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Social Science and Salvation: Risk Society as Mythical Discourse

Jeffrey C. Alexander / Philip Smith

Published Online: 2016-05-20 | **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsoz-1996-0401>

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Summary

Dominant perspectives on science and technology fail to come to terms with the continuing role of culture and mythology in mediating perceptions and moral evaluations of technology and its impacts. The need for such an understanding is demonstrated in a critique of Ulrich Beck's important „Risk Society“ thesis. Failure to acknowledge a mediating cultural variable influencing the time-lag in risk perception leads Beck to theorizing which deconstructs on close inspection. A similar flaw leaves the contending theory of Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky unable to explain the social distribution of risk consciousness except through recourse to residual and ad hoc explanations. As a solution to these problems the paper proposes a late-Durkheimian theory of discourses on technology and risk. This argues that technology is coded as sacred or profane and is narrated as bringing salvation or damnation. This theory is then applied in a rereading of Beck's Risk Society as an environmentalist manifesto replete with apocalyptic imagery.

📄 About the article

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