



Understanding Social Change

Risk and accountability

John Durant

this situation that we're discussing which is a kind of tradition of how you do business from a policy point of view about issues like this, that situation is itself not set in stone if you like, it's currently the subject of a lot of interrogation, debate, questioning, and I think the present government in the UK seems to me to have at least facilitated that kind of questioning by itself very early on after it was elected indicating an interest in trying to open up processes like this a little more, so there seems to me to be more fluidity about the system now, more willingness to think about possible new ways of gaining greater transparency, greater openness and more consultation. I don't think we've yet learnt very much about how you do it, and I think we're very, very groping as a culture because we have so few traditions of public consultation really, apart from issuing of green papers to call on. But it seems to me that for that reasons we're living in very interesting times for this kind of thing, and there's quite a lot to be played for and potentially won in terms of building more open and, if you like, more democratic systems of discussion and decision-making.

Hilary Rose

John's absolutely right, I mean it's not all bad news, there has been a sort of a cautious toe in the water over the last two or three years, perhaps even a little longer than that because the crisis around risk management is not new, and that is that the development of new social institutions, consensus for citizens' juries, I mean these sorts of things are new social institutions well developed in other countries, but those other countries have got a very deep democratic tradition. Now apart from this sort of occasional voting every five years or so, and a very weak local government structure, I mean Britain has not got a very robust democratic tradition, and it's very strange to say that because it's a very old democracy, but it's not got a very deep local democratic tradition. And you can see in a variety of institutions a sort of longing to democratise from below which is very encouraging, and this is part of this, and these would be about producing new social institutions. You will see this in a whole range of things like, for example, oh I don't know the institutions around disability have been much more reclaimed by people with a disability that are managed for them compassionately by people without.

John Durant

We were talking about institutional change but I wonder how much, if I can take an alternative view, if people still want experts, they don't necessarily want to be involved in discussing matters as perhaps their food or whatever, they want to be able to just pick the thing up and go back or go to a situation, in fact maybe we haven't gone from a situation where anything was taken for granted, but actually that's something that we desire, we want to be able to take things for granted.

Steve Hinchliffe

Aren't we, many of us, I speak personally now, we want two things here, don't we, I mean we do want quite a lot of things that are necessary to how we live to be taken care of us for us, I mean we can't all pay attention to everything all the time, but I think we also need quite a lot of confidence in the way it's been taken care of, and the knowledge all the time that if we should have ever really become rather unhappy about this for any reason, we would know how we could go and register our dislike of it, or make a difference, in other words accountability from the people who are being given delegated authority is also important and I think at the moment what I feel, and I sense around this table we're tending to agree, is that we haven't quite got right in Britain at the moment and who can say that any culture necessarily has by the way, but we certainly haven't got right the balance between delegated

authority to other people, and personal responsibility and the sense of accountabilities and trust that will allow you to sustain in a complex society a healthy mix between the two.

Steve Hinchliffe

And finally on institutional change Hilary mentioned earlier the relationship between natural and social sciences, and I wonder perhaps we could finish just thinking very briefly about the role perhaps of social science in this in actually not ignoring questions of the natural and social but getting involved?

John Durant

Well I have a brief answer to that which might be useful, it seems to me that the starting point in the area of risk is to acknowledge that it is by its very nature a concept which needs interdisciplinary approaches and I don't just mean multi-disciplinary but interdisciplinary approaches. Any notion that you could give an adequate treatment to something like risk by staying exclusively within the domain of the natural sciences, or the domain of technology or for that matter, exclusively in the domain of the social sciences, I think is doomed, we're bound to need interdisciplinary and, again, we're not that good at it.

Hilary Rose

Well I've always seen social sciences as basically moral sciences, and as very deeply engaged with trying to strengthen society and for me that's particularly civic society, civil society. And that means that the other area that I'm tremendously interested in is how do we help, work with, and strengthen groups that are on the sharp end of risk, so that they cannot actually better articulate their concerns about risk, and indeed in some cases I mean actually intervening strongly into a debate, so that they can actually secure a less risky outcome.

Steve Hinchliffe

Well I think we've covered a huge area from knowing risk to uncertainty and expertise, to thinking about trust. Ways of thinking about how social sciences can contribute both in terms of engaging with other colleagues in perhaps other disciplines, but also engaging with interest groups, political groups, and so on, perhaps groups that have actually been more successful than most academics in dealing with risk in actually understanding and working, and living in a risky world, but in ways that are more beneficial. So it just remains for me to say John Durant, Professor of Public Understanding of Science at Imperial College, Hilary Rose, and Professor of Sociology at City University, London, and thank you very much.