

2 The quest for excitement and the safe society

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Introduction

In 1926, two years before he died, Fridtjof Nansen, the Norwegian Arctic explorer, scientist and humanist, gave a speech at St Andrews University in Scotland. The speech had the title 'Adventure' and Nansen talked about the human need for challenges:

It is our perpetual yearning to overcome difficulties and dangers, to see the hidden things, to penetrate into the regions outside our beaten track – it is the call of the unknown – the longing for the land of Beyond, the driving force deeply rooted in the soul of man which drove the first hunters into new regions – the mainspring perhaps of our greatest actions – of winged human thought knowing no bounds to its freedom

(Nansen, 1927: 20)

He did, however, speak not only about the deep longing for the ultimate challenges, but also about our everyday lives, 'You have to take risks, and cannot allow yourself to be frightened by them when you are convinced that you are following the right course. Nothing worth having in life is ever attained without taking risks' (ibid.: 36). Now one could think that these are the words of a very special person; a risk-taking explorer. What might ordinary citizens say on the matter?

In a national survey (Norsk Monitor, 2003) of opinions, attitudes, values and behaviour in a representative sample of the Norwegian population above 15 years, 10 per cent agreed completely and 37 per cent to some extent to the statement 'I am willing to take big chances to get what I want out of life' (ibid.: 29). That means that around half of the population is to some extent willing to take big chances in life. When one bears in mind that this includes not only the young and daring men, but the total population above 15 years, it is a strong indicator of a need for taking chances that is in total contrast to the idea of a safe society. Obviously there is a tension between, on one hand, the quest for excitement and thrills that according to Nansen is deeply rooted in human nature, and, on the other hand, the idea of a safe society that has been so central in modern welfare policies.

Concepts and basic assumptions

Let us first take a look at some of the concepts that we use. We have concepts that refer to the general interest or need for thrills and excitement. Expressions like 'quest for excitement', 'thrill seeking', 'adventure seeking', 'need for stimulation' point to a general need for arousal, stimulation or novelty, and more specifically to a need for strong positive sensations or feelings, where ecstatic joy is the most extreme form. In psychological theories concepts like 'novelty seeking' are used to express this general disposition. A more specific trait, which has received a lot of attention, is called 'sensation seeking', which may be defined as 'the seeking of varied, novel, complex and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experience' (Zuckerman, 1994: 27).

The quest for excitement, or more specifically sensation seeking, may involve but does not necessitate risk taking. Sometimes it seems as if risk taking in and of itself is a strong stimulation, and not only a consequence of, or an adjunct to, the seeking of strong sensations. 'Risk' is a concept that is used in several scientific and non-scientific contexts and with varying content. The concept first appeared in the Middle Ages, relating to maritime insurance (Lupton, 1999). In most cases risk seems to involve a loss of some kind (Yates and Stone, 1992). The loss may be related to economic or material factors, to social and personal factors, or to physical and mental factors (Breivik, 1999a). According to a long tradition in philosophy it is also possible to speak of existential risk that puts one's total life project in danger (Tillich, 1952).

In many theories in different scientific disciplines there is a concern for safety and control that becomes evident in the basic concepts. As Mary Douglas has repeatedly pointed out, these concepts and constructs have strong social and cultural underpinnings, and are not neutral or objective in any sense (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Douglas, 1992). Embedded in the construction and use of these concepts are several basic assumptions about what constitutes 'normal' or 'acceptable behaviour'. Humans are, for instance, often supposed to be 'risk avoiding' and 'safety seeking'. 'Risk taking' is accepted as rational only under certain circumstances. In the discussion of the risk construct Yates and Stone point to the fact that several authors have stated that 'in isolation there is no such thing as acceptable risk; because by its very nature, risk should always be rejected' (Yates and Stone, 1992: 3). Other authors, like Adams (1995), think

character. *Homo aleatorius* – dice man, gambling man, risk-taking man – also lurks within every one of us' (Adams, 1995: 16).

