

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND SCIENCE POLICY

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# DEMOCRACY, RISK, AND COMMUNITY

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Technological  
Hazards and  
the Evolution  
of Liberalism

RICHARD P. HISKES



# Democracy, Risk, and Community

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Technological Hazards and the Evolution of Liberalism

Richard P. Hiskes

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For Anne and Ben,  
two sure things.

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# Acknowledgments

Anyone who writes for publication already possesses an intuitive grasp of two of the predominant themes of this book. First, this book explores the idea and impact of risk, and authors recognize that all professional writing exposes them to risks: intellectual, psychic, and, these days if one writes on computer, the special technological terror that comes from forgetting to “back up one’s hard drive”—the mantra of 1990s authors. Second, like ideas themselves, all books are intrinsically “emergent” phenomena, whether the author is willing to own up to his intellectual debts or not.

These are the pages where authors usually admit their book’s emergent status, so I will cheerfully remind all potential critics to review this and their own books’ acknowledgment pages before they dismiss my underlying contention that phenomena exist that we all recognize as solely the products of collective rather than individual events or actors. Risk, I will argue throughout this book, is such a phenomenon, whose emergent nature even the most solitary of writers must sooner or later acknowledge.

Having thus anticipated (and tried to defuse) criticism, I want especially to thank those who lessened the riskiness of this particular phenomenon. First and foremost, Professor Kristin Shrader-Frechette, the editor of the series of which this book is a part, was present at the very start of the project, and her special abilities to prod, cajole, and encourage kept me believing (and working) whenever the risks seemed ready to overwhelm. She is also a foremost scholar in the field of risk analysis, and her substantive comments on the manuscript are present behind every page. Professor Larry May also deserves my heartiest gratitude for reading the manuscript twice in its entirety and offering his own critique. The present version would not have been possible without his ideas, willingly shared and duly incorporated.

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# Democracy, Risk, and Community

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# Introduction

Two concepts dominate the political consciousness and even the popular culture of many societies today. They are ideas sharing an association at least since the seventeenth century and arguably backward to the time of the ancient Greeks. Today their individual definitions rely, I argue, on a curious symbiosis, and both their definitions (and therefore their relationship) are currently in a state of evolution and flux. They are the concepts of democracy and risk. The following chapters explore their present interrelationship as a defining aspect of modern political and social culture.

Risk and democracy since the seventeenth century have shared a common heritage within the political theory of liberalism, which views both as products of individual behavior. Democracy in the liberal mode is described largely in terms of protected features of individual life such as liberty, privacy, and rights of participation. Similarly, liberalism also views risks as the products of individual choices and behaviors; historic examples include the decisions to explore the “New World,” or to “go West.” More contemporary risks, viewed as liberalism sees them, involve taking individual economic gambles or risking one’s present or future welfare in the pursuit of excellence, pleasure, or gain of one sort or another. Today, however, it is increasingly difficult to view such pursuits as strictly solitary acts about which no one else has an interest or stake except the individual. It is the organizing thesis of this book that the ontological status of risk has been fundamentally altered by the rise of modern technological society and, as a result so, too has life in democratic societies.

Unlike risks perceived through the liberal lens of individual decision and behavior, the risks that arise from modern technologies are in some important ways not reducible to either the individual decisions, actions, or people participating in them. Consider the risks arising from technologies like modern communications, data processing, or nuclear energy; from behaviors like smoking or unprotected sex; or from political decisions such as those involved in siting hazardous installations. They share the same basic definition of all other risks as “exposure to the chance of loss.”<sup>1</sup> Yet I contend that in a fundamental way these risks are different in that they

are “emergent” phenomena—the results of collective decisions or behaviors not completely reducible in a meaningful way to the individual people involved in them. As I define them at length in the first chapter, emergent risks have collective histories—partly contained within the history of science taken as a community, partly within political history, and partly within their own policy histories. They also have futures, futures that are disconcertingly independent to some extent of how individuals individually choose to cope with them: nuclear waste will persist in some of its forms for millennia; the personal risks of tobacco use persist through the dangers of passive smoke whether one quits smoking or not; moving to the country can land one in proximity to society’s waste dumps and breathing somebody else’s polluted air as it drifts in from cities in distant states.

