

Playing with Risks

What is risk and how do we define it? This is the central question that the readings for this week address in differing perspectives at the same time different degrees or levels. Slovic and Lofstedt lays the historical (though as they say themselves, the field is very young and the history isn't really that long yet) background and framework of how risk has come to be defined, perceived, deconstructed and constructed. Slovic, a psychologist, writes about the individual psychology behind the perception of risk and anchors it in the concept of trust and distrust being the central factor that affects a person's view of risk. He identifies a supposed fundamental mechanism of the human psychology – the asymmetric principle – that is trust is easier to destroy than to create. From this explanation of the idiosyncrasies of individual minds, he moves to saying that particular social systems, such as quick and more widespread flow of information through different forms of media and the rise of special interest groups, reinforce this kind of thinking and thus amplify and attenuate the destruction of trust and the creation of distrust. Building up on this view, Lofstedt puts forward the need for evaluation of how we communicate about such risks on terms that are not only technical (as is most of what comes out in technical risk assessment papers) but also appeals to the social and psychological nature of risks noted by Slovic. He uses the experience between Sweden and Denmark regarding the Barseback nuclear plant in showing how trust (or the lack thereof) played a role in how risk communication process evolved between the two countries. Also, the social amplification of risk was exemplified in this case similar to the means and ways Slovic identified in his article. But a feature of this social amplification of risk that Lofstedt described but Slovic did not discuss was the aspect of transboundary risk, in this case that of the risk of having nuclear power plants in Sweden not contained to this country only but also to the nearby country of Denmark. This transboundary feature adds another layer of social, psychological and also political factors that amplifies and attenuates the risk.

Kasperson and Kasperson pick up on this transboundary feature in their article as they describe in greater detail the aspects of transboundary risks and how it is different from other risks. They basically identify the fact that risks in this category ignore national borders and sovereignty and political authority. Thus, just the mere spatial separation between the area generating the risk and the areas exposed to the risk of harmful consequences exacerbates vulnerabilities and invokes greater risks. They classified these transboundary risks into four: 1) border-impact risks; 2) point-source transboundary risk; 3) structural/policy transboundary risk and 4) global environmental risk. This classification is quite expansive and illustrative of the multi-faceted nature of transboundary risk and they identify this very nature as the most important factor for the social amplification of such risks. The complexity of the relationships and the existing social, political and economic systems in the four types mentioned is fertile ground for very contentious, controversial and conflictual perceptions of risk leading to greater vulnerabilities and increased risks altogether.