Taming Risk

Taming Risk:
Uncertainty, Trust and the Sociological Discourse of Modernity

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CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

Taming Risk: Uncertainty, Trust and the Sociological Discourse of Modernity,
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Peer Reviewed by Professor Deborah Lupton, University of Sydney

This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-5317-8, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5317-0

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FOREWORD

Historically speaking, sociology was institutionalised as a distinct branch of knowledge and academic expertise designed in order to provide knowledgeable and scientifically reliable solutions facilitating human understanding of modernity and modern forms of social existence. When perceived from a more contemporary vantage point, the discipline is entangled in structures and institutions of modern society which are conceived as projects *in statu nascendi*. Hence, sociology is nowadays understood as being cognitively subsumed within the very nature of modern society which is perceived as a "grand experiment" and a new model of social organisation that seems to undermine all existential certitudes typical of the realm of pre-modern, traditional societies.[1] In this context, the contemporary sociological perspective on modernity is based upon the critical awareness that the advent of industrial society was not necessarily a leap taken towards the general betterment and amelioration of human existence. Likewise, social development is very often perceived as a deeply traumatic process in which linear progress implodes into the multiplicity of counterfactual and potentially dangerous consequences. As Piotr Sztompka observes:

> The discourse of progress is slowly undermined by another perspective: the discourse of crisis. Several authors notice that major social change, developmental or progressive in some respects, may incur grave social costs. First, it is observed that otherwise progressive processes do not run in a smooth, linear fashion, but rather – to put it metaphorically – through "blood, sweat, and tears,"[…] Second, as the changes expand and deepen, we see ever more clearly that progress does not realize itself in a uniform manner in all domains, areas, or spheres of social life.[2]

This work traces the traumatic character of (late) modernity from the perspectives of trust and risk regarded as the correlates to human action

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[1] Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 15-16.

[2] Piotr Sztompka, "The Trauma of Social Change. A Case of Postcommunist Societies," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds. J.C. Alexander et. al (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), p. 156.

and forms of social consciousness. Therefore, the essay goes well beyond conventional sociological insights into the realm of modern society; namely, the undertakings which imply thinking in terms of institutions (e.g. national states, bureaucratic apparatuses and free markets) and personality traits typical of modern social actors. Moreover, this essay wishes to explore a different conceptual framework for modernity in which social structures and systems are conceptualised from a more phenomenological perspective entailing the notions of risk and trust understood as significant elements of human experience, social knowledge and personal motivation to take actions.

Sociological debates over, to use Anthony Giddens' telling notion, the "phenomenology of modernity" may be structured by the interplay between the ideas of trust and risk conceptualised as agential correlates to modern social systems. The terms, consequently, constitute useful methodological tools that may be applied to diverse sociological insights into the protean, incessantly changeable reality of post-traditional world in which individuals seem to lose the sense of having well-entrenched identities associated with the legacy of customary axiological and normative systems. The reality of late modernity, to put it otherwise, stands under a sign of the all-pervading aura of contingency which seems to run rampant throughout human lives. Individuals are – to use the Heideggerian nomenclature – "thrown into" the world which is structured by the ubiquity of risks, the centrality of agential choice, and the plurality of counterfactual biographical options. Needless to say, the contemporary world may be perceived in terms of "risk climate"[3] in which interpersonal trusting relations may fulfil a palliative role with regard to contingencies and uncertainties of everyday life.

The idea suggesting that trust and risk are essential in order to understand late modern social orders seems to be in league with the extensive criticism of industrial society conceived as a project whose supposedly progressive and future-oriented nature has led us astray. This overtly traumatic character of modernity clearly gestures towards Ulrich Beck's idea of "risk society" postulating that the intensified social awareness of risk and danger is a result of ongoing modernisation processes. In this specific sense, collectivities as well as individuals are haunted by the grim aura of foreboding, a sense of uncertainty suggesting that we all live in the world deprived of shared orientation points – such as fixed identities, trustworthy science, effective mechanisms of policymaking

[3] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 126.

– which individuals may perceive as being trustworthy with reference to their participation in routines of everyday life.

It seems, moreover, that the idea of risk society does not simply imply the rise of uncertainty conceived as "a major force of political mobilization, often replacing references to, for example, inequalities associated with class, race and gender,"[4] but it also indicates the progressive erosion of trust cultures as well as related reservoirs of social capital. The interplay between risk and trust is strongly reflected by a plethora of post-modern theories suggesting that contemporary societies may be seen as realms of universal deregulation, spheres that know no sense of hierarchical order, since from the very onset they were founded as networked and post-traditional patchworks of dissimilar ideas, discourses and counterfactual worldviews.[5]

This essay is, hence, an attempt to outline social and cultural underpinnings of modernity perceived through the perceptual lenses of trust and risk. The argument is divided into six chapters illustrating diverse social and cultural mechanisms structuring societal experiences of risk and trust in modern societies.

The work begins with a strictly methodological note (the first chapter) in which constitutive elements of sociology of risk are being elaborated upon. It is argued that risk, as far as sociological theories are concerned, is an inter-subjective category denoting that uncertainty experience is a product of social and cultural processes of moral attribution. In this way, a constructionist approach to risk-related problems is introduced: uncertainty is no longer a psychological variable, but a cultural construct originating in societal processes of interaction and communication. Furthermore, the chapter postulates a distinction between "strong" and "weak" forms of the constructionist approach to risk-related issues. The distinction, furthermore, is considered as a formative dichotomy facilitating a more informed categorisation of sociological approaches to risk.

