

Risky subjects: changing geographies of employment in the automobile industry

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This paper examines employment in the Canadian automobile industry in terms of Beck's (1992) Risk Society. We demonstrate that risk transcends terms of employment, to encompass injury, lay-off, and displacement. Work becomes increasingly risky with the blurring of employment relations within and among three geographic scales: the globe, the locale and the plant. We argue for an embodied account of the experience of risk which emphasizes the inscription of different temporal and spatial configurations of work on the body.

Key words: *Canada, automobile industry, risk, body, employment*

Introduction

This paper explores the spatiality of risk as it relates to employment. We examine the case of General Motors in St Catharines, Canada, in light of Beck's (1992) *Risk Society* and the discussion it has spawned within industrial geography. Beck's conceptualization of the relationship between risk and reflexive modernization provides a starting point for theorizing how GM workers experience changing employment relations. We begin by reviewing the literature on risk and employment, highlighting several areas where debate could usefully be extended. These include the production of risks in manufacturing, the multiple dimensions of risk, the bodily effects of working in a risk society, and the subjective experiences of risk. The case study that follows contributes to geographical literature on risk by demonstrating how workers experience risks emanating from the geographical scales of the global corporation, the locale, and the plant, and by illustrating how risks associated with different times and spaces are inscribed onto labouring bodies.

We draw from 55 two-hour interviews with GM workers and union representatives, conducted in 1995 and 1996. Approximately half the workers we

interviewed had worked in the foundry, one of four GM plants in St Catharines. The corporation's decision, in 1992, to close the foundry initiated a process whereby 2200 workers were either displaced to other plants in St Catharines or forced to accept early retirement packages. This displacement is a salient example of the multiple and layered dimensions of employment risk.

Risk and employment

Ulrich Beck's conceptualization of *Risk society* has focused debate on how employment relationships are increasingly subject to risk (Beck 1992; Allen and Henry 1997; Reimer 1998; Harvey 1998; Lash and Urry 1994). Beck defines risk as a 'systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself' (1992, 21). In reflexive modernization, hazards pervade all aspects of social life to an unprecedented degree. Risk society emerges not just from vulnerability to a growing range of risks, but is also constituted through subjects' understanding of their place in the world in terms of those risks. Thus, risk society produces, and is produced by, reflexive subjectification. Implicit is an 'occasionally evident

sense of self-critique—an awareness of [our] own self-censorship with respect to the overweening power and hubris of dominant institutions and discourses' (Lash and Wynne 1992, 7). This process of justification is simultaneously a:

- 1 constitutive element of risk, in that reconfiguring one's identity, and the reflexivity such a task requires, is itself hazardous and destabilizing;
- 2 consequence of risk, in that it emerges directly from the specific hazards and instabilities one encounters; and
- 3 way of responding to risks.

Beck includes employment among his examples of a shift towards advanced modernity—a risk society—in which 'the social production of *wealth* is systematically accompanied by the social production of *risks*' (1992, 19). Most discussion has focused on how work has 'lost many of its former assurances and protective functions' (Beck 1992, 140). Until the 1970s, lifelong and full-time employment constituted the basis for predicting the utilization of labour in the factory, as well as for planning individual life biographies. This system of full employment is now disintegrating. The hazards of unemployment have re-emerged as generalized underemployment, a trend that exemplifies Beck's statement that

the driving force in the class society can be summarised by the phrase: *I am hungry!* The movement set in motion by the risk society, on the other hand is expressed in the statement *I am afraid*. The *commonality of anxiety* takes the place of the commonality of need. (Beck 1992, 49)

