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Beck's Sociology of Risk: A Critical Assessment

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ABSTRACT

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck has elaborated a highly original formulation of the theory of risk and reflexive modernization, a formulation that has had a significant impact upon recent sociological theorizing and research. This article examines Beck's sociology of risk in the context of his broader social theory of reflexivity, advanced modernization and individualization. The article argues that Beck's work is constrained by several sociological weaknesses: namely, a dependence upon objectivistic and instrumental models of the social construction of risk and uncertainty in social relations, and a failure to adequately define the relations between institutional dynamism on the one hand and self-referentiality and critical reflection on the other. As a contribution to the reformulation and further development of Beck's approach to sociological theory, the article seeks to suggest other ways in which the link between risk and reflexivity might be pursued. These include a focus upon (1) the intermixing of reflexivity and reflection in social relations; (2) contemporary ideologies of domination and power; and (3) a dialectical notion of modernity and postmodernization.

KEYWORDS

domination / modernity / postmodernity / reflexivity / risk / social theory

As competent reflective agents, we are aware of the many ways in which a generalized 'climate of risk' presses in on our daily activities. In our day-to-day lives, we are sensitive to the cluster of risks that affect our relations with the self, with others, and with the broader culture. We are specialists in carving out ways of coping and managing risk, whether this be through active engagement, resigned acceptance or confused denial. From dietary concerns to

prospective stock market gains and losses to polluted air, the contemporary risk climate is one of proliferation, multiplication, specialism, counterfactual guesswork, and, above all, anxiety. Adequate consideration and calculation of risk-taking, risk-management and risk-detection can never be fully complete, however, since there are always unforeseen and unintended aspects of risk environments. This is especially true at the level of global hazards, where the array of industrial, technological, chemical and nuclear dangers that confront us grows, and at an alarming rate. Indeed the German sociologist, Ulrich Beck (1996a), defines the current situation as that of 'world risk society'. The rise of risk society, Beck argues, is bound up with the new electronic global economy – a world in which we live on the edge of high technological innovation and scientific development, but where no one fully understands the possible global risks and dangers we face.

My aim in this article is to explore some of the issues that concern the relation between risk and society by focusing on the work of Beck. A profoundly innovative and imaginative social theorist, Beck has developed powerful analyses of the ways in which the rise of the risk society is transforming social reproduction, nature and ecology, intimate relationships, politics and democracy.[1] It is necessary to state at the outset that I am not seeking in this article to provide a general introduction to Beck's work as a whole. Rather, I shall offer a short exposition of Beck's risk society thesis, in conjunction with his analysis of reflexivity and its role in social practices and modern institutions. The second, more extensive half of the article is then critical and reconstructive in character. I try to identify several questionable social-theoretic assumptions contained in Beck's risk society thesis, as well as limitations concerning his analysis of reflexivity, social reproduction and the dynamics of modernity. In making this critique, I shall try to point, in a limited and provisional manner, to some of the ways in which I believe that the themes of risk and social reflexivity can be reformulated and, in turn, further developed in contemporary sociological analysis.

Outline of the Theory

Let me begin by outlining the central planks of Beck's social theory. These can be divided into three major themes: (1) the risk society thesis; (2) reflexive modernization; and (3) individualization.

The Risk Society Thesis

From his highly influential 1986 volume *Risk Society* through to *Democracy without Enemies* (1998) and *World Risk Society* (1999b), Beck has consistently argued that the notion of risk is becoming increasingly central to our global society.[2] As Beck (1991: 22–3) writes:

> [T]he historically unprecedented possibility, brought about by our own decisions, of the destruction of all life on this planet … distinguishes our epoch not only from the early phase of the Industrial Revolution but also from all other cultures and social forms, no matter how diverse and contradictory. If a fire breaks out, the fire brigade comes; if a traffic accident occurs, the insurance pays. This interplay between before and after, between security in the here-and-now and security in the future because one took precautions even for the worst imaginable case, has been revoked in the age of nuclear, chemical and genetic technology. In their brilliant perfection, nuclear power plants have suspended the principle of insurance not only in the economic but also in the medical, psychological, cultural, and religious sense. The 'residual risk society' is an uninsured society, in which protection, paradoxically, decreases as the threat increases.

For Beck, modernity is a world that introduces global risk parameters that previous generations have not had to face. Precisely because of the failure of modern social institutions to control the risks they have created, such as the ecological crisis, risk rebounds as a largely defensive attempt to avoid new problems and dangers.

Beck contends that it is necessary to separate the notion of risk from hazard or danger. The hazards of pre-industrial society – famines, plagues, natural disasters – may or may not come close to the destructive potential of technoscience in the contemporary era. Yet for Beck this really is not a key consideration in any event, since he does not wish to suggest that daily life in today's risk society is intrinsically more hazardous than in the pre-modern world. What he does suggest, however, is that no notion of risk is to be found in traditional culture: pre-industrial hazards or dangers, no matter how potentially catastrophic, were experienced as pre-given. They came from some 'other' – gods, nature or demons. With the beginning of societal attempts to control, and particularly with the idea of steering towards a future of predictable security, the consequences of risk become a political issue. This last point is crucial. It is societal intervention – in the form of decision-making – that transforms incalculable hazards into calculable risks. 'Risks', writes Beck (1997: 30), 'always depend on decisions – that is, they presuppose decisions'. The idea of 'risk society' is thus bound up with the development of instrumental rational control, which the process of modernization promotes in all spheres of life – from individual risk of accidents and illnesses to export risks and risks of war.

In support of the contention that protection from danger decreases as the threat increases in the contemporary era, Beck (1994) discusses, among many other examples, the case of a lead crystal factory in the former Federal Republic of Germany. The factory in question – Altenstadt in the Upper Palatinate – was prosecuted in the 1980s for polluting the atmosphere. Many residents in the area had, for some considerable time, suffered from skin rashes, nausea and headaches, and blame was squarely attributed to the white dust emitted from the factory's smokestacks. Due to the visibility of the pollution, the case for damages against the factory was imagined, by many people, to be watertight.