The second chapter addresses the contemporary discourse of risk society which becomes inscribed within the framework of more general philosophical and cultural considerations concerning the dissolution of axiological and ideological foundations of modern societies. From this essentially cultural perspective, the chapter aims to delineate a specific "phenomenology of risk society;" that is, a conceptual framework inscribing risk awareness within the panorama of late modern characteristics featuring

[4] Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p. 4.

[5] Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism.* (London: Sage Publications, 2007), pp. 3-5.

binary oppositions between displacement and re-embedding, intimacy and impersonality, expertise and re-appropriation, and privatism and social engagement.[6]

The third chapter offers a further elaboration and a novel re-interpretation of the risk society thesis. Taking the discrepancy between objective danger and subjective risk as the starting point (Niklas Luhmann's perspective), the argument is structured around a possibility of searching for specific mechanisms rendering the inherent societal dynamism of risk society. Such a re-interpretation is methodologically intelligible from the perspective of Piotr Sztompka's theory of social becoming which offers a comfortable theoretical vantage point for observing the ontology of risk society and its functioning in terms of an interplay between human agential experiences of uncertainty as well as systemic or structural framework of risk-related experiences.[7]

Since trust is generally conceived as a remedy to contingencies and dangers, the last three chapters are devoted to mechanisms of trusting relations implicit in the framework of late modern societies. The fourth chapter, thus, outlines an interplay between trusting and risk referred to as a mechanism that is intrinsic to the very nature of modernity. The concepts have become vital analytical tools facilitating our understanding of modern social orders conceived in terms of social and political considerations concerning diverse mechanisms of cooperation and interpersonal communication inherent in modern democratic societies. In this overtly socio-political context, the concepts of risk and trust emerge as theoretical constructs illustrating the perils of collective action and public good accumulation that are typical of modern models of civil society.

Trust is a major component of social order. Yet, the very nature of modernity seems to undermine and jeopardize positive and firmly embedded trust cultures. The last two chapters of the work aim to provide an insight into dangers for trusting and social capital accumulation that are typical of late modern social systems. The fifth chapter outlines sociological debates over the interplay between trust and risk as seen from the perspective of informational systems and social networks that convert the traditional order of sociality into the networked and media-centred era of global village. This process gestures to the transformation of traditional trust cultures towards a new form of "hyper-real" trusting environments which are constituted by impersonal mechanisms implicit in information networks (the Internet) and late modern abstract systems.

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[6] See Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, p. 140.

[7] Jan Burzyński, *Ryzyko w nowoczesnym świecie. Między strukturalną determinacją a podmiotową kreatywnością* (Bielsko-Biała: Wydawnictwo ATH, 2008).

Being a continuation of its predecessor, the last chapter continues the aforementioned argumentation and poses a question concerning the role of post-modern ideologies in the creation of unwavering trust cultures. In this particular case, discourses of post-modernity are interpreted from the perspective of symbolic practices undermining the modernist belief in the project of ordered, bureaucratically administered society. By promoting the ideology of all-pervading deregulation and relativism, the intellectual provocateurs of post-modernity (e.g. Richard Rorty, Zygmunt Bauman) seem to undermine the ideal and axiological foundations of positive trust cultures and introduce a specific, philosophically-oriented discourse of distrust and disbelief.

CHAPTER ONE

MAPPING RISKS: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The concept of risk is a relatively new notion as far as the mainstreams of theoretical and practical sociologies are concerned. Its appearance as a fully-fledged problem on agendas of academic debates in the humanities and social sciences is a result of the "normative shift" in the philosophy of technology which, in turn, has paved the way for the increasing importance of ethics conceived as a discipline aiming to delineate relationships between society and technology.[1] In this particular context, technology is no longer perceived as a morally neutral factor that facilitates processes of modernisation and industrialisation. *Techne* is perceived from an essentially ethical perspective evoking a need to conceptualise societal uses of technology in terms of responsibility and blame.[2] Consequently, the notion of risk has become a token of the contemporary social criticism aimed at the ameliorative powers of science that have enabled people to exert and exercise control over natural as well as societal environments.

The development of sociological interest in danger as well as risk is also closely related to the growing importance of modernization studies. The concepts have been instrumental for developing a more critical perspective on modernization processes which are nowadays perceived

[1]Andrzej Kiepas, *Moralne wyzwania nauki i techniki* (Katowice–Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza "Warszgraf," 1992); Andrzej Kiepas, "Moralne uwarunkowania akceptacji ryzyka w technice," in *Społeczeństwo a ryzyko. Multidyscyplinarne studia o człowieku i społeczeństwie w sytuacji niepewności i zagrożenia*, eds. L.W. Zacher and A. Kiepas (Warszawa-Katowice: Transformacje, 1994); Andrzej Kiepas, *Człowiek wobec dylematów techniki* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Gnome, 2000); Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

[2] David Garland, "The Rise of Risk," in *Risk and Morality*, eds. R.V. Ericson and A. Doyle (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 63-64.

with a sense of disillusionment resulting from the omnipresence of technological dangers and contingencies implicit in contemporary socio-technical systems.[3] Furthermore, the historically unprecedented ubiquity of innovative technologies has given rise to a significant paradigm shift in both theoretical and empirical studies of modernisation processes. This shift of epistemological perspectives resulted in the foundation and institutionalisation of new academic discourses, such as sociology of science and technology, environmental sociology and sociology of risk *par excellance*.[4]

The aim of this chapter is to provide some introductory remarks concerning the sociological approach to risk. As opposed to the psychometric paradigm, whose ultimate goal is to analyse cognitive mechanisms of individual risk perception and assessment,[5] the sociological theories are based upon a firm intellectual conviction postulating that uncertainty experience constitutes an inter-subjective phenomenon which is deeply rooted in societal processes of interaction and interpersonal communication. Hence, sociologists tend to refer to the conceptual category of "risk construct" as a notion coined in order to emphasise a variety of social and cultural processes that have given rise to cognitive strategies and heuristics which individuals utilise in their everyday practices of risk assessment. This overtly constructionist approach may assume – as it is postulated in this chapter – different forms that gesture towards distinct manners of risk conceptualisation in contemporary sociological debates.

