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Perspectives

Revisiting Risk Society

A Conversation with Ulrich Beck



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RCC Perspectives

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A Conversation with Ulrich Beck

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Agnes Kneitz, Cheryl Lousley, Uwe Lübken, Diana Mincyte,
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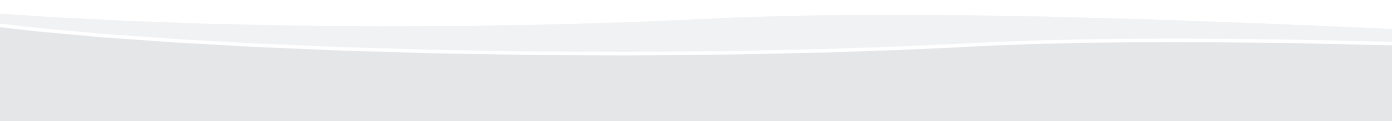
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Introduction

In the opening pages of his 1986 book, *Risk Society*, Ulrich Beck sketches the emergence of a new configuration of social relations, economic power, scientific expertise, and environmental problems that is organized around experiences and perceptions of the risks produced through modernization. Conceived a few years before Chernobyl, the publication of *Risk Society* could have not been timelier. The ensuing disaster in the Ukraine, risky food epidemics of the 1990s, and, more recently, the war on terror and the nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima have not only brought Beck's risk society to the fore in scholarly debates, but also propelled it to become one of the most cited concepts in public debates and institutional parlance. The twenty-fifth anniversary of the book's publication presents an opportunity to consider its lasting impact, and its place in environmental thought.

This set of individual reflections on risk society is an outcome of an interdisciplinary reading and film group composed of fellows and associates at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society at Ludwig Maximilian University (LMU) in Munich. Focusing on risk as an organizational topic and thematic issue, our meetings opened a forum to revisit and explore the broader implications of this theory for social relations, environmental politics, material agency, global connections, and their history. Ulrich Beck's work has resonated with our own research in multiple ways, and throughout our discussions we went back to the original texts to rethink the substantive and analytical insights that this concept has brought forth. Against this backdrop, our quest was to critically historicize the concept of risk society, considering how it might be a product of its particular time and place as well as what it means for public debate and scholarship in the early twenty-first century.

We are a diverse group, coming not only from different parts of the world, including Canada, Colombia, New Zealand, Germany, the United States, Lithuania, and the Netherlands, but also covering wide disciplinary grounds and interdisciplinary inquiries, such as geography, sociology, literary studies, history, and science and technology studies. We were drawn to the Rachel Carson Center because it was named for the woman whose rigorous and publicly minded scholarship made ecological health a global concern. Such diversity in our backgrounds has helped us to think beyond the singularity of risk society to acknowledging the vastly different ways in which risks manifest them-

selves and are experienced across space, social hierarchies, cultural and political borders, and in time. We also became acutely aware of disciplinary canons and how our own conceptions of risk society were set in disciplinary work.

Our reading group culminated in a meeting with Professor Beck in late July 2010 at the Center for Advanced Studies of the LMU, where we raised the questions and themes outlined below. Through an intense, inspiring, and fruitful exchange of ideas during reading groups and in our meeting with Professor Beck, we gained a more nuanced understanding of the term and explored the new directions in this field of inquiry. This issue of the RCC Perspectives is an accumulation of our thoughts and considerations. The text in the shaded inserts is taken directly from the conversation between Ulrich Beck and the authors at their meeting. We are grateful to Professor Beck for sharing his work and current projects with us, as well as for patiently answering our questions and engaging us in a productive conversation.

Lawrence Culver

Historicizing Risk

I was delighted to have the opportunity to meet Ulrich Beck, and to be able to ask him questions about his work. As a historian, I especially wanted to inquire about the chronological nature of his analysis, and that informed my questions for him: Do we have a more acute sense of global risk now than in the past? What is the *longue durée* of risk? Are we in risk society now?

Beck has written persuasively about the spreading awareness of risk, both in the 1980s in *Risk Society* and again in the early twenty-first century in *World at Risk*. This awareness and pervasiveness of risk as a global phenomenon is key to his definition of a risk society. With my questions, I hoped to gain a fuller understanding of the historical context for this risk society. In our discussion, Beck proposed some key hallmarks that for him separate our historical moment from earlier eras. First, he asserted that risk has escaped the control of institutions, yet that much of what preoccupies those same institutions is what Beck terms “manufactured risk”—risk amplified by a self-interested security state, for example. He also asserted that institutional efforts to control risk, as well as perceptions of risk, have been central to what he identifies as successive stages of modernity. In the “first” modernity, efforts were made to manage and “demoralize” risk. For example, a worker injured or killed in a factory in the late nineteenth century was considered “guilty” of the injuries he or she suffered—the corporation owning the factory claimed to be blameless. In the more recent “second” modernity, institutions attempt to manage risk by anticipating dangers that we individually have not—and hopefully will not—experience, with terrorism the most recent manifestation of this. Beck also uses the threat of climate change as another example of risk institutions have attempted to control, albeit with little success thus far.

