WORLD AT RISK: THE NEW TASK OF CRITICAL THEORY*

ULRICH BECK
Munich University and LSE

In the current phase of reflexive or second modernization, we are witnessing a dialectics of modernity: continuity of the principles and discontinuity of basic institutions of nation-state modernity. This process is leading us from the national industrial society to the world risk society. A theory of reflexive modernization consists of theorems of individualization, cosmopolitanization, and risk society. This radicalized modernity has produced world risk society. What signifies the risk society are manufactured uncertainties which tend to be intangible to our senses. The theory of world risk society as a new Critical Theory assumes three characteristics of global risks: delocalization, uncalculability, and non- compensatability. This theory also adopts eight theses regarding the inequality of global risks; the power of risk definition; risk and culture/trust; cosmopolitian politics of world risk society; a 'revolutionary subject' for climate change; global risks empowering states and civil movements; divergent (environmental/ economic/ terrorist) logics of global risks; world risk society as a boundary-transcending process. The "cosmopolitan moment" of world risk society is now set free.

Key Words: *Reflective Modernity, World Risk Society, Manufactured Uncertainties, New Critical Theory, Cosmopolitan Realpolitik.*

In 1861 during the birth pangs of modern society Charles Baudelaire wrote in the foreword to *Les Fleurs du Mal*: 'Paris is the centre and splendour of universal stupidity. Who would ever have believed that France would pursue the path of progress with such verve?'

What Baudelaire calls 'universal stupidity' is nothing other than modernity's belief in itself, in its unstoppable victory march: argument triumphs over superstition and belief, the human being becomes the measure of all things and, by continually extending the boundless plasticity of modern technology, everything accidental can be cast off. Historically speaking, this ceaseless change appears as a transition from darkness into light, as an implicit theory of the process of moral evolution which we call 'progress'. Science, which displaces God and religion from the centre, operates with a 'mythology' of its own that captures the old distinction between the sacred and the profane as a distinction between lay opinion and expert rationality, and this becomes the source of secular-religious visions of

---

deliverance. One question arises among many others: Can we imagine a power capable of shattering these idols of modern capitalist society?

The counter-actors and counter-visions heralded by the self-empowerment of modernity have been subsequently dethroned — the proletariat, communism, socialism, nationalism, the new intelligentsia or the mute force of public argument. They have not withstood the test of history, as the twentieth century shows. If there is any countervailing force that could transform this immanent metaphysics of modernity then, I would argue, it is the power of modernity itself.

Modern society's belief in linear modernization contradicts the self-disenchantment of modernity, its ability to epochal change, to self-transformation. Contrary to the social theories of Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, through Horkheimer, Adorno, Parsons and Bourdieu, up to Foucault, Luhmann and Habermas, I maintain that the apparently independent and autonomous system of industrialism has transgressed its logic and boundaries and has thereby begun a process of self-dissolution. We are witnessing a *dialectics of modernity*: continuity of the principles and discontinuity of basic institutions of nation-state modernity. This radical turn marks the current phase in which modernization is becoming reflexive. What we need in sociology are models of 'discontinuous change', of internal differentiation of modernity. Because modernization is now impinging upon the very social, political and cultural basic institutions of industrial society of nation-state, is breaking them down and is giving rise to new potentials in opposition to industrial modernity; that is, for environmental sub- and (authoritarian) state-politics; emerging cultures and movements of participation; a profound critique not only of neoliberal capitalism, but also of the hierarchically organizing practices of the traditional left; and — last but not least — a New Critical Theory. In this way, the process of reflexive modernization is leading from the national industrial society to the (still indeterminate ambiguity of) world risk society.

GENERAL PERSPECTIVE: NOT POST-MODERNITY BUT SECOND MODERNITY

I reject the idea that this epochal shift is a move from the modern to the post-modern, as some argued two decades ago. For me these are all 'modern' capitalistic societies. Even more they are modern and more capitalistic. So there is not a moving beyond the modern to its opposite. But there is *second* modernity in the making.

This theory of reflexive or second modernity has, of course, to be

contextualized. One has to specify it in relation to historical conditions, i.e. different paths to modernity (self-transformation or colonialization, authoritarian state, expert system, cultural backgrounds, failed state, human rights and democracy, religious cultures etc). "South Korea or China, for example, has been transformed from a typically agrarian society into a highly differentiated industrial society *within the period of just one generation*. At the apex of this rush to development stands the bureaucratic authoritarian state which was at once productive and repressive: productive in the sense that the state was able to mobilize all the available resources to attain the national goal of development as quickly as possible (...) At the same time, the state ruthlessly controlled popular social movements through violent means, marginalizing the democratic institutions of representation and legal justice" (Han, 2006).

