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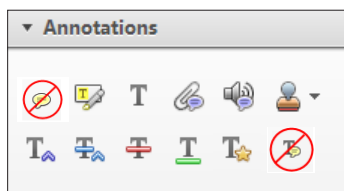
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**Article Number:** 651027

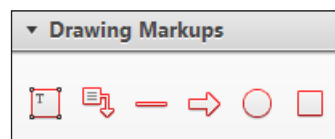
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# Not knowing, emancipatory catastrophism and metamorphosis: Embracing the spirit of Ulrich Beck

Security Dialogue

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DOI: 10.1177/0967010616651027

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**Abstract**

Embracing the spirit of Beck's (2016: xii) observation that 'what was ruled out beforehand as inconceivable is taking place', this article urges a re-engagement with Ulrich Beck's work within security studies. In so doing, the article falls into three parts. First, we provide necessary contextual orientation, discussing the magnitude of Beck's contribution to understandings of risk and security in the social sciences. Second, we discuss the importance of comprehending Beck's unique methodological approach in order to appreciate the more specific resonances of his work. Third, we embrace the theoretical novelty of Beck's work, demonstrating the ways in which the tools that he devised might be put to use and extended in future. To this end, we focus on three interconnected conceptual devices developed by Beck in the latter stages of his career: *nichtwissen*, emancipatory catastrophism and metamorphosis. We conclude by emphasizing the vital need to grasp the practical as well as the academic ambitions that underpinned Beck's projective style of social theory.

**Keywords**

Ulrich Beck, metamorphosis, risk, uncertainty

*More than ever, we need ideas and theories that will allow us to conceive of the new which is rolling over us in a new way, and allow us to live and act within it.* (Beck, 1992: 12)

**Introduction**

The quote above is taken from the English translation of the 1986 book *Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*. It tells us much about Ulrich Beck's academic ambitions. In this magnum opus, Beck challenged us to think the world anew, boldly proclaiming the dawning of a 'second modernity'. The publication of *Risikogesellschaft* coincided with the Chernobyl power plant disaster in Ukraine and tapped into a rising tide of public concern about environmental risks in Germany (Wilkinson, 2011). Following on from his stark warnings regarding the potentially

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deleterious impacts of nuclear technology, Beck was hailed as a sociological forecaster *par excellence* (Jeffries, 2006). While Beck always maintained that he sensed the major impact that *Risikogesellschaft* might have, even he could not have foreseen its international reach. The book has been translated into 35 languages and sold hundreds of thousands of copies worldwide. It remains one of the most cited social theory texts of the last four decades. The ripples created in the academic community following the 1992 publication of its English translation, *Risk Society*, spread rapidly, with Beck's ideas being championed by the Green movement, debated by cultural commentators and used by risk analysts and policy makers (Mythen, 2014: 7). Fêted by Anthony Giddens (2015) as 'the greatest sociologist of his generation', Beck was an intellectual who made vital contributions to public debates about the nature of security in the modern world and whose work informed politics and policy.

Although *Risk Society* was very much the centrepiece of his *oeuvre*, Beck made many other acclaimed contributions. His interests were truly panoramic – ranging from making sense of long-distance relationships, to perceiving shifts in political engagement and the changing nature of work triggered by globalization. These writings bequeathed new concepts to the social sciences, including 'individualization', 'reflexive modernization' and 'cosmopolitization' (Sznajder, 2015: 221). His career – which spanned over 40 years, from the award of his doctoral thesis at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU) in 1972 to his untimely passing in 2015 – was devoted to analysing the social processes that shape and define the modern world. What is remarkable about Beck, in comparison with his peers and predecessors, was his capacity for iterative theory building. While scholars frequently hitch themselves to a particular theoretical framework and remain wedded to it throughout their careers, Beck was different – his writing was restless and promiscuous. His hunger to learn, adapt, challenge and change propelled a diverse and multi-layered academic contribution. In as much as Beck's theoretical base was undoubtedly world risk society, this framework provided the platform for notable extensions into debates about globalization, cosmopolitanism and, finally, metamorphosis.

Rather than celebrating the notable advances made by Beck in the world risk society thesis, it is our concern in this article to focus specifically on three conceptual devices developed in the latter stages of his work: *nichtwissen*, emancipatory catastrophism and metamorphosis. In keeping with the creative ambitions of this Special Edition, we wish to suggest that further engagement with these concepts may both provide fresh insights for security studies and enhance opportunities for interdisciplinary dialogue. Our emphasis throughout will be on the need for scholars to appreciate the exploratory and provocative nature of Beck's contribution. This, we argue, enables them to have a proper appreciation of the practical utility of the conceptual devices he created, unblinkered by their own specific discipline.

## **Risk, security and transformation: Mapping the foundations of Beck's work**

Beck's substantial body of work (1992; 1995; 1999; 2009; 2015) focused on the catalytic effects of risk on social transformation. What subsequently became known as the 'risk society thesis' describes an epochal shift from a first or 'industrial modernity' to a 'second modernity', or risk society. Where the hazards produced in industrial modernity are relatively localized, affect particular groups and can be institutionally managed, the risk society is characterized by labile security threats that are universal in nature. Beck's claims regarding the transference from previous historical eras into the risk society were founded on an analytical separation between 'risks' and 'natural hazards' (Beck, 1992). In previous epochs, 'natural hazards' – such as earthquakes, famine and floods – were said to have most adversely affected human existence. By contrast, Beck (1995)

reasoned that in modern Western cultures, the catastrophic force of natural hazards had been tempered by strategic scientific and technological interventions. Yet, at the same time, the advancement of science and technology, coupled with an unregulated capitalist market based on unfettered mass production has inadvertently created an assorted batch of 'manufactured risks', such as global warming, financial crisis and nuclear accidents. For Beck, the 'mega-hazards' of the risk society are inherently global and evade established institutional practices of regulation and control. Within the risk society, security threats are not so much visited upon society by nature, but arise as unplanned 'side effects' of economic, scientific and technological development. In this way the generation of manufactured risks through capitalist modernization and scientific development effectively renders the second modernity 'a problem for itself' (Beck, 1997: 5). Thus, while the defining logic of the class society is hierarchical – some win and some lose – the logic of the risk society is horizontal: everyone loses. What Beck (2009) determined as the three foremost threats in contemporary society – financial meltdown, ecological crises and global terror networks – affect rich and poor alike. It is this universality which undermines the authority of security institutions. Beck argued that despite being rendered impotent in the face of threats of great magnitude, institutions have to continue to act as if they are able to control and regulate. Nevertheless, interventions and regulation are, for Beck, purely performative. The tendency to 'carry on regardless' with countermeasures that cannot reduce or manage manufactured risks was referred to by Beck (2009: 27) as 'organized irresponsibility'.