While global climate change is clearly a dire risk—and one I am interested in placing in an analytical and historical context in my own work—I remain less convinced that this particular historical moment is by definition more risk-aware, or more of a risk society, than some other historical moments. To take just one example, what about the Cold War era? For the whole of that period, most notoriously during the Cuban missile crisis, many people feared that all of human civilization could be obliterated at

any moment. Beck convincingly discusses the “staging” of risk by institutions and the national security state in the post-9/11 era. Yet the “duck and cover” drills, urban evacuation plans, and endless displays of nuclear weaponry—particularly atomic testing in a variety of global locales—seems to me the staging of a far more urgent and potent risk than the relative tedium of an airport security line in the twenty-first century. This staging of risk and the mobilization of the state to prevent or prepare for calamity is certainly a hallmark of the post-9/11 era, but it is not new or unique. For that matter, while terrorism has become a global concern, even at its most destructive it cannot alone threaten global civilization with annihilation, no matter how much havoc it may be able to wreak in an individual locale.

Ulrich Beck on Manufactured Risk

Manufactured uncertainties are those kinds of risks that emerged as answers to the uncertainties introduced by modernity. They produce a wide range of risks. And science, even good science, even the *best* science, is always producing numerous alternative risks. This is the context in which what I call a “reflexive modernization” happens, because the consequences of radicalized modernization undermine the institutions of first modernity, and produce crisis inside those institutions. This is has not been formulated clearly in *Risk Society*, but it is its foundation. It is sociologically and politically important because environmental problems are not just environmental problems; they are induced by various kinds of conflicts in institutions, in movements, in families, in all kinds of contexts, and they open up alternatives to seemingly necessary modernization processes.

Climate change *is* a truly global risk, one that affects all people and is a product, Beck notes, of societal success—advances in technology and consumer capitalism resulted in the carbon dioxide, methane, and other emissions which are altering the planet’s climate. Here again, however, one can find similarities with an earlier era. The Cold War was itself the product of its own sort of success. For all of their differences, after 1945 the United States and USSR were able to dominate global affairs—and threaten the world with annihilation—because both states had successfully mobilized their

militaries and economies to win World War II. Their atomic arsenals were a product of their technological and economic power. The Cold War conflict between these two states and their allies was also a struggle to contain nuclear weapons within national and international institutions—treaties signed to limit the number or types of weapons each nation stockpiled, for example, or efforts to prevent a nuclear exchange triggered by a computer malfunction or miscommunication.

Yet climate change does not fit Beck's definitions of risk and a risk society as well as the Cold War does in retrospect. Climate change does not threaten all individuals or nations equally. Wealthy individuals and nations will have more resources at their disposal than poor ones. The government of Bavaria, for example, is already making plans to cope with predicted climate changes that will affect precipitation, snowmelt, and river flows from the Alps north to Munich and the rest of the state. Yet German state governments, and the national government, will have many more resources at their disposal than those in a poor nation. Likewise, large nations with a variety of climate zones, agricultural regions, and natural resources can adapt more readily to a shifting climate or rising seas than can a poor coastal nation such as Bangladesh, or small island nations that may disappear entirely. The risks posed by global warming may be universal, but their consequences will not be suffered equally.

Beck's formulation of risk is a useful and influential one, but it is also a societal and political phenomenon we can read into the past. If we are indeed now living in a risk society, we are not the first people to do so. If we are instead not yet quite in the risk society he proposes, then it has been a long time coming. The *longue durée* of risk may not extend into the distant past, but it does clearly predate our own historical moment. In any case, in our conversation, as in his books, Beck certainly has offered compelling claims for the problematic and central place of risk in human society.

Uwe Lübken

On the Role of Natural Hazards and Catastrophes.

Harriet Bulkeley has pointed out that “in risk society, risks arise not from a lack of modernity, as hazards associated with poverty and underdevelopment might be conceived, but rather as the side-effects of modernization.”¹ In fact, one might even label risk *the* modern (or postmodern?) condition. Natural hazards and natural catastrophes, however, have for a long time been viewed as pre-modern threats—as a danger located outside of society and thus as “Acts of God.”² Hence, it is hardly surprising that such events played no role at all in Ulrich Beck’s *Risk Society*. In his seminal work, Beck focused mainly on new, late-twentieth-century risks inherent in the use and operation of, for example, nuclear energy, chemical plants, or industrialized food supply.

Historically, however, the opposite has been the case. Hazards triggered by natural phenomena such as wind, water, or the movement of tectonic plates have to a large extent arisen out of processes of modernization. Many fire-prone forests, for example, are engineered landscapes and hence extremely vulnerable. In a similar vein, flood damages are not just the result of the unforeseen (and, at times, also unforeseeable) volatility of a river but also a consequence of the ever increasing utilization of floodplains for residential, industrial, commercial, and infrastructural purposes. While such catastrophic events have, of course, haunted societies for millennia, the damage patterns have changed fundamentally over the last two centuries as the result of industrialization, urbanization, and population growth. The exposure to and handling of natural hazards have also played a crucial role in the evolution of risky behavior and attitudes. Tellingly, one of the first significant applications of the risk principle was in navigation and trade—two fields that are strongly influenced by the vagaries of the natural environment. The origins of the insurance industry—one of the most important actors dealing with risk—go back to a contract between Genoese maritime traders in the fourteenth century. For a long time, the most profitable segment of the nascent business was fire insurance.³

1 Harriet Bulkeley, “Governing Climate Change: The Politics of Risk Society?” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, n.s., 26, no. 4 (2001): 432.

2 Theodore Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

3 Uwe Lübken and Christof Mauch, “Uncertain Environments: Natural Hazards, Risk, and Insurance in Historical Perspective,” *Environment and History* 17, no. 1 (2011): 1-12.

