

Ulrich Beck's theory on risk society

- I. Ulrich Beck – sociological biography
- II. The transition from industrial society to risk society
 1. Risk society
 2. World Risk Society
 3. Reflexive politics
 4. Cosmopolitan vision
5. A paradigm change in social sciences
- III. Conclusion
- IV. References

I. Ulrich Beck – sociological biography

Ulrich Beck (1944-)

- ❖ Ulrich Beck is Professor (emeritus) of Sociology at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU).
- ❖ Since 1997 he is the British Journal of Sociology Visiting Centennial Professor at the London School of Economics.
- ❖ Since 2011 he is also Professor at the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris.
- ❖ He is co-editor of the journal *Soziale Welt* and editor of the books *Edition Second Modernity* at Suhrkamp.
- ❖ Since 2013 the Principal Investigator of the ERC project: "Methodological Cosmopolitanism – In the Laboratory of Climate Change".

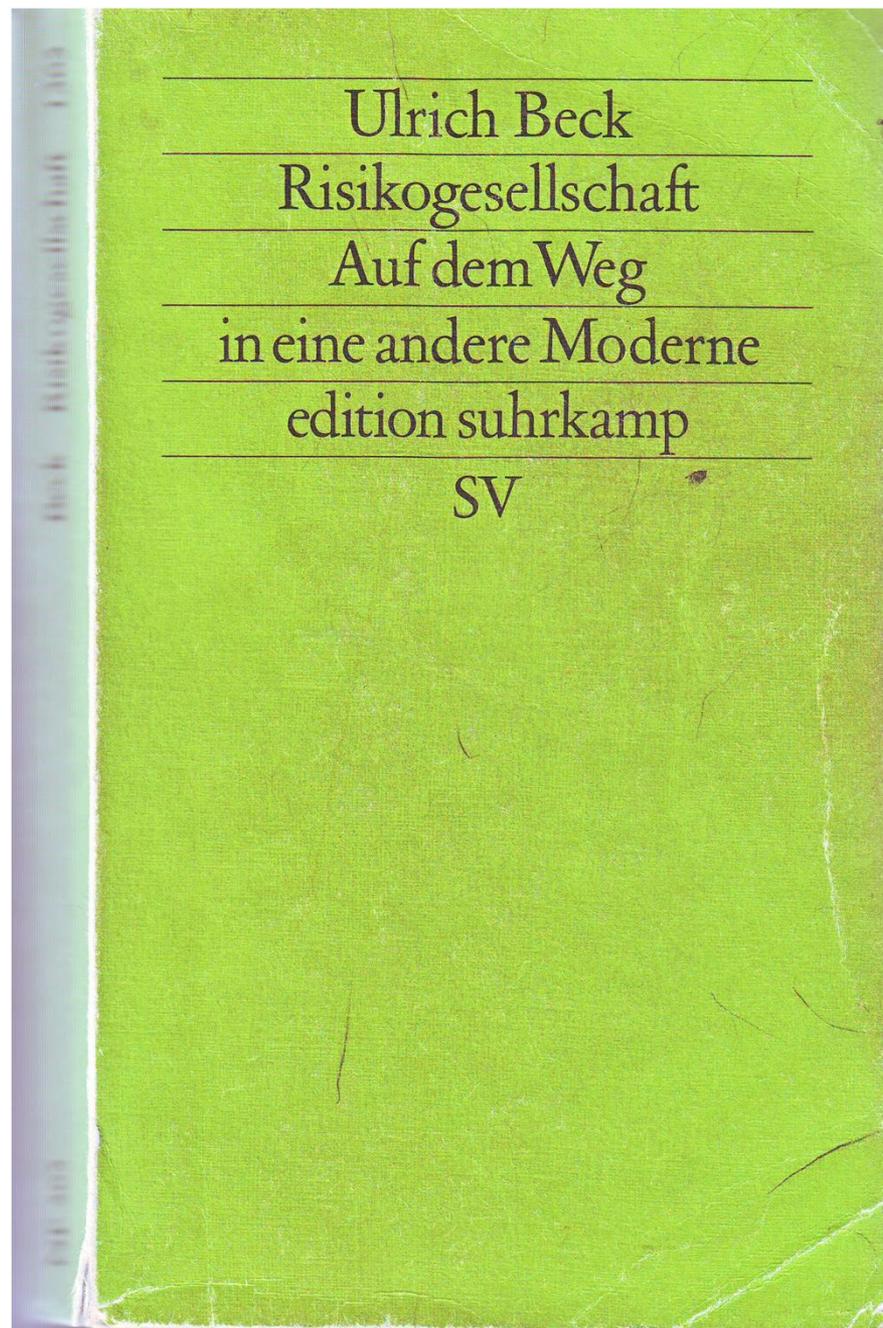


Table 1. Environmental crises as a breakdown of a modernity: some critical social theorists and their core concepts (Massa 2009).

