

The Intractable Citizen versus ‘risk and reason’,

Why the failure of risk policies can’t be blamed to a failure of citizenship



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In·tract'a·ble adjective [Latin *intractabilis* : confer French *intraitable* , formerly also *intractable* . See In-not, and Tractable .] Not tractable; **not easily governed, managed, or directed; indisposed to be taught, disciplined, or tamed; violent; stubborn; **obstinate**; refractory; as, an intractable child.**

- As you all know: once accidents were an act of god, later on the liberals believed them to be personal faults but since the sixties or so accidents are evidence of a failure of prevention – we moved from a blame culture to a risk culture
- We all turn to the government, it now is even responsible for preventing ‘uncertain’ risk – the precautionary logic
- One of the consequences is that victims of large accidents have more ‘rights’ than victims of regular car accidents etc

We created Frankenstein's monster



- Risk policies now are
 - Not transparent – we don't know the costs and benefits of our risk policies
 - Unbalanced – we don't go for efficiency
 - Immoral – it's better to be victim of a disaster or threatened by a technological risk
 - Not practical – it's all paper and symbolics so those who must work with it are left bare handed

And whose fault is all this?



- Scientist and politicians alike point to the modern citizen who doesn't like the 'risk society' he is living in – we exchanged hunger for fear
- The one thing modern Western citizens are claimed to be most afraid of is involuntary risk
- Especially if a risk is technological, invisible, grapping you by your genes etc.
- So it's the citizen who makes politicians do all these ugly irrational things...

- History shows that perceived unpopular measures can make a politician popular
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- Classical scientific insights are, as you are aware of, that:
 - Citizens like voluntary risks a thousand times better than involuntary risk (Starr 1966)
 - Citizens are incapable of understanding the concept of 'chance times effect' (Wagenaar, Fischhoff)
 - NIMBY is the middle name of any citizen (Kasperson, Renn)
 - The effects of risk communication on risk acceptance are unproven (Fischhoff)
 - Risk socially amplifies (Kasperson, Renn, Slovic)
- Citizens thus are irrational, self-centred ordinary human beings

- However there are some disturbing contradictory examples as mentioned before
- An risk specific example is the fairy tale of Son en Breugel
- We as yet have no validated theory to explain this peculiar non-social behaviour which seems so unlike we expect citizens to think
- So science seems not to be able to help us out, however there is no solution for a 'gap' in science then more science

- Face to face interviews among 800 metro users in Amsterdam
- Question: do you ever think of safety?
Answer: no, only of security.
- Question: do you know that a fire in the tube will kill you for certain and that nobody is coming to rescue you?
Answer: NO!

Let us experiment a bit (II)



- Question: do you want the authorities to mitigate this risk?
Answer: YES!
- Question: do you want to pay extra for more safety?
Answer: NO!

- But now for the unprecedented part of the questionnaire
- Question: would you, if you were mayor, spend a substantial amount of money to more tube safety?
Answer: no of course not, do you think I'm dumb to invest in the safest form of transport? (65%)
- Question: you have a risk communication tip for the authorities?
Answer: Yes, place a sign like at the entrance to Dante's hell...

- Central claim of a (possible) radical new insight in citizens handling of risk: ‘if you ask us what we want then we tell you what we want ... but this is not what we expect you to do. And if you find that hard then you should have learned a trade instead of becoming an authority.’
- Just a little bit more scientific formulated: the modern citizen has an intractable character.

- Traditional polling does not tell you very much.
- The concept and meaning of risk communication should be revisited.
- Politicians can start acting more rationally also, or so we might hope.

Are we there yet?



- We have to do a few things yet....
- ... validate the intractable citizen theory so we have to experiment ...
- ... come up with transparent risk policy...
- ... make it 'trendy' for politicians to use it ...

Thank you for your attention!

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