

ULRICH BECK'S LEGACY

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Introduction

Ulrich Beck made one of the most creative contributions to the social theory of the late XX and early XXI centuries. This assessment was re-emphasized after his sudden death at the dawn of 2015, in statements published in the most important international newspapers. Since *Risikogesellschaft* (2011a) was published in German in 1986 and in English (*Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*) in 1992, with his vast work in books, articles, notes in newspapers, talks, debates, etc., Beck turned into one of the most relevant social theorists of our time, establishing dialogues with the most important and consolidated names in the academic spectrum. That is the case of the fruitful cooperation with Giddens (1990, 2002, 2010), which allowed the complex characterization of the reflexive modernization, besides the movement towards the conceptualization of the global risk society.

Beck started by challenging the dominant social theories and making the environmental issue central to understand our global society. With different new categories, he dared to formulate a general theory, encompassing from the conditions of scientific research, the ecological crisis, the role of the State, sovereignty and nationalism issues, up to the 'normal chaos of love' (title of one of his books with his wife Beck-Gernsheim; Beck, 1995). All of the basic themes of sociology, were presented from a renewed, stimulating and creative vision to other areas, such as environmental sociology (Guivant, 1998), business administration, law, economics and religion (Latour 2003). After his death, we were left with an open work, under construction, with unfinished plans of theoretically furthering his ideas, expanding them empirically.

In this article, I intend to present the topics that stood out in his most recent work. To be able to expose his contribution in the XXI century, I will first briefly focus on the publications which granted him international recognition, despite not intending to conduct a full intellectual biography.

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Global risk society and reflexive modernization

From his very first works, Ulrich Beck attempted to shake social theory from its cobwebs, criticizing the role some categories had, and which he denominated “zombie concepts”, such as State, social classes, family, nation (Beck, 2002a: 14-18). New problems, new theory, which, instead of having classes as the center, started to have environmental risks as the axis to define risk society. They were not trivial risks, but those which presented serious consequences (irreversible, once identified, invisible and democratic, crossing any boundary and social class) and which fundamentally emerged after World War II. They happen to be risks against which there is no insurance to protect us, once they cannot be calculated. They lie in the dimension of uncertainty. Nuclear power and pesticides are paradigmatic examples. The pact for progress made between science and industry would have been the origin of the risk society, which now returns to us with a strong boomerang effect.

Beck (2010) says that, when the Chernobyl nuclear accident occurred (April 25, 1986), he was revising his book proof-copy and ended up adding a new preface, arguing a clear example of the new modernity in which we are affected by the collateral effects of the victory over the control of natural resources. We would ourselves be the danger and progress, the source of risks. With this new proposal and concepts, Beck gradually started to be a compulsory reference in academic debates. He entered the theme of risks using an essayist style and mostly ignoring the already significant tradition in social theory as a specific area. In spite of that, Beck brought a refreshing perspective on risks, considering that they are not synonymous of catastrophe, but rather an anticipation of it.. They exist in a permanent state of virtuality and are turned into topics when foreseen by means of different visualization techniques, especially those used by the media.

Despite the emphasis placed on risks with serious consequences, which lead us to leave behind simple modernization, typical of the industrial revolution, Beck's analysis is not pessimistic. By means of new alliances, the new risks also allow for new ways of making politics, which Beck called sub-politics (Beck, 1997). This would be one of the possible spaces of reflexivity, away from the institutions representing the Nation-State, especially political parties, and where cooperation could emerge among international institutions (top-down globalization) and among local actors trans-nationally bonded (bottom-up globalization). Class, as a category of social change, is replaced by these new social and political actors, who do have the possibility of challenging the dominant structures while organizing around everyday issues (feminism, environmentalism, anti-war, anti-nuclear, etc.).

The other meaning of reflexivity is that of a reflex, which does not involve awareness or political action because it occurs objectively, non-intentionally, within the dynamics triggered by the risk society. This understanding of reflexive modernizations keeps Beck distant from some of Giddens's formulations (Beck et al, 2003). This is also observed in the way he defines individualization, not as a voluntary process (as Giddens tends to characterize it) but rather deriving from an institutional dynamic of the second modernity directed to the individual rather than to the group (Beck, 2002 a: 67-83). Beck identifies the same compulsive process in cosmopolitanization – which will be seen further on.