Within the field of disaster research, the insight that society is largely responsible for the molding of a particular catastrophe is decades old. “Floods are ‘acts of God,’ but flood losses are largely acts of man,” as Gilbert Fowler White summarized his research in his groundbreaking study on floods in the United States.⁴ Today, with the strong emphasis on the man-made aspects of disasters, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain any “natural” contribution at all. Still, despite these insights, society and especially the media have continued to treat natural catastrophes as something exogenous. Until the turn of the twentieth century, risk was associated with nuclear power plants, the disappearance of the ozone layer, and safety belts, rather than landslides or avalanches.

Ulrich Beck on Controlling Risk

Risk is about the possible consequences of decision in the sense of “good” and “bad” outcomes and about the distribution of “good” and “bad” for different people. We can see how the uncertainties produced by modernization are being anticipated and controlled by all kinds of institutions. Insurance is the key answer, and the institutionalization of insurance is very important. It can be followed through history; it is one of those historically interesting projects which reveals the stages of handling risk conflicts and reconsidering demoralizing risk contexts. It is a technical means of handling huge conflicts about the production of catastrophes. And this tells us that in history, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were all kinds of discussions which were similar to today’s discussions on the environment: discussions which said, for example, that the victim who had had an accident in a factory and whose arm was hurt, must have made a mistake himself, and that therefore he is responsible for it.

More recently, however, natural hazards and disasters have entered the theoretical scene of conceptualizing risk. The most important reason for this surprising turn is, of course, climate change. While one might argue that the fundamental characteristics of natural disasters have not (yet) changed, we certainly look at them in a different light

⁴ Gilbert F. White, *Human Adjustment to Floods: A Geographical Approach to the Flood Problem in the United States*, University of Chicago Geography Research Paper 29 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1945), 2.

today. No longer are such events being viewed as divine interventions (fundamental religious interpretations of more recent disasters are the exception rather than the rule). Rather, they are looked at as bellwethers and as a modern, secular form of prodigies—that is to say, as a window into the future workings of a world determined by totally new and possibly uncontrollable climatic conditions. The latter are—just like the then “new” risks of the late twentieth century—invisible, inescapable, and internal to the workings of society. With these qualities, natural hazards have become an essential part of the *World Risk Society*.

Stefania Gallini

Compressed Cosmopolitanization

I joined the reading and film group on risk run by some of the then-fellows and associates at the RCC in its very final stage, and in my first week at the Center. I was excited when I discovered that the group had arranged a meeting with one of the most outspoken social theorists of our modernity, and to have the opportunity to participate. Joining the reading group seemed just the right step to complete my introduction into the stimulating intellectual milieu of the RCC. It also promised to be an extremely exotic experience. I live in Bogotá, a megalopolis where the notion and practice of dealing with risk is an everyday experience. Daily risks can be minor events—like stepping into a sewer whilst walking along the street whose manhole has been stolen by “recyclers” interested in selling iron and indifferent to the fact that the manhole is not yet waste, although it is on the ground—or major fears, such as having your urban sector flooded, or being kidnapped for a “millionaire walk” (the nickname for a forced trip to withdraw money from however many cash machines your bank deposit allows for). Risk is such a common state of mind, and so intrinsic to the stereotypical image of Colombia from abroad that one governmental campaign puts it at the center of its promotional message aimed at tourists. “Visit Colombia. The Only Risk is that You May Want to Stay,” it announces. With my skin still damp from the Colombian awareness of risk, I found it rather bizarre to be in one of the safest cities on Earth, discussing *Risk Society* whilst seated in comfort in an imposing room in a very peaceful neighborhood.

Talking to an author adds another level to the reading of their work. It is an invaluable opportunity to add facial expressions to his or her written words. I am usually better at committing the former than the latter to my memory. For the interview, I intended to watch Beck's face on his concept of "cosmopolitanization." I wanted to understand to what extent a historian dedicated to the history of territories other than the Global North and to periods other than the twentieth century (by which I mean primarily *this* historian, myself) benefits from grappling with contemporary social theorists.

In *Risk Society*, and even more emphatically at the beginning of our inspiring talk with him, Beck refers to the "cosmopolitan moment" of world risk society, which prompts a "cosmopolitan imperative." Unlike multiculturalism or universalism (or globalism for that matter), "cosmopolitanism means the recognition of cultural otherness, both internally and externally."⁵ In our late modernity, this recognition is made possible by means of the reality of a common threat: "we are all trapped in a shared global space of threats—without exit."⁶ What we need then, Beck claims in our dialogue, is "methodological cosmopolitanism," a way of pinning down this cosmopolitanism. Similar to the Asian experience (think of the Asian tiger economies, Japan, even China) of compressed modernization, Beck maintains we are in need of "compressed cosmopolitanization" to work towards a world that will not just accept, but value, differences.

The concept of risk society is meant to be a sort of Grand Theory, a general interpretation of collective existences. As with any social theory, it is also strongly prescriptive. Compressed cosmopolitanization is not just a critical assessment of contemporary societies, but first and foremost a political exhortation. I can easily see why Beck inspired both social scientists dedicated to contemporary societies and political activists. But, is his theory as much of an inspiration if your (or indeed, my) field of interest is Latin America prior to the twentieth century? In other words, can the notion of shared risk as a kind of social glue help us interpret non-European and non-North American societies? Can cosmopolitanization be applied to a historical period other than our late modernity? How "universal" in time and space is Beck's theoretical proposal?