However, because there were three other glass factories in the area, the presiding judge offered to drop the charges in return for a nominal fine, on the grounds that individual liability for emitting dangerous pollutants and toxins could not be established. 'Welcome to the real-life travesty of the hazard technocracy!' writes Beck, underlining the denial of risks within our cultural and political structures. Such denial for Beck is deeply layered within institutions, and he calls this 'organized irresponsibility' – a concept to which we will return.

The age of nuclear, chemical and genetic technology, according to Beck, unleashes a destruction of the calculus of risks by which modern societies have developed a consensus on progress. Insurance has been the key to sustaining this consensus, functioning as a kind of security pact against industrially produced dangers and hazards.[3] In particular, two kinds of insurance are associated with modernization: the private insurance company and public insurance, linked above all with the welfare state. Yet the changing nature of risk in an age of globalization, argues Beck, fractures the calculating of risks for purposes of insurance. Individually and collectively, we do not fully know or understand many of the risks that we currently face, let alone can we attempt to calculate them accurately in terms of probability, compensation and accountability. In this connection, Beck emphasizes the following:

- risks today threaten irreparable global damage which cannot be limited, and thus the notion of monetary compensation is rendered obsolescent;
- in the case of the worst possible nuclear or chemical accident, any security monitoring of damages fails;
- accidents, now reconstituted as 'events' without beginning or end, break apart delimitations in space and time;
- notions of accountability collapse.

Reflexive Modernization

Beck develops his critique of modernity through an examination of the presuppositions of the sociology of modernization. Many mainstream sociological theories remain marked, in his view, by a confusion of modernity with industrial society – seen in either positive or negative terms. This is true for functionalists and Marxists alike, especially in terms of their preoccupation with industrial achievement, adaptation, differentiation and rationalization. Indeed, Beck finds an ideology of progress concealed within dominant social theories that equate modernization with linear rationalization. From Marx through Parsons to Luhmann, modern society is constantly changing, expanding and transforming itself; it is clear that industrialism results in the using up of resources that are essential to the reproduction of society. But the most striking limitation of social theories that equate modernity with industrial society, according to Beck, lies in their lack of comprehension of the manner in which dangers to societal preservation and renewal infiltrate the institutions, organizations and subsystems of modern society itself.

In contrast to this grand consensus on modernization, Beck argues that we are between industrial society and advanced modernity, between simple modernization and reflexive modernization. As Beck (1996b: 28) develops these distinctions:

> In view of these two stages and their sequence, the concept of 'reflexive modernization' may be introduced. This precisely does not mean reflection (as the adjective 'reflexive' seems to suggest), but above all self-confrontation. The transition from the industrial to the risk epoch of modernity occurs unintentionally, unseen, compulsively, in the course of a dynamic of modernization which has made itself autonomous, on the pattern of latent side-effects. One can almost say that the constellations of risk society are created because the self-evident truths of industrial society (the consensus on progress, the abstraction from ecological consequences and hazards) dominate the thinking and behaviour of human beings and institutions. Risk society is not an option which could be chosen or rejected in the course of political debate. It arises through the automatic operation of autonomous modernization processes which are blind and deaf to consequences and dangers. In total, and latently, these produce hazards which call into question – indeed abolish – the basis of industrial society.

It is the autonomous, compulsive dynamic of advanced or reflexive modernization that, according to Beck, propels modern men and women into 'self-confrontation' with the consequences of risk that cannot adequately be addressed, measured, controlled or overcome, at least according to the standards of industrial society. Modernity's blindness to the risks and dangers produced by modernization – all of which happens automatically and unreflectingly, according to Beck – leads to societal self-confrontation: that is, the questioning of divisions between centres of political activity and the decision-making capacity of society itself. Society, in effect, seeks to reclaim 'the political' from its modernist relegation to the institutional sphere, and this, says Beck, is achieved primarily through sub-political means – that is, locating the politics of risk at the heart of forms of social and cultural life. 'Within the horizon of the opposition between old routine and new awareness of consequences and dangers', writes Beck, 'society becomes self-critical' (1999b: 81).

The prospects for arresting the dark sides of industrial progress and advanced modernization through reflexivity are routinely short-circuited, according to Beck, by the insidious influence of 'organized irresponsibility'. Irresponsibility, as Beck uses the term, refers to a political contradiction of the self-jeopardization and self-endangerment of risk society. This is a contradiction between an emerging public awareness of risks produced by and within the social-institutional system on the one hand, and the lack of attribution of systemic risks to this system on the other. There is, in Beck's reckoning, a constant denial of the suicidal tendency of risk society – 'the system of organized irresponsibility' – which manifests itself in, say, technically orientated legal procedures designed to satisfy rigorous causal proof of individual liability and guilt. This self-created dead end, in which culpability is passed off on to individuals

and thus collectively denied, is maintained through political ideologies of industrial fatalism: faith in progress, dependence on rationality and the rule of expert opinion.

Individualization

The arrival of advanced modernization is not wholly about risk; it is also about an expansion of choice. For if risks are an attempt to make the incalculable calculable, then risk-monitoring presupposes agency, choice, calculation and responsibility. In the process of reflexive modernization, Beck argues, more and more areas of life are released or disembedded from the hold of tradition. That is to say, people living in the modernized societies of today develop an increasing engagement with both the intimate and more public aspects of their lives, aspects that were previously governed by tradition or taken-for-granted norms. This set of developments is what Beck calls 'individualization', and its operation is governed by a dialectic of disintegration and reinvention. For example, the disappearance of tradition and the disintegration of previously existing social forms – fixed gender roles, inflexible class locations, masculinist work models – forces people into making decisions about their own lives and future courses of action. As traditional ways of doing things become problematic, people must choose paths for a more rewarding life – all of which requires planning and rationalization, deliberation and engagement. An active engagement with the self, with the body, with relationships and marriage, with gender norms, and with work: this is the subjective backdrop of the risk society.