Generally speaking, one can divide the theory of reflexive modernization into three complexes, namely, the theorem of forced individualization, the theorem of multi-dimensional globalization (cosmopolitanization), and the theorem of risk society. All three theorems extrapolate the same line of argumentation and thereby mutually interpret and reinforce each other: 'Individualization,' 'cosmopolitanization' and 'risk society' are viewed as radicalized forms of a dynamic of modernization that, when applied to itself, annuls the formula of simple modernity and its specific logic. This *logic of unequivocalness* — one could speak metaphorically of a Newtonian theory of society and politics of the first modernity — is being replaced by a *logic of ambiguity* — Heisenbergian principle of indeterminacy of the social and the political, of second modernity, so to speak. Of course, classical sociology is also familiar with crises and functional disruptions. But the notion that the foundations of modern society become porous or shaky, or must be recalibrated at the moment of their triumph, is alien to the classics of social science.

Individualization

Individualization must be clearly distinguished from *individualism*. Whereas individualism is commonly understood as a personal attitude or preference, individualization refers to a macro-sociological phenomenon, which possibly — but then again perhaps not — results in changes in attitude in individuals. That is the *crux of contingency* — how individuals deal with it remains an open question. I, like Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens, emphasize that individualization is misunderstood if it is seen as a process which derives from a conscious choice or preference on the part of the individual. The crucial idea is this: individualization really is imposed on the

individual by modern institutions.

The instance of falsification (and with it also the empirical proof of the theorem of individualization) is not to be found primarily in the contingency of attitudes and modes of behavior of individuals (and in corresponding qualitative and quantitative studies), but in the field of *law*, thus in the *relationship between state and individualization*: basic civil rights, basic political rights, basic social rights, family law, divorce law, but also the neoliberal reforms of the labor market — in all these fields there is an evident, empirically verifiable or refutable, and historic trend towards an *institutionalized* individualization. This is because the addressee of these (basic) rights and reforms is the individual and not the group, the collective. From this point of view, the historical-empirical basis for testing individualization theory, not only within a national society, but across borders, is:

> 1) the establishment of basic civil and political rights in the nineteenth century Europe, their restriction (to men) and their de-restriction (inclusion of women) and,
> 2) the establishment, expansion and then dismantling of the welfare state in Western Europe after the Second World War, and in particular the developments from the 1960s and 1970s onwards.

Cosmopolitanization

The cosmopolitanization of reality is not the result of a cunning conspiracy on the part of 'global capitalists' or an 'American play for world domination.' The nation-state is increasingly besieged and permeated by a planetary network of interdependency, by ecological, economic and terrorist risks, which connect the separate worlds of developed and underdeveloped countries. To the extent that this historical situation is reflected in a global public sphere, a new historical reality rises, a cosmopolitan outlook in which people view themselves simultaneously as part of a threatened world and as part of their local situations and histories. The exposure to different risks and religious cultures gives them a particular understanding of a world in which violent division and unprecedented intermingling coexist, and anger and opportunity vie.

Risk society

Risk means, not catastrophe but *anticipated* catastrophe, *potential danger*. Risk society means: risk has come across the current stage of modernity.

I then distinguish between the industrial and the risk society, asserting that the transformation from the former to the latter began at the late 1960s. What signifies the risk society are *manufactured uncertainties*, that is a range of new risks – for example, environmental problems – which are unintended side effects of technological and economic development. These manufactured uncertainties result from scientific and technological progress, which supposedly should solve, not create problems.

Historically I describe two ways of movement: from danger to risk and from risk to danger as manufactured uncertainty. I define *danger* as caused by nature and *risk* as caused by humans: danger does not presume decision, risk presumes decision (and modernization). In radicalized modernity the new risks are hence manufactured or fabricated uncertainties and dangers, because the range of potential catastrophes and uncertainties grows with technological and scientific progress and more industrialization, more cars and more wealth also cause more environmental problems. Of course, there have been always side effects, but in first or simple modernity these side effects were immediately noticeable, the new risks tend to be intangible to our senses. Which means that they only can be known by means of scientific tests – and they are often latent. Their latency is one reason why these new risks are not fully scientifically determinable, even though they are to a degree knowable through science. This means that the traditional technologies of risk assessment, management and insurance are no longer fully functional. The new risks are, in other words, manufactured uncertainties and dangers: modernity is faced with its own destructive potential of social and technological development without having adopted adequate answers. Again, it is not post-modernity but more modernity radicalized, which produces world risk society.

WORLD RISK SOCIETY: A NEW CRITICAL THEORY

The theory of world risk society argues that the global anticipation of global dangers and catastrophes rock the foundations of modern societies. Such global risks exhibit three characteristic features:

1. *Delocalization*: their causes and consequences are not limited to one geographical location or space; they are in principle omnipresent.
2. *Uncalculability*: their consequences are in principle uncalculable; at bottom they involve 'hypothetical' risks based on scientifically generated non-knowing and normative dissent.
3. *Non-compensatability*: although the dream of security of the first

modernity did not exclude harms (even major harms), they were regarded as compensatable so that their destructive impacts could be made good (by money, etc). If climate change is irrevocable, if human genetics makes possible irreversible interventions in human existence, if terrorist groups already possess weapons of mass destruction, then it's too late. Given this new quality of 'threats to humanity,' argues François Ewald (2002), the logic of compensation is breaking down and is being replaced by the principle of *precaution through prevention*.

