

Self-help reading: A social ritual of coping with risk in everyday life

Marquis Nicolas (CES-FUSL)

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Introduction : confidence, trust and breach in everyday life

In sociology, the issue of risk is often dealt with at a « macro » level as if it were a total and encompassing phenomenon.

Some authors such as Ulrich Beck (1986) and Anthony Giddens (2000) say that we have now entered a “society of risk (Risikogesellschaft)” with no possible way back. Post-modern age is the era of global, irreversible risks that have unlimited impacts.

Yet, when using the vocabulary of “mutation”, this relevant reflection may overshadow two important points. First, the fact that all human societies have had to face the issue of risk (even if its nature changes with social organization and technological means) and have developed cultural ways to deal with it. Second, the fact that risk-managing is part of human life, part of our everyday thinking and acting. Risk-managing has an anthropological dimension. Indeed, we spend most of our time minimizing the risks we are running when engaging into the world. This attitude is neither a rational action nor a conscious one. The truth is that most of the time we have no information that could enable us to weigh up risk.¹ Contrary to what the economists’ theories suggest, we spend most of our life not working things out. Quite the reverse in fact: in the everyday life, we trust the world. This process is what Giddens (1987) calls “ontological security” in ‘reference to Erik Erikson (1963). As Luhmann says, confidence is a *sine qua non* condition to our existence:

“Confidence, in the broadest sense of the word, i.e. the fact of trusting one’s own expectations, is a fundamental element of social life. Of course, in many situations, we have the choice to or not to put our trust in somebody else in various respects. But, if we were not to trust anybody or anything on a common basis, we wouldn’t even be able to get up in the morning. We would be assaulted by an indeterminate anguish, a paralysing revulsion. We wouldn’t even be able to articulate a definite distrust and make it the basis of defensive measures since this would mean putting our trust to something after all. Anything could happen then. Nobody can stand such direct confrontation with the extreme complexity of the world.” (2006: 1, my translation from French-speaking edition).

So, we interact with the world on familiar terms (or, as Thévenot (1990, 1999) puts it : “*sous un régime de familiarité*”). We take the continuity of our environment *for granted*, as Schütz (1987) would have put it. As the sociologists belonging to the interactionist school of

¹ In this sense, it would be more ‘accurate to speak of uncertainty than of risk, if we use F. Knight’s dichotomy (1921).

thought have shown, we shun surprise and uncertainty. We put situations into boxes and bring the unknown as close as possible to the known. In other words, we “typify” (Simmel, 2010, Goffman, 1973 etc.).

Our everyday life turns into a close-meshed fabric that makes us feel secure as it ensures consistency over time. This security enables us not to address the issue of the relevance of our expectations or of the success of our acts. The common sense attitude we are describing here refers to what the American pragmatists call the “practice regime”, in which our main concern is to make sure that life goes on (whereas what matters in scientific thinking is to speak only of things that have been checked-out).

But a breach might arise (in the form of a more or less tragic event, a change in one’s routine, a vague unease, etc.). What used to be obvious (and above all unquestioned) has become uncertain. The way things go is not longer fluent since the person is now bewildered and can’t cope anymore with the situation. Such a breach may seriously question the person’s *involvement* into a world that has suddenly become strange, threatening, complete nonsense.

The reading of self-help books as a cultural reaction to breaches

It may be interesting then to observe what people do in such moments when disquiet has invaded the scene in order to overcome misfortune, both on a symbolical and operative level. My hypothesis is that our attitude towards misfortune is in line with a specific cultural context. Like Eva Illouz, I understand culture as

“the way we make sense of who we are through actions shaped by values, key images and scenarios, ideals, and habits of thought; through the stories we use to frame our own and others’ experience; through the accounts we use to explain our own and others’ failures and successes; through what we feel entitled to; through the moral categories we use to hierarchize our social world.” (2008: 8).

In other words: in order to allow life to come back to normal after a breach, people resort to the resources their own culture makes available to them². This is the reason why studying their attitude gives privileged access to understanding some aspects of a specific culture.

In my dissertation research, I have made a sociological object out of a well known social phenomenon: the reading of self-help books. These are so much a part of our everyday environment that most of the time we don’t even notice them anymore. Yet, when getting a closer look at these books, we can see that they are somewhat surprising. First, because of their common claim, which is made more or less explicitly and with more or less affectation: they are going to change their readers’ life. Then, their sales figures are often impressive, tens of millions of issues in the USA, hundreds of thousands in the French-speaking world. According to many editors, the market for self-help is one of the most buoyant in the book sector. Despite their large readership, these books claim to be intended to each one of the readers and often address them in the second person. Even more surprising is the readers’

² This idea is not that far from the one the ethno-methodologist H. Garfinkel developed when he was suggesting to his students that they should carry out “breaching experiments”.

zestful praise of the virtues of these books as well as their claiming that “they have changed their life”.