To identify the cultural and normative underpinnings, it may be a good idea to make explicit the alternative levels of risk tolerance such as risk avoidance, risk acceptance, risk taking, or risk seeking. These levels refer to varying situational and personal constraints and possibilities. In some situations we must face risks that are imposed upon us. In other situations we can choose freely which level of risk we want, as when we are skiing in the mountains. In some situations we are aware of taking risks, in others not. There are a lot of other variations around the risk taking situation. Risk taking is not a natural but a many-layered construction.

To exemplify the differences in basic assumptions let me sketch two quite different basic normative attitudes to risk that may influence not only the choice of theories and hypotheses, but also the basic concepts. One basic normative attitude could be called 'Risk Aversion'. It would imply a belief that human beings are basically risk avoiding and safety seeking. They should therefore logically avoid risks whenever it is possible. One should always try to scan, detect, identify and control risks. When it is impossible to avoid risks, then one should choose the smallest. One should always avoid taking risks that involve other persons without their explicit consent. This would exemplify a normative risk averse strategy.

An opposite basic normative attitude could be called 'Risk Acceptance'. It would imply that human beings should accept risks and even take risks under certain circumstances. One should, however, always try to identify and control risks. One should avoid or eliminate risks when there are no rewards. Risks should be minimized when other people are involved. One should, however, be willing to take risks when the rewards are obvious and the total expected outcome is positive. One should not only accept, but even seek, risks when the odds are good enough, mastery is possible and the total expected outcome is positive.

In my view we find in modern societies an increasing support of the risk aversion attitude. Risks should be eliminated or at least avoided and minimized. In this chapter I argue that there are many good reasons to give support to a more risk accepting attitude. This does not mean that we should not try to make people more rational in their dealing with risk. On the other hand we should be careful to transfer scientific ideals of risk and uncertainty to ordinary life. It may not be a good idea to make people into risk processing machines or to give an illusion of too exact information about the future. As Bernstein says about the economist Keynes, 'Rather than frightening us, Keynes' words bring great news: we are not prisoners of an inevitable future. Uncertainty makes us free' (Bernstein, 1996: 229). Uncertainty may be better than probability. 'Where everything works according to the laws of probability, we are like primitive people – or gamblers – who have no recourse but to recite incantations to their gods' (ibid.: 229). Also

because we want to: Too much certainty is boring, unrewarding and belittling' (Adams, 1995: 17). Like Keynes he thinks uncertainty makes us what we are: 'Only if there is uncertainty is there scope for responsibility and conscience. Without it we are mere predetermined automata' (ibid.: 18). This means, according to Keynes and Adams, that we are free, our decisions matter, we can change the world. In order to master the world we should not rely upon our probability calculus but upon our skills and mastery. We should confront danger and take calculated risks, but only when we have developed the necessary skills and experiential tools.

Two social cosmologies: risk versus safety

We find historical paradigms and examples of both risk acceptance and risk avoidance. Some social cosmologies favour attitudes where members of the society enter risky arenas and confront dangers by using their skills to the uttermost limit. However, we also find societies that encourage their members to control risks and base their lives on safety mechanisms, whether real or hypothetical. I think the original paradigms for these differing social cosmologies go back at least to the beginning of Western philosophy. Two thousand, five hundred years ago two Greek philosophers gave us two quite opposite views of the world, of *kosmos*. Heraclitus from Ephesus (500 BC) thought of *kosmos* as a dynamic process where everything was moving, changing. For Heraclitus the essence of *kosmos* is captured in metaphors like the streaming water in a river, the licking flames of a fire, the opposite sides of a *polemos*, a fight, the dynamic tension between the bow and string which makes the arrow fly. The world is a world of opposites, of light and dark, up and down, sweet and sour, pleasure and pain. This dynamic tension between opposites is the *dynamis*, the power of change. The deep nature of *kosmos* is that *panta rei*, everything flows or runs.

