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3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan by Richard J. Samuels (review)

J. A. A. Stockwin

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work of historical scholarship and a major contribution to our understanding of modern Japan and modern natural disasters.

3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan. By Richard J. Samuels. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2013. xv, 274 pages. \$29.95.

Reviewed by
J. A. A. STOCKWIN
University of Oxford

The Great Eastern Japan Disaster (Higashi Nihon Daishinsai), to give it its official title, combining mega-earthquake, mega-tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in the Fukushima No. 1 reactors, immediately cost around 19,000 human lives, devastated coastal towns to the north and south of the major Tohoku city of Sendai, severely disrupted the economy of northern Japan (including cutting transport links and closing many factories), forced the evacuation of a large inhabited area inland from the Fukushima reactors, and created a seemingly endless problem of how to control the stricken reactors. It also led to a (mostly temporary) exodus of many foreign nationals from the Tokyo area, fearful of the effects of nuclear radiation reaching as far as the capital region, and substantial displacements of population within Japan itself.

In the medium term, the disaster brought about the progressive closure of nuclear power stations throughout Japan, precipitating a huge debate about the future of nuclear power. It cast doubt not only on security preparations for natural or man-made calamities, but also on the efficacy and viability of longstanding political institutions. A spin-off of the crisis and its aftermath was the enhanced reputation of the Self Defense Forces (SDF) and of the defense relationship with the United States, following the effective performance of both the SDF and U.S. forces in postcatastrophe clear-up operations.

The crisis occurred at a time when the Japanese economy had experienced some two decades of stagnation and deflation, and when government was in the hands of an inexperienced coalition, based on the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), elected less than two years earlier. The handling of the crisis by that government, and in particular by Prime Minister Kan Naoto, became a matter of intense controversy, but the crisis also raised far wider questions about the viability of the political system as a whole, suggesting that Japan had a problem of governance and even of governability.

One wonders how a hypothetical LDP prime minister would have handled things, had that party still been in power.

Unsurprisingly, apart from a plethora of writing in Japanese, the crisis has generated a number of books in English describing what happened and exploring the implications. These include edited works by Jeff Kingston and by Bong Youngshik and T. J. Pempel, a monograph by Mark Willacy, and most recently an ethnographic volume edited by Tom Gill, Brigitte Steger, and David Slater.¹

Richard Samuels brings impressive credentials to understanding what the crisis meant, having previously written monographs on Japanese local and regional policy, energy policy, technological change, political leadership, and security policy.² Soon after the crises in Tohoku occurred, he shelved another project in order to bring his accumulated understanding to bear on the question of what kind of Japan was likely to emerge from the catastrophe. He notes in the preface that after six months of research he had to abandon his working title, "Rebirth of Japan?" now realizing that the crisis aftermath fitted better into the rubric of recovery than of transformation.

The earlier chapters deal extensively with disaster management, including an intriguing exercise in comparison, both with earlier natural disasters in Japan and with similar catastrophes in other parts of the world. Samuels pays particular attention to the great earthquake and fires that destroyed much of the capital region of Kanto in 1923 and to a number of other disasters outside Japan. These investigations lead him to notably bleak conclusions: the Great Kanto Earthquake facilitated military dominance and damaged the progress of democracy; international goodwill generated by foreign aid and participation in rescue efforts seldom leads to a real improvement in relations between nation-states.

In the Japanese case he also finds it difficult to discover evidence of improvement in standards of national governance following 3.11. Indeed, perhaps the most lamentable effect of the crisis was that, rather than foster-

1. Jeff Kingston, ed., *Natural Disaster and Nuclear Crisis in Japan* (London: Routledge, 2012); Bong Youngshik and T. J. Pempel, eds., *Japan in Crisis: What Will It Take for Japan to Rise Again?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Mark Willacy, *Fukushima: Japan's Tsunami and the Inside Story of the Nuclear Meltdowns* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 2013); and Tom Gill, Brigitte Steger, and David H. Slater, eds., *Japan Copes with Calamity* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013).

2. Richard J. Samuels, *The Politics of Regional Policy in Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); *The Business of the Japanese State: Energy Markets in Comparative and Historical Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); *National Security and the Technological Transformation of Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); *Machiavelli's Children: Leaders and Their Legacies in Italy and Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); and *Securing Japan: Tokyo's Grand Strategy and the Future of East Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

ing political solidarity in the task of national recovery, after the briefest truce, party political backstabbing resumed with enhanced intensity. An offer by DPJ Prime Minister Kan Naoto to give some senior cabinet posts to members of the opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was summarily rejected. National unity in conditions functionally equivalent to war was brushed aside in favor of narrow party and factional advantage.