The idea of individualization is the basis upon which Beck constructs his vision of a 'new modernity', of novel personal experimentation and cultural innovation against a social backdrop of risks, dangers, hazards, reflexivity, globalization. Yet the unleashing of experimentation and choice which individualization brings is certainly not without its problems. According to Beck, there are progressive and regressive elements to individualization; although, in analytical terms, these are extremely hard to disentangle. In personal terms, the gains of today's individualization might be tomorrow's limitation, as advantage and progress turn into their opposite. A signal example of this is offered in *The Normal Chaos of Love* (1995), where Beck and Beck-Gernsheim reflect on the role of technological innovation in medicine, and of how this impacts upon contemporary family life. Technological advancements in diagnostic and genetic testing on the unborn, they argue, create new parental possibilities, primarily in the realm of health monitoring. However, the very capacity for medical intervention is one that quickly turns into an obligation on parents to use such technologies in order to secure a sound genetic starting point for their offspring. Individualization is seen here as a paradoxical compulsion, at once leading people into a much more engaged relationship with science and technology than used to be the case, and enforcing a set of obligations and responsibilities that few in society have thought through in terms of broad

moral and ethical implications. It is perhaps little wonder therefore that Beck (1997: 96), echoing Sartre, contends that 'people are condemned to individualization'.

Critique

Beck has elaborated a highly original formulation of the theory of risk, a formulation which links with, but in many ways is more sophisticated in its detail and application than, other sociological approaches to the analysis of risk environments in contemporary society (among other contributions, see Douglas and Wildavsky (1982), Castell (1991), Giddens (1990, 1991), Luhmann (1993) and Adam (1998)). Beck's sociology of risk has clearly been of increasing interest to sociologists concerned with understanding the complex temporal and spatial figurations of invisible hazards and dangers including global warming, chemical and petrochemical pollution, the effects of genetically modified organisms and culturally induced diseases such as Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) (see Lash et al., 1996; Adam, 1998). In what follows, there are three core areas around which I shall develop a critique of the work of Beck: (1) risk, reflexivity, reflection; (2) power and domination; and (3) tradition, modernity and postmodernization.

Risk, Reflexivity, Reflection

Let me begin with Beck's discussion of the 'risk society', which, according to him, currently dominates socio-political frames thanks to the twin forces of reflexivity and globalization. There are, I believe, many respects in which Beck's vision of *Risikogesellschaft*, especially its rebounding in personal experience as risk-laden discourses and practices, is to be welcomed. In the wake of the Chernobyl disaster and widespread environmental pollution, and with ever more destructive weapons as well as human-made biological, chemical and technological hazards, it is surely the case that thinking in terms of risk has become central to the way in which human agents and modern institutions organize the social world. Indeed, in a world that could literally destroy itself, risk-managing and risk-monitoring increasingly influences both the constitution and calculation of social action. As mentioned previously, it is this focus on the concrete, objective physical-biological-technical risk settings of modernity which recommends Beck's analysis as a useful corrective to the often obsessive abstraction and textual deconstruction that characterizes much recent social theory. However, one still might wonder whether Beck's theory does not overemphasize, in a certain sense, the phenomena and relevance of risk. From a social-historical perspective it is plausible to ask, for instance, whether life in society has become more risky? In 'From Regulation to Risk', Bryan S. Turner (1994: 180–1) captures the problem well:

> [A] serious criticism of Beck's arguments would be to suggest that risk has not changed so profoundly and significantly over the last three centuries. For example, were the epidemics of syphilis and bubonic plague in earlier periods any different from the modern environment illnesses to which Beck draws our attention? That is, do Beck's criteria of risk, such as their impersonal and unobservable nature, really stand up to historical scrutiny? The devastating plagues of earlier centuries were certainly global, democratic and general. Peasants and aristocrats died equally horrible deaths. In addition, with the spread of capitalist colonialism, it is clearly the case that in previous centuries many aboriginal peoples such as those of North America and Australia were engulfed by environmental, medical and political catastrophes which wiped out entire populations. If we take a broader view of the notion of risk as entailing at least a strong cultural element whereby risk is seen to be a necessary part of the human condition, then we could argue that the profound uncertainties about life, which occasionally overwhelmed earlier civilizations, were not unlike the anxieties of our own fin-de-siècle civilizations.

Extending Turner's critique, it might also be asked whether risk assessment is the ultimate worry in the plight of individuals in contemporary culture? Is it right to see the means-ended rationality of risk, and thus the economistic language of preference, assessment and choice, as spreading into personal and intimate spheres of life (such as marriage, friendship and child-rearing) in such a determinate and unified way? And does the concept of risk actually capture what is new and different in the contemporary social condition?

I shall not pursue these general questions, important though they are, here. Instead, the issue I want to raise concerns the multiple ways in which risk is perceived, approached, engaged with or disengaged from, in contemporary culture. Beck's approach, however suggestive it may be, is at best a signpost which points to specific kinds of probabilities, avoidances and unanticipated consequences, but which is limited in its grasp of the social structuring of the perception of risk. The American social theorist Jeffrey C. Alexander (1996: 135) has argued that Beck's 'unproblematic understanding of the perception of risk is utilitarian and objectivist'. Alexander takes Beck to task for adopting a rationalistic and instrumental-calculative model of risk in microsocial and macrosocial worlds; to which it can be added that such a model has deep affinities with neo-classical economics and rational-choice theory, and thus necessarily shares the conceptual and political limitations of these standpoints also. Beck has also been criticized by others for his cognitive realism, moral proceduralism and lack of attention to aesthetic and hermeneutical subjectivity (Lash and Urry, 1994); failure to acknowledge the embodied nature of the self (Turner, 1994; Petersen, 1996); and neglect of the psychodynamic and affective dimensions of subjectivity and intersubjective relations (Elliott, 1996; Hollway and Jefferson, 1997).

