

Seeking Safety in Words – (Eco)Social Security in the World Risk Society

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The Vocabulary That Makes Us Feel Safe

The famous Finnish social politician Pekka Kuusi, whose main influence was during the 1960s, once stated that the pursuit of security had in his lifetime become the central goal of mankind. Echoing the earlier remarks of T. H. Marshall he wrote that the era that followed the French revolution, during which freedom was the utmost goal, had changed into an era characterised by the search for collective security (Kuusi 1956, 1). This goal was crystallised in social policy, whose big idea and ideal has been to enhance life's predictability and security. Not so long ago, achieving this goal still seemed possible, effective means for doing so having been found in the building of the welfare state – "one of the greatest inventions of mankind", as Asbjørn Wahl, the co-ordinator of the Norwegian movement For Velferdsstaten (For the Welfare State), put it. With the institution of the welfare state, man would be liberated from fear; with it the insecurity inherent in modernisation would find its solution. The risk technology of social insurance would also permit the disciplining of the future. (Cf. Ewald 1986, 1991). Today, we are less confident. Yet the question of security haunts us more than ever. In the 1960s Kuusi (1961, 78) wrote that our society is based on the fact that innumerable things happen in the future as we expect them to happen. Today we have become increasingly conscious of the fact that they don't. We now face new global and ecological risks that challenge our earlier optimism.

Ulrich Beck (1995, 67) has coined the term risk society "for those societies that are confronted by the challenges of the self-created possibility, hidden at first, (...), of the self-destruction of all life on earth". There are three things that separate large-scale ecological, nuclear, chemical and genetic hazards from the (still enduring) risks of primary industrialisation. First, the former risks cannot be delimited, whether spatially, temporally or socially. Second, they are no longer "acts of God" such as natural catastrophes, but consequences of human action. However, it is not easy to show who bears responsibility for them: blame cannot be assigned according to the rules of causality, guilt or liability. Third, they cannot be compensated: they are global and irreversible. The probability of these risks may be marginally small, but their consequences are disastrous. Risk society has, then, arrived at a stage where social, political, economic and individual risks increasingly elude the grip of its security institutions. This is why these risks make questionable the promise of security and the ideas of insurance and progress upon which modern society was founded. (Beck 1992a; 1992b, 1994, 1995, 76–77; 2002). This phenomenon holds true globally, which means that we live in a world risk society (Beck 1999).

These risks also set the framework conditions for social policy. Also, as far as social security is concerned, globalisation means – at least according to one view – that it becomes exceedingly difficult for governments to provide it. The paradox is that while globalisation results in increased demands on the state to provide social security, it reduces the ability of the state to perform that role effectively (cf. Verstraeten 2000, 31).

Risks have, then, globalised and become intertwined. Also the awareness of risks has grown and intensified. However, this concern is not always expressed explicitly, at least not by everybody. The Finnish philosopher G.H. von Wright (1987) has used the concept technosystem to refer to the totality formed by economy, science and technology. According to him this system does not seem to acknowledge the growing uncertainty. This, I think, applies especially to man-made risks, i.e. the risks that the system itself produces. Thus the technosystem often takes recourse in language that represents many issues as surprisingly uncontroversial. For example the risks of nuclear power can be described as controllable. This kind of language is catching. Whatever the political party, the most common election slogan seems to be: we will make your country safe.

This kind of argumentation and these kinds of promises seem rather detached or abstracted from reality. Ulrich Beck has named this phenomenon paradigm error. By this he means the bewitchment of reason caused by the false belief that the 20th century was a continuation of the 19th. In our bewitchment, we discuss the challenges and dangers of the atomic and genetic age in conceptual and prescriptive terms that derive from early industrial society – or from the heyday of the welfare state, I should rather say (Beck 1995, 1).

The effort of trying to create a feeling of security with words is not always easily detectable. Doug Porter and David Craig (2004) from New Zealand have written an article about the rise of 'inclusive liberalism' that I think illustrates this. I read this article as the story of a cluster of words that are the necessary apparatus of the current neoliberal strategy of government (understood in the sense given by Michel Foucault).

