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WORKING PAPER № 18

A Social Science of Risk: The Trap of Empiricism, the Problem of Ambivalence?

Peter Kelly
THE ALFRED DEAKIN RESEARCH INSTITUTE
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A Social Science of Risk: The Trap of Empiricism, the Problem of Ambivalence?¹

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I draw on work from my forthcoming book (The Self as Enterprise: Foucault and the Spirit of 21st Century Capitalism, Gower/Ashgate [2012]) to engage with a number of theoretical and conceptual concerns for a social science of risk.

Are risk, individualisation, the choice biography, for example, concepts just to be empirically validated? In testing, validating these ideas/concepts what is data? What is evidence?

The trap of empiricism suggests that the world awaits our calculation, our measurement, rather than being something that is enacted in/through the knowledge practices that we put to work/in to play at different times, for particular purposes.

I explore the ways in which irony, ambivalence and ambiguity structure, differently, our experience of choice and risk; and the ways in which irony, ambivalence and ambiguity might frame discussions of choice, freedom, the DIY biography, the self as enterprise, risk:

The paper, via an example drawn from the literature on/debates about Work-Life Balance (WLB), explores the character of the always limited fields of possibility, labour markets for example, in which we practise our freedom. These fields are both/always individualised and normalised, and compel us to make choices and carry responsibilities for the consequences of these choices. In this sense, drawing on the work of Zygmunt Bauman, I argue that the individual – the self as enterprise – is the site/space in which the paradoxes and risks of a globalised 21st century capitalism are to be reconciled and managed - or not. This work presents particular challenges for a social science of risk.

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the Risk and The Lifecourse Workshop, The University of Melbourne, July 21, 2011 (supported by The Australian Sociological Association and The University of Melbourne)
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In this paper – which is more than a little provocative in its title – I don't want to review the extensive literature on risk, or to pick a winner in terms of the approach that best captures an understanding of risk, or why, as a concept, it is so prevalent in social science at this time. In the past I have explored some of these issues – ideas about young people at-risk, individualisation/standardisation, normalization, and the DIY self - through what I see as intersections between governmentality and reflexive modernization/risk society approaches to risk (for example, Kelly 2003, 2007).

I am also not suggesting that we shouldn't do empirical work, but that, possibly, we shouldn't invest too much faith in our data, quite possibly we shouldn't take what we find, hear or count too literally. After all, those who talk to us, fill in our surveys, respond to our questions are human, all too human. As are we. And in the conversations that are mediated by interview data, by questionnaires, by surveys we are involved in the always problematic process of interpretation (What does that question mean? What does she mean by answering that question in that way?). Maybe we should also question whether the world is just waiting for us to turn up in it; just waiting for us to measure, to count, to calculate, to ask questions of and in.

These sorts of questions have been important to me for a while and open up a theoretical and methodological space that is beyond the limits of this working paper. However, these questions have been important in structuring the approach I have taken in a forthcoming book titled New Work Ethics: Foucault, the “Spirit” of 21st Century Capitalism, and the Self as Enterprise (Kelly 2012). The concerns and ideas are more fully explored there.

In that book I take a lead from Max Weber's (2002) The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism to suggest that the essence of the spirit of 21st century, flexible capitalism is that the cultivation of the self as enterprise is the calling to which individuals should devote themselves. That is, 21st century, flexible capitalism is energised by a spirit that sees in the cultivation of the self - as an ongoing, never ending enterprise - an ethically slanted maxim for the conduct of a life. This spirit is analysable as an institutionally structured, individualised entrepreneurialism; a structured series of incitements to manage the lifecourse as an entrepreneurial DIY project. This is a project that requires us to know and govern ourselves in ways that facilitate the pursuit of this calling.

The discussion is framed, to a large degree, by Foucault’s later work on the care of the self, and the particular ways in which he thinks about the self, about power, about freedom. The following exchange comes from an interview shortly before his death in 1984 (Foucault 2000).

Foucault: I have always been somewhat suspicious of the notion of liberation, because if it is not treated with precautions and within certain limits, one runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression. According to this hypothesis, all that is required is to break these repressive deadlocks and man will be reconciled with himself, rediscover his nature or regain contact with his origin, and re-establish a full and positive relationship with himself. I think this idea should not be accepted without scrutiny...

This is why I emphasize practices of freedom over processes of liberation...
It is in the practices of freedom, in the play of power relations, and in the irony and ambiguity of notions such as willing and choice that I identify and locate - via the work and legacy of Weber, Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman among others - a range of encouragements and demands to develop particular ethical dispositions to the conduct of a working life.