The Definition of Risk

Sociologically speaking, the concept of risk belongs to the sphere of human knowledge in which it functions as a cognitive category facilitating our understanding of social and natural environments. It could be, therefore, represented as an element of the shared conceptual framework

[3] It seems that Ulrich Beck's publications have paved the way for the "outbreak" of sociological interest in risk conceived as a correlate of modernisation processes. See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity?* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992).

[4] Lech W. Zacher, "Socjologia ryzyka. Próba nowej dyscypliny," in *Multidyscyplinarne studia o człowieku i społeczeństwie w sytuacji niepewności i zagrożenia*, eds. L.W. Zacher and A. Kiepas (Warszawa-Katowice: Transformacje, 1994), p. 23.

[5] Paul Slovic, "Perception of Risk," in *The Earthscan Reader in Risk and Modern Society*, eds. R. Lofstedt and L. Frewer (London: Earthscan Publishers, 1998).

by means of which social actors make sense out of their environment and refer to it in terms of the reality saturated with unpredictable contingencies as well as dangers. Risk, to put it otherwise, may be perceived as a distinct form of social construct which facilitates taming and calculating uncertainty. Hence, it is little wonder that the construct was automatically subsumed within the typically modern predilection for rationalisation, management and planning:

> Risk has to be separated from hazard or danger. Risk is about the active assessment of future hazards, and becomes a more pervasive notion the more a society seeks to live in the future and shape it actively. The concept of risk becomes generalized with the rise of modernity, as does the idea of insurance. Insurance and safety are the other side of risk.[6]

Since the advent of modern scientific expertise, the notion of risk has become an indispensable element of insurance planning and other management strategies undertaken on individual and collective (corporate) levels. Hence, its role refers both to mapping future counterfactuals as well as providing reliable contingency planning. Nowadays, for instance, most business enterprises are considered to be in a position to take future-oriented actions as soon as relevant risk management procedures are successfully implemented.

The sociological understanding of risk, however, goes well beyond the realms of economy and management. In this context, procedures of risk perception and risk acceptance are regarded as constitutive elements of human agency and are both related to actions involving making more or less informed decisions concerning the future.[7] Consequently, risk awareness is very often conceptualised from the perspective of identity formation processes. Facing the omnipresence of risky decisions, people are very often encouraged to describe themselves as venturesome risk takers who are keen on accepting uncertainty as a part of their pursuits of possible profits. In the sense of identity formation, social experiences of risk are inscribed in culturally acceptable attitudes towards uncertainty.[8]

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[6] Anthony Giddens and Christopher Pierson, *Conversations with Anthony Giddens. Making Sense of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 101.

[7] Anthony Giddens, "The Politics of Risk Society," in *Conversations with Anthony Giddens. Making Sense of Modernity,* A. Giddens and Ch. Pierson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 212.

[8] See: Kazimierz Krzysztofek and Marek S. Szczepański, *Zrozumieć rozwój. Od społeczeństw tradycyjnych do informacyjnych* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo UŚ, 2002); Józef Kozielecki, *Społeczeństwo transgresyjne. Szansa i ryzyko* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe „Żak," 2004); Alex Inkeles, "Nowoczesność indywidualna

This particular viewpoint is, for instance, indicative of diverse sociological theories aiming to explore the constitution of modern personality patterns:

> Being rooted in Max Weber's distinction between tradition and rationality. In the modern personality, secular-rational values are dominant, ascribed status has become subordinate to functional status, mobility possesses a positive value, and an emphatic, cosmopolitan outlook is typical.[9]

Risk acceptance is, thus, a cognitive and behavioural orientation deeply inscribed in the very conception of modern personality. It is also a correlate to the "achievement motivation"[10] orchestrating individual needs for goal accomplishment.

Despite numerous interpretation possibilities, risk may be defined as uncertainty which is experienced and assessed with reference to a subjectively expected volume of harm or loss that may affect an individual's resources of physical, economic, psychological and social descent:

> Being closely related to uncertainty, risk is an indispensable attribute of the human environment. It is implicit in all spheres of human activity, both private and professional, and functions a coefficient to technological and economic processes. Since the ultimate effects of undertaken actions and processes cannot be precisely predicted or controlled by individuals, human beings are compelled to exist in the probabilistic environment in which uncertainty experience is coupled with the existence of negative and positive values.[11]

As a result, risk is inherent in social situations in which a multiplicity of counterfactual outcomes is expected. A similar standpoint is provided by popular dictionaries in which the term is defined as "a state in which the number of possible future events exceeds the number of events that will actually occur, and in which some measure of probability can be attached

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– problemy i nieporozumienia," in *Tradycja i nowoczesność*, eds. J. Kurczewska and J. Szacki (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1984); Alex Inkeles and David N. Smith, "W stronę definicji człowieka nowoczesnego," in *Tradycja i nowoczesność*, eds. J. Kurczewska and J. Szacki (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1984).