While he paid a great deal of attention to a discussion of risk production, Beck was also concerned to highlight the consequences of a pervasive process of individualization which was leading to an increased accent on personal choice, decision and self-reflexivity on the one hand, and introspection and reformation within social institutions on the other. These dual processes of risk production and individualization act in tandem to motor social change. As is increasingly recognized, major global threats are endogenous rather than exogenous: we can no longer turn a blind eye to manufactured risks. Beck averred that these transformations in the nature of societal threats, coupled with the embedding of individualization, propel a fundamental shift in the nature of politics and in patterns of social distribution. The large-scale production of manufactured risks generate deleterious consequences across a range of spheres, compelling individuals to consider their lives as planning projects and to become personally inured to managing risk and uncertainty.

The originality of the risk society thesis has been widely commented on, but there has perhaps been less appreciation of Beck's provocative intentions and his disruptive ambitions. Pitched as 'some no holds barred wrestling against the old theories and customary ways of thinking' (Beck, 1992: preface), *Risk Society* signalled the beginnings of a lifelong odyssey to illuminate what he perceived as the inadequacies of social theory and the ineptitude of static social science categories. In a trenchant critique of the sociological orthodoxy, Beck claimed that the discipline has served to perpetuate 'zombie categories' (Beck, 1992: preface) largely irrelevant to the problems and issues that people face in their everyday lives, and even less relevant to how they express their experiences. For him, the prolonged categorization of individuals by nation, class, race and gender was unfounded in a world in which such forms of stratification have receded as tangible markers of identity. *Ergo*, the grammar, syntax and method of the social sciences must be rethought and recreated. In particular, Beck rallied against what he called the maintenance of a 'national perspective' and the common tendency to assume that the nation-state is a viable unit of analysis in a permeable environment in which major security threats are inherently transnational. He chose instead to propose the adoption of a more open and inclusive cosmopolitan perspective (Beck, 2009). His convictions in this regard inspired him to call for a paradigm shift away from the limited 'methodological nationalism' of the 20th century toward a 'methodological cosmopolitanism' capable of grappling with the emergent contours of the 21st century (Blok, 2015: 111).

## Understanding Beck's approach: The importance of being earnest

Beck's writing has had an impact on a range of disciplines within the social sciences, including sociology, social policy, criminology, geography and environmental studies. In security studies, his work has received a mixed response amongst scholars. Several academics working in areas around political science and international relations have positively deployed the risk society framework to various ends including the relationship between technology and security strategy (Vedby Rasmussen, 2006), international cooperation and policy-making (Williams, 2008) and the nature of modern warfare (Coker, 2009). Others – most notably those of a Foucauldian persuasion – have either dismissed the risk society thesis outright or considered it a trifle (Culpitt, 1999; Ormrod, 2013). During the time in which Beck was extending his framework and establishing the place of risk in a cosmopolitan context, key developments in security studies were heading in decidedly different directions. Prominent scholars in the Paris School tradition were busy stretching out and applying Foucauldian tools and concepts, the Copenhagen School was bound up with establishing the way in which speech acts served to socially construct security, and the Welsh School had taken on the task of developing a critical, emancipatory approach to the study of security. Running parallel with these developments, Beck's work has been commented on in security studies across a range of contexts, from HIV transmission to intelligence-gathering and the use of war as a technology of control (Elbe, 2008; Dunn Caveltly and Mauer, 2009; Jabri, 2006). Given the many fault lines in risk society theory, it is not surprising that wholesale adoption of Beck's thesis has been rare. Yet, relative to the take up of his work in cognate social science areas, use of Beck's work has remained limited within security studies. This is somewhat surprising given both the interdisciplinary nature of his contribution and the relevance for security studies of the topics which he prioritized. We would argue that flat rejections of the macro-level thesis tend toward misunderstanding Beck's *modus operandi* and overlook the micro-level value of particular conceptual devices. In our view, a thorough consideration of Beck's motives and objectives may lead to a greater appetite to engage with some of the more illuminating concepts which he developed. Despite the shortcomings that arise when Beck's risk society thesis is matched at an empirical level against contemporary trends, we maintain that the provocative nature of his academic work has proved valuable in challenging traditional ideas and generating fresh knowledge about the changing world in which we live. In embracing this provocative intent, our approach has been to tap into the feel of his underlying intentions in order to draw out and work with those aspects which enable us to make meaningful entry points. We acknowledge the ambivalence and precariousness of our position in this regard. Nonetheless, at the risk of offending both theoretical purists and empirical sticklers, where we have found what we consider to be incisive tools for social analysis we have mobilized them to illuminate particular trends, processes and practices. In so doing, our ambition has been to force competing theories to converse through engagement, application and comparison (Mythen and Walklate, 2006; Walklate and Mythen, 2015). In our view, the messiness and complexity of people, culture and social structures cannot be comfortably reconciled with an overarching macro-theoretical world-view. However attractive and convenient theory attachment may seem, the diverse ebbs and flows of contemporary existence cannot be unlocked with a single master key. Some would argue that this puts us somewhat at odds with Beck's trajectory. After all, his project is one set in the lineage of Germanic macro-theoretical thinkers such as Marx and Weber who sought to capture the essence of the age. Was not Beck's *raison-d'être* to reveal the hidden dynamics of society by developing an all-encompassing theoretical framework that enables us to understand and interpret the world around us? Yes and no. In as much as Beck had grand designs and toiled hard to build an overarching epistemological framework, he was equally practical in his goals and diligent in applying his work to 'real-world' situations. In many ways, Beck's writing

