captured non-electronic forms of communication.

⁶² See Yokomichi, 2010 for details on this “*heisei gappei*.”

⁶³ Satō, 2011, p.124.

neighbors were reflected in choices of temporary shelters and undercut the ideals of community that were being spun by political leaders and editorialists.⁶⁴

Just as the Reconstruction Design Council officially validated the vulnerability and risk motif, so it sanctified community as a key element for post-disaster Japan. The word *kizuna* appears a dozen times—and in every chapter—in the Council’s short report. The companion term *tsunagu* (connection) appears 36 times, usually in brackets for emphasis. In addition, the report uses the borrowed word *komyunitai* 35 times. In all, there are 83 references to social solidarity in just 39 pages.⁶⁵ The report was the handiwork of vice-chair Mikuriya Takashi, who invoked poetry in his appeal to fellow Council members:

“People connect to people, regions connect to regions, firms connect to firms, and municipalities connect to prefectures and to the central government. Regional communities connect within and without, eastern Japan connects to Western Japan, and nations connect to one another. Whether they are big or small, we have discovered that connections (*tsunagu*) are the means by which support becomes reality and the means by which light will shine on recovery.”⁶⁶

The first of seven fundamental principles articulated in the Basic Law for Recovery from the Great Eastern Japan Disaster was that the recovery should honor the loss of lives and learn lessons from 3.11. Three others focused on community and social solidarity: the second principle called for “restoration of the essence of regional community”, the fourth addressed the need “to continue protecting the strong bonds of regional society”, and the seventh identified “citizens’ solidarity” as a requisite for recovery.⁶⁷ Likewise, each of the affected prefectures emphasized community building in official post disaster planning documents. The first of eight points in the ten year Miyagi recovery plan called for “promotion of community building.” The Iwate plan was based on nine special zones, the sixth among which called for “community building” to replace the more than 47% of capital stock lost in the tsunami. Fukushima’s “recovery vision” was the product of the region’s most exhausted and paralyzed prefecture. It seemed to contain more bromides than hope, but called prominently for “the rebirth of solidarity.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Interviews, local assemblyman and village head, Minami Sanriku, 12 January 2012. Also see *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 18 March 2011 for an article on efforts to maintain existing communities in the temporary shelters.

⁶⁵ Higashi Nihon Daishinsai Fukkō Kōsō Kaigi, ed., 2011.

⁶⁶ Mikuriya, 2011, pp.42-43. His reference to an imminent shining light (*hikari ga sashite kuru*) is the title of a collection of poems by Kitamura Tarō, one of postwar Japan’s most admired poets.

⁶⁷ Mikuriya, 2011, p. 39.

⁶⁸ The Miyagi Plan is at <http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/fukkou/pdf/kousou7/murai.pdf>. For the Iwate Plan, see Iwate Ken, ed., 2011. The Fukushima Plan is Fukushima Ken, ed., 2011.

No doubt because it evokes practical next steps, the term “community building” (*machizukuri*) was invoked by government officials and planners more than any other reference to the post-disaster collectivity. But the metaphorically richer term *kizuna* was also prominent in the broader post-3.11 discourse. *Kizuna* was already a familiar, and therefore easily embraced, social referent. Used in the title of songs, anime, manga, and video games, *kizuna* was ubiquitous in Japanese popular culture well before 3.11. It was even the nickname given to the high speed internet communications satellite launched by the government in 2008.

Kizuna was formally consecrated as the representation of post-disaster solidarity twice. The first instance was official: one month after 3.11, Prime Minister Kan issued a statement entitled “*Kizuna*- The Bonds of Friendship,” thanking the world for its generosity and its outpouring of concern for the people of Tohoku.⁶⁹ The Japanese people may be forgiven for missing this English language missive to the international community, but *kizuna* became the most prominent representation of post-disaster community when it was celebrated in an annual ceremony at the Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto in December 2011. In the autumn and early winter each year, during the run up to the New Year holiday, the priests there invite the Japanese public to submit their choice of the single Chinese character that best captures the mood of the previous year. While sometimes celebratory (“love” in 2005 and “life” in 2006), the zeitgeist is represented more often by expressions of concern and anxiety: “war” in 2001, “return” (of kidnapped youth) in 2002. The character had been inspired by disasters twice before: “quake” (*shin*) in 1995 after the Hanshin/Awaji earthquake, and “disaster” (*sai*) after the Chūetsu quake in 2004. This time, after sorting through more than 60,000 entries, chief priest Mori Seihan wielded a long brush dabbed in black ink and inscribed the more positive and celebratory *kizuna* before a national audience.⁷⁰

