

History 455-641

History of Risk and Its Management

Course Information:

Spring 2014
Course Number HIST 455-641
Tuesdays 6:00 – 9:00 in Williams 307
upenn.instructure.com/courses/1204394

Instructor Information:

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Office Hours: T 4:00-5:30

Course Introduction

Since at least Herodotus, historians have been writing about humanity's attempts to predict dangers and control futures. But while a concern for the future and strategies to mitigate accidents have existed for much of recorded time, the concept of risk is a relatively young construction, emerging only in early modernity.

In this course, we historicize the concept of the risk in order to understand how it became a central organizing force in the modern period—perhaps even *the* defining characteristic of modernity—and how it came to be seen as manageable. As we pull the contours of the society's relationship to risk into focus, we will see a history of knowledge that intertwines religion, the future, the past, accounting, mathematics, biology, trade, business, gambling, and even life itself.

In the course's first unit, we read the foundational materials of the theory of the “risk society”—Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens' early work. Then, in unit 2, move to selections from historians of knowledge who trace the epistemic shifts that developed modern concepts of risk and eventually opened the possibility for its management through the use of statistical probabilities. While the most critical developments in the conception of risk took place in Europe across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, unit 3 moves across the Atlantic to investigate the ways in which risk and, especially the desire to mitigate it, shaped the United States. In this unit (our largest of the course), we will see how risk assessment and management grew into the largest business in the world. Here, we will look at statistics, actuarial science, insurance, speculation, and financial capital. Along the way, we will see many instances in which categories of identity—race, class, gender, sexuality, ability—are tied deeply into the business of discriminating risk. Finally, the concluding unit reassesses the concept of the risk society through the recent past and possible futures as it considers catastrophic threats that remain pressing—nuclear war, chemical waste, genetic engineering, global climate change, and systemic financial collapse.

Course Materials

You must purchase all books listed in the syllabus. Additionally, links to optional scholarly, popular, and primary texts are accessible on our Canvas site in the “modules” section.

Assignments

Research Essay: This assignment is relatively simple. You are to write a research essay on how risk has shaped some aspect of social life since 1660. This assignment offers you a great deal of freedom in the choice of a topic. The main restriction on topic selection is scope. Please do not choose too broad a topic. This research assignment includes eight steps, each of which is geared toward refining your research. You must be able to make your argument in twelve to fifteen pages (twenty to twenty-five for Ph.D. students) and, if the range of your topic is too wide, your argument will weaken and the structure of your essay may crumble.

After I have approved your topic and research question (steps 1 and 2), you need to choose a methodology appropriate for your argument (step 3). Next, you will identify secondary scholarship well suited to construct your historiography and develop your argument (step 4)—an in-class library tutorial will guide you through the best ways to find the best sources. The remaining steps (5 to 8) will see you write and revise your essay.

Each step must be submitted as a Word document (i.e., .doc or .docx extension) through the assignments tool in our Canvas site. A more detailed prompt will be distributed in week 3. Below is a preview of the eight steps.

- **Step 1:** Choose a topic and construct a research question. Submit for approval.
- **Step 2:** After I approve your topic choice, convert your research question into a thesis statement. Include one primary source and one secondary source with this step. Cite these sources in the bibliographic format of Chicago Style.
- **Step 3:** Choose a research methodology to support your thesis and submit a brief (i.e., no more than one paragraph) explanation of why your methodology is appropriate for your topic.
- **Step 4:** Construct an annotated bibliography with at least one “primary” sources and ten “secondary” sources.
- **Step 5:** Revise your thesis and write a one-page draft of your essay’s introduction.
- **Step 6:** Schedule an appointment to meet with your instructor in person or via Google Video Chat to receive face-to-face feedback on the progress of the paper.
- **Step 7:** Write a ten-page polished draft of your essay.
- **Step 8:** Turn in your revised, twelve-to-fifteen-page final paper.

Class Facilitations: This class has the privilege of being quite small, so much of our work with the reading material can be discussion based. To this end, you will not only participate in discussion, you will also, on occasion, lead it. While much of how you shape the discussion is your choice, please, at minimum, present your peers and me with:

- an outline of the author or authors’ arguments
- an analysis of the author or authors’ methodology or methodologies
- an assessment of how the text relates to others we have read
- six to eight questions for further discussion

Following the first class meeting, go to this Canvas discussion thread and please sign up for two dates on which you would like to lead class discussion. When signing up, please consider not only which class dates work well for your schedule, but also (and more importantly) which reading selections are most relevant to your larger work and interests.

Collective Timeline: This course is a historical investigation of the degree to which risk has shaped the social, political, and economic shaping structures of modernity. This investigation, however, need not be performed individually in solitude. Instead, we shall test the strength of social theorists’ “risk society” thesis through a collaborative exploration of risk’s shaping role over the last roughly 400 years. Using Northwestern University Knight Lab’s [Timeline JS](#) we will log the progression and proliferation of the concept of risk in thought (e.g., Pascal and Fermat’s work on the Problem of Points), things (e.g., bills of mortality from plague years), and everyday life (e.g., decision making practices). Intellectuals and events to include, objects and artifacts to foreground, practices to highlight—well, those decisions are up to you. It is my hope that this digital document displays as many contradictions as continuities; that it shows, in short, the many permeations and permutations of risk since it emerged as an organizing force in society in the early modern period. At minimum, you will need to make at least ten contributions to our collective timeline.

