

ULRICH BECK: CONSIDERATIONS ON HIS CONTRIBUTIONS AND CHALLENGES TO THE STUDIES IN ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY

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Introductionⁱ

Ulrich Beck was born on 15 May 1944, in the city of Stolp or Slupsk, Pomerania (former German territory), in present-day Poland, and grew up in Hanover, Germany. After abandoning Law at the University of Freiburg, he devoted himself to studying Sociology, Philosophy, Psychology and Political Sciences at the Ludwig Maximilians University, Munich, where he worked as a lecturer and professor until 1992. Amongst the international positions and distinctions he attained throughout his academic career, Beck was visiting professor at the University of Wales, Cardiff (1995-1997), the London School of Economics (from 1997), both in the United Kingdom, and the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris (from 2011). He married the renowned sociologist Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim in 1975 and together they wrote, among other books, *Das ganz normale Chaos der Liebe* (The normal chaos of love), published in 1990, and *Fernliebe* (Distant Love), in 2011ⁱⁱ.

However, it was *Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, in English, *Risk society: towards a new modernity* which first brought to light Beck's valuable contributions to social theory, more specifically, his social theory of risk. Beck's work appeared at a time when humanity, in shock, was still trying to make sense of the accident at Chernobylⁱⁱⁱ. The world watched as authorities and organizations responsible for safety proved to be unprepared to deal with situations of risk and environmental destruction. In practice, they *experienced* the consequences of their inability to adequately communicate technical information on the risks and failures predicted by specialists and researchers (WYNNE, 1989). In his work, Beck considered a "world out of control", characterized by "manufactured uncertainties"^{iv}, a world where growing mistrust in science and the agencies

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responsible for managing risks and catastrophes revealed the need for new directions in technological policies (RENN, 2008). Beck rightly argued that science, in particular the natural sciences and engineering, could not guarantee “zero risk” when laboratory results were applied to industry, that is, when they were taken out of the laboratory. This required, in his own words a “technological moralization” (BECK, 2002a, p.80).

The distinguishing mark of the world risk society resides in the attempt to renew the critical tradition of social theory, in particular, one of its specific currents, the theory of modernization. Since the publication of his book *World risk society* in 1998, Beck’s (2002a, pp. 01-28) critique and epistemological alternative has been based on providing a new meaning to the concept of cosmopolitanism.

Although Beck was a prolific academic, with a large bibliographical production, he remained the author of three main books: the very widely discussed *Risikogesellschaft* [Risk Society] (2001 [orig. 1986]), *Was ist Kosmopolitismus?* (2006 [orig. 2004]) and, more recently, *Weltrisikogesellschaft* [World at Risk] (2008 [orig. 2007]). Risk Society, an accurate diagnosis of present time, was well received worldwide, particularly in the 1990s after its translation into English (1992). However, it is important to note that it was only published in Portuguese in 2010. Cosmopolitan Vision defines a project for an experimental and transdisciplinary methodological foundation for sociology, while World at Risk is a theoretical update. By bringing environmental issues to sociology, Beck’s work focused on an attempt to open this discipline to other areas of study, more specifically “geography, anthropology, ethnology, international relations, international law and political theory” (BECK & SZNAIDER, 2006, p. 382).

He starts by criticizing the ultra-specialized rationality of the sciences. He also questions the suitability of classic sociology to explain and understand contemporary society (BECK, 2001, p. 20 and 341-397). For Beck, therefore, the essay becomes a discursive-analytic strategy. Thus, the connection between an essayist discursive-analytic strategy, a diagnosis of its times, and a transdisciplinary perspective, results not in a finished theory in the conventional sense, but in a knowledge project. From 2012, Beck began to focus on a specific research project, *Methodological Cosmopolitanism - In the Laboratory of Climate Change* (BECK, 2012).

Given Beck’s sudden death and at the invitation of *Revista Ambiente & Sociedade* [Environment & Society], we will be briefly presenting the author’s theory and making some critical observations. First, we will address the central aspects of his theory and knowledge project. We will subsequently examine some of his innovative proposals and finally, we will make some brief critical considerations and point to some challenges.

Key aspects of the theory of world risk society and methodological cosmopolitanism

The central thesis of the risk society is that today social production and distribution of wealth (work, goods and social welfare) go hand-in-hand with the social production and reproduction of risks such as pollution, economic crises and terrorism (BECK, 2001, p. 35-90, 47-75). “Threats are produced industrially, externalized economically, individualized

judicially, legitimized scientifically and minimized politically” (BECK, 2010, p. 230). In an attempt to prevent, mitigate and remedy risks and destruction caused by modernization, society takes on the task of addressing its unexpected outcomes (BECK, 1997). Thus, it enables us to talk in terms of a *reflexive* modernization. Risks and reflexivity are, therefore, core concepts: the first enables us to access reality and the second to explain the rationale of the dynamics which underpins this reality. The theoretical axis is hereby established: modernization-risk-reflexivity.