confounds attempts to pigeon-hole him. While postmodern thinkers were busy making a fuss fracturing and dissembling risk and security into ever smaller and more complicated atoms (and proclaiming that they were not only unable but, moreover, unwilling to put the pieces back together), Beck was labouring towards opposite ends, eagerly responding to those who engaged with his risk society theory and refining his thesis. Beck's willingness to engage with others, regardless of whether they were professed disciples or signed-up sceptics is, in many respects, what set him apart. Not only did he read the evaluations and considerations of his work, he often took it upon himself to contact the writers directly to thank them for their analysis of his work. This earnest engagement with those willing to grapple with his ideas rendered Beck a unique academic, revered by those fortunate enough to share his company. A longstanding and sustained dialogue with a community of international scholars allowed him to refine and build upon his arguments, developing the theory of cosmopolitanization in an attempt to grasp what he considered to be the global dynamics of world risk society. His final major research project on global climate change involved a transcontinental network of academics, enabling him to absorb and reflect on divergent international trends.

In as much as his attempts to capture the essence of the modern world may suggest that Beck can be considered as a classic macro-theoretical sociologist, his flexibility and adaptability indicate otherwise. Beck never shied away from expressing the contrary view or letting ambiguities settle in the open. While his seemingly anomalous expressions of the relationship between risk and class in the risk society thesis have been used as a prime example of inconsistency, intentional duality was characteristic of Beck's way of thinking and writing. Has risk replaced class as the primary definer of human security? Yes. But surely those from lower classes are more exposed to risk? Yes. While infuriating his opponents, such conversations amused Beck and he was keen to defend the place of ambiguity and ambivalence in understanding complicated phenomena. While the global ambitions of his risk society thesis required the assumption of universality, he was well aware of the uneven and unequal distribution of risk in different continents and within nations and regions. His was a 'non-nostalgic critical theory ... not correctly described as utopianism or pessimism... only the concepts of irony and ambivalence accurately describe it. Instead of an either/or, I am looking for a new both/and: a way of bringing two contradictory postures, self-destruction and the capacity for a new beginning' (Beck, 2009: 49). In addition to appreciating provocative intent and embracing the polemical style of writing, it is important to recognize that Beck's objective was not just to understand contemporary society. Defining his quest to develop 'projective social theory' (1992: preface) Beck made no secret of his desire to bring the emergent terrain of the future into view in the present (Sznajder: 2015: 4).

Given the assertion that the risk society habitat is one which is imperiled by bads, it is perhaps unsurprising that his thesis has been interpreted by some as highly dystopic. On the contrary, Beck (2016: 170) was highly critical of what he referred to as 'preachers of catastrophe'. Far from being a 'professional Cassandra' (Jeffries, 2006), Beck's view of society and of human beings mirrored his general demeanour and outlook: optimistic, positive, progressive. Close readers of his work will be familiar with the dialectical relationship advanced between the production of risk and progressive social change. On the one hand, Beck encourages us to face up to the threats and harms produced by capitalist forms of modernization. Yet these efforts have been very much designed to illuminate the dangers that we face and to urge that we address potentially perilous environmental and social problems. In line with this clarion call, Beck remained sanguine about the possibilities of public engagement and the opportunity to chart alternative political futures. As Lash and Wynne (1992: 2) note in their introduction to *Risk Society*, Beck was a staunch believer that the *effets pervers* of modernization could be addressed via the radicalization of rationalization and advancing reflexive forms of modernization. This unerring faith in human agency that characterized Beck's

approach provides the bridge from his work on risk into cosmopolitanization and his final writing on metamorphosis.

## Opening up new avenues? Extending three Beckian concepts

Having considered both Beck's scholarly contribution and his novel method of inquiry, in what remains of the article we wish to elucidate the potentialities of three of Beck's conceptual devices: *nichtwissen*, metamorphosis and emancipatory catastrophe. In so doing we suggest various security terrains in which these devices might be engaged in the future. Our conceptual selection is deliberate, and enables us to connect the risk society theory developed in the late 20th century with Beck's latter preoccupations. We end by illustrating the capacity of these three concepts in relation to a prescient episode: the war and subsequent humanitarian disaster that has engulfed Syria.