We extend the debate on employment risk in four ways. First, most research has focused on the service sector, where 'Taylor's 'philosophy of dismemberment' is transferred . . . from the substantive aspects of labour to the temporal and contractual relations of employment' (Beck 1992, 147), exemplified by part-time, temporary, and outsourced work. Destandardized forms of labour are proliferating and risk has become encoded in the formal culture of the labour market, characterized by employers' treatment of labour as disposable and pliant (Beck 1992, 142). While couched in terms of flexibility, these forms of employment are better understood in terms of risk (Allen and Henry 1997, 182). The cases of contract cleaning, catering and security are often used to exemplify this new culture of risk, because they symptomize a trend towards more precarious forms

of employment (Beck 1992; Allen and Henry 1997; Reimer 1998; Harvey 1998). Contract workers confront greater arbitrariness in the terms, conditions and lengths of contracts. This is due to the process of tendering, whereby contracts change hands at short notice, leading to a continual repackaging of job descriptions, benefits, hours, and wages. Contract workers also face temporal and spatial distancing from the 'regular' workforce. They work 'in someone else's work place, under a different employer from that of the majority of people around [them]' (Allen and Henry 1997, 188). Their work often occurs outside regular working hours (i.e. cleaning), or is spatially isolated/invisible (i.e. catering). The multi-site organization of contract service firms makes it difficult for workers collectively to resist changes in their employment (Allen and Henry 1997). The example of the automobile industry demonstrates how risks implicit in contractualization extend to manufacturing.

Second, while the literature emphasizes the instability of terms and conditions of employment, Allen and Henry (1997) and Reimer (1998) argue that many risks are associated with work in the late twentieth century, including risk of displacement from one job to another within a plant, and from one factory to another within a corporation. Beck (1992, 142) notes a spatial deconcentration of labour whereby 'the place of the visible character of work, concentrated in factory halls and tall buildings, is taken by an invisible organisation of the firm'. There has been a shift away from the Taylorist objective grid of the shop floor toward a more subjective and flexible organization of the workplace (Lash and Urry 1994, 56). Boundaries between work and non-work become more fluid, and individuals more connected to distant locales (Hinchliffe 1997). Spatial instability operates across a number of scales. As Beck notes:

we are concerned with rationalisation of the *system*, which makes the seemingly ultra-stable organisational boundaries *within* and *between* plants, divisions, sectors, etc. appear malleable. The characteristic of the impending waves of rationalisation, then, is their *boundary-crossing* and *boundary-changing* potential. (Beck 1992, 217)

We illustrate how job displacement erodes the firm's geographical boundaries, with implications for growing risk.

Third, we demonstrate that changing employment conditions also bring increased risk of bodily injury

(Leslie and Butz 1998). Beck (1992, 143) states that 'working people's gains in sovereignty over their work may be combined with a privatisation of the physical and mental health risks of work through spatial flexibilisation of wage labour'. Contractual employment and bodily risk are linked, for example, although the form risk takes depends on the type of employment. While executives in contractual arrangements face fewer bodily risks, and may profit from riskier arrangements, contract cleaners frequently need two jobs to survive (Allen and Henry 1997, 194). This may lead to physical exhaustion and poverty, with consequences for mortality (Harvey 1998, 417). We address the need to examine the multiple bodily effects of working in a risk society.

Fourth, studies have tended to avoid close examination of employees' *experiences* of risk (although, see Reimer 1998). If, as Beck suggests, a central component of risk is subjectification through risk, then careful attention to the experiences and discourses through which workers are subjected to risk, and through which they respond, is essential (see Dore 1982). We address this issue of experience by examining how risk is linked to changes in identity, in order to show the ways that employees may characterize themselves as subjects whose share of the productive process is, increasingly, its risks and not its wealth.

Further, we argue that it is important to understand how experiences are embodied. Lash and Urry (1994, 32) state that Beck (1992) fails to employ a fully embodied notion of the self. For Beck (and also Giddens 1991) the subject reflexively controls bodies; the body is an object monitored by the subject. In contrast, Lash and Urry conceptualize the body as neither object nor subject, but rather as a fully constitutive element of self. By placing the body at the centre of the self, they also locate it at the centre of processes of risk and reflexivity. They 'displace the subject of reflexivity in the direction of the body' (Lash and Urry 1994, 46). The embodied nature of risk can be inferred from Harvey (1988, 406), who argues that risks associated with manufacturing employment are inextricably linked to 'how the exigencies of capitalist production push the limits of the working body . . . in a variety of different and often fundamentally contradictory directions'. Upon entering the factory, we discover a working body that has long been fragmented by the machinery and rhythm of industrialization (Callard 1998). Labour process studies, while not cast explicitly in terms of risk, emphasize the sheer bodily exigencies

of assembly work (Beynon 1973; Collinson 1992; Kamata 1982; Knights 1990).

