

What March 11 Means to Me: Nuclear Power and the Sacrificial System 私にとっての3・11 原子力発電と犠牲のシステム

Takahashi Tetsuya

Introduction and Translation by Norma Field, Yuki Miyamoto and Tomomi Yamaguchi

Summary

Takahashi Tetsuya, a philosophy professor at the University of Tokyo and a native of Fukushima Prefecture, has traversed the devastated region numerous times since the March 11 disaster, engaging in various kinds of activism. An introduction by the translators is followed by an English translation of Takahashi's speech at the University of Chicago on March 10, 2012, and a postscript written by Takahashi in May 2014. Takahashi explains "nuclear-power-as-sacrificial-system" via his childhood memories in Fukushima and the People's Tribunal against Nuclear Power Plants.

Keywords

Takahashi Tetsuya, sacrificial system, nuclear power, Fukushima, people's tribunal, uranium mining, Native Americans, Lakota

Introduction by Norma Field, Yuki Miyamoto and Tomomi Yamaguchi

The Fukushima Daiichi Disaster and the Global Nuclear Village

Takahashi Tetsuya delivered his talk at the University of Chicago on March 10, 2012, one year after the East Japan Earthquake and the

outbreak of a major disaster at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The talk was delivered at the symposium, "What 3.11 Means to Me: A Symposium in Honor of Norma Field," to commemorate the career of Norma Field, who was retiring from her position as professor at the University of Chicago. The two-day symposium featured five speakers from Japan who shared their personal experiences and information from scholarly and activist perspectives related to the disaster of March 11, 2011. Takahashi's talk begins with his boyhood memories and anguish over what happened in Fukushima, as a Fukushima native and a Tokyo resident consuming the electricity produced at Fukushima Daiichi. He goes on to discuss a "people's tribunal" organized to pursue the responsibility for the disaster of TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company) and nine individuals in charge at the central government and TEPCO. His focus is on nuclear energy as a "sacrificial system" - a concept elaborated in his book, *The Sacrificial System: Fukushima Okinawa* (Gisei no shisutemu Fukushima Okinawa, Shueisha 2012).



Takahashi Tetsuya with Yuki Miyamoto (left) and Tomomi Yamaguchi (center) at the “What March 11 Means to Me” symposium. Photo by Kathryn Tanaka.

Two years have passed since the symposium. The disaster at Fukushima is ongoing. Radiation concerns persist, and there are still more than 130,000 people who live as refugees from Fukushima.¹ Cleanup workers at the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant struggle in precarious working conditions.² The Fukushima residents’ complaint, which sought prosecutorial investigation with the possibility of indicting those in positions of responsibility in TEPCO, the government, and academic experts, deliberately filed with the Fukushima Prosecutors Office, was summarily turned over to the Tokyo Prosecutors Office, lumped with other cases and dismissed³ just before the announcement of Tokyo’s selection for the 2020 Olympics (an occasion made memorable by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s assurances that the contaminated water situation in Fukushima was “under control,” a claim promptly denied by none other than a senior TEPCO official).⁴ The group narrowed their list and brought their case to the Committee for the Inquest of Prosecution.⁵ In the meanwhile, elections have been won by promoters of nuclear energy, most prominently, the victory of the LDP under Prime Minister Abe in December 2012, and gubernatorial elections in Tokyo and Yamaguchi Prefectures in 2014. In a landscape where no nuclear power plant is in operation as of May 2014, the LDP-led government is

pushing for restarts, beginning with the Sendai Nuclear Power Plant in Kagoshima in August this year.⁶

This past March (2014), one of the co-authors of this Introduction, Tomomi Yamaguchi, visited the University of Oklahoma to give a talk on the anti-nuclear movement in Japan as a part of a lecture series titled “Japan in Disaster,” organized by anthropologist Bridget Love. Discussing the state of antinuclear movements in Tokyo, Yamaguchi mentioned Takahashi Tetsuya’s critique of the nuclear power industry as a “sacrificial system,” a “system in which the benefits accruing to some parties are made possible at the expense of others’ lives (whether as biological existence, health, daily routine, property, dignity, or hope).” Yamaguchi used the concept to explain the structural discrimination that exists between urban Tokyo and Fukushima, a predominantly rural region 160 miles away. Tokyo residents benefited from the plant, while being quite far from it, muting their sense of the dangers or environmental concerns connected with nuclear power.

VIDEO: “Uranium on the Great Plains”

VIDEO: “WE ARE THE LAND: Uranium mining in the Black Hills”

Peter Barker, a historian of science who also works on nuclear power at the University of Oklahoma, was in the audience, and told Yamaguchi that he would like to get further information on the concept, both for himself, and for his graduate student, Ashley McCray. In her dissertation, McCray, who is Lakota, seeks to pursue the ways in which the Lakota have been deprived of their natural resources, including water, by contamination from

uranium mining.⁷ Barker found Takahashi's concept of a "sacrificial system" useful inasmuch as "the Lakota have unwillingly been made part of a similar 'sacrificial system' connecting them to the US nuclear power and weapons complex."⁸ McCray also emailed Yamaguchi to state how important it was for her to make global connections on the issue of nuclear power, and how glad she was to learn about others who felt the same way.



Radioactive Water Sign by Cheyenne River. [Source](#)

VIDEO: "Turkey: Anti-nuclear protest reaches critical in Sinop"

Yamaguchi contacted Takahashi on Barker's and McCray's interest in his work, and he responded by saying how pleased he was to learn of this. He also added that in Japan, people see nuclear power plant sites and urban centers that consume the electricity they generate, but forget about the sacrifice, such as that endured by uranium mining communities, which go beyond national borders.

Thus, Takahashi's claim that nuclear power entails a "sacrificial system" has implications far beyond Japan.⁹ For example, on the issue of nuclear waste, both Japan and the US have been considering Mongolia, though it is most likely that domestic rural regions will end up providing repository sites in the case of Japan.¹⁰ Moreover, Civil Nuclear Pacts with Turkey and the UAE passed in April 2014, with the LDP, Komeito and the DPJ members voting in favor. The bill allows Japan to export its nuclear technology to Turkey and UAE, facilitating further building of nuclear power plants in these countries.¹¹

The Sacrificial System

Takahashi's interest in the notion of sacrifice (*gisei*) was precipitated by his examination of the Yasukuni Shrine, which, since the nineteenth century, has honored the souls of those construed as having died on behalf of the nation.¹² His 2005 monographs, *The Yasukuni Issue* (*Yasukuni mondai*, Chikuma Shobo 2005)¹³ and *State and Sacrifice* (*Kokka to gisei*, Nippon Hoso Shuppan Kyokai 2005), examine the rhetoric and logic of sacrifice through which the state produces and reproduces people who willingly offer their lives for the country.



