

TRACK 30. THE NEW POLITICS OF RISK: THE PERFORMING OF REGULATION IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

STS has long documented the fact that risk regulation is controversial: in contexts of uncertainty, different epistemic cultures come into conflict when evaluating risks. The conventional deficit model – which views lay logics of risk perception as lying in fundamental opposition to technical estimates of risks – has produced a normative view of regulation as a technocratic decision-making process rooted in the *a priori* elaboration of scientific opinions. Yet it is now widely accepted that the scientific methods, tools, and models underpinning risk estimates are themselves value-laden and need to be further problematised. If experts are not simply accessing truths about the risks that we face, nor transforming these truths into policy solutions, then *what are they doing?*

The objective of this panel is to explore the performative effects of different expert epistemic cultures: the ways that experts frame the need, nature, and uses of knowledge for policy-making.

For example, ignorance as a motive may be strategically used to legitimise non-intervention. It may also function as a resource, as an invitation to explore unknown terrains or to acknowledge the difficulty to conceptualise experiential modes of knowing, as documented in anthropological studies. What are the qualities attributed to ignorance? How do these qualities manifest themselves in risk regulation processes? Computational tools and techniques also carry performative capacities in various domains of risk regulation, from health policy to environmental governance. They are modes of calculation, and along with other statistical techniques have proven useful in predicting, assessing and preparing for natural or human-induced catastrophes. Yet to what extent do these sophisticated methodologies rest upon highly simplified assumptions, and what are the implications of this for regulation? For example, some scholars have traced the current financial crisis back to the use of highly complex risk management models and techniques. These economic models were premised upon the assumption that human beings are rational actors, an assumption long derided by psychologists as a complete and utter fiction. What other heuristics are at the root of risk regulation regimes, and what biases and blindspots are they creating? Similarly, what logics are employed to determine: what counts as valid evidence (vs. junk science); how that evidence is to be analysed (e.g. model choice); and how conflicting evidence should be treated (e.g. weight of evidence rules)? What are their origins? How are they legitimised or justified?

We invite empirical and theoretical papers across all domains of risk regulation (e.g. finance, environment, health, food, etc.), including those not traditionally covered in risk studies. Comparisons across domains are also welcomed.

Abstracts of no more than 500 words should be sent by email (following website instructions) by 2010 March 15th.

Convenors

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