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# Reflecting on Hiroshima/Nagasaki at 75

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As the COVID-19 pandemic rages around the world, I sit pondering what we have, and have not, learned in the seventy-five years since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As the media exhorts, and the world questions, “victories” in the “war” against the coronavirus, it is clear that neither war nor nuclear weapons are of any use against a minuscule virus wreaking havoc with not only personal and institutional health, but also global economies on the one hand, and many aspects of our lives and our communities, on the other. While it seems that at least the U.S. military has been aware for some time of the possibility of a global pandemic, no action has been taken. If only a portion of the money spent to maintain military forces worldwide had instead been used to ensure education, livelihoods and healthcare for all on a global scale, the world might well be in a very different position from the way it is right now.

Using these reflections on the current crisis as a backdrop, I would like to examine what we have and have not learned, or at least not learned sufficiently, from the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the ensuing 75 years of anti-nuclear peace activism. As I have spent most of my adult life in Japan, the discussion focuses on peace/anti-nuclear movements based in Japan. Here I will touch on two aspects: fear and feminism. Regarding fear, while we have learned to fear nuclear weapons, we have not learned how to manage fear in positive and cooperative ways. With regard to feminism, anti-nuclear and peace movements, particularly in Japan, often lack a gender perspective. Movements can benefit greatly from a feminist and intersectional analysis that will enable us to transform, rather than reconstruct, gendered binary approaches to security.

If we have learned anything from anti-nuclear peace movements, it is that nuclear war and nuclear weapons are frightening. The point of learning to fear nuclear weapons is that it then logically leads to the conclusion that no one wants to experience the horror of Hiroshima and/or Nagasaki, and the only way to ensure that we do not have to do so is to

rid the world of nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, that simple lesson has turned out to be far from easy to learn. Our fear of nuclear weapons has taught us to be afraid, but not necessarily how to peacefully confront, ease and transcend our fear.

Fear is of course an important and necessary emotion for survival. Anti-nuclear movements have successfully taught us that it makes sense to be afraid of nuclear weapons and nuclear war. Where they have been less than successful is in raising a convincing challenge to the normalization of the notion that 'stronger is better,' in personal terms as well as between or among actors on the international stage. The concept of deterrence, nuclear or otherwise, still plays a central role in the security policies of most countries, even those that have signed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty). While anti-nuclear movements have been relatively successful in challenging the idea that nuclear war can be won, or that it can be fought without bringing similar destruction to one's one side (MAD), they have been less successful in refuting the assertion that the only way to avoid destruction is to be stronger, for example, better armed, than one's opponent.

This idea of security is based on realist assumptions of dominance and control that are predicated on gendered notions of security, invoking binaries that prioritize and normalize particular hegemonic military masculinities through rejecting and/or denigrating notions understood to be affiliated with femininity. According to this logic, emotion is not only inimical to reason, but also inferior to it. As reason is seen to be an important characteristic of masculinity, so emotion is located in the realm of the feminine. Of course, as fear makes perfect sense in the face of nuclear war, those promoting nuclear development 'reasoned' that more nuclear weapons (on our side) makes us safer.

Japan prides itself for having survived and rebuilt after the atomic bombs. While they take somewhat different approaches, the two cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, portray themselves as "peace cities," and call for the abolition of nuclear weapons in a range of national and international fora, saying that what they suffered should never be repeated. This understanding of peace as the absence of nuclear war focuses on the devastation, despair and inter-generational effects of the use of nuclear weapons. As such, movements centered on the two cities have taught us about what it is we should fear, but not about the ways in which fear is constructed and reconstructed on the bodies of the victims and on ourselves, how our fear reconstructs the need for protection through military and perhaps nuclear means. In failing to engage with ontologies of fear, the movements have taught us to be afraid, but not how to seek new ways

to seek safety. To paraphrase Audre Lorde, we have learned of the need to dismantle the master's strategies for peace and security, but have not been given a full set of new tools with which to do so.

The above discussion focuses on the visible aspects of fear and nuclear destruction, but perhaps the most difficult lessons are those focusing on what is impossible to see. With regard to nuclear weapons, many things are invisible: decision making, monetary flows, research and development, mishaps and accidents, to name just a few. But the primary lesson from Hiroshima and Nagasaki about invisibility centers on radiation. Much like the current coronavirus, we cannot see it, smell it, hear it, or know that it is there until it is too late. Like coronavirus, the lesson is simple and clear: stay away. And yet, after World War II the United States successfully promoted the idea of the "peaceful" atom, and convinced people that nuclear power was safe.

