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**RISK SOCIETY**  
Towards a New Modernity

**ULRICH BECK**

translated by Mark Ritter



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## INTRODUCTION

Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* is already one of the most influential European works of social analysis in the late twentieth century. *Risikogesellschaft* was published in German in 1986. In its first five years it sold some 60,000 copies. Only a very few books in post-war social science have realized that sort of figure, and most of those have been textbooks. *Risk Society* is most definitely not a textbook. In the German speaking world – in terms of impact both across disciplines and on the lay public – comparison is probably best made with Habermas's *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, published in German some twenty-five years before Beck's book, though only released in English as *The Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989.

But Beck's book has had an enormous influence. First, it had little short of a meteoric impact on institutional social science. In 1990 the biannual conference of the German Sociological Association was entitled 'The Modernization of Modernization?' in oblique reference to Beck's thesis of reflexive modernization. *Risk Society* further played a leading role in the recasting of public debates in German ecological politics. Ulrich Beck is not just a social scientist but what the Germans call a *Schriftsteller*, a word that loses much of its meaning when translated into English as essayist or non-fiction writer. The personal and essayistic style of *Risikogesellschaft* – though it is a quite accessible book in the German – has made it an immensely difficult book to translate. And Mark Ritter, elsewhere a translator of Simmel, has done a heroic job here. Beck, as *Schriftsteller* and public sphere social scientist, writes regularly in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. There is no equivalent of this in the Anglo-American world, and one is reminded of a continental European tradition in which Walter Benjamin once wrote regularly for the same Frankfurt newspaper and Raymond Aron for *Le Figaro*.

This said, *Risk Society* consists of two central interrelated theses. One concerns reflexive modernization and the other the issue of risk. Let us address these sequentially.

### **Reflexive Modernization**

There is something apt in the above mentioned juxtaposition of Beck's work on risk society and Habermas's on the public sphere. In a very important way Habermas first gave bones in this early seminal work to what would later be his theory of *modernization*. Beck of course makes no claims to the sort of theoretical depth and weight that Habermas has

achieved. Yet his theory of reflexive modernization can potentially provide the foundation for the rejection and recasting of Habermas's notion of modernization as Enlightenment project.

Theories of 'simple' modernization, from Habermas to Marx to mainstream Parsonian sociology, all share a sort of utopic evolutionism, whether its motor be communicative rationality, the development of the means of production, or structural differentiation and functional integration. Beck sees another, darker dimension to such developments and especially in the constitutive role assigned to science and knowledge. For Beck the consequences of scientific and industrial development are a set of risks and hazards, the likes of which we have never previously faced. These dangers can, for example, no longer be limited in time – as future generations are affected. Their spatial consequences are equally not amenable to limitation – as they cross national boundaries. Unlike in an earlier modernity, no one can be held accountable for the hazards of the 'risk society'. Further, it is becoming impossible to compensate those whose lives have been touched by those hazards, as their very calculability becomes problematized.

Yet given this seemingly dystopian outcome of rationalization, Beck does not succumb to the pessimism of a Weber, or Foucault or Adorno. His claim is that these *effets pervers* of modernization can potentially be dealt with, not through the negation, but through the *radicalization* of such rationalization. In order for societies really to evolve, he maintains, modernization must become *reflexive*. This sort of reflexivity, for Beck, is not to be abstractly located in some sort of hypothetical ideal speech situation. It is already becoming operative in the critique of science developing not just in the Green movement, but in the broad masses of the lay public. This critique, expressed as it is in diverse forms, is reflexive and can lay a moral claim to rationality which is equal to that of modern science. In the public domain, science inexorably tends to refute itself as its culture of scientism creates false claims and expectations in society at large.

Though Beck's theory of reflexive modernization has its origins in the sociology and critique of scientific knowledge, it is applicable right through society. Modernization involves not just structural change, but a changing relationship between social structures and social agents. When modernization reaches a certain level, agents tend to become more individualized, that is, decreasingly constrained by structures. In effect structural change forces social actors to become progressively more free from structure. And for modernization successfully to advance, these agents must release themselves from structural constraint and actively shape the modernization process.

