JTC681 Social Processes of Risk. 3 cr. Prerequisite: graduate standing

Spring 2012  meets 6:20 - 9:00 Monday Evenings, Clark C364
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Description:
Regardless of its positive or negative connotations, risk can be seen as a condition of modernity, as defined by Giddens: “a society—more technically, a complex of institutions—which, unlike any preceding culture, lives in the future, rather than the past” (Giddens 1998, 94). In his work Against the Gods historian Peter Bernstein describes the mastery of risk as the vehicle that propelled society into modernity: “The ability to define what may happen in the future and to choose among alternatives lies at the heart of contemporary societies. Risk management guides us over a vast range of decision-making, from allocating wealth to safeguarding public health, from waging war to planning a family, from paying insurance premiums to wearing a seatbelt, from planting corn to marketing cornflakes.” In a somewhat less utopian vision, sociologist Ulrich Beck describes this condition as the “risk society,” in which “dangers are being produced by industry, externalised by economics, individualised by the legal system, legitimised by natural sciences, and made to appear harmless by politics.”

In perhaps its simplest definition, risk can be seen as a tripartite concept: the probability of harm occurring due to some hazard. Yet any casual scan of the current landscape makes it immediately obvious that there are far more complicated processes involved. This seminar will explore those processes, the social processes of risk. These processes involve psychological mechanisms, social structures, cultural dynamics, and most centrally, communication. The manner in which these processes function to define the world today will be examined across four dominant and strongly interacting contextual domains: technology, health (public and individual), environment, and natural disasters. This seminar will provide students with a broad entry to this sprawling and cross-disciplinary literature, from seminal work that served to coalesce the study of risk perception and risk communication to the most current literature that is redefining this field and charting its future.

Many of the readings for the course are taken from significant compilations of the literature that have appeared at critical junctures in the development of social studies of risk, the balance are from the most current material appearing in book form or in leading journals. A casual analysis of the academic literature published over the last 25 years illuminates the rapid growth of this topic. While readings center on material from the social sciences, the seminar approach will be amenable to graduate students from any discipline.

Evaluation:

1. Discussion (1/3 semester grade). In addition to general participation on a weekly basis, students will be assigned to act as discussion leaders over weekly readings. Discussion groups will be organized such that each week's readings are divided into four groups. Each group will be responsible for presenting a well organized and comprehensive overview of their assigned readings for class and leading the class in a discussion of the readings. All class members are assigned weekly to bring and turn in a set of discussion questions covering each of the papers that their group was not assigned to present, one question per assigned reading. Class meetings will devote about 30 minutes to each of the four groups, then break, and finish the meeting with an overview discussion of the main points for the week.

2. Class presentation (1/3 semester grade). During the final meetings of the course students will present and lead a one-hour discussion based on the topic of their semester paper.

3. Semester paper (1/3 semester grade). The paper assignment is to use a contextual case study approach to examine a specific hazard. The paper will overview the hazard's history and characteristics with respect to science, epidemiology, and/or engineering, present an integrative review the social scientific literature associated with risk concerning the hazard, and offer suggestions for the continued study of the social processes associated with that hazard. Any of the theoretical approaches discussed in the course may be adopted, although most hazards can be examined from multiple theoretical perspectives. An incomplete list of potential hazards to examine includes: nuclear power, mining, asbestos, air safety, terrorism, radon, genetically modified foods, food safety, tobacco, preventative health behaviors, nanotechnology, climate change, natural disasters, technological disasters, electromagnetic fields.
January 23, Week 1: Experiences and Interests
Discussion of risk in your life experiences, your interests in risk.
Course overview, organization of discussion groups.

Introduction pp 1-10
Ch 1 The Winds of the Greeks and the Role of the Dice pp. 11-22
Ch 2 As Easy as I. II, III pp. 23-27
Ch 5 The Remarkable Notions of the Remarkable Notions Man pp. 73-97
Ch 16 The Failure of Invariance pp. 269-283
Ch 19 Awaiting the Wildness pp. 329-337
Chapters 3, 4, 17, 18 included but optional

February 6, Week 3: Psychological processes.


optional:


February 13, Week 4: Social and Cultural processes.


optional:


**February 20, Week 5: Risk Communication**


optional:


**February 27, Week 6: In the context of technology.**


**March 5, Week 7: In the context of environment.**


March 12, Week 8: Spring Break

March 19, Week 9: In the context of natural disaster.


Stetler KM, Venn TJ, Calkin DE. The effects of wildfire and environmental amenities on property values in northwest Montana, USA. Ecological Economics. 2010;69(11):2233-2243.


optional:


**March 26, Week 10: In the context of health.**


April 2, Week 11: Synthesis: Material TBD, review of semester main ideas.
April 9, 16, 23, 30, Weeks 12-15: Topical Presentations (4 per meeting, 30 min ea).
May 7, Week 16: Exam period 8:30 p.m.: final papers due, course evaluation.

Course Book Bibliography (chapters extracted from):