For reasons of party politics and money, anti-nuclear peace movements in Japan were not able or willing to fully engage with nuclear power. And so, just as national security came to be based on the (non-nuclear and only for self-defense) Self Defense Forces in conjunction with, and openly acknowledging, the nuclear capabilities of the United States, so energy policy came to depend on nuclear power. The acceptance of these contradictions has not been universal or without struggles, particularly with regard to national security. Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the majority of the Japanese public, however, came to accept these contradictions as part of the *realpolitik* of the postwar world.

The contradictions of the peaceful uses of nuclear technology are visible in many places. But one lesson about the implications of fear and radiation perhaps could have been better communicated in the years since the first use of the atomic bomb. Like coronavirus, radiation does not choose its victims, although some are more likely to be seriously affected than others. Like coronavirus, our senses cannot tell us if radiation is present, or where it is or is not. We may be able to protect ourselves, but can only do so if we have access to reliable information and the resources to implement the suggested safety measures. We may never again have a world free of coronavirus, but the virus does not stay alive for tens of thousands of years. Today the coronavirus is causing tremendous destruction, but probably there will be a vaccine and medication available before too much longer to make it less deadly. There is no vaccine or medication for radiation poisoning. Today as I write, I am afraid of coronavirus for my own health, that of my community and of the world, but I am hopeful that tomorrow will be better than today. I wish I could be as positive about the future of a nuclear-free world.

After the atomic bombings, people were afraid. Many were dying for unseen and unknown reasons from exposure to the “poison” from the new and horrific weapon, even if they had not been directly affected or in the vicinity of the explosion. People grew afraid in a way that was different from the fear of being bombed or killed in the war. Fear compounded the suffering of people in the two cities in multiple ways. The unknowability of the effects of radiation caused people to fear for their own health, not only in the present moment but for the rest of their own lives and those of future generations. That unknowability coupled with lack of information made people afraid of those who had been exposed. With that fear came prejudice and discrimination, not only in the time directly after the bombings, but continuing even to the present. The effects of radiation are known to be intergenerational, but the details remain obscure.

Survivors of the bombings and their descendants have suffered many forms of discrimination, much of it based on fear. The message of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has at times acknowledged the pain resulting from discrimination, most often in context of the discourse of who does and who does not tell her/his story. But the “peace” message of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has not necessarily been one that is based on inclusion. Rather, from the beginning it was a story of the Japanese victims of the American atom bomb, generally told in a manner that was separate from the story of Japan’s imperial conquest in Asia. Many of those exposed to the bombs were in fact not Japanese but Korean, having come to Japan forcibly or otherwise from Japan’s colony on the Korean Peninsula. Yet the story of *hibakusha* is not usually told as one of hyphenated or hybrid identities, nor as one of intra-categorical difference. The lessons of Hiroshima and Nagasaki portray the atomic bombs as social equalizers, but of course that is only one part of the story. Those who were marginalized before the bombings continued to be marginalized, even as voices were being raised for peace.

Less than a year after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States began nuclear testing in the Pacific. Many Pacific Islanders were exposed to radiation; today some people still suffer from the effects of that exposure. The most well-known stories are those connected with the hydrogen bomb tests, especially the Bravo shot conducted on 1 March 1954. But rather than telling a story of solidarity with those exposed to radiation around the world, Hiroshima and Nagasaki noted the differences between Japanese and other victims, while at the same time emphasizing the danger of nuclear weapons. In so doing, they created hierarchies of legitimacy among survivors of exposure to radiation, assigning the Japanese victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the highest rank.

The message is somewhat different today. It is no longer considered proper to assert that Japan is the only place to have suffered from the effects of nuclear weapons, although many people still say that. Now the more proper phrase is that Japan is the only country to have suffered the “effects of nuclear attack” or “effects of nuclear weapons in war.” For reasons of politics, economics, or colonial and racist attitudes, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were unable or unwilling to claim unqualified solidarity with others facing the unknowability of the effects of radiation. One implication of this has been that rather than joining together in recognizing our common human vulnerability to radiation, the experience of Hiroshima/Nagasaki has been used to make some kinds of exposure more frightening than others.