Once the collaboration is complete in the semester's penultimate week, you will be required to write a short reflection on your contributions and the collective results.

Grading

Assignments	Submission method	% of Grade
Steps 1-6 of Research Essay (5 percent of grade, each)	Step 1: Submit a topic to your instructor for approval via the assignments tool Step 2: Convert your research question to a thesis. Submit via the assignments tool. Step 3: Submit a paragraph on the appropriateness of your chosen research methodology via the assignments tool. Step 4: Submit your annotated bibliography via the assignments tool. Step 5: Submit one page draft of your introduction via the assignments tool. Step 6: Meet with your instructor and complete in person by appointment.	30
Step 7 of Research Essay	Submit via the assignments tool.	10
Step 8 of Research Essay	Submit via the assignments tool.	20
Class Discussion Facilitation 1 & 2 (10 percent each)	Complete in class .	20
Collective Timeline Contribution	Submit via Timeline JS Google Doc .	10
Collective Timeline Reflection	Submit via assignments tool.	10
Total		100 %

The grading policy in this course conforms to Penn Arts & Sciences guidelines.

A grade of incomplete ("I") is given only in a genuine emergency, and for no more than the work due during the last two weeks of the course. You must make arrangements with me before the last day of class in order to receive an incomplete.

All grades and feedback will be distributed through Canvas. You will receive an email when new feedback is available.

A note on participation: You are expected to attend every class and complete each reading and viewing. If you miss more than one class or consistently demonstrate a lack of engagement with the required texts during our seminar discussions, I reserve the right to penalize your grade.

Course Policies

Late assignments: Not accepted

Extra credit: None

Students with disabilities: The University of Pennsylvania, provides reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities who have self-identified and been approved by the office of [Student Disabilities Services](#) (SDS). Please make an appointment to meet with me as soon as possible in order to discuss your accommodations and your needs. If you have not yet contacted SDS, and would like to request accommodations or have questions, you can make an appointment by calling SDS 215.573.9235. The office is located in the [Weingarten Learning Resources Center](#) at Stouffer Commons 3702 Spruce Street, Suite 300. All services are confidential.

Student Conduct: The University of Pennsylvania's [Code of Student Conduct](#) governs all activities in the University, including this course. Students who engage in behavior that disrupts the learning environment for others may be subject to disciplinary action under the Code. This includes any behavior that substantially or repeatedly interrupts either the instructor's ability to teach or student learning. The classroom extends to any setting where a student is engaged in work toward academic credit or satisfaction of program-based requirements or related activities. Students responsible for such behavior may have their registration cancelled.

Scholastic Dishonesty: Cheating is unacceptable. You know this. But just so you are clear about what exactly constitutes cheating, please read and abide by the University of Pennsylvania's [Code of Academic Integrity](#).

Course Schedule

Unit 1: The Risk Society

Jan. 21st: Introductions

Jan. 28th: The Theory of the Risk Society I

- Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1986).

Feb 4th: The Theory of the Risk Society II

- Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990).
- **Due:** Research Essay Step 1

Unit 2: The Emergence of Risk, the Emergence of Risk Management

Feb. 11th: The Origins of the Risk Society

- Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (1984).
- **Due:** Research Essay Step 2

Feb. 18th: Regulating Regularities

- Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (1990).
- **Due:** Research Essay Step 3

Feb. 25th: Toward the Biopolitics of Population

- Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976* (2003).
- **Due:** Research Essay Step 4

Unit 3: Risky Business – The Rise of the Risk Economies in the United States

Mar. 4th: Personal Property

- Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (2012).
- **Due:** Research Essay Step 5

Mar. 11th: Spring Break

Mar. 18th: Flowing from Faith to Trust

- Herman Melville, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (1857).
- **Due:** Research Essay Step 6

Mar. 25th: Insurance and the Commodification of Risk

- John Murray, *Origins of American Health Insurance: A History of Industrial Sickness Funds* (2007).
- **Due:** Research Essay Step 7

Apr. 1st: Socializing Risk

- Beatrix Hoffman, *Health Care for Some: Rights and Rationing in the United States Since 1930* (2012).

Apr. 8th: Risk without End – Risk Management in the Cold War

- Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture* (1995)
- **Due:** Research Essay Step 8

Unit 4: America in the Global Risk Society

Apr. 15th: The Bayesian Revolution

- Sharon Bertsch McGrayne, *The Theory that Would Not Die* (2011).

Apr. 22nd: The Discrimination of Risk

- Bernard Harcourt, *Against Prediction: Profiling, Policing, and Punishment in An Actuarial Age* (2006).
- **Due:** Collective Timeline Contribution

Apr. 29th: Systemic Risk

- Anthony Giddens, *The Politics of Climate Change* (2011).
- Martin Smith and Marcela Gaviria, *Money, Power, Wall Street* (2012).
- **Due:** Collective Timeline Reflection