

## Book Review

*Rischio e comunicazione. Teorie, modelli, problemi*

Andrea Cerase

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Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, zoonotic diseases, vaccines, climate change, nuclear energy and terrorism are very different phenomena, but all have in common the capability to threaten the ordinary life of communities. Although the nature of the threat and the instruments for mitigation it change, the range of problems that these different risks lead to can be comparable. In fact, all these risks generate social, political, economic and legal issues related to the mitigation of their (possible) impact on the relevant communities. The global reach of (some of) these phenomena also affects the effectiveness of the response. Risk studies aim to investigate these different dimensions of risk and offer a holistic approach to the different phases of risk mitigation; that is, risk assessment, risk management and risk communication. Cerase's volume reconnects to this strand of research in risk studies and points out that the notion of risk is not a prerogative of scientists and experts disconnected from the rest of society. The author thus highlights how this holistic approach to risk shall entail a structural "paradigm shift" (p 27) in the mitigation policies and, particularly, in risk communication.

The increasing complexity and interconnection of our societies made risk a crucial concept to understand natural, social, political, economic and legal realities. Because of this complexity, science has no longer been considered as the exclusive owner of the mitigation recipes, or the undisputed authority offering the right approach to risk regulation. As Alberto Alemanno pointed out in the preface to this volume, the "pluralistic approach to risk" does not abandon "the need to objectivise risk" and is still "intrinsic to any attempt to govern it" (p 15), but enriches the rational approach to risk. The enrichment of rational theory, based on the centrality of science, brought the relevance of social sciences in risk analysis and the expansion of the concept of risk, including less predictable events. Uncertainty is placed alongside the probability function and social sciences pool values in risk mitigation.

Against this backdrop, Cerase situates the specific issue of risk communication, which is intended as a "strategic instrument of *Risk Governance*", based on expertise, continuous professional development and situational awareness (p 33). The holistic approach of risk studies affects the approach to risk communication and substantially changes communication practices. Insofar as risk concerns uncertainty, its interpretation generates conflicts, and risk communication can no longer be considered as a "linear, hierarchical, unidirectional and deterministic" transfer of information (p 34).

“Risk claimers” engage in an “epistemic fight” on the social effects of risk (p 192) and open risk communication to the conflict and negotiation process. The key idea of the volume is that this shift in the content of risk communication affects not only its objectives and functioning, but also the conception of the society (p 34) as a *Weltanschauung*. Internet and social media amplify the risks embedded in the plurality of interpretations relying on “a polycentric, global and disorganised model of discussion” (p 188) and may contribute to misinformation as well as to manipulation of the audience. Attention to context is therefore fundamental for a correct risk communication that takes into account social networks, personal influence and opinion leadership (p 189).

Cerese clarifies that risk communication does not consist of “a pool of standardised recipes” (p 213), and upholds those approaches that conceive risk communication as a methodology that shall allow the risk communicator to help the interlocutor to reduce uncertainty and make the best choices out of the communication (see p 184 and pp 216–217). Cerese thus highlights the main principles of such a methodology. Risk communication is portrayed as a continuous learning cycle, based on theory, empirical research, practices and evaluation of the performance, which inputs new variables into the theory and restarts the cycle from a new angle (p 226). Theory therefore feeds practice, but practice adapts theory to the specific cultural and territorial context. More concretely, Cerese advocates the adoption of this model to shape organisations’ risk communication and reduce “organisational uncertainty” in risk situations (p 218). Education and training, protocols, guidelines and best practices emerge as the key instruments that “codify” knowledge (p 219) into practical commands and flexible behaviour. In addition, the strict connection between theory and practice of the learning by doing is pragmatically articulated in the intense cooperation between researchers and practitioners as the irreplaceable source of rationalisation of practical expertise (see p 225).

The volume is organised as a synthetic review of the most accredited sociological theories on risk and their cognitive limits. Chapter 1 focuses on the theories of the risk society developed by Beck and Giddens, passing through the governmentality approach of Foucault and the sociology of risk of Luhmann. Chapter 2 deals with the technical-scientific approach to risk and the paradigm of the rational actor as elaborated in the theory of risk as a function of probability developed by Knight. Chapter 3 addresses the psychological approach to risk as elaborated by Kahneman and Tversky in the prospect theory, which had the merit to point out the subjective aspect in risk theories. Chapter 4 focuses on the cultural theory proposed by Douglas and Wildavsky as an approach that goes beyond both the rational actor paradigm and the psychological paradigm by emphasising the relevance of the socio-cultural context in the allegation of the (un-) acceptability of risk. Chapter 5 embraces the social amplification of risk (SARF) as a sociological theory that flexibly responds to the complexity of the notion of risk. SARF considers risks as technical facts that receive their amplified or understated meaning as a matter of interpretation by individuals, groups or institutions (p 155).

In the words of the author, this review of leading theories is designed to show the increasing complexity of sociological approaches to risk and their coexistence as “autonomous paradigms” yet overlapping and intertwining (p 37). Against the limits, gaps and failures of these theories to explain reality, Cerese builds the need to develop an interdisciplinary discourse on risk and, in particular, on risk communication. Chapter 6

and the conclusions are specifically devoted to the illustration of the “new” methodology of risk communication. When portraying such methodology, Cerase also claims the autonomy of risk communication as a specific form of public communication and the epistemic need to recognise its speciality in the political, legal and cultural discourse (p 196).

With specific regard to the Italian case, Cerase rightly reports the absence of such recognition in domestic law and its underestimation in the political debate. As I pointed out in an article on the 2009 L’Aquila earthquake, published in a Special Issue of this journal (2014), the mis-management in the allocation of responsibilities and tasks between the Major Risk Commission and the Department of Civil Protection affected risk communication and had an impact on the chain of risk mitigation. Insofar as risk studies is emerging as an autonomous and multidisciplinary area of research, Cerase also claims the need to recognise risk communication (and regulation?) as a subject matter with a specific academic dignity (p 196). This peculiar claim hides the substantive need to educate and train future risk communicators, offering them multidisciplinary expertise that makes them able to cope with the complex problems that risks create. In the epilogue to the volume, Alessandro Amato also considered risk education and training key issues of risk communication with specific regard to the seismic risk.

The underlying problem that the volume suggests is that in Italy the instruments of risk mitigation are not effectively framed and consistently developed. This matches the country’s still weak risk culture, which is only compensated by its acknowledged performance in emergency management. The volume clearly has the merit of contributing to the construction and the diffusion of such culture. Even though in the Introduction the author suggests that this work only aims to provide the key principles for the interpretation of the theory and the practice of risk mitigation, it would have been strongly appreciated if it had elaborated more on the theoretical and pragmatic characterisation of risk communication as an autonomous expression of risk studies, looking beyond the reconstruction of the general sociological theories. For instance, case studies would have helped to cement the “new” approach to risk communication and guided the reader in the understanding of how theories may be implemented or revised. Although the key question of how risk communication shall be structured in the uncertain world of risks remains open, the volume convincingly shows that the foundation of risk communication on the dichotomy between science and technology on the one hand and the socio-political context on the other hand cannot be effective in today’s societies. For these reasons, it represents a useful instrument for those who aim to approach risk studies and might also be a handy reading in a (wished) course in risk communication.

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