

ABSTRACT

It is argued that in the wake of the increasing number and extent of industrially produced risks, modern societies are transforming into risk societies (Beck, 1992). The implication of risk for modern society is understood to render traditional institutions and instruments incapable of managing what essentially are the consequences of modernization. The acid mine drainage (AMD) currently decanting from an abandoned underground mine shaft on the West Rand of Gauteng is in many ways the epitome of the type of risks that define a risk society. Having engendered intense political debate due to the threat it poses to the environment and society and the uncertainty over how to manage it, the circumstance on the West Rand might be argued as representing a classic example of a risk society. Using an inductive research design, this study aims to examine the truth behind this statement and furthermore, to what degree a unique form of risk society might be emerging. Specifically, the concepts of organized irresponsibility and subpolitics are explored, as is the role of science. The findings suggest that on the one hand risk does have the predicted impact on institutional arrangements. However, due to certain unique factors within the South African context (e.g. weak state capacity and social inequality) it is evident that there is also potential for society to move deeper into a state of risk society. This is in contrast to the idea posited in Beck's theory that many societies facing the circumstances of risk society will, over time and necessarily, adequately respond to the risks by becoming reflexive. Indeed, if this is to be the case however, the strengthening of current civil society engagement at the political level and a greater institutional willingness for change are seen as the essential ingredients for a more reflexive approach to the risk of AMD.