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# The Metamorphosis of the World: Society in Pupation?

**Gabe Mythen**

University of Liverpool

## Abstract

This article reviews the German sociologist Ulrich Beck's final contribution, *The Metamorphosis of the World* (2016). The drivers of the process of metamorphosis are appraised and the approach adopted by Beck is considered within the broader context of his oeuvre. Continuities with previous work are illuminated and novel developments identified. In order to provide a critical but sympathetic assessment of the theory of metamorphosis, Beck's epistemological position and his sociological *modus operandi* are considered. It is argued that, despite elisions, the theory of metamorphosis breaks new ground in social theory and offers valuable opportunities for future empirical investigation and conceptual debate.

## Keywords

Ulrich Beck, metamorphosis, reflexive modernization, risk society

## Introduction

On New Year's Day 2015, Ulrich Beck passed away suddenly, having suffered a heart attack. He had, characteristically, been taking a stroll with his wife Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim in Munich's *Englische Garten*, animatedly discussing the contents of the book he was finishing. *The Metamorphosis of the World* was to be the first of a planned trilogy. In the opening book, Beck had committed to mapping out the key principles and foundational concepts supporting the theory he had long been ruminating on. He was restive about the venture, which represented both a harmonization of the underlying processes he had spent four decades defining and a step change in his thinking about social change. *In toto*, his final offering constitutes 'an attempt to offer a plausible answer to the urgent question: What is the meaning of the global events unfolding before our eyes?' (Beck, 2016: 4). Beck had provisionally sketched out the parameters of the theory of metamorphosis in a short journal article

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**Corresponding author:** Gabe Mythen. Email: [G.Mythen@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:G.Mythen@liverpool.ac.uk)

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published in *Current Sociology* (Beck, 2015a), and these parameters were to be fully expanded in the book. Having been exercised by aspects of his previous work being lost in translation, this was to be the first sole-authored text Beck would write in English. He had thus been especially keen to gain feedback on a first draft and – aside from the reviews commissioned by the publishing house – had solicited comments from trusted colleagues. Sadly, Beck was to work no further on the project and, following on from the many commemorative gatherings to celebrate his life and work, the decision was made to fill the gaps that remained in the initial manuscript. This enterprise was undertaken by Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, John Thompson and Albert Gröber, working in consultation with a group of researchers from Ulrich's inner circle, including Sabine Selchow and Anders Blok.

*The Metamorphosis of the World* serves as a continuation of Beck's enduring mission to illumine what he saw as the society-shaping forces of the epoch. Having worked at the cutting edge of sociological inquiries in the 1990s into the pervasive effects of risk and individualization (Beck, 1992, 1995, 1999), in the new millennium he turned his attention to the ways in which these processes traversed the evolving dynamics of globalization and cosmopolitanization (Beck, 2000, 2006, 2009). Having made theoretical headway in excavating the various nodal points and interconnections, Beck was eager to explore the utility of the concepts he had devised in real-world contexts (see Mythen, 2014; Guivant, 2016). As Sznaider (2015) observes, in many respects, Beck's quest to lay bare the 'emergent properties' of the age is redolent of the travails of the classical sociologists. This desire led him, in the latter stages of his career, to negate the idea of social change and to explore instead the elucidatory potential of *verwandlung* (metamorphosis). For Beck, this concept offered the prospect of bringing to the fore the distinctiveness of contemporary macro-social processes and enabled a renewed understanding of the relationship between social structures and human agency.

Extracting metamorphosis from its literary roots, Beck's last offering pays homage to Kafka's (1915) classic novella, *Die Verwandlung*. The central protagonist in Kafka's tale is Gregor Samsa, a journeyman salesman who feels undervalued by his family and employer. Samsa awakes one morning from troubled dreams to find that he has metamorphosed into a giant insect. The remainder of the tale revolves around the responses of relatives and colleagues to his predicament. A century on from the publication of Kafka's novella, its allegorical features have been keenly contested, with sociological interpretations focusing on structural dysfunctionality and the reactions of individuals to social change (see Kelly, 2015). Following this cue, Beck's (2016: 189) intention in his last project was twofold. First, to elucidate the dramatic subterranean shifts that were, in his view, remaking the world and, second, to demonstrate the ways in which novel patterns of change were fostering new moral

