



Book Review

Risk and Everyday Life

John Tulloch and Deborah Lupton

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In this book, the authors take up the daunting task of empirically testing, verifying, and (*delete*) (dis)confirming and elucidating upon some of the basic precepts in Ulrich Beck's 'risk society' thesis. This is a challenging endeavour as various critics have observed, because the theoretical formulations that underlie the risk society perspective cast a broad conceptual net at quite an abstract level of generalization, while at the same time, the argumentation is finely nuanced and subtle (Rosa, 1998; Alexander, 1996). Indeed, in reviewing Beck's seminal work, *Risk Society: Towards A New Modernity*, Leiss notes that there are actually three main streams of argumentation presented in the book. These are only loosely held together and requires the reader to 'fill in the blanks and accept a good deal on faith' (Leiss, 1994; p. 544). The three streams identified include: (i) a contribution to the Marxist and Weberian analyses of industrial society; (ii) a critique of science and instrumental rationality in modernity; and (iii) an elaboration on the manner in which risk is conceived and managed in contemporary society. Consequently, the issue of empirical verification of the risk society theory as a whole becomes difficult because the number of concepts that need to be operationalized to test it simply becomes too unwieldy, thus the practical need arises to limit the focus on only select aspects of the overall theory. It is with this realization that Tulloch and Lupton begin their deductive investigation of the empirical basis of the risk society thesis by investigating the general question of how in a setting of heightened awareness and publicity about risk, do people respond, experience and think about risk as part of their everyday lives. The authors address specific questions that naturally derive from this general problem statement such as: What does 'risk' as a concept mean to people and how do they see it as affecting their lives? What risks do people consider most threatening or important to themselves and to members of the society in which they live? Which individuals, social groups or institutions do they see as causing or having responsibility over risk? What kinds of risks do they choose to take or avoid, and why?



To address these questions, the authors focus on Beck's arguments regarding 'individualization', that is, how individuals in the risk society are expected to actively seek knowledge about risks and make their own decisions on these risks based on such knowledge. Such an emphasis also brings forth the need to consider the issue of 'lay' *versus* 'expert' knowledge in the risk society, and this aspect of Beck's argumentation was also discussed by the authors at various points in the book. The empirical data were gained through in-depth interviews of 60 British and 74 Australian members of the general public carried out from 1997 to 2000. The sample was selected to include people with a range of age, educational and occupational backgrounds representing an equal number of men and women. The interviewees were questioned on their views about a wide range of risks including those pertaining to: the environment, transport, leisure, health, finances, education, family, work, and personal relationships. On the basis of such qualitative data, the researchers constructed what they refer to as 'risk biographies.' These risk biographies were essentially narrative accounts of the personal experiences of the interviewees with regard to specific and general risk issues; that is, profiles of the ways in which 'aspects of risk understandings and experiences are lived as part of individual biographies as well as via shared beliefs and meanings' (p. 17). Several representative risk biographies are selected for detailed discussion as illustrative case studies. The discussion of these cases serve as the substantive basis of the ensuing analysis presented in the book.

It was evident that through the use of interview methods to construct risk biographies, the researchers were able to quite effectively tap into the cultural and personal nature of risks – aspects largely neglected by Beck. Thus, in addressing this particular shortcoming of the risk society thesis, the authors were able to investigate and gain insights into how perceptions and experiences of risk may be influenced by sociological variables such as gender, age, sexual identity and ethnicity thereby contributing an important and necessary corrective to Beck's grand theory.

