

Globalization: Theoretical Perspectives
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Lecture 38
Ulrich Beck: The Risk Society Part - I

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Ulrich Beck: The Risk Society



Welcome back to the class and we are continuing our discussion on the very important scholar Ulrich Beck on his theorization on globalization. So in the previous two classes, yes, we discussed his theorization on the state, on cosmopolitan state and we found that he has something very interesting arguments to make about the transformations of nation-state in a globalized era and we discussed in two sessions, his larger argument about a movement from methodological nationalism to that of methodological cosmopolitanism and he uses his analysis of the transformation of nation state in a globalized era.


So we found that his, he argues or he very beautifully he elaborates how the frames of references cannot be contained within the national boundaries or national boundaries no longer contains the kind of processes or transformations of any of these entities that you want to analyse through the lens of globalization. So, we had a very interesting discussion on arguments about nation states, about how its notions of autonomy and sovereignty are getting redefined and a prospect or the possibility of a new cosmopolitan state emerging.

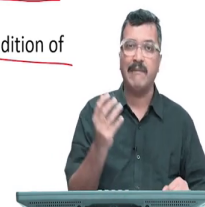
But now we know that those very promising arguments or very positive optimistic arguments about the emergence of a cosmopolitan state, it no longer is the case what we are seeing is a kind of a downturn or a downward trend in the larger arguments about globalization, so now this class as well as the coming two more sessions all together three sessions, we are going to discuss one of yet another very important argument made by Ulrich Beck, his theory of the risk society and maybe we can say that Ulrich Beck is mostly known for this particular argument that his very, very strong argument that the contemporary world in which we live must be characterized as a risk society okay.

So, this is very innovative and very provocative argument and then he has a series of articles and books written on this theme and he has been a very important advocate of this particular theme through his writings, through his speeches and lectures and interviews and everything you will come across quite a lot of Beck's lectures on the YouTube and I would urge you to listen to them because all of them are very, very important and interesting.

So, this three sessions, I am going to take it in a continuous manner, we are discussing the same concept this, the risk society but it is the discussion is split into three sessions in a consecutive manner.

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- On the Way toward an Industrial Society of Risk. *International Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 20, No. 1, RISKY BUSINESS: Ecology and Economy (Spring 1990), pp. 51-69
 - Living in the world risk society. *Economy and Society*, Volume 35. Number 3, August 2006: 329-345
 - Risk as the unintended consequences of our march towards modernity
 - "(1986) I described Risk Society as 'an inescapable structural condition of advanced industrialization'"



So, the material for these two lectures are taken from these two essays, one On the Way towards an Industrial Society of Risk, published in the international journal of political

economy, was published in 1990 and another one Living in the world risk society, Economy and Society, published in 2006.

So, these are the two articles on which I am basing my lectures, and all the PPTs for the coming classes are directly taken from the text of these two lectures. Many times it might appear as if in the first person. However, its Beck's all articles, I am increasingly feeling that instead of scrolling down the article, this might be helpful for the learners. At the same time, I strongly urge you to look for these materials, download them and then read them independently. These lectures are available in JSTOR and several other platforms, so kindly download them, read them maybe a couple of times and then try to see how a scholar like Ulrich Beck makes very passionate arguments about the risk society.

So, before we commence his discussion on the risk society, it is essential to know his overall argument. Because this term risk is not something that we conventionally come across in the Social Science language, the risk is again a common English word that we use in our everyday parlance. However, for Beck and scholars like Giddens, the risk is understood as the unintended consequences of our march towards modernity.

So, this particular theme we have come across earlier. Even Giddens argues when he talks about the runaway world or when he talks about the late modernity or when others speak about it, late modernity, they all talk about the unintended consequences of the first modernity. We developed our technology; we developed many scientific innovations and technology innovations; we invented a lot of new institutions, new political institutions, economic institutions.

So we were all in the march towards modernity with an inherent idea that we would have better control over nature. We will provide better and more secure, safer living conditions for humankind. However, increasingly, we realize that many of the unintended consequences, unforeseen consequences, unintended consequences have come up as the by-products of this particular modernity. These by-products are now posing a serious threat to our existence.

So, even in his earlier work of 1986, he described risk society as a specific structural condition of advanced industrialization. This is the point that we need to keep in mind, he is not talking about natural calamities, not about biological kind of calamities or diseases or

other things, but all of them will have, will assume a kind of a different character when you understand as these calamities as taking place in advanced industrialization.