Contrary to the work to be found in a literature review, I haven’t tried to make the success of these books a sign of the decline of society or of the individual (there is a long tradition of that kind in the USA, from Rieff to Bellah via Lasch or Sennett). Nor have I built this object as an indication to new forms of governmentality, as the authors inspired by Foucault have. More generally speaking, I haven’t tried to define the *effects* (be they positive or negative) which such books might have on the people or on society, as is usually done when speaking of a “psychologisation of society” (such a claim would seem quite pompous to me for that matter...).

I have tried to provide an answer to the apparently naïve question as to how reading SH literature can make sense to people. To put it another way, I tried to understand how readers could know “how to go about” these books and have the expertise “to perform these texts” (Alexander, 2004).

With this objective in mind, I have explored an empirical field of about a hundred self-help books. But first and foremost I have studied 50 in-depth conversations with readers of SH books as well as 300 letters to three well-known authors of such texts. Using the content analysis based on Glaser and Strauss’s *grounded theory*, I coded this over 2000-page-long type-written material in order to describe not only the role such books can play in the readers’ personal journey – they step in precisely when the readers experience a “breach” in their life - , but also the “efferent transaction” (Rosenblatt, 1994) the readers enter into with the text, and above all, the way the readers of SH books tell about the changes *they* (and not the sociologist) perceive in their own life.

I can’t present this efferent transaction here, but I would like to give an indication of the way reading such books constitutes a practical attitude towards everyday risks that is particularly adapted to our culture, in which the question of personal autonomy and individual responsibility is of unprecedented importance. To make this point clearer, I’ll now briefly sketch a comparison with other practical attitudes towards risks.

The fact that people reading SH books, which have such a specific content, have no trouble finding a meaning as well as a symbolic and operative effectiveness to them is due to the fact that these books share a certain language, a certain “*common spirit*”. What helped me most in the analysis of the material was the second Wittgenstein’s approach (in *Philosophical Investigations*, 2005). This one enables us to understand language as a “language-game” that has its own “grammar” and whose origin is not psychological (“in the person’s mind”), but indeed social, as institutions are. This grammar is what the readers summon up when they experience a breach in their life. It is what they try to put into practice and to confirm when reading SH books.

I’ll now concentrate on two of the characteristics of the grammar that can be spotted in the readers’ discourse. First, it seems to give an extremely important place to “interiority”, an entity that pervades the readers’ discourse. Indeed, the readers experience (and tell about) themselves as being inhabited by a “true self” that is the guardian of the truth about

themselves as well as of an unsuspected power of action. In a supposedly democratic anthropology, people practicing this grammar consider that *all* human beings have such an interiority and the hidden resources it contains. The pursuit of and meeting with this true self is endowed with important qualities. To make it short, these actions are considered as *the* solution to most of our problems. Hence, and this is a second characteristic, when faced with big or small misfortunes, the readers of SH books place great value on "working on the self". More generally speaking, only efficient action in front of our problems finds favor in their eyes. Following Wittgenstein (2005), it is necessary to underline that the interesting question (on a sociological point of view) is not to know whether interiority *does* exist or not, or whether these books are *indeed* efficient or not, but to understand how significant these terms (interiority, work on the self, true self,...) are in the language game (and consequently in the people's form of life).

The discourse around sorcery in Azandes' society as a point of comparison

How far is this attitude towards risk specific to our cultural environment, which, as many sociologists have shown, gives an unprecedented importance to autonomy³ ? In order to understand it better, I suggest we compared it with another attitude that has been well-documented in anthropological work. What I am talking about is the language game of sorcery, which is practiced in many traditional societies but also in some parts of the western societies (Favret-Saada, 1977, Schmitz, 2006). The first anthropologist to have gone beyond the issue of the reality of magic (does it really exist or not? Do primitive people have a particular mentality?) was E. Evans-Pritchard (1972). During the first half of the 20th century, he studied the use of a discourse calling upon sorcery in a tribe of South Soudan: the Azandes. Contrary to his contemporaries, who resorted to psychologizing explanations, Evans-Pritchard thought that such a phenomenon could only be understood if the social institutions making a form of magical thinking plausible were taken into account. On the basis of his fieldwork, Evans-Pritchard considered the types of situations in which the Azandes resort to magic. His answer was that magic (which is notably present in accusations of sorcery) only intervenes in difficult times and more precisely when two natural orders of things coincide: on the one hand, the fact that an event ('even a totally explicable one) arises, and, on the other hand, the fact that it happens to me, at this precise moment. The Azandes know of course that it was lightning that made the tree fall down, but they wonder why it happened in that place, at that time, above the head of that person in particular. For the Azandes, such phenomenon can't remain unexplained. They understand what caused their misfortune, but they need to find a *reason* for it all the same. When faced with adversity, the Azandes will always wonder: "who is holding a grudge against me? Who has got reasons to cast a spell on me?".

