

Review by John Adams for THES

*The Government of Risk: Understanding Risk Regulation Regimes*

by Christopher Hood, Henry Rothstein & Robert Baldwin

Oxford University Press, 217pp, £30.00 hardback, ISBN 0-19-924363-8

Published 2001

*Risk, Uncertainty, and Rational Action*

by Carlo C Jaeger, Ortwin Renn, Eugene A Rosa & Thomas Webler

Earthscan, 320pp, £50.00 hardback, ISBN 185383 770-9, £19.95 paperback ISBN 185383 770-9

Published 2001

If you type “risk” into Google, you will be rewarded with 19 million hits. (Sex by way of comparison scores 59 million.) So is there anything more to say? Carlo Jaeger *et al*, after 296 pages conclude that we need a debate, “a debate among the proponents of RAP [the Rational Actor Paradigm] and competing approaches.” Christopher Hood *et al*, after 186 pages conclude that “the analysis of risk regulation regimes is in its infancy” and that “we need more debate about alternative ways to capture similarities and differences.” Risk may yet overtake sex.

The debates proposed by both sets of authors promise to be interminable because risk is inescapably subjective. It is a word that refers to an uncertain future that exists only in our imaginations. These books are inviting everyone to join debates about how we should undertake this imagining.

The central question proposed for debate by Jaeger *et al* is whether our imaginings can be “rational”. Their answer is - up to a point. Beyond this point lie “competing approaches”. The book revisits the now familiar debate about the limits of RAP, especially economics - what they call “the Monarch” of the shaky kingdom of rationality. Despite all the character defects that they identify in this Monarch they cannot bring themselves to reject him. Rather they would demote him from an absolute to a constitutional monarch constrained by the interests of his many and diverse subjects. The book is an account of their inconclusive struggle to draft this constitution.

They want to retain the Monarch: “The new paradigm must include the RAP perspective and it must be as rigorous and decisive as RAP with regard to computational structure and mathematical articulations of its assumptions.” But they would limit his powers in a way yet to be defined: “defining rationality for collective action without sacrificing individual freedom and cultural pluralism will be one of the most serious social

challenges in the next century.” They seek “a platform for developing a consistent but pluralistic view in the era of increasing uncertainty and risk.”

The book, by virtue of its impressively wide-ranging coverage of the risk literature should become a key reference for courses about risk. But it evades the fundamental question that it raises. Is it possible to combine a *collective, consistent, mathematically articulated rationality* with cultural pluralism?

Despite its range, and authorship by four established figures in the risk literature, the book exemplifies a reason to be pessimistic about the possibility of a new paradigm emerging that will unify the field of risk. The book has a lengthy bibliography that includes many references to previous works of its authors. But it contains not a single reference to any of the works of Hood *et al* – three other equally established and respected figures in the risk literature. And the extensive bibliography in *The Government of Risk* contains not a single reference to the works of Jaeger *et al*. The two books are small isolated vessels floating on the vast inchoate ocean of risk.

Hood *et al* set sail armed with the concept of the “regulatory regime”, defined as “the complex of institutional geography, rules, practice, and animating ideas that are associated with the regulation of a particular risk or hazard.” They concede, disarmingly, that it is an elusive concept: “There is ... no single correct way of conceiving risk regulation regimes. No one has ever seen a risk regulation regime.”

But they persist. They justify their pursuit of this elusive creature by asserting that there is a need for a level of understanding intermediate between macroscopic whole-society perspectives on risk and the microscopic perspective of “deep-trench case studies.” They offer examples of the sorts of puzzles they hope to shed light on. Why were cyclamates permitted and saccharin banned in Canada, and cyclamates banned and saccharin permitted in the United States? Why is the regulation of campsites very rigorous in France and relaxed in Greece and Ireland? Why is white asbestos permitted in some jurisdictions and banned in others? And why, in the UK, does the state tolerate high risks associated with radon in the home, while being much more risk averse with respect to much lower risks such as those associated with pesticide residues? The answer by the end of the book seems to be that it is all rather complicated: a regime is an n-dimensional analytic construct, where n can equal infinity.

At one point they quote Rutherford - “Science is divided into two categories, physics and stamp collecting” – and acknowledge that their approach is closer to the latter. They produce an elaborate set of rules for classifying different approaches to risk which have very limited predictive power or even, with respect to the examples cited above, post-dictive power.

The case of radon can be used to illustrate their problem. Before they begin to apply their analytic construct to radon they *assume* it is a significant risk. They establish this assumption by the following chain of reasoning: (1) “some claim ... that epidemiological data fails to reveal an association between high radon levels and above-normal incidences

of lung cancer”; but (2) “a part government-funded epidemiological study ... lends support for the orthodox view ...”; (3) “if that orthodox assessment is accepted, radon is a significant killer ...”; (4) “radon ... is said by experts to kill about 2500 people a year in the UK ...” They then apply their analytical machinery to the puzzle of why this “significant” risk is ignored, ignoring the possibility that the answer may be that it is not a significant risk.

There may yet be a glimmer of hope. Both books in their impressively wide-ranging surveys of the risk literature land briefly, if distractedly, on the contribution of *cultural theory*, and then pass on. Both are complimentary, but go on to fry other fish leaving the impression that they see it as but one approach amongst many. But it does appear to offer solutions to the main problems they raise. Jaeger *et al* say “one of the most promising contributions of the cultural theory of risk is that it acknowledges, accepts, and offers explanations for the clash of cultural orientations within modern society.” And Hood *et al* observe that “a cultural theory perspective leads us to see in risk regulation ... four polar approaches that could be expected to manifest themselves in different regimes.”

Jaeger *et al* reach the end of their book not knowing how to reconcile pluralism with a collective rationality. Hood *et al* reach the end of theirs with an analytic framework that has an infinity of possible dimensions, and offering no confident guidance about how to reduce it to a manageable number: “the process involves difficult judgements”; “we need more refined ways of mapping ...”. The cultural theory approach that both books compliment *en passant* offers answers to both problems. It does not reject rationality, it acknowledges *plural* rationalities; where the science is inconclusive the imagination is liberated to speculate *rationally* from different starting assumptions. Further, this approach limits the contending risk regulation regimes to a comprehensible and manageable number. It won't stop us arguing, but if adopted more widely as a navigational aid, more of the small boats on the ocean of risk might communicate with each other and point in the same direction.

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