### *Nichtwissen*

In *World at Risk* (2009) Beck avers that 'non-knowledge' presents major challenges for institutions concerned with establishing and maintaining security. In circumstances of 'non-knowing', the state and security agencies have either to act swiftly or to monitor threat evolution on the basis of incomplete and possibly contradictory flows of information. According to Beck (1999: 78), 'institutional power holders are rendered accountable for making decisions in a miasma of imperfect information and incomplete knowledge'. He posits that the mismatch between unpredictable manufactured uncertainties and the capacity of institutions to respond to them results in simulation of control as a mode of attempting to pacify fearful citizens. For him, the emergence and embedding of 'manufactured uncertainties' produces new security threats and challenges for expert institutions and lay publics alike. This state of 'radical indeterminacy' is characterized by non-knowing and reproduces multiple problems for human security: 'we live in a world that has to make decisions concerning its future under the conditions of manufactured, self-inflicted insecurity' (Beck, 1999: 8). Building on this argument, Beck (2009) further develops his thoughts regarding the impacts of not-knowing, arguing that the problem of *nichtwissen* is emblematic of the modern epoch. For him, the condition of not-knowing has impacted heavily on a range of health, welfare and security agencies and this can be connected to declining public trust in institutional systems. Beck (2009: 115) is keen also to distinguish between different facets of uncertainty, including provisional non-knowing, unacknowledged non-knowing, and conscious and unconscious inability-to-know (*Nicht-Wissen-Können*). Naturally, different responses to these different types of not-knowing have emerged in different spheres and security contexts, ranging from welfare concessions informed by vulnerability to hyper pre-emptive policing interventions. The nature of response is, of course, partly influenced by the credibility and depth of available information. Beck argues that in situations of limited knowledge, risk-regulating institutions resort to a range of tactics of obfuscation. Central here are various techniques of simulation and feigning control, such as the 'staging of risk realities' (Beck, 2009: 10) in an attempt to persuade apparently anxious citizens that public safety is achievable. In addition to stage management, in particularly risk-sensitive areas such as national security, a myriad of forms of pre-emption have been deployed to tackle hazards at nascent stages of development (Mythen and Walklate, 2010; Zedner, 2009; McCulloch and Pickering, 2010). With reference to national security, ideational practices of speculating about the unknown and the 'unthinkable' are part attempts to deconstruct the uncertainties and part exercises in rendering worst-case futures visible in the present (Amoore, 2013). Without doubt, the creeping 'presence of the future' (Vedby-Rasmussen, 2004: 384) – combined with a climate of intolerance toward security threats – has slanted the regulation of risk

towards the projective. Such attempts to engage with dangers which stretch the boundaries of calculability have reversed the use of probability estimates based on past incidents and advanced speculation about future unknowns (McCulloch and Wilson, 2015; Salter, 2008). Through the lens of ‘vigilant visualities’ (Amoore, 2007), responsibility for guarding against future harms very much depends on assertive action in the present. This was the position adopted after the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States, with the acceleration of horizon-scanning practices after the attacks leading to transformations in legislation, policing and criminal justice (Aradau and Van Munster, 2008; Mythen and Walklate, 2008; Walklate and Mythen, 2015). The extent to which the pre-emptive turn in crime and security regulation has been mirrored by the outlooks and actions of citizens in the West remains an open question. Has the incitement to ‘think security’ (De Lint and Virta, 2004: 465) prompted pre-emptive ways of managing personal health risks? 360-degree private health checks, regular HIV screening, the wearing of pollution masks in urban areas and the proliferation of personal devices to prevent violent and sexual crimes – from Mace spray to ‘anti-rape’ underwear – are but some examples of the application of personal pre-emptive techniques. Yet the nature and scope of their reach in everyday life remains a moot point.

There is now a sizeable bank of cross-disciplinary literature in the social sciences which focuses on how organizations respond and make decisions in conditions of high uncertainty. We have sketched out elsewhere what we consider to be some of the predominant institutional responses to *nichtwissen* within neo-liberal regimes (Mythen and Walklate, 2013). However, much less is known about how different types of *nichtwissen* impact on individuals, both in relation to the effects of institutional strategies of uncertainty management on subjectivities and in terms of the broader effects of non-knowledge on ontological security. In short, we seem to know very little about what people think about, and do, in and with situations of not knowing. Therefore, a profitable seam of future research might involve delving deeper into the ways in which cognition, perception and identity both construct understandings of *nichtwissen* and are shaped by them. Situated and internationally focused, cross-cultural and comparative work in this area would enable us to test common assumptions about the negative consequences of different types of non-knowledge on the human psyche. In a world in which governments have long since retreated from the promise of universal security (Aradau, 2015: 83), there is a need to dig deeper to explore the ways in which problems of uncertainty around national security tap into or are at odds with other insecurities that comprise the contemporary lived experience, such as fear of crime, financial anxieties and worries about physical health and psychological well-being. Similarly there has been a reluctance to explore the capacity for *nichtwissen* to bridge the gap between evidence and intelligence, especially in times of heightened security risks and institutional responses to those risks. In this sense *nichtwissen* becomes the foundation of both action and inaction and, thereby, is inextricably linked with organized irresponsibility. This intertwining affords a fruitful path for security studies in appreciating the increasingly blurred boundaries between what security services might know (intelligence) and what criminal justice professionals strive to know (evidence) in the consequent construction of contemporary ‘suspect’ populations (Hillyard, 1993).

One of the most frequent criticisms levelled at Beck’s work drew attention to his tendency toward macro-theorizing structural changes without adequately empirically evidencing transformations taking place in the world. While this is doubtless a fair comment in relation to his early theory, there has been an unwillingness in the social sciences to excavate how uncertainty in general and non-knowledge in particular are experienced and managed by individuals in the fabric of day-to-day reality and how cognate insecurities and fears habitually shape perspectives and behaviour. Thus, there remains a need to transcend the stock methods and measures deployed to ‘prove’ that people are overly anxious about crime when measured against offending statistics or that a terrorist attack is the single biggest worry for most people in the West. If we are to assume that



there is something both peculiar and specific about the nature of knowledge in contemporary society, it follows that we would benefit from learning more not just about how it is produced and mobilized in policy but, moreover, how we deal with contingent and partial knowledge at the micro level. There remains much exploratory space to probe how the structure/agency dynamic is being impacted by the climate of knowledge in which we live and the types of security threats we prioritize in the face of such institutional constructions. How do individuals manage the demands to address competing security issues within what Young (2007) has described as the ‘vertigo of modernity’? These ‘everyday’ insecurities – long having been a pre-occupation within feminist work – (see, inter alia, Morgan, 1989) remain eminently interesting, researchable and yet relatively unexplored in security studies.