However, they are seen as the specific structural condition of advanced industrialization. We have invented many things with a particular intention, and we must have successfully achieved that particular intention. Along with that, we have also created many unintended and unwanted consequences, and the examples that he gives are, first and foremost, the nuclear threat the issue of radioactivity. We know that the world is on the verge of a nuclear war or the real possibility of a nuclear reactor getting damaged and then leaking the radioactive material is always a possibility.

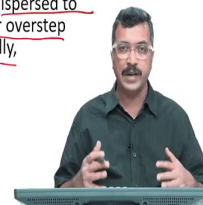
Moreover, a host of other arguments about say increasing pollution level, increasing damage and destruction of the ecology, the rising temperatures or the kind of a rampant adulteration of food or a host of other financial frauds and a host of other things which are our by-products, have emerged as a significant factor that now we are supposed to encounter with.

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- Dissatisfaction with the prefix 'post' in social theory



- My central thesis is as follows. In the advanced modern world, the social production of wealth systematically goes hand in hand with the social production of risks. Accordingly, the problems and conflicts of distribution in a society of shortages are overlaid by problems and conflicts that arise from the production, definition, and distribution of scientifically and technologically produced risks.
- How can the risks and hazards that are systematically produced as part of the advanced process of modernization be prevented, rendered innocuous, dramatized, channeled, and in those cases where they have actually materialized in the form of latent side effects, be so contained and dispersed to the winds that they neither hinder the process of modernization nor overstep the limits of what may be reasonably accepted (ecologically, medically, psychologically, socially).

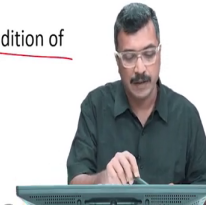




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• Risk as the unintended consequences of our march towards modernity

• "1986 I described Risk Society as 'an inescapable structural condition of advanced industrialization'



In the first essay published in 2000, 'On the Way Towards an Industrial Society of Risk', he says that he is pretty dissatisfied with the tendency to prefix post in social theory because, after structuralism, most of the theories that emerge whether it is that of Foucault and other people it is all seen as postmodernity or post-industrialism or such kind of societies. He argues that the laziness among social scientists because they cannot characterize sure things, they cannot name a particular phenomenon more categorically. That is why they are using this particular term post.

So, for example, when we say that it is postmodern, it only says that it is gone past the era of modernity, but it leaves it unclear what exactly replaces modernity. He says that his central thesis is that the social production of wealth systematically goes hand in hand with the social production of risk in the advanced modern world.

Accordingly, the problems and conflicts of distribution in a society of shortage are overlaid by problems and conflicts that arise from the production, definition and distribution of scientifically and technologically produced risk. He makes a fascinating comparison between the production, distribution and the implication of wealth in a society and the production, distribution and various implications of risk.

We know that in capitalist societies, wealth is produced, and how is wealth produced? Who are the people involved in it? Moreover, how is wealth distributed differently? How are the concentration of wealth among certain people and the lack of wealth in certain other people,

and how do these things significantly impact people's living conditions of people. Hence, all these are very, have given to quite a lot of interesting discussions.

So he is making a parallel between this production of wealth and the production of risk. Let us see how can the risk and hazards that are systematically produced as part of the advanced process of modernization be prevented, rendered innocuous, dramatized, channelled and in those cases where they have materialized in the form of latent side effects, be so contained and dispersed to the winds that they neither hinder the process of modernization nor overstep the limits of what may be reasonably accepted ecologically, medically, psychologically or socially.

So, he says that it is a fascinating argument and says that you cannot stop risk production. You cannot stop the creation of unintended negative or detrimental consequences to humanity because though we may not want all these unnecessary side effects, for example, we may not want the threat of radioactivity, we may not want the threat of increasing pollution level, we may not want the threat of saying rampant adulteration in food or several other things. However, these things are a reality you cannot run away with that; they are emerging as a reality in the advanced world.

So once if that is the reality now, the whole emphasis of the intellectual class, the scientific community, the government, the technocrats, the policymakers, everybody it turns towards the whole question of dealing with this particular kind of risk because stopping this risk from emerging is impossible because they have come already. We keep producing them and a number of examples.

We know that there are many discussions and debates about the consequences of our green revolution, especially in states like Punjab and Haryana, the vast advancements that happened in the 1960s in terms of the production of wheat and rice. However, now we realize that a sudden spurt in wheat and rice production also came with a massive cost in terms of ecological degradation; the number of rampant cancer cases among the people and a host of similar kinds of examples can be seen from across the world.

