

Social strategies of adaptation and prevention

### **"The politics of risks: justice, discourses and contexts in risk assessment."**

Thank you very much for the invitation. I will make profit from being there, and gathering with colleagues coming from different research and fieldwork backgrounds, to share considerations about risk assessment and the importance of contextual approaches. As a geographer, I am still at the stage of training in research, but I am targeting human – environment interactions through the lens of risk and global environmental change, which are two different, though connected, epistemic communities.

I want to enhance a social and political geography of risks and the environment. Therefore, I will present a politicized and contextualized approach of risk issues I wish I could implement in next fieldworks. "Politicized", because of the power relations and the socially rooted causes I want to highlight. "Contextualized", because of the relations that must be assessed within socio-ecological systems (both social and biophysical), over time and across scales.

Such encompassing framework stems from a personal research training process, still ongoing process, which is familiar to French-speaking, Latin-American and North-American literature on risks, and particularly on risks as social constructions. This framework allows addressing socially and politically oriented challenges related with a transformed environment, the "second nature", a "humanized nature", without ignoring the "first nature" and the necessity of biophysical laws.

But let me put forward the importance of scales, contexts and power. I decided to stress on few critical ideas in my ppt presentation to make my point and my demonstration clearer.

#### **1- A social-constructivist approach of risks**

Over the past several decades, risk studies have fallen into either risk-hazard or social constructivist frameworks.

- The risk hazard perspective, biophysical-oriented and dominated by natural scientists, describes climate phenomena as natural with humans acting on nature from the outside.
- The social constructivist view, dominated by the social scientists, "denaturalizes" climate phenomenon looking for root causes and different kinds of causation mainly through the lens of political economy. I claim my belonging to this second trend. But within the social-constructivist trend, a reaction to a rather materialistic conception of risk construction arises from the perspective of discourses and representations.

Therefore, risks are defined by biophysical and social conditions as well as by discourses and representations of these conditions. Vulnerability conditions and risk discourses or representations are closely interwoven. They stem from one another. It is important to account for both tangible and intangible or discursive drivers that shape risk situations, because at the time to "adapt", both aspects will have critical implications.

#### **2- Assessing human-environment interactions, a matter of development**

Nature-Society interactions do not characterize two exclusive systems, but an integrated socio-ecological one. It is not only a matter of biophysical or mechanical interactions. It is humanized nature. It is a politicized and meaningful reconstruction, through practices and representations, that I am willing to call more broadly a development process. A situated

process of development, with multiple human-environment interactions, that is called “peuplement” in French. The way a society embodies its environment, their mutual relations.

This way, risks and their discourses, representations, policies... are both the outcome and source of one another. The – contingent – identification of risks has consequences: it triggers off different kinds of social responses that in return have also consequences on the ways to identify risks and on the sense they are given. This way, the politics of risks are twofold: they stem from the social construction of risks (multiple causes of vulnerability) AND from the responses and strategies developed as a consequence of risk situations. That means = risks are both an **outcome** and a **driver** that has consequences on the human-environment interactions, on the development of a socio-ecological system.

### **3- Risk situations as a snapshot AND as a pathway to development**

Risks are illustrative AND consequential through material dimensions AND intangible aspects. They rely on human-environment interactions. On the one hand, I aim to understand these interactions giving rise to risk as result. It corresponds to a more classic assessment of socially and politically contingent causations of risk. On the other hand, I aim to understand the logics and reasons of the implications of risk policies, management and representations in a socio-ecological system.

Both causal mechanisms (leading to, and implied by risk situations) correspond to the politics of risks and are embedded in socio-ecological systems. They cannot be reduced to hazard-oriented explanations, but the biophysical dimension cannot be ignored. As risks are both a result and a driver of socio-ecological dynamics, they are also a matter of development. This way, environment and risks need to be given political contents so that questions of justice, democracy and power can be asked.

- What are the resources, livelihoods, capitals that can be used by people at risk?
- How do people decide to manage risk?
- Who decide the priorities of risk agendas, what is risk and what is not?
- How is risk distributed across society and space?

But also:

- What is risk management aiming at?
- What are the underlying drivers of risk representations and of policy-making?
- What are their consequences on social order and on human-environment interactions?
- What are the relations between inequalities and identification, policies and management?