The historical passage from tradition to modernity was supposed to uncover a social world free of choice, individualism and liberal democracy, based on rational 'enlightened' self-interest. Yet the post-modern critique has exposed how modernity itself imposes constraints of

a traditional kind – culturally imposed, not freely chosen – around the quasi-religious modern icon of science. Its cultural form is scientism, which sociologists of science argue is an *intrinsic element* of science as public knowledge. The culture of scientism has in effect imposed identity upon social actors by demanding their identification with particular social institutions and their ideologies, notably in constructions of risk, but also in definitions of sanity, proper sexual behavior, and countless other ‘rational’ frames of modern social control.

Ulrich Beck’s origins are as a hard-working and – until recently – a not particularly celebrated sociologist specializing in research on industry and the family. For him, reflexive modernization is also proceeding in these spheres. Thus structural change in the private sphere results in the individualization of social agents who then are forced to make decisions about whether and whom they shall marry, whether they shall have children, what sort of sexual preference they might have. Individuals must then, free of these structures, reflexively construct their own biographies. In the sphere of work the process of structural change leads to individualization in two senses, through the decline first of class structure and second of the structural order of the Taylorist workplace. The resultant individualization again opens up a situation where individuals reflect upon and flexibly restructure the rules and resources of the workplace and of their leisure time.

The subtitle of Beck’s *Risk Society is Towards a New Modernity*. He is referring here to an essentially three-stage periodization of social change. This comprises first pre-modernity, then simple modernity, and finally reflexive modernity. On this view, modernity is very much coextensive with industrial society and the new reflexive modernity with the risk society. Industrial society and risk society are for Beck distinct social formations. The axial principle of industrial society is the distribution of goods, while that of the risk society is the distribution of ‘bads’ or dangers. Further, industrial society is structured through social classes while the risk society is individualized. Yet the risk society, Beck persists in maintaining, is still, and at the same time, an industrial society. And that is because it is mainly industry, in conjunction with science, that is involved in the creation of the risk society’s risks.

### **The Problem of Risk**

Risk has become an intellectual and political web across which thread many strands of discourse relating to the slow crisis of modernity and industrial society. Whilst the champions of post-modernity claim triumphantly that the cultural-political hegemony of scientism and its one-dimensional modernity is finished, others question how far this is true, let alone what the societal implications might be of rampant subjectivism in its post-modern form.

The dominant discourses of risk, for all they have taken on the trappings

of liberal pluralism, remain firmly instrumentalist and reductionist. To the extent that they allow other forms of experience such as public skepticism into their 'rational' modernist frame, they do so only on sufferance and not as a meeting with other legitimate forms of life.

Indeed the dominant risk paradigms have been able to surround themselves with the appearance (and self-delusion) of critical pluralistic debate and learning, through the growth of a plethora of disciplines, sub-disciplines and schools of thought vigorously competing for ascendancy and recognition in the interpretation and 'management' of the risks of modern technological society. Yet the critical force of all this fervent intellectual activity is radically and systematically constrained by its cultural heritage and unreflective idiom (not to mention its forms of patronage and institutional orientations). Risks are defined as the probabilities of physical harm due to given technological or other processes. Hence technical experts are given pole position to define agendas and impose bounding premises *a priori* on risk discourses.

A small group of sociologists and anthropologists from beyond the cultural pale of this hegemony have made three observations in particular. First, such physical risks are always created and effected in social systems, for example by organizations and institutions which are supposed to manage and control the risky activity. Second, the magnitude of the physical risks is therefore a direct function of the quality of social relations and processes. Third, the primary risk, even for the most technically intensive activities (indeed perhaps most especially for them), is therefore that of social dependency upon institutions and actors who may well be – and arguably are increasingly – alien, obscure and inaccessible to most people affected by the risks in question.

Thus the issues of trust and credibility have been raised in the risk field, in a way connected to the trust issue as discussed by Anthony Giddens and others in relation to late modernity and its problems. Yet the treatment of this novel dimension has been itself revealing, as the fuller depth of the problem has been reduced and coopted into the prevailing instrumental terms, as to how institutions can adapt procedures and self-presentation in order to secure or repair credibility, without fundamentally questioning the forms of power or social control involved. The modern sub-field of risk communication exemplifies this baneful defence against reflexivity. Although in the risk field the social dimension of trust has been proposed as crucial for ten years or more, this has been resisted and redefined; now the very different but convergent work of Beck and Giddens has reinforced it.

