



Natures of risk: Capital, rule, and production of difference

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ABSTRACT

This purpose of this paper is to propose starting points for a critically informed understanding of the role of risk in contemporary environmental practice, and to flesh out some preliminary implications of the work risk does as a logic through which environment is managed. Taking cues from scholarship interrogating the production of capitalist natures (e.g., Smith, 1984/2008; Braun, 2000; Heynan et al., 2007). I ask what it means in environmental terms to put risk at the intersection of capital and rule—to conceive of it as something that to paraphrase Dillon (2008, p. 319) makes the combination of capital and rule possible, and to interpret risk as something which (as Martin (2007b, p. 67) has suggested) undertakes to create the very conditions that make new wealth possible. I argue that in order to understand the intersection of capital and rule in environmental terms, risk must be understood as an epistemic framework and political ontology consistent with the advent of capitalist political economy—not as an occasion of danger or geographical condition of insecurity. Using difference as a starting point to attempt to think through connections between risk and accumulation I suggest that risk is a knowledge practice instrumental to accumulation and the politics of rule that secure it, which obscures the functioning of difference and processes of differentiation.

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1. Introduction

In August 2005, the Canada-Deline Uranium Table (CDUT) published the final conclusions of a 5 year study into the health and environmental effects of the Port Radium uranium mine operated by the federal government on Great Bear Lake, North West Territories (NWT) in the Canadian subarctic. Undertaken to address concerns expressed by the Deline First Nation (to parliament, national and international media, and to international UN bodies) since the mid 1980s about the mine's legacies, the study investigated the possibility of adverse health consequences caused by the presence of uranium related contaminants in the environment and judged them to be negligible (CDUT, 2005). The CDUT report (2005) categorically states, based on a series of ecological and human health risk assessments (including a dose reconstruction and partial risk assessment of the effects of historical exposures for Dene men and women working at the mine site), that “health risks” associated with all radiation dose exposures, both in the community and at the mine site, “were below risk levels for background radiation” (73), would “not result in adverse effects” (74), and that there was “no risk to humans from consumption of traditional foods taken from Port Radium” (78). Of particular importance to the Dene were a set of conclusions about past exposure

amongst uranium workers at Port Radium. Consultants hired by the federal government on behalf of the Table (SENES Consulting¹) concluded that past exposure to radiation (based on reconstructed doses for workers and their families) was unlikely to have resulted in cancer deaths (SENES, 2005a). Despite the fact that a full epidemiological study was never carried out, due to suggestions by SENES that levels of confidence associated with the risk assessment would be low, they (and later the CDUT and government) concluded that: “the findings of the... study do not indicate a significantly increased risk of radiation-induced cancer in the community” (CDUT, 2005, p. 40).

At about the same time the Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO)—the federal, body of owners and producers of nuclear waste tasked by the federal government with studying, recommending, and implementing a method of permanently managing nuclear fuel waste produced in Canada—published a series of documents prepared by three consulting companies, amongst them SENES, evaluating different methods for managing wastes. The evaluation was made exclusively on the basis of how each addressed the risks posed by nuclear fuel (NWMO, 2005a,b,c). The assessments (approved and accepted by the NWMO and later federal government) concluded that the “risks” to people and the environment associated with all methods for managing nuclear

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¹ SENES consulting firm are members of the Canadian Nuclear Association, a nuclear lobby group.

fuel waste could reasonably and with a high degree of confidence, be expected to remain within safe regulatory levels over the next 10,000 years (NWMO, 2005a,b). The assessments also constituted Aboriginal peoples (represented as a single, unitary category) as especially “at risk” due to the lower “adaptive capacity” of these communities and resulting lack of ability to adapt to the social, cultural and economic changes that might be expected to accompany construction of a nuclear waste management facility (NWMO, 2005a, pp. 185 and 186).

Of significance in both vignettes is the role “risk” plays in framing and managing knowledge produced about the ecological effects (past, present, and future) of nuclear production and particularly in adjudicating between the different claims of First Nations and industry about this industry. Both the NWMO’s risk assessments and the CDUT’s Final Report represent endpoints or (at least temporary) points of epistemic closure in a long and drawn-out contest between Aboriginal groups, industry, the state, and other civic groups about the effects of the Canadian nuclear program. In the case of the Dene, about the past, present, and future effects of the abandoned uranium mine and tailings as well as historical exposure to radiation of Dene people working at the mine site and transporting uranium ores (see DUT, 2005). In the case of nuclear waste management, about the potential effects of radioactivity in human bodies, ecosystems and reliability of methods for containing radioactivity far into the future (see FEARO, 1993, 1996). Both sets of claims therefore need to be positioned against the highly uneven and distinctly racialized Canadian geography of nuclear production wherein Aboriginal peoples and their lands are disproportionately implicated (from uranium mining to waste disposal) and disproportionately exposed to and familiar with nuclear production and its radioactive, chemical, and other effects (see Stanley, 2006, 2008, 2009a,b). Consequently, knowledge of the effects of radiation and waste containment practices produced by the NWMO, CDUT and their consultants, as well as the practices (including dominant epistemic frameworks such as risk) through which they were produced, need to be interpreted as very specific and charged heuristic moments within the wider set of geographical, historical and political relationships and contests that constitute Canadian nuclear production. For the federal government, nuclear industry at large, and mining companies, the claims contained in these reports effectively close the book on questions of responsibility and liability, and, quite crucially, reduce the visibility of Aboriginal geographies of nuclear production and their difference from official accounts.

