

Risk and East Asia

Annual Meeting 2009

Friday, November 20 – Sunday, November 22, 2009

JDZB Berlin

In cooperation with the Institute of East Asian Studies, University Duisburg-Essen

Across the social sciences, the concept of risk has come to characterise the economic, political and social transformation of industrial societies at the turn of the 21st century. Most notably in the work of Ulrich Beck, the concepts “world risk society” and “reflexive modernity” have opened a new perspective on transnational dimensions of change, challenging the tendency to view globalisation primarily as an economically driven process of market liberalisation. At the same time, the risk perspective highlights the ambiguities of contemporary modernisation processes, between the opportunities raised by the individualisation of lifestyles and the precarious consequences of the “individualisation of risk”. Moreover, the balance of opportunities and threats implied by contemporary social, political, economic and cultural changes are shaped by the changing logic of public institutions and state regulation, as the responsibilities for risks are shifted from states to markets, from the public to private sphere and from collectivities to individuals.

In 2009 the VSJF conference will cooperate with the National Institute of Chinese Studies, White Rose East Asia Centre and participants with regional and social scientific expertise on South Korea, in order to take up a transnational East Asian perspective. The works of Ulrich Beck have received a wide reception in both China and Japan, yet little is known of what Asian scholars make of this perspective in the study of their own modernisation processes. The focus on the East Asian region is of high theoretical interest for an analysis of the “world risk society” precisely because this is a region of the world with a history of a different mix between public and collective protections and responsibilities for livelihood risks. A first aim of the VSJF conference in 2009 is to engage with the “reflexive modernisation” thesis from the perspective of East Asia and with East Asian social scientists, to discuss the risks as well as opportunities raised by global processes of individualisation and transnationalisation in the specific context of East Asia. East Asian scholars who have recently taken up Beck’s theories will begin the conference with the presentation of their recent analyses of East Asian “second” modernizations and individualization. This will be followed by a Keynote address by Ulrich Beck and a podium discussion on the reception of Beck’s work in East Asia.

A second aim of the conference is to focus on major dimensions of risk from both a conceptual and an empirical perspective. In East Asian contexts, where central political elites have traditionally placed a focus on national security and social stability, the perception and projection of risks are increasingly used to frame attempts at enacting major political reforms and structural changes. Individual panels will focus on the governance of risks, East Asian responses to the re-regulation of the financial industry, new social risks related to livelihood security, the changing structure of families and rising unemployment, the risks related to rural transformations, the issue of food security and the health risks posed by pandemic diseases.

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