

l'importance des conditions dans lesquelles émerge une affaire s'impose et contribue à la reconnaissance des contextes. Or, il se trouve que la législation évolue au profit d'une individualisation de l'alerte entre le Grenelle de l'environnement 2007/2008 et la loi Sapin II, fin 2016. Cette version de la loi, toujours en vigueur actuellement, supprime la référence aux personnes morales et inscrit l'alerte dans un protocole intenable du point de vue de ces dernières qui sortent de leur réserve au risque de porter seules les conséquences de ce qui est perçu comme un acte déloyal, voire de trahison à l'égard des organisations dans lesquelles elles ont souvent eu accès à des informations leur permettant de construire leurs soupçons. Ce faisant, la loi confond de fait l'alerte avec une figure héroïque, encensée ou honnie, au mépris de tous les enseignements sociologiques. Cette dynamique est indissociable des nombreuses offensives qui se sont organisées ces dernières années contre le principe de précaution qui plutôt que de servir la démocratie scientifique et technique<sup>23</sup> ferait obstacle aux Lumières et au droit d'innover.

Ces polémiques confortent l'intérêt, voire l'urgence, de procéder à l'exploration de la question de l'alerte par une entrée par les « causes », « entités » et « objets » qui lui sont associés. Cette proposition profiterait à l'enrichissement du corpus d'enquêtes qui s'est mis en place depuis *Les sombres précurseurs* et à la différenciation des profils. Ainsi, on aurait des trajectoires construites à partir d'une caractérisation des affaires financières et politiques et sociotechniques, d'une part, et du seuil de criticité de la réception sociale de ces dernières pour des motifs épistémologiques et ou moraux-pratiques, d'autre part.

L'ensemble de ces explorations confirme que l'alerte relève toujours d'un processus sociopolitique complexe, fait d'alliances et de réseaux. Le déni opéré par l'évolution de la loi témoigne des rapports de force qui se jouent autour de la reconnaissance de l'alerte, cette dernière endossant pour nos sociétés complexes le rôle d'un mécanisme régulateur de la démocratie en situation d'incertitude.

Au terme des considérations auxquelles nous invite l'auteur, la thèse selon laquelle l'alerte remplit une dimension cruciale et indispensable au fonctionnement démocratique de nos sociétés s'impose avec beaucoup de conviction. Cette proposition interpelle *in fine* sur un dernier point, celui des abus éventuels de ce mécanisme systémique. Les recours intempestifs à l'alerte, voire ses détournements par les « marchands de doute<sup>24</sup> » et les

promoteurs de *fake news*, peuvent-ils conduire *a minima* à une banalisation de l'alerte, voire à sa dénaturation ?

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### The science of bureaucracy. Risk decision-making and the US Environmental Protection Agency

David Demortain

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David Demortain's new book, *The science of bureaucracy*, is an impeccably researched sociological history of risk decision-making as it developed within the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The EPA is a key locus, if not the outright birthplace, of environmental risk science, from whence the core concepts of risk assessment and risk management were first articulated, codified into regulatory practice, and exported around the world. More than a case study of a national environmental agency, the book's detailed rendering of the construction of risk science brings readers inside the conceptual architecture of modern understandings of risk in ways that Ulrich Beck's<sup>25</sup> influential but broad-brush sketch of 'risk society' could not. It should be required reading for scholars and practitioners of environmental politics from across the natural, social, and policy sciences.

Demortain begins by noting (and here his argument runs in parallel with Beck's) that risk is not reducible to science, but always involves evaluative and normative choices. And because risk is inherently social, scientific decisions about risk are especially vulnerable to critique and so nearly always contested. These twin observations bring into relief three organizational puzzles, each building on the next to chart the general arc of the book's argument. First puzzle: how can science solve problems of risk when the tools of risk science are themselves sources of conflict? Second one: how did different models of risk, reflecting different sets of normative choices, co-exist within the same agency? Third puzzle: given the near-continuous assault on its autonomy and power, how does EPA maintain legitimacy as a leading innovator of science-based risk governance?

The answers to each puzzle, rendered across ten empirical chapters, illustrate the Agency's institutional commitments to its own continuous reinvention. The key, for Demortain and his readers, lies in understanding that public controversy and the promise of its resolution

<sup>23</sup> Callon M., Lascoumes P., Barthe Y, 2001. *Agir dans un monde incertain. Essai sur la démocratie technique*, Paris, Seuil.