The self as enterprise is required to think of itself, imagine the work that it should do on itself, within a widespread, embracing set of normative terms that seek to position the self as entrepreneurial, as active, as autonomous, as prudential, as risk aware, as choice making and as responsible (Kelly 2006). This self is required to develop a certain self awareness, a particular self understanding, a form of reflexivity that equips it to exercise a well regulated autonomy: and a capacity to exercise choice, and to accept the responsibilities for the consequences of choices made, or not made. Especially in relation to what it means to be a worker in the globalised, risky labour markets of the liberal democracies. In this sense, we all, as individual entrepreneurs of our own biographies and portfolios of choice and achievement, carry an increasingly onerous burden. Individualisation processes increasingly locate the self as the space/site in which the tensions, the risks, the ambiguities and ambivalences of globalised, rationalised capitalism are to be resolved and managed - or not.

The particular character of the self as enterprise can be diverse, can accommodate an array of possibilities. What it means to be entrepreneurial, active, autonomous, prudential, risk aware, choice making and responsible can be relatively open. However, the expectations and norms of the self as enterprise take on particular limits and possibilities in different fields of possibility, in different labour markets. Participation in these labour markets isn’t about unlimited possibilities but rather suggestions, incitements, and demands to imagine and practise the self in ways that conform, more or less, to the norms that give shape to these fields. You want to work here? These are the expectations!

In the book I stress that as workers in the liberal democracies we are free to choose and to act, but to be employable or successful in the world of flexible capitalism we have to choose to act in certain ways – or suffer the consequences. Willing and choice, in this sense, should be understood as both ambiguous and ironic.

An example from the book can illustrate the character of this ambivalence and irony. I introduce a discussion of the debate about work-life balance (WLB) and the intensification of work via reference to Arlie Hochschild’s (2001) influential and best selling The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work.

Against Christopher Lasch’s suggestion that the domestic space is a haven in a heartless world - a place that the male breadwinner might return to after a hard day at work and declare Honey I’m home! – Hochschild (2001, 44-45) tellingly recounts research interviews in which, as the subtitle of her book suggests, work becomes home and home becomes work. In this way of both imagining, and juggling family and work life, the figure of a tired, harassed, often emotionally drained parent...
or partner escapes a domestic space of often 'unresolved quarrels and unwashed laundry for the reliable orderliness, harmony and managed cheer of work'. In this sort of scenario, some 'people find in work a respite from the emotional tangles at home. Others marry their work, investing it with an emotional significance reserved for family, while hesitating to trust loved ones at home'.

Linda Avery – described by Hochschild as a friendly 38 year mother of two who works as a shift supervisor at one of the Amerco plants she conducted research in - embodies many of the tensions, ambiguities, even contradictions that emerge in discussions about the colonisation of time/space by 24/7 flexible capitalism. Linda is in her second marriage. Her current husband works an opposite shift in the same factory as a technician. She has a 16 year old daughter from her previous marriage and a two year old from her current relationship:

‘I walk in the door and the minute I turn the key in the lock my older daughter is there. Granted, she needs somebody to talk to about her day...The baby is still up...and that upsets me...My daughter comes right up to the door and complains about anything her stepfather said or did’


The home shift, here, is no haven. Indeed, Linda, like many others in her situation finds a different set of relationships at work:

‘I usually come to work early just to get away from the house. I get there at 2.30pm, and people are there waiting. We sit. We talk. We joke. I let them know what's going on, who has to be where, what changes I've made for the shift that day...There's laughing, fun, joking. My co-workers aren't putting me down for any reason’


In an introductory chapter to an edited collection titled Work Less Live More? Critical Analysis of the Work-Life Boundary, Chris Warhurst and colleagues (2008) raise a number of concerns with the character and object of the debates about WLB. They suggest a number of conceptual and empirical problems that are fundamental to the territory that is charted in these discussions. Included here are concerns that workplace surveys in many of the OECD countries don't support a view that many workers are working longer hours. Indeed, they claim that the data appears to suggest a decline in working hours for the majority of workers (in a 2003 ILO report, however, Anne Spurgeon (2003) contests this sort of claim). Warhurst et al indicate that work intensification (working harder, with fewer breaks and fewer resources) may be a larger concern for many employees. They are also wary of the ways in which, conceptually, work and life are presented as apparently clearly demarcated spheres of human action, when there is ample historical and contemporary research to suggest that the boundaries between work and non-work lives are not clear cut at all for many workers/occupations. They also want to trouble an often implicit assumption in WLB debates that the work part of this relationship is a bad, and the life (usually domestic) part is seen as the good space.
Madeline Bunting’s (2004) *Willing Slaves: How the overwork culture is ruling our lives*, presents and analyses data posted to her *Working Lives* column on *The Guardian* www site. Bunting solicited email contributions from readers on the subject of overwork. Some of these she followed up in face-to-face interviews. She suggests that the overwhelming response to her call for contributions reveals the ‘sheer invasive dominance of work in people’s lives, and the price it exacted on their health and happiness’ For Bunting ‘work-life balance’ was an inadequate label for the set of issues that energised the responses she received from contributors. She argues that the UK has ‘become a more work-centred society that ever; it demands more of us than ever, and it also purports to fulfil more of our needs than ever’ (Bunting 2004, xiii-xvi).