The delocalization of risks occurs on three levels:

a) *spatial*: the new risks (e.g. climate change) are spreading over national borders, and even over continents;

b) *temporal*: the new risks have a long latency period (e.g. nuclear waste), so that their future effects cannot be reliably determined and restricted; moreover, knowledge and non-knowing are changing so that the question of who is affected is itself temporally open and remains disputed;

c) *social*: since the new risks are the result of complex processes involving long chains of effects, their causes and effects cannot be determined with sufficient precision (e.g. financial crises).

The uncalculability of risk is an implication of the overriding importance of the inability-to-know. At the same time, however, the claim to knowledge, control and security of the state had to be renewed, deepened and extended. This results in the irony of having to control something even though one does not know whether it exists. Why is this so? Because the priority to which modern society accords security is not annulled, but, on the contrary, is activated and dominated, by non-knowing (as is shown in particular by the terrorist risk). Manufactured uncertainties make society more reliant than ever on security and control. It may sound ironic, but it is precisely the unknown which provoke the major conflicts over the definition and construction of political rules and responsibilities − with the aim of preventing the worst.

World risk society is confronted with the awkward problem of having to make decisions about life and death and war and peace on the basis of a more or less frank lack of knowledge. If we anticipate catastrophes whose destructive potential threatens everybody, then the risk calculation based on experience and rationality breaks down. Now all possible, to a greater or lesser degree improbable scenarios must be taken into consideration; to knowledge drawn from experience and science, we must add imagination,

suspicion, fiction and fear.

François Ewald writes:

> "The precautionary principle requires an active use of doubt, in the sense Descartes made canonical in his *Meditations*. Before any action, I must not only ask myself what I need to know and what I need to master, but also what I do not know, what I dread or suspect. I must, out of precaution, imagine the worst possible, the consequence that an infinitely deceptive, malicious daemon could have slipped into an apparently innocent enterprise" (Ewald, 2002: 285).

Given their task of averting dangers, politicians, in particular, may easily find themselves compelled to proclaim that the observance of security standards is assured even though such guarantees are impossible. They do so nonetheless because the *political* costs of omission are much higher than those of an overreaction. It is not going to be easy in future, therefore, given the state's promise of security and a mass media hungry for catastrophes, to prevent a diabolical power game with the hysteria of non-knowing. I have eight theses on the Critical Theory of World Risk Society.

The inequality of global risks

Risk and social inequality, indeed, risk and power are two sides of the same coin. Risk presumes a decision, therefore a decision-maker, and produces a radical asymmetry between those who take, define the risks and profit from them, and those who are assigned to them, who have to suffer the 'unforeseen side effects' of the decisions of others, perhaps even pay for them with their lives, without having had the chance to be involved in the decision-making process. Where and for whom is the functionality, the attraction of the 'globalization' of risks? Here, too, a relationship between risk and power is evident. Often it is the case, that the danger is *exported*, either spatially — to countries, whose elites see an opportunity for themselves — or temporally — into the future of unborn generations.

The dismissal of risks in states, in which poverty and illiteracy are especially widespread, does not mean that these societies are not integrated into world risk society. In fact, it's the other way round. Thanks to the scarce resource of silence, which they offer as their specific form of 'wealth,' they are the worst affected. There is a fatal attraction between poverty, social vulnerability, corruption, the accumulation of dangers, humiliation and the denial of dignity — fast growing in the age of globality of information. The

poorest of the poor live in the blind spots which are the most dangerous death zones of world risk society.

The power of risk definition

Who decides in a world of manufactured uncertainties in which knowledge and non-knowledge of risks are undissolvable, what is and what is not a risk? It is important for the Critical Theory of risk society that the concept of "*relations of definition*" is understood in a constructivist sense. *What 'relations of production' in capitalist society represented for Karl Marx, 'relations of definition' represent for risk society*. Both concern relations of domination (Beck, 1995, 2002; Goldblatt, 1996). Among the relations of definition are the rules, institutions and capabilities which specify how risks are to be identified in particular contexts (for example, within nation-states, but also in relations between them). They form at the legal, epistemological and cultural power matrix in which risk politics is organized. Relations of definition power can accordingly be explored through four clusters of questions:

> 1. Who determines the hazardousness of products, dangers and risks? Where does the responsibility lie? With those who produce the risks, with those who benefit from them or those who are potentially or actually affected by the dangers in their lives and their social relations? What role do the different publics and their actors play in this context? And how can these questions be answered within national spaces, between national spaces and globally?
> 2. What kind of knowledge or non-knowledge of the causes, dimensions, actors, and so on, is involved? Who lays down the causal norms (or nomological correlations) which decide when a cause-effect relation is to be recognized? And who has the right to demand and get what information, and from whom?
> 3. What counts as 'proof' in a world where knowledge and non-knowledge of risks are inextricably fused and all knowledge is contested and probabilistic?
> 4. Who is to decide on compensation for the afflicted — within one or several nation-states? How is the call for 'precaution' put into effect? To what extent should those most seriously affected by the 'latent side effects' be involved in working out corresponding regulations?