For Beck the difference between contemporary risks and those of other periods is not so much their potential for destruction, but first, their institutional aspect - risks are *manufactured* by science, the market, the government, the media, etc. (BECK, 2002a, p. 48-53); second, their *invisibility* (BECK, 2001, p. 80-84); and finally, their *lack of spatial and temporal boundaries* (*idem*, p. 65-80). Therefore, risks do not exist in themselves, as their objectivity derives from perception and the fact that they are the object of *social staging* (BECK, 2008, p. 47-76). When risks are staged, they define situations of social threats and become a feature of institutional relations (State, market, sciences, civil society, etc.). In this way, the social staging of risks establish *relations of definition* that are also *relations of domination* which revolve around issues of power, interests, benefits and losses (*idem*, p. 53-60).

Beck argues that given that risks are not bound by space and time, their social staging leads to a forced reflexive cosmopolitization of social life (BECK, 2006, p. 69-98 and 169-188). Life becomes cosmopoliticized in as much as the future, anticipated as catastrophe, is found in the present as a force for transnational social and political integration (BECK, 2008, p. 34-37). This threatening future is industrially induced, scientifically anticipated, politically managed, socially perceived and globally shared in present action, forcing the reflexive cosmopolitization of society and history. The result is a qualitative differentiation of contemporary society, enabling us to distinguish between first and second modernity (BECK, 2006, p. 09-33).

Accordingly, Beck argues that if what distinguishes contemporary (risk) society at the societal level is reflexive cosmopolitization, then at the level of scientific rationality, this awareness of problems points to the explanatory limitations of the classic reference framework. Therefore it is necessary to re-found sociology with a cosmopolitan intent. *Methodological cosmopolitanism* is based on the theoretical differentiation between the actor's (subject perspective) and the observer's perspectives in the social sciences (observer perspective), and the methodological synthesis between the spatial (territory) and temporal (history) dimensions (BECK, 2006, p. 149-156). Both theoretical differentiation and methodological synthesis are inscribed in the historical distinction between the first and second phases of modernity.

For Beck, the theories of first modernity are marked by a methodological nationalism (observer perspective), which, as a reflection of the national perception (subject perspective), assimilates the concept of society to the Nation-state^v (*idem*, p.52-68). One of the consequences of this assimilation is the logic of *exclusive* differentiation which provides the basis for formulating concepts and categories – such as German *or* Turkish, society *or* nature, the social sciences *or* natural sciences etc. Once society becomes cosmopolitan, it is essential to have an equivalent in terms of the observer perspective: methodological

cosmopolitanism, based on a logic of *inclusive* differentiation – German *and* Turkish, society *and* nature, the social sciences *and* natural sciences. At the theoretical level, the objective is a change of paradigm, from exclusive to inclusive, from simple to reflexive and from national to cosmopolitan. In other words, Beck advocates an epistemological rupture.

Innovations introduced by the theory of world risk society

Generally speaking, Beck's theoretical-empirical intuition is promising^{vi}. When he claims that “environmental risks dynamics can only be understood from the point of view of a methodological cosmopolitanism” (2008, p.219-254), Beck manages to connect a concrete phenomenon, such as environmental changes, with a global category (environmental risk) - though influenced by a variety of cultural meanings - and also establish a theoretical-methodological framework. Broadly speaking, risk - which now includes not only environmental, but also economic, biographical, and terrorist risk (*idem*, p. 32-34) - stimulates the emergence of “cosmopolitan communities of global risk”, which leads to a growing interdependence within the world society (BECK, 2011).

In addition, Beck's contribution has been extremely valuable for studies associated to the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change. This is because, by effectively bringing environmental issues to the social sciences by means of the concepts of risk and uncertainty he enabled us to address issues of negotiation which define risk (relations of definition); understand how the symbolic and normative dimensions of risk are mediated by social interaction and institutions (social staging); consider how the models proposed by the literature to define risk are also socially constructed, that is, they are defined both by consensus and arbitration, according to the conjunctural interest consensus of stakeholders, in particular, the government, industry and the techno-sciences geared toward industrial application (RCEP, 1998; DI GIULIO, 2012; DI GIULIO, VASCONCELLOS, 2014, DI GIULIO et al., *forthcoming*).

