

## Refugee Risk Maps: The Anxious Cartography of Displaced Person Flows

Paul C. Adams  
University of Texas at Austin

Media often include maps of risk. These are more accurately seen as vehicles for the construction of risk, which is a matter of both perception and action. Risk lacks an autonomous existence outside of human perception and representation, but that does not make it a fiction. Rather, it is a discursive interpretation of certain conditions of the world, produced through processes of representation, then circulated through particular topologies of communication (including mass media and interpersonal media), and acted upon in ways that have real-world consequences. Insofar as collective and individual actions are rearranged in response to certain understandings of risk—either increasing or decreasing the potential for particular outcomes such as injuries, illnesses, accidents, loss of property, and death—and insofar as risks are conveyed at least partly through maps in the media, then “risk maps” are crucial to social processes.

Risk maps can be seen more abstractly as keys to several translations: translations between individual perceptions, collective communications (discourses), individual actions, and collective actions. One way to bring these together is to recognize that a risk map participates in the circulation of a certain readiness, an individual and collective inclination to act in certain ways. By preparing to act in a certain way (through framing risk in a particular way) people not only protect themselves and others, they also, inadvertently, contribute to certain types of hazards, disasters and chronic suffering. Therefore, the translation achieved by a particular shared construction of risk is not merely a protection mechanism. It is also a source of what may later be seen as a risks in their own right. An example would be preoccupation with “terrorism,” a perceived risk that justifies focusing billions of worker hours and trillions of dollars on projects such as “homeland security” and the “war on terror,” while distracting attention from vastly more prevalent causes of death such as obesity, lack of exercise, overuse of drugs and pharmaceuticals, vehicular accidents, suicide and gun violence. Here the social construction of risk achieves a strategic translation. It serves certain interests while submerging and silencing other interests.

Turning more specifically to the technicalities of mapping, themes that are typically captured in risk maps include severe weather, floods, droughts, wildfires, military conflicts, acts of terrorism, industrial accidents, and power outages. Among risk maps, one particular type of map occupies an awkward (and therefore quite theoretically compelling) position. A convenient term for this kind of map would be a “refugee risk map,” although not all of the people included in such maps may technically count as refugees. The people in question are in any case involuntary migrants fleeing risks to their own life, wellbeing, security and property. What is of interest here is how such persons are represented in maps that capture a sense of risk or threat. Refugee risk maps sometimes take the form of xenophobic imagery employing metaphors of invasion, contamination, and infection. Here the risk is the refugee while the party at risk is the “invaded” country. At other times such maps focus on concerns with the provision of food, shelter, medicine, clothing and other goods to displaced persons. In this case, the risk is something endured or faced by the refugee. Cartographically it may be hard to tell one type of map from the other, and this observation leads in turn to a critical approach that considers how maps carry

*affect*—in this case an anxious energy that draws on both types of risk: risks from refugees and risks to refugees.

Taking affect into account, a refugee map is an anxious map, one that resonates with the risk *of* the refugee and the risk *to* the refugee, at the same time. This ambivalence makes the refugee map an intriguing cultural artifact. To study this artifact, I will look at recent specimens from the United States as well as from various countries in Europe. In particular, I will compare maps produced in or circulated by news media and websites in Norway, Sweden, France, the UK and the US. Immigration and refugee issues have taken center stage recently in these various national cultures because of economic and political push factors which have caused notable spikes in demographic flows to these places. Because of recent Islamist attacks, the specter of terrorism is prevalent in American and European media, as well, adding to the anxiety with which displaced persons are viewed. It seems that societies are called on to choose between allowing distant strangers to escape from vague and hazy risks by coming into our midst, or protecting ourselves from the concrete and tangible risks incurred by the hostile aliens who exploit our hospitality for their evil purposes.

A cartographic gaze seems to adopt a remote, neutral, analytical perspective. In this case, the cartographic gaze on the risks of, and to, refugees is one that appears to shed personal questions and concerns. However, refugee risk maps remain deeply personal insofar as they convey a type of affect that is anxious. This cartographic anxiety is rooted in a sense of *risks of the Other*, which are rendered more poignant and perhaps even unescapable, because of the manifest *risks to the Other*.