In March 2011, nuclear reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant exploded, sending a highly radioactive plume over a broad area of northeastern Japan. Many residents faced compulsory evacuation, while others felt they had no choice but to run for their lives. Many of those who sought refuge in communities in other parts of Japan found themselves the target of a range of exclusionary and discriminatory practices from those who feared that the refugees had brought the radiation with them. Those discriminatory practices are still continuing, more than nine years after the explosions.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki have taught us to be afraid of radiation, and to understand our fear as legitimate. We have not been encouraged to reflect on the implications of our acts of fear-based exclusion. Could we, for example, having learned the need to protect ourselves, also be taught to be cautious, but at the same time welcoming? The peace lesson of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has not necessarily been one of greeting all seeking help with generosity and understanding, nor one of seeking out our similarities, while acknowledging our differences. Many who struggle against nuclear weapons understand that non-nuclear peace requires respect for all living things, but that message has been less than clear. A non-nuclear future is possible, but only if we renegotiate the meaning of, and our responses to, our own fear of both the known and the unknown.

**I**n an essay written after 9/11, Judith Butler addressed the politics of who we grieve and who we do not, suggesting that what we share with friends and enemies alike is our vulnerability. In thinking about the politics of displaying Hiroshima at the Smithsonian, it is necessary, if not entirely possible, to go beyond the victor/victim binaries and see Hiroshima/Nagasaki as both a symbol of our frailty as living beings and a call for humility in the face of our technological capabilities. If a post-modern Hiroshima/Nagasaki anti-nuclear movement were possible, I think that would be its message.

In this sense, Hiroshima/Nagasaki has failed in two important ways. The first is that, as mentioned earlier, while anti-nuclear peace movements have challenged the concept of nuclear peace, they have not addressed the gendered binaries upon which concepts of national security rest. It is necessary to recognize, for example, that while othering constructs supposedly independent categories of “victim” and “victor,” in fact these identities construct one another. This is clearly visible in the case of Hiroshima/Nagasaki, where the people in those cities were clearly victims, yet they were also a part of Japan’s aggressive war in Asia making some *hibakusha* both victim and aggressor and others double victims. Similarly, it is important to identify the differences within the categories of victim and victor that give legitimacy to some, making them highly visible, while at the same time erasing and/or failing to acknowledge others. Reference was made earlier to the Korean *hibakusha*, but the suffering of other marginalized groups such as the *Burakumin* are rarely identified in stories of atomic bombing suffering.

A much-discussed aspect of peace according to Hiroshima/Nagasaki is the message of forgiveness: those victimized by the atomic bombs “forgive” those responsible for dropping it. For many in the United States, including no doubt many of those who opposed the Smithsonian exhibit, this is at best only a small part of the story. Moreover, it reconstructs yet another binary, where the existence of one is dependent on that of the other. To transcend this duality, forgiveness on both sides would be helpful. At the same time, what is really necessary is an understanding that innocence and guilt are not necessarily opposites. As in our own personal relationships, in the world of international relations innocence, guilt, and responsibility are far more complex and overlapping than the anti-nuclear peace message would have one believe.

**T**he story of what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in all of its multiple forms, could benefit from a feminist lens. Anti-nuclear and peace movements are not hesitant about invoking images of women and children as innocent victims, or as in need of protection. Often, these assertions are based on essentialist perspectives of motherhood and peace; women are mothers and mothers are intrinsically peaceful.

Of course, the reality is quite different. Many women do not have children or even like children, and many women do in fact engage in violence. There are also many women who are victims or victimized, but even if that violence is directed against them as women, as in rape in war-time, it is not because they were born with particular biological characteristics so much as because societies, and often the women themselves, construct categories of identity in particular ways. Because social relations

are constructed around gendered hierarchies of power that privilege masculinities, the denigration and injuring of women becomes as assertion of power and masculinity.

Taking a feminist lens to anti-nuclear politics would allow for a reconceptualization of the emotion/reason dichotomy. It would highlight the ways gender, class, race and other social identities intersect in the construction of emotions such as fear or assumptions about the need for protection. Mapping these intersections in non-binary ways can help to change the boundaries of how we identify ourselves, and how we reach out to others. Finally, focusing our feminist lens on national security could help to emphasize that in a world where life is finite and vulnerable and resources are limited, nuclear weapons threaten not only our safety, but also our quality of life.

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