Emergent risks, I argue, call attention to our lives *together*, within a community of interconnected beings whose actions pose consequences—even risks—for each other. Traditionally, liberal politics has called attention to our lives *apart* as separate political beings with discrete interests protected within democratically defined cocoons of private rights and liberties. The emergent, intersubjective character of risks threatens forcibly to open those cocoons, exposing the individuals within to the risks that exist as irreducible and inescapable consequences of modern social life. Because of their emergent character, risks today are intrinsically befuddling to liberal societies, whose governing notions circulate around a seventeenth-century ontology of reductionistic political ideas such as individual rights and around a set of mechanistically arranged political institutions separately checking and balancing each other’s individual actions. Thus, liberal societies experience great difficulty in making policy for modern risks, and this inability places them and their citizens in additional jeopardy. Therefore, the following argument contends that unless a transformation takes place outside the cocoons of liberal privacy, that is, within the public realm of policy making for risk, the risks we collectively face will continue to fester and infect our private lives as well.

I have much more to say by way of definition and exploration about the emergent nature of risk in the chapters that follow. But putting aside temporarily the disputes within the philosophy of social science in the 1950s concerning the status of emergent phenomena, let me begin with an example of them unique to our technological times.

When I was growing up in Chicago in those 1950s, I recall listening to rush hour traffic reports over my father’s car radio, in which the reporter aloft in a helicopter over one of the city’s many busy expressways would often warn listeners of a traffic delay due to a “gapers’ block.” What he meant, of course, was a traffic stoppage resulting from drivers slowing down to gawk at an accident. Implicit in his name for this traffic phenomenon was both blame and an attribution of cause for the slowness. I remember times when, caught in a gapers’ block, and, in fact, doing our share of gaping ourselves, my father would bellow at the radio voice that *he* was not the problem, it was all the other drivers in their sick need to view highway carnage that were causing the delay.

Phenomena like gapers’ blocks are not very mysterious, since of course they are the result of the actions of individuals, specifically those involved in the individual event of the accident itself, and of all the drivers who slow down as they go

by. Yet there is also something ineluctably, even comically, collective about such events. The problem is not that one person is slowing down to gape, but that so many are, and that the collective effect seems so difficult to avoid. By definition, the event of the block requires a multiplication of individual actions, but within the context of traffic the effect appears so singular, the result not of many disconnected drivers but of a “chain” of events and individuals.

Gapers’ blocks are in one sense simply the products of a set of individual behaviors, but they also witness to the special, sometimes unnerving connectedness of our technological age. It is hard to imagine a gapers’ block created by pedestrians or horseback riders in an earlier century. Also, individuals within the privacy of automobiles becalmed in gapers’ blocks tend, like my father, not to see themselves as in fact the problem—someone else’s morbid curiosity is to blame. Finally, the solution to events like gapers’ blocks is not really to try to change individual behavior. Instead, the solution lies in a collective decision and action—widening the road or providing (through public funds) for more efficient emergency staff to move traffic more quickly. Gapers’ blocks are not inevitable any more than risks are “autonomous,” as they are sometimes erroneously viewed. But they are events that are uniquely part of our technologically developed and risky times, and coping with them requires different conceptualizations than those provided by liberal politics and social science.

This is a book about conceptual change and about how its impact reverberates through the practical politics of liberal democratic societies, demanding changes in that politics and in the conceptualizations that underlie it. As the nature (and, as I begin in chapter 1, the perception) of risk is different today than in periods before the advent of modern technologies, its impact upon concepts that underlie liberal society is just beginning to be felt. But where it is felt, the policy reverberations are unmistakable: controversy, fear, anger, the “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) syndrome, stalemate, and, finally, inaction. In order to understand the very much real-world policy problems surrounding technological risk, it is necessary to explore the interaction of risk at the conceptual level with basic concepts that define the liberal attitudes and expectations of modern citizens. In this book I seek to prepare the way for effective and democratic policy making for risk by identifying where risk challenges liberal understandings of some of our most precious liberal ideas: liberty, consent, legitimate authority, community, rights, and responsibility. As risk affects the meanings of all of those concepts, it upsets the policy process for risk by rendering uncertain the criteria for political decision, criteria identified for liberalism centuries ago but still embraced by citizens today.

Political theory is comfortable operating at the level of concepts, of course, and theorists assume easily (perhaps too easily) that concepts interact with and produce real-world consequences. Certainly we have witnessed within the last decade other examples where concepts like liberty and democracy have wrought remarkable political upheavals in parts of the world not previously considered hospitable to either idea.<sup>2</sup> Yet to speak of the interplay of risk and other political ideas is faintly disturbing for two reasons. The first is applicable whenever conceptual change takes place, for, as Alasdair MacIntyre observes, “to alter concepts, whether by modifying existing concepts or by making new concepts available or by destroying old ones, is to

alter behavior.”<sup>3</sup> If it is risk that is forcing the change in our concepts and therefore our behavior, our present sensation of not being in complete control of modern risk adds a special feeling of helplessness in the face of a new political reality. As risk causes conceptual changes, it also then, as all conceptual changes portend, represents political innovation,<sup>4</sup> in this case innovation that is the product of an emergent process to which liberals almost by nature are blind. Thus, the risk-induced alterations of our political concepts and practices are more disconcerting than most such changes; they take us by surprise.