Scaling the risky body

Armstrong argues that in the late twentieth century risks are understood as being located anywhere and everywhere (Armstrong 1993; Williams and Bendelow 1998). There has been a generalization and globalization of risk associated with the heightened global mobility of capital (Johns 1998, 254). Workers increasingly understand themselves to be labouring in a regime characterized less by particular flows of risk than by its full saturation. Understanding this generalization of risk involves exposing the connections among the scales of body, home, community, city, region, nation, and globe (Smith 1993). GM workers' experiences of risk are most closely associated with three spatial scales: the macro-scale of the corporation, geographies of displacement within a locale, and the micro-level individualization of risk.

First, the largest of these scales encompasses a general culture of insecurity emanating from the corporation. GM's strategy of whipsawing—pitting plant against plant with threats of closure—makes workers uncertain about their employment at the company, and connects them to distant locales. As a GM worker explained:

whipsawing is another form of intimidation . . . [it] is a race to the bottom. Were you, for example, to have two plants build the same product, they would come to both these companies and they'll say, 'we are going to offer you new work'. But in order to get that work we need certain concessions and . . . whoever gives them the lowest bid will get that work . . . generally it results in the closing of the other plant.

This signifies a spatial deconcentration of the context of employment. While employees previously saw themselves as working in a spatially discrete factory, they now conceptualize an invisible corporation transcending easily imagined boundaries: 'working for transnational corporations, they move where the money is . . . I don't know how *secure* [my job] is'.

Burawoy (1985) describes the recent emergence of a regime of hegemonic despotism, in which labour is increasingly vulnerable to capital's geographic mobility. This generates anxiety among workers reminiscent of nineteenth-century market despotism. Labour is 'defensively localised' as corporations pit locality against locality (Peck 1996, 237). Peck

(1996, 232) argues that the process of 'putting labour in its place' is inherently geographic. If space is the terrain in which capital searches for more profitable sites of accumulation, then place represents the rootedness of labour (Beynon and Hudson 1993).

Transnational corporations increasingly outsource labour, a move which blurs boundaries among corporations and places workers in direct competition with employees of other firms. For one worker

outsourcing is a way of keeping the little people little . . . forcing people to work on smaller pay cheques than you need to get by on. It cuts down on the jobs that are already within the plant, that are making fairly decent wages.

For GM employees, who find themselves competing for contracts with lower-paid and often non-unionized workers outside the corporation, the wages and working conditions won by their union become additional elements of employment risk. In some cases sub-contracting occurs within GM facilities. The St Catharines' components plant now makes parts for the American Axle Corporation:

it's one of the most unique situations, where we make parts that we sell to American Axle, so they can sell them back to General Motors . . . [now] you have two sets of bosses looking over your shoulder, so that creates . . . stress.

Thus, GM employees find themselves competing against GM workers and employees of sub-contractors at other locations, and also against employees of other companies inside their plant. The spatial boundaries between plants and between companies are blurring.

A powerful enactment of employment uncertainty occurred on 9 January 1995, when 26 000 job-seekers lined up to apply for jobs at the GM plant in Oshawa, Ontario. The two-day line-up was prompted by a rumour that GM would add a third shift. The company itself was vague about why it was collecting applications, and no applicants were hired. For many in St Catharines the line-up was a clear representation of how easily they can be replaced if they fail to shoulder the risks of working at GM. According to one participant, 'GM management sat in their ivory towers and laughed, "look at those idiots in sleeping bags out there all night". But those idiots are us. They're our brothers and sisters that need a job'. In this despotic system of labour control,

employers create continuous reminders of the consequences of not complying (Peck 1996).

