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Risk, Safety and Capitalism

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In capitalist myth, things are always getting better, always have, and always will, because at least some people are adventurous enough to take risks. A special, public-minded group of inventors and entrepreneurs is perceived to have willingly sacrificed personal fortunes in search of a better life for all. Societal wealth derives from risk-taking. Those societies that dare to be rich are rewarded by quantitatively and qualitatively reduced risks, and are thereby able to appreciate that "richer is safer" and "wealthier is healthier." Any society can enjoy capitalist safety and happiness if it will simply copy the institutional formula of Western Europe and the United States: private property, market price systems, political decentralization and a healthy dose of technology trial-and-error. Those peoples who resist or disdain this Truth of the Higher Order are destined to remain poor, perennially stuck in pre-takeoff. The moribund condition of socialist states and many Third World nations supply painful evidence of this truth.

One could explain the cholera epidemics that swept through European and U.S. cities in the nineteenth century as the side effects of these societies' bold commitments to industrialization, rewarded eventually by the successful development of large-scale sewer and water treatment technologies. In a similar vein, one could explain a host of hazards facing late-twentieth-century societies as the necessary risks of success. Medical wastes washing onto U.S. beaches could actually be understood as testimony to prosperity. What other society can afford to carelessly discard syringes and test tubes, items so precious in other parts of the world? The cancer clusters around many industrial sites certainly represent serious risks to workers and communities. On the other hand, these factories produce vital goods that lower risks to others (e.g., highly sanitary

Styrofoam packaging for cheeseburgers), and may contribute to unimaginable technological breakthroughs (it is important that they cannot be imagined right now). The ozone holes produced by the use of American-manufactured chlorofluorocarbons threaten all life, but eliminating air-conditioning hardly seems progressive. As the Dupont Company has reminded us for decades, there is better living through better chemistry.

The rational response to the present risk is to find a (profitable) chemical substitute. The several thousand deaths from the release of another chemical in Bhopal should not cause us to ignore the considerable benefits to community development that derive from the location of American plants abroad. While it is regrettable that so many infants in the Third World have died from the mixing of infant formula with unsterilized water, the introduction of this American good nevertheless expanded consumer sovereignty and will contribute to the liberation of women there, as it did here. Technology trial-and-error advances the cause of worldwide prosperity and peace. The escaping radioactive water, gases and debris from Department of Energy nuclear bomb-making plants are a small price to pay for the 40-year absence of world war enjoyed as the result of unforeseen achievements in atomic physics.

The Capitalist Myth

Capitalist myth overlooks a few things in explanations. First, capitalism was not and is not a social construction of inventors and entrepreneurs. The East India Company and Union Carbide are hardly comparable to Adam Smith's pin factory, and efforts to explain early or recent industrialization by appeal to entrepreneurialism can only mask our understanding of the social relations underlying capitalist development. Moreover, the myth neglects to men-

tion the prominent role of the military in Western technological development. From interchangeable parts and machine tools to nuclear power and computers, Western technology has been substantially the product of a military-industrial partnership in which the size, scale, and power of the partners have dwarfed almost everything else in society.

The poor are not poor, black, brown, yellow and female by accident

Second, capitalists do not operate in a world of exogenous risks or acts of God. As a rule, they do not bear risks, but produce and distribute them. Exxon extracts and moves oil within a highly organized world economic and technological system. In that system, certain segments of society and the natural environment are the risk-bearers. When the energy crises of the 1970s dramatically increased world oil prices, U.S. oil majors found the value of their domestic reserves increased by \$1.8 trillion. In the same period, the poorest fifth of the U.S. population saw their energy bills climb more than 200 percent (faster by a factor of 1.4 than any other group in society), as they helped to finance the transition of the Seven Sisters to a supposed "post-petroleum future." When world oil prices later fell, Nigeria, Mexico and wildcatters in Texas and Oklahoma were thrown into bankruptcy, while Exxon and its sisters prospered in the top echelon of multinational wealth.

