

Reason of State and a new notion of Fortune:

Historicising the Risk Society

Geraldine Donoghue

Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology

Email: geraldine.donoghue@qut.edu.au

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Abstract

Since the 1980s the concept of risk has produced a large and diverse volume of sociological research. Ulrich Beck's groundbreaking risk society thesis provides a particularly engaging contribution, since it seems that nearly every sociological account of risk engages with this work. For Beck, we are living in second modernity – a new epoch that breaks with pre-modernity and industrial society due to the centrality, incalculability and reflexivity of globalised risk. While Beck's theory is compelling, a reading of other theorists such as Foucault (2007[1978]) and Hacking (1975,1990) suggests that a difficulty with Beck's work is that in attempting to explain what is novel about risk in contemporary times, he too quickly passes over the complexities and ruptures of historical change that impact on the history and contingency of risk.

This paper begins by presenting a brief analysis of the present state of risk by introducing Beck's historical narrative of risk from pre-modernity to the risk society; it then outlines the challenges with the "risk as epoch" argument by considering a range of literature, which suggests risk has a more complex history than proposed by Beck; and finally it highlights the value in examining strategies of statecraft in early modern Europe, specifically Machiavelli's *The Prince* (2008[1513]) and Giovanni

Botero's political treatise, *Della Ragion di Stato* (1576[1589]) – as a means of more thoroughly understanding how our current concept of risk emerges. In doing so, this paper seeks to open up new trajectories in the historicisation of risk for other interested scholars.

Key words : Risk Society, history of risk, Ulrich Beck, Foucault, Machiavelli Reason of State, Giovanni Botero

The paper is a work in progress. It explores Ulrich Beck's historical narrative of risk, which frames his groundbreaking work – the risk society thesis, and positions this against a range of literature that suggests risk has an earlier and more complex history than what is proposed by Beck. It then goes on to argue that in a close reading of Machiavelli's *The Prince* (2008[1513]) and Giovanni Botero's *Della Ragion di Stato* (1956[1589]), we are able to depict a novel and early pre-condition to risk: the changing political concepts of misfortune (Fortuna).

From hazard to risk calculus to global, reflexive risk: Beck's historical narrative of risk

According to Beck, we are living in a unique time, where global risk –environmental, economic and technological - has come to define the human condition in late modernity (2006a: 330). The materialisation of risk in contemporary society is, according to Beck's thesis, closely aligned with the emergence of our globalised world where flows and connections, particularly the global economy (Elliott, 2002:294; Donoghue, 2010) has eroded traditional borders between states (Beck, 1999:8; Chap 1, 2006a, 2006b). This increase in the fluidity of borders has meant that risk – understood by Beck as both an objective phenomena and anticipation of catastrophe - has been able to dilute the once firm boundaries that separated rich from poor, close from distant.

This globalization and compression of risk, combined with what Beck argues is the new inability to calculate or insure against it (1999:53-58) means we are now living in second modernity: a new social world that has broken away from pre-modernity and industrial society through risk. Central to this description of an epochal second

modernity is Beck's historical narrative of risk, which begins with the question, "aren't risks at least as old as industrial society, possibly even as old as the human race itself?" (Beck, 1999:48). In answering this question, Beck argues the transformation of risk occurs across three epochs: the pre-modern world, industrial society (first modernity) and, risk society (second/late modernity). Each of these will be briefly outlined and compared below.

According to the thesis, risk in second modernity/risk society is different both from hazards in pre-modernity and what Beck calls, risk calculus, in first modernity (Beck, 1999:Chap3). As summarised by Jarvis (2010:12), for Beck, hazards are a feature of pre-modernity and are "...naturally occurring events that can produce harm" (2010:12). For Beck, these events - "human dramas – plagues, famines and natural disasters" – were considered by the social body to be "'strokes of fate' raining down on humankind from 'outside' and attributable to an 'other' – gods, demons or Nature" (Beck, 1999:50). In comparison to hazards which were considered 'natural' and were attributable to an unknowable other in pre-modernity; risks in first modernity and the risk society are harms that evolve from "decisions about the production and distribution of wealth through industrialization" (2010:14) and "based on decisions, or, more specifically, decisions that focus on techno-economic advantages and opportunities" (Beck, 1999:50).

