

## *Workshop Summary*

*December 6, 2013*

*Memory in Global Context: The Politics of Difficult Pasts*

# Japan and 3/11: Memory in Formation

## *Presenters*

### **Reflections from Fukushima: From History to Memory and Back Again**

**Harry Harootunian, History, Columbia University**

Survivors of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident of March 11 in Japan experienced a collision of history and memory. History, as presented by the state, immediately placed the disasters in national time and called for national solidarity in the face of hardship, while memory lodged insistently in individual experience and the momentary immediacies of everyday life. As a result of this gap, the past became a phantom, leaving the present as the sole reality. People are living in “a permanent parenthesis,” an “endless present,” with a past erased and a future unimaginable. Whether this living memory can constitute a new politics capable of contesting the heavy historical hand of the state remains a fading hope.

### **Digital Media and Crowd-Sourcing Memory: The Japan Digital Archives for the Disasters of 2011**

**Theodore C. Bestor, Anthropology, Harvard University**

The Digital Archive of Japan's 2011 Disasters at Harvard began two days after the earthquake struck and will continue for five more years. It is now a collaborative database involving a dozen Japanese universities, housing 1.2 million items, including tweets, blog entries, videos, photographs, and other crowd-sourced digital items. The archive allows users to curate and share their own digital collections, creating a dynamic environment for the interaction of individual and collective memory. Interpretive and analytic use of the archive is only just now getting underway, though the early shift from individual accounts to mediated narratives is already clear, something that occurred in the memories of 9/11 discussed at the first workshop in this series, held in October 2013.

## *Discussants*

### **Egypt and 1/11: Memory in Formation**

**Mona El-Ghobashy, Political Science, Barnard College**

El-Ghobashy related Japan's disasters to the accelerating temporality in relation to Tahrir Square the heart of the Arab Spring in Cairo. She discussed a number of bottom-up initiatives that memorialize the events on Tahrir Square, including raw, unmediated testimonies and documentation on the internet, and films like *The Square* and *The Uprising*. In contrast to these unmediated testimonies, the new Egyptian governments conducted a top-down campaign to commandeer the physical space of Tahrir Square to create a memorial culture that legitimizes their power and effaces that of the protesters. As in Japan, the possibility of a new politics and the hopes for change have been repeatedly dashed but not extinguished.

### **Memory: the Past in the Present, the Foundation for the Future**

**William Hirst, Psychology, New School**

Memory works like "mental time travel": we know from fMRI studies that the same area of the brain is engaged both in remembering the past and imagining the future. This is true of normal autobiographical memory, but individuals depressed because of PTSD or other causes recall the past only in an over-generalized way and think of the future in a similar way. One difference here lies in agency, in the sense of control, or lack of it. It is possible that "living in the everyday" may lay a basis for a projected future, if not necessarily the one asserted by the state.

**Presented by the Committee on Global Thought at Columbia University**