

What does Beck mean by the assertion that we live in a 'Risk Society'?

Ulrich Beck (1944-2015) described risk society as a developmental phase in which the social, political, ecological and individual risks created by innovation, such as science and technology, increasingly allude to the control and protective institutions of industrial society (Beck, 1994). He asserted that in contrast to natural hazards, threats presented in the risk society are manufactured from the developmental processes of modernisation and as such, are socially constructed (Mythen, 2004). Modernisation, according to Knowles (2008) is characterised by technological rationalisation, change to work culture and organisation, in addition to changes in norms of knowledge, politics and structures. Technological advancement, amongst rationalisation culture utilised in industrial society, is what Beck (1992) considered to be the cause of risk society. Although this revolutionary advancement was intended to be of beneficial value, it brought with it the unintentional side-effects of manufactured risks, which have arguably been capitalised upon by the ruling class through fear to exploit and control the masses. Beck believed that for societies to evolve modernisation had to become reflexive (Lash and Wynne, 1992), hence why he adopted the position of a second modernity. Drawing upon the works of Antony Giddens (1990, 1991), Beck elaborated on the concept of a reflexive modernity, as opposed to moving beyond modernity to postmodernity, to shape his theory. This assignment will explore Beck's (1992) thesis on *Risk Society* and interrogate the concept of reflexive modernity in relation to this, as an attempt to explain his assertion that we currently live in a 'Risk Society'.

Risk, according to Beck (1992: 21) is defined 'as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself'. He later adds that risks are consequences which threaten the force of modernity and doubt has become a global phenomenon, in what is supposed to be an enlightened society. We are motivated to combat these risks by the fear of pain (Rippetoe and Rogers, 1987). Innate behaviour for survival acts as a deterrence from sources of pain and instead seeks pleasure. As such, the fear of pain, be it physical or psychological hugely impacts behaviours and rationality (Roalfe, 1929). It is therefore understandable why risk society is driven towards actively managing risks; either the threat of pain will prevail or pleasures will be obtained/maintained through prevention. This perspective will be central to examining

Beck's assertion that we live in a risk society and will provide a foundational understanding to the causes and cyclic nature of the risk society that Beck (1992) describes.

Beck proclaims that society reached a second modernity, because modernity in itself did not entirely fail. He suggests that a lot of good has come from the advancement of science, technology, knowledge and reasoning (ibid), even though it has brought about a breakdown in traditions and cultural norms. However, the side-effects of an industrial society has resulted in many unforeseen dilemmas, which are now having to be confronted. Thus the actual meaning of reflexive modernisation is 'self-confrontation with the effects of risk society that cannot be dealt with and assimilated in the system of industrial society' (Beck, 1994: 6). Whilst it is recognised that side-effects have emerged from industrialisation and accepted that complete progression will be problematic, what turned these in to fear inducing 'risks' is debatably more a political control mechanism as conceptualised in the work of Michel Foucault (1926-1984). Essentially those in power have located another way in which to try and control the world by manipulating human talent into exploiting natural ecological resources (Mythen, 2004) on which we are primarily dependant, for their own profit. In doing so, the resulting damage has become the responsibility of mass society globally, cleverly shielding the full blame and guilt of the risk society (Beck, 1994) from the actual masterminds behind it, by making every individual evaluate their own actions through reflexivity, which can be considered a very pessimistic view.

As industrial society grew alongside scientific breakthroughs, it allowed for mass production of many revolutionary products, one of which was genetically modified (GM) foods (Beck, 1992). According to Mythen (2004) these GM products were developed to be more aesthetically pleasing, have a longer shelf-life and arguably, greater nutritional value. It initially appeared that it was a win-win situation for everybody; capitalists amassed an even greater profit and the working classes absorbed increased value from their purchases. However, as time unfolded, leaked pesticides resulted in less biodiversity as it began killing various organisms, assorted allergies became more prominent and growing concerns over the health implications that may become prevalent began (Adam, 2000). Contextualising this further, behind the seemingly harmless advancement of controlling the production of seasoned goods in an era of globalisation, whilst time and space barriers may be obliterated for human 'benefit', allowing the pleasures of desired fruits and vegetables to be met on

disputable demand for example; the mass effects of pollution, global warming and of course the undeniable aim for control (Mythen, 2004) were somewhat hushed until more recently.