Anti-TEPCO Action's protest against the

Turkey/UAE-Japan Pact in April 10-11, 2014.
[Source](#)

In the wake of the events of March 11, 2011, Takahashi extends the economic analyses he had begun to incorporate in his studies of the state and Yasukuni to the complex “sacrificial system” exemplified by nuclear power.¹⁴ Investigating the underlying economic factors leading people in economically stricken rural Japanese communities to welcome and work in nuclear power plants, Takahashi reveals that this apparent willingness to embrace nuclear facilities is not the result of their free choice. On this point, Norma Field’s concept of the “dissociation of life from livelihood” (*seikatsu to seimei no kairi*) is illuminating.¹⁵ For those living in such communities, the terms of the “choice”—between *seimei* (life) and *seikatsu* (livelihood)—have been imposed. Field argues that in a situation like that represented by Fukushima, with its host of nuclear plants supplying power to Tokyo, people who are economically vulnerable are compelled to take on the risks posed by radiation exposure to their long-term health (life) in order to gain sustenance (livelihood) for today and tomorrow. But life and livelihood are in fact inseparable: they should never constitute an “either/or” choice. As disgracefully pervasive as it remains in the 21st century, as Field notes, in its starkest forms it is not typically a choice faced by those in economically privileged positions.



Protest against the Turkey-Japan Nuclear Pact in front of the Japanese Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. January 22, 2014.
[Source](#)

Takahashi criticizes this system of sacrifice that is exemplified by a choice between life and livelihood as a violation of the very right to live. As he argued in his analysis of Yasukuni as well, this injustice is institutionalized and thereby extolled as a *necessary* sacrifice.¹⁶ This, in turn, diminishes our ability to discern the cruelty perpetuated by the systemic injustice. The sacrificial system of the nuclear power plant functions to further benefit the secure and the powerful; those who are sacrificed are only “valuable” insofar as they are “expendable” within the sacrificial system.

For this reason, Takahashi emphasizes that his discussion of a “sacrificial system” should not be conflated with other systems that might be interpreted as sacrificial, such as the food chain, in which human existence is maintained through the lives of other beings. The “sacrificial system” refers specifically to a destruction of human rights whose systemic nature depends on ignoring the dangers posed to the “sacrificed.”¹⁷ Since this system allows the beneficiaries—the national government and TEPCO—to keep violating and destroying human rights, claims Takahashi, we must hold them legally accountable.



Nevada Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Site [Source](#)

The People's Tribunal against Nuclear Power Plants

In response to a situation in which state and corporate interests seemed bent on pursuing their agendas with no accountability despite the enormity of the Fukushima disaster, a group of fifteen launched the People's Tribunal against Nuclear Power Plants in February 2012 (hereafter the NPP Tribunal). People's tribunals (to be strictly distinguished from the "People's Court" or *Volksgerechtshof* established by Chancellor Adolf Hitler in 1934) draw their inspiration from Bertrand Russell's response to escalated US bombing of North Vietnam in the 1960s. With Jean-Paul Sartre acting as Executive President, the Russell Tribunal began on May 2, 1967, and ended eight days later, on May 10. This is what Sartre said of the Tribunal's status and aims in his inaugural address: the Tribunal's "legality comes from both its absolute powerlessness and its universality. We are powerless: that is the guarantee of our independence.... Whatever may be our wishes for impartiality and universality, we are very conscious that this does not legitimize our undertaking. What we should really like is that our legitimation would be in retrospect, or *a posteriori*. In fact we do not work for ourselves nor for our own edification, and we do not presume to impose our conclusions like a thunderbolt. In truth, we would wish, with press collaboration, to maintain constant contact between ourselves and masses all over the world who are painfully watching the tragedy in Vietnam. We hope that they will be learning while we learn, that they will watch and understand, and come to their own conclusions."¹⁸ This approach has since inspired numerous examples. In 1991, for example, former US Attorney General William Ramsey Clark convened what came to be known as the Clark Tribunal, impeaching then-U.S. President George H. W. Bush for his

responsibility in undertaking and prosecuting the Gulf War. Prominent examples involving Japan include the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery in 2000¹⁹ and the International People's Tribunal on the Dropping of the Atomic Bombing on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 2006.²⁰



The third session of the NPP Tribunal held in Koriyama, Fukushima. May 20, 2013. [Source](#)

The NPP Tribunal opened in Tokyo on February 25, 2012, followed by sessions in Osaka and Koriyama, before returning to Osaka, then moving on to Hiroshima, Sapporo, Yokkaichi, Kumamoto, and Fukushima, before concluding in Tokyo on July 21, 2013.²¹ The judges for the NPP Tribunal declared that they were "aware of the people's tribunal's having no binding force." They would "act according to [their] conscience" in examining the charges that the Japanese government and TEPCO had been negligent in their failure to alert the public to the dangers of nuclear power plants prior to the accident and to disclose accurate information about radiation after the accident as well as in restarting operations in other power plant sites under these circumstances.²² But the most sobering message emerging from the tribunal is this: "to pass judgment is also to be judged."²³ This must not be read as dramatic rhetoric, but rather as a sincere expression of the judges' determination not only to assign

responsibility to others, but to acknowledge their own role in bringing about the current state of affairs. Although it is necessary to pursue the legal and moral responsibility of the state and TEPCO, we must remain vigilant to the fact that all of us benefitting from the sacrificial system are also complicit with it.