The recent disaster in Prince William Sound surely was preceded by a weighing of alternative risks. But just as surely the choice was not between progress and safety. The real risks weighed by Exxon were specific and concrete: corporate wealth versus corporate wealth. The choice was not made in a context of uncertainty. While the courts consider whether the specific circumstances which led to the sliming of the Sound could have been forecasted, such a disaster was expected. The oil did not just spill out of the boat and it was not preventable only by a deity; it was a normal accident anticipated by industry and the state. They did not figure on the magnitude of the offense to the environment because they did not have to. The profit equation did not include respect for the environment. Neither the energy crises of the 1970s nor the catastrophe in Prince William Sound were about trial-and-error. These events are part of the domain

of political and economic power and the precise skew of their distribution in U.S. society.

In an earlier paper, Wildavsky warned of the tendency of social scientists to operate under the presumption that the current distribution of income is valid. It is not only the distribution of income which is at issue, but its production. The "advanced" societies of Europe and the U.S. produce income unequally among their citizens and between themselves and the rest of the world. The most privileged in these societies enjoy the safety of their position through the maintenance of inequality. African-Americans, women, and Hispanics did not elect to be disproportionately in the lower income deciles, and did not wind up there because of a mistaken idea of risk or a fetish for safety. Quite the opposite is true. These communities have borne the burdens of U.S. capitalism – from higher infant mortality rates to having hazardous-waste sites as their next-door neighbors. The distinct racial, ethnic, and gender attributes of the European and U.S. underclasses are not merely happenstances of technological and economic progress, and they are hardly evidence of the superior ability of white males to judge and respond to risks. The poor are not poor, black, brown, yellow and female by accident: it is a prerequisite of contemporary European and U.S. civilization that economic and political power is unequally produced and shared. It is also a prerequisite that social risks are unequal in their impact.

Patterns of Inequality

In their relations to the world political economy, wealthy societies reproduce the same pattern of inequality. Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans suffer, starve, and die in their youth in the name of capitalist development. It is they who risk and, all too often, lose everything. When Wildavsky admonishes that "becoming poorer to stay safer makes as much sense as bleeding people to improve their circulation," he is absolutely right, with one difference. In reality, it is usually the rich who, seeking safety, indulge in such mindless acts. There is certainly no safety in the poverty of underdevelopment. Take, for example, the bleeding of the South that the banks of the wealthy West administered during the 1970s. Foreign accumulation, not domestic circulation, was served by the Southern debt crisis as Africa and Latin America now routinely send more in loan repayments to the West than they receive in "aid."

If social science is to avoid being not merely dismal but ghastly, the dismantling of capitalist

myths about progress must command high priority. Early capitalism was not built on heroic commitments to trial-and-error, and dwelling on this non-existent past can only reinforce human callousness. As Lewis Mumford pointed out (in *City in History*) about nineteenth-century Western industrialization, callousness was endemic:

Misery at the bottom was the foundation for the luxury at the top. As much as a quarter of the urban population in the bigger cities consisted of casuals and beggars: it was this surplus that made for what was considered, by classic capitalism, to be a healthy labor market... When Herman Melville visited the prosperous city of Liverpool in the 1830s, he found, as he describes in *Redburn*, a woman with two babes at her breast, dying in a cellar opening under a sidewalk. Despite his efforts to obtain aid, no one would succor these creatures. They were removed only when their dead bodies stank.

Contemporary capitalism has not found a cure for the indigenous disease of inhumanity and is not likely to do so. Meanwhile, its present technological course threatens an even worse result. At risk is not progress versus safety, but progress versus human survival. Our time is the most dangerous ever, thanks to a technological knowledge of energy that can destroy the world. The words of Nakajima Hiroshi, a Hiroshima survivor, offer vivid testimony to the fact that the terrible consequence of this originally Western achievement must not be forgotten or obscured by confused talk about risk-taking:

No one wept
no one screamed in pain
none of the dying
died noisily
not even the children
cried
no one spoke

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