

Diaspora and Disaster

Japanese Outside Japan and the Triple Catastrophy of March 2011

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Diaspora and Disaster

Japanese Outside Japan and the Triple Catastrophy of March 2011

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Diaspora and Disaster

3/11 as a Starting Point of Connecting both Fields of Research

This volume brings together two topics and frameworks of research which up to now have rarely been connected. First a distinct “disasterology” has dealt with the preconditions and consequences of disaster¹, and especially social anthropology has contributed strongly to a deeper understanding of disasters as *social catastrophes*. Second we find a fashionable and not as well defined field of research in diaspora studies. Diaspora studies have been taken up by social and cultural anthropology, literature studies, sociology and many more in the humanities. Only lately have both fields of disaster research and diaspora studies been treated together by a few papers as in the case of Haitians in the USA trying to come to terms with the Haiti earthquake in 2010 (Esnard and Sapard 2011). These papers have proven the potential of grouping disaster and diaspora together, but have only partially lived up to the possibilities that lie within this approach. With our volume on the triple catastrophe in Northern Japan in March 2011 and the reaction of Japanese abroad we try to move one step further.

The research fields of disaster and diaspora both have certain blind spots which are somehow complimentary to each other. First, disaster research tends to think along national borders. As a consequence disasters are analyzed as national catastrophes.² It is true that nation-states form the most efficient institutions to react to disasters unless the state has been very weak already before. They are responsible for preparation and mitigation of disasters or the failure in these two dimensions. Since disasters are not natural catastrophes as media often claims but are conditioned by social circumstances (Bakoff, Frerks, Hillhorst 2004: 1) it is evident that the state should be the starting point for analysis.

¹ Especially Oliver-Smith (1986, 1999, 2004) has been a leading researcher of disaster in social anthropology while others like Alexander (1997) have also made important contributions to the research of disasters as social-natural catastrophes.

² For example Alexander (1997: 25) claims: “In a sense, a disaster is symptomatic of the condition of a society’s total adaptional strategy within its social, economic, modified, and build environments.” He thus supposes that disasters are only symptoms for the condition of the very society hit by them.

In the case of 3/11, as the triple catastrophe is often referred to as the initial earthquake occurred on March 11th 2011 and also because the term resembles 9/11, Japan was basically well prepared to meet natural catastrophes like earthquakes, taifuns and tsunamis. Experts estimated the probability of a major tsunami caused by an earthquake on the coast of Sanriku, the name for the north-eastern region of the main island Honshū, to be around 90 % (Tagsold 2013a: 609). Accordingly inhabitants knew how to react and practiced how to most effectively evacuate. However, the actual tsunami's dimensions exceeded all scientific predictions. Nevertheless the Japanese state proved its resilience during March 2011 as the impact of the natural disaster in terms of casualties as well as destruction would have much more severe in most other countries. However the third catastrophe, the meltdown at the nuclear power plant Fukushima Daiichi came unexpectedly and led to chaos.

Up to this, disasterology has treated 3/11 mostly as a purely Japanese matter and thus has not enlightened the blind spot by extending its research beyond national borders of Japan.³ Books and papers have dealt with the various dimensions of the disaster like living in shelters, food safety, reconstruction of cities, ports and infrastructure in general and of course Fukushima. But the disaster has a strong transnational dimension, which has more or less been neglected. First of all Northern Japan housed a significant number of migrants in March 2011 (Tagsold 2013b: 182f.). Even though migration to Japan always has been seriously curbed by the government, the country does not seclude itself from the trends of globalization. Chinese nationals worked on the farms in rural Northern Japan, as Japanese tend to leave for the big cities since wages on the countryside are low and work is hard and dirty. Nevertheless, these jobs seemed to offer opportunities for migrants. On the coast many Filipinas had married fishermen who otherwise faced difficulties finding partners for marriage in Japan. These migrants and others have widely been neglected in studies concerning the Triple Disaster, as somehow the assumption as well as public image is that the disaster had hit a Japanese island that is populated solely by Japanese.

³ See for examples the papers in Kingston (2012).

Yet another transnational dimension of the disaster is constituted by the Fukushima nuclear power plant. One of the common implicit assumptions in public media was that the Fukushima power plant is a purely Japanese achievement. Hence everything regarding these nuclear reactors was explained by referring to some Japanese national character. The Japanese have full faith in technical solutions to overcome even the most severe disasters. But the walls, which were built to stop tsunami-waves, failed – and so too did the power plant in Fukushima. Nature had overcome human – that is Japanese – hybris, so it was argued. As far as the power plants are concerned however, research has clearly outlined their transnational background (see for example Yoshioka 1999). The US advertised nuclear power as safe and as the energy of the future in the 1950s and 60s in Japan in order to strengthen one of their last reliable allies in East Asia (Kuznick 2011, Tanaka 2011). The multinational company General Electrics built the first nuclear reactor in Fukushima and cooperated with Toshiba in building two additional reactors, only the last three reactors were built solely by Japanese companies. But the transnational networks are not only historical – they also reached out globally in March 2011, a point less explored by experts on Japanese nuclear power politics. For example the reaction of the US marines moving their ships away from Fukushima or closer back was one of the often quoted events in media to determine how dangerous the incident might be. Also the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna played an important role in defining the disaster in Fukushima. Even though studies of the disaster partly grasped the transnational character of 3/11 for Fukushima they nevertheless fell short in consequently asking the same questions about the disaster.

