Discourses of Environment and Disaster

ARST Preconference Session Report

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International news headlines daily narrativize tensions between human activity and ecological conditions, from the risks of fracking to problems resulting from the proliferation of plastic products in the world's oceans. Addressing the broad thematic of the rhetorics of risk in the context of environmental issues, this session comprised four presentations reflecting on these risk relations with attention to the intersection of environmental and national security concerns as types of risks garnering public policy responses. Together, these papers foreground the diverging, ambivalent ways that current discourses of "risk" both reinforce and reconfigure established forms of governance.

Lisa Keränen's presentation of a paper, written with collaborators Hamilton Bean and Phaedra Pezzullo and titled "The Rise of Resilience: Vulnerability and the Post 9-11 Risk Society," highlights the rhetorical resonance of the concept of "resilience," particularly in discourses of disaster management, environmentalism, and biodefense (that is, defense against biological threats posed by bioweapons, emerging infectious diseases, food security, and protection from animal and plant contagion). Responding to a call from Bean *et al.* to chart resistance's multiple deployments (Bean *et al.,* 2011), Keränen and

her co-authors chronicle how the concept of resilience has emerged as a powerful organizing trope in post 9-11 discussions about risks of all sorts: natural disasters, economic downturns, terrorist attacks. They traced the etymological origins of resilience to the idea of leaping up or springing back and affirmed its presence in ancient Greco-Roman texts even as they emphasized the concept's resurgence in association with civil engineering beginning in the 1800s, when the concept referenced a property or quality of materials (Alexander, 2013). Resilience, they argue, gained traction as a concept in public discourse after the end of the Cold War (when ideas of "readiness" gave way to ideas of "recovery"). Yet the preliminary articulation of resilience as a property of societies and peoples spread through and from the fields of psychology, where it refers to a person's ability to withstand trauma, and systems ecology, where it indexes an ecosystem's ability to absorb changes. They demonstrate how the use of the term accelerated in the final years of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century in response to a growing sense of vulnerability to both human-induced and natural threats.

Having charted the term's changing connotations, the authors drew upon the risk society theories of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens to argue that the prevalence of the idea of "resilience" makes sense in an environment in which risks are so pervasive that prevention cannot be expected to ameliorate or preempt them (Beck, 1992, 2006a, 2006b; Giddens, 1999). "In a world out of balance, prevention no longer makes sense as the dominant response to a sense of potential crisis," they write in reconstructing Beck's position. In the West, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 marked a watershed moment in this regard, spurring the interest of emergency management scholars and professionals in addressing questions about national and community resilience in the wake of terrorist attacks. The wide variety of potential natural disasters and human-made environmental threats and emergencies characteristic of late modernity, including "high-impact weather," climate change, oil spills, drought, and many others, have further prompted calls for improving the resilience of critical infrastructure. In the wake of terrorist attacks, the resilience of people (in the wake of trauma) also became valorized in public discourse. Public and policy discourse trumpeting resilience raises political questions about who benefits from bounce-back and whose interests are legitimated, supported, or sustained in the process. Often, the idea of a "resilient" populace trying to return to normal following an attack is used to validate an official discourse or give perhaps unwarranted assent to officials' world views and policy positions. Keränen and

her colleagues point out that too often "a resilient citizen is free to choose only one course of action: the status quo," so that the rhetoric of resilience in the context of terrorism response becomes a form of *discursive closure*, in which particular lines of argument or discussion are sealed off from exploration.

Similarly, the rhetoric of resilience in the context of ecological management and environmental stewardship is open to the criticism that naturalizing "bouncing back" as the proper response adopts a passive or reactive stance, which constrains the collective ability to imagine and work towards alternative visions and ways of being. Relatedly, the trope of resilience can be said to privilege a political agenda centered on radical individualism, in that the ability to survive and thrive under adverse circumstances (a hallmark of resilience) conditions individuals to accept structural inequities in their socio-political environments and obscures the need for systemic change. They quote philosopher Mark Neocleous, who maintains that, "Neoliberal citizenship is nothing if not a training in resilience as the new technology of the self: a training to withstand whatever crisis capital undergoes and whatever political measures the state carries out to save it" (Neocleous, 2015, 5).

Increasingly, the concept of resilience appears across global public health policy discourse, including its mention in plans for post-pandemic *recovery* in addition to disease prevention discourse, where it crops up as a newly emergent but fundamental component of public health policy. Keränen, Bean, and Pezzullo note that "the discourse of pandemic resilience further obscures the ways that human behaviors alter and make more potent novel forms of life, thus increasing the likelihood of pandemic." Moreover, they observe that the move toward global health resilience merges public health and security in powerful ways that demand further exploration.