codes and modes of sociality. Notwithstanding these lofty ambitions, there are also shades of Samsa's plight in the existential bewilderment that arises from inhabiting a world in which taken-for-granted values and ways of living disappear. Analogous to Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*, it is important to stress from the outset that *The Metamorphosis of the World* is very much open to interpretation. Certain aspects of the thesis seem to signify clear departures in Beck's thinking. Yet, there are continuities to be observed and clear bridges that allow routes of travel between the theory of metamorphosis and world risk society. Prior to offering a critical appraisal, it is first necessary to unspool the argument, highlighting the core concepts that prop up Beck's assertions.

### **Exegesis: Tracing the Contours of Metamorphosis**

Beck's (2016: 4) stated ambition in deploying the concept of metamorphosis was to transcend the theory of world risk society. In constructing the latter perspective, he had sought to render visible the impacts of the systemic production of risks intrinsic to capitalist modernization. In contrast, his last endeavour constitutes a more sanguine attempt to mark out the progressive political, social and environmental possibilities that emerge in the aftermath of modern crises. To this end, the theory of metamorphosis urges acknowledgement of the catalytic potential of global risks. Drawing parallels with the process of transformation from caterpillar to butterfly, Beck suggests that we are currently living in a cocoon state. Far-reaching transformations are taking place in the world as a result of environmental crisis, military conflicts and the rapid development of genetic technologies – but we remain largely incognizant of the seismic impacts of these processes. In order to fully comprehend the metamorphosis of the world, Beck asserts that it is necessary to drill down into nascent processes and to register the ways in which they are reforming society and culture.

Echoing the pitch of *Risk Society* (1992), *The Metamorphosis of the World* represents a clarion call that rings out at a series of levels. The decibels generated are designed to jangle the frequencies of a medley of folk: from social scientists, institutional practitioners and media professionals, to party politicians, environmental campaigners and leftist activists. Beck's appeal to reset the moral compass of society is staged in three parts. The first foundational section is directed towards quantitating and qualifying the meaning of metamorphosis. Taking a more direct line of flight than that delimited in *Risk Society* (1992), the transformative capacity of contemporary conflicts and crises are catalogued. Critical here is the catalytic force of contemporary political, economic and social ruptures. For Beck, these ruptures denote not simple transitions but, moreover, a process of metamorphosis. Drawing on historical comparisons, Beck seeks to show that both the propelling pistons and the

compass points of society have altered dramatically, with metamorphosis being distinguished from previous forms of societal change, such as political revolutions or colonial conquests: 'it slinks in, as it were, through the back door of side effects' (Beck, 2016: 48). The key proposition here is that metamorphosis is fundamentally non-intentional and unaligned to particular ideological perspectives. Rather, it 'takes hold of people's daily lives inexorably, with an enormous acceleration that constantly outstrips existing possibilities of thought and action' (Beck, 2016: 56). For Beck, a failure to harness and manage deep-seated transformations has long exposed the ailing capability of the nation-state, with its constituent institutions being unable to regulate cross-boundary problems and issues. This signifies both a material conundrum to be grappled with at policy level and a methodological dilemma for the social sciences. While traditional social science theories of social change have focused on transitions – adhering to a stages model that assumes progression from one phase to another sharing similar characteristics – the turbulent world we are inhabiting is characterized by ruptures and a process of disembedding. Imploring the reader to accept that a paradigm shift is transpiring in front of our eyes, Beck deploys a range of examples – including IVF treatment, global financial crisis and climate change – to distinguish between metamorphosis and routine social change. Using the environment as a touchstone for debate, Beck believes that a focus in politics, the media and amongst scientists about whether climate change is actually occurring masks the fact that the process has already produced sea changes, both geo-physically and in terms of values and actions. In this way, climate change generates shifting patterns of risk distribution that hasten the need to redraw maps beyond nation-state boundaries. For Beck (2015b), global warming and rising sea levels reconfigure national and international inequalities, encouraging ecological awareness amongst the public (see Curto, 2016).

