Environment and Society

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Ulrich Beck

Steve Bruce and Steven Yearley

(*The Sage Dictionary of Sociology*, Sage 2006)

[Edited for readability and for the purposes of this class. ~ Dr. Bradley H. Brewster]

Ulrich Beck's work became widely known to an international audience in the early 1990s when his book *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1986) was first published in English translation. Though the book is wide-ranging and often surprisingly impassioned in its arguments, most readers agree that he makes two novel claims. First, he proposes that contemporary societies differ from their predecessors because of the central importance of the handling of risk. Of course, early modern societies—in the 16th and 17th centuries for example—faced many threats. Bad weather might ruin harvests, disease might strike uncontrollably. Such risks were beyond human control. Subsequently, industrialization and the growth of medical and technical knowledge allowed people to exercise more control over their environments. Weather forecasting diminished the threats to harvests. There was less risk and people were optimistic that further risks would come under control. Insurance and compensation schemes allowed people to be indemnified against risk to a large extent. However, by the final quarter of the 20th century risk had reemerged. This time the risks were typically of human creation. Societies are threatened by the possibility of catastrophic nuclear power station failures or by climate changes caused by emissions into the atmosphere, and, unlike the case of typical industrial risks, it is hard to see how one could meaningfully insure against such hazards. The handling and regulation of such risks becomes so consequential that it changes the character of contemporary societies. Society is no longer primarily a class society, it is a risk society.

Beck's second claim is that, in risk societies, there are widespread difficulties with the generation of authoritative knowledge. On the face of it, this claim is similar to that of postmodernism. However Beck argues that the problem confronting knowledge is really one of "reflexive modernization." In other words, in the face of the new risks, medical, scientific, and technical knowledge is subjected to closer and closer scrutiny. Faced with this relentless

self-examination, expert knowledge becomes less certain and often more divided. Some experts speak in favor of nuclear power, others against. The authority of technical knowledge goes into decline.

Beck's work has become increasingly widely acknowledged largely because, unlike many sociological theorists, his ideas appear to have been borne out in readily understandable ways. Following the publication of his book there were major risk problems surrounding "mad cow disease" and the planting of genetically modified crops. Beck's observations seemed to be bang on target.

Reflexive Modernity

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According to Ulrich Beck, modernization increases our ability to reflect on and to change the social conditions of our existence. It also forces us to do this because it weakens our ties to family, social class and location. As mainstream sociology had long pointed out, modernization leads us to break with tradition. But Beck observed that this occurs in ever more innovative and unexpected ways. For example, with advancing knowledge about nutrition and diet we are increasingly called on to reflect on how we feed ourselves and our children. With the growth in understanding of genetics we may soon be expected to reflect on and take responsibility for the genetic inheritance we will pass on to the next generation. To a much greater extent than previous generations we have to fashion our own identities and those of our children.

Beck points out that this drive towards reflection also impacts on expertise in contemporary society. To take the example of diet, if people are expecting to assume responsibility for their diets they currently face a dilemma: do they believe the main- stream health authorities and focus on reducing their fat intake or do they follow new diets that focus on the elimination of carbohydrates. This places new demands on experts to demonstrate publicly the basis for their own recommendations. In turn, there is assertion and counter-assertion among experts and this leads to an undermining of expert authority. Reflexive modernity is thus both an account of how life feels for ordinary citizens in advanced modernity and a diagnosis of the advancing crisis of authority that Beck detects. His diagnosis is in some respects similar to that offered by postmodernists though he sees the insatiable demands for reflexive justification as the main dynamic that aggravates the problem whereas they put more stress on the undermining of the philosophical foundations of Enlightenment thinking.

Reflexive Modernity Ulrich Beck and the Politics of the Risk Society: The Environmental Threat as Institutional Crisis

Frank Fischer

(*Organization & Environment* 11(1):111-115, 1998)

[Edited and abridged for readability and for the purposes of this class. ~ Dr. Bradley H. Brewster]

The writings of the German sociologists, Ulrich Beck, represent a unique and important contribution to the environmental literature. Beck has tried nothing less than to come to grips with the environmental crisis and its implications for social and political change in western industrial societies generally. Beck, in this respect, has attempted to reconceptualize the whole of modern society as a "risk society." In what has proven in Europe to be a most insightful and provocative thesis, his work has constituted the basis of a wide-ranging environmental discussion. Reaching far beyond the walls of academia, it has been extensively debated in the public media as well.

