

# Fukushima Disaster: Time for Inhuman Security

By Thierry Ribault



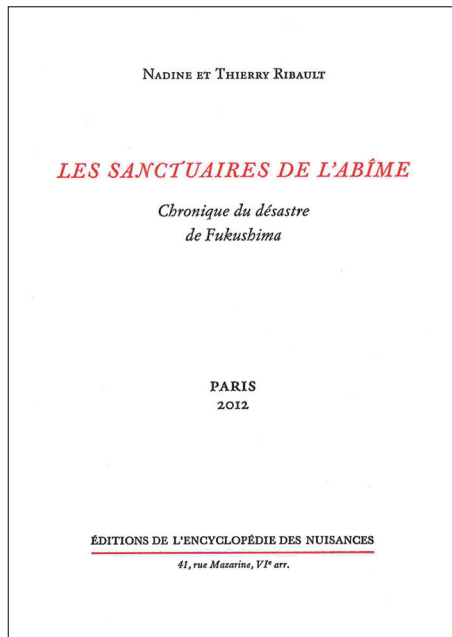
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Acknowledging that persons and communities are threatened by events beyond their control, the concept of “human security” – inspired by the works of economists Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum, and adopted by the UN Development Program in 1994 – is intended to define a framework for protection. It consists in “safeguarding the vital core of all human lives from critical pervasive threats, without impeding long-term human fulfilment” (Sabina Alkire, *A Conceptual Framework for Human Security*, CRISE Working Paper 2, University of Oxford, 2003). However, following the Fukushima nuclear accident, it is appropriate to wonder whether this framework – which has had a strong presence in the rhetoric and actions of international organizations for the last 20 years, as well as those of Japanese public authorities, who have, moreover, made it a pillar of their foreign policy – is relevant, and whether this disaster does not rather display elements leading us to call it into question completely.

## Is the “Human Security” Framework Obsolete after Fukushima Disaster?

The “vital core” mentioned above refers to the idea that within the space of people’s *capabilities* – that is, their capacities to react, which enable them to resist a negative and brutal change of situation – people have fundamental human rights and freedoms, which must be respected by individuals and institutions, being international and non-governmental agencies, and public institutions. However, the Fukushima disaster brings proof of deep doubts about the concept and approach of “human security” and their foundations for thinking about human protection.

In fact, rather than *capabilities*, what defined human protection in the real situation of the Fukushima disaster were administrators’ *incapabilities* to mobilize resources in order to modify their convictions in light of events. In a report recently published by the French Académie des Sciences (*L’accident majeur de Fukushima – Considérations sismiques, nucléaires et médicales*, EDP Sciences, Paris, 2012), it is striking to see the doggedness with which security mechanisms “on the human level” – such as prediction, modeling, communication, education, and anticipation, and whose failure the Fukushima disaster has demonstrated – are being re-mobilized. At the Fukushima power plant there had been precisely prediction, modeling, communication, education, and anticipation – the same disaster administrators repeatedly recommended the same safety methods for handling disasters, like a bureaucratic machine that could only propose the



Thierry and Nadine Ribault, “LES SANCTUAIRES DE L’ABÎME - Chronique du désastre de Fukushima”, Éditions de l’Encyclopédie des Nuisances, Paris, 2012

same solutions to a problem that it had still not managed to identify. We may conclude from this that, in the frantic race for security, before the social, economic, and technological systems of industrial societies will have had time to predict, model, communicate, educate, and anticipate, other catastrophes will probably already have occurred.

Examination of the Fukushima situation actually brings out a paradox in the notion of human security: the state is supposed to protect the population, but it is the population that is protecting the state, by continuing to appeal to it in spite of flagrant evidence of the state’s incapacity to act or at least to protect. In the name of “human security” and from the perspective of “optimizing risk” Japanese government authorities have, notably, reconsidered the definitions of evacuation zones, nine months after the nuclear explosions and

meltdowns, and the population has been invited since April 2012 to return home including into areas where the contamination levels are over 20 or even 50 mSv of effective dose per year, that is to say 20 to 50 times the unacceptability threshold recommended by the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP).

As for protection, which Sen tells us “is necessary when people are too vulnerable to resist overwhelming forces,” radioactive contamination shows us that, in fact, people are finding themselves in situations where they are *not yet vulnerable enough* to actually resist the forces overwhelming them: in other words, when, in a few years, cancers will begin to show up, the various forms of claim and protest that already exist will have to be amplified and spread. In the

meantime, if we follow Sen's reasoning, is protection required, and if not, is it still protection to wait for vulnerability to prove itself – which would render all ulterior protection useless? These are the questions being asked by the Japanese today.