So Evans-Pritchard developed what his follower Mary Douglas (1980) called a theory of "social accountability" : who or what do we hold accountable for what is happening to us?

³ We must underline the fact that this concern for the social promotion of autonomy and its (often harmful) consequences is particularly salient among the French-speaking sociologists, most probably because, contrary to the American (and Anglo-Saxon) tradition, the French-speaking environment is deeply anti liberal (Ehrenberg, 2010).

The discourse around sorcery is what P. Winch later called (1964) an "attitude towards contingencies", which he defines as the "way of dealing (symbolically) with misfortunes and their disruptive effect on a man's relations with his fellows, with ways in which life can go on despite such disruptions"(1964: 321).

In this sense, reading self-help books has a similar function, just as praying does: this practice and the grammar making it possible also testify of an attitude towards contingencies. As is the case with magical practice, both are socially instituted systems of interpretation that enable the people to find some meaning to misfortune and to go on living beyond it.

Yet, the way these two attitudes towards contingencies enable people to make sense and to set up possible actions is very different. The two systems of social accountability are not alike. As you have noticed, the Azandes' attitude is fundamentally projective (the responsibility (or blame) for a misfortune is shifted to somebody else, most of the time a sorcerer). On the other hand, the attitude of the readers of self-help books is introjective : the question which is socially valued is not "who is holding a grudge against me?", but "what can I do to get out of it?" The sorcery 'system makes it possible to consider that the responsibility for the misfortune and the responsibility for the end of it go to the same entity: the sorcerer. In the self-help readers' attitude towards contingencies, these two responsibilities are uncoupled: while "another one" is often held responsible for the misfortune (e.g. the parents, the cell memory of a conflict in the former generations,...), the person is always considered responsible for getting over it: they are supposed to pick themselves up, take care of themselves, act efficiently, improve their own self, etc.

Likewise, the projective attitude (which is characteristic of the discourse around sorcery) is highly discredited in the grammar of the SH readers, as is evident from the distrust that is present in their discourse towards the character of the "victim" as well as towards the figure of the "complaint". This grammar, which so much enhances both interiority as the resource of meaning and power, and efficient work on one's own self, allows us to consider others as responsible for our own misfortune. Yet, it certainly doesn't allow us to wait passively for things to improve on their own. Improvement must be caused in a proactive way by exploring our inner resources.

In the end, this grammar is indeed what people try to put into practice when they read SH books: these books build up their conviction that, whatever the situation they find themselves in (and whoever is responsible for it), they can always do something to it, they can always do something of it. SH books enable the readers to consider all their problems as having a solution in a more efficient practice of their interiority.

Conclusion

I'll conclude with saying that this grammar of the interiority is not only a means to make problems manageable. It is also a powerful resource for assessing oneself and the others, as it makes happiness and well-being a matter of personal choice. Indeed, behind the democratic proposition : "everybody has the ability to manage, we are worth more than what we imagine", a much more meritocratic (and rather anti-sociological) apprehension is

lurking : “the one who doesn’t come to terms with it only deserves what he gets (just like the one who does take responsibility for it, by the way)”. The old Calvinist enhancing of effort making and moral courage as opposed to idleness and resignation is back again, (in that matter, Mc Gee (2005) talks about the “enhancing of enthusiasm”: showing what you want, etc.). People who don’t put on a brave face, who don’t work at being consistent with themselves, who content themselves with the secondary benefits of a life that doesn’t suit them, who expect solutions to drop down from heaven etc., these people only have themselves to blame. This phrase, which usually has negative connotations (at least in the French-speaking sociological discourses), doesn’t in the people’s mind. “Blaming oneself as the only one responsible”, not for what “is” but for what “could be”: isn’t that exactly what this grammar of the interiority allows? Isn’t that what the readers are fishing for when reading self-help books? Indeed: what would be the use of reading books saying there is nothing to do to improve our situation? Thus, the readers willingly shoulder the consequence of the fact that the problems have now been brought to their level: that consequence being that people should take the responsibility for the fact problems perpetuate or disappear. A consequence which, as you know, sociologists (notably French-speaking ones) criticize a lot today.

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