Review: Curran, Dean 2016: *Risk Power and Inequality in the 21st Century*. Palgrave Macmillan

As a sociological concept 'risk' entered scholarly debate internationally with the translation of Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society Towards a New Modernity* in 1992. Beck suggested that with ongoing processes of societal modernization no longer *social class* but increasingly *risk* would become a concept capable to understand the social changes under way at the time such as the mass protests and resistance against new technologies and the foundation of Green parties in many Western countries. Social conflicts would increasingly spark about *risk* rather than *class contradictions*. This claim which goes to the heart of sociological analysis of social structures and processes met fierce resistance and controversial debates ever since.

Curran's work and its value for the debate must be seen in this context. In several articles Curran contributes to attempts to overcome the confrontation of class theorists and risk theorists to find a way to combine these two defining concepts of present day societies. *Risk, Power and Inequality in the 21st Century* brings together these publications and develops them into a broader and detailed outline of his major argument, the need to combine risk studies with class analysis for a better understanding of growing relational social inequalities. His work is a refreshing contribution which creatively develops conceptual work beyond the silos of class theorizing and risk studies.

The book develops its key arguments in three conceptual chapters and two case studies on environmental risks and corporate finance. After the introduction, in chapter 2 Curran briefly reviews social science risk approaches to argue that only Beck's *risk society* acknowledges the power of the reality of risks for shaping the social world, arguing that "a realist understanding of risk is an indispensable element of any analysis of the social structuration of contemporary risks" (40). On this basis Curran suggests a reshaping of the risk society approach in chapter 3. He discusses critical realism and Nancy Cartwright's concept of 'dappled world' to de-totalize and decentre risk in risk society theorizing as a way to conceptually combine the complexities of the social and material reality in a way that neither risk nor class dominates (57-8). Curran suggests that his "framework allows us to identify and analyse a certain subset of risks that have particularly important characteristics – they are socially produced and distributed, and they are generated as non-local systematic side-effects in the context of organized irresponsibility. They can have socially formative effects because they fall outside of the traditional scope of methods of harm prevention and compensation, and they have the potentiality to radically restructure the bases of social power and of life chances." (61-2). In the following chapter 4 Curran revisits the work of Bourdieu, Marx and Weber which he contends establish different connections between social and economic relationships. Although identifying systematic limits of these approaches for the analysis of risk as part of class and social inequalities, he wants to use these approaches as "resources with which to better analyse the multidimensional nature of contemporary inequality" (72). In this way prepared with a "realist, dappled world approach" (72) he provides in chapters 5 and 6 two case studies on "environmental bads and financial risks" (82) to show how "advantages that contemporary elites enjoy are being generated through the increased risk exposure of the least advantaged in society" (82). Chapter 5 repeats the main arguments of the book referring to examples of the increasing distribution of environmental "bads" which would "increase relational inequalities". "The relatively wealthier are able to monopolize socially scarce 'private escape routes' from hazards" (18) "while those in dominated class positions have little choice but to be exposed to the brunt of the processes associated with risk society." (105) Chapter 6 provides an example from the realm of finance to "explore how different risk processes beyond environmental risk can be integrated into this framework of the intersections of risk, power and inequality" (113). More concretely Curran examines "the massive differentials in risk positions between senior finance employees and the less advantaged" and how processes of organized irresponsibility and macro-economic trends contribute "towards the intensification of existing class inequalities." (116) by showing how "senior financial

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employees were able to benefit from the production of risk due to *risk illusion*, in which the massive amplification of risk is registered as an increase in the long-term value of an investment, and hence legitimating corresponding increases in pay". (118, 124). In the conclusion he finally summarizes some of the key conceptual suggestions of the book and its contribution to the broader debate on the relationship of the dynamics of risk positions and class positions.

Although the book makes important and original contributions to the debate on risk, power and social inequality this also comes with some weaknesses. Research on social inequalities has developed quite a lot since the classics. One might think about the intersectional research program building on earlier work of feminists, which has shown for decades that it is highly problematic to look at class in isolation rather than in combination with other socio-structural variables such as *gender* and *race*. Curran, indeed, mentions such developments but without engaging with them conceptually. Disaster studies, for example on Hurricane Katrina (Luft 2016) and risk studies (Olofsson et al. 2016) as well as health studies (Bowleg 2012) have started a more nuanced approach to risk and inequality more broadly which allows to better understand and research the complex relationships between inequalities and risk.

Curran quite early develops a strong argument for realism as a necessary basis for combining risk and class and later refers to critical realism. Many of such epistemological debates I find overstating the point. Indeed, it is not uncommon that realist ontologies combine with constructionist epistemologies and I am not so sure whether Curran provides a coherent solution for these issues. Interestingly he does not engage in a more detailed debate of Beck's writing on the issue. In many contributions Beck has outlined and emphasised that he understands risk as a 'not yet catastrophe' which seems crucial for his theorizing. Curran did also not engage in any detail with Beck's concept of the 'relations of definition' which might have given the opportunity for a more nuanced debate, where the knowledge about the reality of risk remains contested and co-produced by different social players.

I found it sometimes difficult that the book reduces Beck's approach to class on his writing on risk rather than including the broader arguments about reflexive modernisation and the key role of individualisation processes. In this context Beck suggested the possibility of increased inequalities which can no longer refer to class but individualised identities. Beck's notion of class is driven by the idea of the political subject and to what extent social class constitutes specific identities rather than being merely a statistical construct. I have gotten the sense that there is a systematic difference between Beck's and Curran's concept of class. Some clarifications might have been valuable.

Reading through the book is not always a smooth and inspiring experience. The chapters repeat the arguments of the book quite a lot, in particular when it comes to chapter 5. In contrast, some of the arguments and literature Curran refers to later on could have been included in the earlier debate.

The book makes an overdue step out of the backlog in theorizing of risk and social disadvantage. Curran makes an important contribution. It is time to move on and recognize and integrate the work beyond the classics of class analysis and risk studies.

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