While what typified industrial society was "progress and controllability, full employment and exploitation of nature" (Beck, 1999:2); this regularity and certainty, is undermined in risk society by an increase in the spread and magnitude of risk events such as financial crises, environmental destruction, nuclear accidents and so

on. For Beck, in risk society the globe becomes plagued and defined by *major* global risks.

Challenges to the epochal proclamation and making the case for historicising risk

While compelling, in recalling certain aspects of Beck's risk society, it becomes obvious that in accounting for second modernity, Beck's thesis aims to *newly characterise* the present and in doing so displaces other accounts of late modernisation. Although such characterisations of the present – in pursuit of proclaiming what is new or novel about society – are often interesting and convincing; a significant challenge can be overselling the degree of historical transformation (Hirst and Thompson, 1999) by either overlooking empirical evidence (Helleiner, 2008) or by too swiftly passing over the complexity, ruptures and instability of historical change – leading to continuous, causal and anachronistic analyses of what can better be described as complex discontinuous processes (Foucault, 1998[1967]:279-81).

If we consider this last point made by Foucault within the context of Beck's account of risk, it certainly appears that Beck takes a linear and continuous approach in his description of how risk emerges historically – moving quickly between what he argues is the pre-modern conception of risk (hazards) and the later conceptions of risk calculus in industrial society and radicalised risk in risk society. This rapidity rests on Beck's argument that risk is incapable of emerging without the significant technological progress of the industrial era, which offered new means of producing wealth – “risks presume industrial, that is, techno-economic, decisions and

considerations of utility” (Beck, 1999:50). To be sure, such an approach clears the path to positioning risk as the centre point of social transformation in contemporary society, however, as evidenced by Fressoz (2007), it does leave a question as to what interesting and important transformations may have been overlooked in the pursuit of such a neat and concise historical picture of risk.

For example, Fressoz challenges the “supposed radical novelty” that is the centrepiece of the risk epoch by examining the works of a historically forgotten philosopher, Eugen Huzar, who during the mid 19th century reflects on the technological shocks, fears and anxieties of his time. Such concerns included many of the ‘risks’ that are espoused to be central to second modernity/risk society/reflexive modernization, including “vaccination... chemical manufacturing, deforestation, transoceanic canals”. In working through earlier historical conceptions of danger and hazard Fressoz works to display the historical polymorphous character of risk that he argues has been reduced to “somewhat reassuring categories” (334) by contemporary literature. Literature that argues the risk society has morphed out of a current anxiety over new and radically different technological risks. Through his detailed historical analysis, Fressoz calls for a rethink of how risk comes to be¹.

In light of the importance of historical investigation, if one of the tasks of scholars interested in historicizing risk is to engage with how risk emerges, the value in investigating the history of risk is not just in order to determine *when* risk arises, but rather what its emergence is *attached* to. This was a question that Nacol (2007) aimed to answer in her examination of the early assemblages of risk in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She contends that examples of risk theory can be found in

¹ See also De Goede (2005) who through her genealogy of finance, outlines the importance of historicizing taken for granted concepts such as finance, risk and regulation.

classical theories of political relations, particularly the early modern social, economic and political thoughts of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith. She argues that conceptions and deliberations of risk central to these scholars and that embedded in these early theories of political power is the notion that risk is “not just a peripheral concern for political creatures” rather “it is the problem politics is meant to solve” (2007:2).

Interestingly, while Nacol looks to Hobbes and Locke for evidence of risk’s early political attachments, a close reading of both Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (2008[1513]) and Giovanni Botero’s *Della Ragion di Stato* (1956[1589]) reveals there is perhaps an earlier pre-condition to risk that can be examined in the changing ways politics engaged with the concept of misfortune (Fortuna) in early modern western Europe. This is briefly discussed below.

Statecraft and a new notion of Fortune – Machiavelli to Botero

In examining changing concepts of misfortune between Machiavelli and reason of state we must necessarily begin with a brief introduction to Fortuna, the mistress of chance and luck, a concept that according to Pocock (1975:36-37) has had complex meanings assigned to it throughout antiquity up until the Renaissance, particularly in political theory². From Aristotle, who “attributed to her the task of doling out earthly goods such as wealth, health, and beauty” (DeGoede (2005:29), through to Boethius’s idea of Fortuna as “heavenly instrument” (Skinner, 1978a:96) who in his *Consolation of Philosophy* “subordinated Fortuna to Providence” ensuring fortune’s place as a figure of divinity, through to Petrarch’s contention in his *The Remedies of Both Kinds of Fortune* that “man may be said to have the capacity to

