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“RISK” IN SOCIAL THEORY

WHERE ARE THE FEMINIST VOICES?

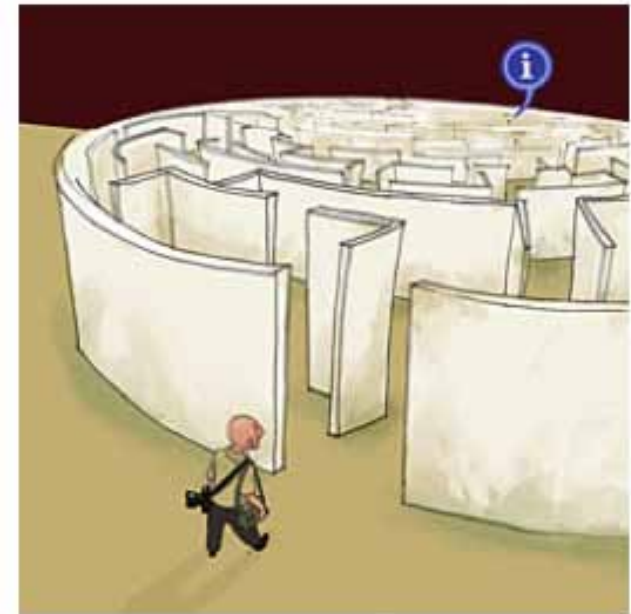
by Mary Fox

To read the front page of a newspaper or to work in many disciplines is to encounter the notion of risk. Stated simply, risk refers to the possibility that something negative may occur or that something positive may not occur. Most of the time risk connotes the possibility of a negative event, but in some quite specific contexts, ‘risk’ and ‘risk-taking’ take on a positive meaning, either in privileged contexts or when limits are being voluntarily explored or expanded. The New York Museum of Metropolitan Art’s 2004 exhibit, “SAFE: Design Takes on Risk,” reflects the increasing prominence of risk discourses and the kinds of ambiguous roles that risk and safety have come to play (Antonelli, 2005).

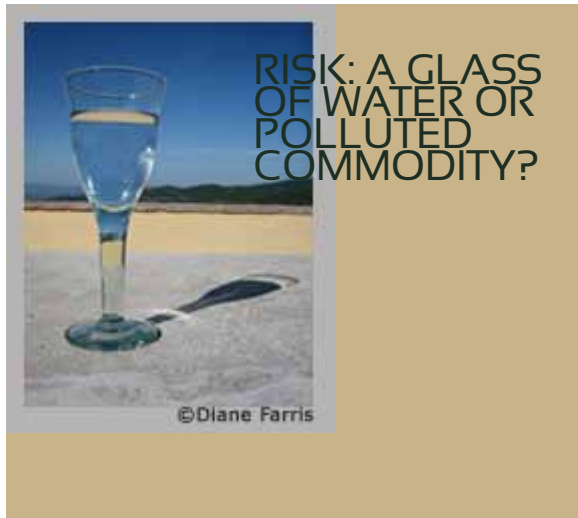
Because work with risk occurs in many disciplines, the term risk often carries cross-disciplinary connotations. Yet the meanings of risk

or the conventions of its analysis in one field are not necessarily those of another. Risk in regulated areas, such as for procedures with medical radiation, may be estimated quite differently from the social risks of, say, homelessness. Risk analysis in economic areas has developed its own conventions, which until recently carried with it the positive connotations of the applied physical sciences and statistics.

While the technologies of risk analysis have grown in scope across the disciplines, a fuller understanding of the social uses of this risk apparatus has led to important critical thought on risk itself (Lewens, 2007; Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2006). The need for such work on risk in social theory is apparent from the variety of ways risk is portrayed, often uncritically, in language. The linguistic examples below are followed by a



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discussion of risk in social theories and a consideration of feminist theories and risk.

THE LANGUAGE OF RISK

Risk-taking in investment, corporate governance, military engagements, and extreme sports has until recently enjoyed a connotation of privilege. In some of these contexts risk-takers have been less available for scrutiny, surveillance, or regulation than might otherwise be the case. Conversely, to be risk-averse in these domains has carried the connotation of timidity and incapacity for leadership. Apart from the above domains the connotation of someone's *taking risks* often varies depending on their gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual identification; in marginalized groups the meaning is frequently negative.

