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Edgework, Ontological Reflexivity, and Reflexive Community

Toward a Critical Theory of Risk

Stephen Lyng

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Edgework, Ontological Reflexivity, and Reflexive Community: Toward a Critical Theory of Risk

This paper is devoted to two interrelated tasks. First, it presents a new perspective on voluntary risk taking practices in late modern societies by contextualizing these practices in terms of the "risk society" model introduced in recent years by social theorists like Ulrich Beck,[1] Anthony Giddens,[2] and their collaborators. This represents the most recent iteration in a long term study of voluntary risk taking behavior conceptualized as "edgework."[3] Earlier versions of edgework theory have drawn on different strands of modernist and postmodernist social thought, including the Marx/Mead synthesis,[4] Weberian and Foucauldian theory.[5] As we shall see, contextualizing edgework in terms of the risk society perspective represents a significant departure from these earlier efforts. Rather than viewing individual risk taking as a response to structural characteristics such as alienation, rationalization, oversocialization, or disciplinary technologies, the notion of risk functions in the present analysis as a unifying concept that applies to both societal-level structures and individual-level actions.

The examination of edgework practices from the perspective of risk society theory is connected to the second major goal of this study. While there is much to be learned about voluntary risk taking through the application of the risk society perspective, the more fruitful outcome of this analysis is the opportunity to elaborate risk society theory in some promising new directions. As I will demonstrate, bringing edgework into the risk society framework will

[1] U. Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992.
[2] A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity, 1990.
[3] S. Lyng, 'Edgework: a social psychological analysis of volunteer risk taking,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 1990, vol. 95, 851-886; S. Lyng (ed.), *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, New York: Routledge, 2005a.
[4] Lyng, op. cit., 1990.
[5] S. Lyng, 'Edgework and the risk-taking experience,' in S. Lyng (ed.), *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, New York: Routledge, 2005b.

allow us to explore a missing dimension of current formulations of this framework. Although Beck and other risk society theorists[6] have expressed their intention to orient this approach to a critical/emancipatory agenda, there has been minimal progress on this front. By considering the connection between edgework practices and the other societal patterns emphasized by the risk society model—i.e., the emergence of new global risks, reflexive modernization, individualization, subpolitics, and related trends—it will be possible to explore the possibilities for emancipation and freedom in the second modern era. This effort to outline a "critical theory of risk" will also require an engagement with other theoretical traditions that incorporate human emancipation as an explicit goal of theory development. Thus, in what follows, I weave together elements of risk society, edgework, existentialism, pragmatism, and Jurgen Habermas's the theory of communicative action to outline an emancipatory agenda defined in terms of the edgework experience of "ontological reflexivity." Finally, I explore the connections between edgework practices and the emergence of "reflexive community" in the late modern era.

Existentialism and the Risk Society Thesis

After several decades of relative dormancy, existentialist thought appears to be making a comeback in selected areas of social scientific study. In recent years, edited collections devoted to existentialist themes have appeared in sociology[7] and an even larger collection of book chapters and journal articles dealing with existentialism have been published in criminology.[8]

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[6] See especially S. Lash,'Reflexivity and its doubles: structure, aesthetics, community,' in U. Beck, A. Giddens and S. Lash (eds.) *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994.

[7] J. Kotarba and A. Fontana (eds.), *The Existential Self in Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984; J. Kotarba and J. Johnson (eds.), *Postmodern Existential Sociology*, Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2002.

[8] W. Morrison, 'Crime and the existentialist dilemma,' in W. Morrison, *Theoretical Criminology: From Modernity to Postmodernity*, London: Cavendish, 1995, pp. 349-382; B. Arrigo, "Critical criminology, existential humanism, and social justice: exploring the contours of conceptual integration,' *Critical Criminology,* 2001, vol. 10(2), 83-95; S. Farrall, 'On the existential aspects of desistance from crime,' *Symbolic Interaction*, 2005, vo. 28(3), 367-386; S. Mackenzie, 'Situationally edited empathy: an effect of socio-economic structure on individual choice,' *Critical Criminology*, 2006, vol. 3, 365-385; C. Williams, 'Engaging freedom; toward an ethics of crime and deviance,' in B.

This body of work seems to indicate an increasing awareness of the expanding uncertainties of social living in the twenty-first century. The conditions of social life in the developed and developing world today share a basic similarity with the global context in which existentialist thought first emerged as formal theoretical system. With the publication of key works in the 1940s and 1950s, existentialist thinkers were responding, in part, to a situation of enormous global uncertainty not unlike that which exists today. While philosophers, theorists, and other cultural observers in the immediate postwar period were struggling to make sense of the international realignments, genocidal campaigns, and the technologies of past and future mass killing made possible by global war, the social and cultural transformations taking place today are being driven primarily by global cultural and economic forces (which many observers see as also impelling another important source of global uncertainty—international terrorism). Despite the differences in the steering currents at work in each era, both periods can be characterized as times of unprecedented change that have stimulated new ways of thinking about the conditions of our collective existence.

Although there has been a growing appreciation for the contemporary relevance of existentialist concepts among some sociologists and criminologists, little agreement exists within this group about the most useful approach for theorizing the changes in structure and agency that are behind the revival of existentialism. In order for existentialism to yield useful insights about sociological or criminological problems, it must be linked to a framework for conceptualizing the social and cultural environment within which existential themes can be addressed—i.e., issues of authenticity, morality, self constitution, and freedom. A range of theoretical frameworks can be employed for this purpose, but I have chosen a perspective that highlights the rise of reflexive

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Arrigo and C. Williams (eds.), *Philosophy, Crime, and Criminology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, 167-196.

risk culture and risk agency in the late modern context, an approach consisting of a set of sensitizing concepts drawn from the "risk society and culture" perspective[9].

From the "death of God" to the "death of the social"

The link between existentialist thought and the social conditions of uncertainty can be traced to the rise of the modern Western worldview beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A common concern among the progenitors of twentieth century existentialism was the irrevocable shift in human self-reflection that accompanied the breakdown of traditional ways of living. With the growth of science and the new "attitude of skepticism" that marked the shift to the modern era, the accepted truths and moral certainties of the traditional world were brought into question. For Nietzsche, this marked the beginning of a historical epoch in which all absolutes would be cast aside, a movement of critical annihilation of the ultimate foundations for values and beliefs that he referred to as the "death of God." Nietzsche's use of this dramatic phrase covered not only the collapse of religious absolutes but also all other transcendent foundations of meaning and value. As Guignon and Pereboom[10] note, "the madman's" statement that "God is dead" in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* applies to the full pantheon of transcendental concepts appearing in the last several centuries: "God, Reason, the cosmos, providence, divine rights, the noumenal realm, *Geist*, Humanity, History—all these conceptions of the ultimate foundation for our beliefs and practices have been shown up for what they are: human constructs, expressions of our own thinking and acting."