[9] Richard D. Brown, "Modernization and the Modern Personality in Early America, 1600–1865. A Sketch of a Synthesis," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 2, no. 3 (winter 1972), p. 201.

[10] See David C. McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1961).

[11] Maryla Goszczyńska, *Człowiek wobec zagrożeń. Uwarunkowania oceny i akceptacji ryzyka* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Żak, 1997), p. 9. Translation T.B.

to each possible outcome."[12] Hence, risk refers to a situation of "cognitive surplus" in which an individual becomes lost in the maze of counterfactual possibilities. The nature of risk seems to transgress the discourse of human reflexivity which, as Anthony Giddens postulates, praises the ability to make informed choices and perform intelligible actions by means of constant self-monitoring.[13] As a result, reflexivity cannot be conceived as an activity of risk evasion, but rather as a cognitive strategy of contingency selection. A decision to move out from the centre of a metropolis to its suburban areas, to provide a provisional example, could be dictated by the self-evident need to run away from the heightened crime volume experienced in city centres. However, at the same time, the decision implies the increase of road accident risk as a consequence of taking part in the routine of daily commuting. Social existence is, in fact, a social practice of risk selection. As Mary Douglas observes:

> The choice of risk and the choice of how to live are taken together. Each form of social life has its own typical risk portfolio.[14]

Risk, therefore, is not a variable that can be intentionally reduced up to the point of non-existence. It is a correlate to socio-cultural realities, a constitutive characteristic which – to put it more philosophically – defines our existence as being "thrown into" the world of contingencies.

This omnipresence of risk cannot be, however, interpreted in a way indicating that all individuals remain equal in terms of experienced uncertainty volumes.[15] Risk is distributed unevenly and social patterns of uncertainty experience – regardless of contemporary technological risks and their global character[16] – are related to social inequalities as represented by social classes or strata. This means that the actual volume

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[12] Graham Bannock, et.al., *The Penguin Dictionary of Business* (Penguin Books, 2002), p. 323.

[13] Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 36; Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

[14] Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture. An Essay on the Selection of Environmental and Technological Dangers* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), p. 8.

[15] Jan Burzyński, *Ryzyko w nowoczesnym świecie. Między strukturalną determinacją a podmiotową kreatywnością* (Bielsko-Biała: Wydawnictwo ATH, 2008), p. 81.

[16] Cf. Beck, *Risk Society.*

of experienced uncertainty is embedded in an individual's social standing which, in turn, determines the probability of being exposed to certain real-life contingencies (unemployment and health risks are prime examples here).[17]

Sociological definitions of risk share a perception that the combination of uncertainty, future orientation, and action delineates the constitutive elements of the term in question. Piotr Sztompka, for instance, defines risk as a variable referring to "humanly created future, threats due to the actions of other people (personal, social, political, economic risks)."[18] Consequently, the sociological perspective on risk usually comprises the following elements:

1. risks are always oriented to the future disguised as something unpredictably dangerous,
2. although risks are very often related to natural reasons, the sociological perspective is exclusively focused upon humanly-made contingencies,
3. the term denotes uncertainty concerning loss or harm combined with a grim expectation that the danger could be impossible to prevent or mitigate,
4. risks always imply some degree of agential commitment; they are rooted in taken decisions and performed actions.[19]

Having stressed these characteristics, we must not neglect the fact accentuating that the sociological understanding of risk becomes even more complicated when it comes to technology and modernisation studies. In this particular case, the sociological investigation into this problem area refers to postulates suggesting that risk should be defined as a property inherent in processes of social, economic and technological modernisation. Hence, risk, as Ulrich Beck justly notices, is perceived as:

> […] a systemic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself. Risks, as opposed to older dangers, are

[17] See Jan Burzyński, "Ryzyko a struktura społeczna. W kręgu teoretycznych i metodologicznych rozważań nad ryzykiem w socjologii," in *O wielości struktur i ich transformacji. Szkice i eseje socjologiczne,* ed. E. Jurczyńska-McCluskey (Bielsko-Biała: Wydawnictwo ATH, 2004).

[18] Piotr Sztompka, *Trust. A Sociological Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 30.

[19] Ibid., p. 30.

> consequences which relate to the threatening force of modernisation and to its globalisation of doubt. They are politically reflexive.[20]

Beck seems to point out that technological risks have become the negative surplus of modernisation processes, the unwanted added value of social change. This is especially true of "manufactured risks" which – as opposed to "external risks" – are the side effects of social development related especially to scientific and technological progress. Since external risks are inherent in violations of safety procedures, the manufactured ones are less susceptible to managerial intervention and are embedded within a sphere of contingency that is endemic to the reality of rapid social change.

The aforementioned sociological definition hints at another theoretical problem to solve; namely, the distinction between danger and risk. This problem is central to sociological debates on technology in which risk is generally seen as a function of objectively existing dangers or hazards localised within socio-technical systems. Such a differentiation is also typical of Niklas Luhmann's conceptualisation in which danger is conceived as a property of abstract social systems, whereas risk is defined as a coefficient of humanly made actions or decisions.[21]

Yet, the aforementioned distinction is endowed with more substantial sociological implications. One may postulate that agential, action-related risks and objectively defined dangers are related to each other in a way that agency and structure can be intertwined in sociological analysis.[22] In this sense, as Jan Burzyński points out, the category of risk is placed in the sociological middle ground between the relative autonomy of human agency as well as systemic and structural determinants. Therefore, the notion of risk is inherent in the sociological understanding of human actions as being situated between the structurally defined past (the plane of systemic determinants) and the agential orientation to the future conceived as a sphere of possibilities as well as threats.[23] Taking this postulate into consideration, one may also observe that social actions take place within the framework of pre-established structures, systems and institutions. These phenomena are represented as socio-technical systems, economic and labour markets, or diversified regulatory and political bodies. In this