| <u>Scholar</u> | <u>Core theoretical concept</u> |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Allan Schnaiberg (1980) | Treadmill of production and consumption |
| Jussi Raumolin (1984) | Raubwirtschaft, extractive economy |
| Ulrich Beck (1986) | Risk society |
| Niklas Luhmann (1986) | Ökologische kommunikation |
| Joseph A. Tainter (1988) | Collapse |
| Thomas F. Homer-Dixon (1991) | Ecoviolence |
| James O'Connor (1996) | Second conflict of capitalism |
| John Bellamy Foster (1999) | Metabolic rift |
| Jason W. Moore (2003) | World-ecology |

II. The transition from industrial society to risk society

1. Risk society

- ❖ Phase one: effects and self-threats are systematically produced but do not become public issues or the centre of political conflicts ("residual risk society").
- ❖ Phase two: the social, political, economic and individual risks increasingly tend to escape the institutions for monitoring and protection in industrial society (risk society).
- ❖ The institutions of industrial society become producers and legitimators of threats they cannot anymore control.
- ❖ The concept of organised irresponsibility: denotes of cultural and institutional mechanisms by which political and economic elites masks the origins and consequences of the catastrophic risks and dangers.
- ❖ The industrial society is clouded over by debates and conflicts that stem from the dynamism of risk society.
- ❖ Wealth, privilege, status and economic power dominating the industrial society provide no escape for at least global risks like climate change.
- ❖ "Society is drifting in the sea of global risks"

2. World Risk Society

- World society will become an objective necessity and push national states etc obsolete
- Beyond 150 years of national states
- How we can create a greening of modernity?
- Second modernity and dissolution of the nation-state narrowness of nation states
- We all prisoners of national states

3. The distinction between official and reflexive politics (Beck 1994).

| | Quality of period of the political | |
|----------------------------------|--|---|
| Place and type of political | Simple (rule-directed) | Reflexive (rule-altering) |
| Politics of the political system | Symbolic politics, growth, full employment, technical and social progress | Economic reactivation or metamorphosis of the state |
| Sub(system) politics | Simple expert rationality, dominance of the technocratic, bureaucratic action, private sphere. | Reform of rationality, political entrepreneurs, vocation as political action. |
| Conditions of politicization | Strike, parliamentary majority, governmental initiative, collective-individualistic solutions. | Congestion, blockade and, as one variant, the struggle for consensus and reforms of the modernisations inside and outside the political system- |

4. Cosmopolitan vision

- ❖ Cosmopolitan moments tear down national boundaries
- ❖ Cosmopolitization: “the global others” cannot be excluded anymore.
- ❖ Forced cosmopolitanism: cooperate with global others or fail.
- ❖ What is the role of social media like facebook for creating cosmopolitan everyday life?

5. Paradigm change in social sciences

- ❖ The social theories originated in the past centuries and their modern modifications are "intellectual ruins" or "zombi categories", hindering the understanding the modern social dynamics and its new central challenges.
- ❖ The main problem of the classical social theories is that the nature is conceptualized as given and suppressed entity.
- ❖ Severe epistemological problems: how to study an interconnected world?
- ❖ From methodological nationalism to methodological cosmopolitanism.
- ❖ Ulrich Beck is in a row of other modern environmental social scientists, which have begun to work in criticising and rejecting post-war modernization theory

Table 2. Conceptual shifts in environmental social science since WW II (Massa 2009)

| Researcher | Hegemonic concept | Alternative concept |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Economics (Boulding 1996) | Open economy | Spaceship Earth |
| Political studies (Ophuls 1977) | Human-centered politics | Ecological scarcity |
| Sociology (Catton & Dunlap 1978) | Human exceptionalism | New ecological paradigm |
| History (Nash 1972) | Human-centered history | Environmental history |
| Anthropology (Moran 1984) | Cultural ecology | Ecosystems anthropology |

III. Conclusions

- ❖ Beck wants to be provocative and stimulating rather than systematic and strictly analytical.
- ❖ His texts are rather warnings that modern world is off rails and all the safety checks and assurances are worthless, unless we really change the rules and try to build an cosmopolitan world.
- ❖ The world is not "world village", but in many ways socially, politically, economically and culturally divided.
- ❖ Only the anticipation of global risks and the mere threats has a reflexive possibility to unite us and foster the cosmopolitan vision Beck is trying to foster.

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