Beck (2010) admitted that in the book *Risk society*, he still had a universalist vision, generalizing his analysis from a European experience. In the works that followed, he kept considering the process of reflexive modernization as universal, but only regarding the difficulty in preventing the collateral effects of industrialization. Beck started to discuss multiple modernities, referring to how that process could assume different formats, with possibilities of superposition between pre-modernity, the first and the second (or reflexive) modernities and without a linearity¹.

In the publications in which he analyzes the global risk societies, Beck (especially 1999, 2005, 2009) improves and expands his definition of risks by presenting them as the ones allowing the anticipation of planetary catastrophes, and which encompass, as we mentioned previously, besides the central environmental risks, the economic ones and those deriving from terrorism (Beck 2002), which should be seen as interlinked in the planetary crises. He also starts to place more precisely environmental risks, by affirming that they cannot be understood in a dualist opposition between nature and society (Beck 1996), as previously identified, as he admits, by Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway and Barbara Adams. We are faced with global risks, which are real and simultaneously socially defined according to the relations of power. The central question becomes: who has the control to establish and to measure such risks? Moreover, who defines what is or is not a risk? The reality of risks may dramatically be presented or minimized, according to who decides what should and can be known. We are facing uncertain and manufactured risks within our civilization, and which were industrially internalized. Following these questions, which characterize Beck's realistic reflexivity, how evidences are produced should be researched as well as how alternative interpretations are closed inside black boxes (Beck, 1996).

Cosmopolitan sociology

The analysis of global risks cannot be disconnected from what Beck (2002c: 17) later defines as his cosmopolitan, and even "revolutionary" effort. In this new and ambitious proposal, some central elements in the cosmopolitanization concept need to be identified. That concept cannot be mistaken for a philosophical normativism to organize the world, in Kant's terms, or for the globalized citizen's ideal. It happens to be a sociological perspective focusing on the not-at-all pure process which impels us to assume global risks with complex solutions including the cosmopolitan element: it is now mandatory that we have to work together, considering the contradictions and conflicts permeating reality. We would be faced with empirical-analytical cosmopolitanization, completely different from the normative cosmopolitanism, as a compulsive drive rather than a voluntary choice (Beck et al, 2013: 3).

The cosmopolitanization process means globalization from within the national societies, with important transformations in daily identities, since global problems have turned to be part of our day-to-day, and of the global governance structures. This is the fundamental difference from the 'globalization' term, which delimits something else that is outside. Cosmopolitanization occurs from inside (Beck and Szneider, 2006).

One of the dimensions explaining cosmopolitanization is the one referring to the way diversity is interpreted and dealt with. And this is not merely plurality: there are not only different types of modern societies but there are especially new forms of dynamics interlinking the societies. One of the major ones is the end of the other global. We have all started to be imperatively and coercively connected, even if global risks may affect countries, states and cultures in different ways (Beck, 2011b: 1348). Hereafter, other key questions are posed: “May the reasons by which a society justifies the exclusion of foreigners be questioned by members of society and also by foreigners? Who questions, decides, justifies and defines who is ‘who? ... Can the members claim the right of homogeneity to exclude others? The right to ‘religious homogeneity’, of ‘racial homogeneity’? Or of ‘ethnic cleansing?’” (Beck, 2002b: 20). For Beck, we are before a cosmopolitan constellation that creates new demands for legitimation, opening discussions on how to integrate those excluded (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Therefore, cosmopolitanization is asymmetric, permeated with relations of power and strength, and may create new asymmetries within and between societies.

