

David Niget and Martin Petitclerc (eds.). *Pour une histoire du risque: Québec, France, Belgique*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université du Québec. 2012. 366 pages. 35.00 \$. ISBN 978-2-7605-3359-2

Elsbeth Heaman

Volume 41, numéro 1, 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065966ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065966ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

1918-7750 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Heaman, E. (2019). Compte rendu de [David Niget and Martin Petitclerc (eds.). *Pour une histoire du risque: Québec, France, Belgique*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université du Québec. 2012. 366 pages. 35.00 \$. ISBN 978-2-7605-3359-2]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 41(1), 86–88. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065966ar>

David Niget and Martin Petitclerc (eds.). *Pour une histoire du risque: Québec, France, Belgique*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université du Québec. 2012. 366 pages. 35.00 \$. ISBN 978-2-7605-3359-2.

What do floods, murders, and cough syrups have in common? In this collection of essays on risk, all three show the emergence of new ways of calculating danger. They show us how modern notions, languages, and technologies of risk were formulated under a wide variety of circumstances and in dialogue with older languages of morality, political calculation, and knowledge claims. They write risk and prevention into modern commerce, professionalization, and state-formation. Whatever risk is, we are told, it is conspicuously modern, and at once influential and understudied. This collection brings together an impressive collection of historians, European and Canadian, Anglophone and Francophone, all writing case studies in the history of risk in Quebec, France, and Belgium. It offers a terrific vista for reflecting on similarities and differences between these places. Quebec is often described as having embraced modernity later than Europe, especially France. So how well does risk work as a mechanism for telling us about when, where, and how Quebec modernized?

Risk, as the editors note, is much studied by social scientists but comparatively neglected by historians. There's been new work in the field since this book first appeared, in 2012, but the book very ably holds its own in the conversation. The history of risk merits particular attention because

both history and risk are analyses of causal relations, albeit constructed very differently. History always looks backwards, with hindsight; risk always looks forwards, predictively. But ultimately both history and risk are debates about causes. We might describe risk as rational calculation around predictive factors.

But determining why some factors become predictive and some become invisible requires contextual, historical analysis of the sort done here. Various papers identify the way risk lends itself to particular styles of reasoning, with a particular bias for liberal economics and technological solutions. As Stéphane Castonguay remarks in his analysis of flood management in early twentieth-century Quebec, natural and social factors continually intermingled in calculations of risk. Water engineering were an important foundation for modern risk, and Castonguay's is one of two papers on floods, the other—by Damien Bouchée and Grégory Quenet—on the Seine in 1740s Paris. If science and engineering can do new things—i.e. with water—then the study of risk shows us how engineers, state officials, and corporations integrated those new possibilities into changing expectations upon the state. Hence the relevance of this book for readers of *Scientia Canadensis*.

Several papers survey the changing understandings of police and prophylaxis that emerged in the early modern period. New urban agglomerations created new hazards to life, health, and property. To some degree, Xavier Rousseaux suggests, risk was an urban logic, reflecting new

calculations about how to govern the city, according to quasi-commercial, quasi-political considerations that could be generalized to other constituencies. In an incisive conclusion, Mariana Valverde, remarks that the history of risk is, amongst other things, a history of the “naturalization of certain levels of governance” (346) and she instances the way that immigration became a national-security question.

The most interesting analyses show state and personal rationalities colliding. Anywhere that someone had to do serious rational calculation about how best to use technologies, especially new technologies, with potentially lethal consequences in the event of misjudgment, you were sure to get new debates about risk. Terrific examples here include Magda Farhni on the dangers that cars posed to pedestrians and Marie-Aimée Cliche on the dangers of overdosing infants with opiates (amidst new pressures to keep babies quiet in densely populated slums). Were individuals to blame or were cars and opiates just too dangerous for ordinary folk? Corporate lawyers and public moralists did battle in newspapers and courts on such questions. Doctors had their opinions about risk, of course, and they exercised particular influence in the emergence of the public health movement that ranked alongside water management as a core constituent of modern risk. Prophylaxis was supposed to prevent the catastrophic threat that epidemics posed to public welfare and stable political order. Thus, for example, we get Yannick Marec on hygiene in Rouen and Janice Harvey on its relative lack of influence in Montreal, where bourgeois

reformers worried about children at risk (“in danger”) feared the moral hazards from poor relief more than the physical hazards of insalubrity. David Niget also writes about at-risk children with a history of incorrigibility in Belgium.

Some papers yield fascinating results when they compare “traditional” and more modern and risk-infused discourses. Jean-Philippe Warren shows that colonial Quebec had its own mechanisms for dealing with the calamities consequent on an unexpected death. Its experts were lawyers and notaries, and its technologies were law and the family. Martin Petitclerc shows that, whereas theorists believe that risk edged out religion as a response to such catastrophes, the Montpetit commission had no difficulty in fusing them in a conservative model of social-welfare organization. Donald Fyson sheds further light on both the question of comparison and the bias of risk itself when he compares Montreal and Quebec. The former was construed as a modern city with such attendant modern dangers as high crime rates; the latter as a bastion of antimodernity. Because Quebec was less invested in modernity, it didn’t report crime statistics as Montreal did. Greater concerns about crime in Montreal created a market for burglary insurance. Because you couldn’t make a claim without reporting a burglary, claims were probably disproportionately reported in Montreal compared to Quebec.

Risk, in other words, tended to generate its own evidence and its own biases in the process. His and other papers show that crime continually

produced calculations of danger, ranging from early modern reflections on murder, recidivism, and pardon analysed by Bernard Dauven, to Xavier Rousseaux on crime and police, to criminal-peril in the Third Republic, analyzed by Frédéric Chauvaud. There's

no single answer to the “is Quebec typical?” question but the collection is a must-have for anyone interested in the history of governmentality in Canada.

Elsbeth Heaman
McGill University