Kan's performance as national leader quite rightly became the focus of an intense media spotlight. He acquired many detractors but also a number of champions. Samuels appears to straddle this controversy, in which some were castigating Kan for micromanaging and interfering, while others applauded his head-on confrontation with the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) and some of them even argued that his actions had saved Japan from a far worse nuclear catastrophe that might have necessitated at least the partial evacuation of Tokyo. Samuels was not the only commentator to straddle both sides of the fence in evaluating Kan's performance. Willacy, for instance, quotes the veteran former *Asahi shinbun* journalist Funabashi Yōichi as being scathing about Kan's micromanagement and his failure to keep the public informed, but also as venturing that "he saved the nation" by refusing to allow TEPCO to abandon Fukushima Daiichi, as it seemed inclined to do in the immediate aftermath of the catastrophe.³

Indeed, as Samuels argues, in the public mind (and that of the media), TEPCO eventually came to be seen as a worse villain than the prime minister, and its lack of preparation for a "black swan" event could be traced back to overintimate relationships between successive governments, sections of the government bureaucracy, and the nuclear industry. These relationships were appropriately pilloried as "the nuclear village." TEPCO, of course, described the tsunami as *sōteigai*, meaning something unforeseeable or unimaginable, whereas the company's many critics pointed to its complacency and lack of rigor in matters of security, documented over many years.

In the core argument of his book, Samuels develops three alternative narratives, which he boils down to "put it in gear," "stay the course," and "back to the future." The first of these envisaged "rebirth," "a new political paradigm," and even a period of Schumpeterian "creative destruction." In the aftermath of the disaster, many observers genuinely thought that Japan would be radically reconstructed and that on the principle of "not wasting a crisis," a new vigorous, enterprising, and efficient system would emerge, purged of corrupt and incestuous relationships and practices. It is worth noting that this idea was not uniquely a product of 3.11. A similar rhetoric may be detected surrounding the election of the DPJ government in 2009, following almost two decades of economic stagnation.

3. Willacy, *Fukushima*, p. 284.

Samuels's second alternative narrative favored recovery rather than revolution. The innate conservatism of the politico-economic system was sure to reassert itself once sufficient time had elapsed. Evidence of the persuasive power of this narrative emerged quite early, after Kan had been replaced by Noda Yoshihiko as prime minister, leading to a less adventurous, more conservative approach. He also outlines a third, less widespread but still significant narrative, according to which Japan should return to its own time-honored traditions, seen as in harmony with nature rather than arrogantly neglecting nature and tradition as implied in both the first two narratives. The principal proponent of this narrative was the Kyoto University philosopher, Umehara Takeshi.

In the second half of the book, Samuels attempts to match these three narratives successively to security policy, energy policy, and the "repurposing" of local government. In security policy, he is able to show that long-standing assumptions of reliance on U.S. security guarantees have hardly shifted following the crisis of March 2011; indeed, the effective assistance given by U.S. forces in the clear-up operations after the disaster seem to have reduced the level of unease in the general population about the U.S. military presence. Since this was also accompanied by a satisfactory performance in disaster management by the SDF, Samuels argues that there was some diminution in pacifist sentiment. But he also insists that this exerted little impact on the problems of U.S. bases in Japan, nor any enhancement in the resolution of security threats being experienced from North Korea and China.

Samuels argues that change was far greater in energy policy. TEPCO, one of the brightest stars in the corporate firmament before 3.11, was reduced to the status of a zombie company in its aftermath, reliant for its survival upon financial support from the state. More fundamentally, the Fukushima disaster brought about the closure of practically the whole nuclear energy industry, though with the prospect of some nuclear reactors coming back into operation after lengthy and rigorous "stress tests" were completed. Many reactors, however, would probably have to shut down for good. Public opinion moved massively against nuclear power, though substantial pockets of support remained, especially in rural areas that had become dependent for employment and subsidies on the nuclear industry. What was replacing nuclear power were sources of energy such as natural gas that were carbon-based, so that the drastic decline in nuclear energy sources set back policies designed to minimize carbon emissions. Renewables were given a boost, but any increase in renewable sources of energy was from a very low base. And pressures emerged for the energy industry to become more decentralized.

