Trust and Etiquette
Some Societal Consequences of the Great East Japan Earthquake

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Etiquette is the natural enemy of freedom. This is particularly evident when we visit foreign countries where we have to submit to different rules that govern everyday behaviour. Customs, conventions, manners and traditions always restrict freedom and individual choice. However, there is a payoff in that fixed rules save energy and provide security.

It is a well-known fact that most people believe that their own society is to be preferred to all others. This is not the only reason why comparing the merits of social systems in a disinterested way is not easy. There are also different standards and criteria for comparing societies that are subject to the contingencies of the natural environment and history. One criterion which is relatively rarely invoked is the response to disaster. It is of considerable interest, for emergencies put a society to the test revealing its strengths and weaknesses. How does a society react to a crisis; how does it cope with it?

Living with the threat of disaster

Japan is a world leader in earthquake disaster management. When the Great East Japan Earthquake hit Tohoku, crisis management began when the earth was still trembling and before the devastating tsunami reached the Sanriku coast. In the new media environment the government watched the disaster unfolding live. It was immediately clear that a major catastrophe had occurred, and government response was swift. An army of 100.000 was set in motion within days. Every community has designated emergency shelters, but because of the extensive destruction the evacuation of victims in all tsunami-hit areas took time. Survivors endured in harsh conditions for days, and once they had been accommodated in

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gymnasiums and other public shelters, tens of thousands of evacuees were faced with the prospect of camping indefinitely on a few square feet depending entirely on relief provisions and having to put up with primitive hygienic conditions. On March 14, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism requested the Japan Federation of Housing Organizations to construct 30,000 temporary housing units in two months – an awfully long time to spend in a shelter.

People who could stay in their own homes also faced tremendous challenges. Many had no electricity and water. Towns and villages were swept away or partly destroyed. Pictures that went around the world showed ocean-going vessels stranded on rooftops and a wasteland beyond description. Yet, in the face of such hellish circumstances, reduced to bare survival, the victims stayed calm and behaved in an orderly manner – which surprised Western observers. The Japanese “stoic composure” quickly became a pet topic of the Western-dominated press, inviting interpretations that ranged from Buddhist fatalism to Nitobe Inazō’s “Soul of Japan,” the Bushidō spirit. Culturalism had a heyday.

Yes, the disaster victims bowed to each other, they took off their shoes before entering crummy shelters, they queued calmly for hours on end for water and food, they kept their voice down not to disturb their neighbours. Do we have to belabour Bushidō to explain this? It’s common sense. Everybody knows that pushing and elbowing one’s way into a crowded train makes things more uncomfortable for everyone. Etiquette is more than decorum, it has a function.

Why could the Japanese act the way they did? Why was there no looting, no rape and rioting? Were the Japanese still so docile, some reporters asked in earnest, as during World War II when they blindly followed their leaders into the abyss? Asking such questions testifies to certain assumptions: When disaster strikes, public order breaks down and the law of the jungle takes over. Is this a natural law? It certainly happens, but by no means inevitably. Consider what Indian journalist S. Gurumurthy reported about the deluge that flooded the city of Mumbai in 2005: There was “not a single case of lawlessness.” And he continues: “Not just when the killer rains hit Mumbai, even when the killer tsunami hit the east coast
of India and thousands died, and hundreds of thousands had to be fed, the story was no different.” (Global Perspectives, 27 September 2005)

No Bushidō in Mumbai, but no breakdown of civil society either. It is a worthy and challenging task to determine the conditions that lead to lawlessness after a natural disaster in some cases, but not in others. Tackling this question requires more time than I have for this talk. My purpose is more modest. I just want to argue that etiquette is less of a moral issue than a matter of collective intelligence offering a prop and support under duress.

In retrospect, what happened? “The facts are well-known,” a newspaper man who wanted me to write an article about “one year after …” recently told me. “Just write your own story.” However, I’m not so sure that the facts have been incontrovertibly established. An examination of the Japanese and the international press reveals that rather diverse accounts of this traumatic event are in circulation. I shall not pretend to proffer more than my personal view of events based on my experience in Tokyo at the time of the earthquake and repeated visits in the disaster area thereafter.

**Trust**

There is evidence linking trust and subjective well-being (Helliwell, Wang 2010). People who feel that they are living in a trustworthy environment generally have a higher level of life satisfaction (Hudson 2006). There are many kinds of trust, in other words, trust is put in various agents and conditions that impact on our lives. For example, people have more or less confidence

- in their family,
- in the safety of their neighbourhood,
- in employment security,
- in health care,
- in the police,
- in other government institutions,
- in voluntary associations,
- in banks,
in the media.

