



## **A new kind of uncertainty for a new kind of modernity? Expertise in an age of risk.**

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Modernity is not what it used to be (see for example Giddens 1991, Beck 1992, Bauman 2000, Luhman 2005). It has, so the sociologists tell us, mutated in order to thrive in a new age of risk and uncertainty. Some might say that it is not quite thriving yet. Whereas old modernity relied on experts to evaluate the problems opposing society and devise solutions for them – *savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour pouvoir* – new modernity can no longer indulge in such straightforwardness. The hazards facing us have become so undeniably complex and in multiple ways produced by the very social activities they threaten, that uncontroversial fixes based on indisputable evidence can no longer be assumed. What role for expertise, then, in this increasingly complicated social landscape? As a starting point for thinking about this question, the paper sets out to explore the concept of uncertainty. After all, when it comes to hazards, this is what experts are expected to handle. Has it mutated as well? Does it make sense to speak of a new kind of uncertainty for a new kind of modernity?

In its first modernity setting, uncertainty was what had to be transformed into some sort of certainty (see for example Latour 1999). In the case of the inherent uncertainties related to hazards and risk this task was accomplished with the emergence of probability theory and actuarial science (see for example Hacking 1979, 1990). Expertise in old modernity thus acquired a lot of its straightforwardness from its belief in uncomplicating uncertainty by transforming it into certainty. So, why is it still complicated? A crucial point in Latour's argument is that expertise works by reducing complexity in order to amplify facts (certainties). This requires a sense of direction and an agreement as to what is deemed important. Markets, for example, possess this. So do scientific communities and political institutions. But do the combined constituencies implicated by the complex risks facing society possess it? Are they all compatible? And is it thus sustainable for each of these communities of practice to go about producing their own reductions, bringing about their own settlements, before attempting to understand the hazards in their complex entirety?

At closer inspection most hazards disclose an infinitely heterogeneous makeup. A flood could be a river out of bank. As such it would present a well defined problem to the experts of first modernity. But there is normally more to the story: flood defences in bad repair, drains designed for different weather patterns, changes in rural land use, new builds with poor resilience, planning policy, hazard maps, insurance, climate change, nature conservation, the list goes on. And this complexity is recognized politically. From the EU Water Framework Directive and proposed Flood Directive to national flood management approaches like the English Making Space for Water strategy, the general trend has been towards more broadly integrated solutions spanning greater geographical areas, more government offices and a wider range of actors. Expertise to facilitate and inform this cooperative effort is in high demand. The paper will argue that it might indeed make sense to match a new kind of modernity with a new kind of uncertainty. A kind of uncertainty that is seen as a generator of engagement across constituencies, disciplines and practices rather than an unruly unknown in need of settlement. A kind of uncertainty capable of leaving complexity open to the scrutiny of different forms of expertise instead of shutting it off to the benefit of only one of them. It will present this argument through examples from a field study carried out in the UK insurance sector and archival material relating to the history of this sector.