Having laid down the central tenets of metamorphosis, in part two of the book Beck alights on key themes, writing across different areas of analysis including class inequalities, (geo)political structures, global cities and digitalization. In this, the most expansive portion of the book, theory is synthesized with case study examples. Drawing on examples of what he calls 'emancipatory catastrophism', Beck traces the ways in which manifesting crises and impending disasters have the capacity to foster critical social reflection which can facilitate the expansion of collective moral horizons (Beck, 2016: 69; Blok, 2015: 110). Borrowing from the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, Beck argues that high magnitude risks such as climate change bring about an *Umwertung der Werte*, or a revaluation of all values, altering people's perspectives and institutional 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, 2015a: 79). With reference to a case study of the New York waterfront, Beck demonstrates the ways in which the redistribution of environmental risks can produce new normative horizons that protect 'common goods'. Similarly, despite its catastrophic effects, Beck argues that the Hurricane Katrina disaster produced forms of 'moral violation' that illuminated endemic inequalities in the United States. Although it is questionable whether either of these cases have tangibly impacted on the redistribution of wealth or a levelling off of (in)security between different socio-economic or ethnic groups in the United States, Beck is eager to draw attention to the rising economic and political power of urban enclaves. Seeds of hope are invested in civic liberation movements, with co-operation between eco-friendly cities promising a way around embedded conflicts of interest between nation-states (Beck, 2015b: 3).

Part three of *The Metamorphosis of the World* is comparatively brief, providing a prognosis of future possibilities. While it is here that the unfinished nature of the manuscript becomes most palpable, the single chapter is arguably the most novel section of the book. At this juncture, the experiences of 'global risk generations' are recounted, with Beck depicting young people as proselytizing actors capable of vectoring metamorphosis toward progressive ends. A dualism is deployed here, with Beck (2016: 187) shining a light on both the 'generation of metamorphosis' and the 'metamorphosis of generations'. Highlighting inter-generational distinctions, Beck describes the 'metamorphosis of socialization' through which the unique upbringing and life experiences of young people can be appreciated. Recounting the impacts of risk, individualization and globalization on the 'generation of side effects', Beck (2016: 188) sketches out the prospects for a cohort of young people who have grown up in a world in which national structures have consistently failed to tackle global problems. *Ipsa facto*, a vital value shift is in train, whereby young people recognize the limitations of extant institutional frameworks and develop alternative understandings of their place in the world and their possibilities for political action. Thus, the cultural landscapes and communicative practices of young people are described as fundamentally distinct from those of their forebears. The rapidly evolving nature of communication technologies and the side effects that are routinely thrown up by the dynamics of globalization are constitutive of a societal tidal turn:

there are increasingly fields in which...the younger generation turns into the teacher of the older, showing the elderly the way forward. They are the one's for whom metamorphosis has become second nature, while the older generations experience it as a threat to their existence. The elderly were born as human beings but, as in Kafka's novel, woke up one morning as insects called the 'digital illiterate'. The young generations, on the contrary, were already

born as ‘digital beings’...the *Homo cosmopolitanus* within world risk society are radically different. Already today the global risk generations are better interlinked across borders and more open to the world and its self-destructive potential. (Beck, 2016: 189–90)

Despite the relative brevity of part three of the book, it is here that truly fresh terrain is trod and where acolytes of Beck might forage further to progress the theory of metamorphosis.