Keeping these clusters of questions in mind, it becomes clear that risk

societies, in virtue of the historical logic of their national and international legal systems and scientific norms, are prisoners of a repertoire of behaviors that completely miss not only the globality of environmental crises but also the specificity of manufactured uncertainties. Thus these societies find themselves confronted with the institutionalized contradiction, according to which threats and catastrophes, at the very historical moment when they are becoming more dangerous, are more present in the mass media and hence more mundane, increasingly escape all established concepts, causal norms, assignments of burdens of proof and ascriptions of accountability. As long as these relations of definition − ultimately with the aid of a critical theory of world risk society − are not uncovered and politically transformed (a truly Herculean task), the world will continue its fruitless search for its lost security.

Risk and culture: the 'symbolic code' of 9/11

The mode of existence of risks does not consist in being real but in becoming real. Becoming real, the globally shared *expectation* of catastrophe, however, proceeds from the staged and globalized real experience of the catastrophe itself. How? Seldom has an image captured so clearly the instant of global transformation, the shock-birth of a global threat. One of the most massive structures erected by human beings collapsed within 14 seconds in a monstrous cloud of whirling and swirling dust − a hundred-floor giant was transformed into a rising plume of white smoke. The end of the World Trade Centre gave Americans an idea of what it means to awaken suddenly in the strange new world risk society. On the fateful day, two airliners were detached from their socially defined context of use and 'converted' into weapons, partly into weapons of mass destruction, partly into weapons of symbolic destruction.

'Staging', the deliberate production of the real possibility of the global terrorist threat, captures and circumscribes this deconstructive and reconstructive real and symbolic destructive unity. This destructive force was directed at the Twin Towers of a materially constructed and simultaneously profoundly symbolically imbued social authority in a literal sense, namely, the World Trade Centre. The resulting fireball consumed everything around it, including thousands of human lives. It exploded everywhere, in every living room in the world. In the process, the deed destroyed deeply rooted cultural assumptions. The television images of the twin cathedrals of global capitalism collapsing suddenly in a giant cloud of dust exerted such a fascination because of their traumatic obscenity. The

belief in the invulnerability of the greatest military power on earth was executed before a live audience. The eruption transformed the site into a dark crater that swallowed up life, dignity, compassion and military security.

These material and symbolic explosions brought forth something spatially and temporally removed from them, namely, the *expectation* of terrorism. They created the taken-for-granted belief that, however improbable it may seem, such a thing is really possible, which means that it can reoccur anywhere at any time. And because expectation is the medium and goal of staging, the boundary between justified concern and hysteria is becoming blurred.

Here the relationship between risk and trust becomes important. The expectation of catastrophes undermines trust, which is the key to a functioning relationship between a wider society and different expert systems (Giddens, 1990): the less trust, the more risk, the more manufactured uncertainties.

Politics of world risk society

Let's ask: is there, for example, a political narrative for climate change politics? Yes, there could be. Climate change is not solely a matter of hurricanes, droughts, floods, refugee movements, impending wars or unprecedented market failure. It has suddenly become much more than that: for the first time in history, every population, culture, ethnic group, every religion and every region in the world is living in the common presence of a future that threatens one and all. In other words, if we want to survive, we have to include those who have been excluded. The politics of climate change is necessarily inclusive and global — it is cosmopolitan realpolitik. National realpolitik is still dominant; but it is looking backwards, becoming ineffective! Most of all: cosmopolitan realpolitik is *empowering* national states!

There appear to be two radically different models of climate policy emerging. The one adheres to the formula 'climate protection doesn't hurt.' The idea here is to try and lower greenhouse gas emissions in a consumer- and voter-friendly way by pursuing bold innovations in ecology and technology, in line with the old logic of progress.

However, by keeping a seemingly realistic eye on the power of the powerful (the automotive corporations, for example) one runs the risk of overlooking the power of the powerless. Climate change forces us to realize that the only way of setting up effective checks is through fairness and

equality: only by taking account of the others — the poor — in our own decision-making can we ultimately protect ourselves effectively from the consequences of climate change. Thus cosmopolitan *realpolitik* is the politics of listening and the politics of global justice.

Thus the other model is based on the realization that, when taken seriously and thought through to its logical conclusions, climate change entails a *political paradigm shift*. Only a broad-based coalition that includes 'old Europeans,' eco-conscious Americans, underdeveloped countries, developing countries, China, India, South Korea, civil society movements and powerful fractions of global capital can win back national sovereignty in a world risk society that is ecologically fragile and vulnerable to terrorist threats. It is not a matter of undermining, let alone abolishing nation-states. Rather, it is a matter of restoring to them the capacity to act effectively at all — i.e. together and in collaboration with one another. Thus cosmopolitan realpolitik is about *empowering* national societies and states.

Is there a 'revolutionary subject' for climate politics?

In an unexpected meaning, yes, there is. Risk — I argued — is *not* catastrophe. Risk means the *anticipation* of catastrophe. And the mediating and staging of this anticipation has a huge mobilizing force which fundamentally changes global politics.

