

**Risk Acceptability According to the Social Sciences.** [Social Research Perspectives, Occasional Reports on Current Topics, No. 11.] Mary Douglas. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1986, 115 pgs. \$6.95 paper.

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This book acts as a promising review of the literature on social influences on risk perception, suggesting that most research views risk perception as an individual, and not a social, phenomenon. (Do developmental changes in perception regarding risk danger and evil necessarily always begin with the individual rather than the collective?) In the tradition of Durkheim and Mauss, Douglas focuses on social factors and the neglect of culture.

*Purity and Danger* [Douglas, 1966] presented an anthropological approach to human cognition—an approach which is developed further in *Risk Acceptability*. The argument reveals that humans pay attention to particular patterns of natural disasters, and mutually adapt in society to punishments and rewards in the environment. *Risk and Culture* [Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982] tested this hypothesis in Western culture, with its new awareness of technological dangers. In the present book, Douglas increasingly discusses the sociology of perception with its persistent gaps in information: “regularly scheduled obliviousness is more intriguing” to her. There are signs of strong intention to protect certain values and their accompanying institutional forms. Risk perception is a paradigmatic example of this. A conclusion is that risk perception studies stay within the very confines that they are instituted to transcend.

Douglas elicits a number of crucial questions: how the acceptable distribution of risk in society is an aspect of distributive justice; how public standards of acceptability are set; and how standards of acceptable risk reflect moral judgments about the kind of society in which we want to live. An assumption is that individual perceptions and choices about risk are strongly directed by social influences, yet, social scientists seem reluctant to examine these factors.

In scouring through the social sciences, Douglas analyzes various methodologies of examining risk behaviour. Personally, I think the fields of psychohistory and depth psychology might yield fruitful promise as well. Collective representations and those who uphold or institute them seem to be necessarily one-sided in their perceptions. If collective representations are meant to be formalistic, health-promoting and stabilizing of society, they turn a blind eye to those risk-provoking ideologies and measures inherent within the system. The social scientists who are trained in and work in these systems naturally have great difficulty in perceiving the limitations and dangers of the systems.