Dreams and Action

Before turning to Takahashi's text, let us pause over the halves marked in his talk. Beginning with a rare expression of attachment to a boyhood spent in Fukushima, he demurs midway, wondering if he may not have dwelt too long on the personal before turning to the public register. It is impossible to imagine a time when humans didn't impute significance to their dreams. Should we see only personal meaning in Takahashi's repeated return to Fukushima in his dreams? It surely bespeaks attachment to the particular sites and textures of his boyhood, but the telling of that attachment sparks a similar impulse in others. In their very concreteness, dreams reveal social formations lost to historical change. The daylight world is only too eager to dismiss any yearning for them as futile, immature, or retrograde.



The tenth session of the NPP Tribunal held in Tokyo, July 20-21, 2013. [Source](#).

It is all too easy to romanticize the past, but it is almost as easy to avoid examining our attachments just to escape the charge of nostalgia. How can we judge the value, understand the meaning of what has been lost if we do not give our hearts and minds to registering our losses? Takahashi was dreaming of Fukushima well before March 11, but now that the nuclear disaster has waved the wand of radiation over the land, that dream world has been lost in a way that can hardly be captured by such expressions as "historical change." And granted that the lost world was different for each dreamer, that it contained suffering and despair for many, radiation contamination has forever changed everyone's relation to touching, to tasting, to breathing—

to being in the world.

And yet, as the cliché truthfully says, life goes on, for now. The access to lived experience, or imagined lived experience afforded by dreaming, can still guide us in the altered present. The sharp sense of loss can yield not only sorrow but just anger, on our own and others' behalf. The fugitive experience of happiness can energize us to action, to seek renewed and extended solidarity that is the only reliable source of solace. Takahashi's dream experiences surely inform and sustain, with subterranean force, his commitment to the discursive labor of exposing the injustices of the sacrificial system so that we as a species might come to live in a way more worthy of our capabilities.

The "Postscript" newly added by Takahashi in April 2014 makes clear the resonance his claim has for those who struggle in various places under the "sacrificial system." This is the context that led Takahashi and the co-authors of this Introduction to publish this piece in English now, so that it can be read, used, and discussed widely, by all of us who live in a world under the global "sacrificial system" of nuclear power.

What Does March 11 Mean to Me?

Takahashi Tetsuya

March 10, 2012

(Translated by Norma Field, Yuki Miyamoto and Tomomi Yamaguchi)

A year ago, on March 11, at 2:46pm, the massive earthquake began. I had never experienced a quake lasting for such a long time in my life. I was in my condominium at the time, and I braced myself for the possibility that the building might collapse. For a brief moment, I even thought I might die. Then, while we were still reeling from the earthquake, the tsunami came. But this I experienced through the TV screen. Enormous seawalls were nothing compared to the power of the tsunami, and the coastal towns of the Pacific in the Tohoku region were swallowed by the waves accompanied by piercing cries. The thought came to me that this must be what is meant by “apocalyptic”—this nightmarish scene—and that the shock that Americans felt on September 11, 2001, might have been something close to this, even though there is a difference between natural and human-made disasters.

But to me—and I would like to emphasize “to me” (as these were my personal, subjective feelings)—the true shock of 3.11 came next: the accident at the nuclear power plant in Fukushima. One after another, Reactors 1, 3 and 4 were convulsed by hydrogen explosions. The “mushroom cloud” emerging from the explosion of Reactor 3 made me suspect a nuclear explosion. The suppression chamber of Reactor 2 exploded as well. As a result, one week after the accident, massive amounts of radioactive materials—770 quadrillion becquerels—were released into the air.

I spent those days shaken to the core. It was a Level 7 accident, of equal magnitude to Chernobyl. And now that far-away horror was

happening in Japan. I am not the kind of person apt to think in national terms, but it is true that at the time, I asked myself what was going to become of this country. It has since been revealed that during the early days of the crisis, the chairman of the governmental Atomic Energy Commission created a model of the worst-case scenario, and according to those projections, the government was seriously considering the possibility of over 35 million people living in a 250 kilometer radius, which includes Tokyo, needing to be evacuated. Because such a scenario could lead the Japanese state to total collapse, it was considered “too terrifying” for disclosure. As a result, the scenario was suppressed, and its existence denied.

My anxiety over what would happen to Fukushima became more pressing with each day. What if Fukushima were to be obliterated and disappear from the map? I was gripped by anxiety. This is because Fukushima was my “*heimat*,” my hometown, where I was born and raised. During my elementary and junior high school years, my father’s work meant that I moved around Fukushima Prefecture, living in towns with populations around 10 to 20 thousand. I graduated from a high school in Fukushima City, and moved to Tokyo when I got into university. So I have memories from all over the prefecture. The town of Tomioka, 20 kilometers away from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, where the Fukushima Daini (Second) Nuclear Power Plant is situated, is the town where I entered elementary school and lived for four years. That was in the early 1960s, and there was no power plant then. The beach, the hill at the back of my house, the forest, the town, the rice paddies and the schoolyard were one huge playground for us children. If I trace back my life, that’s where I always end up. But that town was about to be covered by a thick, radioactive veil. Weren’t Tomioka Township and Fukushima Prefecture about to be killed off? No! How could this be happening?

Seeking to flee from exposure, hundreds of thousands of people became “nuclear power plant refugees.” Among them were many children. Every time they showed up in the media, I couldn’t help seeing myself in their images.

Everybody dreams while he or she is asleep. I don’t know why, even now that I am in my mid-50s, my dreams are almost always of my childhood years. People who had an unhappy childhood may repeat their unhappy experiences in their dreams against their will. But with me, it’s the precious memories that ineluctably draw me back to my childhood self in Fukushima. I return to the scenes of my family, friends, streets and the nature that surrounded me. It has occurred to me over the years that the childhood memories of Fukushima constitute the unconscious foundations of my being. So, if 3.11 has a special meaning for me – I emphasize “for me” – is it not because the accident at the nuclear power plant threatens the unconscious foundations of my very existence? It’s as if something deep inside me had been contaminated and blackened by radiation. Not that radiation is black.