Had Nietzsche been able to see the latest historical turn in the project of modernity, he may have been surprised by his own prescience. The successive collapse of absolutes has been a key trajectory of the modernization process over the last several centuries, with the "attitude of

[9] U. Beck, A. Giddens and S. Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order,* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996.
[10] C., Guignon and D. Pereboom, *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, Indianapolis, IN: Hacket, 1995, p.93.

skepticism" now even applying to one of the main sources of critical reflection in the post-Enlightenment period—the scientific worldview itself. The accumulation of scientific knowledge and the social and technological "advances" made possible by science has stimulated a growing critical awareness of the expanding global risks and dangers directly traceable to these scientific and technological developments.[11]

The erosion of confidence in science and technology is a marker of what some see as a much more powerful source of growing uncertainty in the world today, a process that they claim has brought us to a new phase in human history. The increasing risk of humanly produced disasters in the "global risk society" is rooted in a more fundamental historical development that Ulrich Beck and his collaborators term as "reflexive modernization."[12] The emergence of reflexivity in the contemporary global system makes it possible to distinguish a "late" or "second" modernity that follows the "early" or "first" modern phase of nation states, industrialism, and scientific legitimacy. In the second modernity, indeterminacy in human experience does not derive only from critical reflection on the intellectual foundations of truth and moral consciousness, but is rooted more fundamentally in the erosion of first modern institutions—nuclear family, ethnic group, class, nation state—and individual self-distancing from roles that interface with these structures.[13] Thus, if Nietzsche's phrase the "death of God" captures the annihilation of absolutes, the "death of the social" designates the demise of the ontological foundations of a social "reality sui generis" that serves as the empirical ground for social scientific analysis

[11] Beck, op. cit.
[12] U. Beck, W. Bonss, and C. Lau,'The theory of reflexive modernization: problematic, hypotheses and research program,' *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 2003, vol. 20, 1-33.
[13] S. Lash, 'Reflexivity as non-linearity,' *Theory, Culture, and Society,* 2003, vol. 20, 49-57.

Connecting Nietzsche's 'death of God' and Jean Baudrillard's 'death of the social'[14] to reflect on the putative historical transition from first to second modernity is more than a rhetorical exercise. Although risk society theorists do not typically employ either of these phrases, both are relevant to key contrasts drawn by these theorists in conceptualizing the two distinct phases of modernity. For instance, Scott Lash indirectly references Nietzsche's critique of the foundational discourses of the first modernity by exploring the contrast between reflection and reflexivity:

> [T]he individual of the first modernity is refle*c*tive while that of the second modernity is refle*x*ive. The idea of reflective belongs to the philosophy of consciousness of the first modernity. … To reflect is to somehow subsume the object under the subject of knowledge. Reflection presumes apodictic knowledge and certainty. It presumes a dualism, a scientific attitude in which the subject is in one realm, the object of knowledge in another. [15]

By contrast, dualism between subject and object has no place in the refle<u>x</u>ive consciousness of the second modernity: "Reflexive … has more to do with reflex than reflection. Reflexes are indeterminate. They are immediate. They do not in any sense subsume."[16] Lash's description of reflexive consciousness echoes Nietzsche's "perspective" approach to consciousness, which "recognize[s] that each person's body, biography, and location are unique optics,"[17] and accepts that "we have access only to our own perspectives on things, with the result that we can never exit from our perspectives to know reality as it is in itself."[18] This position is consistent with Beck's phenomenologically-based approach to consciousness which emphasizes the partiality of our knowledge of the object and the interest-oriented perspective of the knower. Beck asserts that "the objectivity of simple-modernity knowledge is replaced by the *intentionality* of

[14] Although I employ Baudrillard's term "death of the social" in this analysis, the development of this idea departs in some important ways from Baudrillard's formulation, as revealed below.
[15] Lash, op. cit., p.51, 2003.
[16] Ibid
[17] R. Antonio, 'Nietzsche's antisociology: subjectified culture and the end of history,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 1995, vol. 101, 1-43.
[18] Guignon and Pereboom, op.cit., p. 101.

knowledge in the second modernity," which is related to one of the key dynamics of reflexive modernization—the fact that "what is intended leads to the most extraordinary unintendedness, to side-effects, to unintended consequences."[19]

As late modern individuals gravitate toward various cultural expressions of perspectivism and increasingly reject the foundationalism of early modernity, one of the ontological pillars supporting an objective reality of "the social" begins to crumble. With the clear absence of a Durkheimian "collective conscience" serving as an interpretive reference for cooperative endeavors and self-reflection, the ontology of structurally formed agents reproducing institutional arrangements and constructing cohesive narrative biographies is progressively eroded. As Lash notes, this does not mean that the subject and knowledge disappear: "The subject is still with us and so is knowledge. Only knowledge itself is *of* uncertainty. … It is itself precarious as distinct from certain, and what that knowledge is about is also uncertain—probabilistic, at best; more likely 'possibilistic'."[20] Thus, the "death of the social" is partly a consequence of the shift from the dualism of reflection to the monism of reflexivity, but even this change points to the deeper transformation that is at the heart of reflexive modernization. To understand this deeper movement, we need to appreciate the immanent character of reflexivity—an immanence that erases the distinction between structure and agency entirely.

If first modern social life is characterized by the dominance of structures and systems that have a determinant impact on agency, the second modernity is distinguished by the immanent termination of structural determinacy. In this expression of second modern reflexivity, social structures and systems acquire characteristics that diminish their determinant impact on agency. In the early work of some risk society theorists, this aspect of reflexivity was discussed in terms

[19] Lash, op. cit., p.51, 2003.
[20] Lash, op. cit., p. 52, 2003.

of the increasing separation of agency and structure.[21] More recently, however, Lash has proposed the idea of *non-linear* reflexivity as a way to avoid the implicit dualism involved in the earlier conceptualization.[22] While linear systems move toward a state of equilibrium that can only be disturbed by external forces, non-linear systems are characterized by change and dis-equilibrium produced by forces internal to the system. "It is the 'chaos' or noise of the unintended consequences that leads to system dis-equilibrium."[23] Thus, agency within non-linear systems does not exist independently from structure, but rather emerges as a reflex response to structure: "Reflexivity … is characterized by choice, where previous generations had no such choices. … [T]his choice must be *fast*, we must—as in a reflex—make quick decisions. … We must live, are forced to live, in an atmosphere of risk in which knowledge and life-chances are precarious."[24]

The type of structure/agency blend that Beck and Lash envision here accords with Manuel Castells[25] notion of a social universe governed by the logic of flows:

> Beck's notions of unintended consequences, of ever-incomplete knowledge, of not irrationalism but a rationality that is forever indeterminate is comfortable in the logic of flows. Beck's chronic indeterminacy of risk and risk-taking, of living with risk is much more of a piece with, not the determinacy of structure but the partial, the elusive determinacy of flow.[26]

Applying Castells' metaphor of flow to structure/agency relation gives us an additional way to distinguish between first and second modernity: while the first modernity is rooted in the logic of structures, the second modernity is governed by the logic of flows.