Corporate strategies such as whipsawing, outsourcing and the line-up foreground the anxieties of manufacturing employment. The creation of a terrain of anxiety emanating from the macro-scale operates on individual bodies, and places them within a larger set of interactions with other bodies elsewhere:

different bodily qualities and modes of valuation (including respect for the bodily integrity of the labourer) achieved in different places are brought into a spatially-competitive environment through the circulation of capital. (Harvey 1998, 410)

For Burawoy

the new despotism is the 'rational' tyranny of capital mobility over the collective worker . . . the fear of being fired is replaced by the fear of capital flight, plant closure, transfer of operations, and plant disinvestment. (Burawoy 1985, 150)

No longer is concern focused on the firm's success from year to year, but rather on the rate of profit that may be obtained elsewhere: 'a spatial mode of calculation has displaced a temporal mode of calculation' (Peck 1996, 237).

Second, workers confront risks associated with dismantling boundaries internal to the locale. Until recently, workers in St Catharines were distributed among four main plants: two components plants, an engine plant and a foundry. Diverse working conditions existed among these environments. Employment risk became acute in 1992, when plans to close the foundry were announced. Many foundry workers could not face the prospect of displacement to line-tied work in other plants, and opted to retire: 'I know people that have quit because they are going to be put on another job [after] twenty-five years or whatever, [and] they are *scared*'. Rationalization schemes cross and change boundaries, contributing to greater spatial instability. These changes did not just impact foundry workers; everyone experienced greater levels of spatial and job insecurity. Many employees in other plants had less seniority than most foundry workers, and were laid off or transferred when foundry workers were displaced. This highlights workers' increasing vulnerability to job loss. Risk of lay-off has always been significant at GM, but was traditionally presumed to be a temporary setback in a 'job for life': 'One time when you got hired in the automotive industry, sure you got laid-off

and that was part of the job . . . the different lay-offs and the strikes, but generally . . . you were guaranteed your job for life'. Temporary shutdowns were an expected element of one's employment trajectory, but workers were almost always recalled (Smith 1999, 200; Beynon 1973, 163–87). However, risk of permanent lay-off is now a constant worry.

Closing the foundry was a strong statement for all employees, particularly as the operation had recently won an award for quality and was recognized as one of GM's more productive foundries. A displaced foundry worker said:

That did not make sense, that foundry closing. That foundry was an up-to-date foundry. It was more efficient than the American foundry that they deal with now, and all it took was just one guy in New York maybe, dealing with the stocks and the papers to say, 'hey, move it'.

GM's decision highlighted that employees could do a good job, and the plant could still be closed because of larger corporate imperatives. Many felt that the foundry closed simply because GM wanted to consolidate production at its larger US facilities. This made risk less predictable for employees.

The foundry's closure highlighted employees' vulnerability. As one worker argued:

that foundry closing was a clear message. Be scared or be out of work . . . We put out the best product. We were number one and we were proud of it. What's the best way to get at a proud man? Slap him where he works . . . What are you so proud of? We can close it like that.

A strong sense of betrayal was articulated by foundry workers:

We did everything management told us basically and the decision was still made to close our operations. And it's really hard to deal with. I mean you're dealing with the loss of your mates . . . the restructuring of the operation hurt a lot of people. And you're almost like a *displaced* person and that's how you feel . . . you don't want to complain too much because you've got to say, hey, I'm the lucky one. I got a job. You know, at least I . . . have a job. So how can you complain about your plant closing and you've got *displaced*?

Many employees are less concerned about the discrete economic consequences of job loss than about the ongoing anxieties associated with continual instability and uncertainty in the work place. It is

evident that workers increasingly understand their identities in terms of anxiety, disposability and fear; in short, in terms of risk. Moreover, displacement within the scale of a company's operations in a locale leads to a less spatially-bounded workplace; the once rigid factory doors have become more permeable.

