

Sociology 480:

SOCIOLOGY OF RISK AND DISASTER

Professor Andrew Lakoff

Spring 2022
Wednesdays 2:00 - 4:50 pm
CPA 106
(First two weeks via zoom)

Email: lakoff@usc.edu
Office hours: Fri. 1 – 2 pm
via zoom (and by appt.)



Course Description

A number of social theorists have argued that we now live in a “risk society.” From natural disasters, to mass casualty terrorism, to pandemics, to climate change, society is faced with a series of potentially catastrophic threats, and relies on experts and government authorities both to assess threats and to provide security against them. However, there is often disagreement about which threats are most important to prepare for, and in the wake of catastrophic events, there is disaccord over how to apportion blame. In this course we will look at a number of current public controversies around risk and disaster, in areas such as environmental pollution, food safety, vaccination, and climate change. We will ask questions such as: how do members of the public come to worry about some dangers and not others? How is knowledge produced and disseminated about imperceptible threats? What is the role of trust in public response to the warnings of experts? And what are the challenges to efforts to mitigate vulnerabilities to catastrophic events, whether pandemics or climate change? The course will be held in a seminar format, and students will develop and present research projects on a topic related to the sociology of risk and disaster.

Course Requirements and Expectations

The course will focus on in-class discussion of the required readings, and its success will therefore depend on active student reading and engaged participation. Each class will begin with a brief overview of the week's themes, followed by student presentations of discussion questions. In the second half, we will in many cases break into smaller groups to focus on specific themes and problems. Articles and book chapters for each week will be posted on the course Blackboard site, with the exception of the book that is required for purchase (listed below).

Each student will be responsible for posing discussion questions for **one** week of the course. Presenters are encouraged to meet with me in office hours to discuss key themes for the week. All students should come to each class ready to contribute, having carefully read the required materials and having considered important questions to be raised in discussion.

In addition to participation during the seminar itself, you will also contribute to the course discussion board (on Blackboard). Each week, you should post roughly two paragraphs of either commentary on the significance of the week's readings and/ or queries for collective reflection. These comments and questions must be posted by 8:00 pm on the evening before class (Tuesday) in order to receive full credit. Please read the posts by your classmates in advance of class on Wednesday, and try to bring others' comments up in your own contributions to the discussion.

There will be one **short paper assignment**, due before class on March 2. There will also be a **final project**, which you will develop as a paper over the course of the semester, beginning with a proposal due on March 23. In the last meeting of the course, students will present their final projects to the class. The final paper will be due – in lieu of a final exam – by 5 pm on the scheduled date of the exam, May 9.

Assignments and Grading:

- Attendance and active participation in discussions 20%
 - Includes one session as discussion leader
- Discussion board commentary 20%
 - Due each week by Tuesday at 8:00 pm
 - You may skip one week
- One short paper (5 pages) due on March 2 20%
 - Assignment will be provided two weeks in advance
- Final paper (10 - 12 pages) due Monday, May 9 40%
 - Includes project proposal, outline, and presentation

Learning Objectives

By the end of the semester, students will be able to: explain the content and significance of risk thinking in modernity; discuss why certain risks become more or less salient to collective perception than others; examine the sociological dimensions of the allocation of blame in the aftermath of avoidable disasters; evaluate the political processes through which policy

decisions are made in relation to risk reduction; and conduct a sophisticated analysis of the social dimensions of a particular risk or disaster.

Attendance and classroom etiquette

You are expected to attend all meetings of the class. This is especially critical since the class meets only once per week. If absolutely necessary, you may miss one meeting of the class without affecting your grade, but please let me know ahead of time. If you miss a class, you are still responsible for the assigned readings and the accompanying contribution to the discussion board. Missing more than one class without a valid and documented reason will affect your grade. Please refrain from using your laptop or phone during class. I recommend that you bring with you a notebook and writing implement, and, if possible, hard copies of the week's readings. Please come to class ready to discuss the readings with your classmates. Be attentive, engaged, and curious.

Communication

I will respond to email within 48 hours on weekdays. I am not available over email on weekends. I encourage you to visit my weekly office hours (on zoom), or alternatively to schedule an appointment with me.

Technology Considerations

You will need the following to fully participate in this course:

- Access to your USC email account (note that Blackboard uses this email address for all correspondence)
- Access to Blackboard
- Adobe Acrobat Reader

Attending classes online and completing coursework remotely requires access to technology that you may not personally own. If you need aid to procure equipment or services for your education, such as a laptop computer or internet hotspot, you may be eligible for the university's equipment "["Student Basic Needs" program](#). For any technical Blackboard issues, please contact [Blackboard assistance](#). Free downloads of [Microsoft Office](#) are available for USC students, as is [information](#) on how to install and operate Zoom through your USC account.

Accessibility

Blackboard includes accessibility features in its learning management system for various accommodations and display options.

COVID-19 Policy

Students are expected to comply with all aspects of USC's COVID-19 policy. Failure to do so may result in removal from the class and referral to Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards.

USC Statement on Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Students and Disability Accommodations

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University’s educational programs. The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Required book for purchase:

Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Polity, 2018)

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

There may be minor adjustments in reading assignments during the semester – any changes will be announced both in class and on the course Blackboard site.