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[21] See A. Giddens, 'Living in a post-traditional society,' in U. Beck, A. Giddens and S. Lash (eds.) *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994, pp. 56-109; S. Lash, 'Reflexivity and its doubles: structure, aesthetics, community,' in U. Beck, A. Giddens and S. Lash (eds.) *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994, pp. 110-173.
[22] Lash, op. cit., 2003.
[23] Lash, op. cit., p.50, 2003.
[24] Lash, op. cit., pp. 50-51, 2003.
[25] M. Castells, *The Informational City*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
[26] Lash, op. cit., p. 49, 2003.

Thus, at a point in the historical process when the logic of structures give way to the logic of flows, when the dualism of reflection collapses into the monism of reflex, where cosmopolitanism supplants nationalism, and the family is fragmented by divorce, long-distance marriage, and the distancing effects of new communication technology on parents and children, it is possible to say that the domain of the social, as it was understood and experienced in early modernity, has largely disintegrated. In the new postsocial universe of late modernity, functions are no longer tied to roles but are managed in ad hoc fashion by subjects detached from first modern institutions. There is a general move to greater complexity and chaos, but the chaos is regularized at a higher level. This involves, in part, what Lash refers to as "a normalization that institutionalizes abnormality,"[27] a process of institutionalizing the exceptional rather than the normal. These are the general changes that can be termed the "death of the social" in the era of late modernity.

Promise and peril in the risk society

What would an existentialist appraisal of the social configurations of the risk society indicate about our collective human prospects in era of the second modernity? One theme in existentialist thought that is clearly missing from Beck's and Giddens' assessment is attention to the moral and emotional implications of people's confrontation with the consequences of reflexive modernization. While both theorists emphasize the contradictory mix of threat and liberation that conditions life in the risk society, neither is particularly attuned to the terror that both of these experiences produce in most people. In contemplating the broad range of global dangers that confront us in the twenty-first century, from the threat of environmental catastrophe, pandemic disease, nuclear annihilation, financial panics, and terrorist attacks, most of us understandably harbor deep fears about what global tragedy we may witness or experience on

[27] Lash, op. cit, p. 52, 2003.

any given day. At the same time, the loosening of structural ties between individuals and first modern institutions and the subsequent confrontation with seemingly infinite choices in how we manage our lives is also a potential source of terror. In a context in which daily living requires that we come to terms with the logic of flows in order to insure our survival, Marx's famous phrase "all that is solid melts into air"[28] aptly describes a kind of horrifying weightlessness that characterizes the lived experience of growing numbers of people. What existentialists would ask about this experience of "normal chaos"[29] and "ontological insecurity"[30] is "how do people respond to these conditions and how do these responses contribute either to the destruction or emancipation of the human spirit?"

First, it is clear that individuals exposed to the unpredictable flows of the risk society are likely to respond in many different ways. One response that has acquired great geopolitical importance in recent years is the move to re-legitimize tradition in the wake of its steady erosion under the conditions of reflexive modernization. Giddens describes this response as a two-pronged movement in which defenders of tradition either justify it by acknowledging the plurality of worldviews and then argue that traditions have value within that plurality or by embracing reactionary moves to fundamentalist orientations that reject any form of critical scrutiny and assert "formulaic truth without regard to consequences."[31] From an existentialist standpoint, the conservative/fundamentalist response is particularly destructive of human freedom, representing little more than a cowardly retreat into what Nietzsche called the "slave morality." According to Nietzsche, individuals subscribing to such moralities become so thoroughly domesticated that they lose all capacity for creative expression and uniqueness and

[28] K. Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1964.
[29] U. Beck and E. Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, Cambridge, MA: Polity, 1995.
[30] Giddens, op. cit., 1994.
[31] Giddens, op. cit., p. 100, 1994.

ultimately succumb to the "herd instinct of obedience."[32] Their moral judgments are guided by the ethical/emotional sense of *ressentiment*, in which one's suffering is given meaning by blaming others who then become the focus of imaginary revenge. What may be most destructive about the desire to reclaim tradition, however, is its link to a deep-seated hatred for the world that actually exists. For Nietzsche, this hatred is "a product of nay-saying and negativity, a symptom of the resentment of individuals who cannot live fully in the actual world."[33]

If neo-conservatism and fundamentalism define one general reaction to the normal chaos of the risk society, we also see a pronounced movement in the opposite direction, toward a positive acceptance of the principle that "anything goes." With its focus on nihilism as a response to the radical doubt engendered by modernism, existentialism calls attention to a moral and emotional issue that is curiously absent from the risk society perspective. While theorists of reflexive modernization emphasize the decline of structural determinacy and the expanding choices available to individuals freed of institutional constraints, they rarely acknowledge the feelings of "lack" or "absence" that these conditions generate. In the midst of the "pandemonium of free spirits," it is not surprising that many people experience a profound loss of meaning and develop a cynical stance towards all systems of value and truth. This state of mindless drifting and general indifference supports the sense that everything is permitted but nothing is particularly inspiring. For Nietzsche, these conditions are emblematic of the cultural exhaustion that is taking place in Western societies after an extended history of rationalization. His anticipation of the contemporary shift to reflexive agency is strikingly revealed in the following passage:

> The entire West has lost those instincts out of which institutions grow, out of which the *future* grows. … One lives for today, one lives very fast—one lives very irresponsibly: it

[32] Antonio, op. cit., p. 7.
[33] Guignon and Pereboom, op. cit., p. 108.

> is precisely this which one calls "freedom." That which *makes* institutions institutions is despised, hated, rejected: whenever the word "authority" is so much as heard one believes oneself in danger of a new slavery.[34]

With the decline of normative controls and legitimate authority, behavior increasingly "follows the grooves of habit, organizational routine, and mass culture or is simply disoriented."[35]

As an observer of late nineteenth century social life, Nietzsche could not have imagined what the nihilist response would look like at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Had he been able to glimpse this late modern strategy for living, he would have likely regarded it as another slave system no less destructive than the slave morality of conservatism and fundamentalism. Contemporary nihilists not only follow the grooves of habit and organizational routine in their work life, they commit levels of time and energy to these routines that are unmatched by workers in past decades.[36] Long hours at work and forsaken vacations do not reflect necessarily any special meaning and value assigned to one's occupational or professional status. Rather, commitment to work is justified by a basic desire to maximize one's economic resources for participating in the mediated world of consumer culture. Today's nihilists work hard in order to consume more, not because the commodities they acquire have intrinsic value for them but because they are a source of fleeting stimulation or part of a continuous flow of status signifiers. Indeed, the value of all things, including objects, ideas, relationships, experiences, or any other tangible resource, are ultimately reduced to commodity exchange value, since everything is for sale in the late modern marketplace. The nihilist orientation even extends beyond that which is commodified to the actual *advertising* of commodities as consumers become sophisticated interpreters of print ads and television commercials and cease to be moved by standard advertising appeals. This fuels a spiral of new advertising approaches,

[34] Nietzsche, 1968a: 93-94 as quoted in Anotonio, op. cit., p. 9.
[35] Antonio, op. cit., p. 9.
[36] See Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt, 2005 for empirical documentation of increasing demands on U.S. workers.

which at each turn seeks to incorporate the cynical interpretations of previous approaches into the new format. In the most recent turn in this process, print and electronic advertising abandon all pretense of making a logical case for the superiority of a product and lapse into complete incoherence as a way to attract the consumer's attention.