This framing is of course not unique to geographies of nuclear production. Risk is a common-place (*à la* Bourdieu) of environmental governance: as an environmental knowledge, as a discourse, as a category, as a rubric thorough which environment is organized and managed, and perhaps most importantly as a category through which insecurity and precariousness are understood. Nowhere has the latter been more clear than in the aftermath of recent events like hurricane Katrina, the 2005 Indian Ocean Tsunami, and 2010 Earthquake in Haiti wherein the historical processes of abandonment and dispossession through which these environments were produced and differentiated (Bakker, 2005; Braun and McCarthy, 2005; Keys et al., 2006; Glassman, 2005; Dalby, 2009) were replaced, in risk based narratives, by probability curves, and stories about volatile environments and endemic poverty.

The purpose of this intervention is to critically explore the politics of governing environment through risk, and more specifically to interrogate the political and economic significance of risk as the now *de facto* analytical frame for explaining, representing, and figuring harm. Dillon (2008, p. 319) has recently suggested that risk is situated at the intersection of capital and rule, and is a practice that makes the combination of capital and rule possible. Similarly,

Martin has proposed that risk, in the contemporary moment, undertakes to create the very conditions that make new wealth possible (2007b, p. 67). More provocatively he argues, race and other modes of social differentiation are now being renegotiated through risk—suggesting that the splitting of populations along the lines of risk into the “risk capable” and the “at risk” articulates new forms of managing and producing abject populations (Martin, 2007b pp. 137 and 138). Indebted to the work of the governmentality school, who theorized connections between 19th century finance, capital, labor, and the state (e.g., Castel, 1991; Ewald, 1991; Hacking, 1991; Defert, 1991; Donzelot, 1991; Dean, 1999) these claims are part of a growing scholarship that has yielded a series of important and challenging insights in relation to finance capital, the war on terror, and neoliberal geopolitics about the articulation of risk with insecurity, capital accumulation, and social differentiation (e.g., Aradau et al., 2008; Martin, 2007a,b; Dillon, 2008, 2007a,b; Dillon & Reid, 2001; Cooper, 2008; Cooper, 2006). This work takes the privileged position of risk and its role as a logic of management as its analytical object, and suggests important links between the notion of risk, liberal rule, and the advent of capitalist political economy. Importantly, it raises questions of risk as integral to practices of rule.

Taking cues from this scholarship and from scholarship interrogating the production of capitalist natures (e.g., Smith, 1984/2008; Braun, 2000; Braun, 2002; Robertson, 2006; Mansfield, 2007; Prudham, 2007a; Heynan et al., 2007; Castree and Braun, 2001) I ask what it might mean in environmental terms to put risk at the intersection of capital and rule (Dillon, 2008, p. 319) and to interpret it as something connected to the production of new wealth (Martin, 2007b, p. 67). Risk, I argue is a practice that traces its genealogy in the constant drive to reconcile a need for order with capital’s imperative of accumulation. Situating risk at the intersection of capital and rule challenges (as I describe below) conventional understandings of risk as a condition of geographical insecurity and occasion of danger. In the first part of this paper I propose that risk should be understood as a logic and set of knowledge practices inseparable from capitalist relations of production that work to securitize economy and accumulation rather than protect life and livelihood. I suggest *contra* the expansive geographical literature on risk that risk is neither an occurrence of danger nor expression of harm (see Dillon, 2008; De Goede, 2008; Ewald, 1991; Hacking, 1991; Dean, 1999; Aradau et al., 2008). Nor is it a particularly accurate way of explaining the confluence of abandonment and exposure. Rather it is a knowledge practice with a complex genealogical history, that masks how certain spaces and certain bodies are made to contain the effects of accumulation. Risk is a knowledge practice that articulates political economy, providing it both an epistemology and political ontology consistent with managing the effects of accumulation. Overcoming and resisting barriers to accumulation Smith (1984/2008) and Harvey (2003), tell us are moves inescapably tethered to evermore acute practices and processes of social differentiation. The second part of the article takes difference as a starting point to attempt to think through and illustrate the specific ways in which, as a knowledge practice, risk engenders connections between capital, rule, and production of wealth. Returning to the empirical example of the recent risk assessment of Dene ore carrier exposure to radiation, I ask what the management of the environment thorough risk (taken as a distinct, historically specific form of knowledge and discursive strategy) does to difference. I argue that risk is a knowledge practice that securitizes accumulation by containing, obscuring and instrumentalizing differentiated life. As a knowledge practice, risk articulates existing registers of social differentiation to unload the effects of accumulation. This is both a strategy of accumulation and mode of political rule.

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