By reinforcing that the action of interpreting and selecting what is important in terms of environmental problems (risks) is a social process involving the media, science, moral and political aspects, Beck provides us with a sociological framework for analysing the current ecological crisis, specifically understood as a profound crisis of institutionalized rationality. This crisis in rationality is the reflection of environmental changes induced by human actions which resulted from negotiations, projections and political responses influenced by social variables, technological choices, development policies, consumer behaviour and economic performance (YEARLEY, 2009).

Furthermore, by reinforcing the concepts of uncertainty and insecurity within the studies on the Human Dimension of Global Environmental Changes, Beck enables us to place a deserved emphasis on these components, in particular by focusing on increasingly more complex and diffuse environmental issues such as climate change which can have harmful and still unknown impacts on human life (NAUSTDALSLID, 2011, BECK, 2009, 2010). By addressing such complex problems Beck reminds us of the need for a “culture of uncertainty” which can find a voice in an open dialogue with the sciences, the political system, the market and civil society in order to address risk. In his own words, it is more

“[...] the willingness to negotiate between different rationalities rather than engage in mutual denunciation; the willingness to erect modern taboos on rational grounds, last but not least, a recognition of the central importance of demonstrating the collective will to act responsibly and accountably with regard to the losses which will always occur despite every precaution”^{vii}.

This means that the theory of world risk society also contributes to studies on risk governance. This is because it manages to characterize specific risks as global phenomena. On the one hand, it allows for the objective association between the managerial universe of the Nation-State with globalization, within a context where government policy can be legitimate and efficient when mediated by post-national regulatory spheres (BECK, p. 48-65 and 214-221); and on the other, it allows for new forms of direct participation in the decision-making processes at the heart of the political system, thus redrawing the basis for the political legitimacy (BECK, 2010, p. 234-238).

Furthermore, Beck's contribution to the studies on the Human Dimension of Global Environmental Change reinforces the idea that the process of risk governance must necessarily include strong and reflexive public opinion which is also self-aware and universally democratic. These are very big challenges for certain societies such as that of Brazil which are still affected by problems which include lack of resources and high levels of unequal distribution of wealth, whilst facing issues which are “typical” of a risk society, albeit without “active” reflexivity (GUIVANT, 1998).

When confronting institutionally manufactured uncertainties and risks, the combination between counteracting voices and opinions, and issues which are not discussed, or simply unknown to normal science, are undoubtedly fundamental stages which ultimately lead to reflections on the future we want to attain, mediated by technical-scientific and industrial development, the uncertainties and insecurities these produce and by the normative standardization which they demand as a result.

Final considerations, critiques and challenges

It is difficult to disagree with Beck's diagnosis and his theoretical (transdisciplinary) intuition. If globalization has shaped social integration to such an extent that it forces the modern conception of the integration between society and nature to be transformed, then new theoretical questioning becomes essential. However, the author's efforts are not immune to criticism^{viii}.

A first shortcoming relates to the intended opening toward transdisciplinarity and, more specifically, to Environment and Society studies. On the one hand, if Beck is recognized for his obstinate attempt to make heuristic use of knowledge produced by various disciplines, on the other, his selection of the essayist discursive-analytic strategy requires that the term *theory* be clarified within the context of the “theory of world risk society”. It is worth stressing that Beck has left us with a challenge: a transdisciplinary (cosmopolitan?) theory of method, of essay and/or of scientific practices still needs to be developed.

The second critical consideration relates specifically to sociology. Are risks and reflexivity really able to capture all the dimensions of globalization, including the various

forms in which nature is internalized by local cultural and historical meanings? It seems empirically unlikely that the highly complex interaction networks which make globalization a concrete phenomenon can be adequately condensed into only two concepts - risk and reflexivity. Studies such as those conducted by Saskia Sassen (2010), Renato Ortiz (2003) and Paul Gilroy (2002) - just to refer to a few - suggest the need for expanding subject matters and theoretical differentiation so as to incorporate phenomena which are also just as relevant in characterizing globalization. However, this criticism is only pertinent in as much as we continue to the aim for a general theory of society as intended by Beck. Otherwise, it should be restricted to being a (cosmopolitan) social theory of risk.

Here we stumble across another challenge left by Beck which relates specifically to the meaning of cosmopolitan within his risk theory. The term cosmopolitan seems to suggest the need to make the theoretical sphere reflect the diversity of cultural meanings - for example, in the concepts of risk, reflexivity and environment. In other words, how they manifest themselves as localized cultural *praxis* as they circulate globally. By moving around the globe, phenomena such as risk become associated to different historical, cultural, political and environmental conditions, requiring a greater degree of theoretical differentiation in the light of empirical scrutiny. Thus, we suggest that risk not only drives a single cosmopolitanism but a number of *cosmopolitanisms*, in that there is specific symbolic and material diversification between the realities in which they emerge as a motivation for social action. In other words, it is essential that the theory of world risk society is complemented by conceptual differentiations derived from the empirical study of different social realities, such as for example, the Brazilian reality.

