

Theories of risk and uncertainty



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Outline the main social theories of risk and uncertainty using at least one example as illustration.

One of the most lively areas of theoretical debate in social and cultural theory in recent times is that addressing the phenomenon of risk and the role it plays in contemporary social life and subjectivities. Three major theoretical perspectives on risk emerging since the early 1980s and gaining momentum in the 1990s may be distinguished. The first is offered by the work of Mary Douglas, who began in the early 1980s setting forth an influential perspective on risk, one that adopts a cultural anthropological approach (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Douglas, 1985, 1990, 1992). The German sociologist Ulrich Beck's book 'Risk society', published in English in 1992, has provided a major impetus to recent sociological examination of risk (for some of his other writing on risk in English see also Beck, (1992a; Beck and Gernsheim, 1995). The English sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991, 1994, 1998), adopting a similar perspective to that of Beck, has also influenced sociological diagnoses of the role of risk in society. A third perspective is offered by the several theorists who have taken up Michel Foucault's writings on governmentality (for example, Foucault, 1991) to explore the ways in which the state and other governmental apparatuses work together to govern – that is, manage and regulate – populations via risk discourses and strategies (Castel, 1991; Ewald, 1991; O'Malley, 1996; Dean, 1997).

These major theories are identified respectively as the 'cultural/symbolic', the 'risk society' and the governmentality perspectives.

Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault was a French philosopher, sociologist and historian. In his book *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault outlines his theory of governmentality, and demonstrates the distinction between sovereignty, discipline, and governmentality as distinct modalities of state power. [1] The concept of risk, employed to address governmental concerns, has contributed to the production of certain kinds of rationalities, strategies and subjectivities. According to the Foucauldian perspective, risk strategies and discourses are means of ordering the social and material worlds through methods of rationalization and calculation, attempts to render disorder and uncertainty more controllable. It is these strategies and discourses that bring risk into being, that select certain phenomena as being ‘risky’ and therefore requiring management, either by institutions or individuals. This is an outcome of the emergence of the modern system of liberal government, with its emphasis on rule and the maintenance of order through voluntary self-discipline rather than via violent means. Risk is understood as one of the heterogeneous governmental strategies of disciplinary power by which populations and individuals are monitored and managed so as to best meet the goals of democratic humanism. Normalization, or the method by which norms of behaviour or health status are identified in populations and by which individuals are compared to determine how best they fit the norm, is a central aspect of liberal government. Those who are determined to deviate from the norm significantly are typically identified as being ‘at risk’. To be designated as ‘at risk’, therefore, is to be positioned within a network of factors drawn from the observation of others. The implication of this

rationalized discourse is that risk is ultimately controllable, as long as expert knowledge can be properly brought to bear upon it.

Some of those taking up a Foucauldian perspective have remarked upon recent change in the governance of risk, in which there is far less reliance upon social insurance and far more upon individual self-management and self-protection from risk. This is an outcome of the political ethos of neo-liberalism, which emphasizes minimal intervention on the part of the state and emphasizes ‘self-help’ and individual autonomy for citizens. [2]Foucault himself and those taking up his perspectives on the regulation of subjects via the discourses of governmentality may be criticized for devoting too much attention to the discourses and strategies and not enough to how people actually respond to them as part of their everyday lives.

Mary Douglas

The authors suggest, reasonably enough, that one’s personal political and cultural predispositions affect how one assess the risk of different possible social dangers. If this were the only factor affecting people’s risk assessment, it would be quite difficult to generate an informed social policy in a democratic society, and research in to actual risk levels associated with different degrees of social damage would be worthless, since people simply listen to the gurus that support their personal positions.

The authors present no data. Why is data important? Because if 90% of voters fit their description, we are in a much different situation than if 10% do. My best guess is that people systematically underestimate most social risks (e. g. accidental nuclear war, deadly SARS-type plagues) and

overestimate a few (riskiness of air travel, danger of poisons in food). Most people, however, are willing to let the ideologues battle it out, and are strongly affected by the way the journalistic accounts of the battle portrays the cogencies of different positions. If I am right, the extremists on either side of positions, of the sort depicted by the authors, perform a valuable function but do not determine the outcome for the purposes of social policy. For instance, there are vehement supporters of gun control and equally vehement supporters of the rights of gun owners. Most voters, however, lie somewhere in the middle and are swayed both by events and scientific evidence. If that is so, the possibility of effective social policy is possible in a democracy. But, some say, the extremists are willing to put in time and money to sway the public, so ideology wins the day in this manner. I respond that it is wise for voters to take the strength of preferences into account in making social policy decisions. At any rate, no balanced discussion of these issues will be found in this volume.

According to the NYT review " Offering what they call a cultural theory of risk perception, the authors suggest that peoples complaints about hazards should never be taken at face value. One must look further to discover what forms of social organization are being defended or attacked."

Applying this logic, we have to ask what Mary Douglas and Wildavsky have to gain from advancing this argument...and their consistently dismissive and condescending attitude toward environmentalists makes this fairly clear. If your unenlightened opposition INSISTS on talking about certain risks AS IF that was what REALLY mattered then you are, of course, completely justified in disregarding their point of view, (and for that matter them) entirely.

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Cultural Theory, as developed by Mary Douglas, argues that differing risk perceptions can be explained by reference to four distinct cultural biases: hierarchy, egalitarianism, individualism, and fatalism.

Ulrich Beck

Central to Beck's and Giddens' writing on risk society is the concept of reflexive modernity. This concept incorporates the notion that late modernity is characterized by a critique of the processes of modernity, which no longer unproblematically viewed as producing 'goods' (such as wealth and employment) but are now seen to produce many of the dangers or 'bads' from which we feel threatened (such as environmental pollution, unemployment and family breakdown). The central institutions of late modernity – government, industry and science – are singled out as the main producers of risk. An emphasis on risk, Beck and Giddens assert, is thus an integral feature of a society which has come to reflect upon itself, to critique itself.

Exponents of the 'risk society' thesis also argue that in late modernity there is a trend towards individualization, or the progressive loss of tradition and social bonds as a means of structuring the life-course and forming personal identity. A major difference, they argue, in the ways in which we conceptualize and deal with dangers compared with individuals in earlier eras is the extent to which individuals are positioned as choosing agents. We now think of ourselves as exercising a high level of control over the extent to which we expose ourselves to danger and therefore as culpable for becoming prey to risk. Risk is primarily understood as a human

responsibility, both in its production and management, rather than the outcome of fate or destiny, as was the case in pre-modern times.

[1] · ^ Hansen, Thomas (2001). States of Imagination. Durham: Duke University Press. p. 43. ISBN 0822327988.

[2] Dean, M. (1999) Governmentality, Sage, London