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Reviews

Richard J. Samuels, *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013, 274 pp.
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On 11 March 2011, northeastern Japan was hit by a powerful earthquake, triggering a devastating tsunami and unleashing a nuclear crisis at the Fukushima reactor complex, located about 240 kilometers from Tokyo. Many observers predicted that the tragic, unprecedented triple disaster, widely known as ‘3.11’, would mark a turning point for the entire country. They believed a catastrophe of this magnitude would galvanize Japanese society, driving radical political, economic, and social change, and prompting long-overdue institutional reforms.

Against this backdrop, MIT Professor Richard J. Samuels explores the disaster’s impact on Japan’s politics and society in his new book *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan*. The analysis focuses on three policy areas most affected by the earthquake: national security, energy policy, and local governance. Based on his careful and detailed study, Samuels argues that predictions about major change were inflated. He shows that the disaster prompted debates and soul-searching among politicians. While some incremental changes in existing institutions were initiated, the widely anticipated substantive reforms failed to materialize. ‘Normal politics’ trumped ‘crisis politics’ as most political leaders stuck to their extant preferences and beliefs and resumed pre-crisis ideological battles. Samuels nevertheless cautions that the full impact of 3.11 cannot yet be judged, as ‘a 3.11 master narrative was still under construction’ (p. 200) nearly two years after the disaster.

The book consists of a preface, six chapters, and a conclusion. After outlining the research question and key findings in the preface, the first chapter provides an overview of the human, economic, and political costs of the calamity. In this chapter, Samuels introduces the relevant actors in the post-disaster response, including the central government, the reactor operator TEPCO, Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF), the US military, volunteer groups, and non-governmental organizations. The subsequent chapter discusses the common belief that crises induce great change. According to this view, a crisis loosens normal constraints by dividing old allies and enabling new coalitions among decision-makers, thereby permitting policy innovation and reform. By contrast, Samuels notes that crises may serve as tools for politicians and stakeholders to promote their extant interests. Three camps with differing intentions are likely to emerge after a crisis: (1) reformers, who seek to stir the country in a new direction, (2) status quo supporters, who oppose any major policy change, and (3) reverse course advocates, who favor

returning to an idealized past. According to Samuels, all three camps can be found in Japan's post-disaster discourse, although the second group generally prevailed. Samuels furthermore introduces four powerful themes which politicians in post-disaster Japan invoked to appeal to the public: change, leadership, vulnerability, and community – themes that resonated with previous national debates.

The third chapter takes a historical and comparative perspective. Samuels finds parallels with earlier disasters in Japan and abroad (i.e. Hurricane Katrina in the US): each catastrophe stimulated debates about the four above-mentioned themes. Moreover, 'postdisaster politics were dominated by political actors with extant preferences who would generate and use narratives to explain what had happened and sell their prescription for how to make things better' (p. 77). In most cases, the debates led to incremental changes rather than fundamental institutional reform and renewal. The chapter also examines whether 'disaster diplomacy', in which another country offers support in disaster relief operations, can yield diplomatic advantages and create opportunities for rapprochement. After the triple disaster, some observers claimed the US support to Japan was orchestrated for the purpose of improving public perceptions of the alliance and moving forward on controversial basing issues. Samuels surveys different cases of disaster relief by the US to Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Myanmar, and by Japan to China after the Sichuan earthquake in 2008. He concludes that such support operations 'were always welcomed on the ground, but in no instance did they transform international relations' (p. 192). Overall, he concludes that the experience from past disasters does not lend credence to the claim that crises precipitate fundamental change.