The whole question is how risk and hazards systematically produced as part of the advanced process of modernization be prevented and rendered innocuous. So that they do not look at us


as threatening and dramatized, sometimes you may have to dramatize. Certain people may have to dramatize the negative consequences, especially many of these activist groups may have to dramatize.

Channelled and in those cases where they have materialized in the form of latent side effects, in the form of particular side effects, as in the case of increasing diseases or many other things, be so content and dispersed to the wind that they neither hinder the process of modernization nor overstep the limits of what may be reasonably accepted ecologically, medically, psychologically and socially.

So, how do we deal with them, how do we manage these side effects, how do we kind of deal with them, how do we learn to live with them, how do we make them innocuous, how do we make them appear less threatening or less dangerous? So, he says that a whole establishment has come into existence in the advanced late modernity to deal with this.


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The risks of modernization: five theses


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- First thesis: the dependence of risks on knowledge
Risks are a byproduct of modernization, and occur in a surfeit worth preventing. They must be either eliminated or disavowed or reinterpreted. Risks remain largely invisible and their existence is conveyed basically through argument. What impairs health and destroys nature is often not perceptible to one's own senses and eyes. Even where it seems to be obvious it must be socially construed after it has been "objectively" determined by an authoritative expert judgment.

Radioactivity, food adulteration, pollution and so on



Now he further proceeds by talking about five theses that he wants to point out: the risk of modernization, five theses, the first thesis is a significant one, he says the dependence of risk on knowledge and this is a fascinating argument. He says that risks are by-products of modernization. I hope this point is obvious. We are not talking about natural calamities, biological or significant diseases or epidemics like that. However, we are talking about the

by-products of modernization, okay, the things we created the ecological design. I gave you many examples, and Beck speaks explicitly about that.

Risks are by-products of modernization and occur in a surfeit worth preventing. They must be either eliminated or disavowed, or reinterpreted. Risks remain largely invisible, and their existence is conveyed basically through argument. Do we know whether the farmers of Punjab or Haryana faced higher levels of diseases in all these cases? Or is there proportionate, disproportionately higher incidences of cancer among these people? Or are there many diseases caused by radioactivity among the people residing near the nuclear reactors in India or abroad?

Or what exactly are the consequences of a disaster like Chernobyl or Fukushima in Japan? So these kinds of, of course, we know that these are all the perfect examples of risk, but how does an ordinary person understand that, or how do ordinary people make sense of that? So what, so they must be either eliminated, disavowed or interpreted. Risk remains invisible mainly, and their existence is conveyed basically through an argument.

What impairs health and destroys nature is often inaccessible to one's senses and eyes. We know that the whole idea about global warming is simply beyond our perception. Immediate perception or the destruction of the ozone layer because of CFC or several other things, we do not know, we cannot see that, so consequences of quite a lot of advanced medicines or any such kind of interventions leave behind a series of side effects.

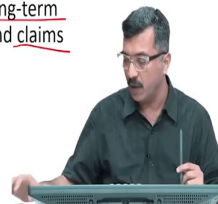
So, what impairs health and destroy nature is often not perceptible to one's senses and eyes. Even where it seems obvious, it must be socially constructed after it has been objectively determined by an authoritative expert judgment okay, so this authoritative, so it has to be objectively established through the authoritative expert judgment.

So who is this authoritative expert judgment? Moreover, most often, these authoritative expert judgment is given by the scientific community or the technocrats or the people, the expert people who come and then study a group of people and then say that okay these people are suffering from high incidences of cancer and that has a causal link or that is produced by this high level of toxins that are found in the air or the soil or in the water, and that is related to the effluents coming from a particular industry okay.

So, if that has to be established even when people are suffering in their own life if people can see their neighbours or their family members are suffering from the diseases like cancer or other things, it has to be established only with the help of an authoritative expert judgment and a number of examples, radioactivity, food adulteration, pollution and all these examples that we mentioned.

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- Common people lose their competence to judge matters concerning their own involvement. They lose an essential bit of the sovereignty of knowledge. What threatens them at the same time makes them dependent on the outside knowledge of other people, and hence on the norms, interests, and mistakes latent in that knowledge. Accordingly, in risk situations, the things of daily life can be transformed overnight into Trojan horses out of which the risk experts come storming and (though disputing among themselves) proclaim what one need fear and what one need not fear.
- These knowledge about risks also at the same time decisions about the state of being affected, about the scope and the type of risk, the substance of the threat, the group of persons affected, the long-term consequences, measures to be taken, persons responsible, and claims for compensation. Hence, much larger implications.