When transportation to Tohoku was restored in April, I could not wait to run to Fukushima. Tomioka Township had been designated an evacuation zone and was off-limits. So I spent most of my time looking around the Yamagiya District of Kawamata Township, Iitate Village, Minami Soma City, and Soma City. Nature’s beauty is abundant there: in both Yamagiya District and Iitate Village, hamlets, cultivated fields, and pastureland dot the narrow spaces between the hillocks of the Abukuma Plateau. Iitate Village, designated one of “Japan’s Most Beautiful Villages,” was known for its distinctive village planning that promoted organic farming and livestock farming. But these areas were seriously contaminated by radiation from the power plant more than 30 kilometers away, and several thousand

residents had to evacuate. “The Tragedy of Iitate Village” became a symbol of the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant accident. (The other day, a TV broadcast showed Mayor Kanno Norio of Iitate Village delivering a lecture during an invited visit to New York.) In Minami Soma City, the southern half of the city became an evacuation zone and therefore off-limits. The center of the town was designated an “indoor evacuation zone,” and despite the clear skies and sunny weather with warm spring sunlight and cherry blossoms in full bloom, there were few people and cars in the downtown area. Walking along the coast from Minami Soma City to Soma City, I saw the cruel traces of the tsunami in what had been residential areas.



Takahashi Tetsuya, at Tomioka Station of JR Joban Line, in May 15, 2013, right after its designation as an evacuation zone was rescinded. Photo provided by Takahashi.

The next time I went to Fukushima it was early May. I visited Ena, a small port town of Iwaki City, on the Pacific coast. I was born and lived there for one year with my parents. Of course, I have no memories from the time. But when I was a child, my mother told me repeatedly, “You were born in Ena,” and thanks to my mother, the name of the town took on “mythical” proportions. The day of my visit was a beautiful day, lit by the soft light of late

spring and the sparkling Pacific. The port, however, was filled with mountains of rubble from the tsunami of March 11. I learned from the villagers who were cleaning it up that the fishery had been devastated by the massive discharge of radioactively contaminated water into the ocean from the Daiichi Power Plant, and they had no idea what they should do. I walked up the street and found a temple where the gravestones had fallen down in the earthquake. There was also a big monument that had toppled over. It had a list of those killed in a catastrophic shipwreck of fishing boats mobilized as patrol boats against the American military toward the end of the Pacific War. I realized anew that I was born only ten years after the ravages of the war that surely had an enormous impact on this small fishing village. Walter Benjamin's words about history as ruins piled upon ruins crossed my mind.



Ena, Iwaki-City, Fukushima in April 2011. [Source](#)

Speaking of temples and graves, in August 2011, during *“obon”*—a major ritual occasion in Japanese Buddhism—I stood before my family grave in a suburb of Fukushima in observation of the 27th anniversary of my father's death. Just touching the tombstone and removing the weeds that had grown around it made me think about radioactive contamination. Was I to

“decontaminate” even this grave where my father, mother and grandparents slept in peace? It was unbearable. I could not help thinking we had done something irreversible to the earth.

I just said we did what was irreversible. But who are “we”? It is certain that I am one of the “we.” I have been speaking about Fukushima as if I were experiencing its agony as one who had been a child there. But I also have been a resident of the Tokyo metropolitan region for almost 40 years, beginning with my entry into college. Both the Fukushima Daiichi and Daini plants belong to TEPCO—Tokyo Electric Power Company. They did not generate a single ampere of electricity for Fukushima Prefecture in the Tohoku Region—they only served the Tokyo Metropolitan area. Structural discrimination exists between Tokyo and Fukushima, the metropolitan region and Tohoku, the center and the periphery. I had known about the nuclear power plant accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. But as a resident of Tokyo, hadn't I imposed the risks of a nuclear accident upon my homeland Fukushima and derived only the benefits? Wasn't I myself party to a project leading to irredeemable consequences?



Takahashi Tetsuya, walking on a prefectural road near Naraha-cho, Fukushima Prefecture in May 15, 2013. On the left are piles of black plastic bags

containing contaminated soil. Because designated storage sites could not accommodate all the bags, they were left on the street. Photo provided by Takahashi.

Inside myself, there is a split between Fukushima and Tokyo. In post-March 11 Japan, there are not a few people who assert that the areas with nuclear power plants had invited their siting and the attendant risks in exchange for economic benefits, such as large amounts of governmental subsidies, grants-in-aid, tax revenue and employment. Accordingly, those regions were not simply victimized. Certainly, there is an element of truth to this view with regard to the Fukushima power plants. We cannot, however, forget that the invitation to site the power plants was based on the presumption of their safety. Those communities believed the government, which promoted nuclear energy as national policy, the power companies, and the scholars and specialists who worked with them when they proclaimed the “absolute safety” of nuclear power plants. Moreover, why did Fukushima and other municipalities with nuclear power plants depend on the economic benefits of nuclear power plants? It was because of the economic disparity that already existed. During the period of rapid economic growth in Japan, many young people entered the urban labor force from Fukushima and other rural regions to support economic growth. All in all, this phenomenon is none other than an aspect of the operations of modernization. Resultant depopulation and a panicked sense of being left behind from development led rural regions such as Fukushima to rely on the benefits of siting nuclear power. This could be considered an underlying cause of the power plant accident. Pursuing this line of thought, I have even begun to have a deep-seated feeling, transcending the level of argument, that not only was I receiving and benefiting from the electricity generated at the Fukushima plants, but that I became in some measure responsible for the tragedy of Fukushima in leaving for

Tokyo in the first place.

What 3.11 means to me. It is far from simple. Residents of the Tokyo metropolitan region have benefited from imposing the risks of nuclear power plants on Fukushima, but they are also clearly victims insofar as they themselves face the threat of radioactive contamination. As I have said, there was actually a worst-case scenario in which 35 million people of the Tokyo metropolitan area could have become “nuclear power plant refugees.” It seems that within me there exists a child of Fukushima and a resident of the Tokyo metropolitan area, victim and perpetrator, complexly intertwined. By the way, I also consider that while the municipal governments of the power plant sites and the people of Fukushima are the principal victims of the accident, they also share in the responsibility for it. Granted that they were “fooled” by the “safety” campaign, we cannot deny that the majority of Fukushima residents failed to think about the risks of nuclear power sufficiently, either minimizing them or remaining indifferent.

Thus far, I may have focused too much on what 3.11 means “to me” personally. Now I will shift and look at the impact on a different, public level, focusing on the issue of responsibility that I just touched on.