Kizuna was appropriated broadly as a metaphor for social solidarity. The Japan Graphic Design Association created a striking web-based “*Kizuna* Japan Project” that captured the cultural, spiritual, and ethical climate of a nation determined to connect to itself and its future. In a bit more than six minutes, more than five dozen separate graphic images flow one into another, evoking a national family that is reconnecting and recovering. The rising sun is represented variously as a knot of red silk, as a heart, as backdrop for the character *kizuna*, and in multiple messages of solidarity with the people of Tohoku. The disaster victims are reminded they are “never alone.” They are exhorted to “take each others’ hands” and to “connect everyone’s thoughts and feelings.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/kan/statement/201104/11kizuna_e.html

⁷⁰ *Mainichi Shimbun*, 13 December 2011.

⁷¹ The video is at: www.kizuna-japan.com/kizuna_movie.html.

Politicians and private firms were not far behind in the appropriation of newly fortified metaphors for national solidarity. In January 2012 nine dissident DPJ Diet members, all allies of Ozawa Ichirō, left the party to form the “New Party Kizuna.”⁷² The irony, of course, was that in doing so they slashed their “bonds” with the DPJ. The Rengo trade union federation campaigned for members yearning for community. Union membership, according to one subway poster, would “build a society (*shakaizukuri*) with hope and peace of mind” and promised to “connect Japan.”⁷³ Meanwhile, a sake brewer issued a new brand labeled “*Tohoku no Kizuna*” (The Bonds of Tohoku), promising that 2% of the proceeds from sales would support disaster victims.⁷⁴

Heroes are much easier to find in this corner of the national discourse, as they come directly from the affected communities. They were the municipal mayors, like Minami Soma’s Sakurai Katsunobu, who stood by his post and issued a quickly famous “YouTube SOS” on behalf of 8,000 displaced residents in 40 shelters within city limits, and Rikuzentakata’s Mayor Toba Futoshi, who continued to supervise rescue and relief efforts even after his wife and 68 employees were swept into the sea. They included rank and file local officials like the twenty-two police officers who died while on duty, or emergency workers like Endō Miki, the 24 year old woman who broadcast repeated tsunami warnings until she was herself washed away from her post in Minami Sanriku’s crisis management center. Ms. Endo is credited with saving 700 lives, and is memorialized on dozens of YouTube videos and on hundreds of blogs. Her “determination to fulfill a public duty in the midst of a crisis” was recognized by Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko in his first Diet speech in September 2011. She also was celebrated by Kobayashi Yoshinori, the right wing cartoonist.⁷⁵

Others were more ambiguously heroic, however. The first to come to the attention of the global media were plant workers who, ignoring their personal safety, returned to the reactor site in an effort to contain the damage. Dubbed the “Fukushima Fifty” by the foreign media, these workers’ story was too enticing for some hagiographers to ignore. A headline in the *Asahi Shimbun* declared that “The Struggles of the Fukushima Fifty Will Not End,” and the newspaper reported that “bearing the burdens and uncertainty, they continue to battle an unseen enemy.”⁷⁶ There were two problems with these accounts. First, there were far more than fifty workers—TEPCO said that the actual number of workers who returned to the plant was closer

⁷² *Asahi Shimbun*, 5 January 2012.

⁷³ Rengo advertisement on Chiyoda subway line, Tokyo, January 2012.

⁷⁴ www.sakaya1.com/SHOP/njk007.html

⁷⁵ For a video of Ms. Endo’s final moments and her broadcast, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6KI08zHiJY>. For Noda’s eulogy, see http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/noda/statement/201109/13syosin_e.html For Kobayashi’s use of Endo to frame his account of 3.11, see Kobayashi, 2011, p.16. For a story on the deceased first responders, see *Sankei Shimbun*, 16 April 2011.