Bunting (2004, xv) is keen to emphasise that her book is not ‘a diatribe against work’. For the range of damaging consequences associated with work in the globalised, risky labour markets of the 21st century that I discuss in the book there are other, more ambiguous dimensions to the world of paid work. For example, Bunting acknowledges a point that is central to the themes that I explore: namely, that for many of us work is not drudgery. For many contributors to Bunting’s column paid work is ‘stimulating, exciting and rewarding’. In a 2004 book - *Better than Sex: How a Whole Generation Got Hooked on Work* - Helen Trinca and Catherine Fox (2004, 3) structure a discussion of the roles that paid work plays in the lives of Generation X workers through this very theme. Their discussion examines the tensions generated in new work regimes that demand ever increasing levels of commitment and performance, and which promise substantial rewards in terms of a sense of achievement, worth and of self. For many people whom Trinca and Fox interviewed and spoke to work is something that could not compete with sex for ‘glamour, excitement and emotion, but it’s close’. However, because it takes up so much of so many people’s lives – in terms of hours worked, in terms of hours spent thinking/worrying about it, in terms of dreaming about it, or it interrupting sleep/recovery time - work can ‘drain people of the energy, time and desire that make sex and intimacy happen. It can push away love, deaden our interest in others and flatten our horizons – and yet still rate as the most important part of our life’. Indeed, on so many levels work can be ‘more fulfilling, empowering, constant and controllable than…[our] sex life. Better, in so many ways…’

As Bauman points out (especially in his two books *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* [2004] and *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* [2005]) the privileges of vocation, where (with some irony) we might imagine that work is better than sex, are not enjoyed by all: for many workers their work lives continue to be characterised by what I call toil and drudgery. In these circumstances ideas of willing and of choice, and the state of the self as enterprise, are profoundly ambiguous and ambivalent, and, often, bitterly ironic.

Space doesn’t permit a full engagement with some of Bauman’s key ideas – such as modernity and ambivalence, the liquid modern, the shift from an ethic of production to an aesthetic of consumption. However, a brief engagement with the ways in which he has explored the roles that ambivalence plays in everyday life, the social science and politics (as he discusses in *Modernity and Ambivalence* [1991], *Modernity and the Holocaust* [1989]) is important for the issues I want to discuss here. Bauman (1991, 1) argues that anxiety is a characteristic of ambivalence. It is ‘because of the anxiety that accompanies it and the indecision which follows that we experience ambivalence as a disorder’. Ambivalence, as the ‘failure’ of the ‘naming/classifying’ function of language is, in effect, ‘the alter ego of language, and its permanent companion - indeed, its normal condition’. In generating structures of the world, language situates itself (provisionally, partially) between ‘a solidly founded, orderly world fit for human habitation, and a contingent world of randomness, in which human survival weapons - memory, the capacity for learning - would be useless’. The ordering functions of language promise to ‘sustain order and to deny or suppress randomness and contingency’; for in an ‘orderly world’ we know ‘how to go on’. Bauman (1990, 165) also argues that the ‘history of modernity’ is a history of attempts to exterminate ambivalence: to define precisely - and to suppress
or eliminate everything that could or would not be precisely defined. In his studies of the Holocaust and of modernity Bauman suggests that the costs of attempting to exterminate ambivalence are (have been) too high. Indeed, the historical legacy of past attempts to impose order on disorder, to pursue, rationally and scientifically, the quest for order indicate that countless millions of humans have paid these costs with their lives, their liberty and their diverse potentialities.

I want to suggest, drawing on discussions by key scholars of Bauman’s work, that the real value of his mode of thinking, of his sociological imagination has less to do with the empirical veracity or truthfulness of concepts such as liquid modernity, and more to do with how, after reading Bauman, after struggling with what it is that he is suggesting, then our thinking, our sense of the limits and possibilities of our knowing, of what we can imagine, has been pushed into different spaces.

