

2014

Review of *The Fukushima Dai-Ichi Accident*. Peter Bernard Ladkin, Christoph Goeker, and Bernd Sieker (Eds.). Reviewed by Richard York

Richard F. York
University of Oregon, rfyork@uoregon.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

York, Richard F. (2014) "Review of *The Fukushima Dai-Ichi Accident*. Peter Bernard Ladkin, Christoph Goeker, and Bernd Sieker (Eds.). Reviewed by Richard York," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 41: Iss. 3, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3977>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol41/iss3/14>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



is an easy read for anyone interested in the topic. As well as giving the reader access to the voices of a marginalized and hidden population, Irvine provides a thorough review of the relevant literature and key sociological concepts throughout the book. It is useful for homeless and animal welfare practitioners, researchers, students, and as a text in many different sociology courses, including courses on qualitative research, identity, animal-human relationships, as well as homelessness, among others.

Tiffany A. Parsons, University of West Georgia

Peter Bernard Ladkin, Christoph Goeker, and Bernd Sieker (Eds.), *The Fukushima Dai-Ichi Accident*. Lit Verlag (2013). \$59.95 (paperback), 291 pages.

The crisis at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi nuclear power plant in Japan, which began in March of 2011 after a major earthquake and tsunami severely damaged the plant, highlights the threats created for societies by the technologies they rely on and raises questions about both how to make and who should make societies' technological decisions. The edited volume under review here explores the Fukushima nuclear accident from the mixed perspectives of system safety engineers and sociologists who study risk and organizations. The book originated from a workshop in Bielefeld, Germany that was held in August 2011 to discuss the accident and what can be learned from it about how societies handle risky technologies and disasters.

Following a short introduction, the first chapter, by Ladkin, a safety engineer who is the lead editor and who spearheaded the workshop, gives an overview of the accident. The second chapter, also by Ladkin, discusses the Fukushima accident in the context of hazard analysis, exploring the extent to which the accident could have been anticipated. The third chapter, by Sieker, also an engineer, discusses the physics of nuclear power plants and what happened in the Fukushima plant. These first three chapters present the technical side of the accident and the ways engineers assess and analyze risks and hazards.

Chapters four through nine present comments from a

social science perspective. Chapter four, by Lee Clarke, which discusses how warnings about risk are presented and received (and mostly ignored), is a particularly interesting, and rather witty, chapter. Chapter five by John Downer discusses how accidents like the one at Fukushima are rationalized in a way that characterizes them as anomalous, which serves to avoid the troubling implications such accidents raise about the safety of and future risks presented by technologies. Chapter six is by Charles Perrow, one of the leading sociological experts on risk, technology, and organizations, who authored the influential *Normal Accidents*, a highly important book on the risks associated with complex systems, which has a particular focus on nuclear power plants, with a careful examination of the Three Mile Island accident. Perrow is the star of the book, having predicted in print in 2007 that an accident much like what actually happened at Fukushima was a genuine possibility, a fact Ladkin rightly highlights in the introduction. Perrow's chapter discusses how, despite its especially high consequences, the Fukushima accident is a common-place type of disaster in contexts where energy, economic power, and political power are highly concentrated, and considers the implications of regulatory failure, warning systems, and accident preparedness. Chapters seven through nine are very short (two to three page) essays comparing the context of the recent earthquake and tsunami to ones past in Japan (chapter seven, by Stephen Moseley), the differences between Japanese and Western styles of decision-making and communication in emergency management (chapter eight, by Stefan Strohschneider), and the importance of information infrastructures for handling socio-technological systems, particularly in a crisis (chapter nine by Volkmar Pipek and Gunnar Stevens).

The final chapter, which at 130 pages takes up more than half the book, is not a chapter in the traditional sense, being a ponderous series of comments that Ladkin sent to an e-mail list set up to discuss the Fukushima crisis immediately after it began. Many of these comments are interesting and informative, but the totality of them makes for tiresome reading. The chapter appears to have been included more to bulk up the book than due to careful consideration of what readers are likely to find helpful and engaging.

The authors of the chapters in this book are truly outstanding scholars, whose expertise, intellectual prowess, and wisdom about disasters such as that which occurred at Fukushima cannot be questioned. However, the book as a whole is not of especially high quality, and I suspect that few readers will find it of great value. Despite the excellence of the authors, the chapters themselves are of uneven quality, and for the most part are not top-notch, clearly showing that they descend from quickly written (although thoughtful) talks, rather than being designed as analytic, scholarly papers from the start. I have no doubt that the workshop from which this volume stems was exciting and lively, and it would have been wonderful to hear the great minds there present their worthy insights so soon after the disaster, but a great workshop rarely leads to a great edited volume, as this book demonstrates.

Richard York, Department of Sociology, University of Oregon

Matt Taibbi, *The Divide: American Injustice in the Age of the Wealth Gap*. Spiegel & Grau (2014). \$27 (hardcover), \$17 (paperback), 416 pages.

Matt Taibbi is a journalist and a contributing editor of *Rolling Stone Magazine* and known for hard-hitting investigative reporting. In this book, he presents stark contrasts between the harsh scrutiny and punishment of the poor—disproportionately Black, Hispanic and immigrant—with that of the big banks and financial services corporations and their executives responsible for the financial meltdown of 2008.

In the last several years, there has been considerable scholarly attention to the enormous growth of the prison population in the U.S. and the reasons for it: finite sentencing, 3-strikes laws, disparate treatment of Whites and Blacks convicted of drug offenses, inadequately funded and therefore over-burdened public defense lawyers, the reliance on plea bargains resulting in imprisonment, and overly aggressive police scrutiny and arrest policies focused especially on poor minority young men. What Taibbi contributes to this literature is his skill in describing the fate of those millions of little guys who are caught up and punished in our criminal justice systems. He