Five minutes with Ulrich Beck: "All kinds of positive developments can result from climate change"

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Climate change is one of the most salient issues facing governments across Europe, but does it have the potential to alter the political and social order of the world? In an interview with EUROPP's Managing Editor Stuart Brown, Ulrich Beck discusses the transformations brought about by climate change, the role of global cities in generating innovation, and why climate sceptics should put aside their reservations and embrace climate change solutions.

How important is climate change to the political and social order of the world?

In the climate change debate we tend to focus very much on whether or not it is actually happening and, if it is real, how to find an immediate solution. This is because we believe it is an extremely time-sensitive issue. However in order to understand the basic transformation which is taking place in the discourse of climate change, and the perception of it, we have to decouple the urgent search for a solution from the question of how climate change is actually transforming the world.

To my mind, this involves a number of basic changes which have the potential to bring about both positive and negative consequences. One of the most important is our idea of conflict and class. In the standard nation state model of the world, these categories are simply too soft to offer an understanding of climate change issues. Many of the transformations are already underway, even though we have not actually asked for them. Indeed we tend to overlook them, but they are visible if we conceptualise climate change from a more sociological perspective.

What are the specific limitations of the nation state model in understanding the politics of climate change?

If we look at how the issue of climate change fits into the general perspective we have in politics and the social sciences, we can see the limitations of what I call 'methodological nationalism'. We frame almost every issue, whether it relates to class, conflict, or politics, in the context of nation states organised in the international sphere.

However, when we look at the world from the perspective of climate change, this doesn't fit at all. For example, if we take the basic concept of risk – in this case global climate risk – we find that there is a new power structure already imbedded within the logic of this concept. This is because, when we talk about risk, we first of all have to relate it to decisions and decision-makers. We have to make a fundamental distinction between those who take the risk and those who are affected by it. In the case of climate change these groups of people are completely different. Those who are taking the decisions are not accountable from the perspective of those who are affected by the risks, and those who are affected have no real way of participating in the decision-making process.

So from the start we have an imperialistic structure because the decision-making process and the consequences are attributed to completely different groups. We can only observe this when we step outside of a nation state perspective and take a broader view of the issue. I call this a cosmopolitan perspective, where the unit of research is a community of risk which includes what is excluded in the national perspective: i.e. the decision makers and the consequences of their decisions.

You have written that this transformation would shift power from nation states to world cities. Why are cities so important for climate change solutions?

I think this is one of the key transformations implied by climate change. If you look at climate conferences and the way they are set up, they are mostly organised on a nation state basis, attended by representatives of nation states,

and you almost always find that they are confronting each other. We shouldn't underestimate that, from the perspective of international relations, there are lots of differences between different countries and regions in relation to climate change. Some countries take it as a serious problem because they acknowledge the consequences of modernisation for other people and other countries across the world. Other states don't do this at all. So we simply hold one conference after another, and each is labelled a failure because different states have different ways of defining their national interest.

From a national point of view, states are the main actors, but in reality there are many other actors involved. Indeed, in the last decade practitioners and researchers have come to recognise global cities as important actors in relation to climate change. Why is it the case that cities are important? For a start, climate change is not visible to the senses. This is, from a sociological point of view, a very important aspect. We cannot smell climate change – nor can we taste it or touch it. Whether it is a human-made or natural catastrophe is also unclear: they all seem to be natural catastrophes, and there is no way to ever know with 100 per cent certainty whether it is actually the result of human activity.

Since it is not visible to our senses, we very much depend on information and data as they are handled in the global public, and what we can observe ourselves. Here we find that cities are spaces for action where people actually experience climate change directly. They smell it in cars producing smoke and emissions – in some cities they also see the consequences of flooding. Because they experience it more directly, they feel the pressure to do something in a way that nation states, which are divorced from the effects of climate change, do not.

This highlights an interesting and important element. Climate change is not only a catastrophe – it is the anticipation of catastrophe, and it is this anticipation which forces people to take action. It is the anticipation of catastrophe that empowers the mobilisation of people and resources. In this sense, it is a mobilising force and a source for the legitimation of political power.

Cities are generally regarded as being more progressive than nation states – both from a political perspective and in terms of embracing new innovations. If a shift to world cities occurred could this progressive tendency feed into world politics?

I believe that this is a central consequence. We can see that cities really do have a different political party and government structure than nations. For example, Zürich is one of Switzerland's major cities and is extensively cosmopolitan, with people from all over the world. It attracts interconnected professionals who are not only linked to the territorial unit where they live, but who have all kinds of networks and spaces for engagement beyond the region. The city has a green-red government, while the conservatives don't seem to understand how to gain power in this context.

Cities are in many ways very interesting actors in relation to climate change, as all kinds of innovations are taking place in them. I think another aspect comes into play here, which is that those who don't believe in climate change actually contradict their own interests. Climate change is driving technical and social innovation and the re-emergence of normative horizons for everyday life: making the world better, more liveable, more enjoyable. To deny its existence is to hamper this innovation. This progress is very much part of the experience in global cities.