Diaspora studies have far less problems with transnational dimensions. The framework of analysis is based on the very question of overcoming national borders. After all, as Nico Besnier in his introductory paper stresses, diaspora studies have their own blind spot. There is a tendency to treat the presence of people with the same foreign background in a city or a country as a distinct “community”. However the notion of community evokes a sense of shared values, practices and methods of identifying oneself with the alleged country of origin, which often runs counter to the real degree of cohesiveness among these

people. A working infrastructure for one group of citizens like a Chinatown or Little Italy might seem to prove a shared identity among these citizens in a foreign and yet homey country. Still, the mere existence of food shops, bookstores, or even a consulate general doesn't say much about identities of the people termed "members" of the community. This is certainly true for Japanese diasporas worldwide which are often supported by a Japanese infrastructure and are advertised as coherent groups. However, most Japanese have much more complex strategies for identifying themselves than advertising themselves as a personification of a perfect Japanese; some do at times for various reasons, others refrain from doing so.

In contrast to this understanding of diaspora we look for performative moments in which citizens identify themselves as diasporic. A cultural center or a festival which normally would be seen as an expression of identity of an diasporic "community" thus turns into a moment in which diaspora and even community is created – momentarily and dynamic, not as a static assumption about "belonging". 3/11 certainly was such a moment in which many people worldwide were emotionally hit by the dramatic situation in Northeast Japan and felt the need to show their solidarity. Various motives drove these people. A basic human compassion, a long standing history of personal protest against nuclear power, personal experience of similar disasters or a sympathy for Japan and the Japanese might have been reasons for donating, starting relief projects and other ways of helping. Another strong motive for many people to engage themselves into relief projects for North Japan was their Japanese descent and their feeling that they had to identify with the "country of their origin". However, in a sense, terminology is misleading here and in itself suggests "natural bonds" between Japanese abroad and Japan. The question of origins only became virulent for some people because of 3/11 and their feeling that they had to react somehow. Others did not feel any obligation and thus did not stress origins.

In our volume we look at the effects of 3/11 on diasporas in various places. First Nico Besnier's article concentrates on frameworks and concepts for dealing with diaspora. His theoretical introduction forms the theoretical setting for the following papers as it challenges the idea of diasporas as tightly knit *community*.

Based on this critique we scrutinize reactions to 3/11 and ask about the motives of the various actors in the unfolding process. Next our volume analyses reactions to two different types of Japanese diasporas as outlined by Harumi Befu (2001: 12). Japanese diasporas in Düsseldorf, Belgium and London belong to the rotating type according to Befu. Most Japanese are not permanently in Europe, they have been dispatched by the companies for a period of three to five years or are family members of dispatched managers. This group's ties to Japan are mostly very strong and absolutely unquestioned, and the 3/11 disaster was a test for them regarding the relation of the Japanese to their surroundings. Ruth Martin shows how this led to overwhelmingly positive reactions and feelings in London. The Japanese living there were successful in organizing meaningful public events which helped to console the grievance and strengthen ties to non-Japanese. In contrast the public events of mourning staged in Düsseldorf – the location of the third largest Japanese diaspora in Europe after London and Paris – were somewhat unsettling and unfolded their meaning only in the coverage of the local media but less so for those taking part as Christian Tagsold shows in his paper. Finally Andreas Niehaus and Tine Walravens present the findings of their research into the reaction of long-term and short-term Japanese nationals living in Belgium following the Triple Disaster.

Jutta Teuwsen and Peter Bernardi present findings on two permanent diasporas. Teuwsen asks about the meaning of 3/11 for Japanese in Hawaii. Most Japanese came to the islands about a century ago. The current diaspora is made up mostly of third-, fourth- and fifth-generation Japanese. For a long time these Japanese-Americans have avoided identifying themselves by the history of migration of their (great) grandparents, due to Japan's aggression in World War II. However, 3/11 sparked a new trend of identification with Japan. As Bernardi shows, Japanese in Sao Paulo have never felt the need to disguise their migrational history. After 3/11 various actors have tried, however, to lead the broad movement of solidarity and channel donations through their organization to gain reputation and recognition in Brazil as well as in Japan.

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