Notes

i Translated by PJ Language Services

ii See newspapers articles: Kaldow & Selchow, 2015; Smale, 2015.

iii On 26 April 1986, in northern Ukraine, an accident was recorded in reactor number 4 at the Chernobyl nuclear plant. At the time, the Soviet government took over 24 hours to evacuate the region and another two days to admit to the world that the disaster had occurred. Furthermore, it did not advise the population as to how they should act, sending in to the region hundreds of soldiers, and police and fire officers to fight the fire without protection. The Ukraine Health Ministry recently announced that 2.3 million people in eight cities and spread across 2,100 villages have suffered or will suffer, in some way, the health effects of the explosion (O ESTADO DE S. PAULO, 2006; CHAVES, 1998; DI GIULIO, 2012).

iv See Ulrich Beck interview: "Incertezas fabricadas – Entrevista com o sociólogo alemão Ulrich Beck".

v For a critique of Beck's methodological nationalism critique, see: Chernilo, 2006; FINE, 2007, p. 07-14.

vi Beck's theory was widely used by researchers in various disciplines. Amongst whom we cite only a few: ALLAN et al., 1999; ADAM et al., 2000; GUIVANT, 2000; FERREIRA, 2006; IANNI, 2010; TAVOLARO, 2011; DI GIULIO, 2012; CASTRO, 2012; ARNAUT, 2013. For general aspects of the theory of world risk society we suggest: VANDENBERGHE, 2001; BOSCO, 2013 e 2015 (forthcoming).

vii See Ulrich Beck interview: "Incertezas fabricadas – Entrevista com o sociólogo alemão Ulrich Beck".

viii In addition to the critical assessments cited above, we highlight: MYTHEN, 2004; COSTA, 2006, p. 49-82; BHAMBRA, 2011; MARTINS, 2011; JERÓNIMO, 2014.

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Abstract: In this article, the authors present the general aspects of Ulrich Beck's theory of the world risk society and formulate a critical assessment. Once presented the theoretical axis, defined as modernization-risk-reflexivity, and the experimental and transdisciplinary methodological foundation of sociology on cosmopolitanism, the authors highlight the contributions, some shortcomings and reflect on the challenges which, subsequent to Beck's sudden death, still remain with regard to Environment and Society studies. In order to do so, we present a brief historical reconstruction of his theory and point out to some of the directions taken by researchers in various fields. We also lay down some well-established criticisms and our own considerations.

Keywords: Risk; Reflexivity; Cosmopolitanism; Beck, Ulrich (1944-2015).

Resumo: Neste artigo, os autores apresentam os aspectos gerais da teoria da sociedade mundial de risco elaborada por Ulrich Beck e formulam uma avaliação crítica. Uma vez apresentados o eixo teórico, definido como modernização-risco-reflexividade, e a fundação metodológica experimental e transdisciplinar de sociologia no cosmopolitismo, os autores destacam as contribuições, algumas insuficiências e refletem acerca dos desafios que, depois do falecimento repentino de Beck, são deixados para os estudos em Ambiente e Sociedade. Para tanto, valem-se de uma breve reconstrução da história da referida teoria, da indicação de algumas de suas mobilizações por pesquisadores de diversas áreas, de críticas consolidadas e de considerações críticas próprias.

Palavras-chave: Risco; Reflexividade; Cosmopolitismo; Beck, Ulrich (1944-2015).

Resumen: En este artículo, los autores presentan los aspectos generales de la teoría de la sociedad mundial del riesgo elaborada por Ulrich Beck y formulan una evaluación crítica. Una vez presentado el eje teórico, definido como modernización-riesgo-reflexividad, y la fundación metodológica experimental y transdisciplinaria de la sociología en el cos-

mopolitismo, los autores destacan las contribuciones, algunas deficiencias, y reflexionan sobre los retos que, después de la repentina muerte de Beck, siguen planteados para los estudios en Medio Ambiente y Sociedad. En este contexto, los autores elaboran una breve reconstrucción de la historia de la teoría mencionada, indicando algunos de sus usos por parte de investigadores de diversos campos, críticas reconocidas, así como consideraciones críticas propias.

Palabras clave: Riesgo; Reflexividad; Cosmopolitismo; Beck, Ulrich (1944-2015).