⁷⁶ *Asahi Shimbun*, 10 April 2011. Note that the word “Fukushima” is rendered in katakana to connote the invention of the term by the foreign media.

to 700. Only small numbers could enter at one time, and only for brief periods, so they rotated through quickly. More problematic, many of these workers may not have been the “samurai salarymen” of legend or even “volunteers” at all, but low paid and exploited contract workers who had no other employment options. One analyst asks provocatively if these men were “a committed TEPCO vanguard, or the castoffs of Japan’s employment system who are being brought in for a highly paid suicide mission?”⁷⁷ Indeed, in its 2010 annual report, TEPCO disclosed that fewer than 20% of the employees at Fukushima Daiichi were regular TEPCO staff and reports that fully 100% of severe injuries to plant workers were incurred by contractors in 2009, up from 89% in 2008.⁷⁸ A conservative vice governor of Tokyo ignores all that, focusing his account instead on how welcome it is that plant workers shattered the postwar taboo against living or dying for others.⁷⁹

How the Discourse Divided

Like all catastrophes, 3.11 generated pain and imagination, heroes and villains. Political entrepreneurs with motivation and resources were quick to do battle for control of the event. They spun narrative explanations for the tragedy across a broad horizon of meanings and values, all conforming to their own preexisting preferences and to what they believed would be effective with the Japanese public. Existing enemies were enemies still, but newly villainous. The stakeholders, thus rearmed, then used these narratives aggressively in an effort to shift the still unformed preferences of a general public struggling to make sense of otherwise unfathomable events.

In a larger study I examine the use of these narratives in three policy areas: security, energy, and local public administration.⁸⁰ In each case, extant and aspiring political actors spun up stories to help make sense of the disaster, always in ways consistent with what they already knew to be true. Hence their stories were consistent with “normal” politics. Those who thought the utilities were villains before 3.11 insisted that 3.11 proved their point. Those who believed the DPJ was a collection of incompetent parvenus before 3.11, likewise now had additional evidence to make their case. Supporters of the Japan-U.S. alliance and of the Japanese military renewed their claim that they were right all along—Japan and the world now had “proof of concept” after 3.11. There was a continued, albeit intensified, competition among political

⁷⁷ Penney, 2011, p.1. For a detailed investigative report on the often seamy use of subcontractors by TEPCO, see Takahashi, 2011, pp.52-55. For details on these workers, also see *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 April 2012.

⁷⁸ The TEPCO report is at: www.tepco.co.jp/en/challenge/environ/pdf-1/10report-e.pdf. See p.66. See also Jobin, 2011.

⁷⁹ See the narrative of Inose Naoki in *Chūō Kōron*, July 2011, p.92.

⁸⁰ Samuels, forthcoming.

actors armed with a new tool—the disaster itself. As Karl Von Clausewitz might have framed it, 3.11 was simply the continuation of “normal” politics by additional means.⁸¹

This new tool, 3.11, was used differently in each of these three sectors. Some policy entrepreneurs insisted that the catastrophe was a warning that Japan must abandon past practice and head in a new direction. In the security realm this was based on a reading of 3.11 as a “wake up call.” The natural disaster was a test run of military preparedness, but the real threat would be much more challenging. In a war, troops and commanders would not be using cell phones to coordinate responses and would not focus on rescuing civilians. They would be under fire and struggling to survive themselves. Japan therefore needed to “put it in gear,” and use this historic chance to prepare to confront its real enemies— on some accounts even to move beyond the alliance with the United States. The SDF were heroes, of course, and, even though they could not be blamed for the catastrophe, the real villains were China, Russia, and North Korea.

In the case of energy policy, this “forward leaning” response would require transformation of the entire electric power sector. The lesson of the disaster was that nuclear power—until 3.11 the foundation of Japan’s “Basic Energy Plan” and a key element of its “New Growth Strategy”—would have to be shut down and replaced by renewable energy. If a second economic renaissance were to occur, the regional monopolies, with their centralized power generation and one way transmission that had powered Japan’s postwar economic miracle, would have to be replaced by distributed power sources and smart grids that both generate and consume power. The entire regulatory structure would have to be torn down and replaced with one that avoided capture by the firms and their allies in government. Since the villains in this narrative —TEPCO, METI, LDP, and Keidanren—were evil on the face of it, their collusive “nuclear village” would have to be dismantled root and branch.