As apprehensions surrounding GM foods surfaced, Adam (2000) writes that, so has the organic food industry, which claims to be the healthier option. Whilst this may seem a reflexive counteraction to confronting the unpredicted consequences of meddling with nature, it is not unreasonable to advocate that this too will bring a new set of dilemmas. At present, organic foods carry a higher cost (Monks, 2008), which are generally not affordable by mass society, especially having just come out of a global recession. This is a niche that capitalists have yet again started finding ways to exploit, and as will be explored later, will amplify to such a 'risk' that non-critical minds will begin nurturing fear, changing their dietary habits, and purchasing foods which they cannot afford; potentially leading them into debt, which presents a whole alternate set of problems. Nevertheless, it is recognised that many do exert critical thinking and do not simply take new information at face value. However, this trial and error process is somewhat cyclic and whilst it creates unintended side-effects, it also creates social change which can be advantageous. Perhaps this is why Beck presses we are reconstructing modernity through reflexivity and confrontation, rather than deconstructing it in postmodernity (Raymond, 2006). Nonetheless, this would imply that society will permanently remain in reflexive modernity and never extend beyond it, which would be a very naïve view to maintain because eventually everything becomes exhausted and societal shifts herald new epochs.

Beck asserts that in addition to eluding temporal and spatial mobility, unlike natural hazards, manufactured risks are more catastrophic (Beck, 1995) and could easily result in the extinction of human life because they cannot be contained (Beck, 1999). Perhaps it is for this reason that society have a completely rationalised reason to be fearful of the many risks trying to be simultaneously managed. In an era characterised by the possession of knowledge, juggling all the risks that are posed could be a psychological minefield of its own, hence why, understandably, most selectively choose the risks they will actively manage in their respective lives (Mythen, 2004). Additionally, Mythen (ibid) claims that in reflexive modernity, making individualised decisions has become more routine, meaning individuals shoulder greater responsibility for the consequences of their choices and actions. This emphasises that individuals are not passive, and they recognise they can determine

their own paths and create change; they are equip to become increasingly independent and less reliant on societal institutions which in itself offers hope. In this respect reflexive modernity relates to liquid modernity in the sense that everything is more malleable and open to adaptation for a greater sense of self-expression/identity suggesting a more utopian view. It is therefore no surprise that Beck (1992; 1995) contended that everyday experiences of risk have become individualised and as a result, fear has seeped into everyday survival, be it relationships or lived environments, however the resulting fear has also created new forms of collectivistic practices. Further to this Beck (1996: 32) writes that regardless of class, status or economic power 'there are no bystanders anymore', placing emphasis on the ruthlessness that has now become of a society full of risks made exclusively by humans, bringing a whole new meaning to the phrase 'survival of the fittest'. However, Beck fails to recognise that tradition and cultural beliefs are sometimes more poignant than calculable reasoning (Raymond, 2006), and the fear of breaking these could act as a deterrent in changing practices, no matter what the rationality may be, in order to avoid communal upheaval. As such, Wilkinson (2001) declares that anxiety and insecurity have become an integral characterisation of the risk society, suggestively explaining why one in four people will be affected by a mental health condition in this era of constant change (Time to Change, 2008).

In addition to the prevalence of mental health conditions, are an increasing number of physiological conditions. With the advancement of science and modern technologies, medicine and health did not escape the ongoing experiments of human control (Mythen, 2004). Despite chemical pollution, the quality of medicinal treatments have been enhanced (Smith, 2001), even if it is at the detriment to further natural resources and nature, for the benefit of humans. Amongst science's latest innovations, is that of genetic screening; antenatal women can have an extensive range of screening tests to determine the likelihood, i.e. 'risk' of their baby inheriting a genetic condition, or equally, diagnostic tests with even higher risks, as a baseline for considering treatment and/or medical termination of their pregnancy (National Health Service (NHS), 2015a). On an individual level, arguably this is the right of the parent(s)-to-be, so they can control whether or not they are prepared to accommodate disability in a highly enabled world. Socio-politically, it could also be a move towards trying to eradicate disability from the world before it drains further resources

from treatment, carer time and perhaps the economy. Once again, this expresses the inherent need for choice, management and control in the risk society that Beck (1992) asserts we live in.

Not all fears are unfounded, many do have firm benefit, though this is most often at the expense of ecological resources. Mythen (2004) rightly points out that risk has enabled western societies to eliminate a chain of threats surrounding public health, which would have defeated our predecessors. To an extent this supports Beck's (1994) claim that society is confronting risks, and actually resolving them, but it has to be remembered that whilst one problem may be resolved in isolation, the lasting effects may create further dilemmas. For example, with the advancement in healthcare and relating factors to general wellbeing on the whole, the average life expectancy has progressed significantly (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2013). Though this eradicates the fear of imminent death at a younger age, the ageing deterioration of the body brings a series of predicaments. New health problems have arisen, which share the same connotations highlighted above as they begin to disable the individual from their usual functioning (Breivik et al., 2006), perhaps then, death was nature's own prevention of this. According to Mythen (2004), catastrophising the many ways which may exacerbate this fatalistic outcome has become central to contemporary society, which is evident in the current health and safety culture regulated by innumerable risk assessments. With a magnitude of campaigns stressing various fear inducing outcomes to influence behaviours via mass media, somewhat forcing individuals to accept health risks as an unavoidable aspect of life and therefore, perhaps resigning to a defeatist attitude (Lupton, 1999), which ironically still benefits capitalists either way, regardless of the individual's psychological wellbeing.