The other dimension of cosmopolitanism is the one referring to the endemic nature of global risks, which creates possibilities for new global civility or for a new cosmopolitan civilizational shared destiny. To global risks correspond possible alternatives, but not obviously unavoidable, and which would result from transnational reflexivity, global cooperation and coordinated actions. We would be confronted with new risks creating imperatives, responsibilities, cosmopolitan, since on the one hand they mix ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ and contribute to the emergence of a global awareness; on the other hand, they create interlinked networks of political decisions between the States and their citizens, alternating the territorial characteristics of the governance systems (Beck and Grande, 2010: 417). With the recognition of these risks, cosmopolitan communities emerge, without delimitations in time or in space. In these communities or cosmopolitan coalitions of different actors beyond the boundaries of nation-state, clashes are established for conflicting projects, each sector trying to represent “universal” interests. These new spaces have to be researched.

Together with the theoretical proposal, Beck developed a deep questioning of the status of social sciences, impregnated with what he identifies as *methodological nationalism* (Beck 2000, 2006; 2011b; Beck & Grande, 2010). This is a serious problem because it assumes as universal what is individual and, furthermore, it appears as a limitation with the transformations in the role of the nation-state. This restricted approach hinders the understanding of the dynamics and specific conflicts characterizing the global risk societies, and which are globally constructed, mediated and staged. Beck proposes a *methodological cosmopolitanism* (Beck 2006; Beck & Grande 2007; Beck & Grande 2010) as an approach taking as the starting point the varieties in modernity and its global interdependencies. As from this approach, it would be possible to study the aforementioned new social, economic and environmental risks (such as climate change, bio-politics, terrorist threats) and the characteristics of the second modernity deriving from new global boundaries.

The instigations of cosmopolitan sociology are manifold, starting from how to study the global and how to avoid falling into philosophy and metaphysics while not counting on systematic empirical references. Beck highlighted two concepts that may guide

this work and which are being worked on by other sociologists, such as John Urry: that of interconnectivity and that of cosmopolitanization from within. By the first one, he understands 'the fluid that flows' (Beck, 2002 b: 25), mobility, networks, in which neither boundaries nor relationships may establish the differences between one place and the other. Boundaries and relationships may oscillate and be transformed without cracking. By the second, as already seen, he refers to something else than having transnational sensitivity to conduct empirical sociological research. There is also something beyond the disciplinary dimension. Geography, anthropology, ethnology, international relations, international law, political philosophy and political theory join sociology in the need of changing the central theoretical and empirical axis, in the cosmopolitan effort (Beck and Sznaider, 2006). This was the major theme of a special issue of the periodical *The British Journal of Sociology*, from 2006, as well as from a trilogy of books, in which Beck (2005, 2006) and Beck and Grande (2007) take the European Union as a model of cosmopolitanization processes. Yet with the coming crisis on its base and the German power centrality, Beck partly revised his theses in the book *German Europe*, from 2013.

Climate change and metamorphoses: the unfinished project

In 2012, Beck started a project to develop the cosmopolitan sociology aiming to reinvent the social sciences in the cosmopolitanization era, proposing new theoretical, methodological and empirical advances. Beck recognized the need of providing greater materiality to his proposals, articulating them with empirical researches. The focus was placed on climate change, as one of the most relevant global problems, a concern for populations and governments. The project, named *Methodological Cosmopolitanism – In the Laboratory of Climate Change (Cosmo-Climate)*ⁱⁱ, was financed by the European Research Council for a 5-year period. The project had two blocks. The first referred to the study of the cosmopolitan climate changes, with three comprehensive case studies 1) greening cities in the world; 2) low-carbon innovation networks; and 3) media and global risks. The second block involved the development of the cosmopolitan theory, placing the components of the case studies in a distinct (re)structuring process as from the methodological cosmopolitanism. One of the contributions intended by means of this perspective was to better understand if and how new types of actors emerge, that is, cosmopolitan actors as drivers of social-political transformation.