The virtuality of climate change does not mean it is untrue or inconsequential. Indeed, because as the case of the Australian elections at the end of last year has shown, the anticipated future catastrophe, which cannot be experienced in everyday life but has to be taken at face value on the basis of the strength of its mediation, shows the mobilizing power of hypothetical futures. Yet few of these individuals voting could have direct experience of the effects of climate change, all this knowledge is indirect, it comes from scientists, politicians, media, and the whole array of sub-politics. These sub-political forces are in essence not very strong and they were initially not well connected, they were marginal forces often ridiculed for their extreme views. And look at the world now, Al Gore received a Nobel Prize for his slide show on climate change. And it is not like he is such a powerful actor or that his allies are that powerful. Yet they managed to shape the political agenda on a global scale.

Global risks empower states and civil movements

The strategies of action disclosed by global risk are rudely overturning the order brought forth by the neoliberal coalition between capital and the state:

climate risks *empower* states and civic movements, because they reveal new sources of legitimation and options for action for these groups of actors; on the other hand, they *disempower* globalized capital because the consequences of investment decisions create climate risks, destabilize markets and activate the power of the sleeping consumer giant. Thus there is an alternative option for neoliberal politics both in the national and global arenas: to connect civil society with the state, and that means to bring about a *cosmopolitan form of statehood* (historic example: European Union).

To put it more concretely, the state's regained cosmopolitan scope for action *extends* its influence in the domestic *and* the foreign domains through action and governance in transnational networks to which other states — but also NGOs, supranational institutions and transnational corporations — belong. Thus the cosmopolitan state, freed from scruples concerning sovereignty, uses the cooperation of other governments, non-governmental organizations and globally operating corporations to solve 'national' problems.

Of course, this optimistic construction could easily collapse under its own weight. It is fragile because the costs and benefits of an active climate change policy are unequally distributed, both internationally and nationally, and because the burning question of justice in a radically unequal world is at the heart of the struggles of distribution. The costs will hit existing generations hardest whereas the benefits will fall to the grandchildren of our grandchildren. The wealthiest countries must demonstrate the greatest willingness to compromise even though they are not the most vulnerable to the impacts of global warming. In order to strike the required 'global deal,' the agreement of the United States is most urgently needed, even though it would have to pay China, its archrival, gigantic sums in order to make that country carbon dioxide-free — at a point in history when this huge country is preparing to overtake the United States economically and to become a centre of world power. Here are reasons why cosmopolitan *realpolitik*, of course, is less attractive for superpowers, which believe in autonomy, and attractive for European powers, which believe in cooperation and interdependence. The consequences are evident: The crisis deepens, and so does the gap between words and capability.

Divergent logics of global risks: on the distinction between economic, environmental and terrorist risks

At least three axes of conflict in world risk society must be distinguished in the communicative logic of global risks: first, *environmental risk conflicts*,

which spontaneously generate a global dynamic; second, global financial risks, which are at first individualized and nationalized; and, third, the *threat posed by terrorist networks*, which are both empowered and disempowered by the states. In the case of environmental risks that pose physical threats, there is on the one side *affluence-induced* environmental destruction, as in the case of the hole in the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect, which may justifiably be laid primarily at the door of the Western industrial world, though their impact is, of course, global. From this we must distinguish *poverty-induced* environmental destruction, such as the clearing of the rain forest, which is mainly confined to particular regions though its scale is no less alarming.

Then there are the global *economic* risks, the imponderabilities of globalized currency and financial markets. As the 'Asian Crisis', the 'Russian Crisis' and the 'Argentinean Crisis' demonstrated, the middle classes are the worst hit by global or regional financial crises. Waves of bankruptcies and job losses shook the respective regions. Western investors and commentators viewed the 'financial crises' exclusively from the perspective of the possible threat they posed for the financial markets. However, global financial risks, like global ecological crises, cannot be confined to the economic subsystem but mutate into social upheavals and thus into political threats. In the case of the 'Asian Crisis', such a chain reaction destabilized whole states and led simultaneously to outbreaks of violence against minorities who were painted as scapegoats.

Even advocates of a global free market increasingly express openly the suspicion that, after the collapse of communism, only *one* opponent of the free market remains, namely, the unbridled free market which has shrugged off its responsibility for democracy and society and operates exclusively on the maxim of short-term profit-maximization. There are surprising parallels between the Chernobyl reactor catastrophe and the Asian financial crisis. The traditional methods of steering and control are proving to be inoperable and ineffectual in the face of global risks. The millions of unemployed and poor cannot be financially compensated; it makes no sense to insure against the impacts of a global recession. At the same time, the social and political explosiveness of global market risks is becoming palpable. Governments are being overthrown and civil wars are threatening to break out. As those risks come to public awareness, the question concerning responsibility becomes loud. This dynamic leads to an inversion of neoliberal policy — not the economization of politics, but the politicization of the economy.

"Serious consideration should be given to establishing an Economic Security Council within the United Nations....There are many issues,

including governance of currency markets and responding to ecological risks that cannot be resolved without collective action involving many countries and groups. Not even the most liberalized national economy works without macroeconomic coordination; it makes no sense to suppose that the world economy is different"(Giddens, 1998: 176).