Capitalists shamelessly purposefully create, use and abuse fear as a control mechanism for maximising their own profits (Anderson, 2006) through utilising two of the major markets in contemporary society: consumption and mass media. Further to this, Beck (1992) argues they imbed mechanisms for control over the masses, stressing support for Foucault's surveillance society. For Beck (ibid) there are two ways of understanding risks, one is the actual hazard itself and the other is the public perception of it. The latter is manipulated to instil fear, which as discussed above influences behaviour towards harmful stimuli and pleasures (Roalfe, 1929). Miles (1998; 2010) argues that consumption habits have become

so intrinsic to modern societies because they help fill a void that has been created from negative emotions, such as fear and insecurity, providing us with temporary pleasure. Capitalists essentially play on these weaknesses so that consumers purchase products to manage the threats posed. For example, early fetal development is a critical period during which major organs and skeletal structures, such as the spine, are formed (Coad and Dunstall, 2011). Building on this knowledge, biochemists developed folic acid supplements, which allegedly prevent neurological and spinal defects (NHS, 2015b). Catastrophising the detrimental effects this could have for a baby, capitalists posed the risk as a marketing strategy, to increase consumption of the product and therefore profit. Consequently however, thankfully, fewer babies are being born with defects (De-Regil et al., 2010), with a combined effort from said supplements and screening developments, as a result of capitalists using scare tactics through mass media.

Mythen (2004: 58) writes that in the risk society 'public consciousness is informed and nurtured' by mass media, as indicated above; he elaborates that this therefore throws the objectivity of science into question. The vast growth of media in the risk society, alongside the diversification of information now readily available has led to ontological insecurity as social institutions have become ideologically undone through constant questioning and we no longer know what is actually real (ibid), emphasising critical thinking. As such, society no longer have a concrete belief of what is or isn't true, which is principally another side-effect of the risk society disputably becoming increasing untameable in this modern era (Beck, 1992). Additionally, social institutions have increasing difficulty in being able to manage the manufactured risks presented in the risk society, to the point where social insurance has broken down (Beck, 1995). The entire concept of insurance is yet another capitalist ploy to coax money out of fear factors based on risk; it is effectively based on hypothetical adverse outcomes which may never happen, but are known to be a hazard related to the cause. With this realisation Wynne (1996) acknowledges that it can only be expected that public scepticism and suspicion of 'expert' knowledge is becoming progressively common in the risk society. Motives behind presented risks are being questioned and scrutinised by society, which is characteristic of reflexive modernity (Beck, 1994), but also means that control exerted in this sense is becoming threatened as ontology is questioned. Again, the underlying factor triggering all these constructions and behaviours, is the need to control.

When Beck (1992) asserts that we live in a 'Risk Society', he primarily means that we live in a society continuously presented with the side-effects of inventions that humans have previously manufactured. These side-effects produce risks which are unfortunately intrinsically cyclic, thus leading society to actually become a risk management society. Much like the egg-chicken debate, it is almost impossible to locate where the cycle began, however the outcomes are nonetheless the same. Ecological exploitation occurs for the resolution of some perceivable human need mostly related to health, this is capitalised upon for economic benefit via mass media and consumption, aided by politics (Mythen, 2004); eventually, if not immediately, a side-effect of this isolated resolution is encountered and the cycle begins again. As the rotation continues risks become less localised and more global, which most likely explains how Beck reached his thesis on *World Risk Society* in 1999. For example, something as 'harmless' as the mass production of GM foods being transported worldwide, has unintentionally fed into the tragedy of global warming, creating even more fear of our prophesised eventual extinction (Beck, 1999). However, now that consumers have experienced these pleasures and benefited from the advancements of interventions such as antenatal screening, the fear of transgression also becomes a factor. The defeatist attitude of the countless risks expressed in society mentioned above, could potentially explain the reckless behaviours society continues to participate in; driven by the ideology that they cannot defeat all risks, they may as well enjoy the pleasures from them. In conclusion, having explored the three support mechanisms of risk society, i.e. the transcendence of time and space barriers, catastrophising and the breakdown of social insurance and how these are interlaced, Beck (1992: 49) rightly asserts that the meaning of living in a risk society can be summarised by the poignant statement 'I am afraid'.

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