### *Metamorphosis*

In his final contribution, Beck’s rethinking of the risk society thesis and his work on methodological cosmopolitanism led him to synthesize these ideas via the theory of metamorphosis. He had planned a trilogy of books on the subject and had completed a draft of the first volume just days before he passed away. In *The Metamorphosis of the World* (2016), Beck attempts to demonstrate the resonance of the metamorphosis thesis with reference to a range of examples, including climate change, the financial crisis and the transformative capacity of IVF treatment. The origins of the theory of metamorphosis are both philosophical and literary. As well as being curious about the classical Greek philosophy of Plato and the dialectical philosophy of Nietzsche, Beck’s interest had been piqued by Kafka’s (1915) classic short story *Die Verwandlung* (Metamorphosis) in which the central protagonist Gregor Samsa awakes to find that he has mutated overnight into a giant beetle. As the tale unfolds, we bear witness to the various ways in which his transformation from man to creature is responded to by friends, family and an outside world that cannot accept his metamorphosis. The incapacity of humans to recognize and accept change is one of the dominant themes explored by Kafka in *Die Verwandlung* and this is one of the key factors that inspired Beck to deploy metamorphosis as a metaphor.

The central proposition of *The Metamorphosis of the World* is that the process of societal change may appear familiar but is, in reality, fundamentally different. Rather than transition or even transformation, what Western societies are undergoing is essentially a metamorphosis. Thus, while the processes endemic to risk society are considered to be the agents of metamorphosis, the theory of metamorphosis itself represents an attempt to move beyond world risk society. For Beck, the world is not undergoing a phase of transition, nor indeed a transformation of the kind represented by the motion from the first modernity into risk society: ‘social change allows us to turn towards the same, but does not allow us to understand that things are becoming different ... social change is about the reproduction of the social and political order, while metamorphosis is about the transfiguration of the social and political order’ (Beck, 2015: 77). The term ‘change’ implies that certain aspects of society change but others remain constant. The theory of metamorphosis, by contrast, implies a deeper and more complete transformation in which something distinctive and novel emerges. To appreciate this we must focus on new beginnings which appear – often through turmoil – out of the old. As the caterpillar does not notice its pupation into a butterfly, so do human beings miss the transfiguration that happens across different spheres and territories. The key example used by Beck is climate change. Here he argues that public and political debates have remained stuck on the issue of whether or not it is occurring and if so, what can be done to prevent it. For Beck (2015), such solution-seeking forces us to miss the dramatic changes in perspectives and behaviours that are already well advanced by climate change. Not only do rising sea levels draw new markers of threat and insecurity, they force people to act and think in dramatically different

ways. Borrowing from Nietzsche, Beck (2016) avers that metamorphosis promotes *Umwertung der Werte*: a revaluation of all values. Beck (2015: 76) proposes that the metamorphosis of the world both opens up and demands the development of 'a new public and scientific vocabulary'. Arguably then, the dialectical dynamics explicit in the risk society thesis are arguably even more pronounced in this final act of writing.

For analytical clarity, the key principles and conditions of the theory of metamorphosis can be dissected into four parts: methodological, ideational, generational and moral. First, as recounted above, Beck is suggesting that both social science and society must grapple with major threats to security through the development of new lines of thought, techniques of analysis and modes of regulation. In the *Metamorphosis of the World* (2016: 112) he rallies against the 'assumed naturalness of the social and political order' describing the 'Copernican Turn 2.0', or the tendency to conceive of nation-states as the fixed star around which the world rotates. In contrast to the narrowness of national approaches, Beck encourages the search for new diagnostic methods and concepts. Second, the important prerequisites of openness and enhanced perception lead Beck to discuss the 'paradox of metamorphosis'. This term describes the symbiotic relationship between observer and observed: a precondition for recognizing metamorphosis. The paradox suggests that in order to recognize the radical transformations afoot – from the systemic failure of the financial system to the powerlessness of nation-states to combat the barbarism of groups such as ISIS – individuals themselves must undergo a personal metamorphosis and see the world with fresh eyes. In effect, the theorization of metamorphosis requires the metamorphosis of theorizing. In Beckian terminology, metamorphosis does not seek to resurrect the 'either/or' of bygone revolutions but to appreciate the cumulative 'and' of the modern world: 'It is both – it has been there *and* it is new' (Beck, 2015: 77). In order to appreciate this and to explore it further, social scientists must approach the issue from the perspective of methodological cosmopolitanism. Third, and connected to the last point, Beck asserts that a metamorphosis of generations has occurred, meaning that young people view, interpret and act on the world in ways which are very different from their parents and grandparents. Fourth, the dynamics above – of changing world-views, approaches and diagnostic methods – facilitate the formation of a 'moral compass for the 21st century' (Beck, 2015: 83). Such an orientation is not a 'false universalism' nor a postmodern 'anything goes'; rather it is constituted by a 'cosmopolitan moment' (Beck, 2015: 81). Out of the problematization of norms and values of the past, new forms of cooperation and collectivity emerge.

While there will be those who do not subscribe to Beck's vision and may reject his hypothesis on the grounds of tautology, logic or evidence, the theory of metamorphosis has the potential to stimulate points of reflection in security studies regarding the roads along which it has travelled and is presently heading. Certainly, the four dimensions defined by Beck give us much food for thought and generate some important – if prickly – questions. What are the principal modes of academic engagement in security studies and how apt are these methods used for 'knowing' the world? How truly reflexive are we as knowledge consumers and producers? Are the fruits of our labours largely governed by integrity and the quest for truth, or by the need for 'outputs' spawned to satisfy the criteria set by universities and external research agencies? To what extent do we, and should we, set ourselves at a distance from social life? What is the moral function and role of the academic in contemporary society? Now is not the time to respond to these testing questions, but they are perhaps located in the interregnum of provocation in which Beck resided and thrived.

