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Introduction: risk and sociocultural theory

Deborah Lupton

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 writings on risk in English see also Beck, 1992a, 1992b, 1994, 1995, 1996a, 1996b; 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).

I have elsewhere identified these three major approaches respectively as the 'cultural/symbolic', the 'risk society' and the 'governmentality' perspectives (see Lupton, 1999). There are, of course, some differences in the approaches offered by the scholars I have grouped together within these perspectives, but there is clear evidence of similar concerns, foci and epistemological underpinnings in their work. Together they stand in clear contrast to technico-scientific approaches to risk in taking into account the broader social and cultural, and in some cases, historical, contexts in which risk as a concept derives its meaning and resonance. For exponents of the technico-scientific perspective, which emerged from and is expressed in such disciplines as science, engineering,

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psychology, economics, medicine and epidemiology, risk is largely treated as a taken-for-granted objective phenomenon. The focus of research on risk in these fields is the identification of risks, mapping their causal factors, building predictive models of risk relations and people's responses to various types of risk and proposing ways of limiting the effects of risks. These inquiries are undertaken adopting a rationalistic approach which assumes that expert scientific measurement and calculation is the most appropriate standpoint from which to proceed. Such researchers may be described, therefore, as adopting a realist approach to risk.

For those working within the influential field of psychometric studies of risk, for example, people are largely viewed as responding individually to risks according to various 'heuristics', or frames of perception and understanding that structure judgement. Little attention is paid to the broader social, cultural and historical contexts in which such heuristics are developed and function. In this research, lay people's judgements on risk are typically portrayed as 'biased' or ill-informed compared with 'experts' more 'accurate' and 'scientific' assessments. The question of how risk might be understood as a sociocultural phenomenon in its own right rarely intrudes into technico-scientific research endeavours. This question, however, propels the analyses of writers adopting the three major social and cultural perspectives referred to above. For exponents of these perspectives, a risk cannot simply be accepted as an unproblematic fact, a phenomenon that can be isolated from its social, cultural and historical contexts. Rather, what are identified as 'risks', by 'experts' as much as lay people, are understood as inevitably the outcome of sociocultural processes. Further, such risks tend to serve certain social, cultural and political functions.

These commentators argue that there are a number of important new features in notions of risk in late modern societies. They have addressed the following aspects of risk: the ways in which risks are conceptualized, in terms of from where they are thought to originate and whom they are seen to affect; how blame is ascribed for risk; the role played by expert knowledges in identifying, mediating and managing risk; the ways in which different perspectives on risk tend to create conflict between social groups based on differing aesthetic, moral and political assumptions; the relationship between the emergence of risk as an important phenomenon and broader social structural trends such as modernization and globalization; and the symbolic use of risk as a means of casting blame upon certain individuals and social groups, distinguishing social groups and establishing cultural boundaries.

The 'cultural/symbolic' perspective proposed by Douglas and her

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followers has its origins in her earlier work on notions of purity and contamination (Douglas, 1966/1969). In this earlier work, Douglas argued for a view of these notions as serving to construct cultural boundaries – between individual bodies, between social groups within a community and between communities. What is understood to be contaminating or polluting – and therefore as dangerous in the threat it poses to social order – is culturally specific, and works to establish and maintain ideas about self and Other. Douglas' later writings on risk and culture drew attention to the use of the concept of risk as a means in contemporary western societies of maintaining cultural boundaries. She sees risk as acting primarily as a locus of blame, in which 'risky' groups or institutions are singled out as dangerous. A 'risky' Other may pose a threat to the integrity of one's own physical body or to the symbolic body of the community or society to which one belongs. Notions of risk, Douglas argues, are inevitably phrased through cultural assumptions, and thus are shared conventions and expectations rather than individualistic judgements or 'cognitive aids for the individual decision-maker' (1985: 80). Risk acts as a 'forensic resource' in providing explanations for things that have gone wrong or unfortunate events that are foreseen to occur. Risk as a forensic resource has come to dominate in western societies because of its associations with scientific neutrality, while that of 'sin' or 'taboo' continues to dominate thinking about the dangerous Other in non-western societies.

