

# Risk!

## History and development of a concept and the everyday experiences of coping with uncertainty

### **Instructor:**

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### **Course description**

Risk! is a course designed to introduce graduate students to the origins and development of an ubiquitous, complex, and controversial phenomenon in human and non-human societies. Through a series of selected readings students will become familiar with the contextual and contingent meanings of risk across several centuries, in Western and non-Western societies. Scientific approaches to risk in the modern era became the symbol of rational approaches to uncertainty in human experience: from individual behavior to social organization, from natural phenomena to god's intervention. Exploring the multiplicity of meanings of and approaches to risk is a way to understand how culture, power, and moral orders shaped technoscientific, legal, and everyday practices developed to curtail the odds of uncertainty and unknown consequences of human activities and natural disasters.

Risk! will explore how individuals and societies coped with uncertainty and risk taking. The main structure of the course revolves around specific themes, roughly organized in chronological order. The first part of the course (weeks 1 and 2) explores the emergence of probability in connection to moral theories of decision making and uncertainty in business enterprises. The second part focuses on specific historical case studies related to risk in different social realms: labor, markets, health, etc. The final part (last 5 weeks) of the course will be devoted to recent social theories of risk developed by historians, anthropologists, and other social scientists (roughly 1980s-2000s).

### **Course organization and assignments**

Students are required to participate actively during the weekly meetings. Each week, one or two students will present the assigned readings' main themes and questions and will start discussion. Each participant will post a comment on Canvas the day before class so that the entire group can have a look at all the comments before discussion. In addition to weekly activities students are required to write a final paper related to the theme of the course. A final paper proposal is due on February 26. Depending on their stage in the

graduate career students have two choices: 1) writing a research paper on an original topic related to their research projects OR 2) writing a conceptual paper that analyzes some of the central questions emerging from the readings. In any case, the final paper should be roughly 20/22 pages long (double spaced, 12 font, Times New Roman, footnotes, and bibliography included). Final paper deadline: April 29.

## **Class Schedule**

1 – January 8, 2019

- Introduction to the course

### Origins

2 – January 15, 2019

- James Franklin (2015), *The Science of Conjecture*, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Jeremy Baskes (2013). *Staying Afloat: Risk and Uncertainty in Spanish Atlantic World Trade, 1760-1820*. Stanford University Press.

3 – January 22, 2019

- Ian Hacking (2006). *The Emergence of Probability*. Cambridge University Press (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

### Labor

4 – January 29, 2019

- Julia Moses (2018). *The First Modern Risk: Workplace Accidents and the Origins of European Social States*. Cambridge University Press.

### Markets

5 – February 5, 2019

- Justin Fox (2009). *The Myth of the Rational Market: A History of Risk, Reward, and Delusion on Wall Street*. Harper Business.
- Frank Knight (2006). *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* (Dover Books on History, Political and Social Science) Paperback – March 17, 2006

### Health

6 – February 12, 2019

- Jacqueline H. Wolf (2018). *Cesarean Section: An American History of Risk, Technology, and Consequence*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

### Everyday experiences

7 – February 19, 2019

- Arwen P. Mohun (2013). *Risk: Negotiating Safety in American Society*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

### Policy

8 – February 26, 2019

- David Vogel (2015). *The Politics of Precaution*. Princeton University Press.
- Research proposal due in class

### Exposure and environmental justice

9 – March 5, 2019

- Barbara Allen (2003), *Uneasy Alchemy*, MIT Press.
- Scott Frickel and Vincent Bess, “Hurricane Katrina, contamination, and the unintended organization of ignorance,” *Technology in Society* 29 (2007): 181-188.

### Experts and expertise

10 – March 19, 2019

- Scott G. Knowles (2011). *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

### Risk taking and Risk Aversion

11 – March 26, 2019

- Michael Thompson (1980), “Aesthetics of Risk” in Richard Schwing (Ed.) *Societal Risk Assessment: How Safe is Safe Enough?* Springer.
- Daniel Kahneman (2012), *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Penguin Books.

### Contemporary Understandings of Risk: social theories of risk

12 – April 2, 2019

- Deborah Lupton (2003). *Risk*. Oxford University Press.

### Modernity and modernization

13 – April 9, 2019

- Ulrich Beck (1992), *Risk Society*. Routledge.

### Cultural theory of risk

14 – April 16, 2019

- Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* and *Risk in Culture*

### Semiotic (material) approach

15 – April 23, 2019

- Davide Orsini, “Signs of Risk” Materiality, History, and Meaning in Cold War Controversies over Nuclear Contamination,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 62 (3) 2020.
- Olga Kuchinskaya (2014) *The Politics of Invisibility*, MIT Press.

Final Paper due on April 29