So ordinary people lose their competence to judge matters concerning their involvement, and there is a most crucial point as I told you, as I mentioned ordinary people are the ones who are actually at the receiving end. Nevertheless, they will not be able to establish it scientifically. They have to depend upon somebody else. They lose an essential bit of the sovereignty of knowledge. This is very different from the more traditional ways of their existence, where they know what is happening around their locality. They have their traditional knowledge to deal with that, but it is simply out of the question.

What threatens them at the same time makes them dependent on the outside knowledge of other people and hence on the norms, interests and mistakes latent in that knowledge. So, we know that the whole scientific establishment and the entire scientific procedure to pronounce sure things as objective or as truth is heavily problematic because science is often depending upon a host of new frameworks and new pieces of evidence, new procedures which can come up with quite a lot of different or competing and kind of arguments and pieces of evidence.

Moreover, there could be hardly a consensus even among the scientists concerning even the case like high incidences of cancer in some districts in Punjab, or there was a significant disaster in Kerala associated with the spraying Endosulfan potent pesticides in a cashew plantation. So the opinions among the scientists are different. The scientists who support the government says that it has nothing to do with it. There are quite a lot of people patients with deformities and scarce kinds of diseases.

Moreover, a host of people, including environmental activists and politicians, argue that there is a direct side effect of the aerial spraying of Endosulfan in those cashew plantations. However, the scientists who support the government establishment completely deny that; there is no evidence to suggest, so they have to depend upon the same interest mistakes and latent in that knowledge.

Accordingly, in this situation, daily life can be transformed overnight into Trojan horses. The risk experts come storming and disputing among themselves, proclaim what one needs fear and what one does not fear. So the ordinary people are left at the mercy of those who claim to have this kind of expertise knowledge. This knowledge about risk also, at the same time, decisions about the state of being affected, about the scope and the type of risk, the substance of threat, the group of persons affected, the long term consequences, measures to be taken, persons responsible and claims for compensation, hence much larger implications. So, this is another significant point.

Now, these experts who come out of specific research labs or certain institutions and claim to be having expertise knowledge have a much larger responsibility before them to address a host of much more significant issues. They cannot simply say that this is because of that or this is not because of that.

Even when they say that this higher level of disease is mainly because of this particular pollution, it does not simply end with that. It brings in a host of other questions that are clearly outside the purview of this technocratic expert. These are primarily social questions. These are political questions; these are questions associated with ethics, philosophy, and a host of other issues.

For example, the scope and type of the risk, the substance of the threat, what exactly, the group of persons affected, the long-term consequences, many times even the experts will not have any idea on that. The measures to be taken, persons responsible, obviously it is again a very fraught question, who exactly are the people responsible for that, how do you fix responsibility in the case of such a disaster.

Moreover, compensation claims, it is even more we know the whole case of Bhopal tragedy, Union carbide tragedy, where almost thousand to two thousand people were killed. So what happened to the conversation, whom to blame and how much compensation should be? They are all simply beyond the purview of this expert who comes from this kind of institution.

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Second thesis: the risks attendant on modernization burst asunder the class schema



Social differences and social boundaries are made relative as the risks attendant on modernization (i.e., the endangerment of nature, health, nutrition, etc.) spread.

Risks objectively have an equalizing effect in respect to the range and degree of people's exposure. This in fact is what gives them their novel political force. In this sense, risk societies are not class societies; their risk situations cannot be understood as class situations, nor their conflicts as class conflicts.



The second thesis is that the risk attendant on modernization burst the class schema asunder, so burst asunder means it completely disrupts, it completely disrupts, and the boundaries are disrupted and other things. Social differences and boundaries are made relative as the risk attendant on modernization, that is, endangerment of natural health, nutrition, etc., spread. So the social differences and boundaries, whether based on your gender or caste or class, have a more, these risks have a kind of more universalizing character.

They do not care for all these social distinctions. Then it can affect all people irrespective of their caste and class position, whether it is about pollution in Delhi or the rising tidal level or

rising sea level in Mumbai, so all these things have the ability and potential to affect everybody equally. It can burst to assemble the class schema.

Risks objectively have an equalizing effect regarding the range and degree of people's exposure. This is what gives them their novel political force. In this sense, risk societies are not class societies; their risk situation cannot be understood as class situation, nor their conflicts as class conflict.

So, through the essay, he makes a kind of a parallel analysis with the Marxian notion of class association but here, he argues that the risk is equally applicable to everybody. However, at the same time, we know that, or he himself acknowledges, the way different people deal with risk could be different. The people from the upper class are far better equipped to deal with the consequences of risk.

