Book review

No fear? Growing up in a risk averse society, by Tim Gill, London, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2007, 94 pp., £8.50, ISBN 978-1-903080-08-5

No Fear? Growing up in a risk averse society is a report written by Tim Gill for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation outlining the recent approach that the UK has taken to childhood and risk. As such, the report puts forward a strong argument on the issue to an audience that is wider than academia and this is reflected in the style of the writing. Specifically focusing on the 5–11 age group, Gill argues that the UK's obsession with eradicating risk from children's lives is actually detrimental to their development as individuals. This argument is illustrated using a number of case studies: public playgrounds, antisocial behaviour, bullying, child protection and fear of strangers. Some of the reasons behind these risk adverse attitudes and practices are then considered, followed by suggestions for alternative ways forward for policy makers.

The introduction to the book (Chapter 1) draws briefly on ideas from the new social studies of childhood, to point to the way that children in the past were often assumed to have greater resilience to life than they are now. Despite claims that children are growing up more quickly, Gill argues that they experience less personal autonomy than previously. This is due to more and more restrictions from adults, aimed primarily to protect children from what are perceived as ever-increasing risks to their safety. The two processes identified as contributing to these developments include concerns about compensation claims and an over-protective state. Gill highlights a number of cases that have been made in favour of children taking risks as part of their normal development, including the need to learn to manage risk and the building of character and personality through encountering risky situations. He also draws on research with children and young people to show the extent to which they value autonomy and opportunities to experience risk. The book joins a number of other works on children and childhood in geography that have highlighted risk aversion tendencies in Western societies (e.g., Valentine 2004, Katz 2008) and as such the general argument is difficult to dispute. However, Gill's decision to limit his analysis of risk to children as a homogeneous group, regardless of their social background and identity (see p. 15), is more open to criticism.

Gill's particular focus on playgrounds (Chapter 2) is used effectively to illustrate some of the ideas in his main thesis. He shows through the use of statistics and quantitative research how the figures on child injuries and fatalities in public playgrounds, compared to road traffic accidents involving children, do not warrant the vast amount of money spent on soft safety surfaces. Gill explains how such measures can arise when emotive campaigns are allowed to influence rational decision-making, and how these can actually be detrimental to children's safety when they then take more risks as a result of perceived security. Although

the author states that qualitative research on the benefits of play is more open to methodological challenge than quantitative research (see p. 17), more references to child-centred empirical studies would have strengthened the argument in this section. The following case studies on anti-social behaviour, bullying, fear of strangers and online risk (Chapter 3) demonstrate a similar approach, although the section on anti-social behaviour sits uncomfortably with the rest, focusing more on children as risks, rather than risks to children. The case studies outline ways in which disproportionate responses to perceived risks for children in different contexts can work to restrict their autonomy and development or even reduce safety. Again, more references to research studies may have highlighted some of the missing complexity in areas such as bullying, where social identities such as gender, disability, ethnicity and sexuality are essential for making sense of children's experiences.

The next chapter (Chapter 4) focuses on reasons behind the development of a risk adverse society and takes a more balanced approach to the use of supporting evidence, perhaps because the area necessarily draws on the voices of adults rather than children. Gill discusses some of the factors influencing the behaviour of parents, teachers, practitioners and the media to explain approaches to children and risk. These factors include complying with norms and expectations about 'good parenting', avoiding excessive health and safety bureaucracy for school trips, trying to free up more time in the school day for test and examination preparation, and creating a climate of fear in order to sell more newspapers. What becomes apparent is a situation where complex and mutually-reinforcing processes have led to a general culture of risk aversion for children in UK society. In the final part of the book (Chapter 5), Gill suggests a number of ways of combating this culture, through the adoption of a philosophy of resilience rather than protection across children's services. He particularly highlights the contribution that children themselves might make to this process. One of the most interesting and more radical parts of this chapter, which may be of particular interest to geographers, is the section on child-friendly communities. Drawing on examples from other European countries, Gill points to the role of urban planning and design in creating safe child-centred environments, such as public parks, streets and traffic routes, which allow for children to take reasonable risks and develop their autonomy.

In summary, the book offers a very good overview of many of the issues surrounding children and risk in the UK. It is particularly strong on its references to facts, figures and organisations, and its focus on legislation and policy contexts. However, because of the nature of the intended audience, academic readers may find its limited scope and reference to research studies necessitate further reading on the subject. It therefore offers more of an introductory-style contribution to the children's geographies literature.

References

Katz, C., 2008. Childhood as spectacle: relays of anxiety and the reconfiguration of the child. *Cultural Geographies*, 15 (5), 5–17.

Valentine, G., 2004. *Public space and the culture of childhood*. London: Ashgate.

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