In a social-theoretical frame of reference, what these criticisms imply is that Beck's theory cannot grasp the hermeneutical, aesthetic, psychological and culturally bounded forms of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in and through

which risk is constructed and perceived. To study risk-management and risk-avoidance strategies, in the light of these criticisms, requires attention to forms of meaning-making within socio-symbolically inscribed institutional fields, a problem to which I return in a subsequent section when looking at Beck's analysis of tradition, modernity and postmodernity. In raising the issue of the construction and reconstruction of risk – in particular, its active interpretation and reconstruction – one might reference numerous studies of socio-political attitudes relating to the conceptualization and confrontation of risk, danger and hazard. The anthropologist Mary Douglas (1986, 1992), for example, argues that advanced industrial risks are primarily constructed through the rhetoric of purity and pollution. For Douglas, what is most pressing in the social-theoretic analysis of risk is an understanding of how human agents ignore many of the potential threats of daily life and instead concentrate only on selected aspects. Interestingly, Beck fails to discuss in any detail Douglas's anthropology of risk.[4] This would seem peculiar not only since Douglas's path-breaking analyses of risk appear to have laid much of the thematic groundwork for Beck's sociological theory, but also because her work is highly relevant to the critique of contemporary ideologies of risk – that is, the social forms in which risk and uncertainty are differentiated across and within social formations, as well as peculiarly individuated.

My purpose in underscoring these various limitations of Beck's theory is not to engage in some exercise of conceptual clarification. My concern rather is to stress the sociologically questionable assumptions concerning risk in Beck's work, and to tease out the more complex, nuanced forms of risk perception that might fall within the scope of such an approach. To call into question Beck's notion of risk is, of course, also to raise important issues about the location of reflexivity between self and societal reproduction. Now it is the failure of simple, industrial society to control the risks it has created, which, for Beck, generates a more intensive and extensive sense of risk in reflexive, advanced modernity. In this sense, the rise of objective, physical, global risks propels social reflexivity. But again one might wish to question the generalizations Beck makes about human agents, modern institutions and culture becoming more reflexive or self-confronting. Much of Beck's work has been concerned to emphasize the degree of reflexive institutional dynamism involved in the restructuring of personal, social and political life, from the reforging of intimate relationships to the reinvention of politics. But there are disturbing dimensions here as well, which the spread of cultural, ethnic, racial and gendered conflict has shown only too well, and often in ways in which one would be hard pressed to find forms of personal or social reflexive activity.

No doubt Beck would deny – as he has done in his more recent writings – that the renewal of traditions and the rise of cultural conflicts are counter-examples to the thesis of reflexive modernization. For we need to be particularly careful, Beck contends, not to confuse reflexivity (self-dissolution) with reflection (knowledge). As Beck (1994b: 176–7) develops this distinction:

> … the 'reflexivity' of modernity and modernization in my sense does not mean reflection on modernity, self-relatedness, the self-referentiality of modernity, nor does it mean the self-justification or self-criticism of modernity in the sense of classical sociology; rather (first of all), modernization undercuts modernization, unintended and unseen, and therefore also reflection-free, with the force of autonomized modernization. … [R]eflexivity of modernity can lead to reflection on the self-dissolution and self-endangerment of industrial society, but it need not do so.

Thus, reflexivity does not imply a kind of hyper-Enlightenment culture, where agents and institutions reflect on modernity, but rather an unintended self-modification of forms of life driven by the impact of autonomized processes of modernization. Reflexivity, on this account, is defined as much by 'reflex' as it is by 'reflection'. 'It is possible to detect', write Lash et al. (1996) of Beck's recent sociology, 'a move towards seeing reflexive modernization as in most part propelled by blind social processes – a shift, crudely, from where risk society produces reflection which in turn produces reflexivity and critique, to one where risk society automatically produces reflexivity, and then – perhaps – reflection'.

Without wishing to deny the interest of this radical conception of reflexivity as self-dissolution, it still seems to me that Beck's contention that contemporary societies are propelled toward self-confrontation, split between reflex and reflection, remains dubious. In what sense, for instance, can one claim that reflection-free forms of societal self-dissolution exist independently of the reflective capacities of human agents? For what, exactly, is being dissolved, if not the forms of life and social practices through which institutions are structured? How might the analytical terms of reflexivity, that is social reflexes (non-knowledge) and reflection (knowledge), be reconciled? It may be thought that these difficulties can be overcome by insisting, along with Beck, on reflexivity in the strong sense – as the unseen, the unwilled, the unintended; in short, institutional dynamism. But such an account of blind social processes is surely incompatible with, and in fact renders incoherent, concepts of reflection, referentiality, reflexivity. Alternatively, a weaker version of the argument might be developed, one that sees only partial and contextual interactions of self-dissolution and reflection. Yet such an account, again, would seem to cut the analytical ground from under itself, since there is no adequate basis for showing how practices of reflexivity vary in their complex articulations of reflex and reflection or repetition and creativity.

Power and Domination

I now want to consider Beck's theory in relation to sociological understandings of power and domination. According to Beck, reflexive modernization combats many of the distinctive characteristics of power, turning set social divisions into active negotiated relationships. Traditional political conflicts, centred around class, race and gender, are increasingly superseded by new, globalized risk conflicts. 'Risks', writes Beck (1992: 35), 'display an equalizing effect'. Everyone

now is threatened by risk of global proportions and repercussions; not even the rich and powerful can escape the new dangers and hazards of, say, global warming or nuclear war. And it is from this universalized perspective that Beck argues political power and domination is shedding the skin of its classical forms and reinventing itself in a new global idiom.

The problematic nature of Beck's writings on this reinvention of political power and its role in social life, however, becomes increasingly evident when considering his analysis of social inequalities and cultural divisions. Take, for example, his reflections on class. Reflexive modernization, says Beck, does not result in the self-destruction of class antagonisms, but rather in self-modification. He writes (1997: 26):

> Reflexive modernization disembeds and re-embeds the cultural prerequisites of social classes with forms of individualization of social inequality. That means … that the disappearance of social classes and the abolition of social inequality no longer coincide. Instead, the blurring of social classes (in perception) runs in tandem with an exacerbation of social inequality, which now does not follow large identifiable groups in the lifeworld, but is instead fragmented across (life) phases, space and time.

