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Space, Place and Knowledge: Natural Disasters and Cultures of Risk in Modern Societies

For almost three decades, risk has developed as one of the main concepts that can be used to structure modern societies (cf. Beck 1986, 2008; Bonß 1995). In this perspective, societal conflicts appear to be no longer “problems of societal order,” but rather “problems of risk with open outcome” (cf. Bonß 1995, 17). Beyond that, risks are seen as products of social interaction and not as facts, which have to be determined and described. To focus on the societal aspects of risks, Niklas Luhmann and others suggest utilizing the difference between risk and danger (instead of the antonyms risk and security, for instance). The two terms can be distinguished by the attribution of decision: Danger happens while risk is the result of decisions (e.g., there is always a *danger* to get an infection, but since there are vaccines to be inoculated against the swine flu, for instance, this danger transforms into a *risk* because it is up to the individuals whether they get the inoculation or not and, therefore, whether they can be blamed for getting sick or not). Hence, it is highly contingent what is (or is not) classified as a risk, depending (a) on the practice of construction within a specific culture of risk and (b) on the perspective: for whom and in what context a specific phenomenon is addressed as a risk or, rather, as a danger. Moreover, most discourses on risk include interesting geographical aspects, for they employ spatial facets or terminology. Spatial indexing serves to make risks tangible and visible, and sometimes to conceal the uncertainty and the open outcome of phenomena.

Indexing risk spatially can be seen as a process of reification of risk with the result that we can treat these risks as real and that they (seem to) become manageable (e.g., the virtually placeless al-Qaeda network seems to be manageable when it is spatially reduced to the Afghan or Pakistan mountains or to mosques in European countries). The first part of my fellowship at the Rachel Carson Center will be devoted to finalizing a working group book, applying a concept based on second-order-observation to geographical risk research (“Geographische Risikoforschung. Zur Konstruktion verräumlichter Risiken und Sicherheiten”).

In addition I will focus on the meaning and consequences of natural disasters in modern societies. At first glance, risks and catastrophes induced by natural processes (e.g., avalanches, floods, landslides, earthquakes or volcanic eruptions) seem to be inevitable (“natural” or “acts of God”), while risks or catastrophes induced by societal processes or human action (e.g., as a consequence of technology) seem to be avoidable (or at least manageable). With closer inspection, natural disasters turn out to be not sudden incidents but rather the culmination of long-ranging processes that are closely connected to societal processes. Whether a natural phenomenon proves to be a natural disaster mainly depends on the resilience of the affected community or society. Despite the fact that natural disasters and risks are a constant companion of societies, they are understood as ruptures of the normal order. In my project I pursue the question, in what way (natural) disasters and risks belong to the “normality” of societies and how we—as societies, as well as individuals or groups—can manage to live with this uncertainty and ruptures. I will try and combine the following approaches:

- Considerations on “normality” (cf. Link 2006);

- The process of organizing (cf. Weick 1985, Weick and Sutcliffe 2007);
- Considerations on “next society” (cf. Drucker 2002, Baecker 2007).