

The Morning After: Resilience and a Little Anger

Alexander M. Sidorkin

National Research University Higher School of Economics

In a complex and passionate essay, Naoko Saito makes a strong case in favor of a new interpretation of civic virtue linked with a sense of recovery. She begins with a critique of the risk society, using Ulrich Beck's writings. Saito presents his notion of "solidarity motivated by anxiety" as antiutopian, as "*negative and defensive*."¹ Beck calls for education to cultivate the ability "*to anticipate and endure dangers*."² Then she brings in John Dewey to show the way past the foundationalist dystopia. In her view, Dewey calls for us to embrace risks, rather than put safety first. He conceived risk and uncertainty as necessary parts of our lives. Her next move is to take Dewey's pragmatism one step further by engaging Stanley Cavell's philosophy of transcendence, crisis, and rebirth. His philosophy of morning takes us from darkness into the light, and not returning to how things were before. Saito recasts these ideas in the notion of resiliency — the capacity to recover after a dramatic change in circumstances. She brings forth Ralph Waldo Emerson's self-assured subject, who is "open to what happens, to chance and contingency." To Cavell, such resiliency "has to do with one's reengagement with language," in turning negativity into affirmation.

What Saito suggests is not a program for the formation of resiliency. She recommends "Living in this way beyond the risk society, raising ourselves from quiet desperation, raising ourselves to suffer." And more, it "requires patient, daily reinvestment in language, which is at the heart of the education of critical thinking."

I am with her until the very last lines of her essay where she says. "It will open us to a more risky exercise of judgment." If this is the moral of the story, I have to disagree. While the tsunami disaster was unavoidable, the Fukushima nuclear disaster was preventable and therefore avoidable. There was a point where an island nation with high risk of tsunamis and earthquakes decided to build nuclear power stations. Jagadees reports the tsunami study in 2007 predicted exactly the kind of challenge the power station had experienced in 2011; it was promptly ignored.³ Therefore, there were a number of other decision points, which could have prevented or mitigated the disaster.

While American, Russian, and Japanese nuclear power stations all have experienced major disasters, many others have been very close to major accidents. For example, in 1989, a core meltdown similar to Chernobyl occurred in Greifswald, East Germany. Germany has recently made a very expensive decision to phase out all of its nuclear power plants, even though the German facilities had no major accidents. I am not sure how to describe the German public's reasoning. Have they succumbed to the foundationalist dystopian risk-avoiding mentality? I don't think so. It seems that Germans have actually exercised a better mode of critical thinking than did Japanese, Russians, or Americans. Their unconventional move is actually risky from the economic point of view. It may bring up the total German energy

bill, and tip the economy into another recession. The decision also puts Germany in closer ties with carbon-based power suppliers, such as Russia and the Middle East countries. These all are huge risks.

The problem with the notion of risk is that one person's risky behavior is another person's risk mitigation. There are always multiple, and mutually balancing risks, and embracing one may reduce or increase another risk. The risk of doing nothing is often the biggest of all risks, although it *feels* less risky. Human beings are poorly equipped to weigh systematic risks, especially the kind that we have no direct sensory experience of. This is why we need critical thinking. The *extreme* risk avoidance can be stifling exactly because it overestimates the risk. But I would argue that casual underestimating of risks is just as stifling, for it breeds complacency, and in effect, disregard for others and for the common good. It is hard to imagine a public without some sort of risk-assessment capabilities, or a public that intentionally increases risks to the society.

The foundationalist thinking grounds risk outside of human practice, and outside of realistic assessment of its probability. In the particular case of Japan, it looks like the nation engaged in extremely risky behavior for many years and *Anshin-Anzen* is certainly not the only kind of foundationalist thinking present in Japan. The other kind has to do with overconfidence in the nation's technical expertise, an irrational trust in the country's national nuclear safety policy. This kind of uncritical foundationalism has led to the taking of enormous risks and, ultimately, to devastating consequences.

It also seems obvious to me that the kinds of risks Dewey had in mind are different from engaging in potentially risky collective behaviors. One has to learn to take risks with one's own money and one's own career or love life. But it would be not only dangerous, but also unethical to encourage risk-taking that involves other people's lives and well being. I have an issue with the somewhat romantic notion of risk as the necessary component of life and of change. There seems to be a steady supply of disasters, both natural and human-made, that keep coming our way. It is healthy to acknowledge that future is not risk-free, and therefore we need to be prepared to exhibit resolve and solidarity to meet future calamities. But what is the point in inviting more of them by taking unnecessary risks?

The civic virtue of getting over a disaster is very useful in getting over a disaster. In this respect, societies with experience and the mindset of moving on have better chances of full recovery. And yet it does nothing to prevent us from the next one. The best way of getting over a disaster is not getting into it in the first place. Among Russians a popular saying is "We keep creating disasters for ourselves and then heroically overcome them." There is something manipulative about exhorting the population to be tough and resilient while it suffers from a calamity in part rooted in negligence and overconfidence. It looks like channeling potential anger into resilience. Moreover, it is more difficult to sustain a democratic polity during the times of emergency, when the possibilities of public discourse and democratic action may be limited. In other words, disasters are not good for democracy. A situation of emergency induces simplistic, highly emotional appeals for stoicism and resilience. It

actually prevents people from rationally weighing the possibilities of the next major disaster versus the collective capacity of preventing one.

The most important component in Saito's account of civic virtue during disaster is the public's ability to learn lessons from both natural and artificial disasters. And such lessons, however formulated, will always involve prevention of such disasters in the future, and in a way, in decreasing future risks.

Yes, we need to educate for resiliency, but it seems to me that we also must educate for risk-assessment and risk-prevention. A little dose of *Anshin-Anzen* may not hurt the Japanese chances of recovery. If anything, a little more soul-searching, and quite a bit more anger at their government and their industrialists may help the Japanese in their healing and recovery process. Resilience alone is not going to do that.

1. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: SAGE, 1992/1986), 49 (emphasis in original).

2. *Ibid.*, 76 (emphasis in original).

3. S. Jagadees, "TEPCO Did Not Act on Tsunami Risk Projected for Nuclear Plant," *Alienated World: Jagadees's English Weblog*, February 13, 2012, <http://jagadees.wordpress.com/2012/02/13/tepc-did-not-act-on-tsunami-risk-projected-for-nuclear-plant/>.