### *Emancipatory catastrophism*

Having suggested that further engagement with both *nichtwissen* and the theory of metamorphosis may enable us to glean valuable insights into the broad nature of security in contemporary society,

we wish now to turn to the third concept for consideration, that of ‘emancipatory catastrophism’. Emancipatory catastrophism stems from the theory of metamorphosis and represents an attempt to reconcile the emergence of positive changes out of the shadows of disaster. The approach taken here can be connected to – but also conflicts with – that advanced in the risk society thesis. There are many dimensions to the theory of metamorphosis which lock into the extant architecture of the risk society. For example, an insistence on ineluctable epochal change, the problem of organized irresponsibility, a renewed demand for fresh tools and techniques of inquiry, the need to confront unintended environmental consequences and the conviction that human agency can intervene to prevent disaster. Yet the theory of metamorphosis goes beyond the principles of world risk society. Whereas world risk society theory is about the negative side effects of the production of goods, metamorphosis reveals the positive side effects of bads. For Beck, engagement with and dialogue about bads can produce ‘common goods’. Here Beck reasons that deleterious side effects of capitalist development, such as global warming, can generate revamped and progressive normative horizons that shatter the limitations of the national perspective. Dismissing inward-looking national approaches to security management, Beck forwards a ‘cosmopolitan perspective where the unit of research is a community of risk, which includes what is excluded in the national perspective: that is, the decision makers and the consequences of their decisions for other across time and space’ (Beck, 2015: 76). The positive possibility of metamorphosis is that it has the capacity to force institutions out of engrained habits of organized irresponsibility (2015: 75) and compels them to open up to and involve those affected by the risks which others produce. However, what might all this mean in practice? To what extent can emancipatory catastrophism enable us to gain purchase on unfolding events in the world?

To capture ‘the hidden emancipatory side effect of global risk’ (2015: 75), Beck refers to three processes: moral violation, anthropological shock and social catharsis. Using the example of Hurricane Katrina, he argues that major disasters have the capacity to produce ‘anthropological shock’, whereby cultures collectively feel violence and transgression. Although the term was first used by Beck in the 1980s, here he develops the notion of anthropological shock and connects it to what he calls ‘moral violation’. This occurs in instances when populations are subjected to devastating events that leave indelible marks on consciousness and affect collective values. Not only do such anthropological shocks impact on and reorient world-views, they also have the capacity to drive forward radical change (2015: 80). In Beck’s terms, extreme ‘bads’ harbour the potential to create normative horizons of common goods, stimulating reflection on questions of justice. This process of ‘social catharsis’ can facilitate the development of new normative horizons and refigure cultural practices:

Climate change is not climate change; it is at once much more and something very different. It is a reformation of modes of thought, of lifestyles and consumer habits, of law, economy, science and politics. (Beck, 2015: 79)

To illustrate the potentialities of the concepts of metamorphosis, emancipatory catastrophism and *nichtwissen*, in what follows we consider the conflict in Syria and the resultant and ongoing humanitarian crisis.

### **Living (in)securities: Considering Syria**

In excess of a quarter of a million people have been killed since the onset of the conflict in Syria. What began largely as a battle between those loyal and those opposed to President al-Assad has descended into a religious and sectarian civil war with global consequences. Since the outbreak

of conflict in 2011, it is estimated that around 11 million people have been displaced from Syria, almost half of the country's former population. Although the media and political focus in the West in recent times has been on the number of Syrian refugees travelling to Europe, it is the countries bordering Syria that have been most affected by mass migration. In 2015 it was thought that over two million Syrian nationals had relocated to Turkey, over a million to Lebanon and in excess of 600,000 to Jordan. The underlying causes of this population displacement are neither simple nor straightforward, but it is possible to point to significant turning points: the public protests against the Syrian government in March 2011 – part of what has been referred to as the 'Arab Spring'; the government's violent response to these protests; and the subsequent formation of opposition groups into an organized offensive against al-Assad's regime, constituting the Free Syrian Army. In more recent times, the increasing presence of ISIS has been a major factor in the escalation of the war in Syria. The conflict has descended from an attempt to overthrow government into a religious civil war between Sunni and Shia Muslims and a minority of Christians making up 10% of the population. The scale of the humanitarian disaster in Syria is sizeable and multi-layered, involving warfare, torture, human rights violations as well as lack of access to food, water and medicine. While the vast majority of refugees have settled in neighbouring countries Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, in 2015 increasing numbers began travelling through Turkey, attempting to settle in mainland Europe. This led to hundreds of thousands of people making dangerous journeys by water in ill-equipped boats across the Mediterranean Sea from Turkey to Greece and onto other parts of Europe. At present, four million Syrians are formally registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the agency coordinating the emergency response in the region.

Prior to the autumn of 2015, the response to the crisis by many Western governments was paltry, both in terms of conflict resolution and provision of aid. Indeed, the severity of the conflict seems only to have struck home when it became geographically proximate. One image of tragedy was arguably crucial in raising public awareness of the crisis and forcing political leaders in the West to act (Lucas, 2015). This image, broadcast in the media worldwide, depicted the body of Aylan Kurdi, a boy of three years old, being carried across a Turkish beach, having drowned at sea in the course of fleeing from Syria with his parents. This photograph – coupled with footage beamed out by international news channels of anguished refugees being hosed like cattle with water cannon and peppered with tear gas on the Hungarian borders – seemed to pique European moral sensibilities sufficiently to compel some genuine action in the face of this humanitarian crisis. That action was, however, mixed. On the one hand the starkly anti-immigration approach of Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, served as a sharp reminder that the national security perspectives critiqued by Beck are still alive and kicking. Typifying the strategy of the Hungarian government, in a commentary published in the *Frankfurt Allgemeine Zeitung*, Orban (2015) claimed that it was important to shore up his country's borders 'to keep Europe Christian'. When later probed at a press conference about his views, he claimed that Europe was being 'overrun', arguing: 'we think all countries have a right to decide whether they want to have a large number of Muslims in their countries. If they want to live together with them, they can. We don't want to and I think we have a right to decide that we do not want a large number of Muslim people in our country. We do not like the consequences of having a large number of Muslim communities that we see in other countries' (Orban, cited in Akkoc, 2015). On the other hand, in contrast to these nationalist approaches, there have been signs of a more cosmopolitan approach to the problem. Refugees treated with blank contempt in Hungary received a warmer welcome on arrival in Germany. At train stations in Dortmund, Frankfurt and Munich, crowds of German nationals gathered to greet those travelling from Hungary, handing out toys and chocolates. The words of Dieter Reiter, the mayor of Munich, contrast sharply with the xenophobic rhetoric of Victor Orban: 'Every day I am asking myself how can we accommodate

these people, these refugees, how can we give them a feeling that they are safe here in Munich, here in Germany. I am not really thinking about how many people can we afford and can we take here in Munich. That is not the question' (Reiter cited in Graham-Harrison, 2015).

