

*The Politics of Risk Society.*  
Jane Franklin, ed.  
Polity, London 1998, 138pp., H/B £39.50

Review for *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry*  
by John Adams, UCL, 8.9.98, published in vol.10, no.1, 1999.

This book can best be described as a *festschrift* for Ulrich Beck. Beck's influential book *Risikogesellschaft* was first published in 1985, but has only been available in English as *Risk Society* since 1992. It identified risk as *the* defining characteristic of contemporary society. *The Politics of Risk Society* consists of an editorial introduction by Jane Franklin and essays by 13 prominent social commentators<sup>1</sup> elaborating this theme and exploring its implications.

In *Risk Society* Beck argued that modern science and technology have created a society in which the creation of wealth has been overtaken by the production of risk; the primary concerns of "industrial" or "class" societies - the production and equitable distribution of wealth - have been replaced, he said, by the quest for safety.

"In advanced modernity the social production of *wealth* is systematically accompanied by the social production of *risks*.(19) ... ecological and high-tech risks ... endanger *all* forms of life on this planet ... by risks I mean above all radioactivity, which completely evades human perceptible abilities (22) ... risk society is a *catastrophic* society (24) ...

The dream of the class society is that everyone wants and ought to have a share of the pie. The utopia of the risk society is that everyone should be spared from poisoning."(49)<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 1 of *The Politics of Risk Society*, is by Beck himself. He continues with the gloomy message of his earlier book; "Society," he insists, "has become a laboratory where there is absolutely nobody in charge." (9) The risks being created in this laboratory, he insists, are different from the risks that earlier generations encountered:

"There was once a time when a risk was something that you indulged in for a bit of excitement. A bet on the Grand National, a spin of the wheel - it was all meant to add a bit of spice to an otherwise orderly and predictable life. Now manufactured uncertainty means that risk has become an inescapable part of our lives and everybody is facing unknown and barely calculable risks. Risk becomes another word for 'nobody knows'. We no longer choose to take risks, we have them thrust upon us. We are living on a ledge - in a random risk society, from which nobody can escape. Our society has become riddled with random risks. Calculating and managing risks which nobody really knows has become one of our main preoccupations. That used to be a specialist job for actuaries, insurers and scientists. Now we all engage in it, with whatever rusty tools we can lay our hands on - sometimes the calculator, sometimes the astrology column. The basic question here is: how can we make decisions about a risk we know nothing about?" (12) "Risks that were calculable

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Adam Raphael, John Gray, Martin Wollacott, Robin Grove-White, Stephen Tindale, John Durant, Pat Kane, Patricia Hewitt, Susie Orbach, Ray Pahl and Anna Coote

<sup>2</sup> Ulrich Beck (1992) *Risk Society: towards a new modernity*. Sage: London.

under industrial society become incalculable and unpredictable in the risk society.” (16)

Chapter 2, “Risk Society: the Context of British Politics”, is by Anthony Giddens; he is often bracketed with Beck in discussions of risk, but is less apocalyptic

“the idea of the ‘risk society’ might suggest a world which has become more hazardous, but this is not necessarily so. Rather it is a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk.” (27).

However he shares Beck’s concern that scientists and technologists are conducting increasing numbers of experiments in a laboratory in which no one is in control - “we increasingly live on a high technological frontier which absolutely no one completely understands and which generates a diversity of possible futures.” (25)

What, if anything, should we do about it? The prescriptions proffered in this book are frustratingly elusive. In her introduction Franklin explains that “to understand risk society ... we have to begin to think in a new way about the world we live in, to find a new language to describe what is happening to us,” (1) that we must “resist the comfort of reconstructing old certainties,” (8) and that “we need policy initiatives which give space to a new politics, still emerging, generated by uncertainty, which insists that decisions which affect us are taken in the context of democratic debate.” (8) She urges the application of the “precautionary principle, so that we can all engage creatively with risk.” (8)

The contributors worry about how to label the society they are studying and how to distinguish it from an earlier era when risks were different. They resist the label “post-modern” and the cultural inchoateness with which it is associated, in favour of modernity mark II, what might be termed *neo-modern*:

“the first phase [of modernity] is characterized by industrialization and the drive to conquer the natural world ... Risk society marks the end of the first phase ... The second phase of modernity is taking shape but we cannot understand it or describe it with our existing vocabulary ... although things still look the same ... they are not working in the way we have come to expect.” (2)

Franklin argues that there are two possible responses to our current state of incomprehension. The first she introduces in order to wave it aside:

“If we see it as a consequence of a breakdown of traditional order, we may seek to preserve and strengthen those institutions and relationships that once worked. ... This politics appears to be a resistance to change. It builds on an idealized notion of community and encourages efforts to bring back the traditional family, reconstruct strong neighbourhoods, and reassert a kind of commonsense morality to hold it all together. ... It endeavours to build the ideas of trust and responsibility into institutions that are themselves rapidly changing and are incapable of responding as we imagine they used to.” (2)

The second is ineffable:

“In contrast, the politics of risk society takes the reality of everyday life as its starting point, recognizing that we need a new language to describe what is happening to us. This language is not yet formulated, but it has to be a

language that resonates with our experience and can take us forward into the unknown, opening up the possibility of living creatively with risk and uncertainty. It offers an alternative strategy to the politics of nostalgic community.” (2-3)

The outlines of the alternative strategy remain obscure. The last three chapters by Susie Orbach, Ray Pahl and Anna Coote all focus on *relationships*. Anna Coote insists in the concluding chapter that “a high trust democracy [is] the only way to face a risky future.”(131) But how the requisite trust is to be engendered is not made clear. Ray Pahl argues for the importance of friendship in “a society in which there is considerable mistrust in most institutional spheres;” (116) but presents evidence that contacts with friends and relations are growing weaker. Susie Orbach warns against placing our trust in the nostalgic rhetoric of “family values” and stresses the importance of “trying to build quality relationships - [enabling relationships] - in a risk society.”(94) But *how* this is to be done in a world that she describes as beset by “economic pressures, shifts in gender relations, the collapse of the health and educational services, worries about work ... consumer culture ... the hurts of racism and class”(91) does not emerge.

