

Section 2

Invited comments

Bill Durodié

Predicting the future is a thankless task. It is easier to play safe than to accurately discern long term trends, and history is littered with events and discoveries that transformed society but none could foretell. In fact, futurology invariably tells us more about where we are now, the forces and trends that shape us, than it can ever say about what is to come. Contemporary obsessions tend to be projected forwards and amplified, whilst popular prejudice can preclude focusing on more contentious or uncomfortable analyses of the present.

Thus, an attempt to map out the 'drivers of societal change' (p. 366) over a 20-year period to unearth the future of risk management should be considered to be either foolhardy or brave. At first sight it would appear that those involved in this collaborative research project involving the *Journal of Risk Research*, King's College Centre for Risk Management, Shell International Limited, the UK Health and Safety Executive, Électricité de France and the European Patent Office are at the very least risk-takers. But, as they themselves should note, appearances can be deceptive.

As the starting point for this endeavour is necessarily the here and now, one can safely assume that if this is not accurately described and determined, then all that follows suffers accordingly. Unfortunately, *Riskworld* 2020 uncritically repeats many of the assumptions, aphorisms, platitudes and prejudices that currently inform the risk discourse. The single key question here should have been: 'Do people's perceptions of risk, match the reality of the dangers they face?' Yet it has not clearly been asked.

Instead, we are treated to the usual litany of assumed problems from 'the effects of climate change' (p. 370), through 'financial contagion' and 'new scourges such as BSE' (p. 373), to 'swelling populations' that 'create growing dependency' (p. 378), 'work-related stress' (p. 391) and even US 'hegemony' (p. 375). The fact that Britain was warmer during the Roman period than today is presumably irrelevant, as is the sorry tale of those who died falling down the stairs over the last decade, and who outnumber the human victims of mad cow disease. The notion that more people on the planet could offer us more solutions is not even envisaged.

Along with the usual risk suspects, words such as ‘complex’ or ‘non-linear’ are used whenever there is a need to evade the debate and as a cover for ignorance. We live, we are told, in ‘an era of increasing connectivity and bewildering complexity’ (p. 372). Never mind the industrial and innovatory slowdown we have witnessed since the early 1970s, or our growing sense of alienation and political purposelessness. Arguably, people lead far more disconnected lives today than in previous generations, as all manner of formal and informal networks have fallen by the wayside, and it is this that shapes our perceptions of risk. It will be a major task over the coming decade to untangle this mish-mash of complicity, confusion and prejudice.

Clearly, the crisis of confidence that informs this agenda, which is often and quite wrongly presented as having been driven by environmentalists and consumer activists, started from the very top of society. It was when the élite, charged with running our world, with all its problems and contradictions, lacked their own vision for the future or alternatives to pitch themselves against, that things began to go wrong. This manifested itself as an inability to lead through a growing reluctance to accept responsibility.

Our leaders are all too aware of the problems of society but lack insight and courage as to how these might be resolved. The rise of risk consciousness represents acquiescence to this imperfect world. It implies that society has problems that cannot be solved, only managed. Such an outlook is explicitly stated in the *Riskworld* report: ‘The illusion that we can control risk is being replaced by a recognition that we can only navigate and adapt to risk’ (p. 387).

Thus, lacking a vision of the future, the élite have come to view their role as the management of risk in the here and now. The strategy is not to solve the problems of society, but to contain them – often by an ever-closer regulation of individual behaviour. But this approach is fraught with problems. It is a negative philosophy that encourages passivity and which, rather than attempting to unite people around a vision or cause, tends to scare them by drawing attention to their individual vulnerability.

Also, by setting up the role of political leadership as the ability to contain risk, it exposes the inability of society’s leaders to deliver a safe world. This encourages cynicism and deepens doubts about the legitimacy of the élite. This legitimacy hangs in the balance. With no vision and no programme, there is no reason for our political leaders to be where they are except the will of the electorate. But the electorate have become increasingly disengaged as risk averse politics simply takes the form of technical management fronted by differing and failing personalities.

Mistrust ensues as fear has been used to foster coherence but the ability to protect is always found lacking. Trusting nobody at the top, individuals' actual isolation in the very opposite of a networked world, makes them very exposed to every new scare or panic – whether it is issued by the authorities, campaign groups or anybody else. And the cynicism of politicians means that there is little antidote for these panics. A scared society may continually seek official reassurance, but increasingly, it does not trust this advice.