To be sure, economic crises areas old as the markets themselves. And, since the global economic crisis of 1929 at the latest, it has been clear to everyone that financial crashes can have catastrophic effects — especially for politics. The Bretton Woods institutions established following World War II were conceived as global political answers to global economic risks, and the fact that they functioned was a key factor in the emergence of the European welfare state. Since the 1970s, however, those institutions have been largely dismantled and replaced by a succession of ad hoc solutions. Thus we face the paradoxical situation that, whereas markets have never been more liberal and more global, the powers of the global institutions that monitor their effects have been drastically curtailed. Under these conditions, we cannot rule out the possibility of a worldwide financial disaster on the scale of 1929.

In contrast to environmental and technological risks, whose physical effects first win social relevance 'from outside,' financial risks also affect an immediately social structure, namely, the economy or, more precisely, the guarantee of solvency which is indispensable to its normal functioning. This means, first, that the impact of financial risks is also much more strongly mediated by other social structures than the impact of global environmental risks. Hence, financial risks can be more easily 'individualized' and 'nationalized' and they give rise to major differences in perceptions of risk. Finally, global financial risks — not least in their worldwide (statistical) perception — are attributed as *national* risks to particular countries or regions. Of course, this by no means implies that economic interdependence risks are any less risky. Since all of the subsystems of modern society rely on the other subsystems, a failure of the financial system would be catastrophic. No other functional system plays such a prominent role in the modern world as the economy. Thus, the world economy is without doubt a central source of risk in the world risk society.

The threat posed by global terrorist networks, by contrast, is a completely different matter. As we have seen, environmental and economic conflicts can be understood as *side effects* of radicalized modernization. Terrorist activities, by contrast, must be understood as deliberate, *intentional* catastrophes. They deliberately exploit the manifest vulnerability of modern civil society and replace the principle of chance and accident. The concept of an accident, which is based on the calculation of the probability of cases of

loss, is no longer applicable. Terrorists need only target so-called residual risks and the civil consciousness of a highly complex and interdependent world to globalize the 'felt violence' which paralyzes modern society and causes it literally to freeze with panic. Correspondingly, the terrorist risk leads to an extreme expansion of the domain of 'dual use goods' that serve both civil and military purposes.

Transnational terrorism differs from national terror in that it neither pursues national goals nor depends primarily or exclusively on national actors within nation-states. Thus 'transnational' means multinational terrorist networks with the potential to attack 'the West' and 'modern society' anywhere. What is striking is that and how the global anticipation of terrorist attacks is ultimately 'manufactured' in involuntary interaction with the power of the Western mass media, Western politics and Western military. To put it pointedly, the belief in 'global terrorism' springs from an unintended self-endangerment of modern Western society. We must stop seeing the world through the glasses of Al Qaida, because this, and only this, makes them powerful.

For all their differences, environmental, economic and terrorist global risks have two key features in common. First, they all promote or dictate a policy of proactive countermeasures that endangers liberty and annuls the basis of the existing forms and alliances of international politics, necessitates corresponding redefinitions and reforms, which call for new political philosophies. This means that the premises of what counts as 'national' and 'international' and of how these dimensions should be related to and demarcated from each other are collapsing and must now be renegotiated under the banner of risk prevention in the meta-power game of global and national (security) policies.

A case study of SARS: does risk empower authoritarian regimes in Asia?

'Flows' (Appadurai), 'actor-networks' (Latour), 'liquidity' (Bauman), 'scapes' (Albrow) – these metaphors are designed to render the boundary-transforming and boundary-transcending processes of risk definition and management. Viewed in this way, world risk society is a *process*, one in which the transcending and the setting of boundaries intermesh and unexpected relations and interconnections arise, are enforced or rejected. Aihwa Ong has proposed the concept of 'global assemblage' (2004: 81) for this process. The immediate responses to the SARS virus gave rise to an 'assemblage' of institutions, governments, experts and ethics across borders and great geographical distances. The health experts in Asian

cities and global medical institutions in different parts of the world were included in medical measures and administrative monitoring practices. This produced a network of joint calculation efforts across national borders. The 'mobility stream' of the SARS risk gave rise to transactive, novel and unexpected connections between hospitals and doctors in Hong Kong and other Asian cities, on the one hand, and institutions such as the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, on the other. The new diagnostic keys were developed on one side of the world and were tested and put into action on the other. In an interplay between technology, governments and monitoring agencies, 'SARS-free' and 'SARS-infected' areas were distinguished in which different norms of conduct and control were to be applied. In this way, political spaces that were otherwise sealed off from one another were transformed into overlapping, transnational zones of governance. Even the military was brought into play to an extent and drastic surveillance measures were implemented. Transnational intervention spaces arose where risk zones threatened to violate the prevailing safety norms. The primacy of safety was implemented strictly at both the local and national levels through global norms and instruments based on scientific expertise.

