

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Jens O. Zinn, ed., *Social Theories of Risk and Uncertainty: An Introduction*. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2008, 246 pp. \$44.99 paper (978-4051-5336-2), \$103.99 hard-cover (978-4051-5335-5)

This edited collection examines five sociological streams of risk theorizing. These are Beck's *risk society* approach, the *governmentality* perspective originated by Foucault, Luhman's *system theory* on risk, the concept of *edgework* introduced by Lyng, and *cultural approaches* owing most to Douglas and Wildavsky. For the most part, the chapters describe prior theoretical work that has been done under each approach. Zinn provides both an introduction and a final chapter comparing the different theories.

In presenting dreams as wish fulfilment, Freud alleged that "We are standing in the clear light of a sudden insight." A similar conviction attended Beck's work on the *risk society*, and the idea that risk might replace — or at least be elevated to the standing of — social class in sociology remains alive. Risk theories are generally applied to a *second modernity* or *reflexive modernity*, a historical phase where the assumptions of the *first modernity* are radically questioned (science now provides not just solutions but often is part of the problem). Beyond general concurrence about this loosely defined historical shift, there is little in the way of shared themes or convergences among the chapters of this book. Rather, we are presented with strikingly heterogeneous theoretical approaches. Thus we are informed that other risk researchers rarely employ *systems theory* concepts, and *edgework* is clearly at variance with all other work in the field. There is no agreement over what constitutes risk or how to approach it. In the final chapter, Zinn concludes that this diversity is a strength, though I suspect many readers will be perplexed by the range of claims and concepts. Ultimately, this lack of anything approaching a common understanding serves to severely limit "risk's empire" (p. 68).

Beck is notoriously obscure and difficult to read. This book is also not an easy read. Potential readers need considerable sociological background if they are to profit from what is being offered. I do not get the sense that any of the contributors are aiming, as did Sartre, to be positively obscure. But in trying to deal with Foucault, Luhman, and the

rest, the chapters cannot stand alone. The contributors end up unfolding too many unfamiliar and often ambiguous concepts in about 20 pages. The chapter on systems theory is particularly challenging in this regard, especially since Luhman's work is not part of conventional knowledge in sociology. And while Zinn discusses the risk society in some detail, he omits key ideas about surprise accidents, the public pillory and the hot potato, effectively removing the urgency motivating Beck (recall Chernobyl). So predominant and abstract are the theoretical concerns that there is little sense of how to connect to the empirical or "real" world, or how to use these theories. As a result, this collection must be deemed too difficult for undergraduate students. Notwithstanding my criticisms, this book could be very useful for graduate students, since it provides such a broad and comparative perspective, but they would require some familiarity with the original works in order to make much headway.

Consider Lyng's chapter on *edgework*. There is a real insight here which hooks up with other ideas (crime, risky occupations) and gives a different twist to the idea of risk, particularly risk aversion. But the chapter is hardly more than tantalizing, as Lyng only hints at some of the more compelling issues surrounding voluntary risks, and instead mires his work in dubious theory — Marx's concept of alienation and Mead's "I" and "me." These ideas have been long been deservedly moribund, and it seems that Lyng is trying to connect with ancient theorists for the sake of their ostensible theoretical pedigree. (Weber and rationalization, an alternative he also pursues, is more promising.) While issues surrounding adventure industries and efforts to manage or control risks in *edgework* are potentially far more interesting, they are not pursued.

Theories of risk and uncertainty inevitably connect to broader ideas and practices within sociology. As alluded to above, the distinction between first and second modernity (as well as post-modernism) is treated in a cavalier fashion in the risk literature. This lack of precision and specificity continues to nourish many historians' disdain for sociology. These chapters also devote considerable attention to realist and assorted constructivist epistemologies. Social constructivism was an insight commensurate with Freud's claims for his work on dreams, but forty years on it is no longer a cutting edge idea. Yet in both the chapters under consideration, and all too often in other sociological research on social problems, social constructivism is used to hammer quaint realist claims that hardly anyone upholds anymore, at least in their naive versions. There are enough interesting ideas in this collection that there is no need to promote it by tiresome jabs at a largely imaginary challenger.

Dr. Sheldon Ungar is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto at Scarborough. He has researched real world events that have produced social scares, including the nuclear arms race, emerging diseases (Ebola), global climate change and bird flu. His current work also examines knowledge and ignorance and seeks to identify how popular culture and new media affect “cultural literacy,” including instances of the “silencing of science.” In the past year, he has published papers on ignorance as a social problem (*British Journal of Sociology*) and global coverage of bird Flu (*Communicating Science*). ungar@utsc.utoronto.ca