### **Travelling Beyond World Risk Society? Continuities, Departures and Advances**

Building concepts around an established foundational framework has been a defining feature of Ulrich Beck’s method (see Mythen, 2014, 2018). It is thus unsurprising that it was the risk society perspective that led him to the theory of metamorphosis. Rather than being considered as a standalone piece, the book is thus best appreciated as the culmination of Beck’s attempts to feel the patina of the age. The metamorphosis of the world is contingent upon the socially shaping power of the processes previously unpacked by Beck over the course of the last three decades, most notably risk, individualization, globalization and cosmopolitanization. Further, the theme of societal confrontation implicit in the process of reflexive modernization – as previously delineated by Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) – remains critical. Indeed, the heightened intensity with which the consequences of economic, scientific and technological ‘development’ destabilize societal foundations is recounted with reference to illustrative vignettes, including the Fukuyama nuclear incident and the Edward Snowden case. Yet, alongside the continuities, there is tangible expansion in Beck’s train of thought, most notably in relation to the emancipatory potential of global risks. While the impacts of unintended ‘side effects’ are omnipresent throughout the book, Beck’s construal of their political consequences is more boldly defined. Whereas world risk society theory tilts toward the negative side effects of the production of ‘goods’, the theory of metamorphosis prioritizes the positive side effects of ‘bads’. Correcting previous misapprehensions of his work, Beck (2016: 67) stresses that world risk society should not to be confused with a ‘catastrophe society’. The global threats that we face are not irremediable or necessarily cataclysmic. On the contrary, ‘the constant threat of a growing array of local risks and mega hazards’ stimulates political energies in growing ‘sub-political, sub-revolutionary spaces of action’ (Beck, 2016: 114). The dualistic properties of risk and opportunity associated with metamorphosis represent a marked adjustment in Beck’s thinking around social change. As customary, layers of ambiguity are woven into the argument and a spectrum of futures is projected, contingent on a confluence of factors, including institutional responses

to crises and individual actions. Far from a linear journey towards utopia or dystopia, the theory of metamorphosis foreshadows indeterminate prospects, with Beck remaining ambivalent about the contours of the coming horizon: 'our movement towards future modernization is not towards progress or apocalypse, but rather something constitutively and forever in between' (Sznajder, 2015: 3).

Overall, the book constitutes an attempt to grapple with the contours of a labile globalized world in which nation-states fail to manage trans-boundary risks and social institutions are constantly outstripped by the pace of change. The theory of metamorphosis revolves around three interconnected transformative principles (Beck, 2016: 134). Firstly, 'categorical metamorphosis', which involves realization of the fundamentally distinct and novel nature of the transformations kindled by capitalism, global risk and individualization. Categorical metamorphosis engenders a particular way of seeing the world that involves recognizing the limits to dominant Western frameworks of knowledge production and analytically transcending them through the development of cosmopolitan modes of analysis which invite in and include previously excluded global 'others' (Beck, 2016: 76). Secondly, Beck identifies forms of 'institutional metamorphosis' through which the incapacity of contemporary structures are acknowledged and attended to. Through institutional metamorphosis, social structures previously 'hollowed-out' are compelled to adapt in order to meet the challenges of a labile globalized world. Thirdly, 'normative metamorphosis', which involves both definitional struggles around risk and shifting sets of cultural and moral values. Through transformations in ideas, actions and practices, Beck avers that different ways of living and acting are emerging. As the three propositions suggest, Beck's departing theory represents an attempt to connect risk consciousness to political action, with the coalescence of the three forms of metamorphosis promising the creation of a cosmopolitan outlook.

Amidst the conceptual advances in thought, residual hues of the risk society approach indubitably shade Beck's final contribution. The widening cracks in the 'third way' fantasy of a caring capitalism are writ large in his critique, with the destabilizing effects of the drive toward unfettered growth being recounted. Beck is again motivated to stress the intractable nature of 'side effects' that render capitalism a 'problem for itself' (see Beck, 2016: 102; Mythen, 2018). Consistent with previous work, the omnipresence of global risks – such as financial crisis, terrorism and environmental despoliation – is accented, alongside the incapacity of nation-state structures to manage trans-boundary hazards (Beck, 2016: 44). Building on earlier work on the 'relations of definition' (Beck, 1995), the significance of institutions in reproducing knowledge about social risks is pivotal in the metamorphosis thesis. Notably, emphasis is placed on the way in which threats are rendered meaningful via