Parmenides from Elea (500 BC) thought that the *kosmos* was a huge round ball, which was in complete rest. Change and movement are illusions: 'Trust your thinking and not your senses.' Thinking tells us that the world is perfect and therefore it has to have the perfect shape of roundness and it has to be still. Parmenides' student Zeno tried in several examples to show how we end up with paradoxes when we accept that motion is possible, for instance in the famous story of Heracles who was unable to overtake the turtle.

The thought forms of Heraclitus and Parmenides shaped our Western tradition. We find the tension between the two views in many contexts as a tension between movement and rest, process and structure, the dynamic and the static, growth and stability, risk and safety. The paradigmatic views of the two Greek philosophers are to differing degrees realized in historical societies. There is an interesting study by the climber and anthropologist Mike Thompson (1980) which shows how different environments and ways of living shape different risk strategies in two different cultures. The Hindu culture of sedentary cattle farmers

north side of the Himalayas. The Hindus are safety seeking and try to spread both risks and rewards. One should help one's neighbour and one should expect help in return. The Buddhists are risk takers who concentrate both risk and rewards. It is typically the Buddhists that have raised and equipped caravans over the high mountain passes in order to trade from south to north and from north to south. One needs to take economical, physical and social risks to do this and one may become very rich or very poor. Interestingly enough Thompson found that the Hindus were in many ways pessimistic in their outlook and the Buddhists were optimists. In many ways the Buddhists seem to represent the Heraclean world-view. The world is a changing, uncertain place where one has to master risks in order to stay alive. One has to be alert. The Hindus seem to have more of a Parmenidean world-view, which includes the wish for stability and predictability, but with a pessimistic undertone since the world after all is unstable.

Differing social cosmologies are attached to different cultures and societies. But we can also find differing and even conflicting cosmologies running as opposing strains through one and the same society. Norway has on one hand a 'coast culture' based on fishing, shipping, trade and the oil industry. This culture in many ways expresses a risk accepting attitude. On the other hand we have an 'inland culture' based on farming and industry that express a more risk averse attitude. Church and state support and underscore risk aversion and seek to develop safety and security as fundamental values. In a survey of peoples' attitudes we actually find that the coastal people are more willing to take risks (Norsk Monitor, 2003). One reason for this is probably the long adaptation to a shifting and insecure environment that favours the open and risk accepting attitude. In his celebrated novel about the nineteenth-century fishermen who sailed to Lofoten in northern Norway for cod fishery, Johan Bojer (2005) told how these fishermen not only accepted the necessary risk. They challenged the wind and the waves, took risks and loved the competition between the boats.

We can even go further. Maybe risk and safety are complementary factors, not only in world-views, between cultures, inside a culture, between individuals (as we shall see later), but also inside individuals or persons. Moxnes (1989) has developed a psychological theory, where not only the need for safety and security is stressed, but also the need for growth, challenges and risks. Each person needs a basic safety, an ontological security, which they should get during the first years of life. On the other hand we undergo a fabulous development from conception, through birth, when growing up and until we die. It is impossible to grow and develop under full security. Therefore we need to accept chances and risks. This factor is, according to Moxnes, closely tied to our need for freedom. On the other hand our need for security is tied to our search for meaning and roots. Our life should, according to this view, make a spiral from one level of security, through risky leaps and stages of growth, to higher levels of stability. This means that there should be a place in people's individual lives as well as in societies for challenges and risks. The modern societies have tended to put too much emphasis on security. Let us look closer at why this is so and what it implies.

In many ways modern industrial society is obsessed with safety and control. We are not only obsessed with control but we have also developed a culture of fear. Frank Furedi (1997) points to the increasing risk consciousness in modern societies. People are afraid of hidden dangers everywhere. This is in sharp contrast to the fact 'that despite the many problems that face humanity, we live in a world that is far safer than at any time in history' (Furedi, 1997: 54). Furedi thinks that 'The exaggeration of problems and risks is only matched by the denigration of the problem-solving potential of people. On the basis of such a negative representation of people, it is difficult to motivate or inspire society' (ibid.: 164).