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[20] Beck, *Risk Society*, p. 21.
[21] Niklas Luhmann, *Risk. A Sociological Theory* (New Brunswick and London: Aldine Transaction Publishers, 2005).
[22] See Burzyński, *Ryzyko w nowoczesnym świecie*
[23] J.M. Barablet, "Social Emotions: Confidence, Trust and Loyalty," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* no. 9/10 (1996), p. 82.

way, they are regarded as "institutionalised risk environments" which, as Giddens teaches us, "link individual and collective risks."[24]

These systems could be also seen with different sociological lenses through which they assume a shape of structurally defined constraints and opportunities inscribed in such aspects of social structures as normative, ideal, interactive and economic resources.[25] Hence, risk may be perceived as a correlate of undertaken actions, but its experience is always mediated by the position that an individual occupies within social structures and systems.

The Inter-Subjectivity of Risk

The conceptualisation of risk as an action-related variable that binds subjective agency with the objectified influence of social structures and systems opens a new path of interpretation facilitating perceiving uncertainty experiences in terms of the inter-subjectivity and trans-personality of social life. In this particular sense, the notion is no longer defined as a cognitive representation of objectively existing dangers, which is typical of psychological studies aiming to delineate subjective risk constructs from the perspective of qualitative characteristics of hazardous events.[26] Sociologists, on the contrary, tend to seek for a truly societal (inter-personal) dimension of risk experiences in which the term becomes a variable deeply inscribed in trans-personal properties of social and cultural systems.[27]

The interest vested in the societal dimension of risk experiences is indicative of the methodological turn towards "soft variables" in sociology. The concept has been coined in order to delineate new conceptual and methodological solutions facilitating a more detailed insight into phenomenological and cultural aspects of social systems. From this perspective, social reality is usually conceptualised in terms of a

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[24] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*

[25] The enumeration refers to the INIO scheme devised by Piotr Sztompka. This concept and its relation to the risk problematic is elaborated upon in the third chapter. See: Piotr Sztompka, "Pojęcie struktury społecznej: próba uogólnienia," *Studia Socjologiczne,* no. 3 (1989); Piotr Sztompka, *Society in Action. The Theory of Social Becoming.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

[26] This interpretation is indicative of the "psychometric paradigm," a leading theme in the contemporary psychology of risk. See Slovic, "Perception of Risk…"

[27] Deborah Lupton, "Sociology and Risk," in *Beyond the Risk Society. Critical Reflections on Risk and Human Security*, eds. G. Mythen and S. Walklate (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006), pp. 12-13.

living matrix which consists of interpersonal relationships and other mutually oriented actions fostering the purposeful exchange of cultural resources, such as symbols, norms and values. The interchange, in turn, results in the collective construction of the inter-subjective universe of social practice:

> At the ontological level there is a turn away from "hard", organic, holistic, or systemic images of society, toward the "soft" field image of social fabric seen as a fluid and constantly moving pattern, a matrix of human actions and interactions. At the epistemological level there is the corresponding turn away from structural explanations invoking "hard" variables – like class position, status, economic situation, demographic trends, settlement patterns, technological development, organisational forms – toward the cultural explanations focusing on "soft" intangibles like meanings, symbols, rules, values, norms, codes, frames, and forms of discourse.[28]

In the context of the methodological shift delineated above, the sociology of risk has not been devised in order to study risk *per se*. It is rather aimed at exploring and explaining the idiosyncrasies of social experiences in a situation of risk exposure. Consequently, sociologists tend to refer to all experiences of risk that have been filtered through values, norms and symbols of culture. In other words, risk is seen as a social construct which is interwoven into the inter-subjective tissue of cultural symbols, axiological and normative regulations as well as discourses of ideology.

This particular conceptualisation is based upon a firm belief that risk is always experienced in a collective way, which means that the processes of assessing and defining natural and man-made hazards are followed by an intense need to socialize, to make one's experiences a matter of public discourse.[29] As a consequence, dealing with risk is not only a situation of subjective judgement. It implies engaging oneself in interpersonal processes of communication as well as meaning and value negotiations. Risk acceptance and risk management depend on a community consensus, a certain *modus operandi* that aims to create an agenda of common fears and common coping strategies.

The assumption of the inter-subjective nature of risk is at heart of the "cultural theory of risk" developed by Mary Douglas and Aaron

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[28] Sztompka, *Trust*, pp. 1-2.

[29] Mary Douglas, *Risk and Blame. Essays in Cultural Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 12.

Wildavsky.[30] The discourse aims to criticize the psychological and psychometric theories of risk which are viewed as individualistic and, therefore, incapable of describing a plethora of societal processes and phenomena associated with uncertainty perception, assessment and acceptance. As Steve Rayner comments on the methodological assumptions implicit in the cultural approach:

> Thus, cultural theory is fundamentally a social theory concerned first with relationships among human beings and second with societal relationships with nature. Methodological individualism that extrapolates from individual behaviour to social action has no place in cultural analysis.[31]

The cultural theory of risk utilises a typically sociological language and methodology in which societal totalities, cultural forms of interpersonal interaction and models of social order assume crucial explanatory functions. In this sense, risk is no longer conceptualised from a psychological perspective of individual perceptions or assessments. The conceptual category of risk is regarded as a cultural construct whose function is to uphold moral orders by means of reinforcing values, norms or lifestyles that are dominant in a given community or institutional setting.[32] Consequently, technological risks are seen from an essentially moral perspective in which hazards are defined in terms of moral defects affecting communities and their traditional ways of living.