### Toward Horizontalization of Protection

The Fukushima disaster shows us that a human security approach in terms of a hierarchy of rights and threats is outmoded, and at the same time it puts into question the idea that “institutions” are the best placed to “protect”. Comparative analysis of the modalities of the “management” of the Fukushima disaster – between, on the one hand, government and local authorities, and, on the other hand, individual and collective mobilizations (by associations or “citizens”) – makes it clear that, in moments of crisis, protection becomes self-reliant and autonomous, as in New Orleans following the 2005 catastrophe there. This autonomization, as we may call it, which is also a horizontalization of protection, can be observed in the domain of radioactivity measurement, medical assistance and examination, and aid in re-settling nuclear refugees. Such a shift from centralized protection to autonomous and non-hierarchical protection raises the question of the possibility and efficacy of protection without national or local leadership, within a context where hierarchic state or para-state entities are increasingly unable to respond to “crises” and to “manage” the damage from them.

On the other side, over-valuing so called “ordinary people’s” initiatives within the context of a nuclear disaster can also be a way to deny the real risks such people are taking in the name of what is often proudly considered as the “power of resilience”. The disaster administration at Fukushima has not been exempt from the observation made about Chernobyl in its time: all risks are acceptable when those who take them are not given the opportunity to refuse them. Since 3% of the Fukushima population have left the region since 3.11, 2011, and only 10% of children have, one must also question the idea of autonomization and individual self-responsibility, which is essential to the notion of “empowerment” – another pillar of human security. According to Sen, people helping each other can increase their capacity to resist the events threatening them. But if one begins to doubt the fact that mutual help among affected populations is always a source of resistance to threatening developments, one realizes that in the case of Fukushima, people are essentially helping each other indeed – to remain in dangerous sanitary conditions.

### From Freedom from Fear to Freedom to Fear

Finally, is it possible to continue to base the concept of “human security” on the very Rooseveltian notions of “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want”? What the Fukushima disaster and its handling brutally remind us of is actually the constant possibility of annihilation of freedom to fear and freedom to want. For most of the people there is no possibility to *depart* without the freedom to fear and the freedom to want.

Contrary to governance by fear, the freedom to fear refers to a given population’s “capacity to experience fear at the scale of the

danger facing it, to feel the anguish that it must feel to really succeed in freeing itself from this danger” – in the words of Günther Anders in his 1956 work *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen (The Outdatedness of Human Beings)*. It is thus necessary to fear in order to be free. A significant erosion of this freedom can be seen in the stigmatization and pressures facing mothers who, accused of “radiophobia”, raise concerns about the health of their children with the Fukushima medical corps. As for the freedom to want, that is to say the freedom to have needs and to revise them, it refers not only abstractly to fundamental *capabilities*, but also, concretely, to the capacity to exist within forms of economic life that are autonomous enough not to threaten one’s existence or the existence of others. In contrast, the principle of “freedom from want” led the Tohoku region to be literally colonized since the beginning of the 19th century, and reduced to an energy supplier for the Tokyo metropolitan area, to the detriment of its own social and community organization, in the name of “producing jobs” and “land planning”.

### Great Inversion: Nuclear Disaster Is Not Cause of Problems but Remedy

At the *International Expert Symposium in Fukushima: Radiation and Health Risks* which took place on Sept. 11–12, 2011 in Fukushima, Margaret Chan, general director of the World Health Organization, gave the following message: “The Fukushima accident was an industrial disaster that has affected confidence in nuclear energy all over the world, but it was not at all a health disaster.” Such a soft injunction to the people of Fukushima to be irradiated and satisfied finds an echo in the declaration of Prof. Shinichi Niwa of Fukushima Medical University, who headed the psychiatric section of the *Prefectural People’s Health Management Survey*: “Take decontamination work for example, people can feel secure if they do it themselves, rather than if they ask others to do it. It is also important to ease anxieties over radiation exposure with participation of local residents in such a program.” (*Mainichi Daily News*, March 26, 2012). To consider decontamination as a therapy is a perfect demonstration of the growing confusion between administering the disaster and administering a medicine. Thus, “living with” contamination, and consequently with decontamination – which is, however, recognized to be almost ineffective – has become the fatal issue of the disaster and the only discourse taken up these days in Fukushima. It is understood to mean living in full “human security” where it is in fact part of the *Great Inversion* the people of Fukushima are requested to be involved in: it is as if the nuclear disaster was not the cause of problems, and even becomes the remedy to them. Where have the protectors gone? Who protects whom? What is “human security” useful for if it is not to fight against dehumanization, and if it is not a matter of considering the possibilities of changing the world without dehumanizing life? **JS**

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