With this proposal, Beck aimed to fill a blind spot in the current thinking regarding the climate issues, since on the one hand it is very sophisticated concerning climate sciences, economic rationality and present in certain political projects; on the other hand, there lacks a systematic understanding of how different societies, cities and regions are altered by, and respond to, the risks of climate change. This proposal is closely related to the apprehension formulated in the following question (Beck 2010b:254): *Why is there no storming of the Bastille because of the environmental destruction threatening mankind, why no Red October of ecology? Why have the most pressing issues of our time – climate change and ecological crisis – not been met with the same enthusiasm, energy, optimism, ideals and forward-looking democratic spirit as the past tragedies of poverty, tyranny and war?*

For Beck, cosmopolitan sociology could provide important clues to understand and even to change this limited interpretation regarding climate change. He replied to those questions with eight theses: 1) the discourse on climate politics is an elitist and expert one, leaving out other important voices; 2) climate politics should be understood not as being about climate but about the transformation of the concepts and institutions of the first modernity; 3) total complementarity between climate change and social inequalities; 4) climate change is ambivalent (hierarchical and democratic) and demands a reinvention of green politics; 5) regulations need to be addressed by focusing on who has the power to define the rules of accountability, compensation and proof; 6) the importance to understand the central role of global mass media staging global risks and allowing them to become ‘cosmopolitan events’; 7) climate change can allow an alternative modernity with a new vision of prosperity; and 8) the greening of modernity can be achieved through cosmopolitanism as a power multiplier: it can be the result of overcoming national barriers for climate politics.

Again, here emerges his surprising perspective, for the optimism and for the way in which he formulated it. Beck changes the terms of the debates about whether climate change is really occurring and, in case it is, what can be done to halt this phenomenon. For Beck, the focus on the solutions prevents us from perceiving that climate change has already altered our way of imagining and of making politics. Whereas in the book *Risk Society* Beck discussed the negative (*bad*) and positive (*good*) effects produced by the highly industrialized society, before climate change there is the possibility that the *bad* may produce *common goods*. Here, still unseen, would be the emancipatory collateral effects of global risk. Beck turns inside out the interpretations that climate change is an apocalyptic catastrophe, capturing an *emancipatory catastrophe* process. This is fundamentally due to being there, among the *good*, a transformation in the conditions and in understanding the transformation, which he denominates *metamorphoses* or era change (Beck, 2014). This would not merely be a social change, or evolution, or reform or revolution. *It is a mode of changing the mode of change.*

Metamorphosis has the power of leading to new developments, in terms of laws, regulations, technologies, negotiations between cities, etc., but without linear political responses and without focusing on the reduction of carbon emissions. These would have turned into a kind of iron cage of environmental policies, fundamentally in the natural sciences terms, with an elitist discourse, without reaching citizens (Beck 2010 a, b).

Beck resorts to the role of the new cosmopolitan sociology to provide a foundation to his interpretation. Climate change may lead to integrating natural and social aspects, transforming social institutions, as well as the understanding about the climate and of the environment. It thus implies new forms of power, inequality and insecurity, together with creating new ways of being and acting in the world, in cooperation and in solidarity (Beck *et al.*, 2013). In a scale of future scenarios, such a cooperation may predominate or would predominate a sinister perspective of radical separation between the rich and the poor countries. Cosmopolitanization would be compatible with both possibilities or some of the intermediary ones. Yet, as pointed out by Beck *et al.* (2013), we still have to

know how these opposing trends can intertwine regarding climate global risks and what the consequences would be. This is a job for sociology, questioning that environmental politics is more than just about the climate: it is about transforming the institutions of modernity and the concepts studying them (Beck 2010b).

What could already be identified as occurring in the second decade of this century is the configuration of a new horizon for perceiving climate change and of the strategies for action, which are due to: 1) changes in the structure of social classes and in the inequalities created by the rising level of the sea, drawing new maps of the world. This would imply a different way of conceptualizing the world and the chances of survival; and 2) the decisions-makers are not the ones who suffer the consequences. Beck here identifies an organized irresponsibility, in which those affected are not included in the decision processes. This can only be seen when the nation-state perspective is abandoned as well as categories such as North/South or the West and the rest of the world.