The conversion of the modern, actuarial discourse of risk into the moral narrative of blame stems from the nature of contemporary technological hazards. It is, to cut a long story short, the uncertain, ambiguous character of technological dangers that calls for the interpretation procedures implying allocation of blame for their potentially negative consequences.[33]

> Knowledge always lacks. Ambiguity always lurks. If you want to cast blame, there are always loopholes for reading the evidence right.[34]

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[30] See especially: Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1969); Dougals, Wildavsky. *Risk and Culture*; Douglas, *Risk and Blame*.

[31] Steve Rayner, "Cultural Theory and Risk Analysis," in *Social Theories of Risk*, eds. S. Krimsky and D. Golding (Westport: Praeger, 1992), p. 86.

[32] Dougals, Wildavsky. *Risk and Culture*, p. 8; Douglas, *Risk and Blame*, p. 6.

[33] Richard V. Ericson and Aaron Doyle, eds., *Risk and Morality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 1-9.

[34] Douglas, *Risk and Blame*, p. 9.

This is especially true of "manufactured risks" and the societal processes of their management. In this context, the general public is compelled to adhere to simplified methods of reasoning in order to make sense out of a theoretically infinite number of consequences spawned by a misuse of sophisticated technologies. The blame-allocating mechanism of taboo is one of the heuristics available in such cases. It evokes, as Douglas asserts, the pre-modern mentality of fear in order to cope with modern technological dangers. Here, the cryptic nature of modern technological contingencies facilitates the outbreak of moral outrage which, in turn, provides excellent opportunities for casting blame on diverse commercial and regulatory institutions (especially the entrepreneurial sector, local and federal authorities). Thus, it is the moral mechanism of blaming the Other that provides communities at risk with moral integration and, as a result, paves the way for undertaking collective actions aimed at the reinforcement of traditional order by means of struggling with pro-technological opponents. This moral and inter-personal quality of risk experiences is especially evident in the case of social movements and other forms of grassroots protest organisations formed *ad hoc*. Douglas' cultural approach explains, for instance, social mobilisation mechanisms orchestrating the dynamics of the so-called "NIMBY" movements (Not In My Back Yard). Risk awareness becomes here a powerful social force that is capable of transforming an individualised perception of danger into an inter-personal process of collective action.

Running parallel is also a postulate suggesting that social mobilisation induced by risk remains deeply inscribed in the "second theory of action."[35] The term denotes a methodological standpoint stressing that human agency cannot be perceived through the objectified prism of technical or economic rationality delineating the figure of self-centred and overly utilitarian *homo oeconomicus*. Processes of social mobilisation may depend on values of cooperation represented by the interactive *homo reciprocus*, a sociable and cooperative-minded individual who remains shrouded in the aura of reciprocal communication constituting cultural rationality of inter-personal descent.[36]

> At the ontological level there is a shift from the image of action seen as purely rational, constantly calculating, consistently maximising profit and minimising cost (*homo oeconomicus*), toward the richer picture including

[35] Sztompka, *Trust*, pp. 1-2.
[36] See Howard Becker, *Man in Reciprocity* (New York, 1956), p. 1.

> also emotional, traditional, normative, cultural components: value orientations, social bonds, attachments, loyalties, solidarities, identities.[37]

There is little doubt that Douglas' cultural theory of risk accentuates the development of axiological and normative bonds, the emergence of relatively stable "imagined communities," as Benedict Anderson aptly calls the phenomenological sense of attachment to a social grouping which is expressed by the subjective affirmation of its inner axiology and other elements of group culture.[38] In this sense, the initial feeling of uneasiness becomes converted into a social asset (one may call it "social capital") rendering collective actions possible. As opposed to more institutionalised forms of sociality, in which interpersonal cohesion and societal bonds are attained due to the existence of inner regulatory bodies, imagined communities are far less formalised. Their social productivity depends upon the existence of reciprocal moral obligations as well as ethical habits which are not enforced by a third party (the state or other regulatory bodies).[39] As Bronisław Misztal concludes:

> This idea of society has less to do with formal organisation than with a sense of belonging, trust and responsibility, and duties towards others who share our values, interests and goals.[40]

Imagined communities could be conceptualised in terms of specific "moral communities" consisting of mutual and multilateral trust relations since from the very onset they are founded upon a generalised expectation that trust, loyalty and solidarity should be reciprocated. This concept is, nevertheless, firmly embedded within the humanities: one may recall Alexis de Tocqueville's idea of "the habits of the heart" referring to the ideological and cultural underpinnings of complex social systems.[41]

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[37] Sztompka, *Trust*, pp. 1-2.
[38] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* (London: Verso, 1991).
[39] Cf. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 7.
[40] Bronisław Misztal, *Trust in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp. 206-207.
[41] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. II (New York: Knopf, 1945), p. 8. See also Sztompka, *Trust*, p. 6.

