

Fukushima: The Unremitting Disaster

An Interview with Paul Jobin, sociologist

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Paul Jobin, who has been monitoring workers at the Fukushima nuclear plant, provides an analysis of the Japanese government's denial of the health implications for these workers and, more broadly, the long-term effects of the disaster. This censorship is, however, being challenged by the social mobilization that has followed, particularly on the Internet.

Paul Jobin is an assistant professor at the Université Paris Diderot and also leads the Taiwan branch of the French Center for the Study of Contemporary China (*Centre d'Études Françaises sur la Chine contemporaine*). He has written *Maladies industrielles et renouveau syndical au Japon* [Industrial Sicknesses and the Revival of Japanese Unions] (Editions EHESS, 2006) et co-edited *Santé au travail, Approches critiques* [Health in the Workplace, Critical Assessments] (La Découverte, 2012). Since the 2011 disaster, he has pursued a research started 10 years ago with the workers of the nuclear plant of Fukushima Daiichi, looking specifically at the social mobilizations that take to task the government for its denial of possible industrial sicknesses there.

Books and Ideas: What is the current assessment of the situation in Fukushima?

Paul Jobin: On 16 December last year, the Japanese government issued a statement saying that the disaster was over, and that the site was under control because the reactors had cooled down.

However, when I questioned the workers who were still at the site, the situation was clearly nowhere near stable or under control. As far as the consequences of the disaster are concerned, for the moment we cannot talk in terms of the consequences that contamination from caesium or other radionuclides might have for human health. In fact, it is still a little too early for exposure to ionizing radiation to have an impact on people's health. Unfortunately that will probably come later on. An investigation system has been set up at the University of Fukushima, but it is highly disputed by a large number of civil associations and citizens who believe that the government is using them as guinea pigs, rather like what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, without showing any real concern for their safety. One thing that is causing the most controversy is the exposure limit that the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare is about to establish as acceptable: 20 millisieverts a year as opposed to 1 millisievert a year during normal periods. Some government experts consider that there is no danger up to 100 millisieverts per year, even for children.

Books and Ideas: Is civil society responding to this?

Paul Jobin: At the end of April, one of those experts, Professor Kosako, was in tears as he announced his resignation on television. This had a very significant impact, not only in the nuclear community but also among the general population, including supporters of nuclear energy who had, up to then, been in a state of terrified apathy. They were saying: if even he is having this reaction and these concerns, if even he is refusing to expose children to such levels, then something has to be done.

It has been said abroad that the Japanese were passive or naive about the information they were being given. This is not true; television viewers and civil society expressed their discontent with the information provided by the mainstream media, particularly the national news channel. There has been widespread use of the Internet, which marks a major difference with Chernobyl: not only chat forums but also forums containing highly specific information that maps dosimetry readings taken by ordinary citizens using dosimeters, or else by academics working independently of the government and the Nuclear Safety Commission, and all that information is

made available through blogs. It is hard for individuals who are unfamiliar with the issue of radioprotection to find their way around; however, we are also seeing the opposite—ordinary people who are becoming radioprotection specialists. We are seeing mothers who previously had no awareness or interest in the matter, become popular experts. This, in turn, has pushed the media to take responsibility and remain objective as regards government statements.

Books and Ideas: Has the government decided to move away from nuclear energy?

Paul Jobin: The ambivalence shown by the Japanese government towards phasing out nuclear power stems from the fact that what is known as the nuclear village—the Japanese nuclear lobby—is still powerful: the monster is not yet dead, and it continues to rear its head in a number of different ways. I believe that its power has diminished within the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, which continues to house the Nuclear Safety Commission. There are plans to reform this authority, but for the time being it is still under the supervision of the Ministry of Economy. This has created an incestuous relationship between nuclear industrialists, the Nuclear Safety Commission and the Ministry of Economy, but I believe that within the Ministry there are increasing numbers of economists who are seeing the cost of the disaster and of nuclear energy, even without disasters, in terms of dismantling power plants and managing spent fuel rods and radioactive waste—rather like in France recently, when the report issued by the Court of Auditors made the economic cost of nuclear power a reality. Up to then it was only Greenpeace making those kinds of anti-nuclear associations. Now, when it is the Court of Auditors, people are saying, “There must be some truth in it.” I think there was a similar debate in Japan, although even more dramatic given the situation. It is true that no clear statements on this have been issued yet. Such was the case with Naoto Kan [Prime Minister of Japan from June 4 2010 to August 26 2011], and I believe that is why he was removed from power. Since the end of August, the situation has continued to develop and for the moment it is difficult to see what kind of resistance the nuclear lobby will show.

Books and Ideas: Have we fully understood the risk of nuclear power since Fukushima?

Paul Jobin: In terms of safety, we have a major blind spot when it comes to the nuclear risk. We can see evidence of this in an interview I did with Olivier Isnard, a specialist in nuclear crisis management, at the French Institute for Radiological Protection and Nuclear Safety, who was sent to the Japanese ambassador on 12th March in order to advise the French ambassador in Japan on how to manage the crisis. I questioned him on the radioprotection standards that had been raised from 20 millisieverts to 250 millisieverts a year for workers. I consider that level to be very dangerous for the workers and so I asked his opinion. He said that 250 millisieverts was nothing. Because by that point, the challenge was to save the pools containing the spent fuel rods, for if they melted, it would have meant a dose rate so high that nobody would have been able to approach the site. The dose would no longer be calculated in millisieverts but at 100 to 1000 sieverts an hour. He told me that if anyone were sent to the site they would be burned to a crisp in seconds. I asked him what the consequences would be if those pools melted, if we lost the whole plant—then what would happen? He replied that this is the kind of risk that does not bear thinking about. That kind of thing is rarely rationalized or explained clearly, and the scenario calls to mind the words of Nesterenko, the nuclear physicist who was given direct responsibility for managing the Chernobyl disaster. He said that if the liquidators had not been sacrificed then the whole of Western Europe would have been affected, becoming almost uninhabitable. The problem is that this is never said, because even they don't want to think about it! It would mean opening the door onto our worst nightmares, much as Kurosawa portrayed in his film *Dreams*...

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