In what sense is this shift to consumer-driven nihilism a destructive force rather than a liberating one? To be free of institutional constraints and normative controls would seem to create new opportunities for self-development, interpersonal exploration, and structural innovation and yet the lives of late modern nihilists appear to be distinguished most by increasing unidimensionality. The enslaving nature of the "work to consume" lifestyle leaves little room for the development of one's individual and interpersonal powers: people work more only to be able to spend more. And as traditional normative constraints on spending habits are relaxed and spending actually exceeds many workers' earning capacity, they become even more tightly bound to their jobs by the weight of their mounting personal debt. Although reflexive modernization creates greater *potential* for multidimensional self-development, this potential remains unrealized for most people in the consumer culture of late capitalism.

Whether one seeks to escape late modern anxiety by finding refuge in early modern traditions or by embracing the one-dimensional lifestyles of the consumer nihilists, there is little possibility for individual freedom in either of these responses to the immense uncertainties of the risk society. Although existentialists confronting the institutional dislocations of other periods have argued for immersion in intense emotional experience as way to achieve deep insight into one's moral predicament, even this avenue of self exploration has been cut off in a market system that has extended the commodification process into the affective dimension. In late capitalism, powerful emotional experiences can be purchased just as easily as a pair of shoes or a

box of cereal, particularly with the rapid development of media technology in recent decades. Consequently, the reflexive value of intense affective experience has been cheapened by the same market processes that have devalued most other sources of meaning in consumer culture.

In short, an existentialist interpretation of the changes in structure and agency that characterize the risk society seems to cast doubt on a key premise of the reflexive modernization thesis: whatever liberating potential may be found in the greater range of choices available to people in the risk society, this freedom of choice is overridden by the delimiting consequences of the dominant lifestyle responses to the uncertainties of the present age. In this analysis, the increasing importance of risk as a system-level imperative is not only reflected in the growing likelihood of human-made global disasters, it has also inspired individual-level responses to the new uncertainties in the direction of increasingly unidimensional lifestyles, comparable in many ways to Herbert Marcuse's "one-dimensional man" complex.[37] However, the picture may not be as bleak as it first appears. By contextualizing risk in ways not previously considered by risk society theorists and incorporating the concept of "edgework" into the framework, I will demonstrate how the type of emancipatory experience envisioned by existentialists does in fact emerge within the risk society.

Corporal transaction, life-world, and system in the risk society

The analysis can be expanded at this point by linking it to an ongoing theoretical project that offers a way to explore in greater depth the relevance of existentialist themes to the conditions of social life in the second modernity. This theoretical project consists of an effort to

[37] H. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964.

reformulate Jurgen Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action (TCA)[38] by deepening the theory's connection to ideas associated with the American pragmatism tradition and by incorporating the human body into the framework. The reformulation has yielded an approach that Lyng and Franks designate as the Theory of Corporeal Transaction.[39]

Space limitations preclude a detailed description of the Theory of Corporeal Transaction (TCT) here, so I will discuss only those elements of the framework directly relevant to the present focus on the existentialist dilemmas posed by the risk society. The crucial concepts for dealing with this problem are captured by Habermas's distinction between the 'life-world' and 'system.' Although Habermas employs these concepts as key conceptual devices for synthesizing a broad range of social theories, including phenomenology, pragmatism, semiotics, and various versions of systems theory, the impressive synthesis accomplished by TCA is deeply rooted in a rationalist ontology that some pragmatists find troubling. For example, Shalin, Halton, and a number of other pragmatist critics of Habermas criticize the privileging consciousness and discursive practices in TCA.[40] This approach is problematic because it employs a conception of reason that "has no obvious relation to the human body and noncognitive processes (emotions, feelings, sentiments)."[41]

In an effort to address this problem, Lyng and Franks strengthen TCA's connection to the pragmatist ontology by substituting the notion of "corporeal transaction" for Habermas's

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[38]J. Habermas, J., *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1, Reason and the Realization of Society*, Boston: Beacon, 1984; J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 2, Life World and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Boston: Beacon, 1987.

[39] S. Lyng and D. Franks, *Sociology and the Real World,* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002; see also S. Lyng, 'Crime, edgework, and corporeal transaction,' *Theoretical Criminology*, 2004, vol. 8, 359-375.

[40] D. Shalin, 'Critical theory and the pragmatist challenge,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 1992, vol. 98, 237-279; E. Halton, *Bereft of Reason*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995; R. J., Antonio and D. Kellner, 'Communication, modernity, and democracy in Habermas and Dewey,' *Symbolic Interaction*, 1992, vol. 15, 154-163; H. Joas, 'An underestimated alternative: America and the limits of "critical theory,' *Symbolic Interaction*, 1992, vol. 15, 261-275;and D. Sciulli, 'Habermas, critical theory, and the relativistic predicament,' *Symbolic Interaction*, 1992, vol. 15, 299-313.

[41] Shalin, op. cit., p. 254.

"communicative action" in the action-theoretical framework.[42] With this alteration of the theory, analysis of the life-world can now be expanded beyond the exclusive focus on communicative action to consider other bodily transactions involved in a wide range of social practices in the realms of production, consumption, and social interaction. The transactional approach puts *embodied* actors at the center of the life-world, which allows us to see transacting bodies as the ontological foundation of the conflicting forms that constitute this domain.

With this conceptual modification, it is possible now to discern the key problem of the life-world as involving the need to discover ways to *terminate* the inherent *indeterminacy* of the body. This problem is implicated in the specific meaning that pragmatist give to the concept of "transaction." According to Dewey,[43] transaction can be understood as the actualization of intentions to alter a world that responds indifferently to these acts. The body's capacity for the manipulation of objects to achieve specific ends is the foundation of the doubled-edged process by which environmental objects are constituted and sensitivities and capacities of the organism are developed. Thus, the over-riding experience of the body is found in the dialectic between its subjective and objective aspects—the sense of both *being* a body and *having* a body simultaneously. Indeed, these two dimensions cannot be separated in actual experience because it is in the action of the body as subjective agent that we discover its ego-alien unpredictability. The latter experience—the sense of the body's objective contingency or indeterminate reality—forms the key problem for the embodied actor, a problem that can be addressed only through corporeal transactions in a world of objective resistance. Thus, corporeal transaction is

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[42] Lyng and Franks, op. cit., 2002.