In the case of local government, policy entrepreneurs identified two ways forward after 3.11, each portending a significant redimensioning of the scope and scale of public administration. Japan could “supersize” or it could “localize.” Advocates of the former, such as Keidanren, saw in 3.11 an opportunity to revive the repeatedly debated—but always deferred—plan to eliminate prefectures and replace them with larger states. They pressed a view that the disaster proved that when districts are too small, authority is fractured, hindering the effective delivery of public services. Creating special, comprehensive economic zones with relaxed central regulation would be the first step toward scaling up to a state system (*dōshūsei*) that would rationalize services and generate public goods, including free trade. Miyagi Governor Murai Yoshihiro was eager to “supersize” primary industry in Miyagi and was a leading advocate of

⁸¹ For his famous definition of war as “nothing more than the continuation of politics by other means” see Von Clausewitz’s, *On War*.

these special zones. The larger state system concept was embraced by Osaka Mayor Hashimoto Tōru, undoubtedly the most revolutionary politician to burst on the national scene after 3.11. The localizers, however, saw big firms and bigger states as the problem, if not as outright villains. The scale of local government was already too grand. They argued that had the government not forced the amalgamation of localities before 3.11, a great many more victims could have been rescued. In their view, moreover, small scale had economic benefits as well. It was small producers and their privileged position in global niche markets that would rescue the Tohoku economy. The faceoff between Iwate Governor Tasso Takuya, who embraced this view, and his neighbor, Miyagi Governor Murai, cast the choice between supersizing and localizing in sharp relief.

If this forward leaning model demanded doing things differently and exaggerated 3.11 failures in order to justify change, the second, “stay the course” model required doing the same things better and inflated the virtues of the status quo ante. This was the dominant perspective in the national security case, where alliance managers and defense analysts were delighted to see the Japanese military and the U.S. alliance accepted by an unprecedented majority of the general public. They weaved a sort of “we told you so” narrative, maintaining that their years of insistence on the value of the alliance and the quality of the SDF were now proven concepts. The lesson of 3.11 was that Japanese military power and the alliance each could be further enhanced at just the moment when the need for provision of national security was becoming most acute.

In the energy case, this second narrative model took two forms, both of which urged the government to “stay the course” of nuclear power. Each was justified by a “black swan” defense in which its proponents insisted that since 3.11 was the consequence of an enormously unlikely—indeed, unimaginable (*sōteigai*)—confluence of events, no one could be held culpable for the damage that accompanied the catastrophe. Both groups defending the energy status quo had a more difficult task than in the security area, since they were forced to defend villainous businesses, not heroic militaries. The first cohort adopted a more defensive “business as usual” posture: any changes to the extant electric power sector—especially to the provision of nuclear power—would be unwise, or as one DPJ elder put it, “suicidal.”⁸² Changes to the electric power sector could have perverse consequences, e.g., electric power supplies would decline, prices would rise, economic growth would stall, and both unemployment and pollution would rise; they could jeopardize operation of the most stable supply system in the industrial world and counter trends toward liberalization; or else they could waste resources and time—in essence, they could be futile.⁸³ “Business as usual” was therefore the best available option. The second group that urged staying the course of nuclear power comprised self-declared “realists”

⁸² The speaker was Sengoku Yoshito. See *Kyodo*, 17 April 2012.

⁸³ Perversity, jeopardy, and futility are the three elements in the “rhetoric of reaction.” See Hirschman, 1991.

who acknowledged that nuclear power may have been more risky than the industry and its regulators had been willing to acknowledge, and that this would and should change as Japan returned to its only rational course—the restarting of its reactors. This group reminded the Japanese public that zero risk is impossible, and urged planners to improve their designs and enhance transparency—the only ways to ensure risk is reduced to acceptable levels.

This second model was most dynamic and innovative in the case of local governance. Here local public officials who had been inventing new forms of policy cooperation with one another for decades, found their efforts rewarded and reinforced after 3.11. Prefectures and major cities—sometimes in coalition, as in the case of the Kansai Regional Union—were quick to identify “counterpart” localities in Tohoku, and charged ahead of the central government to determine and meet many of their needs. For their part, the governors and mayors in the affected area could not wait for central government assistance and welcomed the demonstration by sibling localities that central guidance was unnecessary in any event. They fashioned ad hoc supply and administrative chains to two substantive ends. First, by dispatching thousands of officials across every conceivable policy function for extended tours of duty in the affected areas, they assisted Tohoku localities in desperate need. These distant neighbors collected, delivered, and distributed emergency supplies; helped plan new civil infrastructure, counseled pensioners, relocated refugees, taught children, and collected debris. Second, their extended dispatches provided invaluable training for their staff, experience that they reckon will be critical when disaster strikes at home. Governors and mayors, and the legions of public officials they dispatched, celebrated 2011 as “year one” of solidarity among local governments.⁸⁴ In fact however, they were deepening an important element of local autonomy that they had already done much to enhance.