On February 25, 2012, The People’s Tribunal against Nuclear Power Plants was convened.²⁴ The defendants were the Tokyo Electricity Power Company (TEPCO) as a corporate entity and the following nine individuals: TEPCO Chairperson Katsumata Tsunehisa; ex-chairperson Shimizu Masataka; ex-president Muto Sakae; ex-prime minister Kan Naoto; ex-cabinet secretary Edano Yukio, who is currently [as of March 2012] Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI); ex-METI minister Kaieda Banri; Chairperson of the Nuclear Safety Commission, Madarame Haruki; Director General of the Nuclear and Industrial

Safety Agency (NISA), Terasaka Nobuaki; and Chairperson of the Japan Atomic Energy Commission (JAEC), Kondo Shunsuke. According to the indictment, these individuals were charged with violating Articles 2, 3, and 4 of the “Law for the Punishment of Environmental Pollution Crimes Relating to Human Health” and “Professional Negligence Resulting in Death or Injury.”

Seven victims from Fukushima Prefecture offered testimonies conveying the extent of the disaster. They were Murata Hiroshi, Masuko Rika, Kameya Sachiko, Muto Ruiko, Shigara Shunji, Ogawara Tatsuko, and Sasaki Keiko. The nuclear disaster had shattered each of their lives, robbed them of their hometowns, and compelled them to live with the constant fear of radiation exposure. Each of their statements reflected, with great dignity, both rich individuality and profound sorrow. The appeals made indisputably clear the criminality and irresponsibility of TEPCO and the central government. Emphasizing the “absolute safety” of nuclear power, they had neglected to take safety measures and prioritized profitability at the expense of safety. Many of the seven witnesses demanded criminal penalties for those in positions of responsibility. Murata Hiroshi pleaded as follows: “Just as the concept of ‘crimes against peace and humanity’ emerged after World War II, we are urging the creation of a new concept designating ‘crimes against the dignity of humanity and nature’ for prosecuting those accountable for this unprecedented crime.”

Though a year has passed since the disaster began, the case of the Fukushima nuclear power incident has not yet seen criminal prosecution. Last June, writer Hirose Takashi and journalist Akashi Shojiro together brought criminal complaints against 32 TEPCO executives and the Chairperson of the Japan Atomic Energy Commission.

It is uncertain, however, whether this will

result in criminal prosecution.²⁵ Will those individuals who bear great responsibility for this disaster go unprosecuted? The head of the prosecution team of the People’s Tribunal, attorney Kawai Hiroyuki, emphasized the abnormality of the situation in his opening statement. That is to say, it is normal procedure for the police and public prosecutors office to launch an investigation when a large corporation has apparently engaged in destructive actions with major social impact. Why were these parties reluctant to move against TEPCO? Was it reluctance to move against a corporation carrying out national policy? Kawai concluded by stating the People’s Tribunal prosecution’s determination to vigorously pursue the responsibility of the accused in order to prevent the restart of Japan’s nuclear power plants and any further disasters.

Since the accused were absent from the Tribunal, the lawyer acting as *amicus curiae* (someone not party to the proceedings who offers information and opinions to assist the court) offered an opening statement purporting to represent all the defendants: “1) Radioactive materials exist in the natural world. Even if the damages described in the indictment had occurred, it would be impossible to trace their cause to the specific radioactive materials released following the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant; 2) radioactive materials emitted into the air constitute ‘*res nullius*’ (property belonging to no one), meaning that those persons claiming to be victims acquired such material of their own volition; 3) accordingly, even if the damages described in the indictment were incurred, they are unrelated to the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.”

I am not making this up; it is no joke. The organizers of the People’s Tribunal are deadly serious and would not think of caricaturing or belittling the defendants’ claims. “Since airborne radioactive materials constitute ‘*res*

nullius,' TEPCO is not accountable for any consequent damage': this is a statement made by none other than TEPCO. Last August (2011), a company running a golf course in Nihonmatsu City, Fukushima Prefecture, applied for a provisional disposition in the Tokyo district court, demanding that TEPCO decontaminate the golf course since high radiation levels after the accident had seriously impacted business. In response, TEPCO actually claimed, "The radioactive material dispersed from the nuclear reactors does not belong to TEPCO. Therefore TEPCO has no responsibility for decontamination."

The Tokyo district court declined the application for provisional disposition. The court's decision apparently does not mention TEPCO's claim concerning "res nullius." But imagine if such reasoning were acceptable! Could Japan be considered a nation governed by the rule of law? As I mentioned earlier, in just the week immediately following the accident, 770 quadrillion becquerels—that's 770 followed by 15 zeros—of radioactive materials were released into the environment. All the harm caused by this accident issues from the threat posed by these radioactive materials. Yet TEPCO disavows all responsibility by claiming that the radioactive materials do not belong to the company. Once again, if such logic were to prevail, corporations would never be accountable for environmental pollution, including the Minamata mercury poisoning case. There, methyl mercury flowing into the sea would be considered "res nullius," and accordingly, Chisso Corporation, which released the mercury, would have no responsibility for whatever happened to the people who consumed the fish and shellfish with bioaccumulated mercury.

It seems clear that TEPCO executives have no sense of responsibility. Two months ago, in January 2012, 42 stockholders proposed to file suit against 60 current and former senior

management, demanding five trillion, five hundred billion yen in damages to the company's value, with the intent that the money be used for compensating the victims of the nuclear accident.²⁶ To this request, TEPCO auditors' response was that "not all senior management could be held responsible." The current government is also protecting TEPCO, and with no one having taken any responsibility, it is aiming to restart the reactors taken off line for routine inspection. The People's Tribunal seeks to puncture this structure of irresponsibility on the part of TEPCO and the government.



The plaintiffs of the stockholders' trial against TEPCO appealing to the public in front of the Tokyo District Court in April 17, 2013. [Source](#).

I participated in the Tribunal as a prosecution witness and was examined by the prosecutors and cross-examined by the amici curiae. Because my book *Sacrificial System: Fukushima and Okinawa*, published in January 2012, had been accepted as evidence, the examination concerned the content of that book. During the cross-examination, the person acting as legal representative of TEPCO and the central government posed several questions, two of which furthered my thoughts, and to which I will now turn.