The present-day individualizing forces of social inequality, according to Beck, erode class-consciousness (personal difficulties and grievances no longer culminate into group or collective causes) and also, to some considerable degree, class-in-itself (contemporary social problems are increasingly suffered alone). In short, class as a community of fate or destiny declines steeply. With class solidarities replaced by brittle and uncertain forms of individual self-management, Beck finds evidence for a 'rule-altering rationalization' of class relationships in new business and management practices, as well as industrial relations reforms. He contends that new blendings of economics and democracy are discernible in the rise of political civil rights within the workplace, a blend which opens the possibility of a post-capitalistic world – a 'classless capitalism of capital', in which 'the antagonism between labour and capital will collapse'.

There is considerable plausibility in the suggestion that class patterns and divisions have been altered by rapid social and political changes in recent years. These include changes in employment and the occupational structure, the expansion of the service industries, rising unemployment, lower retirement ages, as well as a growing individualization in the West together with an accompanying stress upon lifestyle, consumption and choice. However, while it might be the case that developments associated with reflexive modernization and the risk society are affecting social inequalities, it is surely implausible to suggest, as Beck does, that this involves the transfiguration of class as such. Why, as Scott Lash (Beck et al., 1994: 211) asks, do we find reflexivity in some sectors of socio-economic life and not others? Against the backdrop of new communication technologies and advances in knowledge transfer, vast gaps in the socio-cultural conditions of the wealthy and the poor drastically affect the ways in which individuals are drawn into the project of reflexive modernization. These

tensions are especially evident today in new social divisions between the 'information rich' and 'information poor', and of the forces and demands of such symbolic participation within the public sphere. What Beck fails to adequately consider is that individualization (while undoubtedly facilitating unprecedented forms of personal and social experimentation) may directly contribute to, and advance the proliferation of, class inequalities and economic exclusions. That is to say, Beck fails to give sufficient sociological weight to the possibility that individualization may actually embody systematically asymmetrical relations of class power.

Taken from a broader view of the ideals of equal opportunity and social progress, Beck's arguments about the relationship between advanced levels of reflexivity and the emergence of a new sub-politics do not adequately stand up to scrutiny. The general, tendential assertions he advances about business and organizational restructuring assume what needs to be demonstrated – namely, that these new organizational forms spell the demise of social class, as well as the viability of class analysis. Moreover, it seems implausible to point to 'sub-politics', defined by Beck only in very general terms, as symptomatic of a new socio-political agenda. When, for example, have the shifting boundaries between the political and economic spheres not played a primary role in the unfolding of relations between labour and capital? Is decision-making and consciousness really focused on a post-capitalistic rationalization of rights, duties, interests and decisions? A good deal of recent research shows, on the contrary, that income inequality between and within nations continues to escalate (Braun, 1991; Lemert, 1997); that class (together with structures of power and domination) continues to profoundly shape possible life chances and material interests (Westergaard, 1995); and that the many different definitions of class as a concept, encompassing the marginal, the excluded as well as the new underclass or new poor, are important in social analysis for comprehending the persistence of patterns of social inequality (Crompton, 1996).

These difficulties would suggest that Beck's theory of risk requires reformulation in various ways. Without wishing to deny that the risk-generating propensity of the social system has rapidly increased in recent years due to the impact of globalization and techno-science, it seems to me misleading to contend that social division in multinational capitalist societies is fully transfigured into a new logic of risk, as if the latter disconnects the former from its institutionalized biases and processes. The more urgent theoretical task, I suggest, is to develop methods of analysis for explicating how patterns of power and domination feed into, and are reconstituted by, the socio-symbolic structuring of risk. Here I shall restrict myself to noting three interrelated forces, which indicate, in a general way, the contours of how a politics of risk is undergoing transformation.

The first development is that of the privatization of risk. Underpinned by new trans-national spatializations of economic relations as well as the deregulation of the government of political life (Giddens, 1990; Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Bauman, 1998), the individual is increasingly viewed today as an active

agent in the risk-monitoring of collectively produced dangers; risk-information, risk-detection and risk-management is more and more constructed and designed as a matter of private responsibility and personal security. By and large, human agents confront socially produced risks individually. Risk is de-socialized; risk-exposure and risk-avoidance is a matter of individual responsibility and navigation. This is, of course, partly what Beck means by the individualization of risk. However, the relations between individualized or privatized risk, material inequalities and the development of global poverty are more systematic and complex than Beck's theory seems to recognize. In the post-war period, the shift from Keynesian to monetarist economic policies has been a key factor in the erosion of the management of risk through welfare security. The impact of globalization, transnational corporations and governmental deregulation is vital to the social production of the privatization of risk, all of which undoubtedly has a polarizing effect on distributions of wealth and income. It has also become evident – and this is crucial – that one must be able to deploy certain educational resources, symbolic goods, cultural and media capabilities, as well as cognitive and affective aptitudes, in order to count as a 'player' in the privatization of risk-detection and risk-management. People who cannot deploy such resources and capabilities, often the result of various material and class inequalities, are likely to find themselves further disadvantaged and marginalized in a new world order of reflexive modernization.

The second, related development concerns the commodification of risk. Millions of dollars are made through product development, advertising, and market research in the new industries of risk, which construct new problems and market new solutions for risk-fighting individual agents. 'As risk is simultaneously proliferated and rendered potentially manageable', writes Nikolas Rose (1996: 342), 'the private market for "security" extends: not merely personal pension schemes and private health insurance, but burglar alarms, devices that monitor sleeping children, home testing kits for cholesterol levels and much more. Protection against risk through an investment in security becomes part of the responsibilities of each active individual, if they are not to feel guilt at failing to protect themselves and their loved ones against future misfortunes'. In other words, the typical means for insuring against risk today is through market-promoted processes. However the fundamental point here, and this is something that Beck fails to develop in a systematic manner, is that such 'insurance' is of a radically imaginary kind (with all the misrecognition and illusion that the Lacanian-Althusserian theorization of the duplicate mirror-structure of ideology implies), given that one cannot really buy one's way out of the collective dangers that confront us as individuals and societies. How does one, for example, buy a way out from the dangers of global warming? The commodification of risk has become a kind of safe house for myths, fantasies, fiction and lies.