Even if the problem solving capacity of people is denigrated and undermined the solution of the problem for many still seems to lie in the direction of rational control. According to Lupton:

the emphasis in contemporary western societies on the avoidance of risk is strongly associated with the ideal of the 'civilized' body, an increasing desire to take control over one's life, to rationalize and regulate the self and the body, to avoid the vicissitudes of fate. To take unnecessary risks is commonly seen as foolhardy, careless, irresponsible, and even 'deviant', evidence of an individual's ignorance or lack of ability to regulate the self.

(Lupton, 1999: 148)

The need for control is even more salient in society at large. Modern society has become a huge industrial, technological and economic monster structure that simply must not collapse. One doesn't play with an atomic reactor. Therefore modern society can only survive if it succeeds in taming humans into rational, safety seeking creatures. Such a view of human beings emerged during the Enlightenment period in the eighteenth century. The idea of modernism encompassed progress, science, rationality and control as central factors (Harvey, 1991). The goal was to create a 'dominion of man' that could control nature and bring happiness to all human beings. The new industrial and technological society that was developed in the nineteenth and the twentieth century, presupposed the docile and tamed 'animal rationale'. Without control over impulses and needs and a rational, long-term perspective on one's own behaviour and thinking, it is impossible to run a complex, fragile technological society in a safe way. The many failures and problems in introducing modern technology and lifestyle in so-called Third World cultures are, according to many experts, due to the lack of the modernistic ethos in these cultures. They often lack the long-term planning, the achievement motivation, the control of needs and impulses, the sense of well-tempered pleasure and the concern for safety that has become endemic in the industrialized world. But this attitude, even in Western societies, is only skin deep; it is not deeply rooted in human nature. The many accidents and problems show that irrationality lurks under the surface of rationality. It seems that we

thrill seekers who not only accept risk but even seek it.

A lack of fit between modern society and human nature?

I am not in line with behaviourism and other psychological or anthropological views, according to which we humans are entirely malleable. We are not born as a 'tabula rasa', a blank tablet. Some people seem to think that it would have been nice if we had been malleable, and could be formed, developed, shaped and adapted to natural and cultural environments. For work on safety such malleability would have been nice, since we could have developed the necessary ability of fit between humankind and modern society and thereby improved safety and security.

It becomes increasingly evident, however, that human nature and modern society do not fit with each other as a hand into a glove, or as a key into a lock. There are mismatches between human nature and modern society that is evident in many sectors and particularly (for our purposes) in relation to safety. One can see the problems both from the side of the individual human being and from the side of society. The risks that are not handled well may have several causes. Some of them are outside our control. Accidents happen due to chance, bad luck, complexity, time factors and so on. Others happen because of human factors. Accidents are caused by fatigue, lack of concentration, lack of attention and foresight. Some are due to strong emotions, irrationality, bad temper, irritability, aggressiveness or stress. And at other times people simply lack the skills, do not understand things, or lack the necessary insight. As the studies of heuristics in risk taking have shown, people have many illusions concerning objective security and risk (Kahneman *et al.*, 1986). A special case is, however, the type of situation where we simply are not concerned about safety, as the only motive and want to take risks in a conscious and calculated way. Should we handle this motive as something that should be suppressed, sublimated or avoided, since it is contrary to a safety seeking attitude, or should we accept this 'beast within' as part of human nature and try to handle it in the best possible way. There are strong reasons why I think we should accept the 'beast within'. One of the reasons I think lies in our evolutionary heritage.

Evolutionary anthropology shows how humans were adapted to, and formed by, shifting environments through the last millions of years from *Homo habilis*, or earlier, to the present human being (Staski and Marks, 1992; Buss, 1988). The general picture given by these evolutionary approaches is very different from the picture of humans that in varying shapes have been presented in the last 200–300 years by the bourgeois culture in Europe. The bourgeois picture projected the human being as a frail and weak creature that had to compensate the lack of bodily strength through a well-developed brain and the use of symbolic powers like language, communication and abstract thinking. The evolutionary picture portrays humans as beings with considerable bodily strength and robustness. Humans developed as hunter-gatherers through 2 million years of evolution, from

diverse environments, to higher altitudes, than other animals. Even recently the Indians at Tierra del Fuego slept naked in the snow. The Bushmen of the Kalahari have survived in extreme desert conditions. They have not only survived, but lead a life that the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1972) has labelled, after the economist J. K. Galbraith, 'the original affluent society'.

