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The Social Invisibility of Radiation After Fukushima

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In 2016-2017, I carried out fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Japan with the populations displaced by the Fukushima disaster. In particular, I collaborated as a volunteer with NGOs that have organized recreative activities and health screenings for the nuclear evacuees living in temporary housing facilities in western Japan.¹ I worked mainly with vulnerable groups, namely single mothers with young children, the elderly, and the disabled. For this project, I investigated how the Fukushima evacuees were coping with different kinds of risk. These included not only the risk of radiation, but also economic risk, job insecurity, loss of homeland, identity crisis, state abandonment, and discrimination due to widespread radiation stigma. Consequently, I scrutinized how my collaborators made their choices amongst the many risks they were facing, in response to the “toxic anxiety” (Gusterson 2011: 4) that was released by Fukushima. I carried out more than two hundred structured and semi-

¹ However, my experience of collaborating with Japanese NGOs and volunteering for the victims of 3.11 predates my doctoral fieldwork. Since April 2011 I have worked as an interpreter, translator and museum guide in charity events held in Italy and France for the 3.11 victims. Moreover, since 2013 I have joined as a volunteer three Japanese NGOs which have organized regenerative spring/summer camps for children (aged seven to twelve) living in the most contaminated areas of Fukushima. I spent six months over the past six years volunteering in these camps for Fukushima children. I would suggest that my identity as a volunteer who has engaged in activities for the survivors of 3.11 in the past has helped me to access my doctoral project’s participants from the early stages of my fieldwork in Japan.

structured interviews with the nuclear evacuees, and I attended for a year the Fukushima trials² held in a city of western Japan.

I wrote my doctoral thesis as an ethnographic study on the modes of governance and administration of the politics of risk in the post-Fukushima context, with a particular focus on the survivors' intimate narratives of fear and affection as opposed to the official discourses on safety and risk containment. I investigated how people conceive and manage risk in a post-nuclear disaster environment, where risks are invisible and hazards may not even take effect within the lifespans of those affected, but instead during those of their children (Beck 1992: 27). In fact, in the case of manufactured risk such as nuclear disasters, it remains unclear what the long-term consequences are (Giddens 2000: 46). The real impact of the Fukushima disaster on public health will take decades to unfold and will be difficult to measure due to uncertainty about the extent of the contamination, and to challenges of mapping its bio-accumulation. As a result, in post-nuclear disaster Japan, risk management shifted *away from* the Japanese state and the nuclear industry *to* the affected populations who had to self-determine where to draw the line between safe and unsafe.

In Japan, the disaster has induced grassroots citizen science and activism among local residents, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Such responses have included radiation monitoring, independent laboratories, self-made radiation maps, and participation in demonstrations and public trials. The forms of resistance which emerged from these movements might not look like revolutions, and yet have the potential to collectively gain public attention and move towards concessions and recognitions from the authorities. Such

² These cases have revolved around whether the government and TEPCO, both of whom are responsible for disaster prevention measures, could have foreseen the scale of the tsunami and subsequent triple meltdown in Fukushima. Since 2011, over 12,000 Fukushima survivors have filed 30 cases in different regions against the government and TEPCO. The plaintiffs in this court cases are requesting: the right to evacuate from the contaminated areas where radiation levels are above 1mSv/year; to clarify both TEPCO and the Japanese government's liability for not preventing the nuclear disaster; adequate compensation for losses, and physical and psychological damages; medical security for pregnant women, young children, the elderly and the disabled; regular check-ups of absorbed radiation dose in the population; housing support and employment measures to help the survivors rebuild their livelihoods after the triple disaster. In fact, only a relatively small percentage of those who experienced significant loss from the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear catastrophe in northeastern Japan have received compensation (Feldman 2015: 134).

forms of actions have been defined with different terms as “infrapolitics” (Scott 1990), “hidden resistance” (Scott 2008), “social non-movements” (Bayat 2013), and “informal life politics” (Morris-Suzuki 2014). In particular Kimura (2016: 156), referring to such processes in post-nuclear disaster Japan, uses the terms “invisible politics” to define the actions of citizen scientists which have the potential of improving people’s livelihood although they may not seem explicitly political. My monograph added to this literature and attested how the efforts of the displaced survivors to gain state protection have collided with bureaucratic discourses invested in technical strategies to limit intervention.

In relation to the Chernobyl disaster, Kuchinskaya (2014: 161) points out that public knowledge about risks and protection standards cannot constantly improve if the public visibility of risk depends “on whose voices can be heard and which groups have what kinds of institutional and infrastructural support”. The unequal politics of risk that have emerged also after Fukushima have shown how geopolitical, economic, and local interests were prioritized over the collection of extensive empirical data and scientific analysis. Both Chernobyl and Fukushima have shown the intensely political nature of science, and the social implications of the political and economic containments of a large-scale technological disaster. Chernobyl has demonstrated that absent lifetime studies of victims of nuclear catastrophes leave the public incapable to handle future crisis (Petryna 2013: xxi). Likewise, nowadays also the victims of 3.11 risk to remain in a state of permanent vulnerability.

In my thesis, I documented the resilience of the survivors in their struggles for being heard. My dissertation provides an ethnographic account of how some of the survivors have engendered a reconfiguration of their relationship to state authority and have become food activists, anti-nuclear protesters, and plaintiffs in the Fukushima public trials. I highlight how and why protesting women have often been targeted as ‘emotional subjects’ whose actions were due to a ‘deficient scientific knowledge’, and why such statement has not been contested in the public

discourse, as women's political opinions are still seen as a "private luxury" in Japan (LeBlanc 1999: 70). Throughout my monograph, I explain that protesting women - in an attempt to achieve a form of citizenship which does not deny their embodied experiences - presented themselves as 'angry mothers from Fukushima' and yet, by doing so, they involuntarily contributed to reinforce pre-existing gendered hierarchies.

Most importantly, through the ethnographic material that I analyze in my thesis, I highlight the insidious nature of the safety discourse promulgated by the authorities, which has minimized public concerns over contamination and produced the social invisibility of radiation. Notably, such discourse has worked not always from above, but very often from within civil society in Japan - as concerns about radiation were avoided and silenced particularly by local communities in Fukushima. Nevertheless, despite being denied access to the public sphere and being often silenced by their own communities, concerned individuals have decided to endure in their survival strategies for themselves and future generations. In particular, the survivors who have engaged in the Fukushima trials have resisted such discourses, as rational agents willing to challenge the authorities. The narratives that I collected in my thesis ultimately suggest that what is most needed in post-nuclear disaster Japan is a dialogue between the survivors and the authorities, and joint policy-making to protect the Fukushima evacuees, and future victims of natural and techno-scientific disasters.

This article is based on my doctoral research project. I completed my PhD in Social/Legal Anthropology at University College London in March 2019. I am indebted to the British Arts and Humanities Research Council's (AHRC) scheme 'London Arts and Humanities Partnership' (LAHP), which has fully funded my research. Since May 2019, I have been working as a full-time postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Edinburgh Medical School || USHER Institute || Centre for Biomedicine, Self and Society. Here I am involved in a new research project funded by Wellcome Trust, for which I investigate the possibilities and challenges of using AI technologies and robotics in health and social care. This study melds my interests in risk, technology, ethics, health, and human rights. Finally, I am currently turning my doctoral dissertation into a book for publication, and I would be delighted to receive your comments, critics or suggestions. Please, get in touch also if you are interested in collaborating with me on research projects/panels on risk, technology, ethics, humanitarian assistance, AI and health. Thanks.

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