Neoliberal Values and Traditional Gender Roles: The Construction of Resilience after 3.11 Japan

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Abstract:

Mire Koikari's book analyzes cultural production in Japan after the disaster that took place in March 2011. The book proposes a critical look at values, discourses, and practices in constructing a culture of resilience in Japan. Far from being an impartial and uniform practice, Koikari argues that the new impetus for the politics of resilience has also deepened neoliberal values and traditional gender roles.

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German Abstract:

Das Buch von Mire Koikari analysiert die kulturelle Produktion in Japan nach der Katastrophe vom März 2011 und wirft einen kritischen Blick auf die Werte, Diskurse und Praktiken, die der Aufbau einer Kultur der Resilienz in Japan hervorgebracht hat. Koikari argumentiert, dass die neuen Impulse für eine Politik der Resilienz weit davon entfernt sind, eine unparteiische und einheitliche Praxis zu sein, sondern betont vor allem, dass neoliberale Werte und traditionelle Geschlechterrollen starken Zuspruch erfahren hätten.

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During the Coronavirus pandemic, the term resilience became a buzzword as the global crisis has naturally brought about the need to know how to recover after a major disaster. In *Gender, Culture, and Disaster in Post-3.11 Japan*, Mire Koikari engages with resilience as a concept by asking questions such as: What are the values behind building a resilient society?

Koikari's study explores how Japan's March 2011 triple catastrophe (earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident) resulted in social transformation by analyzing the cultural production that emerged in post-disaster Japan. Throughout the book, Koikari focuses on practices and discourses of several classes of actors, such as politicians, bureaucrats, businesspeople, soldiers, athletes, myriad disaster experts, and scholars. Furthermore, the large number of sources used by the author is impressive: policy documents, *mangas*, videos, workshops, history records, scholarly publications, announcements, civil handbooks, posters, juvenile literature, songs, school texts, female magazines, films, and others. As evidenced by the variety of her sources, Koikari argues that the culture of resilience is everywhere and reaches everyone, and aims to transform society to be ready for disaster. However, according to Koikari, it also reinforces traditional gender roles, increases militarism in society, and spreads neoliberal values as self-responsibility or self-care.

The book is structured into five chapters and ends with a brief conclusion. In the first chapter, which functions as the introduction, Koikari introduces the three ideas that run through the whole book as a common thread. First, she argues that the 3.11 disaster produced a massive and complex cultural production seeking national resilience. Second, these cultural endeavors boost the diffusion of specific values and practices associated with reinforcing traditional gender roles

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in Japanese society. Third, Koikari proposes that the promotion of resilience culture should be understood as part of worldwide policy and as a result of local-global connections in each context.

In chapters two and three, Koikari deals with gender and the effect of resilience policies for both men and women. Koikari shows that recovery politics placed men at the top of the social hierarchy and held them responsible for leading the recovery process. Koikari argues that disaster policies and masculinity became intertwined with society's moral and economic recovery. Thus, this presented an opportunity to exalt masculinity and virility for men which went hand in hand with the country's reconstruction. In contrast, women were marginalized and relegated to performing traditional gender roles of homemaker and family caretaker. In the third chapter, the author shows how extensive the disaster policy has become as it sought to affect most aspects of women's daily lives. For example, lifestyle magazines of the time instruct women how to be ready for disasters, or mothers are taught how to integrate disaster preparedness into their household routines.

Children and youth are the focus of the fourth chapter. The effects of resilience politics on this group are perhaps the most surprising because they promoted broad educational measurements and distribution of leisure material for children. The author points out that "children constitute a concentrated site of resilience politics as they bear the nation's future" (p. 75). A new vision of education, the reinforcement of moral education, the increased relation between military and youth, and the politicization of juvenile culture are features of these politics. Finally, in the fifth chapter, Koikari points out how the history of the Hula Girls dancers of the Spa Resort Hawaiians, who became a symbol of resilience after 3.11., was turned into a story of successful resilience enterprise. However, following the Resort's history, Koikari exposes hidden records that reveal the dark underbelly of the successful business venture: labor exploitation, imperial connections, and discrimination.

The book has several strengths; for instance, it emphasizes the role of gender in the recovery from disasters. In Japan, the recovery places men in charge of the nation's reconstruction and women in a secondary position that reinforces traditional gender roles and values. In addition, Koikari demonstrates how government resilience policies, far from being comprehensive, are contradictory and do not necessarily have coherence among practices and discourses. Also, in

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a field where policies are evaluated based on results — more or fewer victims, a decrease of economic losses, or elaboration of plans and protocols — bringing back the cultural implications of resilience is significant. By turning the spotlight on the diffusion of this disaster culture into everyday life, Koikari invites reflection and questioning of a global practice usually accepted as positive and imminent. She highlights the mechanisms in which it operates, the values it fosters, and the interests behind a supposedly depoliticized approach to disaster.

Although the book focuses on practices and discourses of a variety of cultural actors, it would have been fruitful to include interviews with public officials, businesses leaders, or laypeople. For example, an interesting question would have been if women leaders involved in disaster politics believe that women's roles in disaster risk-reduction reinforce traditional gender roles, or if they consider women's actions to have subverted a masculine sphere? Another question left unanswered by the book is how Japanese society has responded to those practices and discourses imposed from above by academics, politicians, businesspeople, or disaster experts. What was the response of the population to this comprehensive policy? How were discourses and practices aimed at fostering resilience accepted, transformed, or resisted?

The book is recommended for those interested in exploring the connection of gender and disasters, as well as nationalism in Asia and the Pacific. Even readers unfamiliar with the Japanese context, as in my case, can follow the author's argument as her use of various examples allows readers to comprehend the full scope of social transformation that emerged in post-disaster Japan. As policies are often accepted as positive and neutral and overwhelmingly focused on quantifications, this book has shown that it is necessary to rethink our understanding of resilience in the context of politics and policies. Far from being neutral, resilience policies can result in the transformation of attitudes and mindsets of the population, as Koikari's insightful book shows for the Japanese case, and requires further analysis and discussion of what values and interests are fostered to build a resilient society.