

**Book Review: Sternsdorff-Cisterna, N. (2018). Food Safety after Fukushima: Scientific Citizenship and the Politics of Risk. University of Hawaii Press. 190 pages, \$62.00, cloth.**

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Almost eight years have passed since the Fukushima Dai'ichi Nuclear Power Plant accident that caused not only immediate damage to neighboring communities, leading to massive evacuation and disruption of human lives, but also became a significant burden to the Japanese economy in terms of the cost of cleanup and financial aid to affected citizens. The accident spawned discussion about the limits of Japanese democracy and the capacity of civil society members to influence the policy-making process. The accident also attracted the attention of various researchers and academics, resulting in the voluminous collection of literature related to the social, economic, political, and medical consequences of the nuclear meltdown.

This book by Nicolas Sternsdorff-Cisterna adds to this collection as an anthropological perspective on food risk and food safety and proposes the concept of “scientific citizenship”. The concept explains how the relationship between citizens and the state has been transformed since the nuclear meltdown due to citizens’ active self-education process and the acquisition of scientific literacy.

The author starts with the concept of “scientific citizenship,” drawing on the ideas of Aihwa Ong (2006) of active, interventionist aspects of neoliberalism. Sternsdorff-Cisterna argues that life-threatening events can reconfigure the relationship between governing and the governed, encouraging citizens to be proactive and acquire scientific expertise that can help them critically engage with expert advice and go against state decisions. The author discusses Ulrich Beck’s (1992) ideas of the “risk society” and individualization of risks that many authors connect with neoliberalism forces and their emphasis on self-responsibility. By deconstructing Japanese environmental movement history that has been shaped by numerous accidents and diseases

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caused by environmental pollution but also vibrant environmental movements that have been working against the state, the author argues that contemporary Japanese citizens are engaged in a different, transformed type of confrontation and politics that “moves away from the streets of demonstrations . . . into smaller spaces” populated by local groups of active, flexible and knowledgeable people.

The author also elegantly incorporates and summarizes the existing research on Japanese gender studies, showing how the concept of “scientific citizenship” is realized within women’s changing roles and responsibilities within Japanese society. The author demonstrates this connection by providing the reader with historical background, a detailed account of the role of women in Japan, their place in society and their assumed role in the family structure. By going back to the prewar era, the author invokes the concept of “Good Wife, Wise Mother” that prioritized and idealized the role of mother and wife among all other roles. Sternsdorff-Cisterna suggests that women’s complaints about the food and their neighborhoods’ safety after the accident were justified and socially accepted by the virtues of their motherhood and their concern about the health of future generations. However, women’s marginalized position in Japanese politics made them vulnerable to claims of overreaction, exaggeration, and hysteria. The author argues that intimacy and the close networks created by mothers helped them to return to a collective peace of mind.

The objective of this book is to discuss food safety issues and the author introduces two Japanese terms— *anzen* (safety) and *anshin* (peace of mind) —that were often invoked by various respondents during his fieldwork. The terms describe the complicated relationship between food producers, consumers, researchers, and the state. *Anzen* has been often used in government reports and citizens accounts of the events in relation to specific safety standards. On the other hand, *anshin* explains the subjective and emotionally charged understanding of safety. Thus, while the government managed to secure the *anzen* of consumed products, it failed in securing *anshin*, the piece of mind of its citizens. This, in turn, caused social anxiety and resulted in the occurrence of the civil initiative.

The author further describes how the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident unfolded by emphasizing the lack of public trust in science and in governmental efficiency in response to the disaster. The public blamed the state and the closed circle of policymakers, heavy industry, electric utility companies, researchers, and media, often referred to as “nuclear village,” for their technological elitism and unaccountability that had been flourishing for so many years preceding the disaster. This discussion is supported by the analysis of several interviews with various experts as the concerned ministries’ risk communicators who represent official viewpoints, several university professors and a nutrition expert. They reflect on safety standards and the conflict between safety limits issued by the government and public desire for a zero risk. The author also discusses the online presence of experts and the fact that through augmented reality, the contemporary online world allows more opportunities for information sharing and knowledge

formation.