The vocabulary of 'inclusive liberalism' contains for example the following keywords: inclusion, opportunity, security, empowerment, individual capital, social capital, social investment and participation. It also includes 'fast growth', which, although the authors do not say so, might be the reason why all these other expressions are needed.

These keywords are part of the Third Way Social Inclusion policy, but they can be found everywhere. Variations on this word cluster keep bursting out "all over the place", as the authors write, from the headlines of the World Bank's World Development Report to George Bush's speeches. These expressions have begun to dominate also the everyday political and media discussion, and even our everyday understanding. Maybe they have, then, become part of what could be called 'common sense', which has been defined by Antonio Gramsci (1980, 322, 333) as "the ambiguous, incoherent and sometimes contradictory assumptions, attitudes and beliefs that are part of our worldview". It is bad enough that this may be the way people mostly think, but it is even worse when common sense (understood this way) starts to dominate politics and world politics as well. Because we are dealing with words that can "mean all things to all people", these words come to mean nothing at all. This kind of universalising is usually a hallmark of ideological deceit (Porter & Craig 2004, 2).

Doug Porter and David Craig also suggest that the ubiquity of these keywords may simply be an indication of 'lazy' globalisation. This expression brings to mind the expression 'hasty sociology' used by the French sociologist Robert Castel (1995, 427–428). By this he refers to the fact that sociologists crystallise as 'exclusion' or 'the excluded' a questioning that in reality touches on society as a whole. This brings us to the second part:

Fuzzy Concepts

So, bearing in mind that we live in a world risk society, I have some reservations or questions concerning many of the expressions we keep hearing. Oftentimes they are used ritualistically. This being the case, they are more likely to prevent us from tackling urgent problems than help us solve them.

I shall next briefly criticise four concepts: the conceptual pair inclusion/exclusion, social capital, welfare society and sustainable development. I'm afraid that despite the good intentions behind the introduction of these expressions and the merits they undoubtedly have, they can be counted among the hazy and lazy concepts that are euphemistic in the state of affairs our world finds itself in. Words are often a consolation. At least they can make things sound better than they actually are. And they can also hide how very much afraid we actually are.

Firstly, inclusion. My question is whether we should talk about including people in society or rather ask what is the society like of whose bliss the so-called excluded are deprived? What are its values and goals? Are the so-called included happy? If so, why do so many studies speak of depression, stress and work-related illnesses? What I'd like to underline is that when one utters the word 'exclusion', one should always add the question "exclusion from what?" or "inclusion into what?". Incidentally, the Latin verb *includo* refers not only to 'inclusion' but also to 'enclosure' or 'confinement', which brings to mind the famous iron cage of capitalism that the sociologist Max Weber wrote about already a hundred years ago.

In my opinion, this general sense of ill-being among people is caused by our societies' drive towards economic growth and higher productivity, which happens to be the goal of the European Union as well. According to the Lisbon strategy, the European Union is "to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion." Globally, however, this competition widens the gulf between rich and poor nations. The ecological consequences of this drive can be disastrous as well. It has been said that the two main problems of our time are exclusion and ecological problems. I am beginning to be convinced that the two phenomena are related. Or, to put it in the words found on the website for this symposium, the loss of 'social capital' and the loss of natural capital are related. Although in principle I agree with this, I'll have to present my second critique here. I see the concept of 'social capital' as an unwelcome extension of economic thinking into the social sphere, i.e. a form of economic colonisation. So, I very much agree with the question "It may be social, but why is it capital?" asked by Stephen Smith and Jessica Kulynych (2002) in their excellent article. For my part, I would also like to ask: "It may be capital, but why is it social?" So, my fear is that this concept smuggles back in the economic logic it is trying to oppose.