engagement with various media (Beck, 2016: 123). Repurposing the concept of ‘anthropological shock’ (Beck, 1987) for the modern age, the mediation of specific tragedies – such as those arising out of war and conflict – are said to leave ‘indelible marks’ on the consciousness of populations, feeding ‘collective memories’ (Beck, 2016: 123). Beck believes that iconic events not only inscribe cultural perceptions but also have the capacity to alter future outlooks. Thus ‘social catharsis’ and collective forms of mourning propagate critical reflection on institutional errors and the mismanagement of crises. Without doubt, a more nuanced account of the role of the media in communicating risk is present than in previous work, with the salience of media platforms in the anticipation of catastrophe being foregrounded: ‘global risks *per se* are invisible. It is only through mediated images that they acquire the power to break through this invisibility’ (Beck, 2016: 127). Building on the refreshed appreciation of new technologies begun in *World at Risk* (2009), the axial role of the media in representing risk is foregrounded. In a climate of *nichtwissen* (not knowing) the formation of an ‘apocalyptic imaginary’ in the media is said to serve as ‘an affective prophylaxis’, jolting institutions out of forms of ‘organised irresponsibility’ and forcing them to respond to the plight of those adversely impacted by the risks which others produce (Beck, 2016: 37). This renewed appreciation of the role of the media in informing and shaping understandings of risk acts as a soldering device, enabling Beck to connect together the conjoint conceptual strands of his thesis. It is argued that the evolution of media technologies has opened up spaces of dialogue and advanced the prospects of political resistance: ‘global risks are turning into battlefields of visual globalization. It is not the catastrophic risks but the globalized images of these events that trigger the anthropological shock, which, filtered, channeled, dramatized or trivialized in the diversity of old and new media, can create a social catharsis and provide the normative framework for an ethics of “never again”’ (Beck, 2016: 127). Fashioning his argument around challenges to the ‘politics of invisibility’, Beck (2016: 127) emphasizes the positive capability of media and communication technologies in the advancement of a ‘global sub-politics of civil society movements’.

Despite charting some of the possible routes toward future emancipation it would be wrong – and this may turn out to be a common misconception – to view metamorphosis as an intrinsically positive process. In keeping with Beck’s rendition of the multivalent possibilities of the risk society, the process of metamorphosis has the capacity to yield both deleterious and progressive outcomes. While forms of metamorphosis have the ability to galvanize new forms of co-operation and solidarity, they are equally capable of exacerbating extant cleavages and fostering new insecurities. Thus, the buoyant optimism of Beck’s political spirit is tempered in passages of agnosticism where the indeterminate state of the

future is laid bare: ‘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, 2016: 77). It is the very mutability of metamorphosis – and, moreover, its ramifications for the dynamic between structure and human agency – that gives rise to a historical space in which the future is up for grabs:

Metamorphosis, as in the title of the Kafka story... contains the meanings of magical transformation and a Gestalt shift. It does not describe a static condition, which then changes, but rather a constant shimmering in-between-ness. It is a structural process but, at the same time, the ever-changing result of interactive creative desire. (Sznajder, 2015: 2)

Of course, the extent to which, in fluctuating conditions, people’s interpretations of their own experiences and those of others are subject to transmutation remains something of a black box, with Beck asserting that it is the duty of academics to not only shine a light on unravelling world events, but also to address their profound social and political consequences.

### **Exploring Metamorphosis: Opportunities, Challenges and Limits**

Thus far we have examined the conceptual assemblage which undergirds the theory of metamorphosis and scrutinized the prevalent themes which animate Beck’s thesis. It is now necessary to offer some critical reflections on the theory of metamorphosis, indexing these to Beck’s *modus operandi* and his broader intellectual odyssey. The provocative pulse that resounds through Beck’s opus is palpable. Alongside calls for the modernization and reformation of institutions, Beck animadverts mainstream sociology, maintaining that extant analytical frameworks cannot capture the indents made – nor the ramifications of – global processes currently shaping society and the lived environment: ‘we social scientists are at a loss for words in the face of the reality which is overrunning us’ (Beck, 2016: 69). Incapacity to adequately identify the nature of current social problems – allied to myopia in relation to the significance of contemporary transformations – indicates that a new social science syntax is required. In this regard, the redundancy of traditional units of sociological analysis – such as class and nation – are underscored in the book, echoing Beck’s (2000, 2005) controversial dismissal of ‘zombie categories’. In issuing a plea for the development of new theories and concepts, Beck’s prose is unequivocal and daring, with the dark wit and *wortwitz* beloved by his followers lurking just beneath the surface