The two books under review here are elaborations and extensions of Beck's major work, The Risk Society (Beck 1992). Ecological Politics in the Age of Risk adds his concept of "organized irresponsibility" to the discussion and elaborates on the politics of environmental expertise and counterexpertise. Ecological Enlightenment was written to both clarify his arguments and to respond to his critics.

The concept of the risk society refers to an epoch in which the dark sides of progress increasingly come to dominate social and political debate. It brings forth that which few want to see and no one wants: the self-endangering, devastating industrial destruction of nature. Most basic to Beck's theory is the argument that we now can identify a fundamental shift in the logic of industrial society. Whereas industrial society traditionally concerned the production of material goods, since the end of World War II it has been increasingly overtaken by growing worries about the production of risks. This involves a recognition that the risks involved in the production of many goods have risen to such a level that risk rather than material scarcity becomes the central worry of the current age. It is not that industrial society produced no risks but rather that the nature of contemporary risks tends to become more visible and

worrisome as a more affluent society demands a better quality of life. Given the relative satisfaction of basic needs in industrial societies, risk avoidance becomes a central political issues of our time.

Accordingly, the politics of socially generated risks introduces new lines of political conflict. The main divisions of conflict in industrial societies—class societies—were, as Beck points out, conducted over the way in which the distribution of wealth (and thus the risk of poverty) was divided among different social classes. Whereas in industrial societies class positions and risks positions are more or less traditionally correlated, in the newer risk societies they tend to diverge. In industrial societies, the rich largely live in areas and work under conditions that are not overly exposed to hazards; the working class and the poor, by contrast, are exposed. Today, however, the newer risks posed by nuclear radiation, biotechnology, or the greenhouse effect can potentially threaten all social groups at the same time.

To be sure, concerns about danger and safety are not new to human society. Plagues and other natural disasters, as strokes of fate, were in all respects a fundamental threat throughout most of human history. But modern risks differ, as Beck makes clear, in that they are the result of social decisions—that is, institutional decisions that focus on techno-economic decisions about utility.

Products of the atomic, chemical, and genetic age, these newer modern risks distinguish themselves from traditional dangers in other ways as well. They are unprecedented in terms of scale and invisibility as well as the need for scientific experts to detect them. With regard to scale, the toxicity of contemporary forms of environmental degradation is many times greater than that of industrial forms of degradation. Moreover, the impacts of such risks are in no way obviously tied to their points of origins, and their transmissions are often invisible to everyday perceptions (the invisibility of radiation being the prime example).

Social invisibility means that, unlike many other political issues, environmental risks must be clearly brought to consciousness to be recognize as a social threat. Basic to this recognition are the processes of scientific and social contestation. Given the invisible and highly technical nature of the risks, the politics of risk is intrinsically a politics of knowledge, expertise, and

counterexpertise. Because risks must be deduced by active causal interpretation, their existence is open to the processes of social definition and social construction. At every stage in our understanding of such risks is the mobilization of knowledge central to their description and assessment. This elevates knowledge and the status of knowledge professionals to a prime political position in the discourse of risk. It creates, in the process, tensions between those with and those without knowledge. Indeed, for Beck this is the central fault line of the risk society, or what he advances in later works as a "reflexive modernity."

The environmental crisis, in this respect, is as much a crisis of the institutions of industrial society as it is a physical phenomenon concerned with nature. In this situation, the conventional political forces, representative bodies, and scientific institutions of industrial society are clearly seen to fall short of protection. Parliamentary democracy and its bureaucracies, shaped by the politics of class and interest, are no longer capable of adequately controlling the technological forces of an unleashed capitalism.

Risk societies are thus currently trapped by an outdated repertoire of political responses that are inappropriate for modern catastrophes. Consequently, we face a paradox: At the very time when threats and hazards seem to become both more dangerous and apparent, they simultaneously slip through the nets of proofs, liabilities, and compensations with which the legal and political systems attempt to capture them. We confront, as Beck argues, a late 20th-century crisis with 19th-century institutions. In spite of the diverting labyrinths of bureaucratic irresponsibility that characterize this antiquated system, or what Beck calls "organized irresponsibility," environmental protests still manage to call into question the claims and legitimacy of prevailing definitions.

Demonstrating the "social explosiveness" of hazards, major catastrophes have, in Beck's view, the ability to initiate a process of critical reflection on basic societal assumptions, institutional goals, and practices. Such discourse, which tends to break out just where science clashes with social trust, is seen to be capable of ushering in a new "political reflexivity." The environmental movement is the primary expression of these new risk expressions in risk societies.