What are the risks with which this book is concerned? The implicit answers of most of the contributions to this book suffer from excessive generalisation. The distinction between old-fashioned risks which used to be visible and comprehensible, and the risks of the second phase of modernity which are neither, is exaggerated. It is helpful to divide the subject matter of risk perception and management into three categories - further subdivisions are of course possible.

First there are directly perceptible risks - climbing a tree, crossing the road, riding a bicycle. Such risks have always been coped with instinctively and intuitively. They still are - we do not conduct a formal probabilistic risk assessment before we cross the road.

Secondly, many risks are perceptible with the help of science - cholera, for example, which used to be a mysterious and invisible microbe, can now be seen with the help of microscopes and contaminated sources of drinking water labelled for all to see. This book pays scant attention to either of these categories. In its stress on the mysteriousness and invisibility of modern risks it fails to give science credit for demystifying and rendering visible many risks from the past, and for the enormous extensions to average life-spans that have resulted.

It focuses almost entirely on a third category - what might be termed manufactured *virtual* risks, i.e. risks, not from nature, but produced by human activity, *and about which science has nothing conclusive to say*; BSE and its possible link to new variant CJD, which was much in the news at the time the book was written, is the example most commonly referred to. Food additives, pesticide residues, low-level radiation, electro-magnetic fields, and global warming are additional examples of man-made risks characteristic of phase-two modernity. The last of these in particular, global warming, highlights a further aspect. The idea of The Risk Society rests upon the assumption that science and technology are now creating not only more, but bigger risks than they are mitigating, and making them less rather than more comprehensible. Perhaps.

Science and technology *do* create new risks - the invisible radiation risks associated with the nuclear industry are one of Beck's favourite examples. But even here scientific instruments such as Geiger counters are rendering the phenomenon

perceptible in the way that microscopes did cholera - although fierce dispute remains over the dose at which it becomes harmful. Up until now, evidence in the form of declining death rates, suggests that science and technology have conquered far more risks than they have created.

*Up until now.* Perhaps the most convincing proof of the historic triumph of science over risks to life is the global population explosion - widely held to be the ultimate threat to life on earth. Have we merely deferred some risks at the cost of much larger ones? The problem with *risk* is that it is a word that refers to the future, and the future does not exist except in our imaginations. We view the future through filters constructed out of all previous experience. Virtual risks are unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, by science. Franklin describes the problem they present: “We can’t see them, we have no way of knowing if they are real, yet every day we have to decide...” (1) We decide, and we act. Virtual risks may or may not be real, but they have real consequences. They are reflexive. Attempts to measure risk are confounded by the use of the measurements to inform behaviour - which changes that which has just been measured. In the realm of risk management, just as in the physics of small particles, the act of measurement alters that which is being measured.

Common to the filters of most of the contributors to this book is a mistrust of “hubristic” science and technology. The past, viewed through their perceptual filters, was safer and more “calculable” than the world today; once upon a time risk was “spice” voluntarily consumed. But was it? Others can be found who have very different filters, who look back upon a history in which life was nasty, brutish and short, who see a present that is healthier, wealthier and longer-lived than ever before, *thanks* to science and technology; and who look forward optimistically to a future in which the best hedge against uncertainty is investment in more science and technology<sup>3</sup>.

We do not respond blankly to uncertainty, we impose meaning(s) upon it. In the presence of virtual risk people are liberated to argue from belief, prejudice and superstition. Virtual risks are mental constructs that float free of scientific evidence. This book argues that, in Risk Society, they also float free of words with which to discuss them - it repeatedly reminds us of the inadequacy of our existing vocabulary for making sense of latter-day risks.

Psychiatrists deal routinely with people who construe reality idiosyncratically, people who perceive threats that “normal” people cannot see. But the concept of normality can embrace a range of perceptual filters. Even where risks are clearly perceptible, either directly or with the help of science, it can be difficult for “normal” people to reach a consensus about what is normal and what is not. Agreement about virtual risks is much more elusive. Participants in debates about such risks frequently question their opponents’ grip on reality and denounce those who disagree with them as “mad”. With such risks filters are all; the perception of virtual risk comes uncomfortably close to hallucination - defined as “perception in the absence of external stimuli”. This is territory worthy of exploration by psychiatrists. For those inclined to accept the challenge, this book can be recommended as a good introduction to the intellectual foundations of a syndrome that Furedi<sup>4</sup> has dubbed “the culture of fear.”

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<sup>3</sup> Two good examples are Julian Simon (1996) *The Ultimate Resource 2*. Princeton University Press: Princeton and Aaron Wildavsky (1988) *Searching for Safety*. Transaction Publishers: Oxford.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Furedi (1997) *The Culture of Fear*. Cassell: London.

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