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# Theatres as risk societies: Performing artists balancing between artistic and economic risk

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how performing artists balance between economic and artistic risk-taking within the performing arts sector. The paper is based on a comparative study, including qualitative interviews with performing artists working in three different theatres in three different countries: England, Norway and the Netherlands. The paper discuss how different ways of organizing theatres and different theatre policy represent different systems of economic risk managing, and further how they facilitate artistic risk taking. The author identifies three different approaches to risk management in these three countries: a collectivization of risk, an institutionalization of risk and an individualization of risk. Theoretically, the paper makes use of, and criticizes the work sociology developed by Ulrich Becks and Richard Sennet, as well as welfare theory, including Esping-Andersen.

## 1. Introduction

In his seminal work, *The Brave New World of Work*, Ulrich Beck claims that work society has become a risk society, as the “Securities, certainties and clearly defined boundaries of the first modernity” is being replaced by “the insecurities, uncertainties and loss of boundaries in the second modernity” (Beck, 2000, p. 67ff). Several scholars have claimed that artists and creative workers are located in front of this transformation (Banks, 2007; Caves, 2000; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 2016; Menger, 2006).

In most writings on this new “risk society”, influential sociologists such as Beck (1992, 2000) and Giddens (1990, 1994) describe a society in which individuals living in a feeling of anxiety, vulnerability and uncertainty. People are seen to be highly aware of risk, and critical towards the institutions that produce them:

The emphasis in contemporary Western societies on the avoidance of risk is strongly associated with the ideal of the “civilised” body, an increasing desire to take control over one’s life, to rationalise and regulate the self and the body, to avoid the vicissitudes of fate (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002, p. 114).

In artistic work, the ideal is not to rationalise and regulate the self and the body. It is rather the opposite, artistic ideal includes immediacy, spontaneity, contemporality, scarification and irrationality (Heinich, 1996; Kris & Kurz, 1979 [1934]; Negus & Pickering, 2004; Røyseng, Mangset, & Borgen, 2007). According to these scholars, true artists do not avoid risk, they seek it.

In today’s creative discourse, artistic and economic risk taking tend to be mixed up in a large pot commonly known as creative labour. The new creative worker is flexible, autonomous and independently working in “a dazzling environment of creative autonomy, sensory stimulation and personal fulfilment” (Banks, 2007, p. 4). Risk taking thus becomes an ideal without necessarily

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defining what the definition of risk involves.

In this paper, I question this idealization of risk taking, and ask whether these two forms of risk are actually opposites. I also question the diagnostics and grand theories developed by Beck and Giddens through a comparative study of artists working in three different countries, holding three different political approaches to risk management. Even though artistic and economic risk-taking has been commonly addressed in studies of artistic work (Banks, 2007; Bourdieu, 1998; Campbell, 2005; Caves, 2000; Hesmondhalgh and Pratt, 2005; Lee, 2016; McRobbie, 2002, 2016; Menger, 2001; Oakley, 2009; Ryan, 1992; Santos, 1976), there are few comparative, cross-national studies analysing how artists manage risk within different political and organizational contexts. In this paper, I will analyse how different ways of organizing theatres and different theatre policies represent different approaches to risk management. I will then analyse how artists working in these theatres and these countries manage risk, both economically and artistically. Based on my findings, I question whether this “new world of work” in the creative sector is as much a result of political and managerial decisions as it is a “grand theory”.

### 1.1. Managing economic risk

Making money is not a goal in cultural production. This general insight, described by Bourdieu as the *economic world reversed* (Bourdieu, 1993), has been the basis of numerous empirical studies of the art field (Craig, 2007; Craig & Dubois, 2010; Gustavsson, Börjesson, & Edling, 2012; Nylander, 2014; Pinheiro & Dowd, 2009; Plattner, 1996; Røyseng et al., 2007; Scarborough, 2017). Scholars have defended, nuanced and criticized Bourdieu's claim on artists' motivation for work and the division between an autonomous and heteronomous pole in art production.

Still, even though Bourdieu claims that artists working close to the field of restricted production “denies economy” (1993:331), he would probably not disagree when Throsby (1994) and others claim that most artists still wish to achieve a steady income as an artist. The key point in Throsby's analysis of a work-preference model for artist behaviour is the fact that artists derive satisfaction from work itself, and not from the income they generate (1994). They constantly balance economic and artistic considerations, yet still emphasize the latter the most.

The field of cultural production is further characterized by a labour market in which the excess of artists is generally larger than the demand for artistic production (Abbing, 2002; Author et al., 2016; Casacuberta & Gandelman, 2012). Artistic work has therefore often been associated with considerable economic risk (Abbing, 2002; Author et al., 2016; McRobbie, 2016; Menger, 2006; Throsby, 2010).

Menger describes how artists have developed several ways of managing economic risk (2006). Artists can be supported by private sources, public sources or they can hold multiple jobs. Menger further emphasizes how artists often work in cooperative-like organizations where they are pooling and sharing their income. Within the performing arts, small organizations, like dancing companies or theatre ensembles, are examples of this. Theatre organization, and therefore theatre policy, is not solely about creating an environment for creative processes, it is also about governing and managing economic risk for the persons involved.

In general social policy, risk management and the governance of risk have been central in the development of modern welfare states. According to Andresen (1999, p. 33), Western societies have developed different ways of managing social risk: Briefly summarized, conservative states have relied on the corporative structures and the family, liberal states have relied on the market, while social democratic states have relied upon a strong nation-state governing risk for all the citizens.

In culture policy, risk management for artists has also been crucial. However, the degree of state interference has varied. In some countries, such as the Nordic countries, artists' labour conditions have been subject to an explicit cultural policy; in other countries, such as Britain, cultural policy has only caused some implicit effects on risk management for artists.

The three theatres I will present in this paper manage risk differently. I find the typology of Esping-Andersen relevant in this sense as the general, social welfare policy of each country seems to affect risk management for performing artists. The social democratic country of Norway manages risk largely on a state level, in Britain risk is addressed to the market and the single artist, while in the Netherlands, or at least in the Dutch case, risk is managed collectively.

### 1.2. Artistic ensembles as risk management collectives

The collective nature of theatre production makes this art form particularly interesting for a sociological analysis of risk. Besides, theatre production is one of the most complex art forms when it comes to the plenitude of social actors involved, as it also integrates several other art forms (Becker, 1984).

Today, there exists several ways of organizing theatres. These different ways of organizing theatre production represent important structural conditions for how artists manage risk. Even though the funding government rarely provides clear statements on how theatre shall be organized, their allocations of funding help in promoting and protecting certain forms of organizations. This also makes the theatre organization a part of cultural policy.

Dragan Klaic distinguishes between two primary models of public, none commercial, theatre production: repertory theatres and autonomous theatre groups (2013:37ff). Repertory theatres have been the dominant model for theatres in Europe and the UK, ever since Konstantin Stanislavsky founded the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898. Together with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, he developed a professional theatre company with an ensemble of actors and an ethos that encouraged collectivity (Klaic, 2013; Senelick, 2008). While private commercial theatres relied on some few star actors, the idea behind repertory theatres was an assumption that the company could sustain an ensemble of actors of different ages, capable of playing various roles, working and developing within the company for several years, maybe even for a lifetime. This made ensemble-based repertory theatres a safe working environment

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