Third, at the level of the shop floor, risk is increasingly individualized. What foundry workers experience as a spatial shift from foundry to other plants, everyone experiences as a shift through time towards a culture of instability in which they are pitted against one another. This is evident in a tendency to blame foundry workers rather than corporate strategy:

they [component plant employees] took it that we were taking their jobs, instead of it being GM . . . so I think that was the feeling of some of them . . . just the ownership of jobs . . . they felt threatened. So that was part of the fear.

It is also manifest in the prevailing attitude towards older workers, who are accused of keeping jobs from younger workers. One employee described his experience as follows:

I'm fifty, and I've got thirty-one years [in the plant], and they [other employees] think I should retire . . . in my own case my wife has had MS the last three years . . . and I've got two boys still in school, so I can't afford to retire.

In both cases workers are required to confront other workers as individuals, rather than as part of a community. According to Allen and Henry (1997, 184) risk has led to a 'new form of individualism whereby people fall back on their own resources to construct their own employment biographies'. This diminishes the possibility of a shared burden of risk, and the development of common strategies of resistance (Hoffmann and Waddington 1999).

As part of a larger package of work reorganization, GM is eliminating non value-added jobs, incorporating them into the duties of production workers. A worker summarized this shift by claiming that 'now you are *responsible* for your own work area. You are your own janitor. You are your own chip man. It's cutting out a lot of jobs in that respect. More satisfying? No'. This move increases risk of unemployment by cutting out jobs, and isolates workers into self-contained production units which require self-monitoring and the assumption of added responsibilities by production workers. It also prevents

the sharing of risk among co-workers. Additionally, the boundaries between spatially-discrete work stations have become blurred as employees' tasks are continually reconfigured.

The risks we have described manifest a general dispersal of risks from the macro-scale of corporate structure to progressively lower scales. The net winner is the transnational corporation. Each production location within the corporation becomes more vulnerable as it is pitted against other locations; each section within a location becomes more vulnerable as it is pitted against other sections; and each employee within a location becomes subject to greater risk.

Space/time and the layering of risk

Not only do working bodies experience risks associated with different geographical scales, but different spatial and temporal configurations of risk are layered on individual bodies. We describe how workers' spatial displacement from the foundry to other plants, and a commensurate shift to a new regime of lean production, is inscribed as a progressive layering of embodied risk.

While foundry workers have always laboured in a context of risk, the types of risk they encountered, and corporate responses to them, were quite different in the foundry than in the current environment. Foundry work encompassed more physically-demanding and less routinized labour than the components or engine plants. Workers were less line-tied, often worked in teams, and had longer breaks. Risks were associated mainly with periodic lay-offs, environmental hazards and serious injury; a qualitatively different context of risk than currently exists in the other plants, where repetitive strain injuries, management surveillance and outsourcing are more prevalent (Leslie and Butz 1998).

Injury was prominent in the foundry. However, injury-related risks appear to have been shared among workers rather than individualized, and were more recognized by the corporation. Management cooperated in workers' efforts to share risks:

Management treated us better because we did work that was probably not kosher with Health and Safety or Compensation. Management would give us little incentives and let us double up because there was heavy work, and it was better because you'd get time off the line. It wasn't like the ball and chain.

Another foundry worker claims that:

because conditions were so bad it made people stick together more... [management] actually expected people to take at least a day a week off. They always had enough extra people that you could blow a shift when you wanted and it was okay.

Although the foundry was hazardous, risks were reduced somewhat by management's willingness to recognize them and minimally compensate them. Risks were assumed to be bounded, and were incorporated into seniority calculations: foundry workers received a 30-year pension for 25 years of service.

However, the GM of today is not the automobile industry of yesterday, precisely because it follows the logic of individualization evident in contract services. Former foundry workers cope with a different context of bodily risk in the components plant:

in the foundry it was more like twisting the wrong way because it was heavy. Here it is repetitive. Like the first month I was there I was getting pains... that's what the job requires and if you can't do it, *somebody else will*. And that's how they've got you over there. Either you do it or you go home. Like a couple of friends of mine that had injuries in the foundry and they were working for years in the foundry and they never had a problem. They did fairly good work... but when they got to the components plant, they were told 'that was it'.