The second cause of unease in the interaction of risks and political concepts arises from the scientific paternity that technological risks share. Science presumes a determined world within which explanation and prediction are recognizable goals, but we are uncomfortable about allowing such determinism into our political consciousness. Risk as a product of scientific and technological development may be inevitable in some sense, but to say that it also inevitably will change the way we think and act about political things is to violate at a visceral level the liberal belief that liberty, even free will, is possible. It introduces a disconcerting level of determinism into everyday life. Emergent risks, like gapers’ blocks, make us feel that we do not control our environment or the events of our own lives as much as we might like to think. As one of liberalism’s most eloquent and influential voices, Sir Isaiah Berlin sounds an alarm worth heeding again before we proceed further:

If social determinism is true, and we begin to take it seriously, then the changes in the whole of our language, our moral terminology, our attitudes toward one another, our views of history, of society, and of everything else will be too profound to be adumbrated. The concepts of praise and blame, innocence and guilt, and responsibility from which we started are but a small element in the structures which would collapse or disappear.<sup>5</sup>

I am aware of the charge of determinism that exploring the relationship between technological risk and political concepts might well level against me. But, following the pragmatists in general and John Dewey in particular, I believe it important to realize that all concepts are grounded both in experience and, more importantly still, in action, and that to expect any different is to await a certainty not forthcoming from either science or politics.<sup>6</sup> As we will see throughout this book, the technological products of science have cast doubt upon many traditional liberal conceptions of epistemology, morality, and politics. Yet this need not make us accept the dispiriting and fallacious conclusion that somehow technology is itself autonomous and determinative of our political, moral, even spiritual life. What modern risks do reveal, however, is that, though not autonomously produced, technological effects are not reducible to the individual persons, events, or decisions incorporated in them. Risks are *not* autonomous and do not of themselves determine our lives; they only appear so if we fail to see that they are the emergent products of our lives together—lives in connection with others, where those connections are both new and different products of modern technology.

We should not belittle Berlin’s fears of technological determinism, however, especially since chapter five is largely devoted to exploring exactly how concepts of “praise and blame, innocence and guilt, and responsibility” are, in fact, altered se-

verely by the impact of technological risks. In a sense Berlin is right—as the following chapters make clear, emergent technological risk is forcing changes in the intellectual and normative structure of life in modern liberal societies that are indeed profound, so much so that making policy for them is stymied at almost every turn, even though such indecision runs the further risk in some instances, such as radioactive waste disposal, of unthinkable and unknowable catastrophe.

The recognition that by its impact on relevant political concepts risk causes such policy paralysis not only helps to explain such new phenomena as the NIMBY syndrome, it also points the way toward effective response to the practical changes that risks herald within the political practices of liberal societies. That is, understanding the conceptual and therefore the political changes wrought by technological risk is a guide for action in how to cope with them. We explore this perhaps unexpectedly upbeat consequence in chapter six, when discussing how democratic practices must innovate in response to the challenge that emergent risks pose.

Democracy and risk have always been affiliated concepts. Thus, it should come as no surprise that part of the response to the threats that technological risks present has been an upsurge in political participation by citizens who stand to be most affected by new risks. Perhaps the NIMBY syndrome deserves to be considered, on one level at least, as the late-twentieth-century manifestation of the Jeffersonian requirement of a little democratic revolution every few years. Risks have reinvigorated democratic participation to some extent, in other words, regardless of what we think of the motivations behind such organized responses to policy initiatives. This participatory legacy of contemporary risks should not surprise us once we learn to view them ontologically as irreducibly emergent, collective phenomena. It is, after all, an ontology risks share only with democratic political systems. Democracy too can only be realized in its emergent form. It is the product only and always of the joint activity of citizens—not of only one or several of them, as is the case in monarchies or aristocratic forms of governance. Thus, uncovering the democratic requirements of successful policy making for contemporary risks will itself be an act of democratic political innovation.