My question was driven by the observation of how modernization (industrialization, urbanization, and related processes that happened between the late eighteenth and

⁵ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992), 56.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Ulrich Beck on Undermining Power Relations

I think power is an issue, but it is not about who is in control or how power structures are reproduced. It is just the opposite, in my opinion. Global risk is the opposite to all of our theories, social theories developed in the nineteenth century that were preoccupied with reproduction. Reproduction of power, reproduction of capital, reproduction of structures. This is what we know. But it is global risk that is disturbing us. It is about structure, but much more than that, it is about new resources and new combinations of relations. The nation state is not the only agent any more. Science is not in charge of the power game anymore. This is what I call the meta-power game. It's a power game based on the rules of doubt and uncertainty. And this process is also open. This is why global risk is at the center of my research. I think we are not really prepared to deal with global risks and meta-power issues on a theoretical level, partially because we are deeply influenced by the Marxist tradition, which always believed that there is going to be progress and evolution. Since the second half of the nineteenth century people thought that the structures of power and capitalism are very flexible, and that they reproduced themselves in all kinds of ways, so we have only to look at the reproduction of power. And I think this is distracting us from the questions of global risk, for which we are not prepared. We are not prepared to deal with uncertainties and open fields.

early twentieth centuries) and cosmopolitanization (the complex change that ought to have accompanied them) are often associated in Beck's discourse. Historians know a bit about modernization. In particular, we learned that it did not shape uniform and homogenous modern societies. Electrification and vaccination campaigns, meat packing houses and the disciplined, industrial working class, urban public services and rural infrastructure programs, and all the countless faces of what social scientists labeled as "modernization" when compared across the world, from Norway to Brazil, constitute a patchwork of different socio-economic landscapes. Over the last decades, environmental historians have shown how this mixture of transformation and persistence also shaped natural landscapes. Here too, modernization meant mosaic-like development, where

high-modernist plantations coexisted with traditional (today we would say organic) agricultural family plots. Indeed, traditional and innovative technologies, old and new systems of belief, enduring and revolutionized power relations, traditional and subverted gender roles, new and ancient rules and institutions, and hybrid rather than uniform relationships between nature and society have coexisted for a long time in “modern” societies.

This historical experience and knowledge suggests that we need to be cautious with future expectations of the universal and uniform development of “compressed cosmopolitanization.” Since the cosmopolitan moment of our current world risk society can only be applied very unevenly (according to different cultural, political, and environmental settings), we should be trying to establish whether and how the concept of “compressed cosmopolitanization” can grasp this great diversity.

Gordon Winder

Market Solutions?

As an economic geographer, I am used to both assertions and critical analyses of the (putative) power and (un)intended effects of neo-liberal market solutions to risk; or, as Ulrich Beck would say, to security. Many of my colleagues are frightened by the transformative power of neoliberal marketization, and they seek to understand and oppose the power relations behind “free market solutions.” My own national economy was and is a testing ground for neoliberal doctrines, and often serves as an international exemplar for how to “make markets.” New Zealand’s society and environment undeniably bear the traces, for both good and ill, of a particular remaking of governmentality. I, myself, remain hostile to neoliberal reform agendas because of the new power constellations that they configure and the moralities they conjure with, but I have learned to keep an eye out for unexpected empowerments that may come with such agendas. While David Harvey has penned masterly explorations of the politico-economic dimensions of neoliberal governmentality,⁷ debate continues amongst economic geographers with

⁷ David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982); Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2006).

regard to the history, phases, and character of neoliberalism(s).⁸ In these debates, geography matters. For example, Chernobyl does not figure in New Zealand debates about risk or marketization, even though protests against French nuclear testing in the Pacific Ocean coincided with the New Zealand Labour Party's introduction of sweeping market reforms in the second half of the 1980s. Instead, neoliberal markets tend to be politically accepted and seen as potentially effective solutions to global risk society. This perspective places New Zealand governments in the vanguard of polities pushing forward carbon trading schemes among other market responses to climate change; though, in fact, New Zealand's overall performance in developing climate change policies has been disappointing.

Neoliberalism did not figure in Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* (1986). Perhaps the reactor disaster in Chernobyl fostered specific reactions in a West Germany made prosperous on the back of a technocratic, export-industry economy, but also made vulnerable to nuclear attack, nuclear power, and nuclear waste? Beck's own commitment to a civil society and public sphere is also evident here. At least the political trends Beck identifies seem to have been very different to those spawned by repeated nuclear bomb testing at Mururoa Atoll in an increasingly indebted New Zealand society, struggling to cope with agricultural protectionism and rising costs for energy, but refusing to embrace nuclear futures. To many New Zealanders, it seemed riskier to take shelter under the USA's nuclear umbrella than to try their luck with "free markets." So I thought it would be useful to explore the relations between economics and the futures of risk in Ulrich Beck's thinking, twenty-five years after the publication of *Risk Society* and not long after the apparent defeat in Copenhagen of economists' proposals to establish markets for environmental services in order to combat the environmental effects of economic growth. Does Ulrich Beck see neoliberal marketization as an opportunity to resolve the challenges posed by the global risk society?

