INTRODUCTION

Among the various approaches to analyzing people's attitudes to risks, technologies, and their managing institutions, one can see two fundamentally different metaphysics from which nearly all approaches originate. By metaphysics I mean a closed loop—a cosmology—of taken-for-granted views of human nature, social interaction, public life, rationality, values, and ways of observing which confirm our founding assumptions and faiths.

Many modern analysts take it for granted that individuals are discrete beings, morally insulated from their social context and holding integrated values which are complete and more or less stable. Thus people's values are assumed to be scientifically observable, solid, clear (or, at least, capable of being "clarified") and able to be factored into clusters. This usually also entails the view that people interact according to clear-cut self-interests which they are busy optimizing. Social life is just a calculus of rational individual self-interested material optimality. The methods of observation of these aspects of human nature and social behaviour reflect and confirm their basic metaphysics.

An alternative approach—which I confess to find more congenial and plausible, and which I shall use in this paper—is the opposite of all the aspects listed above. Thus people are assumed to be intrinsically social, down to their very identity and "values." Their identity and values are formed by social interaction (which does not mean they are plastic and so present social interactions to the neglect of history, socialization, basic elements of cultural context, etc.). According to this view, human nature is always essentially incomplete, and values are intrinsically vague, unfinished, and available to some significant extent to social negotiation and definition (which is sometimes called "clarification"). On
this view, ambiguity in values can be seen as a rational
defense against being inflexible and pinned down when social
and other uncertainties would rationally require flexibility.
The methodological counterpart is that "scientific" methods,
for all their power and precision, capture only one dimension
of the way values and attitudes form. Furthermore, they may be
no less laden with essentially unproven and metaphysical
commitments than other approaches, which may, like the
anthropologist's, draw upon a richly varied repertoire of
sources of data. The apparently ill-disciplined, often
anecdotal character of such observations and data may be worth
as much serious attention as the "scientific" methods currently
fashionable. Borrowing the words of a famous beer
advertisement, this approach may reach the parts that other
buys never dreamed existed. In this paper I will attempt to
develop the recent argument that rigorous pursuit of the
perception of risks leads us toward a political and cultural
view of technology as a social institution and indeed as social
process. I will then relate this to a sociological, even
psychoanalytical, interpretation of attitudes by suggesting
that we view technology as a cultural process. I argue that
only with this analytical approach to technology can we take
seriously the question of public perceptions of risks in
technology-dominated societies.

TECHNOLOGY, NATURE, AND CULTURE

Just as there are political implications in the way nature is
defined, there are also political implications in the way
"technology" is defined. Although there is an apparently
irresistible urge to use terms like Nature, Culture, and
Technology as if they were unitary entities (and perhaps this
is always the fate of potent social symbols), public policy
reflection is better served by examining the origins and
implications of received definitions and their "interfaces."

There has been a long tradition of research on the social
negotiation of nature and its complex relationship with culture
(1). What Thompson refers to as an eternal circle of the
cultural construction of nature and the natural destruction of
culture (2), leads to the apparent conundrum of the cultural
destruction (via nature) of culture. The conundrum only
appears, however, if we give the floor to the received approach
to "Culture," which is to see it as a homogenous, monolithic
whole—Western Culture, Islamic Culture, Traditional Culture,
etc. By adopting a more modest notion of culture we can attend
to the contending differentiations within (and elements of