(see Selchow, 2016: 370 [AQ1]). In order to 'see the newness of the world', Beck (2015a: 78) reasons that social scientists must become open to self-critique and more receptive to engaging with prescient contemporary problems and issues. Calling for the maturation of 'a new public and scientific vocabulary', he insists that social scientists must embrace ways of thinking that challenge canonical norms and embark on a sustained project of methodological reformation.

It is important to recognize that Beck's provocative style itself emanates from a particular ideational standpoint in relation to the production of knowledge. This indexes with his preferred methodological framework, cosmopolitanism. The epistemological stance adopted by Beck in previous work propels the theory of metamorphosis, with the unfolding breakdown of nation-state institutions and political systems being seen as symptomatic of the limits to nation-centric modes of thinking. The 'assumed naturalness of the social and political order' (Beck, 2016: 145) is most palpably manifested in what Beck dubs the 'Copernican Turn 2.0', or the tendency to conceive of the nation-state as the fixed star around which the world rotates. In Beck's view, national policies are ineffectual in militating against risks which are inherently global in nature. Imploring the reader to accept the death of 'methodological nationalism', Beck (2016: 128) restates the case for a cosmopolitan methodological framework which, he claims, not only affords diagnostic purchase, but also enhances problem-solving and the generation of new ways of organizing social relations. In contrast with the outmoded categories and concepts associated with methodological nationalism, following the cosmopolitan perspective, '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 others across time and space' (Beck, 2015a: 76). At a methodological level, *The Metamorphosis of the World* represents a further attempt by the author to bring about a prototype shift in social science research away from the limited methodological nationalism of the 20th century toward a methodological cosmopolitanism capable of grappling with the major problems and issues that are prescient in the 21st century. The key to forging a cosmopolitan solidarity for Beck lies in the transmutation of thought. To this end, he urges readers to put themselves in a headspace of thinking the unthinkable, which he believes is essential if the progressive aspects of metamorphosis are to be seized. *Ergo*, so far as ontology and epistemology are concerned, the theory of metamorphosis produces something of a methodological conundrum. Whilst Beck challenges his audience to acknowledge the sweeping transformations reshaping the world, observing and appreciating such transformations requires the individual to undergo a form of personal metamorphosis in order to view the world with fresh eyes. To appreciate the wide-ranging impacts of metamorphosis and to promote the commonweal, the reformatory

potential of risk must be realized. The social science conundrum writ large in Beck's thesis reads thus: the theorization of metamorphosis requires the metamorphosis of theorizing, yet, simultaneously, the metamorphosis of theorizing requires the theorization of metamorphosis. As formidable a task as this may seem, Beck is at pains to stress the everyday quality of metamorphosis which, for him, occurs habitually and routinely through everyday practices in a globalized world where cosmopolitanization is a lived reality rather than a lifestyle choice of privileged elites. Thus 'banal cosmopolitanism' constitutes a modern way of being which cannot be eschewed (see Sierakowski, 2015; Zhang, 2018). Moreover, cosmopolitan ways of being are not only reproductive but are, moreover, transformative. Critical here is the iterative role of dialogue with others in producing progressive change: 'there is no metamorphosis without communication: communication about metamorphosis is constitutive of metamorphosis' (Beck, 2016: 126). In this regard, Beck's objective is to motivate the reader to express the autonomy necessary for progressive emancipatory action. Thus, the cosmopolitan methodological framework favoured by Beck is not an agnostic academic preference. Rather, it constitutes a concerted attempt to practically engage with the thorny issues so often skirted around in sociology, such as ethics and moral principles. Beck not only researched the cosmopolitan turn, he also practised its core values of solidarity, co-operation and trust.

