

Rieko Kage, “Disaster Recovery in Postwar Japan”

Overview

This presentation will discuss some of the recent theories regarding post-disaster recovery, drawing upon studies of past disasters in Japan. There exists a growing body of work on the factors that drive successful post-disaster reconstruction, many of which draw on cases from Japan, such as the Great Kanto Earthquake, the reconstruction of Japan from the destructions of World War II, and the Kobe Earthquake. Some of the factors that scholars have identified to be important in driving successful post-disaster recovery include: availability of financial resources; a coherent and autonomous state structure; and a vibrant civil society. My presentation will discuss each of these factors and draw on examples from Japanese history.

What is Reconstruction?

Reconstruction can be subjective or objective. While the subjective recovery of survivors is no doubt important, this presentation focuses on the determinants of post-disaster reconstruction in the objective sense. Even here, there is considerable debate over what exactly this might mean. Indeed, scholars have measured post-disaster reconstruction in a variety of different ways, including population, housing, and other aspects of the social infrastructure. There is also a debate over whether reconstruction might mean a return to pre-disaster levels or pre-disaster trajectories. I won't go into this debate in much detail, and in this talk I will focus on the physical aspects of a society's reconstruction.

Determinants of Successful Post-Disaster Reconstruction

It has been known that some societies or regions can rebuild more quickly than others, even when they have incurred similar levels of damage. Why might this be?

Scholars have pointed to several different hypotheses. First, the economic hypothesis suggests that, holding levels of damage constant, societies or regions that have higher absolute levels of economic resources at the end of war should recover more quickly than those with less (Fortna 2004; Doyle and Sambanis 2006). For instance, the reconstruction of Western European countries is often attributed to the Marshall Plan, which assumes that the inflow of financial resources allowed for the rapid rebuilding of war-torn countries. Economic resources may come from indigenous or, increasingly, also from international sources, such as foreign governments, international organizations (e.g. the World Bank), or NGOs.

Second, the state-centric hypothesis suggests that the presence of a cohesive and autonomous state leads to more rapid and efficient reconstruction (e.g. Johnson 1982). The successful postwar reconstruction of Japan is often attributed to the presence of a strong state that was able to formulate and to implement policies towards reconstruction in a coherent manner.

A third perspective points to the importance of social ties and a vibrant civil society as an important precondition for successful postwar reconstruction. This view stresses that reconstruction requires coordination among many societal actors, whether in the identification of needs, the actual implementation of reconstruction, or monitoring. Such coordination is greatly facilitated by the existence of strong social ties, which facilitate the flow of information among different societal actors. This argument is a relatively recent argument and there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that neighborhoods that were endowed with strong social ties were able to recover more quickly, whether in the wake of the Great Kanto Earthquake, the damages of World War II, or the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. In my own research, I used data on postal mail and found that prefectures that tended to send more letter mail per population and which more endowed with more financial resources tended to recover more quickly from the damages of war, other things being equal. Postal mail is a useful measure of the density of social ties, especially during the early postwar. Interestingly, prefectures such as Tokyo and Kyoto tended to send large amounts of mail per population, but so did prefectures such as Wakayama, Yamaguchi, Hiroshima, and Ishikawa.

It is important to note that studies have also found stronger social ties to accelerate *subjective* recovery as well. A group of scholars including Shigeo Tatsuki of Doshisha University have been tracking the survivors of the Kobe Earthquake, conducting periodic surveys, and they find that those who are embedded within more extensive social ties tend to have recovered better psychologically from the effects of war, other things being equal.

Of course, this is not to suggest that the availability of financial resources or the presence of a coherent and autonomous state are not important for the task of reconstruction. Reconstruction is expensive, especially in the wake of major disasters such as 3.11. But there is also growing evidence that financial resources by themselves are not sufficient. For instance, there is a study that shows that countries that received more aid from the Marshall Plan did not necessarily recover more quickly from the devastations of World War II than countries that received less aid. A study of the thirty city, towns, and villages that were affected by the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake has also found that aid had little relationship between various measures of recovery,

such as job growth or manufacturing output. My own research also finds that prefectures with higher levels of per-capita income did not necessarily recover more quickly in terms of jobs, number of schools, number of hospitals, or number of books owned by libraries; neither did prefectures with higher budgetary expenditures per capita. Financial resources are no doubt necessarily (I would like to underline this), but it is not the only factor that drives successful reconstruction.

Similarly, the fact that strong social networks facilitate reconstruction also does not suggest that a well-functioning state does not play a major role in facilitating successful reconstruction. As Robert Putnam argues, a strong society strengthens the state and allows it to function better.

A debate remains as to how we might measure the strength of social ties. I mentioned earlier that in my own work on postwar reconstruction in Japan, I used measures for letter mail sent per capita. This is clearly no longer a useful proxy for the density of social networks in present-day societies. Other scholars have used other figures; for instance, Daniel Aldrich uses the number of NPO corporations per capita as a measure of the strength of social networks after the Kobe Earthquake, and this might be a useful measure for urban areas such as Kobe. But for areas such as Tohoku, which is largely rural, other measures may be necessary.

How to conceptualize and to measure the strength of social ties is a particularly important one, because it hinges on the question of what can be done in regions which do not have dense social networks in the first place. Are those regions or areas doomed, or is there any way that social ties can be strengthened from the outside? These are difficult questions to address if we are not sure how to conceptualize and to measure social ties in the first place.

Some scholars have suggested that the experience of disasters itself often serves to strengthen social ties, and that more severe the disaster, the stronger the social ties become after disasters. The evidence on this point is still mixed. In my own research, I found that areas that experienced higher levels of damage in Japan during World War II did not necessarily see a greater strengthening of social ties after the war. Similarly, scholars have found that social ties did not become strengthened among survivors of Hurricane Hugo in the US South in 1989; also, social ties did not become stronger in New York in the wake of the 9.11 terrorist attack. On the other hand, scholars have argued that social ties did become stronger in the wake of the Kobe Earthquake; scholars recently find that experiencing atrocities in civil war, such as in Sierra Leone or Uganda, leads to a strengthening of social ties. The effect of disasters on the social ties may depend on the type of disaster, and how disasters themselves may

affect the strength of social ties is an important question that deserves further research.