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Risk in the Modern Age

Social Theory, Science and Environmental Decision-Making

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For Jeremy

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Preface

This volume was prepared with a couple of different objectives in mind. First, environmental sociology, as a constituent specialization within the overarching discipline of which it is part, has during the past decade come to consist of two disjointed schools of thought. On one hand, there is a largely American tradition with roots stretching back to the 1970s. The birth of this school coincided with the rise of contemporary ecological concerns and has had a mixed history during the course of its maturation over the past two decades. The success of this branch of the subdiscipline has roughly paralleled the changeable fortunes of the modern environmental movement. Phases of sanguine enthusiasm calling for paradigmatic transformations have been followed by more melancholy intervals characterized by pragmatic empiricism. On the other hand, a more recent European expression of environmental sociology has developed around a social theoretical framework. Drawing on the work of a small number of prominent theorists, this vigorous new wing of environmental sociology raises both threats and opportunities to the older, more established variant. This book takes up the tricky challenge of trying to bring together these two currents into a single stream. The intent, obviously, is not to pursue a vague merger for the sake of enhanced organizational coherence, but rather to achieve a mutually beneficial combination.

Though the perils of this initial task are striking, the book's second objective is perhaps still more ambitious. Environmental sociology, whether the American empirical type or the more theoretical European variety, has had a relatively minor impact on public policy. Sociology's meager success in this regard becomes particularly prominent when it is compared with other branches of the social sciences, especially economics. This volume places center stage the unique perspective that environmental sociology can bring to our understanding of ecological risks. In approaching this project it must be stated unequivocally at the outset that environmental sociology is unlikely to provide the same sorts of ready-made solutions that policy-makers have come to expect from the other disciplinary approaches. Environmental sociology's comparative advantage is its ability to provide interpretations that are informed by the social and cultural context of actual experience.

It is surely no accident that environmental sociologists should be making a bid to develop their public role just when institutional decision-making seems to be in such desperate need of assistance. Disputes ranging from the serialized saga that has been playing out in Britain throughout much of the 1990s over the human health effects of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or Mad Cow Disease, to the marketing practices of industrial firms to distribute genetically modified foodstuffs speak to a crisis of faith on the part of sizeable segments of civil society. While such controversies invariably raise numerous issues requiring the careful application of certain technical skills, they also suggest that the props supporting our modern lifestyles, most centrally science and the idea of continual progress, may not be as secure as we commonly believe.

An increasing number of commentators contend that the antagonism between experts and the lay public seems to be reaching critical levels as policy-making bodies cling to prescriptive interventions that become less convincing with each passing day. Government officials claim to be acting on the basis of unassailable scientific evidence only to find it necessary to reverse themselves with the next contradictory disclosure. In the meantime, major media figures work with little appreciation of the esoterica that these crises throw up. Journalists are forced to translate imprecise and uncertain research findings to a public that is continually pulled from pillar to post. Perhaps more menacing is the situation in those communities that live with the ambiguity that arises from more acute breakdowns of our technological infrastructure. These victims frequently face a gray wall of bureaucratic intransigence and indifference as they struggle to cope with the health impacts that stem from ruptured chemical-storage tanks, radioactive leaks, and plumes of industrial pollutants.

This volume derives from a workshop entitled 'Risk in the Modern Age' organized by the Oxford Centre for the Environment, Ethics, and Society at Mansfield College, Oxford on 30 June–1 July 1997. Contributors subjected their original papers to lively critique during the conclave and subsequently revised them for inclusion in this collection. In addition to the authors represented here I would like to express my thanks to Barbara Adam, John Adams, Michael Bell, Sonja Boehmer-Christiansen, Robert Gramling, Robin Grove-White, Maarten Hajer, Jost Halfmann, Alan Irwin, Andrew Jamison, Klaus Japp, Wolfgang Krohn, Brent Marshall, Jerry Ravetz, Peter Simmons, Bronislaw Szerszynski, and Brian Wynne. The success of this workshop

was entirely the result of the enthusiastic participation of this distinguished group of scholars.

An enterprise of this magnitude could not have taken place without assistance of a supportive institution and I convey my appreciation to the fellows of Mansfield College, and in particular to Dennis Trevelyan, David Marquand, and Neil Summerton. I also extend my sincere gratitude to Anne Maclachlan for her Herculean effort helping to organize the workshop and to coordinate thousands of other details issuing from this event. Anne Rafique expertly and cheerfully shepherded the manuscript through the final stages of production. Finally, I would like to thank the Ove Arup Foundation for its generous support of my work during the past three years. Further financial support for this workshop was provided by the Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach Foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Anglo-German Foundation for the Study of Industrial Society, and the British Academy.

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MJC