

BOOK REVIEW

Aya Hirata Kimura. *Radiation Brain
Moms and Citizen Scientists: The gender
politics of food contamination after
Fukushima*. Durham and London: Duke
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It is common practice in many government's risk handling communication strategies to appease citizens by downplaying the serious health threats they are facing whenever, for instance, a nuclear accident happens. Risk communication is not an easy task, there is plenty at stake, from economic, through political to social costs. This risk communication tactic based on under-dramatizing health effects and avoiding fearmongering to spread at all costs was visible among US official authorities when handling the dramatic effects of radiation produced by the 1979 nuclear accident at Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania. The same political attitude and strategy was also apparent from former USSR officials in the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986.

This book tells us a similar story of risk handling communication in Japan after the Fukushima nuclear accident in March 2011. However, it goes far beyond describing the tactics employed by several Japanese governmental agencies, departments, and other institutions and actors aligned in official positions that supported the claim that radioactive contamination of food was minimal and under control. Kimura's attention lies elsewhere. Following an STS and feminist theoretical lens, this ingenious work focuses on the intricate interconnections between the perils of radioactive food contamination, the governmental risk communication tactics that attempted to suppress "irrational" fears, and the counter-mobilization action of citizens (including mothers) who employed science as a discrete tool for resistance, protection, monitoring, and surveillance, as well as for building "effective networks of trust" (see Nicolas Sternsdorff-Cisterna, "Food after Fukushima: Risk and Scientific Citizenship in Japan," *American Anthropologist* 117 (2015): 445-67). The neologism "radiation brain moms" employed in the book title derives from the fact that fears of radiation contamination were spurred by mothers, who were often ridiculed in Japanese social media as "mothers with a radiation brain" due to their "unscientific" "overreaction" to radiation.

The book offers a compelling analysis of how ordinary citizens became involved in setting up "citizen radiation-measuring organizations" (CMRO) throughout Japan to measure the levels of radiation in food. Many of these citizens did not have a background in science nor were previously involved in activist movements. These citizen-science initiatives co-existed with the official radiation measuring stations, whose numbers were often contested by the CMROs (see chapters 4 and 5). Kimura analyzes this counter-mobilization effort against "food policing" – that is "the censoring of people's concerns about food safety in the name of science, risk analysis, and economy" (p. 5) –, and describes in chapter 3 the mobilization of mothers (but also fathers) in order to protect their children from the risk of radioactive contamination by pressing the government to set up measures to control the ingredients served in school meals. Such actions were interpreted by governmental officials, but also by other citizens, friends and relatives, as threatening not only the normalcy of the Japanese way of life but the recovery of the national economy (see chapters 1 and 2). When mothers started to boycott food products on the grounds of suspicion of radioactive contamination, such actions were frowned upon by the State and other citizens, as it severely dented the

livelihood of national farmers and local food producers (see chapter 1). Questioning governmental action was portrayed as highly problematic, especially when such critique was coming from women, who were seen as emotional and lacking technical and scientific knowledge on such complex matters as radiation.

Kimura unwraps a compelling set of nuances, nodes and pitfalls that compose the messy picture of the workings of citizen-science initiatives in contemporary post-Fukushima Japan. However, what is more interesting in the book is the fact that it goes well beyond reading citizen-science initiatives as an exercise of contestation by laypeople of science and technocracy. The picture gets complicated when Kimura analyzes how some Japanese citizen-scientists involved in these initiatives preferred to keep their activities quietened or even silent to avoid being associated with particular party politics or social movements' agendas that were considered too radical. Thus, many citizens preferred to keep a low profile and to focus on the technicalities of measuring food radiation, trying to separate science from politics. An almost impossible mission, as Kimura well demonstrates, demanding a highly tactful balancing act by citizen-scientists.

Kimura advances potential explanations when analysing how food policing creates a particular citizen-subject. Such explanations are aligned with the emergence of neoliberal, postfeminist, and scientist ideologies, which became visible when official authorities handled food radiation risks. Thus, by unpacking these terms and their complex interconnections, the book looks at the role of citizen-science as an instrument for counter-mobilization to food policing but without necessarily manifesting a radical political role. As explained in the book, manifesting such a role in an explicit form could be detrimental to the very mission of citizen-science activities. This opens up a terrain to explore an alternative understanding of politics within citizen-science projects, which is in contrast with a traditional understanding of politics that is considered to be more radical, revolutionary and confrontational. Such alternative politics emerges as "hidden resistance" (after James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 151), through "measuring [radiation] on the margin" (p. 129).

This book offers a fresh look at citizen-science initiatives and problematises their role,

being a welcome perspective on this topic within the feminist Science and Technology Studies (STS) literature. It also offers a compelling read potentially rich for the Food Studies literature. The fact that many citizens in Japan turned away from eating local food on the grounds of radiation suspicion and looked for global sources of food considered as less risky (e.g. US imported soya – potentially genetically modified) puts an interesting spin on food risk perception, food trust and the complex glocal food system relations. Another contribution of the book is the critique put forward regarding bottom-up and participatory risk communication processes, which chapter 2 convincingly analyses and problematises.

In general, the book is well organized, and the empirical material and theoretical framework are cleverly intertwined throughout its five chapters. However, one minor pitfall is the need for a better systematization of the empirical material used. It is not very clear upfront the number of interviews conducted or the sources of information. This is partially unveiled throughout the chapters, but without sufficient detail. However, the fact that the data sources on which the analyses draw are not systematically described does not remove the merit and robustness of the argument made. Overall, this is a pleasant and compelling book to read and an essential reading for students, scholars and researchers with an interest in risk communication, citizen-science, gender politics, food safety and disasters/catastrophes.