The Cultural Roots of Risk: How Mobilities and Risk Work in Underdeveloped Countries

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the story of Mary and Roger an elderly couple who opted to buy a car, but later were pressed to sell it because they were unable to absorb the costs of insurance. The world of risks does not work in the same lines in North than South. This pieces invites the discussion to what extent risk perception is not an instrument for controlling workforce in under-developing nations. The mythologies of mobility have been formulated around life in the First World. They work as ideological devices to activate certain circuits of the economy, which in other times were relegated to peripheral positions. The industries of tourism and air travel transport millions travelers who enjoy the benefits of being mobile in a world where others do not share the same luck.

KEYWORDS

Cars, Crime, Fear, Insurance, Mobilities, Postmodernity, Risk, Travels

INTRODUCTION

From Chernobyl onwards the question of risk has been installed in the politics of industrial societies (Moore & Burgess, 2011). Discussion has proceeded in two contrasting waves, which dispute the meaning of the issue (Beck, 1992; 1995; 2005). Though these groups have received diverse names, for operational and practical purpose, we use the term “culturalists and probabilists” to identify these schools. While the former understands risk as a social construct whose function is to keep society united, the latter examines probabilities as valid source for predicting disasters and hazardous situations (Skoll and Korstanje 2013). The problem for the probabilists is the indeterminacy of the role played by the culture in over estimating some risks while ignoring others. To some extent, each culture has developed its own system to create risks which vary with the economic order (Douglas & Wildavsky 1983; Cahan et al, 2007; Hopkins 2005; Sennett, 2011). If Americans are terrified by global terrorism (Altheide, 2006; Boscarino et al, 2006; Chermak 2003; Skoll 2010; Howie 2012; Korstanje 2013; Skoll & Korstanje 2013; Sageman 2014). Argentineans feel the same terror for local crime or offenses against property (Kessler, 2009; Miguez & Isla 2010; Buvinic 2008; Korstanje, 2009a). Culturalists argue that risks serve as a disciplinary mechanism to enhance political legitimacy (Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996; Foucault, 2009). Probabilists, in contrast, have focused their attention on the effects, not the nature, of risks. For example, we may drive a vehicle at high speeds putting our life at risk. The probabilities of suffering road accidents, though we may not know the precise statistics, are higher among speeders than other drivers (Luhmann, 1993; Giddens 1991). Regardless of culture or personal perceptions, risks can be predicted using algorithms and mathematical models. Despite
such predictive capabilities, culturalists criticize probabilists for not understanding the real nature of risks and their relation to the paradox of technology (Korstanje and Skoll 2013). While science and the production of knowledge are devoted to mitigating risk, other, new and more dangerous risks may arise. The discrepancies between quantitative and qualitative methods adds another point of contention (Waterton & Wynne 1999). Probabilists such as C. Sunstein assert that emotions obscure the horizon in the decision making process. Neglect of risk works by the evaluation of biased landscapes regarding the probabilities of occurrence, but this does not mean that risks cannot be prevented by using mathematical models of correlation and regression (Sunstein, 2002a; 2002b; 2006). A third position in this debate merges the arguments to understand the issue as a probabilistic but without ignoring that it is based on cultural contexts (Slovic 1987; Lash 2000).

This article explores a new, more practical alternative based on a case study to understand how risk works in the daily life. In The Corrosion of Character, Richard Sennett (2011) examined the social role of risk in daily life. He argues that late capitalism weakens social bonds, and thereby reduces trust in, and responsibility for institutions for the protection of citizens. Coming from increased uncertainty, risks encourage the creation of precautionary measures. Here, a class divide appears as elites divest their responsibilities while the work force assumes the burden of the risks. The discourse of change in post-modernity is designed to give ordinary people the responsibility for shaping their own destiny and development. The present article formulates the thesis that risk alludes to a disciplinary mechanism of control that organizes the asymmetries created by globalization and hyper-mobility. At the same time, and paradoxically, consumers embrace the illusion that the consuming life will lead to a dream world, which will enhance their status. Nonetheless, by their pursuit of consumption and accumulation of property they increase their risk of loss and undermine their purchasing power. We cite the notes and experience in personal fieldwork in Argentina to show the contrasting interpretations of risk perception in Northern and southern Hemisphere. The ethical dilemma of risk suggests that what is dangerous for ones is innocuous for others. There would be a process of selection which is conducive to the cultural matrix where risks are produced and distributed to society all. However, no less true is that those unconsidered risks which are not addressed by governments, may lead to apocalyptic disasters. Under some conditions, of cultural exclusion historically determined, as in Latin American nations, not surprisingly, risk perception would be used as an ideological instrument of control over lower classes.

WHAT IS RISK? A PRELIMINARY DEBATEx

According to K. Tierney (1994), risks should be defined as any probability of harm resulting from an event where the integrity of victims is at stake. In recent decades, sociologists have treated risk as a social construction. Within sociology, two perspectives have prevailed on the nature of risk (Tierney, 1994). One group explored the probability of harm, focusing on the effects of unseen risk for social systems. Another paid attention to the perceptions of people and the paradoxes this generates (Duclos, 1987). The professional literature in risk management took the pragmatic perspective that bad evaluations of risk may lead to bad decisions. In this sense, efforts to mitigate risks open new ones (Oliver-Smith, 2002).

Zygmunt Bauman (2011) explained that risks are social constructions aimed at control of the future. In the Middle Ages, happiness was thought to be restricted to few people, who could attain it only through suffering and expiation. The Enlightenment, especially as realized by American Revolutionaries, introduced a radical change in the way that happiness was conceived, as suggested by Thomas Jefferson’s claim in the Declaration of Independence (1776) that the pursuit of happiness is a self-evident truth of the human condition. This assertion of a global right to happiness broadened its possibilities, but linked the paths of happiness to freedom and choices. Risk, then, came to regulate the uncertainty of the future, but also conferred on the subject the liability for failure to be happy.
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