

Considering Risk: Placing the Work of Ulrich Beck in Context

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Within five years of being published in 1986 in Germany, Ulrich Beck's *Risikogesellschaft* – later translated in English as *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1992) – sold some 60,000 copies. This represents an unprecedented volume of sales for a non-textbook work of social science (see Lash and Wynne 1992: 1). Using Google's NGram viewer – which maps trends in book citations over time – a consistently high and rising rate of references can be observed from 1987 into the new millennium. Readers of risk research journals will be familiar with the frequency with which Beck's thesis is routinely cited in articles. Yet, outside of risk studies, Beck's work remains unfamiliar to many scholars in the social sciences. Indeed, within his home discipline of Sociology, reception to his work has been mixed and critiques are well established. It is interesting to speculate about the numbers of people who bought *Risk Society* (1992) expecting a racy account of looming catastrophe and the endemic anxieties of a risk averse culture in keeping with the title, only to find a much more wide ranging and dense sociological account of transformations in work, relationships, class structure and politics. The book is not a straightforward read. In the contemporary context, it is perhaps comparable with Thomas Picketty's best-selling *Capital in the Twenty First Century* (2013). Picketty's work has been influential, but its size and technical character has arguably led to the headline message about capitalism's threat to democracy being endorsed by many that may well not have not read the book in its entirety. In an attempt to engage those who never managed to get beyond past the first few pages of *Risk Society* (1992), this special issue is designed to separate out the different elements of

Beck's thought, contextualising his contribution and drawing out the wider implications of his work within and beyond academia.

While the term 'risk society' has become something of a lingua franca, the impact of Beck's writing is not simply the result of a smartly chosen phrase. Mike Power (2007: 21) in his own work on uncertainty, explains the resonance of Beck's work in terms of its capacity to tap into underlying anxieties and insecurities that define the modern age: 'Beck's ideas appeal in contexts where there is increasing consciousness of self-produced risks and also doubts about the capacity of a flourishing risk regulation industry to cope with them'. Beck put his finger on a central issue of our age; in fact, several issues of our age that are now more widely recognised, partly as a result of his influence. Central to Beck's thinking about risk is the proposition that the major threats that society faces are no longer primarily external, coming from without – most obviously as natural hazards. Instead they are produced as unintended consequences of modernization itself, most palpably in the form of climate change produced by human activity. Another looming example is antibiotic resistance, where thoughtless over use of what were once described as 'miracle drugs' is increasingly rendering them ineffective. What makes matters worse in Beck's reading is that the very institutions and instruments responsible for risk management are now part of the problem, wedded as they are to the frames of reference and types of solutions that produced the problems in the first place. And the further element that made these manufactured risks a qualitatively more difficult problem than in the past is their truly global nature; there is nowhere to hide from the deleterious consequences of climate change or diminishing antibiotic resistance. It is not only the nature and scale of the risks themselves, but the inadequacy of primarily national institutions to cope with global problems that Beck sought to illuminate. He identified a burgeoning culture of public distrust in expert systems, which further limited the capability of regulatory institutions to respond to emergent threats (see Power 2007: 21). The 'risk society' era - which became discernible from the 1970s onwards for Beck - is characterised by an end to public deference and an increasingly active mistrust of corporations, scientific institutions

and government. Previous assumptions regarding acceptance of expertise and institutional authority are supplanted in the risk society by a climate of public scepticism. The BSE 'mad cow disease' crisis of the 1990s is as a paradigmatic case (Burgess 2008). There it appeared that industrial agricultural practices had bred a new disease that was beyond the capacity of science to understand, let alone effectively manage. Government, science and the agricultural industry were compromised by dint of their close associations. The predominant response to new publically articulated uncertainties was denial, as government tended to reject the possibility of the disease affecting humans - as subsequently proved to be the case. Far from being convinced by repeated government pronouncements regarding the safety of eating British beef, public mistrust only grew. The 'truth' of whether BSE was as badly managed as it subsequently appeared is not the principal issue in Beck's terms, but rather that this case revealed new challenges, outdated official responses and signs of critical public disquiet.

Those generally familiar with contemporary risk management and communication may be able to recognise both Beck's concerns and his influence in the clear shift away from 'top down' approaches based upon an idea of public views of risk as an irrational misperception to be corrected through increasing volumes of information (Wardman 2008). The predominant 'scientific' paradigm reduced knowledge of risk to a matter of expert technique, relegating other inputs to afterthoughts to be managed through better and broader communication (Leiss 1996). Following this model, public mistrust is to be corrected in the same way, rather than recognising the need for a thoroughgoing rethinking of institutions themselves and their relationship to the public. The inherent weakness of this traditional approach to public risk management is captured in the expectation that the scientific rejection of claims of harm on the basis that there is still insufficient evidence to be certain of a causal relationship between a particular substance or technology and apparent ill effects could somehow allay concern and close down the matter. Partly as a result of the influence of sustained sociological critiques such as Beck's, public risk perception has come to be recognised as legitimate in its own right

and something that cannot be simply dismissed by experts in the vain hope that it will simply fade away (Kasperson et al 1988). Risk is not only a calculation in this view, but also a complex amalgam of emotions, interests and values (Slovic et al 2004). Within this mix there are valuable 'lay' insights which are themselves born of experience rather than emerging in the laboratory (see Wynne 1989).