When it comes to the issue of trust, the report lacks teeth. 'Societal trust' we are informed, 'is multidimensional and its main components are considered to be transparency, competence and efficiency' (p. 393). In fact, trust quite simply comes from action and it is fear of action that precludes trust. As all actions necessarily encompass the great bogey of risk managers; '*unforeseen consequences*', then trust comes from taking risks. Instead of passively and timidly asking 'Who will society trust to frame risks?' (p. 393), the reports authors could more boldly have asserted that 'who takes risks, trusts society'.

The demand for trust today highlights the gulf between perception and reality as new technologies have invariably improved and saved more lives than they have impaired or destroyed. Public scepticism of this is symptomatic of a broader disenchantment with social progress rather than the actual impact of development. It is an expression of the contemporary world's difficulties in assimilating change rather than complexity, which tends to be experienced and presented today as a negative, purposeless force beyond human control. When people react against change, they necessarily channel this through targeting specific innovations.

In this, I find myself in agreement with just a couple of lines in the report: 'signal events or catastrophes have greater salience and act as lightning rods around which widespread dissatisfaction and disaffection can coalesce. As a result, risk has become a code' (p. 381). But here it is disengagement that is the real problem, rather than 'inequity'. Innovation is necessarily about engaging with uncertainty. That is why emphasising trust will prove counterproductive and only fuel demands that cannot be assuaged. If the underlying cause of the demand for trust is a socially driven scepticism to change, then its absence can have no technological solution.

To understand this, it is worth exploring the distinction between trust and confidence. As Professor Adam B. Seligman of Boston University argues in one of the most illuminating studies of this question (*The Problem of Trust*, Princeton University Press, 2000), trust is not about expected outcomes. If a trusting act was based upon such calculations or on quantifiable rational expectations it would not be an act of

trust at all, but an act of confidence. It is the suspension of reciprocal calculation that truly characterises trusting relationships.

This is the basis of a fundamental difference between trust in people and confidence in institutions or technological systems. With regard to our interpersonal relationships we act as free individuals and recognise in others their free agency as well. But when we act in predefined ways, trust is not called for, nor established. Thus the origins of trust are rooted in our recognition of the freedom of others to act freely. This fundamentally social act allows us to act outside of predefined or ascribed roles. In short, trust is a fundamental part of risk-taking.

Thus trust is not only a means of negotiating risk, it implies risk. Trust is a means of negotiating that which is unknown. The implied risk is central to recognising others' capacity to act autonomously and in unexpected ways. If all actions were constrained or regulated there would be no risk, only confidence or a lack of confidence.

Trust is therefore quite a rare commodity; and because it is based on free will, trust cannot be demanded, only offered and accepted. Trust and mistrust develop in relationship to free will and the ability to exercise that will when existing norms and social roles no longer suffice. Trust as an aspect of social solidarity is very different to confidence, which is based on market exchange whereby roles are ascribed and outcomes expected. Transgressions are resolved through the legal system.

Autonomous and active engagement are the prerequisites of trust. So the passive expectation that trust should be delivered is anathema to the establishment of real trust. Society today however, is increasingly being reorganised along the lines of mistrust. There is thus an overriding impulse to regulate so that society can be confident that aspirations, risk-taking and experimentation are constrained and limited. The longer term outcome of all this will be to have less innovation and development, as well as failing to deliver trust.

The way out of this impasse is to re-engage people in a political debate that challenges our culture of fear. As I have argued elsewhere, we may need 'to recreate confident, combative individuals before we can aspire to having peaceful, progressive communities' (*Times Higher Education Supplement*, 28 March 2003, p. 26).

Sadly, when we come to examining the three speculative, new-age scenarios prepared for us by the *Riskworld* people, the one striking absence is direct, political engagement. Instead all we are offered is; 'the Council of International Risk Governance' (p. 307), 'the enlargement of the European Union' (p. 315) or 'self-organisation' (p. 324).

The projection of unrepresentative, unaccountable quangos into the future, along with individual isolation, surely reflects poorly on the world we now inhabit. Getting rid of these clumsy barriers, arguing for real freedom and reinvigorating political debate are the most urgent tasks of all those who would gladly see the back of our exaggerated risk obsessions.

BILL DURODIÉ

*Senior Research Fellow, International Policy Institute, King's College London,
Strand, London WC2R 2LS, UK*

31 March 2003