

Review for THES  
By John Adams

*Victorian Writing about Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World*

By Elaine Freedgood

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This is a fascinating but irritating book. Upon the writings of Victorian economists, sanitarians, balloonists, mountaineers and explorers Elaine Freedgood seeks to build a theory of risk management. While the writers she introduces are all intriguing characters, the theory is unconvincing.

The key message of her “transhistorical polemic” is that “engaging in, representing and theorizing risk are ... always cosmological projects”. Her principal target is the view that “modernity is characterised by an unprecedented acceptance of the permanence of risk;” on the contrary, she insists that, far from the modern age being accepting of risk, “work on risk is always aimed – symbolically or materially – at increasing safety and reducing danger”.

She sets herself up in opposition to “contemporary works that seem to refuse to be cosmological.” Her principal exemplar is, ironically, the work of Aaron Wildavsky whose “solidly antiprogressive view of risk-management offers little in the way of consolation” and “refuses to provide a cosmology.” Wildavsky not only exemplifies a cosmology but, along with Douglas, Thompson and others<sup>1</sup>, provides a typology of cosmologies that exposes the inadequacy of some of Freedgood’s larger generalisations. This typology renders fatuous sweeping statements about “*the* modern attitude to risk.”

The typology makes the point that within any era or society there is never a single cosmology informing judgements about risk. Indeed the work of the writers that Freedgood presents makes the point very effectively. Her economists, J.R. McCulloch (with his belief in a cornucopian nature) and Harriet Martineau (with her faith in unfettered markets) both exemplify, as does Wildavsky himself, the *individualist* cosmology. Her sanitation reformers, Edwin Chadwick and Florence Nightingale, like latter-day environmental campaigners conform closely in attitude and behaviour to the cosmology of Wildavsky’s *egalitarian* – as do the scarcity-driven economists to whom she refers - Malthus and Ricardo - precursors of today’s limits-to-growth theorists.

Her individualistic balloonists, mountaineers and explorers present a further problem. Generalisations about risk that do not distinguish between *individual* and *institutional*

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<sup>1</sup> *Risk and Culture*, Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, University of California Press, 1983 & *Cultural Theory*, Michael Thompson, Richard Ellis and Aaron Wildavsky, Westview Press, 1990.

risk management frequently sow confusion. The latter is the preserve of Wildavsky's *hierarchist* – a character seriously under-represented in Freedland's exploration of risk management in Victorian England. Hierarchists are the regulators and enforcers of regulations, and are in frequent conflict with individuals who resent both imposed danger and imposed safety as affronts to freedom. Today, as in Victorian times, from the perspective of campaigners for cleaner air and water, and safer factories and mines, the hierarchists do not do enough; and entrepreneurs and *laissez-faire* capitalists complain that they interfere too much. Acceptance of the permanence of risk – a cosmology whose existence Freedland disputes – characterises the *fatalist*, the fourth, and probably most numerous, member of Wildavsky's typology.

Risk management is indeed a cosmological project. All risks are perceived through filters that embody the perceiver's view of the world. Freedland presents an interesting gallery of Victorian characters, but the Cultural Theory framework of Wildavsky et al, whose transhistorical cosmologies Freedland fails to detect, provides a richer and more coherent theoretical framework for understanding them.

495 words

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