It all began with the outbreak of the illness in China. Initially the authoritarian Chinese government succumbed to the impulse to tailor its information policy to the demands of maintaining social order by playing down and concealing the threat. However, such a non-information policy is utterly counterproductive in the case of risk networks and allocations of threats that cannot be delimited. The attempt to control risks by withholding information and covering up the spread of the threat set the emergency sirens blaring across the world. Because the SARS risk necessitates interventions by international organizations in the globalized world, in the end the Chinese authorities bowed to the requirements of transnational risk management. Only through cross-border cooperation could the necessary resources be mobilized also for local solutions, ranging from medical knowledge through strategies of containment and control up to the proclamation of global norms designed to stabilize trust and hence the markets.

Here we again encounter the law of the production of political added value in the global era: transnational cooperation is the precondition for successful national and local risk management. Not by insisting on local autonomy and national sovereignty but, on the contrary, only by expressly violating them could the sum of capabilities be mobilized that ultimately made it possible to find the shortest route to solutions to regional problems

via global detours.

At the same time, these transnational actor-networks bring polarizations to light, such as the proximity of risk and exclusion and of risk and stigma (Hudson, 2003). Health risks mutate into threats to the national economy (job losses, loss of wealth, etc.), which in turn jeopardize political and civil basic rights, with the result that especially authoritarian states in particular are able to 'overhaul' their precarious authority and legitimacy through the 'struggle against risk.' The preoccupation with security and the political exploitation of fear enable states to appeal to global institutions and their requirements to violate individual liberties without any fear of outcry or protest. This leads to an 'internal globalization' of national risk policy. Inside and outside, us and them, can no longer be clearly distinguished. This can go hand-in-hand with an authoritarian policy of renationalization, so that is not completely mistaken to say that cosmopolitanization and renationalization both hinder and complement one another (Levy and Sznaider, 2006).

Aihwa Ong analyzes this contingent mix of technology, politics and norms, which constitute a particular transnational milieu where health and administrative practices define new ways of ruling and living:

> First, concerns with security and securitization have added a whole new dimension to state sovereignty and civil rights. On the one hand, in a region where economies are traditionally dependent upon global links and flows, authorities began to more rigidly control borders. Whereas in the past, the chief concern was to keep out poor migrants or terrorists, today the threat is any traveller with feverish bodies. Such actions have created political tensions between say Malaysia and Hong Kong, threatening to disrupt trade relations long beneficial to both countries. Health sovereignty seems to have overshadowed the old sovereignty of open economy. On the other hand, SARS has persuaded Asian governments to collaborate more fully with the WHO, allowing it to regulate the ways each country manages health treats. (...)
>
> Second, the adoption of new infection control practices has rather unexpectedly given new political legitimacy to authoritarian measures (...) Even in Hong Kong, a special economic zone that is trying to maintain civil liberty against political pressures from Beijing, popular dissatisfaction with the 'authoritarian' leaders have focused on their initial ineffective responses to the SARS outbreak (...) The joint fears of the fever and continuing damage to the economy created an extremely dark mood, combined with an overwhelming desire for the technological efficacy that can secure the well-being of populations. In other words, a

demand for the kind of systematic bio-political regulation that is still incomplete in many Asian nations. There is a kind of irony in that the SARS-inspired debates about government in Asia countries have focused on the inefficiency of the authorities, their heavy-handed practices, but not on those authoritarian measures that curtail civil rights. Indeed, there seems to be surging public demands for active trust in expert systems becoming allied to political parties normally not tolerated in democratic countries or in normal times. But the SARS crisis raises the question of what is normal in a world of endemic, fast-spreading risks, when an ecological sense of security comes into play? (...) Indeed, we are in the era of immense risks born of technology itself — a proliferation of cyber-and bio-terrors or — errors — that will be combated by a variety of contingent assemblages with diverse outcomes for modern individual, social, and political life (Ong, 2004: 87).

The risk of risk in a global structural claim is that we anticipate the wrong kind of risk. By solely focusing on potential health and financial catastrophes that seem to be calculable and controllable, we miss the real endangerment of civic liberty, which thereby is enforced.

THE "COSMOPOLITAN MOMENT" OF WORLD RISK SOCIETY

What causes the inhabitants of the world risk society an anthropological shock? This is no longer the metaphysical homelessness of a Beckett, the absent Godot, nor the nightmare visions of a Foucault, nor the mute despotism of rationality which frightened Max Weber. Like good old communism, the spectre of good old postmodernism no longer keeps people awake at night. What worries people nowadays is the premonition that the anthropological certainty of modernity is founded on quicksand. Perhaps SARS and BSE (Mad Cow Disease) have only been the beginning and climate catastrophes are becoming real. Then it is the panic-stricken fear that the fabric of our material dependencies and moral obligations could rend and the delicate functional system of world risk society collapse.

Thus everything is turned on its head: what for Weber, Adorno and Foucault was a terrifying vision — the perfected surveillance rationality of the administered world — is a promise for those living in the present. It would be a fine thing if surveillance rationality really worked, or if we were only terrorized by consumption and humanism, or if the smooth operation of systems could be re-established by appeal to 'autopoiesis' or through 'national reforms' and 'technological innovation offensives.' It would be a

fine thing if the liturgical chants of more market, more technologies, more growth and more flexibility could still provide reassurance in those uncertain times coming.