² See Pocock (1975:77-78,218,486) and Skinner (1978a:95-98,119-122,145-146,186,189; 1978b:278-9, 292; 1981:25-27) and Patch (1922) for the most thorough examinations of the concept of Fortuna throughout Antiquity, The Middle Ages and up until the Renaissance.

control his own destiny” (Skinner, 1978a:97) and up to Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man* where man’s free will and creative powers under God is examined – Fortuna and ruminations over the ability of man to control his own destiny has been of significant interest throughout the ages. As Patch states in his seminal work *The Tradition of the Goddess Fortuna in Roman Literature and in the Transitional Period*, “if at any time we find her [Fortuna] suddenly steadied in subordination to some other deity, the change is significant for the philosophy of life in that period. In other words, the attitude of a period toward Fortuna reveals its attitude toward the question of fatalism” (1922:132).

Fortuna – also described simply as Fortune – was often characterised as capricious, fickle, blind and uncertain (Patch, 1922:135) seen to be “at once impartial and unfair”, as while “all were equal before Fortuna ... she gave no special rewards to those who worked hard or were of good moral standing” (DeGoede, 2005:30). According to Skinner (1981:24-25) Machiavelli turned to the Roman historians and moralists in order to understand her sway over political and personal affairs, and we can see Machiavelli’s interpretation of her inconstant and wandering character in the quote from his *Tercets on Fortune* at the beginning of this section. However, it is Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (2008[1513]), that most interests us here as not only do we see his most succinct discussion on the tension between Fortune and the capacity of the ruler to be the master of his own fate, but also because of its authority and position as one of the defining texts on early modern statecraft³.

For Machiavelli, his engagement with the concept of Fortuna – or Fortune – is one that has been covered extensively by a plethora of work (Skinner, 1981; Pocock, 1975)⁴. As Lukes states, “Machiavelli was not the first political thinker to analyze the effect of fortune in the affairs of humankind: (1980:33), however, his conceptualisation of Fortune is significant as it marks a break with classical moralists of his time (Skinner, 1981:40). As Foucault tells us, “the politician in Greco-Roman antiquity , in the Middle Ages, and up to Napoleon, and

³ See (Deuchars, 2004:13) for a succinct discussion of this point.

⁴ The list is exhaustive, however, these references listed are ones that I have found to be especially helpful. Skinner (1981) is considered to be a seminal text in understanding the relationship between Machiavelli and Fortune.

perhaps even beyond, operates with bad fortune, and Machiavelli showed that there is a series of rules of the game in relation to bad fortune” (2007[1978]:31). We can see these ‘rules of the game’ most strikingly in chapter 25 of *The Prince* titled *The Power of Fortune in Human Affairs and How She Can Be Countered*.

The uniqueness of Machiavelli’s approach to Fortune, in comparison to the other ambassadors and writers of advice-books for princes of the day becomes clear when we consider his redefinition of the central concept of *virtu* – “the name of that congeries of qualities which enables a prince to ally with Fortune and obtain honour, glory and fame” (Skinner, 1981:39). For the classical moralists the man of true virtuoso is a man with a strong moral virtu – manliness is defined by the degree of moral standing. In contrast, for Machiavelli virtu instead comes to “denote precisely the requisite quality of moral flexibility in a prince” (40) - “he needs a flexible mind, altering as the winds of Fortune and changes in affairs require” (Machiavelli, 1513: lines 74-75:283). Indeed for Machiavelli, the real measure of virtu in the prince was how willing and ready he was to engage in any action – moral or cunning – in order to attain glory. The strength of the prince, for Machiavelli, depended on his flexibility and adaptability to change in the face of always altering circumstances (Deuchars, 2004:20) and while Fortune is a binding force on the life of the prince, Machiavelli argued that her fickleness can be altered by strong actions of the prince so that Fortune becomes “the mistress of half of our actions” (1513: lines15-16: 361). Machiavelli’s relationship with Fortune is best summed up through Skinner (1981:53) who makes the point that “the achievement of great things is never the outcome merely of good Fortune; it is always the product of Fortune combined with the indispensable quality of *virtu*, the quality that enables us to endure our misfortunes with equanimity and at the same time attracts the goddess’s favourable attentions”.