Having laid out these features of the discourse of resilience, Keränen and her co-authors intend to explore the countervailing discourses that resist the exclusion of voices that seek alternatives to the *status quo*, the stigmatization of those who fail to "bounce back" in the aftermath of terrorism or disaster, and the creation of the "resilient citizen" as a radically individualized subject characteristic of the present era. They conclude by noting that, "While resilience discourse confers a number of benefits and may even represent a responsible course of action in many cases, the discourse and its practices should be accompanied by reflection about structural barriers, thresholds of acceptable risk, and the limitations of planning." Picking up this theme of opportunities and limitations, the remaining three papers of the session similarly

explored the complex dynamics of how contemporary discourses of "risk" at once constrain and facilitate rhetorical spaces of public or community engagement in environmental policy and politics.

Philippa Spoel's paper, "Procedural Rights and Substantive Risks: First Nations' Negotiation of Jurisdictional Issues in Ontario's Ring of Fire Mining Development," outlines complex rhetorical dynamics surrounding proposals to begin mining in a region of northern Ontario that is home to nine First Nations communities, the Matawa First Nations. On the one hand, the Matawa First Nations clearly have an interest in minimizing the risk of potential damage or loss to their traditional lands as a result of proposed chromite mining; on the other, they also are interested in the possibilities for economic development and improvement of community resources that mining might make possible. Spoel points out that, in its earliest sense, connected to the insuring of cargos at sea, the concept of risk probabilistically acknowledged the possibility of gain (in the form of financial profit) as well as the chance of loss (in the form of shipwreck, piracy, and so forth) (Douglas, 1994). It is in this sense of risk as opportunity as well as threat that the Matawa First Nations' approach to the proposed mining plans can be understood. Spoel argues that the principles of environmental justice offer a framework for understanding what is at stake in this case. As Haluza-Delay notes in his discussion of environmental justice for First Nations in Canada, such principles go beyond risk society concerns about inequity in the distribution of negative externalities to highlight the issue of procedural rights as a fundamental component of decision-making practices in which participants are able to successfully advocate for better environmental conditions and defend themselves from adverse distributional effects (Haluza-Delay 2010).

Spoel praises the recently established Regional Framework Agreement between the government of Ontario and Matawa First Nations as an attempt to lay out procedural safeguards for participatory deliberation and decision-making related to mining in the Ring of Fire. "This agreement initiates a crucial movement out of a fundamental impasse by establishing full-party decision-making status for First Nations and validating both 'scientific' and 'traditional' knowledge in the deliberations," Spoel says. In addition to establishing desired *outcomes* for the negotiations between the Ontario government and the Matawa First Nations (related to long-term environmental monitoring, infrastructure planning and implementation, community social and economic development, and equitable sharing of economic benefits associated with mining) the agreement also specifies acceptable

procedures for reaching those ends. These are procedures intended to ensure the "meaningful participation" of First Nations communities in a "government-to-government" decision-making process, premised on values of mutual respect and understanding.

This agreement foregrounds the primacy of the "translative" or procedural-jurisdictional *stasis* within Ring of Fire risk negotiations. It takes up questions about methods of consultation and decision-making, admittance to participation and rhetorical agency, rights and responsibilities of participants, assignment of decision-making authority, validity or acceptability of different kinds of evidence, and recognition of particular "voices" or rhetorical modes in the discourse. By doing so, the agreement potentially opens up the discourse space to alternative avenues of approach and thus "the beginnings of new positions, new systems, and new narratives," as S. Scott Graham and Carl Herndl put it (Graham and Herndl, 2011).

Despite the transformative potential of the Regional Framework Agreement for explicitly articulating First Nations' decision-making rights about Ring of Fire development, however, recent actions on the part of the Ontario government have undermined its commitment to procedural justice. These actions include failing to represent First Nations people on an interim Board for the Ring of Fire infrastructure development corporation and, apparently in response to industry pressure, issuance of new exploratory mining permits without consulting Matawa First Nations.

Rowan Howard-Williams' paper, "Sustainability, Risk, and Ecological Modernization: The Breakthrough Institute's Theology for the Anthropocene," similarly addresses questions about the transformative potential of contemporary risk discourses, in this case concerning climate change. Focusing on the work of the think-tank The Breakthrough Institute (BTI), the paper explores the rise of 'eco-modernist' discourse in public debates over climate change in the US. The BTI's founders, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, came to prominence in 2004 with the publication of their controversial essay, "The Death of Environmentalism," which took aim at the failings of the environmental movement to deal with risks such as climate change. Since then they have been active in promoting an alternative approach to dealing with the unintended consequences of modernity. Informed by the work of Bruno Latour, BTI's perspective is that we need to rethink the narrative of modernity, seeing it not as emancipation from nature but instead as increasing attachment (Shellenberger and Nordhaus, 2011). Humans, in this view, should embrace their role as the most powerful force on the planet rather than seeking a return to some

arbitrary 'natural' state, recognizing, as Stewart Brand famously put it, that "we are as gods and might as well get good at it" (Quoted in Nordhaus and Shellenberger, 2007, 271).

