**Risk Society and the Hybris of Modern Japanese State/Society**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article analyses the risk society discourse in the context of Japanese society and the triple shock of the earthquake, tsunami, and the Fukushima nuclear plants catastrophe. Social risk discourse has found its way to Japan but the reception has been rather selective. The policy examples in this article illustrate the obstacles that exist to promote greater social participation and social reforms in Japan.

**Keywords:** Discourse, Fukushima, Japanese Society, Risk Society, Social Participation, Social Reform, Social Risk Discourse, Triple Shock, Tsunami

**WHEN WE ALL ARE RESPONSIBLE**

For Japan year 2011 was the year when risks became reality. In other words, what happened with the triple shock, earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima nuclear plants, was not something that came as a total surprise. There is well-established pattern of similar size earthquakes and tsunamis in the region and there is plenty of knowledge about risks of nuclear energy and, therefore, we are not dealing with a divine punishment but with a series of tragedies where humans are an active party. The big question is why so little was done to prepare for the kind of disaster that actually struck and what people everywhere in the world can learn from this disaster. Furthermore, the teachings of the crisis are bitter for Japan. What can be done to ensure that Japanese society does not repeat its mistakes?

Prime Minister Noda told to journalists on the 3rd of March, 2012 that “the government as well as operators and scientists were steeped too deeply in the safety myth” and that “rather than blaming any individual person I believe everyone has to share the pain of responsibility and learn this lesson” (afpenglish, 2012). Punishment should fit the crime, but it seems that the political establishment has decided that responsibility is not an issue and there is no need even to investigate. Well, if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. It was just a bad myth. Japanese public is expected to be very forgiving. Now we have a Prime Minister who says that everyone is responsible and there is no use to blame anyone, after already having identified the government, operators and the scientists as the ones who shared the same “safety myth.” If no individual was responsible one may wonder what was the lesson for those who believed in

DOI: 10.4018/ijpphme.2011100102
the “safety myth.” Maybe the real insight is that the Prime Minister was thinking that the Japanese decision-making was and is monolithic and the elite has the authority on earth to forgive sins and exonerate responsibility. “Everyone” here does not really cover the unlucky subjects and for the Prime Minister also those people, many of them real specialists, who opposed the fateful decisions, do not apparently exist. Or maybe, Prime Minister Noda is part of the great indigenous legal tradition starting from Prince Shôtoku Taishi and his Constitution and its 10\(^{th}\) Article: “…The right of others is our wrong, and our right is their wrong. We are not unquestionably sages, nor are they unquestionably fools. Both of us are simply ordinary men. How can anyone lay down a rule by which to distinguish right from wrong? For we are all wise sometimes and foolish at others” (Shôtoku, 604 A.D./1968).

In Japan, it is commonplace that decisions are legitimized by meetings where, in principle, members of the group (workers, residents, etc.) can speak out if they have concerns (nemawashi, prior consultation or literally “root binding” as in bonsai horticulture tradition). This practice usually leads to frequent and long meetings. However, in politics a serious problem of nemawashi practice is that decisions are often made behind the scenes, instead of out in the open. Even if nemawashi is extended to all people (e.g., workers or residents) it does not mean that all participants are in an equal setting during discussions or that they would dare to say what they think. In fact, the public pressure usually forces the less powerful to obey the leaders. One can see clear parallels with Konrad Lorenz’s studies on the Jackdaws, who have a linear hierarchical group structure with higher-ranked birds dominating lower-ranked birds (Lorenz, 1949). When decisions really matter, very often before an open meeting, there is an unofficial meeting where the real powerbrokers make their deals. Therefore there is a good reason to regard nemawashi as an undemocratic process instead of one promoting participation and consensus-seeking. However, the leaders in Japan tend to expect that all the members of the group stand behind the decisions once they have been “commonly accepted”. However, wise leaders in Japan are wise enough to cultivate their own sources of real information as they know very well that they cannot expect to hear real opinions in meetings or larger gatherings where most people are saying just what they think they are expected to say.

Of course, no real specialist could ever have taken at face value any childish “safety myth” about earthquakes, tsunamis and nuclear power in Japan. Most who knew better simply kept quiet in public, because they wanted to keep their jobs or in many cases were directly or indirectly rewarded by power companies. It may be that some politicians lacked the basics to understand the risks and never bothered to find out what the real opinions of specialists were. If that is the case, the some politicians may even today fail to understand how the system has failed and what kind of risk society Japan has become.

**RISK SOCIETY DISCOURSE AND JAPAN**

The word risuku (written in katakana, to indicate its foreign origin) has gradually become more frequently used and in a great variety of situations in Japan. There are many book titles available with the word and the most usual references are related to risk management or risk assessment. Some refer to operational risk and some others to more exotic risks such as risk diet for women. However, when checking books with risuku ron (risk discourse, risk discussion) on their title there are only a handful available. On the contrary, such concepts as kiken (danger), kiki (crisis) and anzen (safety, safe, security) are all much more frequently represented in Japanese book titles. The numbers indicate that risk in the sense of danger and threat is a major issue in contemporary Japanese discourses and that there is still little evidence of risk society discourse becoming part of everyday Japanese parlance.
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