So, he is distinguishing between the threat of risk and facing the consequences, whether it is pollution or other or radioactivity, the people from the upper sections or upper classes will be far better equipped to protect themselves.

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- **New social inequalities on a world scale**

- The "proletariat" of the world society of risk live beneath the chimneys and alongside the refineries and chemical plants in the industrial centers of the third world. The poison gas accident in Bhopal, India, brought this to the awareness of the world public, risk industries have been resettled in countries with cheap labor. This is no accident. There exists a systematic force of attraction between extreme poverty and extreme risk.
- Societies of risk are not class societies and that is an understatement. They contain a developmental dynamic that bursts asunder all boundaries, driving humanity together in a uniform situation of the self-imposed risks of civilization.



New social inequalities on a world scale, the proletariat of the world society of risk live beneath the chimneys and alongside the refineries and chemical plants in the industrial centres of the third world. The proletariat of the world society of risk is not the kind of a conventional proletariat that you see in industrial societies, now that is changed. The

poisonous gas accident in Bhopal, India brought this to the awareness of the world public; risk industries have been resettled in countries with cheap labour; this is no accident. There exists a systematic force of attraction between extreme poverty and extreme risk.

Moreover, I do not think that we require further elaboration on that. We see how toxic wastes are exported to third-world countries. Very hazardous industries like shipbreaking industries are concentrated in South Asia in two or three countries, especially in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Or a host of extremely toxic or poisonous or hazardous industries are located in this kind of places and Bhopal gas tragedy was one of the major examples that Ulrich Beck highlights, the leaking of this methyl isocyanate, that particular MIC gas that was extremely poisonous, it was not kept properly and that got leaked in the middle of the night killing thousands of people.

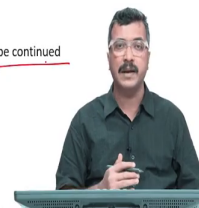
So, he argues that there is a significant difference between the risk exposure and that of your income level, and then people from the lower classes are expected to be more exposed to this kind of stuff. Now, societies of risk are not class societies, which is an understatement. They contain developmental dynamics that burst us under old boundaries driving humanity together in a uniform situation of the self-imposed risks of civilization.

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- The driving force in class society can be summed up in one phrase: "I am hungry!" Conversely, the movement set off by the society of risk may be expressed in the statement: "I am afraid!" A community of need is replaced by a community of anxiety. In this respect, the risk society typifies a social epoch in which solidarity emerges out of anxiety and becomes a political force. But it is still quite unclear how the binding force of anxiety works.

To be continued



The driving force in class society can be summed up in one phrase, "I am hungry". Conversely, the moment set off by the society of risk may be expressed in the statement, "I

am afraid". So you know that is an exciting way of putting it, the class society, the society in which Marx theorized about, society in which capitalism emerged, a society in which you could make this distinction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, these societies were characterized by one phrase that "I am hungry", I am hungry because there was lack of resources for everybody, poverty was rampant, and there was significant social inequality in everything.

And conversely, the movement set off by the society of risk may be expressed in the statement "I am afraid". If you look into that, we know even when we take food regularly from, whether it is fast food or packaged food, there is a certain amount of concern among all of us about the ingredients added to that.

When we eat, say, for example, chicken, there has been quite a lot of concerns about the antibiotics that are being fed to this poultry; there are reports that in India, even one of the most advanced that the last line of antibiotics is being given to this poultry, to these birds in order for them to develop the immunity.

However, that will have severe consequences on the people who consume and not only those who consume but even to those who do not consume non-vegetarian food or meat or chicken because of the viruses they get. Their immunity against these antibiotics naturally and everybody is at much greater risk. Hence, everyone, whether you are a vegetarian or a non-vegetarian, whether however you live your personal life, you are staring at risk whether all these issues of radioactivity or there are many concerns about radioactivity that can be caused from the mobile phone, we do not know how what per cent is that true.

Or there is much concern about when 5G comes into the picture. Very high-intensity radioactive signals must be prevalent for the 5G to operate, so what would be the implication on the human body nobody knows. So in such a situation, "I am afraid" is the most important term. A community of anxiety replaces a community of need. In this respect, the risk society typifies a social epoch in which solidarity emerges out of anxiety and becomes a political force. However, it is still unclear how this binding force of anxiety works.

So, he says there is a standard level of anxiety among everyone. This anxiety was never felt. Maybe some 50 or 40, 40 or 50 years back, did not have this kind of anxiety about these

unintended consequences. So, this is his initial argument of that paper that we are discussing, and we will take a break and meet in the next session. Thank you.