Although a major area of focus for the risk society theory were environmental risks – particularly those that are 'invisible' and 'catastrophic' in nature, such as chemical and nuclear risks as well as the risks of genetically modified food – a key finding revealed by the risk biographies reviewed in this book was that the general population does not appear to be preoccupied with these types of risks, at least to the extent that the risk society thesis seems to imply. The authors note that very few of the individuals interviewed listed environmental risks when asked to list the risks to which they felt they had been exposed. Rather, the types of risk concerns for many citizens in Britain and Australia involved such matters as: those



risks associated with stability in personal situations involving the financial/economic/work domains as well as other types of risks linked to social divisiveness (e.g. racism, sexism, etc.). While the types of risks interviewees voiced most concern about varied on the basis of individual background experiences (such as those immigrating from particular countries), it was also noted that a pattern could be discerned in terms of the types of risk of most concern to British *versus* Australian interviewees in general. For example, it was evident that the issue of race was frequently raised by the Australian interviewees because at the time of the interviews, a national election was soon to occur and a new party entered into this country's political arena on a platform of racist and discriminatory policies. On the other hand, issues of racism did not arise as frequently among British interviewees. For those in Britain, the interviews revealed that the more prominent concerns related to the fear of crime; the creation of a 'risk free' environment for children; and dealing with the risks associated with increasing automobile traffic. These findings again point towards the need to adopt a necessary corrective to the risk society argumentation; namely that, although the notion of the 'democratizing' nature of risks may exist in terms of mega-environmental risks crossing social class, ethnicity, and gender lines – as emphasized by Beck – such conceptualizations are nevertheless overshadowed by other risk concerns of the general population. Notably, these concerns are very much influenced by, and embedded in, the local cultural and political context in which individuals find themselves, including groupings based on social class, ethnic background, gender and sexual orientation. It should further be noted that the need for this corrective has also been stressed by those working in the 'environmental justice' paradigm in North America, who draw attention to the local context in issues related to the social distribution of risk and environmental racism – perspectives with which the authors of the present work did not engage. This apparent omission is perhaps understandable because of the differing socio-political context and historical trajectories of North America and Britain/Australia (thereby actually affirming the authors points about considering the local circumstances in influencing personal views of risk).

It is worth noting that not only do the researchers contribute to the study of risk by offering empirical verification (and refutation) of various tenets of the risk society thesis, but, they also advance this area of study by introducing new ways to analyse risk in everyday life. As alluded to above, this is seen, for example, through the construction of 'risk biographies'. Another example introduced by the authors in this regard is the notion of 'border crossings' (with a chapter devoted to this innovative concept). The notion of border crossings relates to those personal risks experienced when individuals cross



symbolic borders such as those involving: immigration and diaspora; sexual preference; and aging. Specific examples of these include the risks associated with migration to unknown countries and culture; the risks associated with publicly revealing a stigmatized status (such as homosexuality) in the public sphere; or those risks related to the coming of terms with an aging body in a society that cherishes youth. This is an interesting approach to the study of personal risk that is neglected by the risk society thesis because of its tendency to under-emphasize the subjective dimensions of risk.

A third example of how neglected dimensions of the risk society thesis are identified and addressed by the authors involves their treatment of the issue of control. Invariably, Beck's thesis focuses exclusively on the involuntary risks, whereas data from Tulloch and Lupton's interviews reveal the importance of control. An important insight raised by the authors in this connection is that local and personal circumstances – particularly those influenced by social class, gender, and race – do play a role in how risk is perceived. For example, it was noted from their interviews that those with high levels of education and significant cultural and economic capita often expressed the view that individuals should take responsibility for risks by taking personal measures to avoid them rather than expect others to protect them or to blame others for the risks to which they are exposed.

The examples given above reveal the explanatory potential of the approach developed and applied by the authors. Specifically, this approach involved an analytical strategy through which risk biographies are mapped onto two 'grids'. The first involved the different sites of risks: environmental, intimate, lifestyle, health, workplace, economic and criminal; while the second pertained to the different personal and spatial biographies of risk. It was in examining the intersection of these two 'grids' that enabled the researchers to gain new and interesting insights into the nature of how risk is experienced at the subjective level. This was perhaps the most valuable and innovative overall contribution of the book.

In sum, this was a very well-written, interesting and insightful book that will be of great interest to those studying risk as a cultural phenomenon, as well as for those engaging with the risk society thesis at a theoretical level. The writing is certainly accessible to undergraduate and graduate students and would serve as a very nice introduction to tutorial and lecture discussions geared towards the linking of theoretical precepts with experiences in everyday life.

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