



Universiteit
Leiden



Roosevelt
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Studies

Beyond Risk?
Understanding the Threats of the Anthropocene

Academiegebouw, De Grachtenkamer
Rapenburg 73, Leiden, the Netherlands

May 31, 2024

One of the most worrying characteristics of our contemporary age is that systemic risk production, being it related to war, poverty, instability, climate change, toxic pollution, loss of biodiversity, and pandemics, is outpacing risk reduction. Our ability to cope with existential threats is confronted with a series of cross-scale challenges that have become planetary, affecting the Earth's biogeochemical cycles as a whole. The ways in which we assess and manage risk, but also the ways in which we interpret, discuss, and perceive it, have become crucial to envisioning and achieving any form of sustainable future. But how does such a new, comprehensive understanding of risk emerge? Which role do rising doubts, uneven socio-ecological vulnerability, and widespread uncertainty play in the consolidation of new cultures of risk? How do perspectives and narratives of risk change over the times and spaces of the Anthropocene? At the same time, how should risk be communicated, codified, and institutionalized? How should it be transferred to new generations? And how does technological development – most prominently AI – interact with our attitudes toward it?

Across the world, several multilateral institutions and research centers are exploring possible answers to these questions. This workshop aims to contribute to this ongoing conversation by launching an interdisciplinary exchange within Leiden University and across its faculties and institutes. The invited scholars will discuss and address the evolving nature of risk in our contemporary societies from the point of view of the humanities, social sciences, global affairs, law, and environmental sciences. The goal is to lay the groundwork for a deeper and more critical understanding of risk and how it affects the paths toward adaptation and sustainability.

Suggested readings:

- [IPCC, The Concept of Risk in the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report](#)
- [SJ Beard, Martin Rees, Catherine Richards, and Clarissa Rios Rojas \(eds.\), *The Era of Global Risk An Introduction to Existential Risk Studies* \(Open Book Publisher, 2023\)](#)
- Shahr Avin, et al., "[Classifying global catastrophic risks](#)," *Futures*, Volume 102, September 2018, 20-26.
- [UN Global Assessment Report On Disaster Risk Reduction \(GAR\), 2022](#)

Program

- 9:15-9:30 Welcome, registration, and coffee
- 9:30-10:00 Round of introductions
- 10:00-10:45 A conversation with SJ Beard, Senior Research Associate, Centre for the Study of Existential Risk, Cambridge University
- 10:45-11:00 Coffee break
- 11:00-12:00 Session 1
Between Uncertainty and Risk in Global History
Discussion leaders: Gijs Dreijer – Carolien Stolte
- 12:00-13:00 Lunch (Faculty Club, Academigebouw, Rapenburg 73, Leiden)
- 13:00-14:00 Session 2
Communicating Risk: From Assessment to Subjective Perception
Discussion leaders: Anne Urai – Thijs Bosker
- 14:00-14:15 Coffee break
- 14:15-15:15 Session 3
The Politics of Risk Now and Then
Discussion leaders: Anne Heyer – Bernardo Ribeiro de Almeida
- 15:15-15:30 Coffee break
- 15:30-16:15 Closing Remarks
Matthew Connelly, Director, Centre for the Study of Existential Risks, Cambridge University
- 16:15-16:45 Output discussion
- 16:45-17:30 Farewell & drinks (Brasserie, Academigebouw, Rapenburg 73, Leiden)
- 18:30 Dinner (La Diva, Noordeinde 23, Leiden)

The seminar is made possible by Leiden University's 2023 Kiem Grants program and is organized in cooperation with the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies.

Participants: Paul Behrens; Thijs Bosker; Gaetano Di Tommaso; Marleen Dekker; Gijs Dreijer; Dario Fazzi; Eduard Fosch Villaronga; Anne Foster; Anne Heyer; Shivant Jhagroe; Bernardo Ribeiro de Almeida; Maud Rijks; Daniel Saxon; Giles Scott-Smith; Carolien Stolte; Anne Urai; Martina Vijver.

Talking Points and Food for Thought

In order to facilitate the most fruitful and generative interdisciplinary exchange possible, the discussion leaders have drafted a series of pre-circulating open questions and talking points. These issues are meant to stimulate debate and help each participant to formulate original contributions based on different academic interests, cultural backgrounds, and personal viewpoints.

Session 1

Global risk takes many shapes, from climate change to environmental hazards, from nuclear technologies to food insecurity and pandemics. Historically informed analyses of risk seem to confirm the multifaceted nature of it and challenge the idea that a univocal notion of risk exist(ed). The presentations of this session will raise such questions as:

- How is risk defined differently across times, spaces, and cultures?
- Is there a culturally predominant view of risk?
- What is the role of culture, education, religion, identity, and ideology in the shaping of the notion of risk?
- How does the historical development of uncertainty problematize the notion of risk?
- How does the concept of risk change across institutions, social actors, and generations?

Session 2

Assessment is a crucial component of risk. The ways in which risk is perceived, measured, quantified, and rationalized are pivotal to understanding how risk affects individual and collective behaviors. The presentations of this session will stimulate further reflection on the following questions:

- What is scientific risk assessment and which kind of sense of security does it give?
- What is the role of science in framing risk, and how does risk drive scientific research?
- How does technology affect risk assessment?
- What is the role of tipping points in generating alarmism or, by converse, denialism?
- How do human cognitive biases shape the ways risks are perceived and acted upon?
- What is the relation between scientific risk assessment and subjective risk perception?

Session 3

This session revolves around the politics and governance of risk. Political institutions and considerations play a central role in both risk assessment and management. Risk is to a large extent the result of political actions, which are in turn affected by a series of variables that include systemic instability and structural changes. This session is meant to shed light on the following issues:

- How does the governance of risk work and how does risk shape political decisions?
- When does risk become risk and how is it politicized and institutionalized?
- What are the unintended consequences of risk response/reduction? Who pays the price for these responses?
- How are different socio-political systems reacting to and organizing around risk mitigation?
- How do we reconcile risk and justice?