Reflexivity is excluded from the social and political interactions between experts and social groups over modern risks, because of the systematic assumption of realism in science. Contemporary examples abound. When farm workers claimed that herbicides were causing unacceptable health effects, the British government asked its Pesticides Advisory Committee to investigate. The PAC, composed largely of toxicologists, turned



tomatically to the scientific literature on laboratory toxicology of the chemicals in question. They concluded unequivocally that there was no risk. When the farm workers returned with an even thicker dossier of cases of medical harm, the PAC dismissed this as merely anecdotal, uncontrolled non-knowledge.

When they were forced by further public objections to return to the question, the PAC again asserted that there was no danger, but this time added an apparently minor, but actually crucial qualification. This was that there was no risk according to the science literature, so long as the herbicide was produced under the correct conditions (dioxins could be produced as contaminants by small variations in production process parameters) and used under the correct conditions. On this latter question the farm workers were the experts. They knew from experience that 'the correct conditions of use' were a scientists' fantasy – 'Cloud-cuckoo-land' behind the laboratory bench' as one farmers' representative put it. The instructions for use were frequently obliterated or lost, the proper spraying equipment was often unavailable, protective clothing was often inadequate, and weather conditions were frequently ignored in the pressure to get the spraying done.

The idealized model of the risk system, reflected in the scientists' exclusive focus on the laboratory knowledge, contained not only questionable physical assumptions but a naive model of that part of society. What is more it was deployed in effect as a social prescription, without any interest or negotiation over its validity or acceptability. The completely unreflective imposition of these bounding premises on the risk debate only polarized the issue around the realist distraction concerning the truth value of scientific propositions, and polemic about the alleged irrationality of the farm workers and corruption of scientists and regulatory institutions. A reflexive learning process would have recognized the conditions underpinning the scientific conclusions, drawn out the social situational questions which they implied, and examined these with the benefit *inter alia* of the different forms of knowledge held by people other than scientists. This reflexive learning process would have necessarily meant negotiation between different epistemologies and subcultural forms, amongst different discourses; and as such it would have entailed the development of the social or moral identities of the actors involved.

Even in the most apparently technical risk arenas, therefore, there is important sociological work to be done. With a few exceptions, sociologists have been timid and complacent in the face of this pervasive apologia for the (always temporary but incessantly extended) repair of modernity. Whilst from the well padded armchairs of the seminar rooms of Paris, modernity may appear dead and nearly buried, and reflexivity may be thriving as a collective form of discourse, the conditions of ordinary life for many may call this into question, both as a general account of the present and as a model of the future by diffusion outwards and (it seems) downwards from the vanguard intelligentsia.

Ulrich Beck is one of the few theoretically informed sociologists who have escaped this wider tendency towards timidity or complacent ethnocentrism, and grappled with some central dimensions of the role of risk discourses in structuring, reproducing and repairing the modernist historical project. The theme of reflexive modernization corresponds closely with the outline from the example above, of a reflexive learning process which could be advanced in contemporary risk conflicts instead of deepening the crisis of legitimation of modern institutions, locked as they are in their modernistic delusions. Whereas post-modernism implies the wholesale abandonment of scientific-instrumental modes of thought, and modernism grants them grotesquely inflated and unconditional power, reflexive modernization confronts and tries to accommodate the essential tension between human indeterminacy – as reflected in the incessant but always open attempt to renegotiate coherent narratives of identity – and the inevitable tendency to objectify and naturalize our institutional and cultural productions.

An important issue for sociologists and anthropologists which is raised by Beck's perspective concerns the sources of reflexivity. One approach is to conclude that the religion of science secularizes itself, is pushed through the barriers of its own precommitments by the impetus of criticism built into the social structure. This may seem unduly optimistic, though there is something to be retained here.

Another, widely influential view is that the intellectual class, radically marginalized and alienated from mainstream modernism, acts as the nucleus and vanguard of post-modern critique and reflexivity. This class fraction is seen as uniquely capable of sensing and articulating the new post-paradigmatic culture. However, a skeptical alternative, or at least qualification, to this self-congratulatory theory of intellectuals is suggested by looking more carefully at the discourses of non-intellectual lay public groups in risk conflicts. It is common to suppose that when there is no open public conflict about the risks of some technology, chemical or the like, this is evidence of positive public acceptance of the risks, or of the full social package of risk-technology-institutions. When public opposition emerges into political form, the questions are usually posed in terms of the factors which turned the public negative in its attitudes.

Yet more ethnographic fieldwork frequently shows that people were never particularly positive about the risks in question, or about their controlling institutions. They may not have expressed their criticism or dissent in public form, but that does not mean they were not chronically mistrustful of, skeptical of or alienated from those institutions supposed to be in control. They may simply have been resigned to dependency on that institutional or political nexus, with no perceived power to influence it or make it more accountable.

