

Letter to the Editor:

Disasters from the Perspective of Societal Transformation Mechanisms

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1. Introduction

Japan is no stranger to disasters, with earthquakes, torrential rains, floods, and other disasters occurring in various parts of the country every year. One of the things we have learned (and keep learning) from these disasters is that they are not only catastrophic but can be triggers for social transformations that might never be achieved otherwise. When a disaster is recognized as a unit-wide disaster, it can lead to societal transformation throughout the unit. For the Covid-19 pandemic, the unit can be defined as the entire world and humanity. For this reason, it is especially worth discussing how a disaster can trigger social transformation in the here and now.

In this paper, the authors focus not on the impact of Covid-19 as a medical issue, but on the secondary impact from the perspective of mechanisms of societal transformation. This allows us to discuss Covid-19 based on knowledge of past disasters.

2. Mechanisms of Societal Transformation

When we think about social transformation, we tend to focus on desirable futures referring to technological feasibility. No matter how highly developed the technology is, societal transformation will not occur unless it is actually used. One of the biggest obstacles is that our future society will not be a new society created from nothing, but a society that grows from our current society.

Therefore, the first challenge in real social transformation is to alter the mindsets of people, to unchain them from the inertia of the already familiar current society. They need to redefine their way of living and be empowered to break the chains that lock them to current social systems. Once they find a new path as individuals unlocked from current practices, they can find new creativity and release it to generate a new society. Individual creativities in a certain direction can converge into co-creativity to form sustainable intersubjectivity, a basic relationship bringing structure to society. The social creativity thus generated grows into a large stream based on intersubjectivity. This dynamic mechanism is observed when societal transformation occurs.

3. Disasters from the Perspective of Societal Transformation Mechanisms

How do disasters affect each step of the societal transformation mechanism described above? Major effects are listed below.

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a. Raising Issues Shaping Views of Society and Life

Disasters harshly reveal social issues that are hidden in normal times. Many of the social phenomena highlighted by disasters are just extreme versions of phenomena that were latent in society before the disaster. Those with precarious employment may become unemployed, and those who were shuffling around in temporary accommodations may become homeless. A company that was originally just getting by reaches a business impasse, and pre-existing domestic violence becomes even more intense. Disasters reveal the competence of (or lack thereof) politicians and scrape away the thin veneer of civility. They also enable us to recognize together the necessity and context of societal transformation. Needless to say, life-threatening disasters force people to reflect on their own lives, as few people deeply consider life and death in daily routines. This allows people to reconsider their values and mindset.

b. Loosening Current Chains

Self-reflection presents not only an opportunity to change the mindset of individuals, but the chance to disconnect from the current social system. People tend to focus on their role in the social system in daily life, but in times of disaster where life and death are at stake, individuals locked to the system will become disconnected, and may become more aware of their existence and life choices. Covid-19, which restricts social interactions and requires extreme social distancing, should be especially effective at weakening current chains.

c. Simultaneous Movement for Societal Transformation

As described in Section 2, our future society will be built over our current society. This means that social transformation will require not only that members of society share the same direction and social transformation motivational movement, but also move simultaneously. If the members of society eventually share the movement, but the movement is not synchronized, not only will the movement suffer from weak societal impact, but it will be slowed by the inertia of current society. This may be in response to similar movements that have risen at other times, and the movements will counteract each other. A disaster, to the extent that it is recognized, can spark the synchronization of social transformation movements. This is why a disaster recognized as a unit-wide disaster leads to societal transformation of the entire unit.

4. Examples Observed in Japan

a. Spread of Telecommuting

The most basic example of social transformation observed in Japan would be the spread of telecommuting. The hard and soft technology and infrastructure have been in place for decades. In recent years, due to a shortage of workers, the government has encouraged companies to welcome a variety of workers through the introduction of telecommute to allow a flexible working style. But this approach faced slow adoption, as the government's efforts were superficial and companies were reluctant to change.

Under the Covid-19 state of emergency in Tokyo, many people still commute on crowded trains and the government tolerates it, but telecommuting is slowly becoming a more popular way to reduce the risk of corporate activities. This is a prime example of how rational social change was stymied by the inertia of existing corporate habits, even though it was technically possible decades ago and the infrastructure was already in place.

b. Decentralized Systems

The necessity of societal transformation from an overwhelmingly centralized system to a distributed system has been highlighted again, although it has been suggested regularly for many decades, since the post-bubble period of the 1990's. The newer concept of an open & sparse social

system contrasts with the current close & dense system. This newer concept is gradually being accepted as Covid-19 hits those close & dense major cities.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, the author focused on relationships among individuals, although similar mechanisms and impacts can also be observed among organizations. Covid-19 is a rare disaster where individuals and organizations globally share simultaneous life-threatening conditions, and presents a rare opportunity for global societal transformation (Karabag, 2020).

References

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