

## Book Reviews

# Understanding the Nature of Risk in an Uncertain World

**ANTHROPOLOGY AND RISK, ASA BOHOLM, 2015, NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, 190 PP**

This timely book explores the nature of risk in contemporary society, focusing on the cultural and social dimensions that shape how we view, assess, and address risk. The author successfully creates a cohesive compilation of several of her previously published articles that build upon a review of current literature and research perspectives exploring risk. Through a primarily ethnographic lens, the author weaves together theory from multiple disciplines to address the culture-risk nexus, arguing for more detailed investigation of the nature of cultural forces on society's management of risk.

Despite the focus on European history, the reader is provided with sufficient background on risk theory and practice to apply these concepts on a global scale. From the outset, it is recognized that risk is a natural extension of living, where inherent challenges, hazards, and disasters are a constant possibility and that numerous strategies, such as religion and ritual, have been available to help individuals cope with crises. Within the book, the nature of risk is explored by presenting the theoretical basis and its subsequent impact on practical guidelines for risk management. The author uses ethnographic case study to illustrate the gaps in the current literature and outlines directions for future research.

Three primary anthropological perspectives of risk are presented: (1) economic anthropology, where uncertainty is linked to the possibility that basic human needs might not be fulfilled; (2) cultural theory of risk that examines risk as a culturally construed phenomena and therefore lends itself to the understanding of risk perception and risk communication and (3) a situated theory of risk that uses contextual ethnographic approaches that examine risk

within the context of social function and meaning. It is through this final anthropological framework that the author presents a relational theory of risk and using ethnographic case studies, shows how knowledge of risk is locally situated and temporally framed by cultural and social interpretations. To be clear, the author does not suggest a focus on entirely 'subjective' or socially constructed concepts of risk, but instead outlines a framework that examines risk as a relational term that is situated in the context of culture. The author argues that risk be considered as a frame between the object (sources of potential harm) and the object at risk (target of risk) and the evaluation of the possible consequences, linking people, things and outcomes.

Dr. Boholm organizes the book in eight chapters with much of the first half of the book focused on providing an overview of the literature on risk and the remaining chapters serving as case studies and illustrative examples. Starting with the introduction, the author provides the historical context of European concepts of risk and a review of the primary theoretical perspectives driving the exploration of risk. An important strength of this book is how the author ties together the existing literature, while providing a critical review of gaps and suggestions for areas for future research.

Chapter 2 identifies and reviews comparative studies of risk perception that show that it varies considerably by context due to cultural, socioeconomic, and religious dimensions and that many studies may not adequately address the impacts of the socio-cultural dimension of risk within the context of everyday life and social interactions. A strong argument is made for the use of the ethnographic process as critical to gain insights on how public perceptions of risk are sensitive to social context. Chapter 3 focuses on cultural theory, which proposes that risk is

culturally defined and experienced. The author suggests that this theory in fact encompasses disparate and contradictory theoretical stances. Moreover, the lack of a significant understanding of the role of culture on concept of risk makes it difficult to create a context for practice. Here the role of symbolic anthropology is highlighted as an important contributor to risk perception studies.

It is in Chapter 4 that the management of uncertainty and risk within cultures is explored and a stronger basis for the relational framework of risk is provided. Historically, scientists have argued that the implications of risk are socially and culturally constructed and therefore, there is no single rationality behind the knowledge of risk or the ways in which it is managed. The author cautions us from focusing on this level of subjective understanding of risk, arguing instead for a broader understanding of objective and subjective aspects of risk.

At first glance, Chapter 5, with its focus on railway planning and risk management, appears to be a significant departure from the theoretical focus of the initial part of the book. However, through this focused ethnographic study, the reader is given a first hand look at the interpersonal relationships and interactions of the primary stakeholders managing risk on a regular basis. Chapter 5 offers an ethnographic case study of the organizational risk management and railway planning, land-use and environmental planning that demonstrates how risk analysis is embedded in expert practical knowledge. This case highlights the practical and social aspects of risk management and the need for risk management tools that have direct and relevant application to the reality of those involved. Likewise, Chapter 6 presents a case study of local consultation meetings related to the railway tunnel project. This focused ethnographic examination of communications in environmental management fills a needed gap in the literature. This chapter highlights the fact that risk communi-

cation often fails because the meaning of the messages are not sufficiently taken into account and that a more pragmatic perspective on risk communication should shift focus from only providing technical information to considering communication as action and interaction.

The final two chapters of the book begin to explore some of the most relevant issues facing the examination of risk today. Chapter 7 takes an in-depth look at the visualization of risk in the media, using the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster as a case study. Given the widespread and overwhelming real time access to visual images through mobile technologies, the role of visualization through the media has significant relevance to the perception of risk in society. Understanding the impacts of these images and the cultural context and meaning allows greater insights into the nature of risk and effective mechanisms to the management of risk and uncertainty in populations. The book concludes with the final chapter that emphasizes the need for greater exploration of the theoretical underpinnings and practical understanding risk communication both as a research agenda for knowledge production and as a necessarily relevant basis for local decision-making and policy work.

This book provides a critical and timely review of the nature of risk in contemporary society that is well written, easily accessible to students and scholars alike and provides both the theoretical and practical understanding of the issues.

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