

5 | Risk as globalizing 'democratic' discourse? Framing subjects and citizens

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Introduction

Ever since public controversies over new sciences and technologies became a defining part of the public domain from the late 1960s in industrial society, the issues have been defined as 'risk issues', or 'scientific issues', as if the only salient question is the propositional scientific one: is the practice in question effective and safe enough? After dogged institutional reinvention of the repeatedly discredited 'deficit models' of the public, which attributed the public failure of scientific reassurances over such new techno-scientific commitments to various forms of public misunderstanding (Wynne 1991), a watershed appeared to have been reached in March 2000, with the *Science and Society* report of the internationally influential UK House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology (House of Lords 2000). This crystallized an already widespread but diffusely emerging set of understandings, that public scepticism, mistrust or resistance to scientific assertions about such socially shaping technological programmes was not due to public ignorance, and required two-way understanding and dialogue rather than the prevalent norm of one-way 'correctional' idioms of communication. A new and bracing need also for scientific understanding of publics was defined as crucial for 'restoring' an anxiously craved state of public trust.

Reflecting these tidal shifts, a huge flowering of practical and analytical work aimed at such public engagement, dialogue and mutual understanding between science and publics has erupted since the late 1990s. Although not recognized as such, this has partly been playing catch-up with similar moves begun a decade or more earlier in development work, albeit usually in more immediately vernacular domains such as agriculture and land-use issues than with respect to new technologies and sciences.

This shift embodies the potential for new, more constructive models and practices of citizenship, human subjects and, correspondingly, of knowledge and 'epistemic agency' as a key, novel dimension of citizenship. In this chapter, however, I caution that this radical apparent potential is compromised by deeper, less manifest cultural assumptions and commitments framing most such initiatives, and that these problematic founda-

tions have yet to be identified, confronted and changed. I argue that this failure – masked so far by the extravagant investments of enthusiasm, energy and expectation pouring relentlessly into new participatory initiatives by which citizens may influence science, and in expectation thereby render it more legitimate and robust – is founded on two factors.

First, ‘participation’ has an exclusive focus on downstream risk or impacts issues as distinct from upstream research and innovation,¹ reflecting the false assumption that public concerns are only about instrumental consequences, and not also crucially about what human purposes are driving science and innovation in the first place. Second, it reflects an assumption that the public meanings, or issue definitions, are naturally and properly the sovereign domain of authoritative expert institutions, and that citizens have no capability or proper role in autonomously creating and negotiating such collective, and potentially more diverse, public meanings. Thus, standardized and supposedly objective universal public meanings are imposed – ‘risk issues’ – which also imposes a normative, standardized model of citizens.

I develop this line of analysis and explore its validity and implications in the context of globalization processes where knowledge and technology feature. As a key intellectual resource in doing this, I draw upon the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK), and especially the reflexive turn in social sciences and humanities generally. This includes especially the performative dimension, recognizing that even scientific representations of ‘objects’ (such as ‘risk’) as a reference to an external real world are more than mere representation. They also embody tacit projections of human subject worlds, relationships, agency and capacities of the human subject through such unspoken cultural projection, and these tacit projections are forms of material intervention into intersubjective human ontologies as well as nature (Verran 2001, 2002). This reflexive-constructivist perspective on scientific knowledge, however, is not at all anti-realist; it is avowedly realist. It refers to a reality that is contingent, open, complex, hybrid and ambiguously human-natural together, and always non-completed – endemically in-the-making, in both its human and its natural categories, as well as its substantive material features.

I first outline how risk discourse, as scientific idiom, dominates the public definition and treatment of the social issues of new techno-scientific trajectories such as energy, genomics and biotechnology, nanotechnology and the like. This risk discourse in modern societies (and by presumption of its authors, also in emergent ‘global’ contexts) is automatically imposed as the natural and universal objective representation of public issues (and hence of public concerns) as their natural public meaning, which, it is

implied, all proper citizens would recognize. This unquestioned starting point, colonizing as it is more and more areas of public life (Power 2004), then leads to the further presumptive imposition of models of the ‘citizen’ on those publics by interpreting their responses to these (presumptively deemed) ‘risk issues’ as ‘*risk perceptions*’. This further affirms that the exclusive meaning of the issue is indeed ‘risk’, since those public responses must have been to (their own understanding of) those risks as ‘we scientists know them really to be’. That such resistance might be caused by the public experience of finding its own, different meanings to be flatly ignored and denied is never even imagined as a different, more challenging basis of public dissent. Citizens are just not imagined to have such autonomous capacities by institutional actors, who are immersed in and agents of the discourse culture that reflects the assumption that the objective, natural meaning is ‘risk’. This rigid failure of institutional-cultural imagination has not hitherto been challenged by the processes of participation and dialogue that have been developed.

I thus argue, consistent with the critical appraisal of the fashionable development discourse of participation – ‘the new tyranny?’, as Cooke and Kothari (2001) have asked – that virtually all of the mushrooming commitment to public citizen engagement in ‘science policy’ or ‘scientific-technical issues’, or to ‘democratizing science’, is something of a mirage, at least thus far. It imposes severe and unspoken framing limits around these new processes, such that the continuing failure to *democratically sensitize* science, and its persistent non-accountability to publics even in the new (if still limited) ‘participatory’ ethos, is omitted from critical attention.

I then try to address what further issues arise when we try to globalize our perspective in a way that avoids the hegemonistic assumption that modern scientifically framed public meanings (such as ‘risk’) are naturally universal and objective. Again, I try to retain focus on implicit models of the agency, capacities, needs and ‘civic qualifications’ of the ‘public’ or the ‘citizen’, as these can be seen to be embodied and performed silently in those dominant discourses and their framings in those more expansive and even less well-defined global processes.

In order even to begin this, we need to address the combination of three recent historical trends or transformations. These developments of the last twenty or so years are:

- neo-liberal intensification of globalization, in several dimensions, which renders straightforward comparative assessment of North and South cases and situations problematic, since it is the forms of increasing global *integration between* North and South which may be significant;