

Risk, Uncertainty and Public Debate – Successful launch of the thematic group Sociology of Risk and Uncertainty at the First ISA Forum of Sociology in Barcelona, September 5-8, 2008

At the First ISA Forum of Sociology ‘Sociological Research and Public Debate’ the Thematic Group (TG04) the Sociology of Risk and Uncertainty was successfully launched. The group had been founded recently by Dr. Jens Zinn within the International Sociological Association and with the support of the ESRC-Social Contexts and Responses to Risk network (SCARR).

During four days more than 200 participants discussed a wide variety of topics reaching from risk governance and regulation and how these involve ethical questions and democratic values to everyday management of risk and uncertainty and voluntary risk taking. Special domains such as social inequality, social work, crime and finance were analysed as well as more general questions of risk theorizing and how risk is communicated in the media and socio-culturally framed.

Core issues among others were how public and social policy based on conventional economic models of rational action affects the efficiency and effectiveness of policy. There was a strong support for models of social action which fit social reality better. That includes socio-cultural framing of risk, the function of rumours and everyday negotiation of the understanding of risk and how understanding and strategies to cope with risk and uncertainty develop and change during the course of one’s life.

Intense concern was voiced about the strong focus on standardised and formalised risk management techniques for example in crime, social work or health which tend to systematically neglect social and subjective aspects of the management of social problems leading to undesired side-effects such as the loss of public trust, the neglect and devaluation of professional uncodified expertise and the erosion of fundamental social values.

Discussions on good social risk management and the need to cope with growing uncertainties showed large agreement about the need for public involvement while there are obvious limits to do so. There is support for an idea of a social muddling through the challenges of new and old risks in present day societies rather than a tight formalised procedure.

There was a high number of papers reporting of different experiences of how the media communicate risk and uncertainty and even historical reconstruction of how risk communication changed historically.

The President of the group Dr. Jens Zinn (University of Kent) resumed the launch of the group as “a great success”. More than 180 abstracts were submitted. After a rigorous selection process 130 papers were presented at the conference. “It was an exciting event where senior as well as young researchers used the chance for discussions across national and disciplinary boundaries and most of the presentations will lead to high quality publications in books and journals later on.”

The Group was established in order to carry on the research activity of the Economic and Social Research Council programme *Social Contexts and Responses to Risk*, directed by Professor Peter Taylor-Gooby at the University of Kent. He commented ‘ The SCARR programme has identified a number of key themes in risk research and the methods appropriate to tackle them. We are delighted that the new Group is so successful in attracting support in the ISA to take this work forward.’

The presentations and papers are now available at the Risk Group website:

<http://www.kent.ac.uk/soru/TG04/tg04cfabstr2008.htm>