[43] J. Dewey, *Knowing and the Known*, Boston, MA: Beacon, 1949; see also M. Emirbayer, 'Manifesto for a relational sociology,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 1997, vol. 103, 281-317; M. Emirbayer and A. Mische, 'What is agency?,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 1998, vol. 103, 962-1023.

the principle means by which human actors 'terminate indeterminacy' by bringing out some of the potentialities of the body and "render[ing] obscure its other possible determinations."[44]

In Habermas's TCA framework, increasing rationalization of social life in the evolution of modern societies eventually leads to the decoupling of the system and life-world, with the rationalization process taking different forms in each dimension.[45] However, with the conceptual shift to corporeal transaction in TCT, system rationalization of production, consumption, and interaction practices can now be seen as a process of *disembodying* these practices. That is, corporeal transactions directed by the rationalization imperative terminate the body's indeterminacy only in ways that reflect system needs and in doing so, narrowly inscribe bodies in accordance with the structural logics of prevailing work and disciplinary regimens, consumption practices, and patterns of enforcement. Since corporeal transactions shaped by the system are no longer specifically focused on the life-world problem of bodily contingency, the full range of potential terminations that can be explored in *embodied* production, consumption, and interaction are "rendered obscure." Thus, system colonization of the life-world, manifested concretely as the promotion of regimentation, conspicuous consumption, and enforcement, gives rise to distinct styles of body usage that reflect the different ways in which the system inscribes bodies. Following Arthur Frank, these body styles can be designated as the *disciplined body*, the *mirroring body*, and the *dominating body*, which accord with the production, consumption, and interaction practices, respectively.[46]

Framing the analysis of reflexive modernization and risk society in terms of TCT offers a way to further develop this analysis in some useful directions. First, it is possible now to orient

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[44] Shalin, op. cit., p. 258.
[45] Habermas, op. cit., p. 153-155, 1987.
[46] A. Frank, 'For a sociology of the body: an analytical review,' In *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, edited by Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth, and Bryan S. Turner. London: Sage Publications, 1995, pp. 36-102.

the risk society perspective to an embodied form of agency. Although it should be self-evident that human action involves most fundamentally the action of human bodies, the longstanding cognitive bias in social science has tended to obscure this fact. Moreover, as Scott Lash notes, the cognitive bias can also be found in Beck and Giddens's conceptualization of the key idea of "reflexivity."[47] What makes reflexivity possible for both Beck and Giddens are the flows of conceptual symbols that pass through the information structures of the risk society, whether these symbols arise in the sub-political critiques of the institutions of science (Beck) or they are mediated by "expert systems" such as psychology, psychoanalysis, and sociology (Giddens).

However, by employing the ideas of "corporal transaction" and "system colonization of the life-world" as developed in TCT, it is possible to understand the crucial role of the body in how people respond to the uncertainties of the risk society. In addition to Beck and Giddens's cognitive reflexivity in which information structures yield the cognitive categories that enable reflection on first modern institutions and roles, members of the risk society engage in embodied expressions of the nihilistic and fundamentalist responses to late modern uncertainties. On the one hand, the late modern nihilistic response of "working more to consume more" inscribes the *disciplined body* in routines of work and the *mirroring body* in consumption practices, even as worker/consumers adopt a cynical stance towards all existing systems of truth and value. On the other hand, material or ideological enforcement, which in the latter case can be expressed as a fundamentalist response of "asserting formulaic truth without regard for consequences," gives rise to a *dominating body* that seeks to eliminate contingency in the other by drawing on its own contingent nature to subordinate or destroy the other. Thus, each of these body styles refers to corporeal transactions emerging within the life-world, although each arises through system colonization of this domain.

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[47] Lash, op. cit., p. 111, 1994.

The second advantage of linking our analysis to TCT is that we now have a way to explore in more systematic terms how emancipation can be achieved in the risk society. To deal with this issue, we must return to Habermas's distinction between system and life-world and consider how these concepts figure into his emancipatory agenda. For Habermas, the force of reason in the modern era is a double-edge sword insofar as the rationalization process has differential effects on the system and life-world. While he is deeply committed to the modernist project and its promise of liberation through reason and rational discourse, Habermas is also attentive to the subversion of reason by "systematically distorted" communications of the "money-bound," media-steered" system.[48] In this respect, he is indebted to Max Weber whose analysis of reason gave prominent attention to the triumph of formal rationality over substantive rationality. Reason may have its roots in the historical development of a system becoming increasingly dominated by formal rationality, but this historical process also transforms the life-world by creating universal discursive standards for the collective discussion of social issues. Such discussions take place within "ideal speech situations," where "only reason should have force" in mediating issues of truth, justice, and authenticity.[49] Thus, the ideal speech situation is an environment in which appeals to established custom eventually give way to procedural rules for achieving communicative rationality. In this sense, Habermas sees rationalized communicative action within the life-world as an emancipating force that counters the influence of the instrumental-rationality of the system.

Although TCT's reformulation of Habermas's framework is based on an alternative conceptualization of the life-world, it is also possible to envision a further reformulation based on a different conceptualization of the system. As we have seen, Habermas's indebtedness to the

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[48] Habermas, op. cit., pp. 256-282, 1987.
[49] J. Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, Boston, MA: Beacon, 1970, p. 7.

classical canon leads him to identify formal rationality as the central imperative of the system. But what if Beck and Giddens are correct in asserting that we have entered into a second modern era increasingly dominated by the logic of risk? In this conceptualization of the system, risk calculation emerges out of instrumental rationality, since "risks arise precisely from the triumph of the instrumentally rational order."[50] Thus, the new system imperative involves a form of risk consciousness that treats unpredictability as "cognizable through probabilistic calculation."[51] As Lash points out, "[t]he risk society is … not so much about the distribution of 'bads' or dangers as about a mode of conduct centered on risk."[52] This way of conceptualizing the central structural logic of the system therefore shifts the focus away from the "systematically distorted communications" at issue in Habermas's treatment of the system to Beck's concern with the "unanticipated consequences" of risk calculation and action involved in the implementation of scientific and technological programs.

Our principal concern here, however, is gauging the impact of the emergence of risk consciousness and agency on corporeal transaction and the life-world. To be sure, Beck and Giddens and their collaborators have devoted significant attention to how life-world institutions have been either created or transformed by the unanticipated consequences of the risk society, even though they do not make use of the conceptual distinction between "system" and "life-world" specifically. What remains to be addressed however is how risk consciousness has affected corporeal transactions involved in dealing with uncertainty, i.e., people's embodied orientation toward, and encounter with, uncertainty. As the system compels social actors take on new risks and responsibilities by becoming "probabilistic calculating subjects," they develop a

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[50]U. Beck, 'The reinvention of politics: towards a theory of reflexive modernization,' in U. Beck, A. Giddens and Scott Lash (eds.) *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994, p.9.
[51] Lash, op. cit., pp. 140, 1994.
[52] Lash, op. cit., pp. 141, 1994

certain familiarity with the experience of uncertainty and an expanding faith in their abilities as individuals to effectively managed it. Thus, in the transition from pre-modern to first modern societies, we witness a basic transformation in the general stance towards uncertainty. While uncertainty is experienced as hazards and natural disasters that are unpredictable and divinely determined in pre-industrial high culture, uncertainty is conceptualized in terms of rationality and risk in early modern culture and is seen as manageable through either scientific knowledge or financial compensation mediated by insurance. Thus, in the early modern context, voluntary risk taking emerges as a semi-institutionalized practice.