Human beings have capabilities that make it possible to lead an elegant life in extreme conditions. Even today we witness the extreme skills and faculties of the 'human animal'. The deepest free-diver without oxygen is down to more than 120 metres below sea level. Since Habeler and Messner first took the alpine-style climbing trip to the top of Everest without oxygen, many people have done the same. I think the quest for risk, the breaking of records, the test of human limits, the exploration of wilderness, is, at least partly, explained by our past. Our evolutionary background made us more active than most animals; we need greater areas to explore, because we seem to feed, not only on food, but on novelty (Staski and Marks, 1992). Humans obviously combined exploration with willingness to take chances. They took the chance to leave the life in the trees, stepped down on the ground, and then spread out to all climate zones and geographical areas. Humankind is adapted to a life that involves challenges and risks. This fact must, through selective mechanisms, have become hard-wired into our genes. It is therefore not surprising that the first personality-related gene that was identified as part of the big human genome project was a risk taking gene (Cloninger *et al.*, 1996). This means that certain people have a genetic predisposition to take risks. Most people need challenges and are willing to take some chances. In the Norwegian study mentioned earlier (Norsk Monitor, 2003) we found that around half of the population were completely or to some extent willing to take big chances. The hard-core risk takers constitute a smaller part of the population: 4 per cent agreed completely and 10 per cent agreed to some extent to the statement 'I am interested in doing things that are dangerous or forbidden, just to experience something exciting and risky' (*ibid.*: 16). This means that 10–15 per cent are typical risk takers who do dangerous or forbidden things. They have not been socialized well enough into a Nordic welfare society and they are not the docile, safety seeking creatures that the modernist rationality has encouraged them to be. It seems that under the skin of the soft rational modern human we have a 'beast within'; one that thrives on strong stimulation and is willing to take chances to get what it wants in life. This beast is not present to the same extent in all of us. There are some variations due to age and sex. Men are willing to take bigger chances in most areas than women; the young are more risk taking than the old. But even among old people there are risk takers. Trygve Gran, the first person who crossed the North Sea in an airplane, thought it was rational to take more chances as you grow older because you have less to lose and more to win! In the Norwegian study it is not specified what kind of chances and under which circumstances people would take risks. But there seems to be a general attitude that will influence decisions and actions in more specific areas. This explains why people not only do dangerous and risky things

attitude with them when driving to the job, or trying to impress some friends on a Saturday evening. To see how a general attitude to risk spills over into various areas of life, we will look more closely at Zuckerman's theory.