So a climate sceptic should embrace efforts to tackle climate change because they provide benefits in their own right?

Indeed, this would be one of the consequences. From a sociological point of view, I would say that we can never be certain about the reality of climate change. We have many good arguments, with a high degree of probability: I think the climate scientists have done a very good job in making this issue visible and using their models to demonstrate its importance. But there will never be real proof in the classic sense.

We will always have the problem of how to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty. I don't think this has to

be a bad situation. When we think about the past, we realise that humanity has always been about uncertainty. This has even more resonance today. With the challenges of climate change, we are facing existential risks – by which I mean risks that relate to humanity and nature in a way which is beyond our understanding. We seem to be so small in relation to nature, and yet now we are so great that we can destroy it!

But if we take the issue seriously for a moment and think about how we should decide under these conditions of uncertainty, there are two scenarios, I believe, which we should acknowledge. The first scenario is that we doubt it – that we are sceptical. But if it is the case that climate change is real and there are all kinds of catastrophes occurring, then this is a very bad position to be in. We become responsible for these decisions. On the other hand, if we say that climate change is real and we take responsibility for it, then all kinds of expectations and changes become a reality.

If we look in detail at those changes, we find that the anticipation of a catastrophe (which is not in itself a catastrophe) has opened up new spaces for thinking and action. In cities like London, Munich and Tokyo, we suddenly have people who are starting to feel responsible for what is happening in other countries in relation to norms of consumption and lifestyle. This kind of cosmopolitan understanding is proliferating at an everyday level.

This also opens up new markets. We have to open up to 'the other' to some extent because there are no solutions at the national or local levels for climate change. We must find new ways to cooperate, even with those who seem to be our enemies. We may not necessarily overcome the fact that they are our enemies, but we still have to cooperate with them in order to survive. Therefore all kinds of positive developments can result from dealing with climate change.

In this respect I point to the argument of Blaise Pascal. Writing on God, he argued that while we don't know whether or not God is real, if we decide that God does exist then pragmatically we are always on the right side. If God does not exist we lose nothing, but if God does exist then we are rewarded. I would say that we can accept a variation of this argument in the case of climate change. Under conditions of uncertainty, even if we never know whether climate change is real, it is still pragmatically better to decide to accept that it is real. By taking this perspective we can bring about all kinds of social and political innovations and transformations which benefit the world.

You mention that the anticipation of climate change creates new motivations to act. How does this differ from the threat of war, which has perhaps been the primary focus of nations throughout history?

Politics to this point has defined itself by making a clear distinction between friend and foe. Even if you don't accept the political theory of Carl Schmitt, which states that this distinction between friend and foe is the foundation of politics, this is the basis for political scientists and most politicians.

Some argue that this is still the case in relation to climate change as well. I had a recent discussion with the French sociologist Bruno Latour, who argues that climate change is a question of war and peace. I disagree. I think that global risks produce all kinds of new divisions and conflicts, but even these new conflicts bridge and connect friend and foe beyond national identities. The new divisions have a different logic because both those who accept climate change and those who dispute it have fundamentally international perspectives. It is distributed in a very uneven way, such that I sometimes think that I might be on both sides of the debate at the same time! It's not as easy anymore to make simple distinctions between groups of actors.

Global risk introduces a conflict structure and a cooperative imperative beyond the distinction between friend and foe. This is quite an interesting cosmopolitan development. We can no longer say, as some people have said, that referring to humanity is a lie – that, as Carl Schmitt's work implies, human beings must always have an enemy. Rather, constructing collective narratives of humanity is now part of our own survival. Our own basic survival interest is becoming intrinsically linked to the survival of others.

This is not only in an egoistic sense, such as in a 'neoliberal vision' of individual rationality being in the common

good. It is also in a normative sense – you become part of mankind not only to realise your own interests, but at the same time to do the best for others as well. This is something of an 'ideal type' of rationality, and you don't find such an obvious expression in empirical studies, but what we are experiencing is a tendency to redefine politics and conflict in this direction.

Ulrich Beck will be speaking on this subject at an LSE event on 27 February: "How Climate Change Might Save the World"

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About the interviewee

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Ulrich Beck is Professor of Sociology at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, and *since 2013 Principal Investigator of the European Research Council (ERC) project: "Methodological Cosmopolitanism – In the Laboratory of Climate Change".* He was born in the Pomeranian town of Stolp, Germany (now Słupsk in Poland) in 1944. Since 1997 he is the British Journal of Sociology Visiting Centennial Professor at the London School of Economics and since 2011 also Professor at the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris. He has received many international prizes and honours. He is co-editor of the journal *Soziale Welt,* and author or editor of more than 45 books, translated in more than 35 languages.

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