What we find in the evolution of the life-world during the first modern era, then, is the growing influence of risk consciousness and agency on corporeal transaction, a process that is comparable to Habermas's conception of the rationalization of communicative action. Of course, the *system* is also affected by the expanding impact of risk consciousness and agency, with this process transforming purposive-rationality at the system level and unleashing the *disembodying* forces that deform the corporeal transactions of the life-world. This process assumes a particularly virulent form in the transition to the second modern era, as first modern institutions steadily erode and the "secondary institutions" of the market and welfare state[53] exercise greater control over the individual. Thus, the colonization of the life-world by these system imperatives serves to severely restrict the possibilities for terminating the indeterminacies of the body. This can be seen in the styles of body usage that emerge within the life-world under the influence of the colonization process—the disciplined, mirroring, and dominating bodies mentioned above—each of which terminates corporeal contingency in a narrow way consistent with system demands in the spheres of production, consumption, and interaction.

[53] Beck's conceptualization of "secondary institutions" is roughly equivalent to the work/consumption patterns identified above in describing the late modern nihilist lifestyle. See Beck, op. cit., p. 131, 1992.

Standing in opposition to these "deformed," narrowly defined body styles, however, is an embodied practice that expands the range of possible terminations of corporeal contingency, a practice that emerges as a direct consequence of the new willingness to embrace risk. Voluntary risk taking assumes special significance in the late modern "risk society" as increasing numbers of people who possess overwhelming confidence in their capacities to manage risky situations are drawn to the risk taking experience. What they discover in this experience is a new way to achieve self-empowerment and transcendence. Thus, I propose that voluntary risk taking experience—or what can be termed as the "edgework" experience—is the key to understanding the distinctly late modern form of emancipation. Once again, the structure of this argument parallels Habermas's approach in TCA: while he sees the rationalization of communicative action creating the possibility for free and open communication within the ideal speech situation, it is asserted here that the shaping of corporeal transaction by risk consciousness/action generates the possibility for free agency within the edgework experience. Thus, while Habermas's approach to emancipation focuses on "speech acts," the present approach is concerned with "embodied experience"; and while his analytical reference point and political objective is "free communication," the emphasis here is on the existentialist conception of "free agency." As we will see next, examining the nature of edgework activities as an expression of risk consciousness/ action within the life-world will reveal how free agency is achieved through a form of self- and ontological reflexivity that can only be experienced at the edge.

Edgework and the will to power

The concept of edgework applies to voluntary risk taking behavior in various domains of social life, including extreme sports,[54] dangerous occupations,[55] high risk finance,[56] and even

[54]J. Ferrell, D. Milovanovic, and S. Lyng, 'Edgework, media practices, and the elongation of meaning,' *Theoretical Criminology*, 2001, vol. 5, 177-202.

certain forms of street crime.[57] By highlighting the significance of a consequential edge or boundary condition in extreme risk taking, the edgework concept can account for the distinctive experiential characteristics of many high-risk endeavors. Researchers have paid particular attention to the sensual pleasures and aesthetic arousal experienced by edgework participants. In all such activities, one confronts an "other-world" experience consisting of time and space implosions, where time passes either much faster or slower than normal and spatial boundaries collapse as the edge is approached. This gives a "hyperreal" quality to edgework activities, which are experienced as more "authentic" than everyday reality. The feelings of authenticity are accompanied by a sense that the experience is ineffable—words cannot adequately describe what it's like to negotiate the edge.

Edgework typically produces a sense of self-determination or self-actualization. The heightened sense of self represents another dimension of the "authentic" character of edgework experiences: in addition to confronting an exaggerated, transcendent reality, edgeworkers also experience a sense of self that they regard as their authentic or "true" self. They emphasize the innate capacity of their bodies to respond creatively, appropriately, immediately, and automatically in life-and-death conditions. Thus, edgework skills are regarded as non-cognitive and fully embodied in nature.[58]

The analytical power of the edgework idea derives from its usefulness for understanding the ontological foundations of the unusual experiential patterns described here. The concept

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[55] J. Lois,'Gender and emotion management in the stages of edgework,'in S. Lyng (ed.) *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk Taking,* New York: Routledge, 2005, pp. 177-152.
[56] D. Zwick, 'Where the action is: Internet stock trading as edgework,' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication,* 2005, vol. 11, (electronic file).
[57] J. Katz, *Seductions of Crime*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 1988; P. O'Malley and S. Mugford, 'Crime, excitement, and modernity,'in G. Barak (ed.) *Varieties of Criminology*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994, pp. 189-211; W. J.Miller, 'Adolescents on the edge: the sensual side of delinquency,' in S. Lyng (ed.) *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk Taking,* New York: Routledge, 2005, pp. 153-171.
[58] L.Wacquant, 'The pugilistic point of view: how boxers think and feel about their trade,' *Theory and Society*, 1995, vol. 24, 489-535; Lyng, opt. cit., 2004.

calls attention to the importance of consequential "edges" or "boundaries" in the emergence of these powerful sensations and perceptions. As revealed in the work of well-known social theorists like Victor Turner, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze ,[59] approaching, managing, and crossing edges or "limits," in the context of either collective ritual or private exploration, often generate powerful experiences that may include instances of personal transcendence and transformation. Moreover, edgework sensations and perceptions become more intense as they move closer to the critical line between order and disorder. Consequently, participants in high-risk endeavors often try to get as close to the edge as possible without actually crossing it.[60]

In a recent effort to orient edgework to the risk society model, I have suggested that the edgework experience may represent a special form of reflexivity.[61] Lash points out that Beck and Giddens conceptualize reflexivity in terms of what can be called "structural" and "self" reflexivity.[62] Structural reflexivity is best understood as "agency, set free from the constraints of social structure, [which] then reflects on the 'rules' and 'resources' of such structure." By contrast, self-reflexivity designates a reflexive subject who makes an object of itself—"agency reflect[ing] on itself" in the form of self-monitoring and self-construction. While both forms of reflexivity distinguish Giddens' "new social universe of action and experience" dominated by uncertainty and risk, reflexivity achieved in edgework is realized at a much deeper level than the reflexive processes described by Beck and Giddens. The distinctive edgework perceptions and sensations described above are consequences of a type of "ontological reflexivity" attained by

[59] V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969; M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1977; see also J. Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1993; G. Deleuze, *Negotiations,* New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
[60] Lyng, op. cit., 1990.
[61] S. Lyng, 'Risk-taking in sport: edgework and reflexive community' in K. Young, and M. Atkinson (eds.) *Tribal Play: Subcultural Journeys Through Sport,* Atkinson. New York: Elsevier Ltd., forthcoming, 83-109.
[62] Lash, op. cit., p.115, 1994.

those who venture close to the edge in high risk activities. Ontological reflexivity refers to deep perception that extends well beyond structural “rules and resources” and focuses on the nature of reality itself—the socially constructed categories of time and space normally taken-for-granted in people’s everyday experience.

