

**Dominique Bourg, Pierre-Benoit Joly, Alain Kauffmann
(eds.)**

Du risque à la menace. Penser la catastrophe [From risk to threat. Thinking about the catastrophe]

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The book edited by Dominique Bourg, Pierre-Benoit Joly and Alain Kaufmann is a collection of articles presented at the Colloque of Cerisy, which took place in September 2011. After 35 years from the publication of Beck's *Risiko Gesellschaft*, the conference questions the appropriateness of the expression "risk society" to explain contemporary dynamics. The book is divided in four parts.

In the first one, historians contest Beck's main thesis of the existence of a break between the present and the past. According to them many characteristics, which have been attributed to the risk society, were already present at the beginning of the XIX century. In particular, they question the supposed virtues linked to the risk society. In the past, the acknowledgement of the dangerousness and of the potential damages in the development of techno-sciences has not led to a limitation of their expansion. This has rather brought to the development of measures of accompaniment. So, while according to Beck, the risk society would be more reflexive and conscious of the side effects of its production, the authors in the book claim that this avowal goes in the sense of a risk acceptance rather than risk criticism.

In the second, part, different contributions, mostly from philosophers, elaborate on the concepts to think about the actual society. The necessity to overcome the notion of risk and its connected idea of control and capacity of evaluation leads them to propose a substitution of it with the term "threat". Here we find the reason for the title of the book. The "society of threat" would better convey the idea that we live in a society made of potential damages which are out of our capacity of evaluation, prediction and control. In Beck's work, science plays a central role. Different contributions give account of the limits connected to the notion of risk and provide some elements to frame a new epistemological paradigm. The need of controlling incertitude has been increasingly left to mathematical models and cost and benefit analysis. As side effect, the excessive "mathematization" of society has led to the eviction of sense and to all interpretative work. Attention is then addressed to post-normal science (Funtowitz and Ravetz, 1990) which is based on a pluralism of perspectives, on a critical distance towards models and on a new attention to in-

terpretation. This brings to a reconfiguration of knowledge itself, whereby its ultimate goal would not be prediction but “care”. Moreover, the notion of risk does not seem being adapted to cover so called “transcendental damages”. The term risk entails in fact an individualist and monetary dimension. Thus damages connected, for instance, to the degradation of the biosphere could not be acknowledged under the category of risk. The proposal is to take the incertitude for serious and to adopt a cognitive approach, which recognizes the limits of human action. This should be based on a “logic of clues” (in French “*logique indiciaire*” that is based on “*indices*”, clues), which is close to judicial enquiry or to police investigations. The logic “of clues” is linked to a situated type of knowledge and to a way of proceeding by analogy. This would allow overcoming the idea of the principle of precaution as cost and benefit analysis. The assumption of the incertitude by the principle of precaution entails a change in the way of thinking, which does not aspire to tell what is “true” but just what is “right”. Moreover, with the development of the techno-scientific society, new legal questions arise. If new subjects (non-humans, animals, etc) long for rights, this goes beyond the traditional class framework, which has structured society and law. Lastly, the language of catastrophism – natural and social - seems well adapting to acknowledge the contextual framework.

The third part gives account of how social sciences have mobilized and have appropriated the concept of risk. Through a sort of *mea culpa*, French researchers admit of not having taken many risks in analyzing the “risk society”. They have remained in much legitimated areas of research – such as controversies on risk, public debates, etc. - and have not adventured themselves in more uneasy domains: for example the analysis of the risk where it is produced or of risk perception. In the same line, few works have engaged in theorizing risk in connections with the new transformations of the State action. A parallel is then made between technical democracy proposed by STS, on one side, and the sub-politics proposed by Beck, on the other. If both approaches are interested in the new forms of democracy and to the development of participatory processes beyond the institutional ones, some differences in scales and temporalities are offered. Most importantly, while for STS, the affirmation of fora of hydrides is a result on its own, Beck rather tends to lay emphasis on the *apories* of power in the new circuits of sub-politics. The space dimension represents a category, which is embedded in the notion of risk. By taking into account some of the last Beck’s works and the global spreading of some health diseases, authors propose a new grammar of spatiality of risk which overcomes the traditional cartography. The proposition is a “navigation” form of cartography permitting the connection of the different locations where the risk manifests itself. After space, time. If the sociology of risk is connected to predicable and calculable time, the pragmatic tradition lays emphasis on other notions of time which are meaningful in the acknowledgment of risk. The activity of prediction is not based just on

models but on different argumentations that people mobilize in their experience of time.

In the fourth part, studies give account of the fact that the technological risk has not replaced the social risk. In the analysis of the trajectory of tuberculosis, the phenomenon of resistance to antibiotics is not qualified as “iatrogene” by health institutions but it is connected to a misuse of the technology by users and to problematic social contexts. In another example, which compares two experiences of epidemiological crisis in XVIII century and at our time, the human conditions seem to be at the base of the epidemics, beyond any rational technical tool of risk management. Finally, climate change represents the greatest challenge to the notion of risk and to the research in social science. Its exceptional character consists in its planetary dimension, its irreversibility and its close link to governance questions.

Even though some of the argumentations mobilized in this text are not completely new and despite a certain difficulty in finding a *file rouge* among all the texts, the readers of *Tecnoscienza* may appreciate the polysemy of contributions stemming from different disciplinary approaches. Beyond all criticisms and attempt to overcome the notion of risk society, the expression introduced by Beck still represents one of the *grand récit* of our time and this book provides a further confirmation of it. At the same time, this contribution speaks for the difficulty of finding a new coherent *grand récit*, under the banner of “threat”, “catastrophe” or something else.

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Peter Keating and Alberto Cambrosio

Cancer on Trial. Oncology as a New Style of Practice

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What do prizes donated by General Motors, oncomice, molecules, patients, the acronym VAMP, statisticians and oncology have in common? Apparently very little. They are, however, some of the elements and objects that, throughout a complex and articulated convergence process, laid the foundations for the birth of the composite and diverse biomedical transnational movement for cancer research and treatment.

The history of this particular and heterogeneous convergence is the subject of the latest book by Alberto Cambrosio and Peter Keating, two of the most eclectic and prolific authors who have worked at the inter-