Beck's work is one of the three acknowledged strands of explicitly social approaches to risk, alongside the cultural approach pioneered by the anthropologist Mary Douglas and the 'governmentality' perspective of scholars following in the traditions of Michel Foucault (see Arnoldi 2009; Mythen, 2004). All involve varying degrees of understanding risk as socially constructed; which is to say that risk is very clearly regarded as an idea in its own right relatively independent of the hazard to which it relates. Risk is thus understood in relation to perception that is generated by social processes - such as representation and definition - as much as it is by actual experience of harm. This said, Beck saw historically new risks such as climate change as very much real and one of the criticisms levelled at him was his lack of clarity about the relationship between the objective and manufactured nature of contemporary risk (Wynne 1996). This issue of the 'realist' versus the 'constructivist' slant in Beck's work is addressed in several of the papers here.

Beck has been described in his native Germany as a *schriftsteller*. This is a term with no direct equivalent in English language. In rough terms, the word translates as an essayist, but may more comfortably be understood in terms of the role of a public intellectual. Beck wrote regularly for international newspapers on current affairs, politics and society. The style of his academic work reflected this, being very directed and drawing on a wide range of examples to make his points. At the same time, his writing was also clearly rooted in traditions of general theorising about the nature of society, from the classical traditions of Marx and Weber in the 19th Century up to the direct antecedents of Jurgen Habermas' post-war re-establishment of a general theory of society. Beck's work is a giddy blend of high theory with reference points in its traditions and concepts, and direct

illustrations on everything from the Chernobyl nuclear accident, to rates of divorce and the state of European politics. Unlike his English equivalent and close co-thinker, Anthony Giddens, who tended to keep his theoretical writings quite separate from journalistic and political interventions, Beck was inclined to mix the two. Whilst the combination of styles and range of examples enabled him to get his key points across to a range of audiences, the unusual formulation of ideas was considered by some to be disorientating. Beck's provocative and sometimes ambiguous style of writing was partially responsible for the sometimes hostile or bemused response it evoked - but there are other factors. The timing of the German publication of *Risk Society* was fortuitous in some respects, arriving in the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, an event which seemingly proved the 'risk society' to be prophetic. Yet despite being timely, the book was unfashionably wide-ranging, bold and contentious. Grand theorising with 'metanarratives' had long since been declared redundant by post-modernists in an apparently pragmatic, non-ideological post-Cold War world. Beck's declaration of the dawning of a new phase of modernity did not comfortably resonate with the current vogue. His ushering in of a new era defined by pervasive and universal risks challenged the centrality of stratification, inequality and other divisions that sociology held dear. Typical responses to Beck from within his discipline argued that far less had changed than he imagined, asserting the primacy of class and other enduring social divisions. In part, this is simple misunderstanding and lazy misinterpretation. Two of the charges against him are that his work lacked empirical grounding and was purely 'meta' level analysis. Both of these assumptions are challenged in this volume and his later work on cosmopolitan communities around climate change, for example. Whilst it was rarely appreciated, Beck also directed his arguments internally to others in his disciplinary field who, in his view, remained stubbornly attached to old modes of thinking. His aim was not so much to provide a general and rounded theory that could be readily utilised by others in the field of risk research, as to rouse his fellow intellectuals and citizens into recognising how much the world was in the midst of radical transformation. All of the authors in this special issue have strived to render Beck's important contribution accessible to a more general audience perhaps unfamiliar with the nuances of social theory.

Beck shares the historic concern of sociology with the nature of the process of modernization stretching back a century to Max Weber's 'iron cage' of bureaucratization and control. Unlike the 'classical' path of modernization in the work of Marx and others, for Beck the process of modernization does not proceed in a linear, evolutionary fashion. What is so bold and contentious is his argument that we have now reached a qualitatively new and distinct phase of modernity, following the simple modernity of industrial society and, before that, the pre-modern society of tradition. In one of his most famous phrases he asserted that industrial modernity was defined by the distribution of 'goods', while the risk society is instead characterised by the distribution of 'bads'. These bads are more 'democratic' in character; those with resources cannot simply buy their escape routes from risks such as climate change, as they might have done from natural hazards in the past. Whilst pointing towards the dark side of modernization in its creation of new and unmanageable risks, he is not a pessimist like Weber who sees little escape from the 'iron cage'. Rather Beck suggests that citizens themselves can actively challenge scientism and begin to create and nurture a new kind of reflexivity. This is possible in Beck's view for the new and specific reason that our increasing freedom from the structural constraints of the past allows the flourishing of individualism. This individualization brings uncertainty as we are no longer guided by the norms and hierarchies of the past. But out of this uncertainty springs the possibility of playing a more active role in shaping the modernization process as potential disasters may be averted through challenging scientific managerialism.