By examining how radiation-related data was produced and circulated, the author discusses “the agency of the pollutants” and how they can shape the disaster in a unique way. Toxic pollution, as well as radiation contamination, is often imperceptible to human senses and Sternsdorff-Cisterna goes into detail describing various radiation detectors and the challenges that citizens encountered when trying to make sense of diverse numerical values that different detectors produced and of the abundance of data that became available to ordinary people after the disaster. As an example of coping strategies, the author introduces citizen testing centers that allowed citizens to conduct costly and complicated food testing at an affordable price. The author also traces the history of food cooperatives, discussing their role in the formation of food safety standards and in the creation of dense networks between farmers and consumers prior to the accident and their critical role after it. This chapter once again emphasizes the clash of opinions among members of the general public and also between the public and various experts with regard to safety standards and the desire to reduce risks to zero.

The final chapters provide more ethnographic accounts of organic farming practices in Fukushima before and after the accident. When discussing farming in Fukushima prefecture, the author underscores that even though the contamination density within different parts of Fukushima prefecture significantly varied, leaving some places almost untouched by the pollution, the name “Fukushima” and everything associated with it including fruits, vegetables and even people become related to the image of pollution and threat. The author invokes Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) discussion of spaces as physical, symbolical, and lived experiences arguing that Fukushima became “a place and an idea”.

By including various perspectives on the situation, the author demonstrates how invisible radiation has penetrated the everyday lives of people, and how ordinary and intimate acts of food shopping and eating have become highly political acts where citizens can demonstrate their autonomy from the imperatives of the government and risk standards, and make personal decisions to minimize their risks. Along with interviews and participant observation data, the argument is also supported by pictures and posters demonstrating the visual representations of accident-caused and accident-reinforcing power structures. Apart from six main chapters, the book contains chapters on terminology and standards, a detailed timeline of events following the accident and epilogue.

In terms of the volume’s coverage, the author is very sensitive and careful when discussing the highly controversial issue of radiation contamination. However, in this reviewer’s opinion, the author could have gone into more depth about this issue, giving more voice to his respondents rather than existing literature on the topic. This would have allowed for “thick description” and

deeper analysis. Furthermore, more information about research design, translation notes, and ethnographic details of how a male American researcher with no children was able to come into contact with and establish rapport with his respondents, many of whom were mothers, would have added methodological significance to this book. In the third chapter, the author could also have done more to explore how the image of nuclear power had been framed by deliberate division in the public discourse the peaceful usage of nuclear power and nuclear weapons. The analysis of risk management policies and risk communication strategies existing before the accident would have allowed for a deeper understanding of the post-Fukushima situation. Moreover, all local and occupational groups have their physical and symbolic boundaries (Atkinson, 2017), particularly when talking about science and scientific expertise, however, the author, while discussing scientific citizenship, does not draw boundaries between experts and non-experts. This distinction would add more theoretical significance to his data and explain power dynamics existing in the Japanese society at the moment.

The most important is the fact that the author while analyzing food safety and providing a lengthy discussion of food standards and numerical values, particularly about mushrooms called shiitake that at that time often contained high doses of radiation, does not discuss Japanese cuisine (*washoku*) and traditional Japanese dietary cultures and practices in detail. The author does not mention that *washoku* was added to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2013 being recognized as unique social practice. A more detailed analysis of Japanese special relationship with food, food preparation, production, and processing might have reflected the conventions and codes of Japanese food culture and added more theoretical value to this volume. While the fact that it was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013 could have added to the discussion of attempts to change the food agenda and have demonstrated how many actors constructed and influenced the post-Fukushima reality.

These comments aside, *Food Safety After Fukushima: Scientific Citizenship and Politics of Risk* advances our knowledge of post-disaster communities and challenges of risk societies. By emphasizing how trust once lost in the situation of high uncertainty and anxiety was rebuilt between various community actors, this volume helps build theoretical tools that relate various theories of the risk communication studies, social movement studies and science and technology studies. The book demonstrates how the nuclear accident has transformed “the fabric of society” —the relationship between the state and the public, food producers and food consumers; and how during troubled times for life and democracy, the differences in the understanding of food safety and risks made consumers find their own knowledgeable and informed ways of dealing with risks.

## References

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