It is difficult to decisively appraise what is, in essence, an unfinished book using the traditional yardsticks of comprehensiveness, cohesiveness and empirical evidence. Indubitably, the lingering 'open questions, from metaphors of mysterious meaning to arguments based on unknown sources', left those that took up the task of completing the book with an unenviable mission (Beck-Gernsheim, 2016: foreword). Notwithstanding the complexities involved in such a mission, Beck's brand of projective social theory negates measurement against the customary indices. That said, there are evident elisions in his thesis, elements which remain undeveloped, and some exaggerated claims made. At the risk of slipping into the frame of methodological nationalism, there are areas in which the theory of metamorphosis can be unpicked. In raising a selection of points of critique, for illustrative purposes I wish to tether these to Beck's archetypal example of metamorphosis, climate change. In probing the explanatory power of the new concepts that Beck has bequeathed us, it is worth ruminating on barriers to the materialization of an emancipatory politics. Working through the example of climate change, it is possible to contest Beck's view along various axes, including those of representation, power and political will.

While Beck is keen to shine a light on the emancipatory spaces that emerge out of rising environmental awareness, his zeal at times causes him to overlook embedded structural factors that inhibit institutional renewal and hamper political engagement. Questions of personal volition

aside, the manipulation of both basic and beyond survival needs that defines capitalism, means that – even allowing for inclination – few have the time, resources or energy to consistently campaign for change. Whereas those in low-income countries blighted by poverty may have little choice but to engage in practices that directly damage the environment in order to ensure their survival, many living in affluent countries are affected by the ‘value-action’ gap (see Mythen, 2014: 130). Due to a range of intervening factors – such as self and familial reproduction, financial pressures and short-term gains – environmental values do not always translate into either political mobilization or the greening of everyday practices. This aside, the distracting tendencies of consumer capitalism evoked in the classic work of the Frankfurt School have arguably moved to hyper-intense levels in the modern world. Although Beck invests political hope in the ‘generation of metamorphosis’, the pressures that young people face are at least equally likely to encourage forms of retreat into individualism and practices of narcissism. Notwithstanding the double dangers of homogenizing generational categories and valorizing youth (see Gullette, 2017), the potential that Beck identifies for politically progressive activity has to be tempered by acknowledgement of the individualizing and privatistic ethos which underscores aspects of contemporary media culture. Alongside experiencing ruptures in transitional routes from school to employment and home ownership, young people are not impervious to the various forms of ‘bubble gum for the mind’ that preoccupied the Frankfurt School back in the 1930s. Indeed, one might argue that these dimensions are now more firmly pronounced in popular culture. There are no shortage of examples to illustrate this trend – from gaming technologies and mobile phone apps to reality TV shows, talent contests and home ‘make-over’ programmes. Of course, such distractions do not in and of themselves manufacture political acquiescence – for young people or other generational groups – but their centrality within culture indubitably impacts upon values, aspirations and temporal frames of engagement.

Somewhat perversely, while Beck would be the first to admit that his appreciation of the power of the media in the representation of risk had previously been underdeveloped, there are sections of the book in which his approach becomes overstated. For instance, the claims made about the role of media images in ‘socially exploding’ risks feel a tad mechanical. Similarly, anticipation that the media will stimulate a ‘new framework of ethics’ seems decidedly upbeat. Although Beck is justified in augmenting his appreciation of the centrality of the media in both culture and politics, issues of narrow ownership and control impact markedly on the representation of risk, particularly in mainstream news media (see Mythen, 2014: 80). Furthermore, forms of public engagement with various interactive media platforms are motivated by a plethora of interests.