If we turn now to Botero, we see an interesting change in the relationship between misfortune and politics that appears to be tightly interwoven with the goal of maintaining and expanding

the strength of the state. As stated by Fiedler (2010:6), “the emergence of the modern state...was a novel development, and it therefore required novel concepts, categories and rationalities to systematize their relations”, and in Botero we see that the concept of Fortuna has been rejected, emerging in her place a new art of government that seeks out reason and a general theme of stability, peace and certainty – a desire perhaps for the relocation of “order internally through techniques of self-regulation” (Fiedler, 2010:6).

At a surface level, we can see an emphasis on establishing a certain sense of stability through governing if we look at Botero’s book II of *Della Ragion di Stato* (1956[1589]), where he discusses prudence and valour and the forms of knowledge that increase both. For example, in terms of prudence, Botero refers us to Tacitus who in his *Annals* XI states “power is more safely preserved by cautious decisions than by rash ones” (43). Indeed for Botero “nothing is more unworthy of a sagacious ruler than to lay himself open to the action of chance and fortune” (43), something that Botero explains becomes possible not only when the ruler forgoes prudence for self-interest (49) but when he makes unnecessarily bold decisions (49).

This focus on ordering through prudence is important for Botero and we see numerous other examples littered throughout his work⁵, however, in terms of appreciating an overarching new dynamic and logic of preventative forces, we need to put these examples of prudence to one side and turn to Botero’s central argument that the sovereign must adequately administer and plan (book II)⁶ around three key forces – “justice, peace, and plenty” (280). Botero explains why these three aspects are so important to govern when he states,

“For justice assureth every man his own. Peace causeth tillage, trade and arts to flourish. And plenty of food and victual sustaineth the life of man with ease and much contentment to him. And the people embrace nothing more gladly than plenty of corn” (280).

⁵ See Book II.

⁶ See especially page 49, where Botero discusses policy and the best approaches in times of crisis. He again refers to Tacitus (*Annals*, XIII:6) and his advice that “administration and planning count for more in a times of crisis than hands and weapons”.

For Botero, justice, peace and plenty (money) are the three key aspects of the state that require protection and expansion in order to preserve the strength of the state. He provides numerous examples of how this might be achieved: from the regulation of taxation (136) to ensure the burden of taxation does not just fall upon the poor, who are the most unable to support it;⁷ through to outlining the “need for a numerous population” (144-145) in order to increase crafts, trade and commerce; through to comments on increasing the utility of the populace in order to make long term improvements and to ensure money does not leave the state (149-150)⁸.

And so in this brief analysis, what we can decipher from Botero’s treatise is that the strength of the state need not be left to the whim of Fortuna’s capriciousness, not even as in the case for Machiavelli that “Fortune is the mistress of half of our actions” (1513: lines15-16: 361), rather, the strength of the state relies on new calculated and preventative practices. Indeed in less than sixty years between the publication of *The Prince* and Botero’s *Reason of State*, we see Fortuna – which had been one means of conceptualising bad fortune stretching back to antiquity – disabled and in her place a new rationality emerge, which allows for the beginnings of a kind of preventative planning between men and things.

⁷ As Botero states, “these taxes, however, must not be personal but real, that is, not paid per head but according to property owned; otherwise the whole burden of taxation will fall upon the poor, which is the usual case; the nobles pass it on to the populace, the large towns to the countryside. But in the course of time the poor become unable to support the burden of taxation and collapse under it, so that in the end the nobles must fight at their own expense” (136).

⁸ Botero cites China as an example stating, “in China, an extremely well-administered country, begging is forbidden; everyone is engaged according to his ability: the blind, if they have no other means of livelihood, turn handmills, the maimed perform some similar task within their power, and only those who are completely helpless are admitted to public hospitals” (150).

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that in Beck's assignment of an essentially duo-causal⁹ explanation to account for the shift from pre-modernity to the risk society, he leaves behind a number of unexplored "dynamic and dispersed forces" (Der Derian, 1987:3), which are significant to the story and the politics of how we have come to understand and conceptualise risks. By briefly outlining the differences in the ways in which both Machiavelli and Botero respond to misfortune, I made the case that there is perhaps an earlier and more complex layering of historical events, political arts and behaviours that together contribute to making our concept of risk possible.

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⁹ Industrialisation in first modernity and globalisation in second modernity.

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