Week 1 (1/12): Introduction to the Class

Note: class will meet on zoom

Week 2 (1/19): Chance, Fate, and Risk

Note: class will meet on zoom

- E. E. Evans-Pritchard, “Witchcraft is an Organic and Hereditary Phenomenon,” and “The Notion of Witchcraft Explains Unfortunate Events,” in *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (1937), pp. 1 – 17, 63 – 83
- Michael Attyah Flower, “Divination as a System of Knowledge and Belief,” in *The Seer in Ancient Greece* (2008), pp. 104 – 131

- Anthony Giddens, “Fate, Risk and Security,” from *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991), pp. 109 – 142

Week 3 (1/26): Calculating Lives and Deaths

- Peter L. Bernstein, “The Winds of the Gods and the Role of the Dice,” and “The Remarkable Notions of the Remarkable Notions Man,” in *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk*, pp. 11 – 22, 73 – 96
- Francois Ewald, “Insurance and Risk,” in Burchell, Gordon and Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect* (1991), pp. 197 – 210
- Theodore Porter, “Life Insurance, Medical Testing, and the Management of Mortality,” in Daston, *Biographies of Scientific Objects* (2000), pp. 226 – 247

Week 4 (2/2): Biopolitics and the Welfare of the Population

- Michel Foucault, “Right of Death and Power over Life,” in *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (1977), pp. 135 – 169
- Ian Hacking, “Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers,” *Humanities in Society* 5 (1982), pp. 279 - 295
- John M. Eyler, “Farr’s Biometer: The Life Table and its Applications in Medicine and Economics,” in *Victorian Social Medicine* (1979), pp. 66 – 96

Week 5 (2/9): Risk Factors and the New Epidemiology

* Short paper assignment

- Robert Castel, “From Dangerousness to Risk,” in *The Foucault Effect*, pp. 281 – 298
- Allan Brandt, “More Doctors Smoke Camels,” and “The Causal Conundrum,” in *The Cigarette Century* (2007), pp.105 – 158
- Paul Rabinow, “Artificiality and Enlightenment: From Sociobiology to Biosociality,” in *Essays on the Anthropology of Reason* (1996), 91 - 111

Week 6 (2/16): Lurking Environmental Dangers

- Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962), pp. 1 – 38
- Michael Egan, “Guarding the Public,” in *Barry Commoner and the Science of Survival* (2007), pp. 47 – 78
- Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, “Can We Know the Risks We Face?” in *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers* (1983), pp. 1 - 16

Week 7 (2/23): Preparing for Catastrophe

- Herman Kahn, “Will the Survivors Envy the Dead?” in *On Thermonuclear War* (1962), pp. 40 – 95
- Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi, “How to Build a World with Artful Intuition,” in *The Worlds of Herman Kahn: The Intuitive Science of Thermonuclear War* (2005), pp. 124 – 148
- Andrew Lakoff, “Preparing for the Next Emergency,” *Public Culture* 19:2 (2007), pp. 247 – 271

Week 8 (3/2): Technological Accidents and the Risk Society

* Short paper due in class

- Ulrich Beck, “Living on the Volcano of Civilization: the Contours of the Risk Society,” in *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1992), pp. 19 – 50
- Langdon Winner, “On Not Hitting the Tar-Baby” in *The Whale and the Reactor: a Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology* (1986), 138 – 154
- Charles Perrow, “Normal Accident at Three-Mile Island,” in *Normal Accidents: Living with High-Risk Technologies* (1984), 15 – 31

Week 9 (3/9): Industrialized Food and Agriculture

- Sheila Jasanoff, “Food for Thought,” from *Designs on Nature: Science and Democracy in Europe and the United States* (2005), pp. 120 - 145
- Michael Pollan, “The Feedlot,” in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2007), pp. 65 – 84
- Eric Schlosser, “Why the fries taste good,” in *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (2001), pp. 195 - 232

Week 10 (3/23): Reflexive Risk and Vaccine Hesitancy

* Proposal for final paper due in class

- Joshua Yates, “An Interview with Ulrich Beck on Fear and Risk Society,” in *Hedgehog Review* (Fall 2001), pp. 96 – 107
- Sharon Kaufman, “Regarding the Rise in Autism: Vaccine Safety Doubt, Conditions of Inquiry, and the Shape of Freedom,” *Ethos* 38 (2010), pp. 8 – 32
- Jennifer Reich, “Neoliberal Mothering and Vaccine Refusal: Imagined Gated Communities and the Privilege of Choice,” *Gender and Society* (2014), 679 – 704

Week 11 (3/30): Emerging Disease and Pandemic Preparedness

- Laurie Garrett, “The Next Pandemic?” *Foreign Affairs* (2005)

- Nicholas B. King, “Security, Disease, Commerce: Ideologies of Post-Colonial Global Health,” *Social Studies of Science* 32:5 (2002), pp. 763 – 789
- Andrew Lakoff, “The Generic Biothreat, or, How We Became Unprepared,” *Cultural Anthropology* 23:3 (2008), pp. 399 – 428

Week 12 (4/6): Risk and the Politics of Expertise: COVID-19

- Manjari Mahajan, “Casualties of Preparedness: The Global Health Security Index and Covid-19,” *International Journal of Law in Context* (2021), 204 – 214
- Nawal Arjini, “Science Will Not Come on a White Horse with a Solution: An Interview with Sheila Jasanoff,” *The Nation*, April 2020
- Adam Tooze, “The Sociologist Who Could Save Us from Coronavirus,” *Foreign Policy*, August 2020

Week 13 (4/13): Knowledge, Uncertainty, and Climate Change

* Outline of final paper due in class

- Ulrich Beck, “Global Public Sphere and Global Sub-Politics, or, How Real is Catastrophic Climate Change?” in *World at Risk*, pp. 81 – 108
- Anthony Giddens, “Climate Change, Risk, and Danger,” in *The Politics of Climate Change* (2009), pp.17 – 34
- Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, “The Denial of Global Warming,” in *Merchants of Doubt* (2010), 169 – 215

Week 14 (4/20): From the Social to the Planetary?

- Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (2017), 1 – 106

Week 15 (4/27): Final Presentations

- Each student will present their final paper project to the class

Final Papers Due: 5 pm on Monday, May 9