There is empirical research about each of these, indicating a positive correlation between trust and subjective well-being. Veenhoven (1993) demonstrated that what he calls a society’s livability depends on trust in institutions since societies where people trust their institutions are less disorderly.

Yet another aspect of trust that, to my knowledge, has not been investigated much is the natural environment, which, however, may be quite relevant in the case at hand. The Japanese are accustomed to earthquakes in daily life, but a natural disaster on the scale of the Great East Japan Earthquake does not happen often. Since 3/11, the ground under our feet hasn’t stopped shifting. This kind of instability makes people feel insecure and must be considered to have an influence on how they accommodate to their habitat.

Japan has developed social structures characterized by a high degree of mutual trust. Whether or not this is in response to a disaster-prone natural environment I don’t know, but the possibility should be considered. The less secure the environment, the more people have to rely on each other. 3/11 proved evidence for this general connection.

Japan is a civilized society with a high level of consensus on what is and is not done, a society, that is, where there are clear expectations about how to behave. From the point of view of societies that champion individual freedom the corresponding behavioural patterns may seem tradition-bound, repressive and conformist. In fact, this is how Japanese society has often been described. “The nail that sticks out will be hammered down” is a proverb endlessly recycled as a stereotype. Rather than individual genius and originality, this social order fosters conformity and mediocrity. I have doubts about the validity of such a description. Rather than blind subservience and lack of individuality, the well-mannered behaviour of the tsunami victims manifests collective intelligence of a civilized society conducive to surviving disaster.

Japanese society is prepared to avoid chaos. This holds not just for managing natural catastrophes. It is a society that puts a premium on
composure, self-restraint, respect for others and confidence that there are proper operating procedures, that is, mechanisms of behaviour control that are ever more important the greater the difficulties. Losing self-control in a critical situation makes things worse, for oneself and for others. Where insecurity rules supreme, manners afford a measure of security, something to hold on to when everything else is breaking down.

If Japan will be able to turn crisis into opportunity, as the title of this symposium suggests, it will be thanks to this foundation of its social order. This is my considered opinion. The challenges are enormous, for it was not just the physical ground along the coast that liquefied, but also parts of the institutional groundwork most Japanese are used to trust.

**Government**

In terms of confidence in civil service, Japan usually scores medium level values, 32 points in a recent OECD survey, not as high as Canada (50) and not as low as Greece (14). Under normal circumstances the Japanese state functions quite reliably. Major fiascos, such as the mishandling of pension records that came to light in 2007, are rare.

The disaster of 3/11 suspended normal circumstances bringing about a state of emergency to which the government initially responded swiftly and markedly better than to the Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake in Kobe in January 1995 when the local mob made a laughing stock of the government by offering relief supplies more quickly. Yet, but after 3/11 trust in government took a beating for three reasons.

(1) The dimension and the geographic stretch of the devastation made rescue operations and the transport of supplies to the disaster area very difficult.

(2) As time went by, administrative and legal difficulties piled up. The opposition LDP stone-walled which, as it controls the Upper House effectively slowed down government initiatives.

(3) Institutional structures for the supervision of nuclear power plants
proved inadequate. Placing the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA), which is tasked to regulate nuclear power safety, under the roof of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, which promotes nuclear power, was a major mistake. Further, lack of transparency turned out to be as problematic as the many cross-connections between government and industry, that is, the absence of a clear command hierarchy, as described by Aoki and Rothwell (2011).

As for politics, it was not just the opposition that delayed crisis response. The ruling party was unable to pool forces and quickly began to demote its own prime minister who in the face of the disaster was willing to put two holy cows to the test, the low consumption tax rate of just 5% and Japan’s nuclear policy. The infighting in the ruling party and obstruction on the part of the opposition seriously undermined trust in the government, especially in the disaster area. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, within a half a year after 3/11, trust in government halved from 51% to 25%. A majority of Japanese do not expect to be told the truth by government officials.

**Science and Technology**

Japan, as everybody knows, is a high-tech country. The term “techno-nationalism” has been coined for Japan. There is widespread confidence that most problems are amenable to technological solutions. When there was a labour shortage, the Japanese built industrial robots. When urbanization congested the cities, they built the best public transport system in the world. And when Middle Eastern petroleum suppliers became more self-assertive the Japanese moved into nuclear power generation. There was a great deal of confidence that this technology, too, could be put to service without undue risk. The power industry made enormous efforts to accomplish this, and both the industry and the government spent huge amounts of money to promote nuclear power and convince the population of its safety. Their public relations work was very successful, resulting in general acceptance of nuclear energy as a source of electricity. During the two decades after the
Chernobyl accident, public support for nuclear energy increased 10 per cent. What is more, nuclear policy became a part of regional policy. Nuclear power plants were built in outlying communities that used the infrastructure projects that came with them and government subsidies to replenish their empty coffers. There was little public resistance against the construction of nuclear power plants. As a matter of fact, the municipality of Futaba where Fukushima Daiichi is located asked Tokyo Denryoku a short while prior to the earthquake to build another reactor.

