Politicizing risk assessment on vulnerability conditions

Towards a counter-hegemonic approach of risks in a “world at risk”

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- A critical approach of risk assessment and risk definition

- Between **realistic** and **constructivist** approaches:
  *Risk as an objective reality Vs Risk as a social construction*

- **Problematic:** What are the social sciences’ objectives and functions in risk assessment?

- **Hypothesis:** Political and social aspects must be highlighted in so far risks are situated. Social sciences ought to deal with the *“How”* (how is risk defined, or assessed), and with the *“what”* is really at stake when **defining and addressing** risks.

- Theoretical and methodological statements based on fieldworks and in Caracas (Venezuela), thought they make sense at different scales
OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENTATION

Three objectives:
- Figure out **theoretical basis** to **articulate** realist and constructivist positions in assessing – and handling – risks.

- **Politicize** systematically the construction of risk as it is a **situated category** that has **consequences on** urban space

- Push forward the **territories of risks** as an **integrative framework** for analysis and assessment.

Three parts:
I- Risks are **hegemonic**

II- Risks are **performative** and can be **instrumentalized**

III- Towards an **encompassing** approach: **territorializing risks**
I- Risks are *hegemonic*

* The rising of environmental and risk concerns
  - Risk / Security / Climate Change... among the current buzzwords.
  - Hegemonic categories: generalized, legitimate, hardly questionable, Manichean...

* The Tragedy of Vargas a few kilometers North to Caracas, in 1999
  - Huge rainfalls and debris-flows on the coast
  - Risk definition and assessment do not rely on objective conditions

* The need for critical and reflexive social sciences
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* The need for critical and reflexive social sciences
  - Risks must be situated and embedded in social logics by asking:
    ° Adaptation to what? What for?
    ° How are societies adapting? How are scientists assessing risks?
II- Risks are **performative** and can be instrumentalized

* The **realistic** approach. The necessity to deal with the **drama**

\[
\text{Risk} = \text{Hazard} \times \text{Vulnerability}
\]

* The **constructivist** approach. The ability to consider **performativity**

- Social construction of risks
  - Objective conditions
  - Representation of risks
  - What is socially recognized as a risk?
  - How is risk measured?
  - How is scientific objectivity constructed?

* How – and why – should we articulate the two approaches?
Mapa 8: La estigmatización espacial fundamentada en un discurso dominante del miedo a la inseguridad reproduce más los contornos de un orden socio-espacial que la geografía de los actos delictivos en la ciudad.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social construction of risks</th>
<th>Vulnerability conditions</th>
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* How – and why – should we articulate the two approaches?

In a social science vision, risks are a matter of power, justice, and democracy. Why are territories important in addressing risks critically?
III- Towards an **encompassing** approach: territorializing risks

* Defining risks or shaping urban territories?
  - Adaptation creates new risk conditions.
  - Measuring risk is not neutral. It shapes our representations.
  - Acceptability is shifting over time. It is dynamic.

> Risk and adaptation have territorial consequences and they can be instrumentalized

* Risks must be situated and politicized
  - Articulation to multiple causes (from root causes to conjectural ones).
  - Risk assessment is also a matter of **power**, **justice** and **democracy**.
  - Scaling risk is important (risk is a situated notion. Contexts must be set out).

* Territories ↔ Risks
  - Territories give a **context**. They help “situating” risks, actors and logics involved...
  - Territories of risk are a result of the **performativity** of risks. Risk shapes territories

\[
\text{Risks} = \text{Situated outcomes AND Drivers, of socio-spatial order}
\]
Conclusion

Risks are situated notions. They can be territorialized.
Risks are showing hegemonic aspects.
Risks are not just facts, they are also causes. They are performative.
Risks are instrumentalized. They are used according to interests.

What is defined as a risk? What for (what is really at stake when dealing with risks?)
How is risk assessed? How is it addressed?

A critical approach allows denaturalizing risks and consider them as outcomes and as processes. Risk assessment is part of the reality at stake, thus, it must be reflexive.