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"Risk and Trust: The Performative Dimension"

Szerszynski, Bronislaw

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This paper will explore some of the implications of attending to the performative aspects of language for the sociological understanding of issues of risk and trust among lay communities. Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens have alerted us to the way that in late or reflexive modernity trust in authority cannot be taken for granted, but increasingly has to be actively earned and actively invested. For his part, Brian Wynne has pointed out that lay judgements are relational and hermeneutic, including as they do judgements about the behaviour of relevant expert institutions, and about the risk to one's self-identity incurred by being caught up in relationships of dependency. Wynne has also argued that public avowals of trust can often mask deep private distrust, and thus be expressions more of fatalistic acceptance than of genuine trust. However, all of these analyses work from a basic model of "trust" as being the result of a cognitive process as a judgement as to the trustworthiness of others. Yet trust is frequently "active" in an even stronger sense than this. To take a posture of trust towards another can often be best understood not just as a cognitive judgement but as an attempt to bind the "trusted" into a relationship and attitude of responsibility and thus perhaps to alter their behaviour through the taking up of a position in a social ritual. Speech act theory can help us be sensitive to this sort of use of the language of "trust," by reminding us that language can perform a number of different functions not just that of describing the world, or of acting out ascribed roles and identities, but also that of trying to change the world. The analysis of public discourse about risk, trust and mistrust must thus be sensitive to the range of things that people might be attempting to do when they are saying things if it is to avoid drawing misleading conclusions about public attitudes to risk.
— Text from The White Horse Press website

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