Risk: A Constructionist Approach

Sociological theories of risk are founded upon an assumption stating that individuals do not perceive reality in a fully objective and purely rational way. Human perception is shaped by socio-cultural processes that originate in a given societal environment. In this sense, risk perception, as Ortwin Renn postulates, is always anchored in the inter-subjectivity of social co-existence and any attempts to separate socio-cultural influences from an individual's experience of uncertainty are as untenable as squaring of the circle:

> All sociological and anthropological concepts of risk, however, do have in common the notion that "humans do not perceive the world with pristine eyes, but through perceptual lenses filtered by social and cultural meanings transmitted via primary influences such as the family, friends, superordinates, and fellow workers."[42]

Such an assumption is typical of the constructionist approach which – as far as sociological theories of risk are concerned – is represented by two forms of varying strength.[43] The weak form of constructionist risk definitions gestures towards the conceptualisation of risk as a coefficient to objectively existing technological hazards. Symbols, values, and norms of culture function as mere intermediaries in the process of risk perception and uncertainty assessment. As a consequence, social and cultural processes are seen as added values to already existing technological and natural dangers. It is, to put it otherwise, the surplus of culture that makes risk a socially intelligible phenomenon, a problem worth noticing by social sciences.

At the same time, the perception of dangers is not an objective calculation based upon elaborate probability assessments as it is true of technical and economic risk analyses. Hence, risks become highly contextualized and their assessment "begins with the setting, for example, social structure, institutional form, or cultural milieu."[44] Needless to say, social and cultural settings are perceived as instrumental variables in explaining human responses to risk problems which, as the constructionist

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[42] Ortwin Renn, "Concepts of Risk: A Classification," in *Social Theories of Risk*, eds. S. Krimsky and D. Golding (Westport: Praeger, 1992), p. 67.
[43] Deborah Lupton, *Risk* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 28-29.
[44] Shledon Krimsky, "The Role of Theory in Risk Studies," in *Social Theories of Risk*, eds. S. Krimsky and D. Golding (Westport: Praeger, 1992), p. 15.

paradigm postulates, are automatically subsumed within issues referring to socially prevailing values, policies or discourses.

By way of illustration, let us consider the shortcomings of probabilistic risk assessments which are frequently employed in technical and actuarial risk analyses. These objectified definitions draw on strictly mathematical calculations which teach us that the risk variable should be expressed as the relative frequency of a negative event which is averaged over time (probability) and multiplied by the magnitude of its undesirable consequences represented as a volume of physical harm to people, technical systems or environments:[45]

RISK = PROBABILITY X MAGNITUDE

This perspective, however, is far from being an accurate representation of risk as it is perceived by people who do not work as professional actuaries or insurance brokers. It is mostly due to the fact that probabilistic risk assessments cannot differentiate between low-probability/high-consequence events and low-consequence/high-probability occurrences. This critical indifference, nevertheless, stands in a contradistinction to lay people's responses to risk in which the first type of occurrences is habitually assessed as being more dangerous.[46] Hence, the explanatory failure of probabilistic risk assessments shows that uncertainty is endowed with a parade of intangible characteristics of psychological, social and cultural descent that cannot be derived from purely objective calculations. Furthermore, this explanatory failure shows that risk is a social construct whose existence remains emergent; i.e., anchored in properties that originate beyond the cognitive horizon of an isolated individual and, consequently, belong to the trans-personal sphere of social and cultural organisation.

The criticism of the aforementioned actuarial and technical approaches has paved the way for numerous attempts to re-define risk. Given the social and cultural contextuality of risk perception, the variable is nowadays defined in an extended way, linking the probabilistic assessment with typically sociological considerations. This has given rise to

[45] Ryszard Studenski, *Ryzyko i ryzykowanie* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo UŚ, 2004), p. 20.

[46] See especially: Baruch Fischhoff et. al., "The Experienced Utility of Expected Utility Approaches," in *Expectations and Actions: Expectancy-Value Models in Psychology*, ed. N.T. Feather (New York, 1982), pp. 315-340; Slovic, "Perception of Risk" *Science* no. 236 (1987), pp. 280-285.

"polythetic risk definitions" which broaden the meaning of risk by adding variables referring to fiduciary trust, liability and social consent:[47]

$$\mathbf{R = P \times M + T \times L \times C}$$

R = Risk
P = Probability volume
M = Magnitude of negative consequences
T = Fiduciary trust vested in socio-technical systems, economic institutions or regulatory bodies
L = Social distribution of liability for undesired outcomes
C = Perceived fairness of procedures aiming at social consent[48]

The polythetic risk definition fits the requirements of the weak constructionist methodology in a way that it perceives risks as socially mediated constructs reflecting pre-existent social settings that constitute a common plane of interpretation applied when uncertainties are faced. In brief, the conceptualization postulates that people tend to understand risk as an element of broader moral considerations concerning problems of institutional trustworthiness and fairness in the social distribution of costs and benefits associated with risky decisions.

The main theme of the strong social constructionist position is its interpretative relativism postulating that risk has no inherent and substantial nature: it exists, to put it otherwise, "in the eye of the beholder." This kind of discourse, consequently, lays great emphasis on the fact that risk could be seen a some sort of "discourse" that individuals deploy in order to make sense out of social realities.

