

An Inward-Turning Tremor

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925 words

At 2:00 p.m. on March 11, 2011, less than sixteen years after the Kobe Earthquake, a major earthquake struck northeastern Japan. It is being called the Tohoku-Kanto Earthquake, after the areas in the northeast and around Tokyo it affected. The epicenter was the bay off Miyagi prefecture; the magnitude was 8.8 according to the first reports, later raised to 9.0. It was the fourth largest earthquake in the recorded history of the world.

At the time I am writing—March 20, the ninth day after the earthquake—the official death toll is 7,508 people, with 17,653 said to be missing. The number of deaths is rising rapidly day to day. The number of evacuees is surpassing 330,000—another sign of the earthquake's enormous scale.

On the day of the quake broadcast television channels, including the government-sponsored NHK and the five commercial networks, switched to twenty-four hour commercial-free special coverage of the unfolding situation. Most satellite stations did the same. Broadcast television did not return to normal programming until March 19. (Even then screens had a crawl of earthquake information at their bottom.) For a time newspapers published special editions with nothing but articles and other information on the earthquake. International coverage disappeared. The changing state of affairs in Libya, for example, did not make it into print for some time.

Two things about the colossal earthquake stand out. First, damage from the tsunami was great. The water wrought havoc on the region in a single blow, depriving many of life and fortune. In earthquakes like the one in Kobe that occur directly below populated regions, the damage zone is roughly the same as the area affected by the earthquake itself. The tsunami spread destruction across a vast area.

The second, of course, is that the damage included nuclear power plants. Two nuclear plants in Fukushima prefecture were damaged severely. Not only is it impossible to say when the situation will return to normal, it is feared the effects will continue hereafter.

Far from returning to normal, then, the situation is still changing. Judging by past experience we cannot expect a resolution even decades from now. Amid the push to extend relief, address the immediate problems, restore calm and begin rebuilding, the earthquake's impact on debate and behavior is already showing.

One phenomenon is the resurfacing of "Japan" in discourse. The covers of weekly magazines edited after the earthquake exclaimed "Believe in Japan" and "Japan! Don't give up!" in large type. On television, Japanese morals were frequently praised for protecting order amid chaos.

It goes without saying that with lifelines cut off and goods running short, catastrophes of this scale require people's cooperation, solidarity, and mutual aid. Administrative support is a necessity. But in this case the challenges are not being framed in terms of the regional community. In one stroke the frame was blown up to "Japan"—the nation—as a whole.

We are also seeing mistrust of information about the events. During a major disaster accurate information is critical. Although television has been providing special coverage, the information muddle has just increased accordingly. For viewers, publicly released information seems unreliable even though they cannot rely on anything else.

Mistrust of information about the nuclear-plant accidents is of course the greatest. Just what kind of accidents are they, how is the situation developing, and how great are the effects on—or damage to—bodies and the environment. . . The suspicious feeling that there is more to the information that the government and Tokyo Electric release, that they may be hiding important things, is strong among people here.

As a result people are rushing to stock up on necessities. Bottled water, rice, and bread have disappeared from supermarkets and convenience stores. No sooner were rolling blackouts connected to the nuclear plants announced than batteries and flashlights disappeared too. People are engaging in "self-protection" of themselves and their families.

In the continuous anxiety and fear, the sense of regional community and commonality that should be at work is completely neglected. Even people who seek sure footing in "Japan" mistrust public information and are driven by self-protection. The sense of community that should be blossoming is closing and turning inward.

A recent column in a major newspaper observed that "foreigners" are hurrying to leave Japan and declared, "The country has no choice but to put itself back together with its own hands." Although it also expressed gratitude for material and moral support from foreign countries, columns like this too reveal an inward-turning attitude.

When they are living in recurring anxiety and fear people need hope and encouragement, courage and energy. On the one hand, though, the bounds of that solidarity are swelling up to "Japan," while on the other they are shrinking down to the individual and the family. Amid the continuing aftershocks people are taking shelter in the inward-turning attitude that they can only trust what they know. In places like evacuee centers new solidarity and cooperation should be spreading, but this kind of mentality is on the prowl instead.

The accidents at the Fukushima nuclear plants are undeniably at the heart of the situation. And yet in coverage of the nuclear-plant accidents, it is as if Fukushima is completely detached from Japan. The present nuclear-plant accidents are not Fukushima's nuclear-plant accidents, not Japan's nuclear-plant accidents, but accidents that concern the world. Nonetheless news coverage shuts them up in "Fukushima." Enclosing the accidents in Fukushima and the inward-turning attitude here are recto and verso of the same problem. This inward-turning tremor is truly deplorable.

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