Samuels's final substantive chapter is titled "Repurposing Local Govern-

ment.” For many years, local government had been a battleground between central government determined to maintain its hold over local authorities and local authorities in certain regions seeking to assert their autonomy. Proposals for the 47 prefectures to be replaced by a small number of large-scale regions was seen by the center as a means both to greater efficiency and to reinforcing its overall control. 3.11 brought these tensions into sharp relief, as those local authorities along the Pacific coast of Tohoku acted on their own initiative in the face of the disaster, despairing of the slow reactions from Tokyo. The catastrophe also prompted political movements seeking greater local autonomy from regions in the west of Japan, most notably from the ambitious mayor of Osaka, Hashimoto Tōru, who later formed a political party.

In all of his three case studies, Samuels concludes that it was the “staying the course” narrative that prevailed, though the disaster shook up the system sufficiently for new broom approaches to be widely canvassed. In a memorable phrase, he argues that “[d]espite the dysfunctions of its political class, we have seen abundant evidence of creativity in its policy class” (p. 200). He also perceptively notes that all of the debates he has analyzed cut across traditional left-right cleavages.

The second Abe government was formed shortly before Samuels completed writing this book. To some considerable extent, the advent of a radical right-wing government has changed the parameters of the political situation he describes. The new government has a stable majority, and for the time being at least, has stabilized the political situation. Abe seeks to implement the “three arrows” of “Abenomics” in a bid to resuscitate the long stagnating economy. He seeks to strengthen the security alliance with the United States and, should he survive long enough, will move to revise the 1947 constitution, not only by amending the peace clause but also by seriously eroding existing guarantees of human rights. A furious debate continues on the future of nuclear power, and local authorities are flexing their muscles in contestation with the center. The National Diet has now passed an enhanced security law that is widely regarded as illiberal. The traditional media react cautiously to these contentious issues, but the advent of “new media” is empowering protesters, and indeed, helped both by the aftermath of 3.11 and by illiberal trends in national politics, what had been the moribund world of popular protest is experiencing a significant revival. It would be interesting to read an epilogue to Samuels’s book exploring these more recent developments.

This is a carefully argued book, based on immense research and deep understanding of underlying causes. No book is perfect, of course, and two minor errors may be noted. First, the Hashimoto government was in office between 1996 and 1998, not “in the early 1990s” (p. 160). Second, the

Shakai Minshutō (Shamintō) is referred to throughout as the “Democratic Socialist Party,” whereas the correct translation is “Social Democratic Party.” This may seem trivial, but the party is heir to left-wing factions of the former Nihon Shakaitō (Japan Socialist Party [JSP]), whereas the Minshatō (Democratic Socialist Party), a breakaway from the JSP in 1959–60 that lasted until 1994, represented the right wing of the movement.

After the Great East Japan Earthquake: Political and Policy Change in Post-Fukushima Japan. Edited by Dominic Al-Badri and Gijs Berends. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, Copenhagen, 2013. xviii, 192 pages. £50.00, cloth; £16.99, paper.

Reviewed by

JEFF KINGSTON

Temple University Japan

There is a burgeoning literature on 3.11 Japan from a range of scholarly disciplines, but here we encounter Japan-based diplomats’ perspectives. One problem in focusing on changes in politics, energy, food safety, and economic policies in the aftermath of the tsunami and nuclear meltdowns, as this volume does, is that the authors are chasing a moving target. It is not denigrating their contribution to note that the policy and political landscape is evolving and the return of Abe Shinzō as prime minister has unleashed its own policy tremors in the form of Abenomics and his pro-nuclear energy policy.

Perhaps a bigger problem is the competition. Richard Samuels’s masterful *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan* (Cornell University Press, 2013) casts a long shadow over the book under review because Samuels also assesses postdisaster policymaking and politics, bringing decades of research and scholarly depth to the subject. Samuels focuses on three policy areas—national security, energy, and local government—and analyzes the competing narratives that emerged as policymakers hijacked the crisis to bolster their preferred longstanding agendas, meaning the opportunity for bold new reforms slipped away.

Prime Minister Abe’s aggressive efforts promoting Japan’s nuclear power exports are an unexpected post-3.11 development, especially given the ongoing decommissioning problems at Fukushima. In November 2013 popular former premier Koizumi Jun’ichirō (2001–6) called on Abe to show real leadership on nuclear energy by pulling the plug, drawing attention to the absence of a plan to deal with accumulating radioactive waste. But Abe