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*"It's not Japan's demise that the earthquake produced, but rather the possibility of its rebirth."*

# How Catastrophe Heralds a New Japan

by KOJIN KARATANI

I was on the streets of Tokyo when the earthquake struck. The ground shook violently, while buildings swayed around me for a long time. It was beyond anything I had experienced before, and I sensed that something terrible had happened. My first thought was of the Kobe earthquake that killed more than 6,000 people in 1995. Although I did not experience the Kobe earthquake first hand, it hit the region of my hometown where many close relatives lived, and so I headed immediately to the scene of the disaster. I walked the streets where building after building had collapsed into rubble.

Clearly, the scale of the current disaster far surpasses that of the Kobe earthquake. For it also includes the damage caused by the tsunami to coastal regions across hundreds of kilometers as well as the danger of nuclear catastrophe. Yet these are not the only differences. The Kobe earthquake was completely unexpected. Aside from a small number of experts, no one had imagined the possibility of an earthquake there. The recent earthquake, on the other hand, had been anticipated. Earthquakes and tsunamis have struck the Northeastern region of Japan throughout its history, and frequent warnings had been sounded in recent years. Meanwhile, nuclear power had always given rise to strong opposition, criticism, and warnings. Yet the scale of the earthquake went far beyond any prior anticipation. It was not that the scale of such a disaster could not be anticipated, just that people had purposely avoided doing so.

There is another difference. Although the Kobe earthquake occurred after the end of the bubble economy of the 1980s, when economic recession had already taken hold, people at the time had yet to fully recognize the demise of Japan's

high-growth economy. For this reason, the Kobe earthquake initially appeared as a symbol of Japan's economic downfall. Yet this was quickly forgotten as the nation tried to recapture an age when people spoke of "Japan as No. 1." It was after the Kobe earthquake that Japan wholeheartedly adopted neoliberal economic policies with the pretext of reviving the economy.

In contrast, the awareness of economic decline was widespread in Japan prior to the recent earthquake. The shrinking birthrate and the aging of the population left no room for a rosy outlook. Although empty nationalist rhetoric calling for Japan's revival as an economic superpower continues to hold sway in the major media, a different perspective has taken root in people's hearts, one that acknowledges the reality and continuing prospect of low growth and that calls for the formation of a new economy and civil society. In this respect, the recent earthquake does not come as a surprise shock to the economy. Rather, it will only strengthen already existing tendencies, confirming, in a sense, the very issues that were overlooked following the Kobe earthquake.

In the wake of the Kobe disaster I was impressed, first of all, by the relative composure of the elderly people who had lost their homes. Their attitude was that having started out from the burnt-out ruins of World War II, they had only to start over again. Second, large numbers of young volunteers, raised in an age of affluence, gathered from all over Japan to help out, forming communities of mutual aid. Such a phenomenon was not unique to Japan. I have heard of a similar occurrence following the recent Sichuan earthquake in China.

Examining the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and subsequent catastrophes in her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit concludes that "extraordinary communities arise in disaster." It is commonly thought that when order dissipates, a Hobbesian natural state arises in which people behave as wolves toward one another. The reality, however, is that people who regarded one another with fear when living in the social order created by the state form communities of mutual aid amid the chaos following disaster, a spontaneous type of order that differs from that which exists under the state.

It was this type of community that was born in the aftermath of the Kobe earthquake. Yet Japan's particular historical experience also came into play. For the ruins of the earthquake strongly evoked the psychological conditions following World War II, when people came together to reflect upon the war and the history of

modern Japan that led to it. The "paradise" formed in the wake of the disaster, however, was short-lived, and the memory of the war disappeared along with it.

When order was restored following the Kobe earthquake, the dominant tendency was to try to use the disaster as a business opportunity to effect economic revival. Prime Minister Koizumi encouraged neoliberal policies all the more, and he trampled on the postwar pacifist constitution by pushing through the dispatch of Self-Defense forces to Iraq. Yet the end result was continuing economic stagnation and a widening gap between rich and poor. As a result, the Liberal Democratic Party, which had held sway for so long, yielded power to the Democratic Party of Japan. Yet the new administration was unable to embark on a new course.

This was the situation in which the recent earthquake occurred. Once more, the disaster evoked the burnt-out ruins after the war. In addition, the crisis at the Fukushima nuclear power plant cannot help but call forth memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Postwar Japanese have had a strong aversion to nuclear weapons and to nuclear power in general. Needless to say, there was strong opposition to the building of nuclear power plants in Japan. Nonetheless, following the oil shocks of the 1970s, the state affirmed and encouraged the development of nuclear power plants. Early campaigns proclaimed the necessity of nuclear power for economic growth, while in recent years it was claimed that nuclear power could help reduce carbon emissions and therefore benefit the environment. That such claims were a form of criminal deception on the part of industry and government has been made all too clear by recent events.

In the ruins of postwar Japan, people reflected upon the path the country had taken in modern times. Standing against the Western powers, modern Japan strived to achieve the status of a great military power. The shattering of this dream in the nation's defeat led to another goal, to become a great economic power. The ultimate collapse of this ambition has been brought into sharp relief by the recent earthquake. Even without the earthquake, it was fated for destruction. In truth, it is not the Japanese economy alone that is failing. In the early 1970s, global capitalism entered a period of serious recession, and since then it has been unable to overcome the decline in the general rate of profit. Capital has sought a way out of this decline through global financial investment and by extending industrial investment into what had formerly been "third world" regions. The collapse of the former strategy has been exposed by the so-called Lehman shock. Meanwhile, the

accelerated development of countries such as China, India, and Brazil, continues. Yet such accelerated growth cannot last long. It is inevitable that wages will rise and a limit on consumption be reached.

For this reason, global capitalism will no doubt become unsustainable in 20 or 30 years. The end of capitalism, however, is not the end of human life. Even without capitalist economic development or competition, people are able to live. Or rather, it is only then that people will, for the first time, truly be able to live. Of course, the capitalist economy will not simply come to an end. Resisting such an outcome, the great powers will no doubt continue to fight over natural resources and markets. Yet I believe that the Japanese should never again choose such a path. Without the recent earthquake, Japan would no doubt have continued its hollow struggle for great power status, but such a dream is now unthinkable and should be abandoned. It is not Japan's demise that the earthquake has produced, but rather the possibility of its rebirth. It may be that only amid the ruins can people gain the courage to stride down a new path.

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