With her collaborator Wildavsky (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Douglas 1992), Douglas developed a functional structuralist analysis of the cultural response to risk in communities and organizations, entitled the 'grid-group' model (where group relates to the degree of group ethos and grid to the presence of other constraints and expectations that shape social relations). High-group and high-grid organizations are hierarchical in nature and conform closely to group norms and responses to risk, placing their trust in institutions. In contrast, low group and low grid organizations are highly individualistic, preferring a self-regulatory approach to risk. While such structuralist models of risk responses may be criticized for their rigidity, they do begin to offer a view on risk that goes beyond a focus on the individual and her or his psychological or cognitive response to risk to an interest in the sociocultural context in which individuals are sited and through which they make judgements about risk.

The 'risk-society' theorists have chosen to focus their analyses largely on macro-structural factors influencing what they see to be an intensification of concern in late modern societies about risks. They argue that the risks produced under the conditions of late modernity have in-

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creased in magnitude and become globalized, and are therefore more difficult than in past eras to calculate and therefore manage or avoid. Central to Beck's and Giddens' writings 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 are 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.

The role played by experts in constructing and mediating discourses on risk would also appear to be a particularly late modern development. Since the sixteenth century, as Foucault and exponents of the 'governmentality' perspective have described, a huge network of expert knowledges has developed, accompanied by apparatuses and institutions built around the construction, reproduction, dissemination and practice of these knowledges. 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 coercive or 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 then 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

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

Several writers on governmentality have drawn attention to the increasing focus in contemporary neo-liberalism (the political rationale that currently dominates Anglophone countries), on personal responsibility for avoiding and managing risk. They have identified a 'new prudentialism' currently evident in governmental discourses and strategies, which moves away from older notions of social insurance as a means of distributing risks to a focus on individuals protecting themselves against risk (see O'Malley, 1996; Dean, 1997). Like the 'risk society' theorists, therefore, some exponents of the 'governmentality' perspective have drawn attention to the importance placed upon the self-management of risk and the increasing privatization of risk. They have less to say about the ways in which large institutions are singled out as responsible and 'to blame' for risks, a point emphasized in both Douglas' work and that of Beck and Giddens.

While all three theoretical perspectives emphasize the social, cultural and political nature of risk, they each offer somewhat differently nuanced approaches to the phenomenon as socially constructed. Indeed, they may be placed at different points along a continuum, at which a realist approach of the kind offered in technico-scientific approaches is at one pole and a highly relativist constructionist approach is at the other (see Lupton, 1999: chapter 2 for a more detailed model of the risk continuum). The 'risk society' perspective tends to waver between a realist and a weak social constructionist position on risk. Beck in particular tends to move ambivalently between the two positions. Sometimes he suggests that risks are objective phenomena which are proliferating out of control, while at other times he draws attention to their mediation through social and cultural processes. In one of his books Beck explicitly seeks to develop a position that lies between realism and social constructionism. In doing so he puts forward the idea that 'real risks' exist and can be objectively measured through science but also supports the notion that what are considered to be 'risks' are conceptualized differently in different historical and cultural contexts (see Beck, 1995: 76).

The 'cultural/symbolic' perspective is more towards the relativist pole. However, Douglas does emphasize at various points in her writing on risk that she sees the dangers which are identified as risks as 'all too real'. She claims that her interest lies in elucidating the ways in which

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these 'real risks' are singled out as important compared with other possible risks and how they are used in social and cultural relations: 'this argument is not about the reality of dangers, but about how they are politicized' (Douglas, 1992: 29). The 'governmentality' perspective – taking its cue from Foucault's work on the discursive construction of reality – offers the most relativist position on risk. For writers such as Ewald, 'nothing is a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality' (1991: 199). They are, therefore, not interested in investigating the nature of risk itself, but rather the forms of knowledge, the dominant discourses and expert techniques and institutions that serve to render risk calculable and knowable, bringing it into being.

Surprisingly enough, there has been little examination, hitherto, of the convergences and differences in the insights to risk as a sociocultural phenomenon conducted within the three perspectives. Exponents working within each of the perspectives have tended to refer to each other, effectively ignoring the contributions offered by writers adopting the other perspectives. There is little reference to the work of Mary Douglas, for example, in the writings of Beck and Giddens or the governmentality theorists, even as a critique. It is also surprising that there has been little interaction between areas of inquiry such as media and cultural studies, the sociology of the body, postcolonial theory and gender theory and sociocultural theories of risk. Yet several of their concerns and interests overlap: many commentators writing in these areas address questions of risk and danger as sociocultural phenomena. There is much potential for these literatures to relate to each other more closely than they have in the past in further developing insights into risk.