Sensation seeking

We saw that Zuckerman's definition of sensation seeking included a willingness to take risks in order to get the novel and intense sensations and experiences that one wants (Zuckerman, 1994: 27). Sensation seeking can therefore contribute to a better understanding of risk taking. Zuckerman found that sensation seeking contained four relatively independent sub-factors that were weakly correlated: 'Thrill and adventure seeking' contains physical thrills like scuba diving, parachute jumping, fast skiing or diving from a high board. 'Experience seeking' relates to inner experiences, like yoga, music, drugs and to new experiences with strange people or faraway places. 'Disinhibition' refers to partying, flirting, drinking, gambling, sex. 'Boredom susceptibility' describes a restless seeking of stimulation, and avoidance of boredom of any sort. All of these factors describe attitudes and behaviours that may lead to risk taking. Most obvious is the physical type of risk taking contained in 'thrill and adventure seeking'. People who score high on all four sub-factors are the typical high sensation seekers. The scores follow a normal distribution curve which means that most of us are medium in sensation seeking needs. We like stimulation and risk to some extent, maybe more in some areas than in others. But we also feel the need for safety. Zuckerman refers to various studies that show the physiological underpinnings of sensation seeking. A study by Fulker *et al.* (1980) on the Maudsley twin register showed that 58 per cent of the general sensation seeking trait is heritable. 'The remaining 42% is due to specific or nonshared environmental influences and error of trait measurement' (Zuckerman, 1994: 291). This means that one is born with a certain disposition to seek stimulation and accept risks. This will then influence what kind of environments one seeks out and how one reacts to what one experiences. Sensation seeking children probably climb higher in the trees, feel less fear and enjoy the height more. Zuckerman and colleagues have found that high sensation seekers have strong approach behaviour. They seek out new environments, adapt better and faster to new situations. The biological mechanism behind this seems to be low levels of an enzyme (MAO) that is strongly heritable and that regulates neurotransmitters in the brain. High sensation seekers show strong approach behaviour (dopaminergic brain activity) and little inhibition (low levels of serotonergic activity). This biological disposition and the experiences from childhood and adolescence lead to certain characteristic behavioural expressions.

Zuckerman's review of the literature on sensation seeking shows that the findings are fairly consistent over a wide area of behavioural expressions. Both low sensation seekers and high sensation seekers tend to favour the more extreme variants whether it is in relation to job, leisure, sport, social relationships or

fast decisions, challenges and risks. They typically become pilots, firefighters, salesmen, investors, business founders (Zuckerman, 1994: 156ff.). In the traffic they drive faster and better, but are involved in more accidents (*ibid.*: 138ff.). They prefer music that is loud, complex and modern, paintings that have a crash of lines and colours (*ibid.*: 199ff.). They like spicy foods, drink more alcohol, are more likely to try new drugs (*ibid.*: 225ff.). They are involved in the more violent and risky types of crimes (*ibid.*: 266ff.). In sports they prefer high-risk sports, are involved in more sports and experiment with new sport forms (*ibid.*: 156ff.). In a series of studies Breivik (1999b) has shown that there is a close connection between the level of risk in a sport and the sensation seeking needs of the elite athletes in that sport. High-risk sports like climbing, sky diving and white-water kayaking attract high sensation seekers. The low sensation seekers prefer sports like tennis or volleyball. A medium level of sensation seeking needs was found among elite athletes in karate and ice hockey. This means that athletes tend to choose sports that match their sensation seeking needs and their willingness to take risks. Especially at elite level the match is very clear.

Zuckerman's theory, which is well documented through a lot of empirical studies (Zuckerman, 1994) shows how a general need for strong stimulation and 'quest for excitement' (Elias and Dunning, 1986) manifests itself in various specific life sectors and influences behaviour in many unexpected ways. Some people are disposed by genetic background to seek challenges and risks more than others. One could then argue like Apter (1992: 177) that, 'It is advantageous for the group if certain individuals, at any given time, are willing to place themselves at risk through exploring the various aspects of the environment – since others can learn from both their successes and failures.'

Risk and modern society: some pedagogical remarks

It seems humans now want safety, security, control and predictability in a lot of areas of life. We want technological risks to be as small as possible. Bridges, cars, atom reactors, aeroplanes, should be safe. We want other people to behave in a responsible and predictable manner in traffic and transport. At the same time people want to take risks. But risks should be taken in the right or relevant manner. We do not want to get hurt or die by uncontrollable and irrelevant risks. Risks must come in the right or relevant way. If I go climbing I want the rope to be secure, the equipment to be dependable. I know that there are risks in climbing but they must come in the right way, be relevant. And which risks are relevant? The relevant risks are those that can be predicted, controlled, mastered and dealt with by me through use of my skills. It is like the relation between truth and knowledge. My belief that it is snowing on the North Pole at a certain time may be right. But unless it is the snowing on the North Pole that causes my belief we do not say that I have knowledge. If I guess something and I am right my belief is true, but I do not have knowledge of it as such. Knowledge demands more than mere justified belief. In a similar manner my risk taking should be

of the right sort and they want to master risks, in a relevant way. This is typically what we do in nature or environments that pose definable challenges to us. I think we need to develop a society where this is possible. Let me sketch a vision of society and human life where risks are included.

