

Are you at risk? “At risk of what?” you may ask, but the specifics are hazy. Tsunami. Eviction. *Influenza*. Does it really matter? Disaster threatens—any disaster will do: “*Risk* has become an intellectual and political web across which thread many strands of discourse related to the slow crisis of modernity and industrial society.”¹ A discursive web of *risk sensitivities* enshrouds the term. “Systemic risk is an issue that requires fuller understanding;”² but understanding is complicated by proliferate use. An examination of radicals calls me.

Risk is a word with thick and solid—albeit obscure—roots. It holds fast to its shape: *risco*, *rischio*, *risque*, *risk*. In recent usage, *risk* is frequently modified—*wise* vs. *foolish*—or quantified as *greater* or *far greater*, and writers appear to prefer to *take* the noun rather than let the word act directly; *taking a risk*, exposing oneself to danger, peril, hazard. The following quote is typical: “Used unwisely — when greed and the urge to *gamble* with borrowed money overtake sensible *risk-taking* — derivatives can become Wall Street’s version of nitroglycerin.”³ This is double-speak, which is also typical of recent usage: *Sensible* (from L. *sensibilis*, “perceptible to the sense”, from *sensus*, *sentire*) is an English synonym of “practical” or “prudent;” so “sensible risk” is calculated hazard, is a euphemism, a dressed up name for a *bet* (from O.E., “to better”) or *gamble* (from *gambling*, M.E. dialectal remnant of *gammlin*, “to play a game.”) The verb, similar to *to dare*, is often equated to recklessness or altruism,⁴ but deeply implies gambling: *To risque the certainty of little for the chance of much.* (1755)⁵

Chance, *sb.* [ME. *chea(u)nce*, a. OF. *cheance* :—late L. *cadentia* falling; cf CADENCE.]

1. The happening of events; the way in which things fall out; fortune ... = ACCIDENT **1** b.

2. A fortuitous event or occurrence; often a mischance ME. **3.** (One's) hap, luck, lot 1674

4. An opportunity. **5.** A possibility or probability : as distinct from a certainty. **6.** absence of design or assignable cause; fortuity; = ACCIDENT **2** 1526

Chance, *v.* ME. [f. prec. *sb.*] **1.** To come about by chance. **2.** To happen to come (*on* or *upon*) **3.** To speed, to have luck 1553 **4.** To risk, to take one's chance (*Colloq.*) 1859

Old French *cheance* derives from falling—like the falling of dice in a *game of chance*. While a *game of chance* is a risky venture, the game of Risk is harmless. It was invented in 1957 by the film-director Albert Lamorisse, and first released under the name *La Conquête du Monde*. The game of Risk is unrealistic, and includes absurd globe-conquering strategies like seizing Thailand and Australia first. Its creator was a poet, the director of the film *The Red Balloon*. He died in a helicopter crash while filming a propaganda film for the Shah of Iran in which the narrator is a wind called Sabaa. (The Shah did not like it, and ordered additional scenes of dams and modern architecture.) In addition to the falling of marching feet or rolling dice, *cadentia* meant the falling of bodies like apples or helicopters, the downward inevitability of the principle of heaviness, or *gravity*. The Latin equivalent for our modern chance is *fortune*, a goddess whose emblem is a wheel. This *Wheel of Fortune* could symbolize vicissitude—the succession and interchange through the stations of life; but could also symbolize inevitability, destiny, fate. Fatally, the *wheel of fortune* becomes a game of chance, bestowing good weather or bad, misery and prosperity, for reasons beyond our human comprehension. In Middle English, *fortune* discards unpredictability, becoming “good fortune, a prosperous condition.” Fatal fortune distinguishes itself from *chance* to describe a game that has been *rigged*.

Rig, *sb*³, *slang* or *colloq.* 1725 [Origin obscure.] ... **2.** A trick, scheme or dodge; a method of cheating or swindling 1775.

In marrying the Germanic to the Latin, *rig* is one of those words that make English, English. The Germanic *swindle*, derived from the hyperbolic *schwindler*, “a giddy-minded person, an extravagant,” is a good-time word. Preachers, politicians, salesmen and strippers are general types of *swindler*, or “one who practices fraud, imposition or artifice for gain.” *Cheating* on the other hand is the Sheriff’s business. Etymologically, it is correct to say that the State is a *cheat*: akin to *chance*, the O.F. root, *escheat* literally means, “that which falls to one” and is the legal term for the reversion of property to the State when an owner dies without heirs. By transference: “**2.** To deprive *of* by deceit 1590.” Malcolm X was speaking of a rigged game when he said, *you can tell a man is cheating if he gambles and always wins*. The cheater is *secure*.

Secure, *a.* 1533. [ad. L. *securus*, *f. se-* Se- + *cura* care.] **I.** Without a care, careless, free from care, apprehension, anxiety or alarm; over-confident. Now *arch.*
II. I. Rightly free of apprehension; protected from or not exposed to danger, safe 1582. **b.** Of actions or conditions: Involving no danger, safe. 1617. **c.** Of an argument, means, agent: Not liable to fail, trustworthy, safe 1729 ... **4.** Free from risk as to the continued or future possession of something; having a safe prospect of some acquisition or desirable event 1664.

