

Opinion – Japan's 3/11: Ten Years On

Written by Giorgio Shani

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GIORGIO SHANI, MAR 12 2021

In spite of the localized 'state of emergency' in force in the Tokyo in an effort to stop the spread of COVID-19, a memorial service attended by the Japanese Imperial family was held to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the 'triple disasters' of March 11, 2011 (hereafter 3.11). Schools and workplaces throughout the country fell silent at 14:46 to remember the more than 20,000 who died or are still missing in the North-East of Japan. The 'triple disasters' refer to the earthquake, *tsunami* and nuclear accident of 3.11. The earthquake's magnitude measured 9 on the richter scale and generated a tsunami with 17 meter waves which breached the walls protecting the Fukushima Daiichi and Dainii nuclear power plants. 15,900 lives were lost with a further 2,500 people unaccounted for and numerous other have died as a result of physical and psychological injuries inflicted by the triple disasters. Over 400,000 homes were destroyed by the tsunami and further 470,000 evacuated. 10 years on 40,000 people are still waiting to return to their homes. The disaster is estimated to have cost Japan almost 16% of its national budget.

3/11 had consequences which reached far beyond the tsunami devastated *Tōhoku* region. The natural devastation wrought by a natural disaster of unprecedented proportions which displaced entire communities was compounded at the Fukushima *Daiichi* and *Daini* nuclear reactor by a 'man-made' disaster (The National Diet of Japan 2012) which exposed the entire *Kantō* area to radiation. The 'triple disasters' of 3.11 revealed the inability of a modern, industrialized nation-state to protect its own citizens, shattering the public's trust in the government led by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) under former Prime Minister Kan Naoto. The Japanese state, despite adopting the principle of Human Security as a basic policy goal of its foreign policy, had failed to protect the human security of the Japanese and in so doing, endangered national cohesion (Bacon and Hobson 2014, Shani 2014). This in turn created space for the articulation of a discourse of 'resilientnationalism' by ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) under former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo with the support of Japan's 'nuclear village'.

The discourse of resilience interpellated the Japanese people as a whole, and not just the people of *Tōhoku* region, as victims of a natural disaster comparable with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the Second World War. Just as Japan emerged from the ashes of the Second World War as a modern, democratic, affluent and peaceful society, the Japanese people were told to '*ganbare*' and overcome adversity in order to build a new more 'beautiful Japan' (*Utsukushii Nihon e*).

Ganbarō Nippon (loosely translated as 'do your best Japan') became a mobilizing slogan for this new more 'resilient' nation. Resilience is a discourse which *embraces* uncertainty and risk and makes them integral to human existence and flourishing. It challenges the anthropocentrism of human security and the associated claims to individual agency and the possibility of societal transformation through collective action. It seeks instead to inculcate the capacity to *withstand* danger and to rise to the challenges posed by natural disasters or crises. Building resilient individuals and communities, therefore, necessitates *exposing* them to danger (Reid 2012). This discourse had the effect of both 'naturalising' the atomic bombing, absolving the American military of its responsibility for what may retrospectively be considered a 'war crime' and absolving both the state, and most importantly, the Tokyo Electricity Company (TEPCO) of their responsibility for a 'man-made disaster'.

Central to this discourse, was hosting of the Olympic games in Tokyo. Dubbed the 'Recovery Olympics' (*fuukko gorin*), the Tokyo games were envisaged by the ruling LDP to be the demonstration of Japan's recovery from the 2011 disaster. However, many questioned the decision to bid for the games so soon after the triple disasters with

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thousands still displaced and radiation levels in surrounding prefectures raising concerns about the very safety of the athletes and participants. Their postponement due to travel restrictions in response to COVID-19, and the controversy surrounding the appointment and sexist comments of former Prime Minister Mori to head the Olympic committee, has led to an erosion, if not collapse, of public support. The people of Tokyo, it appears, do not want the 'recovery' games giving rise to the question of whether has Japan really recovered from 3.11.

The Fukushima nuclear crisis demonstrated the powerlessness of the state to protect its citizens in a globalizing world where the dominant economic actors are corporations. The Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), according to the official report into the nuclear accident, 'strongly influenced energy policy and nuclear regulations while abdicating their own responsibilities and letting the Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry (METI) take the responsibility on the frontline' (The National Diet of Japan 2012: 44). The Report described the 'regulatory capture' of Japan's nuclear industry, in which oversight by regulators effectively ceases, tracing this back to the establishment of the Federation of Electric Power Companies (FEPC), an unregulated lobbying association of electric power companies which is accused of influencing government policy on nuclear power. FEPC 'prioritized the interests of their organizations over the public's safety', and, in effectively deciding that Japanese nuclear power plant reactor operations would not be stopped in any circumstances, effectively compromised the security of the general public.

The report concluded that it was 'a profoundly manmade disaster – that could and should have been foreseen and prevented' (The National Diet of Japan 2012: 9). Specifically, the Report assigned primary responsibility for the accident to the government, regulators and TEPCO, accusing them collectively of betraying 'the nation's right to be safe from nuclear accidents':

The operator (TEPCO), the regulatory bodies (Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, NISA, and National Security Agency, NSA), and the government body promoting the nuclear power industry (METI), all failed to correctly develop the most basic safety requirements...such as assessing the probability of damage, preparing for containing collateral damage from such a disaster, and developing evacuation plans for the public in the case of a serious radiation release.(The National Diet of Japan 2012: 16)

Ten years on from the disaster and Japan's 'resilient nuclear village' (Kingston, 2012) has tightened its vice-like grip over the political process, lobbying to remove Naotō Kan and elect pro-nuclear Shinzō Abe as Prime Minister. Under Abe, Japan has not only resumed its nuclear program but sought to export its nuclear technology overseas. However, for Kiyoshi Kurokawa, the Chair of the official report into the disaster, the 'fundamental causes' of the disaster are to be found not solely in the stranglehold which the 'nuclear village' continues to exert over the political process but in the '...ingrained conventions of Japanese culture: our reflexive obedience; our reluctance to question authority; our devotion to "sticking with the program"; our groupism; and our insularity' (The National Diet of Japan 2012: 9). This famed insularity, long a staple of the essentialising *nihonjinron* ('discourses on Japaneseness') (Yoshino 1992) will be reinforced by the ban on overseas spectators for an Olympics held seemingly for domestic consumption.

Slogans such as *Ganbarō Nippon* rang particularly hollow in the immediate aftermath of the 'triple disasters' for irradiated communities and residents of the tsunami-affected areas who had lost everything to the 'black waters' while political elites were preoccupied with 'containing' the crisis (Shani 2015). Aside from the insecurity and panic caused by the nuclear crisis with its concomitant effects on an economy still reeling from the financial crisis and two 'lost' decades of 'stagnant' growth, life returned to normal for most in Japan. 3.11 wasn't Japan's trauma, it was primarily that of *Tōhoku!* On my first visit to the region after the triple disasters, I was struck by the absence of the ubiquitous slogan which had been co-opted into a nationalist discourse in other parts of Japan. Instead of *Ganbarō Nippon*, the banner which greeted me as I looked out into the devastated bay from where the 'black waters' had come from, read *Ganbarō Ishinomaki*. This was a poignant reminder that the isolated fishing villages and farming communities of the North-East and not the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991) of Japan were the real victims of 3.11.

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Opinion – Japan's 3/11: Ten Years On

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