The third model was deployed by those who believed that 3.11 taught that Japan had already come too far in the current direction. This narrative did not compete effectively against those arguing for dramatic change or for staying the course in any of these three policy areas. In the case of security, this “reverse course” was taken up by advocates of “disarmament.” Its advocates acknowledged the performance of the Japanese soldiers, but argued that the successes of the SDF during the rescue and relief effort proved Japanese troops are at their best when wielding shovels, not when toting guns. Disarmament narrators squared off against their villains, “militarists” who, they argued, were drawing entirely the wrong lessons from 3.11. Rather than see the disaster as an opportunity to make the SDF muscular or to enhance jointness in the alliance with the United States, proponents of the third narrative insisted that 3.11 paved the way for Japan to abandon its ill conceived postwar course toward rearmament

⁸⁴ Kamiya, 2011.

and recapture the spirit of its peace constitution. Japan should lead the world by creating a global disaster relief force.⁸⁵

In energy and local government, this Model Three narrative touched upon many of the same themes, and some of its advocates, such as, such as Umehara Takeshi, were the same. Theirs was a “back to the future” argument in which Japan should eschew growth and rediscover its origins as a society in which urban and rural societies were balanced and in which the local vernacular was valued and preserved. Evoking a romanticized pre-Meiji Japan in which farmers provided food and city dwellers provided fertilizer in symbiotic balance, and in which both lived comfortably with less, advocates of this perspective argued for recycling, conservation, and a “simple life.” Some blamed 3.11 on science—particularly western science—that smugly assumed human beings could control nature. Business elites pursuing profits by deploying dangerous technologies had steered the nation in the wrong direction, and the only effective solution would be to dial back notions of scientific progress to manageable levels. Western ideas about enlightenment should be surrendered to Buddhist ideas about enlightenment—the latter being truer both to Japan and to nature.

Japan’s post-3.11 discourse was thus a duel among three very different explanations for the crisis with three different prescriptions for change. The contest between “putting it gear” and “staying the course” was the most robust in each policy area. Still, all three narratives captured valuable real estate in the national discourse and, importantly, none was congruent with normal “left-right” orientations, what in Japan are typically referred to as conservative (*hoshu*) and progressive (*kakushin*). Some of the arguments for active change, as in the case of security, were dominated by conservative policy entrepreneurs, but the argument for such change in the energy sector was dominated by progressives. And, of these two arguments in the local government case—one was progressive, the other conservative. That most models were ideologically catholic undoubtedly made it easier for policy entrepreneurs to engage the public and acquire new allies and adherents. The question for analysts of the impact of 3.11, then, is the extent to which public opinion and policy shifted as a consequence of all this chatter—and in what direction.

In the case of security, the “proof of concept” seemed to prevail, but even some of its own advocates felt the need for Japan to “put it in gear.” Public opinion tilted further than ever before toward the legitimacy of the military and the alliance. Still, this new level of support was not enough to embolden officials to seek new budgetary allocations or to try to acquire major new weapon systems. Neither did they create major new levers of command and control or step up alliance cooperation in ways some wished and that their 3.11 successes might have made possible for the first time. On the contrary, Japanese defense budgets continued to fall,

⁸⁵ Mizushima, 2011.

and U.S. exhortations to invoke the nominally available “bilateral coordination mechanism” during the first North Korean missile test after 3.11 were rebuffed by Japanese defense bureaucrats and alliance managers. Despite reports of U.S. bullying during the crisis, the Japanese public now trusted U.S. and Japanese soldiers more than ever, but decision makers remained hesitant to test their new found support.

In the case of energy, the villainization of the “nuclear village” seemed to dominate the national discourse, and every aspect of the extant power system was up for grabs. But when the dust settled, Japan’s nuclear reactors did not remain off line for long, the export of nuclear power was reaffirmed as a matter of national policy, and the institutions of the much disputed “back end” of the nuclear fuel cycle—the Mutsu fast breeder reactor and the Rokkashō mura reprocessing facility—remained largely intact despite dwindling public support. Although a new nuclear regulatory system was established, nuclear power was downsized from earlier plans, anti-nuclear activists became members of government advisory bodies, and a feed in tariff was implemented to stimulate investment in renewable energy, nuclear power remained a critical element of Japan’s fuel mix. So here too it seemed that the “stay the course” narrative prevailed—at least in its realist variant.

Likewise, in the case of local government, while the supersizers and localizers battled it out at the center for control of a narrative to “redimension” Japan, neither would prevail—at least in the immediate term. The policy entrepreneurs with the greatest success were those who locked arms in solidarity against the central government and “stayed the course” to enhance translocal solidarity and promote local autonomy.

