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Review of: Risk in the Modern Age: Social Theory, Science and Environmental Decision Making (Maurie J. Cohen, ed.)

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Risk in the Modern Age: Social Theory, Science and Environmental Decision Making (Maurie J. Cohen, ed., St. Martin's Press 2000). List of Figures and Tables, List of Contributors, Preface, Index. ISBN 0-312-22216-5 [264 pp. \$65.00. Hardbound, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010].

Risk in the Modern Age: Social Theory, Science and Environmental Decision Making is a compilation of essays on environmental sociological theory. It contains case studies that draw attention to the lack of the sociological discipline in risk assessment. Each of the six sections tackles the sociological perspective of environmental risk perception.

Following an introduction, the second section critiques the methods of risk assessment and shortcomings of the rational actor theory, which excludes illogical human behavior. The third section introduces the reader to a new category of risk assessment using examples of communities' voluntary versus involuntary understanding of risks. One example includes populations that are unable to assess risks caused by the breakdown of radioactive particles found in fish. These essays on environmental sociological theory place the social aspects of human life into risk assessment theory through the constant questioning of previous assessments.

Using case studies, the authors examine ways in which social theorists, scientists, and governments assess environmental risks. They use the Exxon Valdez disaster in Alaska to exemplify the public reliance on risk assessment to protect the community.

Through the examination of environmental risk and public policy, the book introduces the paradox of politics and science. Using science to first calculate the risks, the public then relies on political watchdogs to act on the risks, as related to the public interest.

Although the book was written from an environmental sociological perspective, the authors provide brief introductions of theory which allow a reader to understand the discussion. In Part Two, Renn et al. discuss rational actor theories through the rational actor paradigm (RAP) in relation to how it determines risk.¹ The authors go into great

¹ **Risk in the Modern Age: Social Theory, Science and Environmental Decision**

detail discussing the factors of human action and how they relate to this paradigm, using examples of rational actions. The foundation of the risk paradigm helps the reader understand the authors' critical viewpoint that RAP has not proven self-sufficient enough to be a complete analysis of risk behaviors.

Cohen provides pertinent examples of hazardous environmental issues, such as the heart-wrenching story of Love Canal² and the Brent Spar showdown,³ furthering the discussions of risk theory. Although sociological theory examined by an untrained sociologist can become dry and uninteresting, environmental issues in modernity inspire interest in social theory. Through risk factors, such as health, the reader connects to sociology, science, and environmental well-being.

Risk in the Modern Age: Social Theory, Science and Environmental Decision Making presents the shortcomings of the current policy of risk assessment and how, through the introduction of environmental sociology, risk policy would improve the lives of people in at-risk societies. Cohen's compilation of essays provides a thorough evaluation of the assessment of environmental risk in this modern age.

Amy Cutler †

Making 35 (Maurie Cohen, ed., St Martin's Press 2000).

² *Id.* at 123-127.

³ *Id.* at 99.

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