Further, all three major sociocultural perspectives tend to operate at the level of grand theory, with little use of empirical work into the ways in which people conceptualize and experience risk as part of their everyday lives. There remains much room for investigations addressing these issues which bring together theories on risk with empirical research and go beyond the universal 'risk subject' that tends to appear particularly in the 'risk society' and 'governmentality' perspectives. As critics such as Lash (1993) and Wynne (1996) have argued, responses to risk may be understood to be aesthetic, affective and hermeneutic phenomena grounded in everyday experiences and social relationships. Better understanding is needed of how risk logics are produced and operate at the level of situated experience. To what extent, for example, have people in late modern societies adopted the highly rationalistic reflexive approach to risk claimed for them by exponents of the 'risk society' thesis? How do people singled out as being 'at risk' respond to the imperatives on behaviour and deportment issued forth from expert

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knowledges and governmental apparatuses? What sorts of information do individuals trust and draw upon in developing their logics of risk? How do the structuring factors of gender, ethnicity, age, social class and so on, and different social contexts such as the workplace versus leisure sites, for example, influence risk logics? What role do the mass media play in contributing to the risk knowledges of their audiences?

The chapters collected in this book begin to address some of these lacunae, adopting some new ways of using or interpreting risk theories and new topics of investigation. The first chapter, by Nick Fox, unpacks the process of risk assessment by problematizing the relationship between risks and hazards. Fox sets out three epistemological positions on risk, ranging along the realist–constructionist continuum I referred to above. In the ‘realist’ position, as interpreted by Fox, risks map directly on to underlying real hazards. The ‘culturalist’ position sees hazards as real, while risks are the socially constructed responses to these hazards. A third, highly relativist ‘postmodern’ position is proposed and preferred by Fox, in which both risks and hazards are regarded as social constructions. From this position, hazards may be understood as the reifications of moral judgements about the ‘riskiness’ of choices, evoked discursively to support estimations of risk and those assessed to be ‘at risk’. Fox examines the life choices made by people in relation to risk using two case studies: the first of health in the workplace and the second of drug use in club culture. He argues that assessing environmental circumstances as ‘risks’ masks political claims about how people should live, silencing voices which dissent.

The next chapter takes as its point of the departure the topic of fear of crime. John Tulloch argues that fear of crime has received a huge literature. Despite the common positioning in lay and expert cultures of both crime and fear of crime as ‘risks’, however, few commentators have as yet engaged with contemporary sociocultural theories of risk. Focusing in particular on the role played by the media in constructing notions of crime, Tulloch first outlines the epistemological field in which this work and risk theory more broadly has been positioned. His chapter includes a survey of empirical, cultural-realist and poststructuralist work in the fear of crime field that offers both a methodological and theoretical way ahead. Tulloch concludes with some discussion of an empirical study that examined public perceptions of media and fear of crime among Australians. The findings of this study vividly demonstrate the complex interrelationship of audience members’ responses to media with their everyday situated experiences.

As noted above, the theorization of risk has tended to neglect the insights offered by contemporary feminist theory and the sociology of

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the body in understanding the links between gender, embodiment, subjectivity and risk. In my chapter I draw on popular media accounts of pregnancy as well as empirical research involving interviews with pregnant women to address the topic of pregnant embodiment and the ways in which this body is constructed by various discourses as particularly 'at risk' and also 'risky' to others. I make use of some of the insights of all three major theoretical perspectives on risk I have identified above in the discussion. The 'governmentality' perspective is used to examine the pregnant body as an intensely governed body, both on the part of medicine and on the part of the woman herself as an autonomous, self-regulated citizen seeking her own best interests (and, even more importantly these days, those of the foetus). The 'risk society' perspective provides some explanation at the macro-level for why risk discourses have proliferated around pregnancy, including changes in gender relations, women's participation in work, the move towards individualization and the development and introduction of new medical technologies for assessing foetal wellbeing *in utero*. The 'cultural/symbolic' perspective, particularly the psychoanalytic extensions of Douglas' work put forward by feminist philosophers Kristeva and Grosz, offers a way of thinking about the pregnant body as a cultural anomaly, a liminal body that is therefore conceptualized as risky and dangerous to sociocultural order and requiring sustained surveillance and regulation.

Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott's chapter, in addressing risk anxiety in relation to public concerns about children and childhood, provides a complementary analysis, with particular emphasis on the sexualization of risk. Contemporary constructions of childhood and sexuality, they argue, give rise to very particular anxieties whenever the sexual 'innocence' of children is thought to be endangered. Children are regarded as a 'special' category of people (as particularly cherished and vulnerable yet potentially unruly), while sexuality is constructed as a 'special' aspect of social life (uniquely pleasurable but also dangerous, quintessentially part of 'private life' yet hotly contested in public arenas). These two sets of discourses intersect in the construction of the 'innocent' child. Focusing in particular on some recent much-publicized cases of the murder of children by adults and by other children, Jackson and Scott explore these issues in relation to some key antinomies which have emerged in relation to children and childhood in late modernity: tensions between children's autonomy and child protection and between perceptions of children as 'at risk' and as potentially threatening. They argue that the concept of risk anxiety provides a useful means of analysing contemporary fears about children and childhood and thus

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may be conceptualized as contributing to the continuing social construction of childhood.

The next chapter differs from the others in adopting a specifically cultural anthropological approach to understanding aspects of risk. Eva Mackey uses postcolonial theory as a resource for understanding issues of cultural identity and the unexpected resurgence of cultural and racial intolerance in the late modern world of de-territorialized and transnational identities. She argues that new forms of 'cultural racism' emerging in western nation-states often depend upon common-sense conceptions of national cultures 'at risk' from dangerous and destructive foreign elements that supposedly threaten the social cohesion of the nation. Multiculturalism, immigration and Aboriginal rights are often constructed as risks to the 'body politic' of the Australian nation. Mackey uses empirical data from original anthropological research on race and the construction of national identity in Canada and Australia to assess the applicability of work by risk theorists representing a range of approaches. In doing so, her goal is to develop a theoretical framework that will help to understand the emergence of new forms of racial intolerance at the end of the twentieth century. There is a particular focus in her discussion on recent Australian political events around the attempts by Aboriginal people to seek title over land traditionally used by their forebears and the emergence of a new right-wing political party in Australia that has sought to marginalize Aboriginal people and deny them their rights to land.

The final two chapters take a meta-theoretical approach, seeking to identify the ways in which risk discourses and strategies operate as part of broader social concerns and social relations. Mitchell Dean compares the approach to risk in the work of Beck and Giddens with that of the 'governmentality' writers. Dean argues that fundamental to the 'risk society' thesis is a sense of the profound limitation and even subversion of the older mechanisms of risk calculation and management. The 'governmentality' approach, by contrast, attends to precisely those forms of rationality by which risk is constructed as a calculable domain and is linked to techniques of government and self-government. Here may be distinguished different types of risk rationality and technology: epidemiological, insurantal, case-management, and incalculable. According to Dean, our present bears witness to both the subversion of certain types of risk management and to the prodigious attempt at the re-managerialization of risk through multiple techniques. These range from the audit to health promotion, population screening to case-management, in relation to concerns as diverse as smoking, policing, unemployment, mental health, traffic control and pregnancy. Dean

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analyses the use and outcomes of the ‘new prudentialism’ as it operates in relation to risk discourses and strategies.

Stephen Crook takes as his point of departure the importance, in all societies, of the problem of order. He argues that the relations between risk consciousness, risk management and sociocultural order are at the heart of analyses of risk. Crook reviews the insights offered on social order and risk put forward in ‘cultural/symbolic’ (the ‘sociocultural’ account, as he terms it), ‘risk society’ and ‘governmentality’ perspectives, as well as that offered by actor–network theory, an approach which emphasizes the interrelationship of human with non-human actors. He contends that the present high levels of anxiety about risk phenomena of all kinds are intertwined with uncertainties about sociocultural order. Specifically, alternative modes of risk consciousness and regimes of risk management can be related to more general and distinct ‘orderings’: a ‘modern’ ordering centred on formal institutions, a ‘hyper-reflexive’ ordering associated with radical individualization, and a ‘neo-traditional’ ordering working through intense social solidarity. To these orderings correspond ‘organized’, ‘neo-liberal’ and ‘ritualized’ regimes of risk management respectively. Crook claims that the high levels of anxiety about order and risk in contemporary western societies can be related to the eclipse of the hegemony of modern ordering and the inevitable failings of organized risk management. Living with risk, therefore, may involve the acceptance of some degree of uncertainty and instability, however controversial this may seem to we late moderns who are obsessed with control and certainty.

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