First, I claimed that it is evident that primary responsibility lies with the constituents of the so-called nuclear village, in other words, TEPCO, the central government, and scholars promoting nuclear power. But I also argued that some responsibility resides in the citizens and local residents who had allowed the nuclear power plant to operate. Then the cross-examiner challenged me by asking whether it was permissible for those who share in the responsibility for a given act to pursue the responsibility of others for that same act.

To this question, I replied that it is necessary that we discern the qualitative and quantitative differences in responsibility, in order to avoid falling into the trap of “penitence by all.”²⁷ In fact, we must draw a clear line between the crime of those who caused the catastrophe by neglecting to take safety measures even as they proclaimed the absolute safety of the plant, and the responsibility of citizens who as consumers of electricity went along with the “safety” propaganda. The responsibility on the part of the former is a legal matter, whereas no one would think to hold the latter legally accountable. If there are two parties, one the deceiver and the other the deceived, we could say that although the deceived might be responsible for having been deceived, his or her responsibility is fundamentally different from that of the deceiver. Once the deceived realizes the deception, he or she has the right to hold the deceiver accountable. After Japan’s defeat in 1945, the Japanese people were unable, on their own, to hold anyone accountable for Japan’s role in the war. This failure led to numerous distortions in post-war Japanese society. If I may analogize 3.11 to the end of the war, we must not repeat this failure to determine the locus of responsibility.



Takahashi testifying at the opening session of the “People’s Tribunal on Nuclear Power,” February 25, 2012. Photo taken by Lee Icheon.

Secondly, I have criticized the nuclear power industry as a sacrificial system. What I mean by “sacrificial system” is a system in which the benefits accruing to some parties are made possible at the expense of others’ lives—whether biological existence, health, daily routine, property, dignity, or hope. The cross-examiner asked whether, in order to maintain communal existence in a nation-state or society, it might be necessary for some people to take on undesirable tasks. In the case of those living in proximity to nuclear power plants, as in Fukushima, the government provides economic benefits, as in the form of subsidies. In other words, this is not a one-sided imposition of sacrifice. Given such compensatory balance, can we not say the “sacrificial system” exhibits a degree of rationality? Moreover, the nuclear policy was endorsed under a system of parliamentary democracy. Why, then, should we abandon nuclear power?

In response to these questions, I argued as follows. Indeed, depending on how one defines “sacrifice,” such systems may be ubiquitous. We humans, for example, consume vegetables and (non-human) animals, meaning that our existence is maintained on the basis of their

“sacrifice.” In this sense, humanity is part of a sacrificial system. What is at issue here, however, is sacrifice that entails serious human rights violations. Given the potential risk of severe accidents and the enforcement of labor conditions that inevitably expose workers to radiation, nuclear power plants threaten and violate fundamental human rights, such as the right to life and the right to the pursuit of happiness. This is why it is appropriate to pursue legal responsibility when a nuclear power plant accident occurs. Even if particular policies and practices are the result of formal democratic procedures, if they violate human rights, then it is only appropriate that criminal charges be made. The policies of Nazi Germany are a case in point.

Economic returns, such as subsidies, can never make up for the violation of human rights. Nor should subsidies be understood as an advance payment or compensation in case of an accident. Residents were told that accidents “could never occur” and it was on this basis that they entered into coexistence with the nuclear plants. It is for this reason that they feel deceived. However grand the subsidy, and however splendid the towns and villages built with it, if they become inhabitable due to a severe accident, then everything will have been lost. Moreover, as happened this time, human rights are violated even in those areas that received little to no financial benefit. Accordingly, we can never justify such a sacrificial system.

Postscript

(Takahashi Tetsuya, May 2014)

More than three years have passed since the start of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. It was in March of 2012, on the first anniversary, that I presented this material at Professor Norma Field’s retirement symposium at the University of Chicago, “What March 11 Means to Me.” Two years have passed since then.

As I suggested at the time, after the nuclear disaster occurred, I began to think that nuclear power should be thought of as a “sacrificial system.” Sad to say, this realization has now grown into a firm conviction. The reason is none other than the following. Having caused a disaster of such proportions, the government of Japan, incapable of bringing the dangerous conditions on site under control, failing even to thoroughly investigate the causes of the disaster, driving over ten thousand people into refugee-like conditions without proper compensation,²⁸ inflicting on children the dread of long-term health consequences from radiation exposure, behaves for all the world as if this had in fact been anticipated—as if the sacrifices had been calculated in the cost of doing business from the beginning—and has chosen to revert to nuclear restarts. That no brakes have been applied to the pronuclear policy despite these sacrifices is surely proof that what we have here is a system of sacrifice.

It was after my presentation in Chicago that the National Diet of Japan Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission announced conclusively that the accident was a “manmade disaster” (July 2012). This notwithstanding, not a single person has taken responsibility to date, not from TEPCO, not from the relevant regulatory agencies. Not a single individual named as the subject of a criminal complaint has been indicted. We have unfortunately been given conclusive demonstration that a “system of irresponsibility”²⁹ prevails.



The National Diet of Japan Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission, July 5, 2012. [Source](#).

As things now stand, nuclear power generation as a sacrificial system will live on and spawn further sacrifices. Yet a system whereby some people profit from the sacrifice of others cannot be legitimated. We must never allow ourselves to forget that the Fukushima disaster entailed, in the worst-case scenario, the evacuation of 35 million people from the metropolitan region.

Takahashi Tetsuya

As a graduate student of philosophy at the University of Tokyo, Takahashi Tetsuya was focused on mainstream phenomenology. Encountering the work of Jacques Derrida, however, provided a powerful challenge that sent him in new directions, focused on the topic of justice. Grappling with the ethical questions posed by the Holocaust spurred his interest in the history of Japanese aggression in World War II. Since the mid 1990s, he has participated vigorously in debates on historical consciousness and directed his attention to the issues presented by the former military comfort women and the legacy of Japanese colonialism. He has been active in challenging state encroachment on children's consciousness through its dissemination of "Notebooks of the Heart" and revision of the Fundamental Law of Education. In recent years, he has taken on the relationship between growing inequality and the unholy convergence of neo-liberalism and

neo-nationalism. His best-selling 2005 book on Yasukuni Shrine made him a public intellectual, and he has responded generously in his writings and lectures to citizens' groups on questions of war responsibility, Article 9, and other pressing issues of the day.