Are you at risk? “At risk of what?” The specifics are hazy: some sort of financial crisis, hinging on *risk*, its evasion, compression, explosion. If to be free from *risk* is to be *secure*, then one could institute freedom from *risk* through *securitization*:

The term securitization has an interesting origin. It first appeared in a "Heard on the Street" column of the Wall Street Journal in 1977. Ann Monroe, the reporter responsible for writing the column, called me to discuss the underwriting by Salomon Brothers of the first conventional mortgage pass-through security, the landmark Bank of America issue. She asked what I called the process and, for want of a better term, I said securitization. Wall Street Journal editors are sticklers for good English, and when the reporter's column reached her editor, he said there was no such word as securitization... I received another call from Ann Monroe asking for a real word. "But I don't know any other word to describe what we are doing. You'll have to use it." The Wall Street Journal did so in protest, noting that securitization was a term concocted by Wall Street and was not a real word.⁶

Now that *securitization* is a real word, mortgages and credit card debt can be securitized. Streams of debt payments stretching into the future can be turned into *securities* and sold on the open market. According to a fairy tale, Fates of Finance (old men, not crones) were sick of scarcity. In the 1970s, the American *baby boomers* were maturing, expecting to get married, buy homes and have children of their own. The Fates forecasted that the GDP might be insufficiently supplied, feared that there simply would not be enough money in the existing *thrift system*, where lenders leant directly from deposits, for this

generation to be provided with mortgages. And so, they called in magicians who pulled *special purpose entities* as well as rabbits from hats. *Voila! Securitization!* They followed this with a disappearing act: *Limits, be gone!* In terms of currency supply, *post-scarcity* had commenced.

In *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, social ecologist Murray Bookchin envisioned the necessity of freedom in post-industrial society⁷: a very different vision of post-scarcity may be found in a miserably prescient book, *Risk Society*, by the sociologist Ulrich Beck. "In advanced modernity, the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of *risks*. Accordingly, the problems and conflicts relating to distribution in a society of scarcity overlap with the problems and conflicts that arise from the production, definition and distribution of techno-scientifically produced *risks*."⁸ Beck (approximately) defines *risk* "as a systematic way of dealing with the hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself. Risks, as opposed to older dangers, are consequences which relate to the threatening force of modernization and to its globalization of doubt."⁹

Doubt *sb.* [ME. a. OF. *dute, dote, doute*, vbl. sb. f. *doubter* to doubt.] **1.** The (subjective) state of uncertainty as to the truth or certainty of anything. **2.** The condition of being (objectively) uncertain. **3.** A doubtful matter or point, a difficulty. 1693. **4.** Apprehension, dread, fear 1659; danger, risk 1596.

Industrial society was divided into class sedimentation of haves and have-nots based on ownership of the means of production. Post-scarcity announces the *chance of much*, at the risk of *certainty of little*. *Securitization* announces something other than a new class structure. In July 2007, a tent city was established in Ontario, California. Facing a growing homeless population from Adjustable Rate Mortgage adjustments, the City government decided to "set aside a few vacant lots... in an effort to lure them away from dangerous overpasses, bridges and railroad tracks. Tents were provided, food was donated and the city provided portable toilets. The population rapidly grew from 18 to more than 300."¹⁰ 300 failed debtors. In March of 2008, the City of Ontario pushed out 90% of the residents of the camp, claiming that they "lacked ties to the City."¹¹ Meanwhile, that very month, the Fates were spending sleepless nights, flirting on the telephone with JPMorgan, promising to guarantee the debt obligations of another failed debtor, the trading firm BearStearns.¹² These two events illustrate an emergent division between the *at risk* and the *secure*. *Risk society* is divided into *cheaters* and *cheated*.

- 1 Beck, Ulrich. (Trans. Mark Ritter.) *Risk Society*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992. (19)
- 2 Alan Greenspan, speaking to the Futures Industry Association in 1999, quoted in Nelson Schwartz, "What Created this Monster?" New York Times, March 23, 2008: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/23/business/23how.html>
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 "Even in this lousy bourgeois society we do not find it unusual that adults will rescue children from danger although the act may imperil their lives; we do not find it strange that miners, for example, will risk death to save their fellow workers in cave-ins or that soldiers will crawl under heavy fire."
- Bookchin, Murray. *Post-Scarcity Anarchism. (New 3rd Edition)* Oakland: AK Press, 2004. (45)
- 5 OED citation in *Risk*, v. from Samuel Johnson, "A Dictionary of the English Language." (1755)
- 6 Ranieri, Lewis "The Origins of Securitization" in Leon Kendall and Michael Fishman (Editors.) *A Primer on Securitization*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000. (31-43)
- 7 "The problems of scarcity, from which emerged propertied forms, classes, the state and all the cultural paraphernalia of domination, can now be resolved in a post-scarcity society. In reaching the point where scarcity can be eliminated, we find that a post-scarcity society is not merely desirable or possible, but absolutely necessary if society is to survive. The very development of the material preconditions for freedom makes the achievement of freedom a social necessity."
- Bookchin, Murray. *Post-Scarcity Anarchism. (New 3rd Edition)* Oakland: AK Press, 2004. (xvi)
- 8 Beck, Ulrich. (Trans. Mark Ritter.) *Risk Society*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992. (1)
- 9 *ibid.* (21)
- 10 <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/mar/06/local/me-tentcity6>
- 11 <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/crime/la-me-tentcity25mar25,0,17489.story>
- 12 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/17/business/17bear.html>