In some respects these different positions resonate with the shortcomings stressed by Beck in *The Metamorphosis of the World* of thinking and acting in local or national terms in responding to security crises. Notwithstanding the Machiavellian tendencies that Beck was quick to associate with politicians – he had famously dubbed the German Chancellor 'Merkeveli' – the contrasting responses of the leaders of different nations can be framed in terms of national and cosmopolitan frameworks. Many Western governments undoubtedly broached this problem with the tools of methodological nationalism. Prime Minister David Cameron, for instance, sought to prevent displaced people coming to Britain, and instead committed to providing aid for the building of resettlement camps in and around Syria. Aside from the fact that the supply of humanitarian aid can itself produce unintended consequences (Aradau, 2015) given the dire living conditions and the huge threat to life in the country, this attempt to keep people located in a war zone seems perverse. To date, the UK has accepted just 5,000 Syrians through normal asylum procedures and 216 people under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons scheme. Nonetheless, a sanguine reading of the events might suggest that the anthropological shock of the media portrayal of this crisis has led to increasing numbers of people defining it as a 'moral violation' pressing their political leaders to act. Beck's appreciation of the role of the media in 'socially exploding' threats in the public domain seems especially resonant in relation to the pictures of Aylan Kurdi. While dominant understandings of the problem might not be said to constitute widespread 'social catharsis', less still the formation of a new moral compass, there are aspects of it that can be viewed through the lens of emancipatory catastrophism. From one point of view, the grim consequences of the Syrian 'metamorphosis' has forced world leaders to act – even if this may be driven by a mixture of public pressure and shame rather than compassion. In what Beck (2009: 61) might have cast as an instance of 'enforced cosmopolitanism', David Cameron subsequently bowed to pressure from a multitude of sources, agreeing to accept 20,000 Syrian refugees over a period of five years. This number is still relatively low in comparison with European neighbours such as France and Germany who have pledged to house an extra 55,000 Syrian refugees in the next two years. In order to develop a strategic response to the problem, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, has called for 'root-and-branch reform of disparate immigration policies in the EU' (Traynor, 2015). While these are promising signs, a decidedly Eurocentric focus – somewhat at odds with Beck's cosmopolitan vision – has characterized debates about migration from Syria. Indeed, the belated recent pledges of European states appear small-scale in comparison with the commitments of the countries that border Syria. Although the Syrian crisis has become a major security concern in Europe, the weight of the humanitarian burden has, for some time, been felt by neighbouring countries. Despite the political and media furore, it is estimated that only around 10% of those who have fled Syria during the conflict have travelled to Europe (UNHCR, 2016).

Clearly, the shifting global dynamics of politics and conflict are key factors in determining the nature and scope of responses to humanitarian crises. To this end, the knock-on effects of events in Paris on 13 November 2015 stand as a case in point. A series of coordinated terrorist attacks in the St. Denis quarter of the French capital left 130 people dead and more than 100 seriously injured or wounded. This attack – attributed to French and Belgian citizens with connections to ISIS – prompted President François Hollande to impose a national state of emergency and to declare that France was at war. Leaving aside the complexities of deficient security intelligence networks in Europe, the impact of the attacks on Syrians seeking asylum was palpable. As 'evidence' about the terrorists who committed the atrocities in Paris began to emerge in the media, it was claimed that at least two of the attackers had crossed into Europe with false passports, using the same routes as

migrants fleeing the conflict in Syria. After a Syrian passport was found near the body of one of the perpetrators, media and political speculation concentrated on the possibility that the attackers were Syrian migrants. While this turned out to be a *canard*, the uncertainty and fear generated by such claims should not be understated. Directly after the Paris attacks, something of a step change occurred in relation to the housing of Syrian refugees, with several European countries altering their national security strategies and tightening immigration measures. Border fences were hastily erected in Macedonia and the Polish European Affairs Minister rejected the European Council's decision to relocate refugees and immigrants to all EU member countries. Slovenia, Austria and Hungary all adopted new measures to strengthen border controls and the Czech Deputy Prime Minister Andrej Babiš claimed that the Schengen border would have to be closed. Sweden declared no further capacity to accept more migrants, with the government considering legislation to enable them to close the bridge from Malmö to Copenhagen should circumstances of national security dictate. While Germany has maintained its permeable border approach, it would appear that many European borders are rapidly closing, restricting rather than enabling free movement of those fleeing from war.