Another employee articulated a sense of helplessness in coping with old injuries in the new conditions of the engine plant:

I had an injury in the foundry, and it was overuse of a muscle group. The jobs were... not as repetitive as in the engine plant. In making the transition over, I tried to talk to the one supervisor with some common sense and tell him I was injured in the foundry and it would not make sense to be thrown right into the production system that they had there... They explained the nature of the work and how it was different and that there was no other option... even the medical department when I went to see them, the head nurse there suggested that if I don't like repetitive work I should quit GM.

Workers understand their new situation as part of GM's drive to make the workforce more flexible. While some aspects of flexibility—for example, just-in-time—may increase labour's bargaining power, the quote illustrates that in this case workers interpret flexibility as disposability (see also Kamata 1982, 210). Risk of injury was once accommodated within

the factory; now one either performs the required tasks or looks for employment outside GM. Foundry workers respond to both spatial and temporal changes in the company's attitudes to risk. Firstly, GM is less willing to calculate and compensate risks in the engine and components plants than they were in the foundry. Secondly, it is less likely to recognize risks in the current regime of lean production than in the past. The reluctance to accommodate or compensate risk relates to a growing sense of its incalculability as risk becomes less visible and less rooted to specific times and spaces. The dramatic upsurge in repetitive strain injuries (RSIs) is an important example of this incalculability. RSIs are difficult to diagnose, tend not to be linked to discrete events, and are perceived to be easily faked. Thus, 'it is becoming impossible to compensate those whose lives have been touched by those hazards, as their very calculability becomes problematised' (Lash and Wynne 1992, 2).

The bodily risks displaced foundry workers experience emerge from combining bodies constituted by a previous employment regime with a new set of bodily practices and requirements. The risks encountered in the new environment take their form in relation to the bodies workers bring from elsewhere. Foundry workers' experience of risk is both embodied (risk is marked on the body in terms of injury) and discursive (risk is represented, understood, and normalized in discursive practices imposed on and created by workers).

Conclusion

In this paper we relate the experiences of automobile workers at General Motors in St Catharines, Canada, to recent debate on employment risk spawned by Beck's (1992) *Risk Society*. Most contributions to date, while arguing for the generality of Beck's understanding of employment risk, have focused empirically on the contract service sector. Our analysis extends the debate to include manufacturing employment. In the automobile industry risks are highly associated with job displacement and injury, as well as the terms and conditions of employment. Existing risk literature has also neglected an empirical examination of workers' experiences of risk. Our focus on experience indicates the fully embodied nature of working in a risk society.

This analysis contributes to literature on the spatiality of employment risk in two ways. First, we illustrate the scaled nature of risk. Labouring bodies

are increasingly connected to processes operating within and across three main geographical scales: the globe, the locale, and the plant. Workers experience the blurring and fragmentation of boundaries among these scales as risk. Labouring bodies at each scale are pitted against one another, resulting in an individualized experience of risk. The systemic and generalized geographic context of risks makes them less calculable than in the past. Second, we demonstrate that risks emanating from processes linked to these scales are experienced as embodied. The risks of injury associated with the foundry were easily identified with specific times and places. When displaced to the new spatial and temporal regime of the engine and components plants, foundry workers confronted risks that were qualitatively different—incalculable, uncompensated, and less likely to be shared among workers. In addition, risks not immediately identifiable as bodily (e.g. lay-off, displacement, isolation) also inscribe layers of fear on the labouring body.

The process of restructuring at GM involves not just the retooling of old bodies and spaces, but also subjectivities. The reflexive radicalization of modernity is evident in GM workers' interpretations of recent work experiences. Paradoxically, however, the more subjects recognize their increasing requirement to shoulder greater realms of risk, the more they are subjectified through risk. Critical reflexivity produces risky subjects.

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