Conclusion

Japanese political actors and policy entrepreneurs did what politicians and pundits do everywhere after a crisis in a democratic system—they hurried to explain what happened and, in the process, they assigned blame and pressed their cases on an engaged public using familiar and reassuring tropes. They agreed broadly that a 3.11-like catastrophe must not be allowed to recur, but in the process they exaggerated the prospects for change.

The catastrophe inspired motivational stories of leadership, community, and vulnerability that all pointed toward the desirability and, for some, the certainty of change. Civil society, building upon its now considerable experience with disaster relief—and using new networking technologies—mobilized effectively with the business community and state actors.⁸⁶ Yet Japan’s political leadership remained split and its bureaucracy unimaginative; its political

⁸⁶ See Slater, Nishimura, and Kindstrand, 2012 and Pekkanen, and , 2012.

parties were weak, its communities more fractured than most would admit. When public hearings on Japan's energy policy choices were finally held in the summer of 2012, they seemed to many to be "mere staged formalities," and were met with derision.⁸⁷ Yet despite unprecedented levels of civic activism and record low levels of trust in public institutions and leaders, citizens' intense sense of vulnerability did not provoke widespread protest of overall government dysfunction. When the balance finally shifted from volunteerism by concerned citizens to protests by outraged ones, the largest demonstrations—those held in Tokyo in June and July 2012—were focused on the restart of nuclear reactors, and never addressed larger concerns with government performance, the simultaneous breakup of the DPJ, the introduction of an unpopular consumption tax, or any of the other issues on the national policy agenda.

In the first two years after the disaster, politicians busied themselves with long standing power rivalries that frustrated large scale change. Votes of no confidence were threatened, and sometimes held; cabinet ministers came and went as parties teetered for reasons unrelated to 3.11. "Normal politics" never gave way to crisis politics. In short, given that so many of the narratives were spun up by political entrepreneurs seizing upon new ways to promote long held agendas, we ought not be surprised to find that a "stay the course" model prevailed in most debate about policy change. In a sense, a catastrophe that was presented as testing the resilience of the Japanese people turned out to demonstrate the resilience of a fairly sclerotic political system.

On the other hand, 3.11 did stimulate the engagement well informed citizens. For each leader who failed the test of agility and flexibility—and even if efforts to "put it in gear" were more often frustrated than not—there were policy entrepreneurs who directed innovative ideas for change at a newly engaged public. Despite the dysfunctions in Japan's political class, we have seen abundant evidence of creativity in its policy class and renewed activism by citizens. Political entrepreneurs from across the political spectrum in think tanks, private firms, and universities actively generated policy ideas. Anti-nuclear activists failed to block the restart of reactors, but they succeeded with the feed in tariff, mobilized large protests, and came to be represented in councils of state. Utilities and their business allies were by no means impotent, but they were put on warning that they would no longer enjoy unchallenged positions of regional or national leadership. Likewise, the SDF and the alliance with the United States emerged from the crisis set to deploy in a military contingency with public support, and the Ministry of Defense was better positioned to participate in the making of national security policy. Local governments, for their part, were freer of central control than ever before. They demonstrated that they could lead the center as often as the center leads them, and their stout,

⁸⁷ Not only were questions from the floor disallowed, but in one case an electric power company official was tapped to speak in the guise of an ordinary citizen. See *Kyodo* 14 and 16 July 2012.

sustained calls for administrative reform were widely acknowledged by the media, the public, and the political class.

So we are left with a paradox. 3.11 has not been the “game changer” many policy entrepreneurs desired and predicted. It did not “cause” structural change to the Japanese body politic. “Normal” politics prevailed, with all its imperfections, and “staying the course,” rather than the more forward leaning “put it in gear,” seemed to prevail across the three policy areas we have examined. Still, the rhetoric of crisis infused democratic politics, empowered new actors, stimulated long awaited if piecemeal reforms, aroused considerable public protest, and may have pushed the policy process in the direction of transparency. At a minimum, the catastrophe opened all of these possibilities and, in a famously conservative system, the first months that followed the quake, the tsunami, and the meltdown provided encouraging (if limited) signs of change for those who hoped for a new style in Japanese politics. Would those early moves result in long-term alterations in the country’s politics? It is too early to tell and too soon to conclude otherwise: a 3.11 master narrative is still under construction.

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