Adopting the label of eco-modernism, Shellenberger and Nordhaus present a case for a 'modernization theology,' where the processes of endless change that come with modernization are accepted as a matter of faith. The "dream of a better, more prosperous life" to be achieved through technology, innovation, and growth is central to this worldview (Nordhaus and Shellenberger, 2007, 88). Eco-modernism has in common with resilience discourse the notion that risks are so pervasive that they cannot be prevented and must be incorporated into social organization. However, where resilience can work to uphold the status quo, eco-modernism is necessarily transformative. Howard-Williams examines how the metaphors of 'evolution' and 'creative destruction' are deployed in eco-modernist discourse to explain the ceaseless cycles of innovation and upheaval generated in response to newly created risks. Despite this emphasis on transformation, Howard-Williams argues that the increasing prominence of eco-modernism in policy debates often comes at the expense of questions of power, justice, and inequality. The faith that technology will inevitably work towards the aggregate good of humanity elides examination of more localized manifestations of power, and there is little consideration of the role of citizens in these processes.

The issue of tensions and contradictions in contemporary environmental risk discourses also figures prominently in William J. White's paper "The Sacred and Profane in Reflexive Modernity: The Flight 93 Memorial and the Remediation of Acid Mine Drainage," written with collaborator Lisa A. Emili (Penn State, Altoona). This paper examined the intersection of sacralizing and technical discourses surrounding the creation of the Flight 93 Memorial in Shanksville, PA, at the site of a former coal mine where one of the airliners hijacked on 9/11 crashed. The authors conduct a close reading of the National Park Service's General Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (GMP/EIS). The technical and regulatory complexities of remediating acid mine drainage (AMD)—the pollution caused by sulfides and metallic effluents leaching into watersheds near abandoned and "legacy" mines, that is, mines being operated on a reduced-output basis while also undergoing some reclamation or environmental treatment—were exacerbated in this case as the mining site was also the location of the impact crater and debris field containing the unrecoverable remains of the 40 people killed by terrorists when airplane carrying

crashed into the area, which was henceforth to be regarded as "Sacred Ground," a tribute to those lost and a site of secular pilgrimage. White and Emili note the "valorizing impulse" that frames the events aboard Flight 93 on 9/11 as a heroic struggle within a larger romanticized discourse of villainy and efficacious counter-measures. <u>They connect that narrative to the concept of public memory, suggesting that public memory is a useful concept for scholars who want to understand contested public discourses about the past.</u> This frame invites rhetorical readings of texts that help constitute identities at the national, group, and community levels and direct attention to discourses of responsibility, remembrance, and authority. White and Emili's paper points out that these discourses take place within a context of "material recalcitrance"--the constraints of the physical world--and then discusses legal and technical issues that emerged from attempts to create a national memorial on ground that was being treated for AMD because of its history as a coal mine. Their fundamental finding is that the National Park Service and its private-sector partners in the creation of the memorial sought to "isolate exactly those elements of the crash site that supported the public memory narrative of 9/11 . . . and somehow [to] sublimate those elements that did not." The resulting discursive production literally and figuratively *screened off* the work of AMD remediation from the view of prospective visitors to the memorial site and readers of the plan, creating an experience in which the "sacred" related specifically to the remembrance of the Flight 93 passengers and crew in serene and seemingly natural surroundings, relegating the administrative, legal, and technical work necessary in order to prepare and sustain those surroundings to a subordinate domain.

White and Emili draw upon Latour's notion of hybrids from *We Have Never Been Modern* to suggest that this relegation constitutes a work of purification. They show how the GMP/EIS deploys the terms "Sacred Ground" and "AMD" in a way that separates them topically. They describe how the plan literalizes that conceptual segregation by displaying the "concept networks" surrounding each term, and showing how the remediation of acid mine drainage is rendered invisible by absorbing it under the rubric of "healing the landscape"—which focuses mainly on the creation of a seemingly "natural" landscape, rather than on actually repairing the environmental damage and water pollution associated with mining activities.

Considered together, all four papers in this session grapple with the ambivalent and changing dynamics of contemporary risk discourses in contexts of significant environmental and public

security concerns. In diverse yet intersecting ways, they underscore how institutional-governance articulates risk across technical, regulatory, market-based, and commemorative domains continue to dominate, yet also may be destabilized and reconfigured, perhaps even through their silenced presence, by multiple emerging, potentially transformative ways of articulating "risk."

Whether these engagements between established and emerging modalities signal growing opportunities for democratic deliberation and participatory decision-making on issues of public concern remains an open question we think rhetoricians of science, environment, and technology are well-suited and well-advised to continue addressing these questions in the interests of understanding as much as we can about the rhetorical complexity and resilience of "risk" in the contexts the panel explored.

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