Chapter 16
The Japanese Model of Risk Society: Challenges to Japanese Public Policy

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ABSTRACT
Japan, two years after the triple catastrophe of earthquake, tsunami, and Fukushima nuclear plant crisis, is only slowly wakening to the new reality of a new kind of reflexive relationship with nuclear power and, more generally, the use of modern technology and the social risks linked with modern life. In Japan, the idea that Japan’s very own catastrophe is, instead, a global catastrophe has not really sunk in. Coping with the disasters may be the most urgent and visible task of the government, but the Japanese society can hardly wait to find solutions to many long-term policy choices. This chapter analyzes the Japanese model of risk society, the risk society discourse in Japan, and the challenges of risk society to Japanese public policy.

THE JAPANESE MODEL OF RISK SOCIETY (NIHONGATA RISUKU SHAKAI)

As a consequence of globalisation, all risk societies and regimes (using Ulrich Beck’s term) are an integral part of the world system and include social risks ranging from economic risks to ecological ones. However, perceptions of these risks differ considerably between societies. Japan is usually seen to be a centralised state since the role of national government and especially the ministries has been so central. Furthermore, at first glance it may appear that things are very much under control in Japan and, therefore, there must be some public authority that is able to manage things so effectively. However, compared with most European countries the role of the Japanese state is quite weak when it comes to welfare so-
ciety and many other functions. In short, family and business corporations and increasingly also volunteer organisations take care of functions that the public sector prefers to neglect. Taxation remains at relatively low levels and it is politically very difficult to raise taxes, although most people in Japan know very well that sooner or later there will be increased taxation. While the Japanese state has used its power and financial resources without hesitation in some fields such as public construction it has conserved resources by making people face many social risks, such as most family-related risks and unemployment, the best way that they can. If people fall ill or face other individual problems Japanese society often has surprisingly little room for such values as social solidarity and compassion. On the other hand, there have been social practices that have served to soften the image of Japanese working life practices, such as the strong emphasis on lifelong employment and relatively small wage differences among employees, especially among the elite salarymen (sarariman).

The characteristics of the Japanese model of risk society are that the weak political leadership muddles along with the rest of the societies with globalisation and most sectors of the society need to adjust to the changed realities the best way they can. On the one hand Japanese society has its cultural values emphasising the merits of social harmony and virtues of intersubjective practices. However, conflicts have always existed openly or been managed under the facade of harmony and the new era of even weaker national governance, accelerated by the process of decentralisation (chihô bunken) has imposed individualisation on Japanese people from above (for more on chihô bunken, Shindô, 2002). This individualisation has already encompassed every corner of Japanese society and, for instance, in Yoshimi Kataoka’s chapter in this book there is an analysis on the changed balance between individuals and families in very conservative rural areas in Japan. The stated objectives of decentralisation in Japan are related to enhancing citizens’ participation and democratisation. However, the other part of the programme is to find local solutions to problems ranging from local economy to ageing society and environmental problems. However, the real motive for the national government to push through the change, regardless of which party has been in power, has been to stop the deterioration of the nation’s fiscal state and reduce dependency on subsidies funnelled through the national budget. In the process the poorest regions are at risk of being left without current levels of help from the economically more prosperous regions.

Beck believed that we do not yet live in a risk society, but we also no longer live only within the distribution conflicts of a scarcity society (Beck, 1992, p. 20). For him the contemporary societies still live very much in state of ‘not yet…but no longer’ and naturally such a state of systemic switch or interregnum is by definition characterised by tensions between the old and the new. The current social tensions in Japan are very much in the realm of an old industrial society and often surprisingly traditional society (some less Japanophile people may use the term ‘feudal’) finding ways of distributing wealth. The declining economic fortunes of Japan together with waste, mismanagement and demographic trends are contributing to more socially unequal arrangements that herald the birth of the Japanese model of risk society.

Some Korean authors make references to the use of Confucian traditions to strengthen and legitimise state-led authoritarian development and to explain the contemporary Korean risk society (see e.g. Han, 1998, p. 5-27). Kim Dae Hwan creates a most original analytical tool of dual-risk approach to explain how both the insufficiency of modernisation and modernisation have created risks and dangers for Koreans. Another name for this Korean model of modernisation would be “rush-to” growth or limping modernisation (Kim Dae Hwan, 1998, p. 28-45). For me it appears that the dual-risk approach would also fit particularly
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