In Chapters 4 to 6, Samuels examines Japan's post-3.11 debate in the areas of national security, energy policy, and local governance. He meticulously traces the dynamics in each debate and explores the arguments of the three camps, i.e. the reformers, the status quo supporters, and the reverse course advocates. He finds that the status quo supporters generally prevailed in the discourse and hence political and institutional change remained limited. In the security field, the Japanese SDF and US forces gained acclaim for their decisive and successful disaster response. Nevertheless, the improved public image did not lead to major shifts in Japan's security policy, such as a significant increase in the defense budget or progress on controversial alliance issues. In the energy field, anti-nuclear sentiments grew as the severity of the Fukushima nuclear crisis transpired. Nevertheless, the government failed to abandon nuclear power from its energy policy mix. Finally, regarding local governance, many analysts had expected a push towards decentralization and local autonomy following 3.11, given widespread perceptions of central government failure in crisis management. While Samuels finds that the disaster rekindled earlier discussions about the appropriate balance between local and central administration, actual post-disaster change was limited. The debate was won out by those favoring continued deepening of solidarity and cooperation among local governments. Nevertheless, Samuels maintains that among the three policy areas, local governance may be the one with 'the most lasting changes after 3.11' (p. 197). Prefectures and municipalities dispatched public servants including firefighters, teachers and school board officials to the disaster area to assist colleagues while at the same time gaining first-hand experience in crisis management. The solidarity reflected in these vigorous efforts by local governments may be one of the biggest untold stories of 3.11, according to Samuels.

The conclusion recapitulates the main research findings, arguing that the '3.11 catastrophe was not the 'game changer' many policy entrepreneurs desired' (p. 200). At the same time, Samuels

argues that possibilities for further, long-term institutional change have opened up, particularly where the three policy areas overlap. For example, at the intersection between national security and local governance, one can observe new joint efforts in disaster preparedness between the SDF and prefectural and municipal governments. Moreover, Samuels notes that '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' (p. 200).

Samuels provides a stimulating and insightful analysis of Japan's post-disaster response and the domestic debate about the appropriate lessons. He convincingly challenges the conventional view of crises as critical junctures or inflection points. Given the significance of Samuel's research findings, the book also unavoidably invites further discussion. Firstly, one may ask under what circumstances crises do trigger fundamental change in societies. Samuels acknowledges that the threshold for the size of shock required for transforming a political system 'has rarely been theorized' (p. 184), but he does not go into further detail. This seems to be a point that merits further consideration. Compared to Japan's triple disaster, the scale of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States was much smaller in terms of human costs, yet '9.11' is widely seen as triggering a significant shift in American foreign policy. If not the extent of the human tragedy, what factors facilitated this shift?

Secondly, the role of the public in post-disaster debates could be investigated further. According to Samuels, political elites cannot simply impose their preferred narratives on the public. Rather 'receiver characteristics' (p. 29) are important, including citizens' political sophistication, the distribution of ideological preferences in a society, and the level of trust in government. What were the decisive receiver characteristics of Japanese society at the time of the triple disaster? How did they influence the prospect for change in post-3.11 Japan?

Finally, the possible longer-term ramifications of the terrible human tragedy could be explored further. Samuels maintains that intensified cooperation between local governments may be one of the most significant and lasting changes after 3.11. But will solidarity persist beyond the immediate crisis period? Samuels acknowledges that help from local governments was less forthcoming when asked about accepting radioactive debris from the disaster region (p. 174). Will local governments provide support to the ongoing rebuilding and recovery efforts or will their enthusiasm gradually wane? Moreover, Samuels is cautious about making predictions about Japan's future course. He rightly explains that debates about 3.11 and its lessons are still underway, and therefore we cannot yet know whether Japanese society, particularly the younger generation, will push for further change and reform. Yet we may wonder how much longer Japan can resist change, given the country's prolonged economic recession and massive sovereign debt, its ageing population, and the public's dissatisfaction with political leaders.

Samuels' book is a well-researched and captivating account of post-3.11 Japan, which will serve as an important reference point for discussions about Japanese politics in the years to come. Consequently, it is a must read for anyone interested in Japan, the country's response to the triple disaster, and the ongoing policy debates.

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