At this informal, pre-political level, people may well be articulating in their own semi-private social worlds, in their own vernacular, a strong

form of critique, whose reflexivity comes not from the critique *per se* but from the occasionally evident sense of self-critique – an awareness of their own self-censorship with respect to the overweening power and hubris of dominant institutions and discourses. This is to be seen in the ambivalence and social reference in what people are prepared to express as belief.

An example can be drawn from fieldwork with Cumbrian sheep farmers after the Chernobyl accident had rained radiocesium down on their fells. The persistence of the contamination way beyond the scientists' predictions led many to ask whether the contamination was not of longer standing – from the nearby Sellafield nuclear plant site. Despite the scientists' confident assertions that they could see a clear scientific difference between the radioactivity from these alternative sources, many farmers continued to express the view that Sellafield was also implicated and that this had been covered up. What is more, they could give cogent reasons competing with the scientists' claims, which had to be taken on trust.

Yet in-depth interviews revealed a profound ambivalence about what to believe, and a reluctance to express the anti-Sellafield view because, it seemed, this would contradict the cherished social and kinship networks which straddled farming families and work dependency on the local economic-technological juggernaut. Quite a number of farming families also have immediate sons, daughters, brothers and friends who work at Sellafield; often they work part-time on the farm and part-time at the nuclear plant. People are struggling to reconcile conflicting identities, fostered in different if overlapping social networks. Their ambivalence about responding to scientific assertion as to the source of the radioactive contamination reflected this multiplex social situation.

It would be possible to interpret this kind of multi-layered response as a form of 'private reflexivity' which must be the prior basis for its more public forms, if and when these develop (which is not inevitable). One would also expect the same private informal ambivalences and attenuated forms of self-reflection to be found within the dominant institutions of science and administration, an important difference being that these are more defended against such ambivalences being made transparent.

Beck's unusually broad-based approach to social constructions of risk and identity in late industrial society would be potentially a rich basis to examine these questions about the sources and social dynamics of forms of reflexivity with which to transform the project of modernism. Perhaps this will be the focus of future work for him, ourselves and others.

This introduction would not be complete without some mention of the remarkable parallel between Professor Beck's work and the recent work of Anthony Giddens. In *Consequences of Modernity* (1990) and *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), Giddens has developed themes around the distinctive form reflexivity takes in modernity; about risk and trust; and about the self-creation of identity in late modernity through the reflexive shaping of our own biographical narratives. More remarkable is the fact that, though Beck and Giddens have very recently come fully to

appreciate one another's contributions, the major part of this parallel development has been quite independent.

Further, Giddens and Beck write from very divergent backgrounds. The concepts of Giddens now as modernity analyst were already there in his work of the past fifteen years as general social theorist. Thus reflexive modernity for Giddens is very much based in his previous concept of the 'double hermeneutic'. And his notions of risk and trust are grounded in his previously developed notion of 'ontological security'. Finally, the origins of Giddens's theory of modernity lie largely in debates in very general and abstract social theory – in particular in his rejection of structural functionalism via notions of agency from ethnomethodology and Goffman. In contradistinction, Beck's theory stems from experience as a sociologist of institutions, on which he has built a macro-sociology of social change.

One last influence on Beck takes us back to the starting point of this introduction. Even German sociologist's *conscience collective* or even *inconscient collective* is fairly riddled with the assumptions and tenets of the work of Jürgen Habermas. And in the final analysis Beck, like Habermas, does understand social change to be a learning process. He opts, if not for rationality, for a sort of hyper-rationality. He is not the foe but the friend of modernization. But Habermas's benchmark theses on the public sphere were published thirty years ago. If critical theory had to operate in that heyday of the Keynesian welfare state in terms of the fulfillment of the Enlightenment project, times have changed. Today critical theory can no longer proceed on those terms. To operate in a transformed political culture which is at the same time localized – the world of the new (post-traditional) communitarianism, engaged in a seemingly ecumenical, though hopefully pluralist, process of globalization – a new critical theory is needed. Such a theory – if it is to help realize even some of the aims of the Enlightenment – must be reflexively critical and disruptive of the assumptions of the very project of the Enlightenment. In such lies the allure of Beck's work and the theory of reflexive modernization.

*Scott Lash*  
*Brian Wynne*