While on the one hand, social media platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* can be vehicles for political contestation and debate, they are also susceptible to the kind of large-scale external manipulation associated with the Brexit vote in the UK and Donald Trump's election campaign in the United States. This aside, social media platforms are far from insulated against expressions of avarice and malice. Perhaps more inhibiting to the proselytizing capacity of emancipatory catastrophism are the underlying power networks that constitute both capitalist and (formally) socialist economies. It is no coincidence that the current leaders of the 'superpower' states of Russia, China and the United States share common ground in their reluctance to concede that well-documented climate changes are a direct consequence of human activity in general and modes of mass production and consumption in particular. Thus, as appealing as the concept of emancipatory catastrophism may be to left-leaning academics and activists, the political economy elephant in the room looms large. While nationhood may well be outdated in an era of global threats, states remain powerful actors that both govern and influence public institutions. In capitalist liberal democracies a major priority of the state is to facilitate economic growth, and partisan support of corporate interests invariably runs contrary to maintaining ecological equilibrium and the promotion of social justice (White and Heckenberg, 2014). Attitudes toward climate change cannot be readily sequestered from financial interests and the maintenance of power relations for those that profit from them. While Beck is correct that scientists who deny climate change find themselves in the minority – even allowing for concerted collective action – breaking down vested interests in major industries such as oil, gas, commerce and transport is a gargantuan task. Economic coalitions between these power blocks span across actors and institutions with ostensibly conflicting political values. Above and beyond the personal protection of wealth and privilege, assuming that capitalist forms of social organization run up against their own limits, the political reformation that Beck promotes requires not only moral commitment but also a coherent plan for radical restructuring – and one that runs directly contra profit-oriented regimes that characterize contemporary capitalism. While most social scientists would agree that living in the Anthropocene demands alternative systems of production, consumption, politics and governance, the blueprint for change remains oblique.

### **Conclusion: Metamorphosis as an Invitation to Imagine**

If the world that Beck describes is in a state of pupation en route to metamorphosis or merely in transition is debatable. Similarly, it remains to be seen whether the process of metamorphosis can act as a *deus ex machina* that 'alters the political order of the world' (Beck, 2016: 1).

While assiduous assembly of empirical data was never top of Beck's priority list, his vocation was consistently direct. Regrettably, this practical orientation is often neglected in less stringent analyses of his work. Beck laboured hard to evidence and (re)define his theoretical assertions through grounded field studies (see Beck, 2015a, 2015b; Blok, 2015). The gauntlet laid down to researchers is to test the 'middle-range concepts' that constitute the theory of metamorphosis, such as 'social catharsis', 'cosmopolitan risk communities' and 'anthropological shock'. Beck's aim in what transpired to be his last book was to develop 'a theoretically informed, ambitious, historical diagnosis of the metamorphosis of the world... that allows us to describe the epochal change in horizon that universalistic theories fail to recognize' (Beck, 2016: 71). Focusing on the socially conductive side effects of global risks, Beck challenges social scientists to take heed of the ways in which transnational catastrophes harbour the potential to generate progressive political action. Underpinning this aspiration was a desire to uncover the ways in which shifting moral codes and new modes of political participation could facilitate harmonious ways of living in the future (see Guivant, 2016; Wiewiorka, 2016). It is arguably here where the true value and vibrancy of this contribution lies. If we embrace the theory of metamorphosis as an invitation to imagine, then an untrammelled and meaningful discussion that takes place on a plain of possibility can flourish.

Through his writing and lobbying, Beck sought to stir both thought and deed. The emphasis on praxis that defined both his life and his academic career is pronounced in *The Metamorphosis of the World*, with paths to liberation being contingent on purposive action. Far from craving a Eureka moment divined through landmark theory, Beck favoured a recursive approach. Therein resides the invitation to explore with adventure that defines his legacy. As his final piece demonstrates, Beck was unstinting in his desire to capture and convey what he saw as the spirit of the *zeitgeist*. His ambition was to stimulate a refreshed sociological imagination, underpinned by original concepts and innovative tools of analysis capable of grasping both the changing nature of the world and the complexities of social change (Beck, 2015a; Pearce, 2016). Latterly, he became preoccupied with testing the many concepts he had created in real world environments and encouraging the translation of theory into practice. To this end, Beck's determined campaigning and interventions in debates around nuclear power, the environment and European politics informed and shaped policy-making. Aside from being the most avuncular of human beings, Ulrich Beck's catalytic academic contribution necessitates that he should be remembered not simply as a distinguished theoretician of social change but, moreover, as an agent of metamorphosis.

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Gabe Mythen ■■ [AQ2]

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