Risky behaviors as a term of analysis frequently has been used in the social sciences for actions of those on the margins, such as individuals engaging in unhealthy regimens or those involved with criminal operations. Behavior that is normative and that involves risks, such as vehicle driving or motorcycle riding, is usually discussed with other terminology.

At-risk individuals are those who engage in risky behaviors or who are subject to conditions that individually they are not fully able to manage. When applied to a person, their "at-riskness" becomes linguistically and statistically a part of them (Lupton, 2005).

A rich critical literature theorizes risk and attempts to account for the above terms and their social applications. Familiarity with this literature is a key to grasping the uses and mis-uses of risk concepts in areas central to social scholarship, research, welfare, and governance.

CRITICAL RISK THEORIES

There is no single, overarching theory of risk, and probably should not be, given its complex social nature. Risk can best be understood through particular approaches that reflect a variety of ideologies, points of view, and versions of social theory (Zinn, 2008).

In the United States, a technical and scientific approach to risk has been applied in fields such as economics, business, health, medicine, psy-

chology, and in many areas of the social sciences. These empirical approaches assume that specific risk events are observable and measurable, and their likelihoods can be calculated statistically. Thus in the professional literatures and in the media one learns of the 'risks' of homelessness, of breast cancer, of toxic exposures, of global warming, and so forth. Critical science studies can demonstrate that each risk 'fact' is the end product of a set of interests, varieties of funding, and selective research (Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2006). Even the neurobiology of risk perception shows that the apperception of risk is a highly complex subjective process.

In *The Risk Society*, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck offers another level of analysis, arguing that developed countries have become 'risk societies' in which the control of risk has become a central organizing social principle. Beck argues that the production, circulation, and trade of risks have exceeded the production of goods in determining social structures. In Beck's theory, power is thus viewed as the ability to exert more or less control over one's risks as an individual and as a society.

Important debates currently address the responsibilities governments should have toward known risks. For example, the European Union has adopted the 'precautionary principle' that argues that even in the face of inconclusive evidence about a product's harm, regulations should err on the precautionary side. In recent years, the

United States has typically required greater evidence of harm and risk than the EU for products before evoking its regulatory powers.

Theories of governmentality, such as those of Foucault, have viewed the ways that risk discourse acts to exert pressure on people to achieve normative success in order to manage their behavior. When individuals deviate from norms, fail to self-monitor, or require state surveillance, they often are said to be engaging in risky behaviors. Thus non-normative behavior can evoke various forms of risk apparatus and its discourse as a form of control.

Sociocultural studies of risk provide thick descriptions of risk transactions by those embedded in particular social contexts. Such work does justice to risk as a multi-determined phenomenon in fluid association with risk knowledges, agents, structures, social forces, and laws (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003). Sociocultural theorists often show an awareness of feminist thought and the female subject, but do not frequently make these their main discussion in risk research.

FEMINISM AND RISK

Remarkably, few scholars have explored risk from feminist points of view. An important exception is Deborah Lupton's work on risk and agency. Lupton considers the gendered subject who often uses local and contextual information to create knowledge of risks that

are at once realist and personally constructed. Her work has the advantages of standpoint theory and suggests rich areas of inquiry into the ways that given risks become gendered and in turn create a gendered subject.

Feminist points of view in law and political science would have a great deal to say about the stakes in risk that are affected by gender. For example, life course factors and reproductive factors may need to be analyzed in terms of differential risks. A feminist legal scholar would want to interrogate the ways that marginality becomes associated with at-riskness, which in turn evokes the state's apparatus of surveillance and control, while privileged risk-takers often suffer no such fate. Risk distribution and risk attitudes might be read as re-installing the unequal social privileges that feminist activism has worked to interrogate and to interrupt.

Feminists who work in the sciences or empirical social sciences may wish to note the very specific ways that risks are calculated that often reflect the social biases from which they emerge. Also, by interrogating the risks that go uncalculated, one finds evidence of social values at work that need critical note. Does finding a homeless youth "at-risk" for given problems individualize that issue without sufficiently interrogating either the obligations of larger social entities or failing to respect the youth's capacity and agency? Clearly risk calculations need careful understanding, scrutiny,

and critical awareness of the uses that they serve.

Risk analysis has become a major force in the effort to make decisions in complex situations under conditions of incomplete information. Social theories of risk reveal processes deeply involved in the human condition, from neurobiological levels to Beck's 'risk society' itself. Feminist perspectives will enrich and be enriched by participation with risk analysis and theory.

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