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A three-day conference titled “Accidents and Emergencies: Welfare and Safety in Europe and North America, c.1750–2000” and organized by Mike Esbester (University of Portsmouth) and Tom Crook (Oxford Brookes University) was recently held at Oxford Brookes University. With funding from Oxford Brookes, the Centre for European and International Studies Research at the University of Portsmouth, the Economic History Society of the UK, and the Wellcome Trust, it brought together approximately forty-five historians, social scientists, and practitioners from across Europe and North America to discuss health, safety, and risk in a historical context. Following pre-distributed papers, discussions on a range of topics were spread over twelve panels, alongside two plenary discussions and a keynote lecture.

One focus of the conference was industrial health and safety through history, and the ways that practices of risk management have been marked by change and continuity over two-and-a-half centuries. This included such varied topics as shipbuilding, coal mining, munitions factories, and sewer gas, with much of the discussion suggesting that cultures of risk management long predate our current preoccupation with the subject. One of the benefits of such approaches was that with similar time frames though varied national contexts, a comparative transnational perspective was readily apparent, showing many similarities alongside some notable differences. Furthermore, these approaches were complemented by the involvement of practitioners from the field of health and safety—such as John Rimington, a former career civil servant and director-general of the

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UK Health and Safety Executive from 1983 to 1995—who could provide perspectives from their own working careers.

Elsewhere, there were excellent panels on the history of road safety and accident prevention outside of the workplace, which constituted another major theme of the conference. This was introduced by Bill Luckin’s (University of Bolton) excellent keynote plenary on the early, mostly pre-motorized nineteenth-century history of drunk driving in Britain, and the ineffectual legal attempts to tackle it. This sparked a debate about whether attempts at reform were hobbled by a fundamentally conservative culture of mobility and safety. Many of these themes were developed by later speakers, who focused on road-safety campaigns during the twentieth century, with talks on Poland, Britain, Canada, and Germany, among others. The mostly interwar and postwar time frames of these talks allowed for unusually focused discussions on the often very transnational approaches taken by practitioners of road safety through the twentieth century, shedding light on this poorly understood though highly influential field. This was further emphasized by Marjan Hagenzieker’s (Delft University) innovative approach, which sought to identify changing research trends in the English-speaking road-safety community over the twentieth century by quantitative analysis of the main road-safety research journals.

Alongside these panels, there were also those participants who approached the question of risk from the alternative perspectives of disease and public health, the role of financial markets in both managing and creating risks, and the role of the police and coercion in controlling risk. I contributed to a panel on “Policing Risk,” where the roles of surveillance and discipline more generally were discussed on both the empirical and theoretical levels. In the ensuing discussion, it was noted that historically, surveillance had often occurred across all levels of organizational hierarchies as a means of managing risk, in contrast to “big brother” and “panopticon” models of surveillance. Another panel, “Selling Risk and Safety,” raised questions about how insurance companies have sought to lessen risk in new industries like aviation, while other sectors like gambling have attempted to enhance it in the interests of entertainment and profit. Josef Lilljegren’s (Umeå University) paper on corporate-governance strategies in the interwar Swedish insurance industry stood out as another welcome foray into quantitative methodology, with an innovative data visualization approach.

This chimed well with Arwen Mohun’s (University of Delaware) plenary keynote speech, which made clear that risks could be both mitigated and also purposefully created, often for complex reasons concerning retaining agency, demonstrating leadership, or even entertainment. Taking a mostly historiographical and theoretical approach, Mohun traced the arrival of risk as a theme for historical discussion to the upheavals of the 1980s, while arguing that new approaches needed to be developed in order...
to move the discussion forward. The work of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens loomed large throughout the conference, and while acknowledging the debt owed to them, she noted that their arguments often rested on quasi-historical foundations that needed improvement. This meant developing the sometimes simplistic narratives of greedy capitalists and Whiggish progress toward health and safety reform and toward more nuanced histories of risk told from the ground up, noting the sometimes excessive focus on experts at the expense of other, less prestigious actors in the formulation of risk cultures. Mohun further highlighted the need for more quantitative approaches to the field, the better use of legal sources, and a more rigorous approach to transnational, comparative histories of risk, giving the examples of the railways and automobiles as highly suitable starting points.

The conference ended with a round-table session that brought together the practitioner-attendees for their assessments of the meeting. They were emphatic that there was a demand from policymakers and practitioners for histories of risk management, and that more channels needed to be established between these groups and academic specialists to facilitate this. Among the means suggested, engagement with groups like the King’s College London–based History & Policy unit was mentioned, along with better media training for historians. Offering an alternative perspective was Luckin, who argued that Britain was considerably behind the United States with respect to the level of engagement between policymakers and academics in this field.

At the time of this writing, there are plans for an edited collection of the papers presented at the conference, while the keynote speeches and the concluding round-table discussion are available as podcasts at http://www.pulse-project.org/node/568.