Ulrich Beck's answer is an emphatic no. There is a contradiction between global risk and the market, one that undermines both the authority of the market and the First Modernity coalition between economic actors and the state designed to produce a

8 See Adam Tickell and Jamie Peck, "Making Global Rules: Globalization or Neoliberalization," in *Remaking the Global Economy*, eds. Jamie Peck and H.W. Yeung, (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 164-81; also Wendy Larner, "Neoliberalism?" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21, no. 5 (2003): 509-12; and Richard Le Heron, "Globalization, Governance and Post-structural Political Economy: Perspectives from Australasia," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 48, no. 1 (2007): 26-40.

security consensus. Global risks are breaking up the coalition, delegitimizing transnational corporations, and challenging the state's capabilities to manage environments, markets, and societies. At the same time, civil society is empowered, though this largely takes the form of power of information. Consumers are an increasingly important focus for the government-economy alliance. In our interview, Ulrich Beck referred to the oil continuously spewing into the Gulf of Mexico from BP's oil rig as a corrosive contaminant of faith in market pricing and government regulation of the global risk society. Beck conceives of economists as working to produce security for capital. Perhaps that is why they cannot offer the answer to the cosmopolitan good state. Even though Beck's cosmopolitan project envisions a new kind of society emerging through the undermining of neoliberal economic agendas (among other state-economy-capital initiatives), Beck's project is not the same as David Harvey's, something of which Beck is well aware.⁹

Having heard his answer to my question, I remain convinced that economic geographers are right to focus critical analysis on proposed market solutions to environmental risks. Expert knowledge and expert systems remain vitally important to identifying and managing risk, but the old coalition between bureaucrats, scientific experts, and economists—however de-legitimated by increasing risks—remains vigorous, as neoliberalism attests. It is under this rubric that a series of “market” solutions to climate change have been proposed, and they need to be taken seriously. An informed civil society needs to pay critical attention to both the science of risks and the market models being proposed. At the same time, I gained respect for Beck's own position in the debates. I understand his arguments, in the context of the cosmopolitan development that he advocates, for an everyday politics of mobilizing transnational initiatives in opposition to capital and state projects, without too many preconceived ideas about the direction that these politics will take. His cosmopolitan way seeks new understandings of the regional geographies of risk society politics that, in his view, necessarily transcend national borders.

9 Ulrich Beck recounted his experience of David Harvey's hostile reaction to his cosmopolitan politics at a lecture in London.

Gijs Mom

Playing with Risk

When sociologists call something new (as Ulrich Beck does in his *Risk Society*, or John Urry in his equally seminal publications on “mobilities”) my historical relativism starts to play up. But, looking back at this sequence of fellow-commentators I see now that I am not the only one: Uwe Lübken, Lawrence Culver, and Stefania Gallini have made similar remarks already. So (and bearing in mind that I was not present at the meeting with Ulrich Beck) I can concentrate in the following: on an element which comes to mind immediately if one tries to reconcile Beck and Urry, risk and mobility (especially automobility). What does risk society do with people, and how do people resolve the tensions emanating from a constant threat of annihilation? If we are to believe Beck, they become fearful, and darn serious. I am not sure that this “overemphasis on risk aversity”¹⁰ is the only possible response, although the “culture of fear”¹¹ which followed 9/11 forms an aspect of the “risk society” that would have deserved more attention if Beck’s book had been written a quarter century later.

But the history of mobility also illuminates two other possible responses to the ubiquitousness of risk. The first is what Norbert Elias has called *zivilisatorische Rindenbildung* (civilizational bark formation); learning to become hardened to the threatening impulses from the environment. The second is a flight forward: playing with risk, a heavily gendered practice which neither Beck nor Urry really take into account. Risk can be fun, the history of mobility tells us. The (gendered) lust of danger permeates the history of the automobile; from the thrill of running over chickens during the pioneering period around the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, through the hot-rodding that emerged in interwar America, to the yellow-chicken game in *Rebel Without A Cause*. The “bark formation” is there, too: the conviction that statistically one runs a high chance of being killed (and of killing someone else) has to be played down in order for the system of automotive mobility to function properly—the Flow Must Go On! Thrill, angst-lust, danger, and risk form the motivational cocktail that fuels extreme sports (Bavarian Alpine climbing among them) now that the car is becoming ever more domesticated towards the promise of zero-accident

10 Gabe Mythen, *Ulrich Beck: A Critical Introduction to the Risk Society* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 146.

11 Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear: Risk-taking and the Morality of Low Expectation* (London: Continuum, 2005).

traffic. It's true, I can't imagine a dare-devil flying over a smoldering Chernobyl just for the heck of it, but she would not be the first person to choose to dance on the volcano. What Ulrich Beck forgot, then, was the dancing...

Heike Egner

Enforced Cosmopolitanization and the Staging of Risks

On the imperative "Cooperate or Fail"

When I first came across Beck's initial book dealing with risk in 1986,¹² I was struck by the pessimistic view of societies living in conditions of not-knowing and uncertainty. Rereading parts of the book again some twenty years later, I could hardly resist the impression that it seems rather to reveal the anxiety of the author himself, who displays his feelings of helplessness in the face of all the threats to the society he describes, rather than presenting his readers with a detailed sharp analysis. In contrast, Beck's more recent publications offer an optimistic perspective on the possibilities to deal with global risks, such as climate change, on a global scale, which he encapsulates in the imperative "cooperate or fail." Based on a "democratization" of risk, which is his term for the probability that anybody, anywhere can be affected by the aftermath of some extreme event, he predicts the possibility (if not the necessity) of including the excluded "Other" in the considerations and decisions concerning risk. Furthermore, the necessity of including the "Other" would bring about an "enforced cosmopolitanization," which necessarily leads to the imperative of "cooperate or fail." The question that arises out of this argument has at least two dimensions:

Firstly: What is the basis for the assumption that there might be such a thing as a common understanding of global risk and global problems; that perspectives can be held in common, bridging the gaps of ideologies and religions; that solutions can be found that include the "Other?" Take, for example, the newly revisited debate on the use of nuclear energy following the catastrophic explosion in Fukushima in Japan in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami on 11 March 2011. There are quite different

12 *Risk Society* was first published in German as *Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986). The English translation was first published six years later in 1992.