So, what would a Beckian analysis of these events look like and what might be taken from that analysis for the future development of security studies? Certainly, Syria would seem to fit the definition of a 'risk war', being fought by terrorist networks, the state and international military forces and insurgent groups. In such a 'confused mixture of old and new wars' (Beck, 2009: 150) the stakes are decidedly high, with interventions in Syria by assorted military forces including Russia, the United States and France exacerbating the risk of future global conflict. Aside from the potential dangers of different local alignments, misdirected bombing raids by Western military forces have struck schools and hospitals. Such lethal errors are only likely to illicit Beckian 'boomerang effects', potentially reinforcing anti-Western perceptions and acting as a ready-made recruitment campaign for ISIS. Adding to the uncertainty, changes in governance in the Middle East have impacted on both military strategy and humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees. In Egypt, for example, internal political transformations – including political power shifts from the Military Council to the Muslim Brotherhood and the coup staged by Defence Minister al-Sisi – have produced shifting levels of support and changing loyalties in the region (Abdul-Aziz, 2015). While President al-Sisi's hardline approach included preventing Syrians from entering Egypt and restricting movement within the country, other countries in the region have dedicated huge resources to supporting those affected by the Syrian war. Turkey has accepted over two million Syrians, spending over \$6.5 billion on a humanitarian response that includes well-equipped refugee camps which provide schooling, healthcare and social services (Hogg, 2015). Despite having a small population of around 4 million and limited infrastructure, Lebanon has received over 880,000 refugees from Syria at a cost of \$7.5 billion (UNDP, 2016). What we see in the responses of various nation-states is a mixture of organized irresponsibility on behalf on countries disinclined to assist and an appreciation of global responsibility amongst those seeking to solve the crisis. The patchiness of response and the possibility that military interventions may produce iatrogenic effects are all factors that seem to suggest limits to the kind of emancipatory catastrophism envisaged by Beck. Yet it is also possible to see in this case several of the key elements of metamorphosis sketched out by Beck (2016). If we start with the conflict in Syria, the changing landscapes of social class and inequality that he describes are pertinent, given that the civil war in the country cuts across class and caste and exposes all citizens to the risk of violence. Second, as illustrated in the discussion above, the situation cannot be managed or alleviated in local, national or even regional terms. It remains, instead, a humanitarian problem for the world. The third major principle of metamorphosis – ethical and existential volition – hangs in the balance, although into the early months of 2016 the new norms and forms of cooperation manifesting themselves look

rather like the older ‘Fortress Europe’ ones of pre-Schengen agreement days. While a Beckian metamorphosis in which the whole becomes more than the sum of the parts is far from complete, it is possible to trace in these interconnected events both an anthropological shock and a sense of moral transgression that may yet produce new and progressive responses. Whether the kind of cosmopolitan vision called for by Beck will triumph over narrow nationalism and bring positive futures for the millions of displaced Syrian people remains unknown. What Beck might have looked to have stressed in this alarming situation is the vital role of human agency in determining the outcomes, whether good or bad. His concern with the dialectic processes of social change is vitally important in understanding his work. Despite representation to the contrary, Beck did not perceive himself to be a soothsayer. Nor did he foresee the future as either a motion towards a truly reflexive modernization or a one-way journey into the abyss. It would be wrong then – and this is likely to be a common misinterpretation – to see metamorphosis as an inherently positive process. In keeping with the ambivalent possibilities of the risk society, metamorphosis can foster both deleterious and progressive outcomes – and indeed both at the same time, as our discussion of the above events illustrates. Furthermore, the problem of *nichtwissen* is not one which can be solved by metamorphosis. On the contrary, it catalyses it:

Metamorphosis is very much open. Metamorphosis leaves wide gaps of not-knowing. Something is changing basically (the frame of reference in reality and in framing reality) but this leaves wide gaps of not knowing. (Beck, 2015: 77)

In the tangled global security capillaries discussed above, it is evident that something is changing, but the shape and form of that change cannot yet be discerned. This kind of not-knowing poses multi-faceted and multi-layered questions for security studies in general.

## Conclusion

In this article we have sought to travel with the academic spirit of Ulrich Beck to pose what we see as some prescient questions about the broadly conceived problem of security in the modern world. In so doing, we hope to have highlighted areas of non-knowledge which might be profitably probed in the future. While our approach has been exploratory rather than prescriptive, we have demonstrated that aspects of Beck’s work are worthy of further and deeper consideration by scholars of security studies. In the concepts Beck advanced in his last years, there perhaps remains a tendency to overstate what is novel in the world and to overlook the continuities. Thus, many will remain unconvinced that a transfiguration of the social and political order is underway, less still that we are on the verge of an ‘epochal change of horizons’ (Beck, 2015: 77). Yet rushing toward this cul-de-sac risks missing the important side avenues and interdisciplinary opportunities to travel along new roads that Beck’s work provides. Here we have sought to elucidate the explanatory potential of just three of Beck’s conceptual creations, but there are many more that should not be discarded in the clamour for empirical assiduousness. One does not have to be persuaded by the entire thesis to extract and apply the conceptual devices that can enable us to see the world differently. However his final work is received, we would hope that upcoming analyses afford due weight to the motivations and ambitions which propelled Ulrich Beck. For us, it was Beck’s lateral thought and his capacity to turn dominant world-views upside down that most marked him out. We have sought here to articulate the value of experimental and projective social theory by focusing on three Beckian concepts. First, we have argued that there is a need to further examine the possible consequences of *nichtwissen* for the maintenance of ontological security and, indeed, the way in which high uncertainty feeds

into both personal risk management strategies and identity formation. Second, we have demonstrated that the theory of metamorphosis presents us with unsettling and challenging philosophical and moral questions that require further thought. Third, using present upheavals and events connected with the conflict in Syria as an example, we have illustrated that the concept of ‘emancipatory catastrophism’ has resonance and may enable us to focus on the progressive outcomes that can emerge out of conditions of insecurity.

In conclusion, it is perhaps telling that the quote used to frame this article is just as poignant today as when it was first penned 30 years ago. It would seem that the social sciences still lack analytical frames and methodological approaches that can enable us to understand the emergence of major global crises – the descent into brutality in Syria, malnutrition affecting one in nine of the world’s population, the ever-advancing threat of global warming. There is no shortage of examples. We hope to have illustrated here that there is merit in working with the tools which Beck fashioned to respond to contemporary security problems. Whether one chooses to think with, against, or in-between, Beck’s writing should continue to reverberate in security studies. His creation of concepts with cross-disciplinary resonance provides us with an opportunity for academic dialogue that we should seize, not rebuff. Beck’s endeavours have always been practical. His mission was to recursively develop forms and methods of inquiry to tune into the world in motion. He was acutely aware that reflection, invention and critique are precursors to change. Change in terms of outlook, approach and action. Given the risks, instabilities and insecurities that endure in the modern world, this is a lesson that we neglect at our peril.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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