

Reaction Paper Jenny Suckale

The readings cover a great variety of questions related to the perception and communication of risk, both from a theoretical standpoint and with reference to specific examples.

I found the discussion of the increasingly transboundary and international component of risk particularly interesting. Apart from its “traditional” international dimensions as described by Loefstedt in the case of the Swedish Barseback nuclear power plant, where a series of accidents arouse security concerns in both Denmark and Sweden about the plant’s safety in the early 1990s, he introduces four categories of transboundary risk. However, it would be interesting to investigate the effect that globalization has on the development of these transboundary risks in greater detail. It seems that as more processes become internationalized and countries as well as economies closer connected, the worldwide proneness to risk rises simply due to this high interdependence. That means that it would no longer be sufficient to just look at the country risk, but also at the risk to global networks.

In his paper “Perception of Risk” Slovic quotes Wildavsky in saying: “The richest, longest lived, best protected, most resourceful civilization with the highest degree of insight into its own technology, is on its way to becoming the most frightened.” This very interesting quote certainly merits more discussion, but it could be taken as an indication of the above mentioned concern about the stability of globalized networks. As the stability of a network always depends on its weakest part, the strongest has reason to be worried.

Burton and Kates and numerous other authors stress the differences in risk perceptions of experts and resource users and find notable discrepancy. This result hardly comes as a surprise. It might provide more insight into this highly complex question to look at whether there are any similarities and if so where and why. Also, the categorization of experts and non-experts seems highly problematic to me, as I expect high heterogeneity in both of these groups.

Slavic’s more quantitative analysis tries to go into more detail. However, I find his conclusion that laypersons have a richer concept of risk not convincing and possibly misleading. Misleading in the sense that I do not agree with judging perceptions with respect to their “richness”. Apart from the vagueness of this measure, it seems questionable if richness is necessarily and always good. Other problematic aspects in this study include: self-selection bias due to the choice that experts made for their profession, self-evaluation bias, neglected heterogeneity effects, and a vague definition of the utilized measures.