The third development concerns the instrumentalization of identities in terms of lifestyle, consumption and choice. Beck touches on this issue through the individualization strand of his argument. Yet because he sees individualiza-

tion as an active process transforming risk society, he pays almost no attention to the kinds of affective 'investments', often destructive and pathological, unleashed by an instrumentalization of identities and social relations. Of core importance here is the 'culture of narcissism' (Lasch, 1980) which pervades contemporary Western life, and plays a powerful role in the instrumental affective investments in individuals which a risk society unleashes. Joel Kovel (1988) writes of 'the de-sociation of the narcissistic character', a character lacking in depth of emotional attachment to others and communities. Unable to sustain a sense of personal purpose or social project, the narcissistic character, writes Kovel, rarely moves beyond instrumentality in dealing with other people. Such instrumental emotional investments may well be increasingly central to the management of many risk codes in contemporary culture. Consider the ways in which some parents fashion a narcissistic relation with their own children as a kind of imaginary risk-insurance (involving anxieties and insecurities over old age, mortality and the like), rather than relating to their offspring as independent individuals in their own right. Also in risks relating to the home, personal comfort as well as safety, hygiene, health and domesticity, the veneer-like quality of pathological narcissism can be found. Some analytical caution is, of course, necessary here, primarily because the work on narcissistic culture of Lasch and Sennett, among others, has been criticized in terms of over-generalization (Giddens, 1991: 174–80). Accordingly, it may be more plausible to suggest that narcissistic forms of identity are a tendency within contemporary cultural relations of risk management, and not a wholesale social trend.

Beck's writings, I am suggesting, are less than satisfying on issues of power and domination because he fails to analyse in sufficient depth the psychological, sociological and political forces by means of which the self-risk dialectic takes its varying forms. To develop a more nuanced interpretative and critical approach, I have suggested, the sociological task is to analyse privatization, commodification and instrumentalization as channels of risk management.

Tradition, Modernity, Postmodernity

The limitations in the concept of reflexivity I have highlighted are, in turn, connected to further ambiguities concerning the nature of social reproduction in contemporary culture. The production and reproduction of contemporary social life is viewed by Beck as a process of 'detraditionalization'. The development of reflexive modernization, says Beck, is accompanied by an irreversible decline in the role of tradition; the reflexivity of modernity and modernization means that traditional forms of life are increasingly exposed to public scrutiny and debate. That the dynamics of social reflexivity undercut pre-existing traditions is emphasized by Beck via a range of social-theoretical terms. He speaks of 'the age of side-effects', of individualization, and of a sub-politics beyond left and right – a world in which people can and must come to terms with the opportunities and dangers of new technologies, markets, experts, systems and

environments. Beck thus argues that the contemporary age is one characterized by increased levels of referentiality, ambivalence, flexibility, openness and social alternatives.

It might be noted that certain parallels can be identified between the thesis of detraditionalization and arguments advanced in classical social theory. Many classical social theorists believed that the development of the modern era spelled the end of tradition. 'All that is solid melts into air', said Marx of the power of the capitalist mode of production to tear apart traditional forms of social life. That the dynamics of capitalism undercut its own foundations meant for Marx a society that was continually transforming and constantly revolutionizing itself. Somewhat similar arguments about the decline of tradition can be found in the writings of Max Weber. The development of industrial society for Weber was inextricably intertwined with the rise of the bureaucratic state. Weber saw in this bureaucratic rationalization of action, and associated demand for technical efficiency, a new social logic destructive of the traditional texture of society. The views of Marx and Weber, among others, thus advanced a general binary opposition of 'the traditional' and 'the modern'. For proponents of the thesis of detraditionalization, such as Beck, the self-referentiality and social reflexivity of advanced modernity also necessarily implies that traditional beliefs and practices begin to break down. However, the thesis of detraditionalization is not premised upon the broad contrast between 'the traditional' and 'the modern' that we can discern in much classical social theory. On the contrary, Beck finds the relation between tradition and modernity at once complex and puzzling. If tradition remains an important aspect of advanced modernity, it is because tradition becomes reflexive; traditions are invented, reinvented and restructured in conditions of the late modern age.

So far I think that there is much that is interesting and important in this general orientation of Beck to understanding the construction of the present, past and future. In particular, I think the stress placed upon the reflexive construction of tradition, and indeed all social reproduction, is especially significant – even though I shall go on to argue that this general theoretical framework requires more specification and elaboration. I want, however, to focus on a specific issue raised by Beck's social theory, and ask, has the development of society toward advanced modernization been accompanied by a decline in the influence of tradition and traditional understandings of the past? Must we assume, as Beck seems to, that the social construction of tradition is always permeated by a pervasive reflexivity? At issue here, I suggest, is the question of how the concept of reflexivity should be related to traditional, modern and postmodern cultural forms. I shall further suggest that the concept of reflexivity, as elaborated by Beck, fails to comprehend the different modernist and postmodernist figurations that may be implicit within social practices and symbolic forms of the contemporary age.

In order to develop this line of argumentation, let us consider in some more detail the multiplicity of world traditions, communities and cultures as they impact upon current social practices and life-strategies. I believe that Beck is

right to emphasize the degree to which modernity and advanced modernization processes have assaulted traditions, uprooted local communities and broken apart unique regional, ethnic and sub-national cultures. At the level of economic analysis, an argument can plausibly be sustained that the erratic nature of the world capitalist economy produces high levels of unpredictability and uncertainty in social life and cultural relations, all of which Beck analyses in terms of danger, risk and hazard. It is worth noting, however, that Beck's emphasis on increasing levels of risk, ambivalence and uncertainty is at odds with much recent research in sociology and social theory that emphasizes the regularization and standardization of daily life in the advanced societies. George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993) is a signal example. Drawing Weber's theory of social rationalization and the Frankfurt School's account of the administered society into a reflective encounter, Ritzer examines the application of managerial techniques such as Fordism and Taylorism to the fast food industry as symptomatic of the infiltration of instrumental rationality into all aspects of cultural life. *McDonaldization*, as Ritzer develops the term, is the emergence of social logics in which risk and unpredictability are written out of social space. The point about such a conception of the standardization of everyday life, whatever its conceptual and sociological shortcomings, is that it clearly contradicts Beck's stress on increasing risk and uncertainty, the concept of reflexive individualization, and the notion that detraditionalization produces more ambivalence, more anxiety, and more openness.

