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**At the Epicentre of 1920s Japan:
Unity, Contestation, and the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923**

Writing in 1940, historian Marc Bloch suggested that “just as the progress of a disease shows a doctor the secret life of a body,” so too “the progress of a great calamity yields valuable information about the nature of a society.” On 1 September 1923 Japan experienced just such a “calamity” when a magnitude 7.9 earthquake and subsequent fires destroyed large sections of Tokyo and virtually all of Yokohama. In this paper, I will examine what this disaster and the post disaster reconstruction process tells us, reveals, and exposes about Japanese society, state, and the inter-relation between both in the 1920s. I will suggest that while attempts to interpret or explain the event in 1923 and 1924 often resulted in a united discourse that concluded that post WWI Japan was in need of spiritual and ideological reconstruction, debates about the physical reconstruction of the capital exacerbated long-held tensions and fissures that ultimately restricted the ambitions of those wishing to construct a “new,” “modern”, metropolis. In looking at this natural disaster from both perspectives I will suggest that the 1923 Earthquake is an ideal lens with which to examine 1920s state and society at a period in which many historians have suggested was the height of Taishō democracy, liberalism, and consumer culture in Japan. In a broader sense, I will suggest that the exploration of disasters such as the Kantō Daishinsai, the Hanshin-Awaji (Kōbe) Earthquake, or the numerous typhoons and subsequent floods that have struck Japan are rich and fertile grounds for the future direction of Japanese studies.