Since this is a book about concepts and how they change, it is important before going further to be as clear as we can about what those concepts signify prior to their interactive transformation. Toward that end, each of the following chapters begins with an exploration of how concepts such as risk, consent, authority, rights, responsibility, and community have traditionally been construed within the literature of liberalism, in the absence of awareness of risk's impact. Following that, each chapter does three things. First, it elaborates how technological risk has affected the accepted meaning of concepts, whether or not either citizens or commentators have yet recognized those impacts. Second, each chapter explores how risk opens the way toward redefinition of liberal concepts in light of their interaction with risk. In some cases this is more speculative than others, since what the “community” of the future will look like is not easily discernible, and in some cases the redefinition may no longer be recognizable as liberal. Finally, each chapter anticipates how the impact of risk on that chapter's conceptual focus warrants changes in policy making for risk,

always with an eye to the final chapter's discussion of how to maintain the imperatives of democracy within the decision process.

Throughout the following chapters, reference is often made to "liberalism," "liberal societies," and, generally, to things "liberal." Since liberalism these days is itself a disputed concept, and logic would seem to dictate that we will need to recognize what is being threatened if we have any hope of recognizing the threat, I need to say a few words about how I am using liberalism as a backdrop to the discussion of risk and political concepts.

Without sounding too cagey, much of what I take "liberalism" to indicate will "emerge" in each chapter's discussion of different liberal hallmarks. That is to say, understanding liberalism requires separate explorations into the traditional and now threatened constructions of its central concepts. Nevertheless, I should at least list here those central concepts of liberalism and their place in what follows: consent of the governed (chapter 2), legitimate—and therefore limited—political authority (chapter 3), individual rights (chapter 4), moral responsibility (chapter 5), and the role of democratic participation in the identity of liberal citizens (chapter 6).

Many scholarly treatises have been written with the express purpose of defining, exposing, and otherwise criticizing or eulogizing liberalism, and I will refer to a variety of these works in the following chapters. Yet I want to call attention as a final preparation to what follows to two universally accepted aspects of liberal political theory. Liberalism, first, always focuses on the individual as the unit of political analysis, and, second, always draws its (abstract) picture of that political entity as living within two separate spheres of activity, interest, and involvement—the public and private realms. I highlight these aspects of the liberal creed especially, because it is these two that are most challenged by the emergent nature of contemporary technological risks.

The understanding of risks, as they confront us today, is not amenable to the reductionist political analysis of individuals and their isolated behaviors presumed by liberal politics and liberal social science. Risks are the product of our lives together; furthermore, they cannot be sequestered into either the public or private sides of the lives of liberal citizens. Though they often are surrounded by public controversy and fill the political agenda of modern democracies, modern risks cannot be escaped once we leave the political realm and return to the privacy of our own homes. Modern technologies invade our homes and bring their risks with them, forcing their way into our private spaces through our devices of communication, our technologies of entertainment, reproduction, comfort, nutrition, and elimination of waste. The risks these technologies deliver are in the air, the food, the food chain. How risks got there was never only a matter of individual or private choice; getting rid of them cannot be a matter solely of individual effort. Liberalism, like liberal citizens, is bewildered by modern risk, but liberalism has proven itself an adaptable political doctrine. It must be so again. As the following discussion demonstrates, modern risks make imperative the evolution of liberalism as a matter of its—and its citizens'—survival, in every sense.

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## Risk and the Redefinition of Politics

The three concepts in the title of this book could be juxtaposed in a variety of ways yielding widely different meanings. “The Democratic Community at Risk” darkly presages a threat to communities or to their democratic constitutions. “The Risk of Democratic Community” seems a warning about either the practices of democracy or the ties of community. “Community Assumes Risks of Democracy” trumpets a political headline of our time, in which all three elements seem laudatory, heroic, comforting. Democracy, risk, and community are essentially contested ideas of today’s political world, and the possible permutations in their juxtaposition go far in setting the parameters of contemporary political discourse. The meaning of these terms both individually and in combination is often at the heart of current political disputes between political leaders, between leaders and citizens, and between citizens themselves. From issues of war and peace to disputes about land use and “the conquest of bread,” politics today demarcates the boundaries of communities, distributes risk, and claims procedures to be democratic.

The purpose of this book is to explore the relationship between these perplexingly rich ideas within contemporary politics and political theory. I am specifically interested in what is often generically called “technological” risk and how it affects political definitions of democracy and community. It is my contention that, when compared to risks characterizing earlier historical epochs, today technological risk has a special—or at least new—character. Furthermore, this changed meaning of risk plays particular havoc with accepted definitions of democracy and with democracy’s constituent political concepts and practices, especially when democracy is construed liberally.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the existence and perception of risk threaten to alter our political decision-making processes fundamentally, as well as our understanding of the concepts of authority, rights, consent, and liberty, among others, that those processes are presumed, in a democracy, to manifest.

The idea of risk has historically been linked with the urge toward democracy, of course, beginning with the ancient Greeks. Plato and Aristotle certainly agreed that a democratic reliance on the ability of common people to govern both themselves