### **4- Contexts and scales, a long-standing geographical approach?**

As risks are part of a development process, we need to situate them and account for such a process. I try to do it by territorializing risks. My contextual and politicized approach of risks spans different geographical contributions to “place-grounded” or “situated” risk assessment. I can only name some of them:

I refer to Hewitt, Mitchell, Cutter or Turner's work and others in their will to address risks through a contextual, ecological, integrated, regional approach. I am not familiar with all that models, but they have been inspiring me, just like Patrick's work on risk, starting from the damages and going upstream, to concentrate on the human-environment interactions, or like the work of Pérouse and Coanus, in a more social-constructivist view of risks as both outcomes and drivers.

I use the notion of "territory". My conception of territory (and territories of risks) stems from a French tradition of social geography pretty far away from Robert Sack's one. As for Sack, human territoriality is reduced to a bounded piece of space where an authority takes place. As for many French social geographers, the territory is a social construction, both material and intangible, and historically identified through practices and representations. It is a never-end process, and risks are part of this process, both as a result and as a driver.

## 5- Model and variables

Some **human-environment interactions** define the territorialization of risks. They are shaped by **contextual parameters** and can be measured through selected **variables**. Let me explain parameters, interactions and variables.

1- The territorialization of risks has no beginning and no end. It is a way to live with, where natural and social systems snap. As for the researcher, it is a way to assess the humanized environment with view to risks. The territorialization of risks has **contextual parameters**, which are space, time and power.

2- Such parameters frame the **human-environment interactions** that define the territories of risks. These **interactions** can be assessed on the basis of different forms, landscapes or practices, but also through discourses, representations, or policies. Taken in the framework of their contextual parameters, they are research objects that allow characterizing the territorial dimension of risks.

3- In order to measure these research objects, we need to select different variables. The choice relies on both the contextual parameters that frame the nature-society interactions and the research question asked (Bassett, Blanc-Pamard et al. 2007)

## MODEL

Thanks to this conceptual framework, I try to make sense of multi-layered and multi-scalar causations, of biophysical and socially or politically contingent drivers that shape, current and grounded risk situations. Through this model I want to make clear that I deal with a permanently becoming risk situation. The model accounts for place-grounded, articulated and integrated risk situations:

- Place-grounded, as information and human-environment interactions are proper to a specific and situated socio-ecological system

- Articulated or situated, because the choice of variables depends on contextual parameters as well as on research questions. We are not dealing with a community or a spatial unit as an island in the world.

- Integrated, because my final research object is the territorialization of risk, as an outcome and as a process that has implications. It is neither the natural system nor society alone. My

research addresses the always-becoming humanized environment with view to risks, its causations, and implications.

### **Concluding by a threefold perspective**

Risks are involved in development processes. It was already underlined in *At risk* in the 1990s. But since the 1990s, some changes happened:

- The hegemony and the weight of GEC discourse and references in the whole world, which is actually in a downscaling process with adaptation. While mitigation concerned more likely a global scale, adaptation is the grounded and practical face of a discourse that is hard to question. We have already plenty of works on the REDD instrument or the interference of NGOs on the ground because of environmental emergencies.

- Broadening the scope, having risks and uncertainties important consequences today, the way they are addressed, handled or defined is increasingly important. The importance of discourses and representations are underlined by the weight of fear and terror as political instrument in a post 9/11 world. The way security issues increasingly involve environmental aspects points at the same trend. I think about the NATO intervention in Pakistan, after the main floods last year; about the militarization of humanitarian aid; or about the close and simple connections between natural hazards and wars, conflicts or threatening migrations (as Jeffrey Sachs says “about the lack of water, drought causes wars”). All of this needs a context.

- But risks and environmental assessment and policies are not bound to be a new environment-driven colonialism, of course not. In “Adaptation, from resilience to transformation”, Mark Pelling stresses the opportunity we have, again, to improve unequal and unjust situations in the context of pressing environmental debate.

And this opportunity starts from the questions we ask, and the way we shape our research objects: more than looking for adapting to environmental change, we could look for transforming ways of living with the environment, transforming the humanized environment, which also necessarily implies to address ways of living together. Therefore it is critical to politicize the assessment of risks, environment, and social strategies of adaptation and prevention.

### **Model references:**

Hewitt, 1983, interpretation of calamity from the viewpoint of human ecology

Hewitt, 1997, regions of risk, a geographical introduction to disaster

Mitchell, 1983, case and situation analysis

Mitchell, 1999, crucible of hazards

Cutter, 2003, social vulnerability to environmental hazards

Cutter, 2008, a place-based model for understanding community resilience to natural disasters

Pred, 1989, place as historically contingent process: structuration and the time-geography of becoming places