Norma Field is professor emerita in East Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago and an Asia-Pacific Journal associate. Together with Heather Bowen-Struyk, she has been working on *For Dignity, Justice, and Revolution: An Anthology of Japanese Proletarian Literature* (forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press).

Yuki Miyamoto is an associate professor, specializing in ethics, in the Department of Religious Studies at DePaul University. Since publishing her book, *Beyond the Mushroom Cloud: Commemoration, Religion, and Responsibility after Hiroshima* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), she has been working on the Minamata environmental disaster ("[Violence and Atonement in the Postindustrial Age: Minamata Patients, Hongan no Kai, and the Carving of Jizo Statues](#)"), while continuing to work on radiation issues.

Tomomi Yamaguchi is an associate professor of Anthropology at Montana State University. She is a co-author (with Saito Masami and Ogiue Chiki) of *Shakai Undo no Tomadoi: Feminizumu no Ushinawareta Jidai to Kusanone Hoshu Undo. (Social Movements at a Crossroads: Feminism's "lost years" vs. grassroots conservatism)* (Keiso Shobo 2012), and the author of "Xenophobia in Action: Ultrnationalism, hate speech and the Internet in Japan." *Radical History Review*, Issue 117 (Fall 2013): 98-118.

Field, Miyamoto and Yamaguchi, together with Aiko Kojima and Masaki C., are the co-organizers and webmasters of the [Atomic Age project](#).

Related Articles

•Adam Broinowski,. [Fukushima: Life and the Transnationality of Radioactive Contamination](#)

•Norma Field. [The Courts, Japan's 'Military Comfort Women,' and the Conscience of Humanity: The Ruling in VAWW-Net Japan v. NHK](#)

•Shoji Masahiko. Translated and introduced by Tom Gill. [The Rage of Exile: In the Wake of Fukushima.](#)

•Takahashi Tetsuya. [The Emperor Showa standing at ground zero: on the \(re-\)configuration of a national 'memory' of the Japanese people](#)

•Takahashi Tetsuya. Translated by Philip Seaton. [The National Politics of the Yasukuni Shrine.](#)

•Takahashi Tetsuya. [Koreans under assault from the Japanese Right.](#)

•Takahashi Tetsuya. [Yasukuni Shrine at the Heart of Japan's National Debate:](#)

[History, Memory, Denial.](#)

•Takahashi Tetsuya interviewed by Lee Hyo Duk. Translated by Norma Field. [Philosophy as Activism in Neo-Liberal, Neo-Nationalist Japan.](#)

•Tomomi Yamaguchi and Muto Ruiko. Translated by Norma Field. [Muto Ruiko and the Movement of Fukushima Residents to Pursue Criminal Charges against Tepco Executives and Government Officials](#)

Recommended citation: Takahashi Tetsuya, "What March 11 Means to Me: Nuclear Power and the Sacrificial System", The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 12, Issue 19, No. 1, May 12, 2014.

All notes are by the translators.

¹ See the [website](#) of the "NHK Special: The Choice Made By130,000 Refugees." March 8, 2014. Also see Shoji Masahiko, translated and

introduced by Tom Gill: ["The Rage of Exile: In the Wake of Fukushima."](#)

² Hiroko Tabuchi, ["Unskilled and Destitute are Hiring Targets for Fukushima Cleanup"](#) (*The New York Times*, March 16, 2014).

³ See ["Muto Ruiko and the Movement of Fukushima Residents to Pursue Criminal Charges against Tepco Executives and Government Officials"](#) published on this site; see also the movement's [website](#). See also the blog [entry](#) by the plaintiffs in the TEPCO stockholders' lawsuit criticizing across-the-board sloppy reporting that failed to discriminate between the various criminal complaints. Crucially, the Fukushima residents group did not include former prime minister Kan Naoto in its list of subjects for investigation, but rather, focused on individuals in responsible positions and TEPCO as a corporate entity for promoting a "safety campaign" after the accident. Nor did the Hirose-Akashi complaint referred to by Takahashi include Kan. By uniformly naming Kan in their headlines, as if he were the chief target of these complaints, when in fact only one group had included him, the media subtly underscored the unreasonableness of the criminal complaints since it was widely known by then that Kan had become explicitly critical of reliance on nuclear power.

⁴ ["Tepco official denies Abe's claim that nuclear crisis is 'under control'"](#) (*Asahi Shimbun*, September 13, 2013).

⁵ The chances for success through appeal to a Committee for the Inquest of Prosecution are exceedingly slim, 0.98% according to a statement by the Tokushima Prefectural Teachers Union, which is pursuing a case in which the Zaitokukai and other ultranationalist groups and individuals broke into the union office, threatening workers and obstructing business.

⁶ ["'Sendai' saikado ni hantai"](#) (*Shimbun*

Akahata, April 19, 2014).

⁷ For background on Native American communities and radiation poisoning caused by uranium mining, see Jeff Gerritsen “[Uranium Mining Poisons Native Americans](#)” (*Culture Change*, Feb 25, 2009). For information on the uranium mining problem in the Black Hills, South Dakota, see wendydavis, “[The Black Hills and the Lakota: Cursed by Gold and Uranium](#)” (my FDL). In April, 2014, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission permitted and issued a uranium mining operating license in the Black Hills, but later in the month, a federal panel placed a temporarily hold on the license. See Matt Remle, “[U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission Issues Uranium Mining Operating License in the Black Hills.](#)” (*Last Real Indians*), and Carson Walker, “[Federal Panel Issues Temporary Stay on Nuclear License for Proposed Edgemont Uranium Mine.](#)” (*The Republic* via AP, April 30, 2014). “[Clean Up the Mines!](#) and [Defenders of the Black Hills](#) are citizens’ groups working on the issue of uranium mining in the Black Hills. On the recent campaign to clean up the Black Hills, see “[National Campaign Launched to Clean Up ‘America’s Secret Fukushima.’](#)”

⁸ Quoted from Barker’s email to McCray and Yamaguchi, March 31, 2014.

⁹ Also see Adam Broinowski, “[Fukushima: Life and the Transnationality of Radioactive Contamination](#)” on the problem of the transnational “nuclear village,” especially on the question of radiation.