As I have said, the fact that the world of the reigning certainties is in decline is nothing new. However, throughout history it has always been possible to transform the unbearableness of an alien world into a comfortable home. Most recently (something unknown to earlier eras) 'national homes' were created out of national flags, national hymns, national holidays and national heroes and places as cultural reassurance against the lost security of the premodern world. Whether something analogous can succeed again in the era of the world risk society is doubtful: *dis-embedding without re-embedding* — that is a better description of the situation. Or could the fear of descending into a world of self-produced threats nevertheless be successfully transformed into a locally rooted openness to, and love of, the world, into 'cosmopolitan homes'?

What is historically new about the world risk society? Most of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers directly or indirectly advocated the immortalization of self-enclosed national sovereignties. Only a few thinkers raised serious doubts about this notion that the human race is made up of national islands and underlined the realities that prove the contrary: border-transcending interrelations, interdependencies, causalities, responsibility, solidarity and communities of fate. First, Immanuel Kant identified humanism with the respect for the dignity of difference and he invented the cosmopolitan right of human hospitality existing across all barriers and boundaries. Second, Karl Marx showed how the boundless dynamic of capital interconnects the apparently isolated destinies of the nations and individuals in conflictual ways for the most part against their will! Third, Friedrich Nietzsche destroyed the anthropology which held that humanity divides up into fixed kinds of groups whose cultures assemble them into religious and territorial units. His rebellion focused on the practitioners of the self-immortalization of bourgeois society and of 'bourgeois reason' who tried to render the truth of the bourgeois theory of humanity and the goodness of bourgeois reality invulnerable.

However, the developing world risk society delivers the hardest blow to insular national thought, to political and methodological nationalism. For here the seemingly natural, hence divinely-ordained, connection between sovereignty, the right of self-determination, the nation and isolationism is dissolved with the dialectic of modernity itself and the mobilizing power of the anticipated self-destruction of all — in other words: the "cosmopolitan moment" of world risk society is set free. Unilateral national policies are now

backward-looking idealisms, cosmopolitan cooperation is the heart of the new political realism. National isolationism is an illusion, a fiction, a relic — it is counterproductive and condemned to failure. Even the superpower, the United States, was forced to recognize this recently. The autonomy of the state has ceased to exist among the threats to self and others of world risk society; it first arises out of the cooperative added value generated by the merging of national sovereignties. This added value of cooperation first enables and empowers national sovereignty to solve national problems as well. The world risk society could turn the national global order from its head onto its feet. National sovereignty does not make cooperation possible; rather, it is transnational cooperation that makes national sovereignty possible.

To conclude, let me at least pose this question on my own account: Does the sociologist who accords central importance to the *anticipation* of intentional terrorist attacks devotes himself to weakening the inhibitions of the dark imagination which feeds the activity of the terrorists? The dilemma of a self-critical social theory of world risk is concealed in both questions: Isn't enlightenment concerning anti-modernity naïve because it prepares the way for the anti-moderns? Isn't non-enlightenment concerning the apocalyptic visions of anti-modernity naïve because it prepares the way for the anti-moderns? Isn't it this second banishment from Paradise — this time from the secular Paradise of belief in the pre-established functionality and morality of modern capitalist society — that undermines all previous sociology, and provides the inspiration for new beginnings?

REFERENCES

Beck, Ulrich. 1995. *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
_____. 2002. "The Terrorist Threat: World Risk Society Revisited." *Theory, Culture & Society.* London: Sage.
Ewald, Francois. 2002. "The Return of Descartes' Malicious Demon: An Outline of a Philosophy of Precaution." Tom Baker and Jonathan Simon, eds., *Embracing Risk: The Changing Culture of Insurance and Responsibility*, pp. 273-301. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
_____. 1998. *The Third Way: the Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
Goldblatt, David. 1996. *Social Theory and the Environment.* Cambridge: Polity Press.
Han, Sang-Jin. 2006. "Social Transformation and Critical Theory: Three Methodological Issues." A revised version of "Three Tasks of Critical Theory and Korean Development." Han, Sang-Jin, ed., 1998. *Habermas and the Korean Debate*, pp. 289-315. Seoul National University Press.

Hudson, Barbara. 2003. *Justice in the Risk Society: Challenging and Re-affirming Justice in Late Modernity.* London: Sage.

Levy, Daniel and Natan Sznaider. 2006. "Sovereignty Transformed: a Sociology of Human Rights." *The British Journal of Sociology* 57(4).

Ong, Aihwa. 2004. "Assembling Around SARS: Techonology, Body Heat and Political Fever in Risk Society." Angelika Poferi and Natan Sznaider, eds., *Becks kosmopolitisches Projekt.* Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag.

ULRICH BECK was born in the Pomeranian town of Stolp, Greater German Empire (now Słupsk in Poland) in 1944. Since 1992 Beck has been professor for sociology and director of the Institute for Sociology of Munich University. He is also the British Journal of Sociology Professor at the London School of Economics. He has received many international prizes and honors. Beck is the editor of the sociological journal Soziale Welt (since 1980), the author of some 150 articles, and the author or editor of many books, including Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity *(1992).*