I think children should be given more opportunities to play outdoors, be active, explore the world, develop skills and strong bodies. We should let the children freeze a bit, get wet, starve a bit, get hurt, face problems, in order to develop resistance to stress and pain. It is not in their interest that we overprotect them. Our kindergartens and schools should give more opportunity for vigorous play. Adolescents should be given opportunities to take part in challenging sports and activities, trips into nature or new environments. For the adult population we need an arena where people can test themselves, be challenged, develop skills, get to know themselves, who they are and what they can do. They should, if possible, get a taste of real nature, of solid earth, running water and natural elements like sun, rain, desert or snow. These are the challenges and environments we are built to live in and to handle. We need to save the wilderness around us, but also the wilderness within us. We need to let *l'homme sauvage*, the wild human being, get a fair share of our life. I think it is in this way that we can remove some of the problems from the sectors where they do not belong. People should drive fast at the motor sport arena and not on the roads. They should 'get high' by sky diving instead of by using cocaine; they should fight in games like soccer, rugby or American football, instead of in the streets or in wars. People are already trying to acquire these sorts of experiences, but society is not yet ready to develop opportunities and arenas.

Some sociologists, like Ellis Cashmore, think that sports in modern society fascinate and captivate us exactly because they give us opportunities to explore deep-seated needs. Life in modern society is too predictable, too civil and too safe. Sports, and especially risk sports, present us with 'manufactured risks that are actually designed in such a way as to preserve natural dangers or build in new ones' (Cashmore, 2000: 8). And some go to extremes. In *USA Today* (Monday, 17 November 1997) Jim Pinkerton commented on John Denver's death in an plane crash:

What propelled John Denver to his death? Here was someone who spent the '60s singing folk songs, rather than fighting in the Vietnam War or even visibly protesting it. And yet a few weeks ago, the man who seemingly had dedicated his life to the mellow pleasures of country roads and Rocky Mountains highs, climbed into a motorized ultra light airplane, the Long-EZ, which had been involved in 61 crashes since 1993, taking 21 lives. He must have known the flight off the California coast was potentially perilous, and yet he made that last leap. Why would former president George Bush want to jump out of an airplane, as he did last summer? Why is Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*, about the death of climbers on Mount Everest, a fixture on the bestseller lists? Why have Arnold Schwarzenegger and so

many others bought a Hummer, the civilian look-alike of the Army's Humvee? And why is just about every car maker adding its own sport-utility vehicle – even such upscale and traditionally sedentary marquees as Lincoln and Mercedes Benz? Why is it that seemingly every time you turn on a TV you are confronted by an endless array of 'extreme sports'? America does indeed seem overrun by iron men, triathletes, daredevils and dirtheads; legions of rock climbers, fat tire racers, ultra marathoners, bungee jumpers, and hang gliders are all climbing, racing, running, jumping, flying – and occasionally dying – in this new age of go-for-it extremism.

(Pinkerton, 1997: 11)

In their book *Quest for Excitement* (1986) Elias and Dunning have presented some reasons why we seem to have an increase in need for thrills and excitement. The civilization process runs in two directions. Control is compensated by excitement. If society gets too safety-oriented people will find arenas during their free time to get the thrills and challenges that belong to human life, as they did it with soccer and rugby in nineteenth-century England. I would add that such thrills need not be explained, as has been the case with Zuckerman, by a biological need for sensation seeking, but rather by the inherent pleasure and satisfaction that such pursuits provide. This idea is central in the flow theories of Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Deep flow is an autotelic experience, sometimes in the form of a peak experience, encountered when one masters an activity with a certain perfection, is totally involved, feels control and gets immediate feedback.