Thirdly, I shall turn to the expression 'welfare society'. Nowadays criticism of the functioning of the welfare state far outweighs pride in its accomplishments. The search is on for a new ethos. Perhaps it has already been found? The solution to perceived problems is hoped to be found in a transition to a welfare society, a concept that at least in Finland has become extremely popular starting in the 1990s. The welfare society is an expression that many people find appealing, not to say cosy. However, we may well ask who, in the welfare society, make up the society which is expected to assume responsibility for welfare. In the welfare society, principal

social responsibility, it is hoped, will increasingly be transferred to the markets, to private or voluntary organisations, to families, and to individuals themselves. How do we define the responsibilities of each of these actors? How do we ensure that everyone is treated equally? Maybe we don't: equality is an argument that is being used less and less. Paradoxically, the more we speak about welfare society, the less we seem to talk about social security. According to Robert Goodin (2001), the phrase social security has all but disappeared from political discourse. In many countries the phrase has also disappeared from the letterheads of government departments. The same goes for 'welfare state'. For example in the programme of the current Finnish centre-left government the expressions 'competiveness' and 'growth' are both employed about thirty times, whereas the word 'welfare state' appears only once. Further, in the language of the European Union, the concept of 'social dimension' has increasingly been replaced by the expression 'the social dimension of economic growth'. The change is not only semantic: Goodin (2001, 3, 7–8) claims that contemporary welfare reform has made provision for coping with life's uncertainties both less social and less secure. Also Pierre Bourdieu et al. (1998) have claimed that ours is the age of 'social insecurity'. Are we, in fact, trying to cover this up by seeking refuge in the soothing expression 'welfare society'? What is also problematic is that the discussion about welfare society is not usually linked to the question of sustainable development. We talk about enhancing our welfare – i.e. the welfare of the citizens of our country or at most the citizens of the European Union – without stopping to ask what the global price of this welfare might be.

While I see this as a problem, I am not comfortable with the concept of sustainable development, either. And here I arrive at my fourth critique. I'll start with an example. In Finland's national policy for sustainable development, the Government approved in 1998 an overall programme for promoting ecological sustainability and for creating the necessary economic, social and cultural prerequisites. To quote the programme: "With regard to ecological sustainability, the programme primarily aims at minimising the use of natural resources, preserving natural productivity and other natural values, and improving the state of the environment. Again, for social and cultural sustainability, the programme aims at a society capable of facing the challenges of sustainable development by improved knowledge and skills, thus safeguarding the welfare of all citizens. Economic sustainability is to be achieved by means of improved international competitiveness and high employment, while production and consumption should cause less environmental load." Drafting these kinds of programmes is highly recommendable, at least if they act as the starting point of a reform process and not its culmination. The basic idea of sustainable development is sound. It has been crystallised into the question: do we leave behind us a world where the future generations can live a good life – a life in security? However, the last sentence about economic sustainability and competitiveness in the government's programme leaves me in doubt. The underlying assumption seems to be that we can have our cake and eat it, too: have both sustainable development and economic growth. This could be called fuzzy logic, because we neglect the fact that economic growth itself can be a factor causing unsustainable development. So we find here the same kind of logic we found when speaking about exclusion: we wish to integrate or include the so-called excluded into the very society causing exclusion. In doing so, we forget the famous line from Shakespeare's Hamlet: "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" – well, not poor Denmark alone, but global capitalism in general. To return to the concept of sustainable development, the problem is that regardless of the fact that we do speak about its ecological, cultural and social dimensions, economic arguments always seem to outweigh other arguments. The "success" of

society and its members is measured by economic metrics and criteria only. One could say then, that reality has been economised (Kantola 2002, 34, 295). This, as I pointed out, can be seen in the concept of social capital, as well. The concept of sustainable development is a compromise* that leaves the present power structure untouched. It also leaves us feeling happy, convinced that we can get more and more – and safely to boot. What I am asking, then, is this: Is it enough to develop things (as they are) or should we rather aim at changing them?

**Some critics see the widespread adoption of the thematics of sustainable development as having had a stultifying effect on the public debate over environmental policy. This is because those who believe in the blessings of continuous economic growth and those who have adopted a contrary worldview both profess to be committed proponents of sustainable development, even if their ideological underpinnings and specific concerns are quite different. (E.g. Flanders 1999). Here it is appropriate to recall that "nature does not conduct consensus talks" (Schauer 2003, 5)*

Ecosocial Security?

Lastly, I'll turn to the question of social policy, i.e. the possibility of ecosocial policy. If we are to take seriously the three dimensions of sustainable development – i.e. the economic, the social and the environmental dimension – I think we would be much better off, much safer, if instead of the expression "social security" (which seems to be unfashionable anyway) we would use the expression "ecosocial security".

