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Book Review: Risk and Society

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Book reviews

David Denney, *Risk and Society* (London: Sage, 2005). 220pp. ISBN 0761947396, £60.00 (hbk).

Risk is arguably one of the most important themes in contemporary social science. Discussions of risk diverge from many different theoretical starting points and span several social scientific disciplines. The field is dominated by two theorists: Ulrich Beck and Mary Douglas. Both agree that there is heightened societal awareness of risk, and that the increasing pitch to the risk debate is connected to globalization. Douglas' perspective is that the response to the risks we face in modern society is similar to the responses of 'primitive' societies: for her, we politicize risk by selection, and this functions to enhance social solidarity in the face of change and uncertainty (by blaming outsiders). In contrast, Beck's *Risk Society* thesis argues that risks in late modernity are qualitatively different from the risks faced in earlier times. He sees risks in late modernity as the product of science and technology; they are unquantifiable and unbounded, both geographically and temporally. Both Beck and Douglas tend to focus on environmental risks, although other writers, in particular Frank Furedi, encompass a broader perspective, highlighting fashionable obsessions with risk associated with "the culture of abuse" and "risky strangers".

One of the extraordinary and perhaps unique features of the risk debate, in comparison to any other similar intellectual debates, is that the two central figures (Beck and Douglas) almost entirely fail to engage with each other's position. Another criticism made of both writers is that they fail to engage with the growing body of empirical studies of risk, which tends to indicate a more nuanced picture of how the public(s) engage with risks than their theories would allow.

In light of these factors – the lack of debate between the main protagonists in the field; the focus on environmental and global rather than everyday risks; and the growing body of empirical work – Denney's comprehensive account in *Risk and Society* is a timely and useful addition to the literature. He examines how, beyond the environmental context, the nature of risk frames so many aspects of our everyday lives. In the first part of the book, he examines the meanings that

have been ascribed to risk, examining the development of the concept of risk from the pre-modern period and surveying the different theoretical positions on risk.

In the second part of the book he examines risk in everyday aspects of life; for example, personal decisions about housing, education and work provide a context where maximum benefits can be reaped, yet bad decisions can be disastrous. In key life stages, such as when making choices regarding education, the experience of risk is becoming more individualized and complex. Life events such as childbirth, or decisions about medical treatment (vaccinations for example) are increasingly regarded as risk-laden. At the same time, one of the features of late modernity is that the judgements made by professionals are scrutinized and laid open to charges of incompetence, while increasingly the boundaries between "lay" and "expert" knowledge become blurred.

In a secular democracy, the mass media is the main source of information regarding the risks we are said to face. One criticism that could be made of this book is that the media coverage of risk is discussed in only one chapter. Arguably the media is so central to the selection, dissemination and heightening or attenuation of anxiety around risks that a discussion of the effects of the media should be threaded throughout.

This part of the book ends with an analysis of two neglected areas: the first is risk and social welfare, as understood and acted on by practitioners with respect to child protection, old age and mental health; and the second is risk and crime, with respect to the police and criminal justice system. Denney argues that "risk management" constitutes a new paradigm in these fields. His material here widens considerably the scope of the book in comparison to existing books on risk.

In the final part of the book, Denney turns his attention to the risks posed by terrorism, and to global regulation and global governance. He attempts to give some perspective to the recent developments in international relations post-9/11. He highlights how the "new terrorism" is inextricably linked to globalization and seems to present new "unknowable" risks. Denney points out that environmental risks are similarly portrayed as "unknowable", yet the precautionary

principle has not been applied to environmental concerns (such as global warming). In contrast, the precautionary principle has dominated the response of the USA and its allies to post-9/11 terrorism, with the consequent loss of personal freedoms and human rights.

The last part of the book thus attempts to apply the *Risk Society* framework to current events such as the so-called “war on terror”. There are dangers in trying to provide theoretical perspective on such recent events: many statements have to be qualified with “. . . at the time of writing”, and this makes Denney a potential hostage to fortune. However, the social scientific debates on risk have little currency if they are not applied to episodes of such enormous significance. Denney’s contribution is therefore welcome.

Although at the outset Denney describes the book as examining the social construction of risk from a number of theoretical perspectives, his main focus is on Beck. Beck is initially positioned as one of several theorists, but in subsequent chapters, discussions of Beck’s opinions book-end the material. The early chapters could therefore have given a more thorough exposition of Beck’s ideas as students without this background may have trouble getting a foothold. However, this criticism is offset by the fact that each chapter contains an extremely useful guide to further reading.

There are relatively few accounts of risk that manage to be accessible and comprehensive. This readable book achieves this, and, particularly in the later chapters, is both provocative and polemical. It will provide a useful resource for students and scholars in many social sciences where discussions of risk are increasingly pertinent.

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Dave Reay, *Climate Change Begins at Home: Life on the Two-way Street of Global Warming* (Houdmills: Macmillan, 2005). xiii + 203 pp. ISBN 1403945780, £16.99 (hbk).

“Be worried, be very worried” runs the caption on a recent front cover of *Time* magazine. It accompanies a picture of an isolated polar bear on a melting ice sheet. According to this special report on global warming, the earth is currently at a tipping point. Before it’s too late, humans must change their destructive behaviours in order to avoid environmental catastrophe. Public understanding of climate change is therefore of paramount importance if these effects are to be

minimized. Much is being done, and, in the UK, government policies are certainly increasing engagement with the issue. The problem, however, is at what level this can be realistically achieved.

The author of *Climate Change Begins at Home*, Dave Reay, a University of Edinburgh researcher, is “frightened by what climate change has in store” (p.xi) and has crafted an insightful guide on how to do your bit in the battle to save the planet. Unconvinced with the Kyoto Protocol targets and other institutional regulations implemented to combat global warming, Reay advocates a bottom-up solution aiming to modify individual lifestyles. In order to stabilize the climate and meet the proposed scientific consensus estimate of a 60 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, urgent action needs to be taken. And, Reay argues, it is at the individual level that this action is most likely to succeed.

The book opens with a description of the Carbones, a typical middle-class family in the south-eastern United States. Thinking they are doing their bit for the environment, each member is introduced by the individual climate contribution he or she makes. The Carbones pump 39 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere annually, half of this by way of their transport. Despite managing to cut annual emissions by 3 percent, considerable improvements can be made in order to dramatically lower their overall impact. By summarizing the main contributors to this climate impact Reay neatly establishes the structure for the rest of the book. The remaining seven chapters act as an informative guide introducing a variety of ways reductions in greenhouse gas emissions can be made without dramatically altering individual lifestyle.

Using each member of the Carbone family to personalize the message, Reay steers his readers through these well-researched scenarios. Firstly he deals with transport, the most important impact “topping the lifestyle chart at close to half of all our greenhouse gas emissions” (p.25). Transportation in the USA alone generates nearly two billion tonnes of greenhouse gas per year. Despite travel being an indispensable part of modern life, the reader is introduced to considerable adjustments that can be made to reduce this quantity of emission. Using more public transport, changing driving habits and buying cars with smaller engines are just some examples mentioned.

Domestic energy use is “the next big hitter accounting for over a third of emissions” (p.26). Contributing to the 11 tonnes of greenhouse gas the average family home emits per year, heating