> Nothing is a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality. But on the other hand anything can be a risk; it all depends on how one analyses the danger, considers the event.[49]

In this context, risk seems to be deprived of its autotelic value. Risk in itself becomes less important than the risk conceived as a cultural metaphor enabling investigating into the complexity as well as contingency of external realities. For instance, the term may be representative of a specific vernacular of moral and political criticism

[47] Rayner, "Cultural Theory…", p. 95.
[48] Ibid., p. 95.
[49] François Ewald, "Insurance and Risks," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. G. Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller (London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 199.

aiming to wage an ideological war with "the Other" perceived as ruthless and exploitative forces of capitalism. In this context, risk becomes inherent in the cultural setting of environmentalist movements in which it becomes a culturally defined way of perceiving reality and a token of symbolic identification. Moreover, the strong constructionist approach seems to undermine the very possibility of establishing an objective and scientifically neutral science dealing with risk. In this case, scientific expertise is "never value-free but rather is always the product of a way of seeing."[50]

The strong constructionist position seems to pay its intellectual debts to Michel Foucault's views on the process discursive formation conceived as a mechanism fostering social regulation of discourses.[51] From the perspective of Foucault's methodology, risk is a convenient discursive device rendering regularity and structure to the public debates on technology, modernisation and society.[52] Consequently, the strong constructionist position becomes an all-encompassing social theory linking risk to culture, politics, morality and community. As Deborah Lupton comments on the issue:

> Those who have adopted social constructionism, regardless of the strength of their position, tend to argue that a risk is never fully objective or knowable outside of belief systems and moral positions: what we measure, identify and manage as risks are always constituted via pre-existing knowledge and discourses. This approach to risk is indebted to writings in the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of science and technology and theorizing from poststructuralist perspectives.[53]

Proponents of the strong form of constructionist methodology postulate that risk is a construct created in response to the prevailing patterns inner group dynamics. Hence, it is seen as a property of social organisation, an element functionally related to the sphere of communication networks, role hierarchies and patterns of power distribution characterising social groups. This paves the way for the functional-structural methodology in which risk is no longer associated with idiosyncrasies of individual experiences, but becomes inscribed in the structural/organizational matrix

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[50] Lupton, *Risk*, p. 29.

[51] See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Harper, 1969).

[52] This approach is typical of the "governmentality studies" that links, in a very Foucaultian fashion, discursive practices concerning risk and issues of political power and authority. See Lupton *Risk*, pp. 85-91.

[53] Ibid., p. 29.

as a correlate to social roles, group mentality and morality, dominant ethos and other types of social facts.

In the context of the strong constructionist methodology, the risk construct is reflected by two dimensions of societal organisation known as "group" and "grid."[54] The first variable describes a level of coherence that characterises a given social group. Here, the structural properties of social groups are assessed by means of measuring the actual degree according to which individuals are incorporated into a given social totality. In other words, the term corresponds to the internal structure of a social group; it describes the nature of social ties and interactions among the group members. Where the group variable is strong, societal networks of interpersonal interaction are robust and individuals are united by strong ties of reciprocity, solidarity and trust. Needless to say, "strong-group" social groups may be characterised as being ripe with social capital in the sense of well-established and socially productive patterns of interpersonal interaction.[55] By the same token, where the group variable is weak, social interconnections are infrequent and open-ended. In this particular case, individuals are more keen on showing the spirit of competition, rather than cooperation as well as mutual reliance.

The "grid" variable, in turn, refers to the problem of group membership and the resultant formation of identity patterns.[56] The term can be defined as a number of cultural constraints imposed on individuals by their social environment. The constraints may be related to such identity markers as age, race, gender, or social position within established models of social hierarchy. The weak grid variable indicates that a given community follows a relatively egalitarian pattern of organisation in which the distribution of social roles is not dependent upon the pre-existing social and cultural constraints. The strong grid variable, contrariwise, stands for an overtly hierarchical model of sociality in which the admission to social roles depends upon the willingness to comply with the pre-established identity patterns.

Both versions of the constructionist approach – as it is later discussed in this text – have paved the way for distinct sociological methodologies of dealing with technological and natural risks. The strong variety is instrumental for the aforementioned cultural theories of risk, whereas the weak constructionist assumptions are typical of the sociological approach to risk management and analysis.

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[54] Rayner, "Cultural Theory…," p. 87.
[55] Cf. Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
[56] Rayner, "Cultural Theory…," p. 87.

Risk Analysis: From Technical Sciences to Applied Sociology

Risk analysis and risk management have been institutionalised as strategies of coping with the contemporary outbreak of technological and modernisation hazards. This particular field of sociological expertise is based upon the weak variety of constructionist approach in which observed risks constitute an outcome of objectively existing dangers that are assessed in the context of losses and gains associated with a chosen area of entrepreneurial activities. The techniques of risk analysis and management, to put it in the most general manner, have been established in order to pursue the golden means philosophy rendering keeping balance between economic profits and social costs associated with modernisation processes.[57]

Risk assessment has been envisaged in order to 1) define technological hazards, 2) assess them with the use of objectivist methodology (e.g. probabilistic risk assessments), and 3) place the resultant information in a more general, economic matrix of losses and profits. The discipline constitutes an initial process of risk management with, in turn, refers to the mitigation of socially experienced consequences of risk in cases where expected losses are greater than potential financial profits.[58]

> Risk analysis combines risk assessment and risk management. Both are driven by scientific and technical considerations based on the physical and biological sciences and applied mathematics.[59]

However, it is worth remembering that the application of objectivist research procedures is, in the context of risk management, coupled with a more sociological insight into the problem of uncertainty experience. This is especially true of the ISO 31000:2009 norm which is nowadays generally conceived as the most widespread standard in managerial risk analysis. It is a model of good entrepreneurial practice which perceives technical and economic dangers as matters of identification, assessment and prioritisation of risks as well as the application of financial means in

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[57] James F. Short, Jr., "Social Dimensions of Risk. The Need for a Sociological Paradigm and Policy Research," *American Sociologist*, Summer (1987), p. 168.
[58] See Neil Crockford, *Risk Management* (London: Witherby & Co., 1991).
[59] James F. Short, Jr., "The Social Fabric at Risk: Toward the Social Transformation of Risk Analysis," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 49 (1984), p. 711.