It may be that the aim of social security – necessary as it is – contains some risks. According to Johan Verstraeten, the former president of the International Social Security Association, more than half of the world's population is excluded from any type of organised social protection. It would seem to be our duty to change this situation. As Verstraeten adds, in the globalised economy it is curious and unacceptable that social security has not yet been sufficiently globalised. (Verstraeten 2000, 25, 32.) Long before him Gunnar Myrdal (1960, 129–130) expressed the need that once the western welfare states have built their moorings, the building of the welfare world should begin.

Yet – leaving aside the fact that the moorings of the welfare state are today far from firm – were this to happen, what would happen in ecological terms? What is the level of social security and the standard of living that our planet can bear? I am not talking about the eradication of absolute poverty here (While raising the standard of living in the poorest countries to first-world levels would lead to an ecological crisis, eradicating absolute poverty would not. Furthermore, according to UN calculations, the world could well afford it. Based on estimates made in 1994, providing all human beings with access to such essentials as basic education, health care, food, drinking water, sanitation, and family planning and child welfare services, would cost approximately \$80 billion. This is less than half a percent of global income. (UNDP 1997, 112)). And what have been the effects and costs of western "welfare" so far?

We should also reassess another assumption, namely the belief that welfare and social security will follow directly from economic growth. The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1990, 112) has written that we tend to identify gross national product with gross national happiness. This may not be justified. The connection between economic growth and welfare is not as unproblematic as it is often seen to be. Many studies have shown that the idea that economic growth alleviates social problems is a myth (Heikkilä 1995, 3). As far as psychosocial problems

are concerned, some earlier as well as some more recent studies have shown that they become more prevalent as the economy grows. It is also interesting that in Finland the discussion about exclusion began in the 1980s despite steady GNP growth throughout that decade.

The growth of GNP naturally has positive effects for the standard of living. However, if we think of the consequences of material growth from an ecological standpoint, the picture becomes quite different. The greenhouse effect, ozone depletion, acid rain, deforestation, the pollution of air and water, erosion, dumping of toxic waste, loss of biodiversity and regional environmental catastrophes of various magnitudes are all part of this other picture. Looking at this list, one cannot help thinking that we are overambitious if not downright megalomaniacal when speaking of security in any sense. Should we maybe content ourselves with asking "how unsafe is safe enough" (cf. Eräsaari 2002)? Be it as it may, it becomes evident that we cannot hope to achieve social security without linking this effort to the question of ecological security, and do so on a global level. The big question is whether this is possible, i.e. whether the "social", the "ecological" and the "economic" can be made compatible rather than competitive, as has been the case so far? The citizens of European countries seem to think that such an effort is well worth a try. In a Eurobarometer Survey (Europa 2002), 86% of Europeans surveyed stated that public policy-makers should consider environmental policy as important as economic and social policy.

Gunnar Myrdal's ultimate goal was a welfare world. I would rather aim at a sustainable welfare world, where our security – relative as it may be – rests on an ecologically sound basis. But of course, this if anything is utopia, for the most certain thing in life in the world risk society is its uncertainty, its most permanent aspect its impermanence and the least risky approach the expectation of future risks.

To conclude, I turn back to words. The word 'mantra' means "that which protects the mind". I am afraid that this is exactly what some of the current mantras do. What we need in their stead is a profound discussion about the goals and values of our societies. And when I say 'profound', I mean it, and mean something along the lines of "deep ecology" and "ecosophy" (*These philosophies have a predominantly ecocentric or biocentric perspective*) ideas developed by Arne Naess. We can again detect the same logic as with exclusion here: the problems we face are an indication of a profound need for change in the underlying structures of our culture; superficial improvements will not suffice. In the final analysis, what is needed is a new conception of solidarity and a new ontology where humankind is seen as an integral part of the surrounding ecosystem; a relational philosophy where everything connects to everything and where Earth comes first. Finally, in order to say something positive about the concepts we use or we could use, in this context I find the concept 'world problematique' coined by the Club of Rome promising. We need to change the world, and we need the right words to do it.

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