In his The Social Thought of Zygmunt Bauman Keith Tester (2004, 6-10) outlines the qualities of what he calls Bauman’s ‘sociological mission’. For Bauman the possibility is that sociology can show ‘that things could be different to this; that where we perceive only necessity there is the chance of possibility’. Bauman, Tester argues, is interested in how individual biographies and histories are structured by social forces, and ‘in particular how men and women are brought face to face with contradictions in their own lives that are utterly beyond personal and biographical resolution’. Tester uses as an example here the ways in which Bauman’s own story was fundamentally shaped by the manner in which the Communist party/apparatus in Poland ‘made it nigh-on impossible for one to be Jewish and a builder of the purported new world’. As Tester suggests, Bauman’s work has most often taken a course that seeks to unsettle the many intellectual, business and governmental projects which assume or presume that the ‘world is clear to the understanding (or can be made clear as soon as the “correct” method is discovered or as soon as the obstacles to clarity are got out of the way). In unsettling these presumptions of an ordered world Bauman insists that the ‘human condition is instead marked by all the possibilities and problems of ambivalence’. Bauman’s embrace of ambivalence, and recognition of the all too human tendency to seek to impose order on this ambivalence, to exterminate ambivalence provokes what Tester identifies as his ethical commitment to ‘attend to those who are made to suffer most sharply from the ambivalence of the human condition’. It is in encountering and being troubled by these limits and possibilities that we can ‘try to transcend them; and it is precisely in that rubbing against and attempt to transcend that we become fully human’. As a consequence Bauman does not write in order to find answers. To the contrary, his writing is concerned to develop better ways of asking questions.

Peter Beilharz and Tony Blackshaw, in separate chapters in a 2010 collection titled Bauman’s Challenge: Sociological Issues for the 21st Century, also cover some ground that is useful here.

Beilharz (2010, 62) wonders what we should make of ideas such as liquid modernity. He suggests that this, and other figures that Bauman constructs, is ‘an emblem, or a symbol rather than a theory or a social phase of development. It represents a way of seeing where what was taken for granted after World War II now seems mercurial…’. In a similar vein, Blackshaw (2010, 71) suggests that Bauman’s sociological imagination is of a type that has ‘few practitioners around today’; and that there seems widespread resistance to the idea that it has any substantial role to play in the development of contemporary sociological thought. Here he quotes Larry Ray’s (2007) contribution to the collection The Contemporary Bauman, and his critique of what he identifies (somewhat dismissively) as Bauman’s metaphors: ‘However useful they may be in stimulating imaginative enquiry they are not a substitute for rigorous conceptualization and research into the social’.

Blackshaw (2010, 70-71) positions Bauman’s work favourably in relation to the kind of sociology practised by Marx, Weber, Durkheim and others (the so-called founding fathers), and suggests that this hermeneutic or interpretive sociology ‘provides the well-spring of the sociological imagination’.
This form of thinking, this imagination – that ‘intuitive and ethical frame of thought through which sociological ideas are arrived at’ – is ‘markedly at odds with the ethos that underpins empirical sociology, which is dedicated’ argues Blackshaw, ‘first and foremost’ to the scientific rigour of its methods. In this sense, suggests Blackshaw (2010, 75-76), ‘sociology is truthful’, for Bauman, ‘when it is hermeneutical, not in the self-regarding ‘data discourse’ style of the sociology journals’ (which in a blind peer review process probably wouldn’t publish the contemporary Bauman), ‘but in the way that it sparks connections, like poetry’. In this sense, claims Blackshaw, Bauman ‘supplants the false coherence of empirical-evidence-tacked-on-to-social-theory-thought with the contrariness of cross-grained human narrative’.

A social scientific imagination, in this mode, framed by this sort of attitude, even ethos, is more concerned with interpreting rather than proving; is more concerned with meaning than results; is more concerned with possibilities rather than certainties; is more concerned with stories rather than theories.

Bauman’s thinking, his writing, his social scientific imagination opens up spaces in which it is possible to think differently. Not necessarily with any more clarity or clear-headedness. Rather, it troubles what I think I know, what others know, the limits of our knowing. It unsettles certainties and allows us to try to think in different ways. It does not seek to exterminate ambivalence or irony, but to put them to work, to play, in exploring such things as choice, freedom, uncertainty and risk. That is, indeed, a challenge for a social science of risk.
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