Nuclear power never was an issue in national elections. There was the occasional local protest against a new power plant, but nothing like a national movement. The political elite, with the exception of a few communists nobody listened to because they were communists, were largely united in supporting or ignoring nuclear energy. This is very evident in that very few DPJ politicians ever mention the fact that the structural problems of supervision of the power industry that have come to light in the wake of the Fukushima Daiichi accident were entirely of LDP making. Since the industry worked well in the sense that for decades Japan enjoyed the most reliable electricity supply in the world, politicians and bureaucrats were more than willing to believe in the safety of nuclear technology, as was the general population. In 2005, the IAEA found that 82% of Japanese favoured maintaining existing nuclear power plants and/or building new ones (Ramana 2011). By August 2011, more than 70% of Japanese wanted to reduce reliance on nuclear power and support continued to decline, although figures vary considerably depending on who you ask.

After the accident, trust in nuclear safety dropped dramatically, and not only that. “It’s a fact that there was an unreasonable overconfidence in the technology of Japan’s nuclear power generation,” conceded Banri Kaieda, Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry, in June last year. It wasn't just the “safety myth” of nuclear technology that was busted. As the Fukushima Daiichi accident unfolded, it became clear that Japan did not have vital technological equipment for disaster response ranging from powerful water pumps to emergency robots. A September 2011 report by the government-funded Research Institute of Science and Technology for Society states that
Since science and technology far less dealt with disaster caused by the tsunami and the crisis of the Fukushima nuclear power plant than people expected, citizens currently take a harsh view of functioning of science and technology. (RISTEX 2011)

Thus, trust in technology suffered, and science did not fare much better. Not only is a nuclear reactor the most sophisticated piece of scientific hardware, but in the aftermath of the accident scientists were much in demand for damage assessment. Safety standards for radiation had to be re-examined and compliance tested and confirmed; a work for highly trained specialists who, however, did not speak with one voice. For instance, Professor Shunichi Yamashita of the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at Nagasaki University and a leading scholar on the effects of ionizing radiation gave many public lectures arguing that anxiety-induced stress can be more harmful than moderate exposure to radiation. On the other hand, Akira Sugenoya, a medical doctor involved in radiation research for decades and mayor of the city of Matsumoto, called on the government to evacuate all children from Fukushima Prefecture to protect them against damaging effects of radiation. Both of them are highly reputed experts. Yamashita visited Chernobyl more than a dozen times, Sugenoya practiced there for five years. If they don’t agree with each other, who should be trusted?!

In response to the tardiness of the central government many municipalities installed their own monitoring devices as did newly formed citizens groups and businesses. Farmers bought Geiger tellers to measure radiation levels on their produce, but who could be certain that they knew how to handle the equipment? In some places individual consumers started to have their food measured by newly established companies and laboratories, but who certifies the reliability of the laboratories? It dawned upon many Japanese that having the most advanced technology is no guarantee for its impartial use.

Thus, the nuclear fallout from Fukushima Daiichi, on one hand, and the realization that sophisticated technological equipment requires expert knowledge which, however, is not as impartial as one would wish, on the other, had a very negative effect on trust in science and technology. While
there are no general surveys about trust in technology, after 3/11 the issue of the effects on a society that is supported by science and technology was widely discussed in the media.

**Media**

According to the 2012 *Edelman Trust Barometer*, Trust in media increased in many countries in 2011; in Japan, however, it fell by 12 points. Our own research confirms this. A survey we carried out in the Tohoku and Kanto regions in September 2011 demonstrated that trust in family and people living in the same region increased in the wake of the disaster, whereas trust in media decreased drastically (Hommerich 2012). Why was this so? As the nuclear disaster unfolded, the media did not play an altogether happy role. For one thing, the consistently negative attitude by the press to the government undermined its credibility.

The Japanese rely increasingly on the World Wide Web as a source of information, having one of the highest Internet penetration rates of the world. Trustworthy information about the Fukushima Daiichi accident was and continues to be in high demand, but where to get it is not an easy question to answer. Is there any good reason to have more confidence in Green Peace or some other NGO than in the government? There was a veritable glut of information in the form of tweets, blogs, posts in social networks, etc. which competed with established media and official announcements. The threat of misinformation was as real as that of conspiracy theories, and it became increasingly hard for ordinary people to sort out what to rely on.

