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Deborah Lupton.

Risk.

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In this simply but aptly titled book, *Risk*, Deborah Lupton addresses the question of why risk has become so prominent at this point in history. In addressing this central question, she considers the manner in which risk operates in contemporary times and investigates the implications of this for a broad range of sectors, including the personal, the institutional, and the governmental.

In the introduction, Lupton gives a brief summary of how the social understanding of risk has changed from medieval times when risk was simply thought of in terms of fate or fortune, to the present day, when many categories of risk can be discerned, including: environmental risks, lifestyle risks, medical risks, interpersonal risks, economic risks, and criminal risks.

Lupton then outlines and critiques the major theoretical approaches to the contemporary social scientific analysis of risk, specifically, the Cultural/Symbolic perspective developed by anthropologist Mary Douglas, the Risk Society/Reflexive Modernization perspective developed by Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, and the Governmentality perspective on risk emerging from the work of Michel Foucault. In introducing these analytical perspectives, she provides a useful categorization by situating each perspective within a continuum ranging from a weak to a strong social constructionist position. A weak social constructionist position essentially pertains to the realist view of risk, namely, an emphasis on the objective character of risks, as conceptualized by the psychometric paradigm which stresses the distinction between “real” risk and risk perception. At the other end of the spectrum, the strong constructionist position (also referred to as the relativist position) focuses on how risk is a subjective phenomenon that is largely influenced or determined by social factors such as group membership and the power relations that underlie the social meanings that inform risk (and therefore socially “create” risk). In her typology, the Risk Society approach tends to waver (somewhat precariously) between a realist and weak constructionist perspective; the Cultural/Symbolic approach tends towards the strong end of the spectrum, while the Governmentality approach adopts an even stronger relativist approach.

The typology that is developed is very helpful in that it gives the reader a broader orientation that places in perspective the subsequent detailed discussions and critiques of each of the three approaches, thereby facilitating the understanding of the summaries of what are rather complex and finely nuanced theories. In addition, by placing the approaches to risk in this strong-weak social constructionist continuum, Lupton draws attention to the epistemological differences between them. Despite these differences, however, she makes the important observation that there are significant commonalities at the substantive level. First, all three perspectives contend that risk has become a pervasive political and cultural concept that influences the very character of contemporary social life in western society. Second, there is agreement that risk has become a central aspect of human subjectivity. Third,

it is commonly accepted that risks can be managed through human intervention, which in turn implies that risk must necessarily be associated with notions of choice, responsibility and blame. In sum, a common analytical conclusion is reached: risk is a very influential, pervasive and politicized issue in the modern era. Having adopted such an analytical stance, Lupton is free to develop her own perspectives on risk without becoming mired in intellectual debates about the minutiae within and between these perspectives. Thus, after a review of the important concepts and arguments of the three theoretical perspectives (a separate chapter is devoted to each perspective) she goes on to combine pertinent elements from the Cultural/Symbolic, Risk Society/Reflexive Modernization and Governmentality perspectives in order to analyze newer areas involving the relationship of risk to subjectivity, Otherness, and pleasure.

In dealing with the relationship between risk and subjectivity, Lupton deals with the important question of how lay people construct risk knowledges in the context of their everyday lives. She observes that the way risk is dealt with in the public forum may be different from the subjective experience of risk in personal life. Sociological analysis has tended to focus on risk in the public forum to the neglect of the personal and Lupton addresses this deficiency.

The chapter on risk and Otherness begins with a refutation of Ulrich Beck's contention that the tendency to identify the Other as a source of danger diminishes in contemporary times. She develops her arguments by drawing on psychoanalytic theory and the emerging field of the sociology of the body. Further developing the link between risk and subjectivity, Lupton stresses the importance of the Other as necessary for the development of the self as articulated by the Object Relations School within psychoanalysis. According to this school of thought, the early realization by the infant that his/her body is a separate entity from the mother (i.e. the "Other") results in tensions. Subsequently, the sense of Otherness that ensues becomes associated with danger and confounds the sense of peace and order the infant was experiencing before this realization. It is argued that this tension and conflict brought out in the early stages of life has lingering effects throughout adult life and consequently, the self is necessarily always defined against the Other – that which is not us. The Other therefore always represents a sense of danger or risk to the individual and anything that cannot be readily ordered or categorized leads to feeling of uncertainty and angst. Since risk by definition always involves uncertainty, it may be considered as one form of the "Other." The implications of such an argument for the analysis of society are numerous and Lupton delves into some examples of these in relation to gender and ethnic relations where the marginalized member of society is considered "risky" or threatening because of the "Other" status culturally linked to such an individual by the dominant group.

In the final chapter, Lupton turns her attention to the relationship between risk and pleasure. After reviewing Foucault's position that individuals in modern society have become self-regulating and self-controlling (as to opposed to social control by coercive external forces of the state), Lupton argues that some individuals today rebel against such self-control and self-regulation through the active and voluntary courting of risks involved in, for example, extreme sports such as white water rafting, sky diving and rock climbing. Further, lesser forms of risk-taking are considered by some as a necessary part of "self-actualization". Thus, Lupton notes that many self-help manuals argue that unless individuals take some risks, they will place limits on their personal growth and remain trapped in their stagnant condition. As such, risk taking becomes a sort of flip-side of modernity, a response to the ever intensifying control and predictability of modern life.

Finally, Lupton discusses how risk pursuit or risk avoidance attitudes may be linked to the socially constructed ideals of masculine and feminine identity.

In evaluating this book, I must admit that Lupton appears to cover all the bases and extends the theoretical work on risk in new and exciting directions, particularly in regard to the cultural dimensions of risk in the contemporary era. The treatment of risk detailed in this book reveals how the notion of risk is both a conceptual and analytical tool for sociologists as well as an emergent cultural product in and of itself. This recognition is a positive development in the sociology of risk because it directs analytical attention to the relationships between the political-economic, technical and the cultural spheres, instead of situating the notion of risk squarely in one of these areas as if they were mutually exclusive categories. Further, Lupton alerts us to how the concept of risk should be considered in the analysis of a diverse set of social phenomena and should no longer be thought of as a narrow, technical concept of interest to only those studying the sociology of science or risk analysis.

As the arguments developed in the book are theoretically sophisticated, I would recommend this book for use in more advanced courses in sociological theory, environmental sociology, and cultural studies.

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