Related to his perspective on modernization, Beck's work should also be understood as a critique of science, or rather what is sometimes termed 'scientism' in an ecological perspective. This is not the science that embraces uncertainty but the hubris of a scientific management that denies it, and creates unrealistic expectations and claims that it can control what is actually uncontrollable. In a sense, Beck is proposing what we can recognise as mature risk management that recognises that risk can only be managed or displaced rather than abolished, and trade-offs and unintended consequences

are unavoidable. It is now widely understood that it is better to acknowledge and thus stay alert to uncertainty than to pretend it has been fixed through some technocratic means (Wardman and Mythen 2016). Beck's work was prescient in this regard. Challenging the denial of uncertainty is a vital theme developed by Beck. Governed by a sociological orientation, uncertainty in Beck's view is not understood only in technical terms as the result of new technologies and knowledge. Instead it is located socially as a by-product of transformations in patterns of work and life, such as the uncertainty produced by gender equality where the erosion of traditional hierarchies and assumptions leaves unanswered questions about new norms, roles and behaviours (see Mythen 2005).

Moving towards the close of this introduction there are many characteristics of Beck's work which are valuable and we hope can be continued in some shape or form. Firstly, he was bold and even prepared to put forward inconsistent emphases in his work, depending upon which problem and, more importantly, which misunderstanding of the problem he was concerned with. Of course, there is a sacrifice to be made for throwing out incomplete big ideas, so much so that academics and intellectuals are largely reluctant to do so. Nonetheless, the constructivist scepticism running through Beck's work is instructive by consistently raising both normative and epistemic questions and providing a range of conceptual devices which illuminate different paths of critical inquiry into the hidden and global dynamics and impacts of risks, both new and old.

Secondly, Beck's approach to risk is broadly historically situated, allowing us to appreciate what is distinct about the present period which we are living through. Unlike the still predominant psychological/behavioural perspective on risk it does not implausibly assume timeless, laboratory-like reactions to threats (see Taylor Gooby and Zinn 2006). Beck was not unafraid to identify what he saw as a clear break amidst historical continuities, as others conservatively stuck to indicating how new developments were simply continuations of established processes. He highlighted the emergence of a new societal awareness of the contingency of the knowledge, facts and values through which risks

are established and regulated, and consequently that scientific and political divisions with citizens are more porous than before. In so doing, Beck brings much needed focus to the cultural premises of understanding and acceptability contained in scientific and technical statements on risk, even if, to generalize, scientists and politicians are reluctant to entertain the need for greater citizen engagement demanded by this broader historical shift in sensibilities (Wardman 2014). Beck was pointedly aware of the incapacity of humans to recognize and accept change, and argued against the tendency to 'carry on regardless' as evidenced in his critique of 'organized irresponsibility' (Beck, 2009: 27). Instead, he points us away from methodological nationalism to a methodological cosmopolitanism that is more capable of grappling with the transnational contours of risk in the 21st century.

Thirdly, Beck's willingness to generalise and consider issues broadly and thematically is a valuable antidote to the dominance of recent historical and case study based work which has mainly focused on the more straightforward territory of accidents and safety, or how risk has been understood and negotiated in localised contexts, as Mohun (2012: 7) points out. One unfortunate consequence of a reluctance to go beyond the confines of closer notions of 'accidents' or 'safety' is that knowledge doesn't then accumulate as well as it might. While important, localized forms of inquiry and analysis do not in and of themselves allow us to link critical insights and explanations, only to think of risk in particularised ways. The thematic qualities of Beck's projective approach by contrast brings the future into the present, it opens up understandings of the broader constitutive dynamics and relations that shape how risk is formed, acknowledged and managed, and stimulate further reflection on questions of justice and the possibilities for emancipation under such conditions.

While Beck's open and critical approach does not bring finality it can be credited for indubitably helping us to understand the new public and scientific vocabulary of risk, challenge dominant media and political representations, explore alternative frames of analysis, and uncover important contextual factors that shape how and why risk judgements are made worthy of ongoing debate as

well as the underlying conditions that can aggravate or reduce risk (Mythen 2016). Emphasising the historically situated and thematically elaborated nature of Beck's work on risk and uncertainty may seem an unusual tack to take in setting out his legacy, but it is precisely these qualities that mark Beck out against the conventions and contemporaries of his age. His refusal to accept engrained traditions and his willingness to challenge the sociological orthodoxy enabled him to impress upon us the social significance of risk and to encourage researchers to think hard about what it tells us about the world we live in today.

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