<sup>24</sup> Oreskes N., Conway E.M., 2012. *Les marchands de doute*, Paris, Le Pommier. Traduit de : *Merchants of doubt*, New York, Bloomsbury Press, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Beck U., 1992. *Risk society. Towards a new modernity*, London, Sage.

through science is the central tension driving organizational and epistemic change within the EPA today and throughout its fifty-year lifespan. This is where Demortain and Beck part company. For Beck, risk is the ‘manufactured’ byproduct or unintended consequence of industrial technology. For Demortain, risk is purposefully, rationally, and systematically ‘designed’ within the bureaucratic administration of decision-making at EPA – ‘the product of the encounter between science and social conflict’ (p. 42). Risk is not a tool for conflict resolution, but a result of the Agency’s internalization of public conflict.

The chapters are organized more or less chronologically, beginning with an overview of the emergence of risk analysis as a professional field in the 1960s and 1970s. From there, we learn of the early efforts at EPA by toxicologists to develop quantitative risk assessment (chapter 2) and by economists to design risk-ranking tools using cost benefit analysis (chapter 3). The next four chapters describe how the risk framework, which draws clear distinctions between risk assessment and risk management, became institutionalized within EPA, mainly during the 1980s, and included new ways to communicate risk to an increasingly anxious and conflict-prone public. In the 1990s, the risk framework began to unravel in the face of rising public concern with environmental justice and ecological restoration (chapter 8) and amid intensifying efforts to scale-back environmental regulation, promulgated mainly by industry and its Republican Party allies (chapter 9). Chapter 10 brings the story into the 2000s, and the EPA’s ongoing attempts to pivot away from risk and toward sustainability as its central concern and scientific product. The book concludes that because Agency officials and experts ‘have consistently searched for ways to create the articulation between conflicting parties and opposed views of the environment and risks... it succeeds in instituting forms of decision-making, in the United States and beyond’ (p. 320).

Some will take issue with this (suitably) contentious final claim, myself included. If the EPA has succeeded in institutionalizing a new science of risk, has it also succeeded at protecting the environment and public health? Are Americans safer today from pollution and chemical exposures than they were fifty years ago? Does risk science make for a less dangerous world? A useful extension of Demortain’s analysis would follow the frameworks, protocols, and practices out of EPA Offices in Washington, D.C. to its ten regional offices and beyond them to the state and municipal agencies that deploy risk science and make practical decisions within the context of real-world conflict and with at times far-reaching consequences for ecology and society.

These issues aside, make no mistake: this is a big book, loaded with analytical riches. Those who read it

will almost certainly find something nourishing to chew on. Legal scholars may focus on the changing relationship of risk science to legal theory and practice. For political scientists, the implicit exceptionalism that seeps into the analysis may beg comparisons of EPA’s bumpy history with other U.S. regulatory agencies that traffic in risk science, such as the Food and Drug Administration or the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or with risk assessment practices in the European Union. I find it a welcome addition to the two fields that I know best, science and technology studies and environmental sociology. The former remains closely wedded to an ethnographic model of cultural studies that privileges methodological individualism often rendered in smaller case studies of the social construction of knowledge. This book shows that organizations are not only where the action is but also that they do a lot of the work, and that history matters – not just in shaping academics’ access to processes of social construction, but in shaping the constraints within which social constructions of one sort or another, come about. Environmental sociology also tends to miss the meso-level, but from the other end, where macro-political economy locates environmental problems – and proposed solutions – squarely in the lap of global capitalism and that system’s relentless march toward growth, accumulation, and destruction. Demortain’s observations about the networked nature of institutional autonomy and innovation of organizational practice at EPA call into question environmental sociology’s one-size-fits-all theory of the captured environmental state.

*Science of Bureaucracy* is generous in another way as well. It cements the leading position of French scholars’ collective contributions to studies of the politics of environmental risk, chemicals regulation, and the politics of pollution and environmental health. Here, Demortain is joined by an intellectual circle of historians, political scientists and sociologists that includes Soraya Boudia, Henri Boullier, Nathalie Jas, and Emmanuel Henry, among others. Individually and collectively, these scholars are doing the important work of unpacking the history and genealogy of environmental health risk and related concepts, tools, and regimes, especially – but not exclusively – in the U.S. and Europe. For several years now their work has been gaining attention as it circulates through environmental science and technology studies and related fields. *Science of bureaucracy* demonstrates the clear value of the historical approach taken by this emerging ‘French school’ of chemical governance studies.

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