Although Beck's work raises a host of issues that merit discussion, I shall limit myself here to three. The first concerns an unfortunate inclination toward hyperbole. One of Beck's basic theses, for example, emphasizes the invisibility of modern compared to earlier risks and the need for experts to detect them. It is a contention that is not as obvious as Beck would have us believe. Although one could see and smell the human and animal excrement in 19th-century cities, the health risks that it posed were frequently difficult to perceive. Thousands and thousands of people died from the invisible microbes that caused typhoid, smallpox, tuberculosis, and the bubonic plague before modern scientists were able to identify their presence in the drinking water of 19th-century cities. The concept of the risk society is riddled with such ambiguities, and many in Europe have used them as justifications for dismissing Beck as a publicist more interested in shaping a catchy concept than as a rigorous sociologists grappling with the empirical environmental evidence. Unfortunately, this has prematurely led many to disregard Beck's deeper sociological contribution.

Even more basic to the risk society thesis is the state of public anxiety over the environment. Although in Beck's risk society we are seen to be living on the brink of catastrophe, for many people this is not at all obvious—a point that is itself central to understanding contemporary environmental politics. Others, including many environmentalists, are simply not living in the state of worry that Beck would have us believe. Pointing to increasing life expectancies, there is no shortage of experts who argue that we are in fact living in the "safest of times."

What can one make of these differences of opinion? Some argue that those who question the more troublesome environmental predictions are merely apologists for capitalism and its insatiable appetite for growth and profit. Although some of the opponents of the environmental movement certainly assume this role, the situation would seem to be more complicated. One has to explain why larger numbers are not more exercised than they are. The fact remains that although the environmental issue has made it onto the political agenda, it still is not the central concern of industrial consumer societies. Unless we are to fall back on notions of false consciousness (or, in Beck's case, "industrial fatalism"), we have to explain why mere objective data

does not bring forth the kind of widespread outcry and critique that Beck sees characterizing the current political situation.

How to account for this? Part of Beck's problem is his reliance on a realist epistemology. Once we acknowledge the socially constructed nature of risk, as Beck does, it is no longer possible to fall back on the possibility of a fixed or objective level of risk being capable of triggering a new environmental consciousness. The social determination of risk make possible a wide range of views around any given level of physical risk, from relative passivity and denial to extreme public outrage.

In part, Beck's failure here is lodged in his understanding of the role of scientific expertise and the concept of objectivity. Although experts and their knowledge are central to the kind of societal transformation Beck envisions, he works with an outmoded understanding of these concepts. Never does the risk society thesis really question the meaning of expertise and knowledge, especially the social and cultural bases of their indeterminacy. The political issues revolving around his discussion of the politicalization of expertise are more questions of how people decide which experts to believe or trust than questions about the usefulness or appropriateness of the type of knowledge the experts are trading in. The possibility that citizens might question the very nature of such knowledge or that other types of knowledge might more appropriately speak to the worries of an anxious citizenry is never explored. The idea that citizens themselves might have their own forms of knowledge on such matters gets at best only passing mention. Given that the question of knowledge has itself emerged as an issue underlying the concerns of growing number of citizens, this limitation is unfortunate.

Finally, there is the question of the democracy of risk. Beck has argued that environmental risk is a great equalizer, as pollution such as radiation or smoke do not respect social boundaries. But this is only partially true. During the past decade, environmental research has demonstrated that many forms of pollution affect different social classes differently. Indeed, such research has played a significant role in the rise of the environmental justice movement, which emphasizes the impacts of pollution and hazards by race, class, and gender. For many, this movement has become the major revitalizing force in contemporary environmental politics.

Beck's failure to recognize this can in part be attributable to the fact that these ideas were developed and advanced in a small and relatively homogeneous society. However, given that the argument is one of the central tenets of his generally theory of the environmental crisis in industrial society, the degree to which it does not hold raises important questions concerning the validity of his predictions about the coming of a political reflexive societal transformation. In any case, should it happen, it is not clear that it will occur in the ways he predicts. It may be that the concept of the risk society could have only been put forward in Germany, especially around the time of Chernobyl, Beck's primary example. In Germany, the levels of environmental consciousness and concern is simply much higher than in other major industrial countries such as the United States or Britain (where the risk society was initially received with incredulity). But this should not detract from the other dimensions of Beck's contribution.

In spite of these limitations, one can still credit Beck with offering powerful new insights into the social and cultural foundations of the environmental crisis. The ways in which he reveals the crisis to be built into the thought processes, decision rules, and administrative practices of our dominant societal institutions are essential for a proper understanding of the kind of change that we face ahead.