Of course, Beck insists that reflexive modernization does not mark a complete break from tradition; rather reflexivity signals the revising, or reinvention, of tradition. However, the resurgence and persistence of ethnicity and nationality as a primary basis for the elaboration of traditional beliefs and practices throughout the world is surely problematic for those who, like Beck, advance the general thesis of social reflexivity. Certainly, the thesis would appear challenged by widespread and recently revitalized patterns of racism, sexism and nationalism which have taken hold in many parts of the world, and indeed many serious controversies over race, ethnicity and nationalism involve a reversion to what might be called traditionalist battles over traditional culture – witness the rise of various religious fundamentalisms in the United States, the Middle East and parts of Africa and Asia.

These political and theoretical ambivalences have their roots in a number of analytical difficulties, specifically Beck's diagnosis of simple and advanced modernity. Beck furnishes only the barest social-historical sketch of simple modernity as a distinctive period in the spheres of science, industry, morality and law. He underscores the continuing importance and impact of simple industrial society for a range of advanced, reflexive determinations (for example politically, economically, technologically and environmentally), yet the precise relations of such overlapping are not established or demonstrated in any detail. Exactly how we have moved into the age of reflexive modernization, although often stated and repeated, is not altogether clear. Beck's main line of explanation seems to focus on the side-effects of modernization as undercutting the

foundations of modernity. But, again, the dynamics of simple and reflexive modernization, together with their social-historical periodization, remain opaque. In addition, it is not always clear how Beck is intending to draw certain conceptual distinctions between 'positive' and 'negative' instantiations of respectively simple and advanced modernist socio-symbolic figurations. Rejecting outright any crude opposition between traditional and modern societies, Beck relates a tale of the proliferation of reflexive biographies and practices, lives and institutions, in which creative possibilities develop and new forms of risk and hazard take shape. Yet social advancement is far from inevitable: Beck speaks of counter-modernities. The question that needs to be asked here, however, is whether it is analytically useful for social theory to construct the contemporary age as characterized by interacting tropes of industrial society and reflexive modernization on the one side, and a range of counter-modernities on the other.

Viewed from the frame of postmodern social theory, and in particular the sociology of postmodernity (see Bauman, 1992a), Beck's argument concerning the circularity of the relationship between risk, reflexivity and social knowledge appears in a more problematic, and perhaps ultimately inadequate, light. For postmodern social theorists and cultural analysts diagnose the malaise of present-day society not only as the result of reflexively applied knowledge to complex techno-scientific social environments, but as infused by a more general and pervasive sense of cultural disorientation. The most prominent anxieties that underpin postmodern dynamics of social regulation and systemic reproduction include a general loss of belief in the engine of progress, as well as feelings of out-of-placeness and loss of direction. Such anxieties or dispositions are accorded central significance in the writings of a number of French theorists – notably, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Deleuze and Guattari – and also in the work of sociologists and social scientists interested in the ramifications of post-structuralism, semiotics and deconstruction for the analysis of contemporary society (Lash and Urry, 1987; Harvey, 1989; Poster, 1990; Best and Kellner, 1991; Smart, 1992, 1993; Bauman, 1992a, 2000; Elliott, 1996). Postmodern anxieties or dispositions are, broadly speaking, cast as part of a broader cultural reaction to universal modernism's construction of the social world, which privileges rationalism, positivism and techno-scientific planning. Premised upon a vigorous philosophical denunciation of humanism, abstract reason, and the Enlightenment legacy, postmodern theory rejects the meta-narratives of modernity (that is, totalistic theoretical constructions, allegedly of universal application) and instead embraces fragmentation, discontinuity and ambiguity as symptomatic of current cultural conditions.

To express the implications of these theoretical departures more directly in terms of the current discussion, if the social world in which we live in the 21st century is significantly different from that of the simple modernization, this is so because of *both* socio-political and epistemological developments. It is not only reflection on the globalization of risk that has eroded faith in humanly engineered progress. Postmodern contributions stress that the plurality of

heterogeneous claims to knowledge carries radical consequences for the unity and coherence of social systems. Bluntly stated, a number of core issues are identified by postmodern analysts in this connection:

- The crisis of representation, instabilities of meaning, and fracturing of knowledge claims;
- The failure of the modernist project to ground epistemology in secure foundations;
- The wholesale transmutation in modes of representation within social life itself. Postmodernization in this context spells the problematization of the relationship between signifier and referent, representation and reality, a relationship made all the more complex by the computerization of information and knowledge (Poster, 1990).

What I am describing as a broadly postmodern sociological viewpoint highlights the deficiency of placing 'risk' (or any other sociological variable) as the central paradox of modernity. For at a minimum, a far wider range of sources would appear to condition our current cultural malaise.

What is significant about these theoretical sightings, or glimpses, of the contours of postmodernity as a social system are that they lend themselves to global horizons and definitions more adequately than the so-called universalism of Beck's sociology of risk. Against a theoretical backdrop of the break with foundationalism, the dispersion of language games, coupled with the recognition that history has no overall teleology, it is surely implausible to stretch the notion of risk as a basis for interpretation of phenomena from, say, an increase in worldwide divorce rates through to the collapse of insurance as a principle for the regulation of collective life. Certainly, there may exist some family resemblance in trends surrounding new personal, social and political agendas. Yet the seeds of personal transformation and social dislocation are likely to be a good deal more complex, multiple, discontinuous. This is why the change of mood – intellectual, social, cultural, psychological, political and economic – analysed by postmodern theorists has more far-reaching consequences for sociological analysis and research into modernity and postmodernization than does the work of Beck. In Beck's sociology, the advent of advanced modernization is related to the changing social and technological dimensions of just one institutional sector: that of risk and its calculation. The key problem of reflexive modernization is one of living with a high degree of risk in a world where traditional safety nets (the welfare state, traditional nuclear family, etc.) are being eroded or dismantled. But what is left unexplored here is the possibility that today's far-reaching social transitions have occurred as a result of a broader crisis, one that involves not only the spiralling of risk, but also the shattering of modernist culture, the breakdown of enlightenment faith in progress, the collapse of European imperialism, the globalization of capital, and such like. This is not to say, of course, that anxieties arising from post-industrial and technological risks are not of central importance; but it is to acknowledge that such risks form a

part – albeit a very important part – of very broad social transitions currently occurring.