¹⁰ “[Japan’s Nuclear Waste Problem](#)” (*Japan Times*, January 21, 2014).

¹¹ “[Lower house stamps pacts with Turkey, UAE](#)” (*Japan Times*, April 4, 2014). See the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website for the actual pacts [between Turkey and Japan](#), and [between UAE and Japan](#). For citizens’ protest against the pacts, see “[Parliament sitting & rally on 4/15 against the ratification of a](#)

[Japanese nuclear agreement with Turkey and the United Arab Emirates](#)” (The Anti-TEPCO Action) and a [video of the group’s action on April 11, 2014](#), “[Genpatsu yushutsu wa shinryaku da! Kyoko saiketsu yurusanai!](#)” For the reaction from the anti-nuclear movement in Turkey, see “[No Nukes: Anti-Nuclear Activists Condemn Turkey’s Plan to Build Second Atomic Plant](#)” (*International Business Times*, May 6, 2013), “[Nuclear Protest in front of the Consulate General of Japan](#)” (*Harber Monitor*, January 22, 2014), and “[Toruko kara no tegami: genshiryoku kyotei wo hijun shinaide](#)” (*Tanaka Ryusaku Journal*, April 7, 2014).

¹² Takahashi offers a brief overview of the history of Yasukuni: “[t]he forerunner of the Yasukuni shrine was the Tokyo Shokonsha, the Tokyo shrine to the war dead, which was established in 1869, a year after the Meiji Restoration. Its function was, initially, to honour those men of the victorious Restoration forces who had fought against the preceding Tokugawa regime and had given their lives in these battles to establish the new imperial state. ... In 1879, it was renamed Yasukuni shrine.” Takahashi Tetsuya, “Legacies of Empire: The Yasukuni Shrine Controversy” in *Yasukuni, the War Dead, and the Struggle for Japan’s Past*, ed. by John Breen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 109.

¹³ See also Norma Field, *In the Realm of Dying Emperor: Japan at Century’s End* (Vintage 1993), especially chapter II, “Yamaguchi: An Ordinary Woman.”

¹⁴ See “Philosophy as Activism in Neo-liberal, Neo-nationalist Japan” published on this site.

¹⁵ See, for example, “After ‘Peace and Prosperity’: Interview with Norma Field, Professor Emerita, University of Chicago” (“[Heiwa to han’ei no ato de](#), *Asahi Shimbun*, March 1, 2014).

¹⁶ In referring to the concept of “colonialism” in explaining the “sacrificial system,” Takahashi

claims that by analogizing the plight of Fukushima to colonial experiences, he does not intend to gloss over Japan's responsibility for colonization. Rather, he is trying to illuminate Japan's role as a perpetrator in the discussion of "nuclear-power-as-sacrificial-system." For more on Takahashi's thoughts on the sacrificial system and Japan as a colonial empire, see the proceedings of "Responding to the issues of 'Fukushima'" symposium at Tokyo Keizai University ("'Fukushima' no toi ni dou kotaeruka: higashi ajia gendaishi no nakade"), May 19, 2012.

¹⁷ Similarly, Bo Jacobs claims that "radiation makes people invisible." One may extend this insight by suggesting that social "invisibility" begins as soon as people become potential hibakusha by working in nuclear power plants, for example. See Bo Jacobs, "[Radiation Makes People Invisible](#)" at *SimplyInfo*.

¹⁸ From "[Prevent the Crime of Silence: Reports from the sessions of the International War Crimes Tribunal founded by Bertrand Russell](#)." Cited in part in Ukai Satoshi, Tanaka Toshiyuki, and Maeda Akira, "What is the People's Tribunal, Why and What Does It Seek to Judge? The Characteristics and Mission of This Tribunal" ([Minshu hotei to wa nan de ari, naze, nani o sabaku no ka](#)).

¹⁹ On the "Women's Tribunal," see [here](#). For videos of the tribunal, see the "[Fight for Justice](#)" website. For related articles on this site addressing NHK's handling of the tribunal, see [Field](#) and [Penney](#).

²⁰ For background and indictment, see [here](#).

²¹ See [Genpatsu Minshu Hotei](#) for the names of participants (including judges, prosecutors, and attorneys), the list of defendants, and relevant documents. Many of the "defendants" of the NPP Tribunal are also candidates for indictment in the several attempts made to seek assignment of criminal responsibility through official legal processes. Muto Ruiko,

one of the petitioners of the NPP Tribunal, is the leader of one such group. See "[Muto Ruiko and the Movement of Fukushima Residents to Pursue Criminal Charges](#)."

²² The Tribunal also [urged](#) the WHO, ILO, UNESCO, and IAEA to take responsibility in their various domains to protect workers and children from radiation harm, to establish standards according to the precautionary principle, to provide medical assistance, and to acknowledge that there can be no such thing as the peaceful use of nuclear energy and to strive for the elimination of nuclear weapons and nuclear power.

²³ See "[What is the People's Tribunal, Why and What Does It Seek to Judge?](#)"

²⁴ See [here](#) for the videos of the first session of the tribunal.

²⁵ In fact, this complaint, like the Fukushima residents' complaint referred to in the Introduction, was dismissed by the Tokyo Prosecutors Office. See note 4 above.

²⁶ See [the official blog by the plaintiffs](#) for information on the lawsuit against TEPCO by the company's stockholders. According to a press release by 42 stockholders on March 5, 2012, the final number of the accused went down from 60 to 27. See the video [here](#).

²⁷ As Takahashi will elaborate, the reference is to the first postwar prime minister Prince Higashikuni Naruhiko (1887-1990)'s proclamation of "one billion all penitent," sometimes referred to as a "national confession of guilt," wherein there was no distinction between the responsibility of those leaders who took the nation down the path of a devastating war and those who were compelled to follow.

²⁸ See Martin Fackler, "[Forced to Flee Radiation, Fearful Japanese Villagers are Reluctant to Return](#)" (*The New York Times*, April 27, 2014) and "[Survey: Half of Fukushima](#)

Evacuee Households Split Up; Distress Rife in Families" (*The Asahi Shimbun*, April 29, 2014) for the continuing struggles of the evacuees.

²⁹ This is political theorist Maruyama Masao's famous description of the prewar imperial system. See his *Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics* (1963).