Ulrich Beck on Enforced Cosmopolitanization

Our distinctions between “us” and “them,” or “us” and “the Other,” when concerned with the national and the international, with the local and the global, with micro and macro, are no longer functional. Therefore, it is an impure, enforced cosmopolitanization; not the old idea of cosmopolitanism, but a new imperative that we are facing in relation to global risk—an imperative which says “cooperate or fail.” You *have* to cooperate or fail, because it is a global issue. Therefore we have to produce new kinds of cooperative structures or we will *all* fail. To many people, this may be frightening, because the old distinctions no longer work, but it will bring with it new kinds of opportunities at the same time.

notions regarding whether nuclear energy production is a risk that could or should be taken, or whether this is a form of energy that should be abandoned. Germany, for instance, is currently taking a surprisingly strict position against nuclear energy, whereas Sweden, France, the United States, and even Japan are more moderate in their considerations. We can hardly refer to global consensus or even cooperation on the issue. Moreover, the current debate is driven mostly by actors from the westernized, industrialized world, who are considered to share at least some economic, cultural, and social values. However, having spent some time in countries such as Canada, Mexico, and Russia, I doubt that there is a common understanding of shared problems, risks or solutions. Thus, Beck’s imperative of “cooperate or fail” seems to be a rather optimistic, if not naïve and limited western (European, or maybe German) notion.

And secondly: What does “failing” mean in this sense? Let us examine, for instance, the assumptions of climate change and the global aim of achieving not more than two degrees Celsius global warming goal within this century. There are a considerable number of individuals, groups, and nation-states who do not share this argument, who will not feel the same (if any) urgency to cooperate, and who will definitely challenge the concept of “failing” as far as this notion is concerned. In addition, climate change does not threaten all people, groups or nation-states equally, as Lawrence Culver has already pointed out. Who has the agency to decide on failing/not failing (of whom, or in which time range), or even on cooperation/non-cooperation?

Staging of Risk and the Role of Scientists

In his book *World at Risk*, Beck stressed the idea that global risk is the result of a “staging of reality.”¹³ Staging, in his interpretation, does not mean deliberate fraud, but rather that by differentiating between risk as an anticipated catastrophe and the actual catastrophe we are forced to engage today, since we have to devise measures to prevent the anticipated catastrophe. According to Niklas Luhmann, it is “no accident” that in modern societies the risk perspective has developed parallel to the growth in scientific specialization, since in his eyes, dangers are transformed into risks to the degree that members of society are able to make decisions about preventative action.¹⁴ Science is the core functional social system by which knowledge for society is produced. By assembling more and more knowledge (which is in general not absolutely reliable, but rather contingent knowledge), science, and especially risk research, contributes to the social discourse on risk by determining future risk; “the more we know, the better we know what we do not know, and the more elaborate our risk awareness becomes,”¹⁵ as Luhmann has pointed out. To put it pointedly, without the staging of risk by experts or scientists we would not live in a risky world. I addressed this consideration to Beck and asked him whether he would agree that we live in a risky world mainly because of *his* staging of reality by “inventing” the notion of risk society some twenty years ago. After quite a long moment of reflection, Beck agreed, at least in part, by reflecting on the role of scientists in the social construction of our world. The increasing communication of risk and global risk that can be observed over the course of the last two decades does not necessarily mean that the “real” risks have been increasing too. Thus, scientific risk research contributes to the staging of risk and encourages a self-amplification of the social risk debate. This leads to a paradoxical situation for scientists: on the one hand, risk researchers are hoping and trying to produce security with the results of their studies, on the other hand they contribute to the distribution of a risk perspective that identifies risk everywhere, insisting on the societal importance of their work and pointing out the need for action—not least to get funding for research projects. By assisting government agencies, insurance companies, and other actors in the risk debate, science plays a major role in the social process of risk construction. By becoming co-agent, medium of definition, and authority on solutions at the same time, science opens for itself new markets for scientification and self-legitimation.¹⁶

13 Ulrich Beck, *World at Risk* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 30-31.

14 Niklas Luhmann, *Risk: A Sociological Theory* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 28; 79.

15 *Ibid.*, 28.

16 Beck, *World at Risk*, 155ff.

Cheryl Lousley

Risk and Power

In *Risk Society*, Beck teases out the social and political dimensions of environmental risks. Risks are not merely there, they are *produced* and they are *distributed*. Risks are thus another site of political antagonism in late modernity—a social relation around which people come to understand themselves and to contest their place in society. And central to the politics of risk is knowledge and uncertainty. Beck argues that uncertainties are a paradigmatic aspect of late modernity, since risks emerge as side effects of the very production of scientific knowledge and technological development—and require their apparatuses to even be identified, much less resolved, leading in turn to the production of new risks, and so on.