An identical claim can be made for self-reflexivity as a dimension of anarchistic experience at the edge. Lash’s summary of Beck and Giddens’ work on self-reflexivity focuses on the historical shift from “heteronomous monitoring of agents” engaged in role performance to the self-monitoring or “autonomous monitoring of life narratives and love relationships.”[63] However, when we turn to the experience of self in edgework activities, we confront a form of self-reflexivity that involves much more than the autonomous monitoring of life narratives. The feelings of “self-determination” and “self-actualization” reported by edgeworkers point to a sense of self that cannot be consigned to a narrative structure. Actors experience agency in edgework as fully embodied and ineffable; and the self is empowered through externalization of previously undiscovered human capacities. Self-reflexivity in edgework is perhaps best captured by Michel Foucault’s description of the “limit experience,” which closely resembles edgework in most respects.[64] As Foucault describes it, this experience represents a form of self-creation, an “act of liberation” involving “work carried out on ourselves by ourselves as free beings.”[65]

By integrating the concept of edgework with ideas borrowed from pragmatism and the risk society perspective as part of the TCT reformulation of Habermasian critical theory, it is

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[63] Lash, op. cit., p. 116, 1994.
[64] See M. Foucault, ‘How an ‘experience-book’ is born.’ In R. Goldstein and J. Cascaito (trans.) *Remarks on Marx:Conversations with Duccio Trombadori,* New York, 1991. There are strong similarities between limit experience and edgework but also important differences. In limit experiences, the goal is movement *across* boundaries while in edgework the goal is to move *close to* boundaries without actually crossing them. Thus, limit experience is devoted to *transgression*, while edgework involves *transcendence*; See also S. Lyng, ‘Sociology at the edge: social theory and voluntary risk taking.’ In S. Lyng (ed.) *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk Taking*, New York: Routledge, 2005, pp. 17-49.
[65] M. Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon, 1984, p. 47.

now possible to envision the nature of emancipation in the late modern context. As risk consciousness and agency transform the system and life-world in the transition from first to second modernity, edgework emerges as a special zone of corporeal transaction where one experiences free agency in the form of self- and ontological reflexivity. In the process of negotiating consequential edges, one's spontaneous embodied (trans)actions are separated not only from existing institutional structures, but also from existing self-definitions and the cultural "consentient set"[66] employed in the social construction of reality. All of the distinctive sensations and perceptions of the edgework experience arise in this "space outside of culture" that individuals enter as they approach the edge. Alterations in the perception of time and space, the sense of mental control over environmental objects, and the ineffable nature of the experience are all due to the annihilation of the social mind and immediate projection of a contingent body into the flow of action. As edgeworkers "body forth" in responding to the threat at hand, they experience the indeterminacy of the natural world in completely novel ways—"terminating indeterminacy" in ways that breach the cultural consentient set with which they normally construct reality. They discover "authentic" selves rooted in the objective uncertainty of their bodies and an alternative reality in which culturally defined time and space distinctions are dissolved and reconstructed. What is revealed in the experience of self- and ontological reflexivity at the edge is a form of liberation particularly attuned to the existentialist themes discussed above. While not all edgeworkers are proto-existentialists in search of meaningful experience, it is entirely plausible that the power of the edgework reality inspires a deep appreciation of "freedom" in the existentialist sense. To be set free from the social and cultural constraints involved in everyday problem solving and achieve direct personal authorship of one's

[66] For a discussion of this concept see G. H. Mead, 'Time,' in A. Strauss (ed.), *George Herbert Mead on Social Psychology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (1934) 1964, p. 341.

actions in edgework involves the singular experience of moving beyond the "facticity" of normal social existence. Thus, the sense of self-determination and authentic reality reported by edgeworkers arises through the kind of transcendent experience that existentialist see as the antidote to complacent absorption in society. As a profoundly emotional experience that involves embodied reflex rather than cognitive reflection, edgework offers deep insight into the conditions of our personal and collective existence.

But to fully understand the edgework experience, we must also take account of the overriding sense of empowerment involved in negotiating the edge. Thus, by "going beyond" what they presently are, edgeworkers exhibit the quality that Nietzsche termed the "will to power." They are drawn to the edge because it is the place where they can explore what Hunter S. Thompson has referred to as the "place of definitions."[67] In this sense, edgeworkers are akin to Nietzsche's "free spirits" or "overmen" who seek that which is "to be overcome." They are committed to the pursuit of spontaneous and creative action "in which the only goals are self-expansion, the multiplication of perspectives, and the ceaseless drive to overcome everything that has come to seem 'self-evident' and beyond dispute"[68]

Edgework, Ontological Reflexivity, and Reflexive Community

Finally in this last section, I offer some tentative suggestions about how we may relate the subcultural aspects of edgework practices to the preceding discussion of risk, uncertainty, and ontological reflexivity. In sketching this argument, I draw again on the work of Scott Lash, the critic and re-interpreter of Beck and Giddens' original conceptualization of risk society and reflexive modernization. As we shall see, Lash's idea of "reflexive community"[69] can be usefully applied to the various subcultural formations that typically build up around different

[67] H. Thompson, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*, New York, NY: Ballantine, 1966.
[68] Guignon and Pereboom, op. cit., p. 106.
[69] Lash, op. cit., pp. 147-168, 1994.

kinds of edgework activities.[70] Moreover, the incorporation of this concept into the present theoretical framework will yield additional insights about possibilities for emancipation in the risk society. It will allow us to further explore life-world patterns relating to the "cultural consumption of risk," which yield various "subcultural groups [that] mobilize risk as a tool for flouting convention and challenging authority."[71]

Lash's reflections on subcultures relate to his analysis of the experience of the "we" in the second modernity, which is stimulated by another deficit he finds in the risk society model as theorized by Beck and Giddens. He points out that the emphasis on the individualization process in this model seems to ignore ample evidence of a repressed "we" expressed in the patterns of ethnic cleansing, nationalist fragmentation in Eastern Europe and the former USSR, and the "emergent 'neo-tribalism' and ethnocentrism of ethical-aesthetic communities" (like eastern German neo-Nazi skinheads) in the second modernity.[72] These patterns indicate that the detraditionalization process has by no means eliminated all forms of community, although it is possible that the ontological foundations of community life have shifted.