Beck furthers the understanding of this change through 3 new conceptual lenses of analysis into the anticipation of the global catastrophe: 1) transgressing non-written standards of our civilization; 2) causing an anthropological shock; and 3) causing social catharses. The latter is explained by Beck taking the example of the Katrina hurricane. This was an unprecedented experience that, by means of the action and work by different groups, led to reflections of what was not apparently linked, shows to be interlinked: racial injustice and global justice.

Here we are before an innovative research unit that is the risk community, including those excluded in the national perspective. Climate change opens the possibility of thinking in terms of a new paradigm which includes the other globally excluded. For this, cosmopolitan justice should be in the international agenda. The cosmopolitan communities of climate risk are a possibility of responding to the world on the verge of risk. They are new constellations of social actors, not necessarily in face-to-face relationships, but sharing equivalent experiences of climate risks, with potentialities for collective actions.

One of the examples is the narrative connection among distant and apparently distinct phenomena that may be established between electric toothbrush users in the USA and couples who discuss consumption habits in Europe and in Japan, with representatives disputing over a post-Kyoto agreement in global climate conferences, moving to flooding events casualties and to projects in Australia, China, India and Bangladesh (Beck, 2012). This coercive inclusion of the "other distant"/excluded is what Beck defines as the scientific social fact of cosmopolitanization.

In the whole of his production, the so-called cosmopolitan effort can be found, which should lead to a reinvention of sociology for the XXI century, replacing the meanings of the basic concepts and creating new ones, which allowed capturing the world metamorphoses. This perspective of overcoming the errors of the whole industrial capitalism era, concentrated on climate change, poses very ample questions and difficult answers. However, it is a challenge that cannot be avoided.

Final comments

I had the honor to be part of the research team in the project coordinated by Beck, which happened to be his last intellectual enterprise. The project was truncated due to being ended by the European Research Council after Beck's passing away. Yet the international team formed (and I use the simple present because we keep in touch) by Anders Blok, Sabine Selchow, David Tyfield, Ingrid Volkmer, Daniel Levy, Svetla Marinova, Albert Groeber, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, Ana María Vara and I expect to finish the work started.

Having shared some important moments with him, for me, his legacy go beyond the influence of his ideas. Writing about what it ceased to be, as from his death, is a purely academic exercise. I discovered the Risk Society in 1994, and from its engaging reading I found a powerful theoretical reference, which contributed to making sense of some of the ideas I developed in my doctoral thesis about the perception of pesticide risks, in 1992. My feelings are mixed in this organization of his unsettling proposals because, when meeting him in person in the research group, I discovered an intellectual who would listen to others opinions with interest, respect, and be respectful in his criticisms and in the way he stimulated and motivated the work to be followed within the project; modest, despite his brilliance; and patient, full of energy and motivation, as well as his will of thinking in a group, to better elaborate his intuitions and to seriously build, with academic rigor, a new theoretical and empirical proposal for the social sciences. Beck left us with number of challenges opening countless ways to sociologically think the present world and to act politically.

Notes

- i See criticism to the problem of evolutionism and Eurocentrism in Risk Society in Guivant (2001).
- ii <http://cosmostudies.com/>

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Abstract: This article presents the core ideas of Ulrich Beck and his legacy is evaluated. The first part introduces the most widely known concepts, disseminated in the national and international contexts, centered on the works from the period following the publication of his book “Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity”. The quest for transforming sociology, both theoretically and methodologically, was a central drive in the approach proposed by Beck, questioning the zombie concepts permeating the area. From social theory, Beck started to significantly influence other areas within the discipline, highlighting environmental sociology and risk theories. The second part presents more recent works, focusing on the cosmopolitanization concept. This is not part of a normative proposal, but rather an analytical one of a process that has seized our contemporary world, largely independently of our intentions. Reading this part of his work is highly relevant to understand both the intellectual and political challenges permeating the complex metamorphoses of our time. The axle of the final part is his last research into climate change and how Beck and his team were facing the need of empirically translating the richness of the sociologist’s ideas and insights. Fundamentally, the aim of this article is to highlight how his legacy opens innumerable and creative possibilities of recreating the social sciences field.

Key words: Risk society, cosmopolitanism, climate change.