The turn to “cosmopolitanization” that Beck makes in *World at Risk* seems to similarly attempt to describe the social relations and processes through which global risks and subjects are made.¹⁷ But like its normative companion “cosmopolitanism,” the realpolitik term cosmopolitanization appears so general and abstract as to lose sight of power relations and uneven developments. How can the nuanced particularities of power struggles and their different articulations through risk be made visible on the scale of the global? Anna Tsing, by contrast, demonstrates in *Friction* how the very scale of the global is produced in conjunction with nation- and locale-making political projects. Without such nuanced attention to the particular articulations of risk, how can the analysis facilitate political struggles for environmental sustainability and justice? These concerns are amplified by Beck’s suggestion that progress on environmental issues, such as climate change, or national security issues regarding terrorism will come about through “enforced cosmopolitanization,”¹⁸ what he takes as an inevitable result of states trying to grapple with issues that exceed their borders. World risk society is an “enforced community,”¹⁹ founded on “involuntariness,”²⁰ Beck writes. Contrary to Habermas’s rational and communicative public sphere, Beck envisions a “threat public sphere,” which is “emotionally and existentially determined.”²¹ The coercive implications of Beck’s language of force and determinism should give pause. No political agency is left in

17 Beck, *World at Risk*, 61.

18 *Ibid.*, 55.

19 *Ibid.*, 56.

20 *Ibid.*, 59.

21 *Ibid.*

“enforced cosmopolitanization,” although clearly some social actors are still empowered to produce and distribute risk. If we are experiencing “the ubiquity of globally manufactured uncertainty,”²² then surely the task of social analysis is to shine a public light on those who own the means of manufacturing global risk—and the strategies, mechanisms, ideologies, and instruments at their service.

Agnes Kneitz

How Well does Risk Society Speak Beyond the Global North?

Remarkably, what we may often think of as universal experiences and perceptions of risk and safety, turn out to be embedded in local social norms, cultural histories, and economies. Take road safety, for example: In Germany, the introduction of new technologies in cars, such as automatic braking systems or electronic stability control, transformed road safety by withdrawing responsibility and awareness from the driver. Defensive driving, or driving with foresight, seemingly lost in importance, and the attention paid to it by traffic participants decreased. A further unintended consequence involved the emergence of new risks as drivers became less skilled and used the road in a less concentrated manner; there is now little need to brake carefully during bad weather or difficult road conditions, because your ABS and ESP will smooth out the related risks. Simultaneously, new requirements for riding a bike in German cities were introduced, and with them, the cyclists were moved to separate lanes and new traffic lights were introduced, thus apparently reducing the risk of an automobile-bicycle collision. While these safety technologies and conventions may seem “natural,” indeed almost invisible, in Germany, travel outside of Europe quickly reveals to Germans just how unique and regionally specific these safety infrastructures and rules are. For me, the moment of awakening came on my study trip to China. In the small town where my university was located, most of the everyday traffic comprised bicycles, and cyclists shared the same road, without separate lanes or signs, with the drivers of automobiles, trucks and buses. To get breakfast before class, I had to cross one of the main roads that ran in front of the campus. During the morning there was an enormous amount of traffic: indeed, I faced the prospect of cyclists three or four abreast moving in both directions, overtaking,

22 Beck, *World at Risk*, 55.

jingling their bells, swerving, and zigzagging in perfect harmony but at a breathtaking pace. In order not to be run over by a bike by making some incautious move, I stood and watched for nearly half an hour on the first day. Observing the crowds and their vehicles, I could not fail to notice the different perception of road safety in China compared to Germany.

Ulrich Beck on Different Cultural Approaches to Handling Risk

In order to implement environmental politics in China, the state is looking for actors from social movements, public actors, to put this on the agenda and make it relevant. This is interesting, because in the context of climate change, at least in European discussions, the question of democracy always comes up. People are questioning whether democracy is still capable of handling this issue. And here in China, where you might think that actually as a technocratic dictatorship it is ready for the implementation of environmental politics, you find the opposite case; they need social movements, they need openness in order to make these politics possible.

And yet, despite the way that risk is tied to specific places, we know that risks travel across cultural, political, and natural boundaries. As many have experienced in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster and more recently the explosion at the Daiichi plant in Fukushima in Japan, for example, nuclear risks do not have borders; they crisscross vast territories and threaten not only those exposed to the radiation directly, but also distant places and future generations, suggesting that risks traverse temporal as well as spatial horizons. In light of this, it would be helpful to broaden the concept of risk society to explain the ways in which risks that originate in specific locales and cultural environments travel outside of them. Who and what are the mediators of risk? How are these transfers organized, and what are the power relations involved? Are there any patterns in the ways in which risk travels, or are such risk pathways evenly distributed? How are risks changed as they become domesticated in specific locales? Can or should we speak of universal risks, and if so, how do we overcome the issues of global inequalities when the Global North controls most of the capital and other scepters of power? In other words, the key question here is not simply about the technologies of risk transmission, but about power.