Looking to the cultural studies literature, particularly Dick Hebdige's [73] writings on subculture, Lash finds a conceptualization of subculture that accords with the idea of *reflexive community*: "if we are 'thrown' into the collective meanings and practices of the being-in-the-world of simple community, we reflexively 'throw ourselves' into the communal world of youth subculture, as we decide to become involved in, or even with others come to have a hand in creating them."[74] Where Lash breaks with cultural studies, however, is in his rejection of this

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[70] See S. Lyng and D. A. Snow, 'Vocabularies of motive and high-risk behavior: the case of skydiving,' *Advances in Group Processes*, 1986, vol. 3, pp. 157-179; and especially Lyng, op. cit., 2008.
[71] G. Mythen, 'Reappraising the risk society thesis: telescopic sight or myopic vision,' *Current Sociology*, 2007, vol. 55, p. 801.
[72] Lash, op. cit., pp. 111 & 143, 1994.
[73] D. Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London: Methuen, 1979.
[74] Lash, op. cit., p. 147, 1994.

tradition's focus on the "bricolage" of disconnected signifiers (typically co-opted from existing styles) as a foundation of subcultural identity. For him, this focus on co-opted and reconfigured signif*iers* ignores the real basis of subcultures and communities, which are "shared meanings or shared signif*ieds*."[75]

If subcultures in the late modern era are reflexive because they are selected and/or created by their members, they offer their members a sense of community because they involved shared embodied practices and products on many different levels. To adequately convey this latter point, it is worth quoting Lash at length:

> Now community in any substantial sense must be 'worlded'. It must be rooted in shared meanings and background practices. These practices have purpose, have their own specific 'telos'. These practices involve other human beings. They also involve things, which are not 'objects' but '*Zeuge*', in Heidegger's sense—that is, tools, 'gear', including language and informational tools, which we dwell among and invest significantly with affect. Everyday activities in the 'we' are involved in the routine achievement of meaning; they are involved in the production of substantive goods, which themselves are also meanings. Though activities are guided by such substantive goods whose criteria are set internal to a given practice, this guiding is not by rules but by the example of such present and traditional practices.[76]

The elements of community that Lash identifies here relate very directly to edgework subcultures organized around "alternative sports."[77] There is no question about the purpose or "telos" that drives participants: the goal is to push the limits as much as possible, to manufacture a close encounter with the edge. These encounters often involve other people, as when skydivers do "relative work" in group formations[78] or when solo performers like BASE jumpers make and trade videos of their exploits.[79] An especially important part of alternative sports is the attention devoted to "gear." The preoccupation with equipment—inventing new technologies, modifying

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[75] Lash, op. cit., p. 148, 1994.
[76] Lash, op. cit., pp. 149-150, 1994.
[77] Lyng, op. cit., 2008.
[78] Lyng and Snow, op. cit., 1986.
[79] Ferrell et al., op. cit.

existing ones, discussing the virtues and limitations of various equipment configurations, and the like—is a practice that cuts across almost all varieties of extreme sport. Indeed, most practitioners feel a strong emotional attachment to their gear, as revealed in the almost reverent way that skydivers pack their canopies or surfers wax their boards or climbers organize their equipment. Distinctive language and informational tools are also important elements of extreme sport subcultures, since almost every alternative sport has created its own lexicon, collective oral and written knowledge tradition, and vocabulary of motive.[80] Where extreme sports clearly differ from most other expressions of community, however, is the special significance of affect to the central enterprise of the collectivity. As committed edgeworkers, participants must contend with the demands of confronting and managing strong emotions—fear, exhilaration, feelings of omnipotence, anomic terror, and disorientation. Thus, strong affect is one of the most important unifying experiences in extreme sports and other edgework communities.

What we see in these aspects of edgework subcultures are the foundations of an especially strong form of reflexive community in late modernity. However, I believe it is possible to identify an even deeper source of reflexivity and community in these subcultures that may help to explain the special attachment that many of these edgeworkers have to one another. In a further development of his ideas on reflexive community, Lash explores Pierre Bourdieu's approach to reflexivity in order to identify the sources of the "we" that are most difficult to observe. In Bourdieu's conceptualization, reflexivity refers to "the systematic uncovering of the unthought categories which themselves are preconditions of our more self-conscious (in this case, sociological) practices."[81] These "unthought categories" consist of predispositions, orientations, and habits that are deeply inscribed in the body, making up a shared "habitus" of

[80] See Lyng and Snow, op. cit.
[81] Lash, op. cit., p. 154, 1994.

routine practices and background activities. These elements of habitus are "the learned , yet unthought, techniques of the body—such as swimming, ways of walking, playing tennis—which [are also] foundational for conscious conduct."[82]

All of these elements of reflexive community can be found in edgework subcultures. However, these subcultures are reflexive in an additional sense. By choosing to join a collectivity dedicated to doing edgework, one not only acquires the habitus of a particular kind of risk-taker, but also the opportunity to *explore* this habitus through ontological reflexivity. Entering the zone of uncertainty at the edge allows one to confront the unthought categories that underpin collective practices and shared meanings. Reflection on these categories, not in the moment but in retrospect, puts the edgeworker in touch with the "hermeneutic knowledge"[83] that sustains the subculture and the broader culture that circumscribes that subculture. Thus, the achievement of ontological reflexivity in edgework produces a "substantive good" that becomes a profoundly important source of "we" sentiments among edgework devotees. Along with their shared telos, gear, language, informational tools, and affective experiences, they also share a substantive good in the form of hermeneutic knowledge that has been extricated from the realm of the taken-for-granted. While it may not be easy to talk about this knowledge (hence, the ineffable character of their edgework experiences), all members of these reflexive communities recognize their special status as regular visitors to the domain Hunter Thompson has described as "the place of definitions" at the edge.

Finally, I conclude this essay by posing this critical question: In what sense can we regard the type of reflexive community described here as a form of collective resistance to the colonization of the life-world by the system's disembodying imperatives? Or, to put it another

[82] Lash, op. cit., p. 155, 1994.
[83] Lash, op. cit., p. 157, 1994.

way, is it possible to see the expression of reflexive community in edgework subcultures as a means of achieving emancipation on a collective level? These are difficult questions to answer, especially if it is acknowledged that some edgework subcultures engage in risk-taking that clearly harms innocent parties (i.e., edgework involved in criminal activities or when the costs of failed edgework pursuits must be borne by those who did not assume the risks or by society at large). However, there is little doubt that achieving ontological reflexivity in edgework is an act of resistance to the most deep-seated social and cultural inscriptions of human minds and bodies. As noted in the first systematic treatment of the edgework phenomenon,[84] this form of voluntary risk taking is best understood as an expression of "experiential anarchy." In this sense, it represents a rejection of the existing order of things—even at the level of a socially constructed reality—and serves as a means of exploring new ways of being-in-the-world. As such, members of edgework communities share a connection to an experiential "countersystem" that is rooted in a radical form of embodiment. This countersystem functions both as a radical contrast to the disembodied experience of existing social and cultural life and an ontological starting point for recoupling of the system and life-world in institutional arrangements that create and sustain patterns of embodied labor, embodied consumption, and embodied interaction.

[84] Lyng, op. cit., 1990.