Many aspects of the sociology of postmodernity – emphasis on the intensification of modernization, the cult of technology, dislocating subversions of epistemological closure, and the levelling of social and cultural hierarchies – also underline the significant limitations inherent in Beck's faith in the self-limitation and self-control of reflexive risk environments for the emergence of 'another modernity'. The criticism here is that Beck's over-emphasis on a potential reflexive social future in which alternative techno-scientific practices come to the fore – where institutionalized politics is displaced in favour of social sub-politics and the politicization of culture – follows directly from his assumption that risk can be collectively navigated via a modern, rationalist faith in self-control and self-monitoring. But this assumption may be misleading, for it may rest upon a mistaken view of the relation between enlightened rationalities and social transformation. 'After having convincingly argued that modern solutions have become the source of our problems', as Barry Smart writes (2000: 466), 'it is ironic that Beck continues to turn to a version of the modern project in pursuit of a resolution'. Smart persuasively argues, pace Beck, that many aspects of our lives remain far from controllable not only due to the insidious influence of over-rationalization and intensive global risks, but primarily because contingency, ambivalence and ambiguity structure the human condition in a more far-reaching fashion. Following the sociological insights of Bauman (1990, 2000) it can be plausibly argued that postmodern adherents of the paradoxes of modernity indicate that contingency and ambivalence are here to stay, with the implication that the sociological picture may be considerably more messy and ambiguous than Beck cares to acknowledge. The postmodern emphasis on the multiple, fragmented, discontinuous and local implies that all attempts to fashion a master discourse of society are illegitimate. Is Beck's sociology of risk such a 'master discourse'? Probably not, as Beck has been at pains in his writings to stress that he is seeking to elaborate a multidimensional account of the nature of modernity. What these theoretical considerations do highlight, however, is that Beck's work leaves out various cultural, epistemological and political forces that are contributing to current social transitions of the most fundamental kind, and in doing so perhaps over-privileges the degree to which the management of risk is a key institutional value.

Viewed from this perspective, it also becomes apparent that Beck's argument against postmodernists – that is, that they make the sociologically naive mistake of equating modernity with industrial modernization – is vulnerable, and precisely for reasons which have to do with grasping the 'multiple worlds' with which late modern culture increasingly engages. By rejecting all the current talk of postmodernism and postmodernity as conceptually off the mark, Beck closes off the possibility of seeing that the processes of self-reflexivity and institutional dynamism with which he is most concerned might well be propelling us beyond modernity to some new, institutionalized social order. Proper analysis of postmodern cultural conditions demands breaking with our traditional

(modernist) theoretical frameworks in which social realities of the world are assimilated to certain key decisive forces (such as risk, class or nationalism), and the development instead of more heterogeneous interpretative methods for analysing the plurality of traditions, practices and perspectives that constitute social life.

Conclusion

In this article I have presented Beck's argument about risk within the context of a broader discussion of his sociological approach to reflexivity, advanced modernization and individualization. While criticizing various aspects of Beck's sociological theory, I have suggested throughout that the concepts of risk, hazard and uncertainty, when couched within the framework of reflexive individualization and advanced modernization, are significant and provocative ideas that go a considerable distance in resolving some of the central problems and dichotomies within contemporary social theory. As a contribution to the further elaboration of such an approach, I have criticized Beck's account of the 'risk society' for its dependence upon rationalistic and instrumental models of constructions of uncertainty and unpredictability in social relations, and for its failure to adequately define the relations and interplay between institutional dynamism and social reflexes on the one hand and self-referentiality and critical reflection on the other. It can be argued plausibly that Beck's account of risk is at once reductionist and excessivist. At the subjective and cultural levels, Beck makes a number of unjustified reductions when conceptualizing the social construction of risk, specifically the cognitive, informational and techno-scientific inflections his work accords to the issue. It is clear that his work does not appreciate the full significance of interpersonal, emotional and cultural factors as these influence and shape risk-monitoring in contemporary societies. In sociological terms, Beck's theory often appears excessivist: risk is elevated to such prominence in social reproduction and political transformation that other social forces are, by implication, downgraded in conceptual importance. I have suggested that Beck's exclusion of wider institutional and epistemological factors affecting the shape of present-day society is nowhere more evident than in his wholesale dismissal of the idea of postmodernity. In contrast, I have tried to suggest ways in which social theory could develop the notions of risk and uncertainty in connection with an analysis of reflexivity and critical self-reflection, ideologies of power and domination, and a dialectical notion of modernity and postmodernization. 'We are living', writes Beck (1997: 174), 'in a self-critical risk society that is continuing, albeit with restrained pangs of consciousness, in the old routines'. The social theory of Beck represents an important but restricted critique of societal attempts to break from the old routines – that is, contemporary engagements with reflexive individual and collective autonomy, the clarification and formulation of which is essential to current theoretical activity in the social sciences.

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Notes

1 See Beck, 1986, 1991, 1992, 1994a, 1994b, 1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b.
2 Beck developed his approach to risk in the 1986 book *Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weges einem andere Moderne*; for the English translation see Beck, 1992. The book had a major impact in the social sciences across Europe, and generated considerable interest in Beck's approach to social theory and modern sociology on both sides of the Atlantic.
3 Beck draws substantially from the work of François Ewald in developing the idea that society as a whole comes to be understood as a risk environment in insurers' terms. See Ewald, 1986, 1993.
4 Where Beck comments on Douglas, the concentration is typically upon the schism in sociology between the analysis of traditional-agrarian and modern-industrial societies. See Beck, 1997: 57–8, 87.

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