The media is a central tool in provoking both public sympathy and political conflict—it plays a major role in the staging of risk and the constitution of a “global community of threats.” But this tends to occur not in a public discourse about risk, but rather in a distribution of given facts about and interpretations of risks. Those whom Beck refers to as “industrialized citizens” can be the agents of a reflexive modernity, but can this reflexivity travel? In comparison to the more Western-oriented, individualist notion of risk shown in Beck’s *Risk Society*, Chinese citizens tend to display religious, cultural, and socioeconomic characteristics that make them more tolerant towards particular risks, and to accept collective, rather than individual, responses to risk. From this point of view, reflexive modernization that rests on an individual does not seem to speak far beyond Western Europe—although East Asian countries are facing more complex risks, in a much greater intensity than the West, as side effects of their rapid development. Having been criticized for neglecting non-Western societies in his conceptualization, Ulrich Beck has recently published a special issue in the *British Journal of Sociology* on European and extra-European perspectives on Second Modernity.²³ He is trying to overcome the “methodological nationalism” in the social sciences, especially by including Asian voices to rethink the Western universal concept and to question those concepts of modernity which have been presumed to be “universally valid,” or at least a model to be replicated in other regions of the globe.²⁴ But different concepts of risk, as common for other societies apart from the Western model, are only one side of the coin. If the concept of risk used does not identify its Western origins and specificity as such, then the derived change of staging modernities does not work. Even if—in principle—the procedure of staging risks was similar, the different agents involved have to use different kinds of matrices, negotiating the specific risk in order to make their particular societies perceive risk as “risk.” Furthermore, several societies around the globe, which according to Beck have reached the second modernity along with the rest of the world, would still perceive those risks classified by the first modernity as the more pressing ones.

23 Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande, “Varieties of Second Modernity: The Cosmopolitan Turn in Social and Political Theory and Research,” *British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 3 (2010): 409-43.

24 See also Craig Calhoun, “Beck, Asia, and Second Modernity,” *British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 3 (2010): 597-619.

Ulrich Beck on Methodological Nationalism

A new concern of mine is about socio-theory and socio-sciences in general, of them being locked in the nation-state paradigm, something I call methodological nationalism. I think this is actually one of the big issues, at least from the point of view of sociology and socio-theory [...] because in socio-theory, actually in all the major work, not only the collecting of data and comparative studies, but in all of the conceptual tools such as state democracy, identity is related, one way or the other, to the nation-state.

Diana Mincyte

Multiple Faces of Riskiness

When I first came across the notion of risk society I was deeply impressed by the versatility of this concept to capture a wide range of experiences of danger, uncertainty, and not-knowing. While it was primarily addressing the ontological shifts happening in industrialized and modernized “Western” world, *Risk Society* made me think about the early years of post-socialist transition in Eastern Europe, where the entire organization of socioeconomic relations and material infrastructures was fundamentally shaken. Property regimes changed, political systems collapsed, jobs disappeared, food procurement crumbled, land was redistributed, and almost all savings were wiped out by the galloping inflation. Not surprisingly, it is in this precarious moment that risk became one of the key tropes around which public discourses and subjective experiences were organized. People told stories about the risks of walking in previously safe cities after dark, about drinking polluted water, buying vegetables and berries from the Chernobyl zone, about wearing clothes produced using poisonous chemicals. Daily lives in the post-socialist zone became imbued with risks.

But, from today’s perspective, what is striking about this constellation of fears and omnipresent danger is that it focused narrowly on the objects of consumption, rather

than on the structural instabilities and new forms of insecurities that were brought about by shifts in the political and economic spheres of life in post-socialism. Rather than questioning why jobs, environmental protection mechanisms, social security, and health infrastructures were disappearing, narratives of riskiness zoomed in on risks, emphasizing individualized experiences of riskiness and uncertainty. Paradoxically, by assigning risks to consumer goods, the new capitalist economy—which was the very source of insecurities and risks—went unchallenged. It is at the same time that capitalism and globalization were slowly legitimized and established as an inevitable reality and a “natural” state of being.

Ulrich Beck on Global Risk versus The Market

I think there is a contradiction between global risk and the market. This is a severe contradiction, because at least in the context of Western welfare states or states whose main purpose is to produce security and certainty, global risks undermine the authority of their economies. Potential catastrophes and actual catastrophes are particularly relevant for these economic actors.

Circling back to the notion of risk society, my concern is that much of social science scholarship is making a similar move, albeit in a different register. It is common to approach consumer goods, environments, and human and animal bodies as sites where risk society is embodied and experienced, while simultaneously obscuring the often violent processes, economies, and agents that may actually be the sources of these risks. While many social and political institutions may be constructed as stable, they may well be the causes of increased instabilities and uncertainties. In light of this, it may be worth asking what kinds of relations, objects, and subjects are illuminated in defining current condition as risk society, and which aspects of social life become obscured and omitted by it.

On a related note, while risk society captures the experiences of ambiguity and danger when facing food scares, terrorist plots, climate change, and health issues surrounding the use of cosmetics or cell phones, it may not necessarily speak to the ways in which new certainties are produced, contestations settled, and legitimacy

established. The production of risks, as the case of East Europe suggests, is not a singular process by which certain things and practices become risky, but it also involves a double-move, to borrow from Polanyi, where new facts are established, questions are answered, and order is (re)produced. In this sense, the next challenge for risk society is how to deal with and conceptualize what is certain, normal, stable, and safe in risk society, just as much as what is risky and uncertain.

And this process is also open. This is why global risk is at the center of my research. I think we are not really prepared to deal with global risks and meta-power issues on a theoretical level. [...] We are not prepared to deal with uncertainties and open fields.

Ulrich Beck, July 2010

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