Elias and Dunning's theory may also be developed in the direction of a risk homeostasis theory. If the risks and challenges in some areas of life are reduced, there is a relevant increase in risk taking in other areas. The empirical support for such a general theory is difficult to get, because of the difficulties in assessing the relevant risk parameters. But some authors, like Apter, go to quite extreme conclusions in their willingness to develop arenas for risk: 'The safer we make life, the more people may take risks and court danger' (Apter, 1992: 191). Apter suggests that when we think we are in a certain mood or state we are actually looking for the opposite. If we are bored or secure we look for excitement and danger and vice versa. His reversal theory implies that modern society with its extreme focus on safety and control need risky arenas. He writes:

I am suggesting that we should allow people to play with fire, generate new games of violence, duel, crash cars in specially prepared runways, climb the outside of the skyscrapers, swim where there are powerful currents, and undertake other even more imaginative and dangerous activities. We should perhaps permit aggression between consenting adults. We should allow danger where only the individual who chooses the danger is at risk.

(ibid.: 194)

Risk may also increase in unexpected and non-planned ways, not only in leisure and freely chosen areas, but in the areas where most people want security

of a risk society, point to the unexpected consequences of an advanced technological society (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). Due to the complexities, size and dramatic consequences of failure, many industrial and technological devices and plants put people and environment at risk to a higher degree than before. Nuclear waste, chemical substances, biological warfare products, are just symptoms of possible runaway processes.

Risk in modern society, however, may also be placed at the core of human existence. Giddens thinks that modern life has a personal or existential risk. Whereas health risk has been reduced during the last 100 years, the personal risk has increased. We are more free than formerly to choose our life course, plan our life and develop it as a *Gestalt*. We are not victims of social background, class, cultural constraints, economic poverty, to the same degree as we used to be, at least not in the well-developed welfare societies. But this means also that there are no excuses if one's life becomes a failure or a misery. One of the paradoxes in present society is that as life becomes tougher and more risky, in the existential sense, we raise children, educate youth and influence adults to become softer, with less tolerance to pain, injuries, stress and problems.

Conclusion

Is the argument that we should prohibit some risk sports compelling? No, not at all. I think that, provided they enter the sports of their own free will, people should be allowed to take risks, get hurt, be injured, or even die. What about costs for society and the risks for rescue personnel? The risk takers should have opportunities to be insured, to pay premiums. The rescue personnel should be freely recruited people with no obligation to risk their lives. There are various ways to solve these problems. Nevertheless, in order to achieve a better situation, there are several things that need to be in place.

First, we need a more realistic picture of humanity and human nature. We humans are formed by evolution and possess a genetic heritage that reflects earlier life conditions. This heritage is still alive and it predisposes us not only to take chances and risks, but to react positively to the challenges they involve. Through genetic make-up and social and cultural influences there are individual and situational differences in sensation seeking and risk taking. While around half of the population like to take some chances in life, around 10 per cent are typical 'high sensation seekers'.

We should try to develop a society that is concerned about safety in all areas where we want safety and control, for instance in most situations at home, during transport and travel, at work, during research projects and so on. Since human beings are not by nature able or willing to take the necessary precautions in these areas, strong incentives with feedback loops are needed. Humans evolved in a challenging, variable and often risky environment and developed a need for challenges, a seeking of strong sensations and a willingness to take risks. Even if there is no valid inference from 'is' to 'ought', from facts directly to moral con-

challenges and risks. This is an important task for sectors such as sports, recreation, the tourist industry, educational institutions and health and rehabilitation centres.

In order to master our modern, or post-modern, Heraclitan world, which is dynamic, shifting, innovative and risky, we need to educate children and adolescents through programmes and environments that are challenging for the whole person. As Giddens has pointed out, life in 'high modernity' needs persons that have the skills, the responsibility and the freedom to master the possibilities, but also the dangers that lurk. Life in the 'risk society' may become very fulfilling but also very tough, or even disastrous. That is the *condition humaine*, the human condition, at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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