The digital society provided an alternative to established media and put pressure on the information policy of the unforthcoming power plant operator, however, the new media environment also made information more diverse and more difficult to handle. During the first hours and days after the earthquake when power lines were cut and many communities were left without radio and TV, battery-powered cell phones and personal computers were effectively used to transmit and receive distress signals and calls for help (Tokuda 2011).
However, in connection with the Fukushima Daiichi accident, a competition developed between official announcements, established media reporting, and the spreading and sharing of information making it increasingly difficult to discern facts and data from personal observation and opinion. It was not without reason that Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano cautioned the public about the dangers of hearsay and unsubstantiated rumours which tend to spread quickly in emergency conditions and can do a lot of harm. The complexity and density of the available information renders the extraction of critical facts in a crisis situation very difficult. For months TV stations have featured broadcasts on the dangers of radioactive contamination, ranging from Becquerel in beef and spinach, internal and external exposure to ionizing radiation and the statistics of radioactive decay to proper measuring procedures; but the crucial question remains unanswered: Who guarantees food safety? The overall social response to the proliferation of information was a dramatic decline of trust in media.

**Where to turn?**

Where does this leave us? As we have seen, several loadbearing pillars of Japanese society were undermined by the 3/11 disaster. Government, science and technology, and the media all suffered severe reduction in trust. Where would people turn instead? The obvious answer would seem to be: to non-state actors.

It is common knowledge that the Kobe earthquake was a boost for Japanese civil society. In many instances where the government failed, NGOs stepped into the breach. The aftermath of 3/11, too, saw an upsurge of citizen activism ranging from voluntary work in the disaster area to the establishment of local pressure groups and the formation of a national movement to collect 10 million signatures against the continued use of nuclear power. Until the end of January 2012, close to one million registered volunteers had visited the disaster area. According to an Asahi Shimbun poll\(^2\) 90% of them were first time-volunteers and 95% want to

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\(^2\) 13 January 2012, morning edition, p. 19
do volunteer work again. A majority of the volunteers are in their 20s and 30s, that is, the generation that shapes the future of Japan. Many new networks of non-profit and non-government organizations came into being, involving trade unions, religious groups, and the scientific and technological community. Their activities, both in terms of physical assistance and psychological support, supplemented government relief operations and were generally well-received in the disaster area. Yet, overall trust in NGOs declined by as much as 20 percentage points (from 51% to 30%).

In sum, then, a most unfortunate outcome of 3/11 must be registered: The Japanese suffered a severe decline in trust across the board. Not just the government – an obvious target of malcontent in bad times – and science and technology – so heavily involved in the disaster – were affected, but also the media and civil society, meaning that the Great East Japan Earthquake has left the country in a deep crisis that continues today.

For social life, trust is essential. Ordinary citizens must be concerned about which relations they can rely on. Misplaced trust is a threat to their own welfare which in case of disaster may be a question of life and death. Trust is needed to coordinate collective efforts in such a way as to guarantee safety, food supply, and comfort. In modern societies this task, especially concerning the weak, has been delegated, to some extent at least, to the government. But the government’s evident uncertainty as to how to deal with the crisis has discredited it in the eyes of many who have at the same time lost confidence in technology as a cure-all remedy. The dilemma is that while trust in government and in technology has been greatly compromised the present predicament cannot be resolved without government and technology.

No alternative is in sight. We cannot but rely on high-tech instruments and on government agencies that verify their reliability. A recent problem at Fukushima Daiichi provides a telling example. On 6 February, Tokyo Electric Power Co. announced that it injected boric acid into reactor no. 2 to prevent an accidental chain reaction after temperatures rose unexpectedly – only to conclude a week later that a faulty thermometer gave false readings. But how do we know? A measure of trust – no pun intended – is
indispensable. Conditions in the high-tech society with a very high degree of division of labour are such that individual citizens cannot rely on their own judgement regarding many things that affect their lives. So far, transfer and acceptance of governmental responsibilities by civil society agents and the ubiquitous information environment do not offer a way out. Many things are too complex for ordinary citizens to assess, while information is both overabundant and insufficient.

The aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake is changing Japan. It is not yet known how the information space opened up in the Internet will affect community relations and relations between citizens and government. Preliminary observations suggest that in the event the general rule holds that more information pluralism brings decline of trust in authority. Civil society has become more active, but this has not induced the Japanese to place more trust in NGOs. A great deal of uncertainty prevails.

Meanwhile the Japanese still trust each other relying on the standards they know, that is, etiquette that is observed even under duress. Japanese etiquette, often said to cement hierarchies and stifle self-realization, is actually social capital that is distributed quite equally. Proper etiquette satisfies the desire to be recognized as a human being and to be connected with others. It affords security of conduct and, most important in crisis situations, it is a very effective means of conflict avoidance, a means to counter the fatal tendency that “man to man is an arrant wolf,” to use Thomas Hobbes words.

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