Politics of Risk Society

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Consider the intellectual situation in Europe after 1989. A whole world order had broken down. What an opportunity to adventure into the new! But we stick to old concepts and ideas, and make the same mistakes. There is even a kind of left protectionism and a switch of position. As Anthony Giddens has pointed out, radical socialism has become conservative and conservatism has become radical. We have to rediscover this crazy, mad-cow disease world sociologically, and the script of modernity has to be rewritten, redefined, reinvented. This is what the theory of world risk society is about, and to give you a better idea of my 'mistakes', I will concentrate on three points.

First, I shall return to the theory of risk society, to show how it conveys a new conception of a 'non-industrial' society and how it modifies social theory and politics. Secondly, I shall take the position of my critics and explore what I see as the theoretical issues which now limit the development of my ideas on risk. Thirdly, I shall point to the theoretical and political avenues that I should like to see explored, perhaps on a comparative and European level.

Britain is experiencing what The Independent has called 'beef-gate'—the shock of living in a risk society. Society has become a laboratory where there is absolutely nobody in charge. An experiment has been inflicted on us by the beef industries, and the most ordinary decision—to eat or not to eat beef—could be a life and death decision. Hamlet has to be reconsidered: to beef or not to beef, now is the question! Sociologically, there is a big difference between those who take risks and those who are victimized by risks others take. I shall point to a few epistemological principles which characterize the three main arguments of the theory of risk society.

Risk society begins where nature ends. As Giddens has pointed out, this is where we switch the focus of our anxieties from what nature can do to us to what we have done to nature. The BSE crisis is not simply a matter of fate but a matter of decisions and options, science and politics, industries, markets and capital. This is not an outside risk but a risk generated right inside each person's life and inside a variety of institutions. A central paradox of risk society is that these internal risks are generated by the processes of modernization which try to control them.

Risk society begins where tradition ends, when, in all spheres of life, we can no longer take traditional certainties for granted. The less we can rely on traditional securities, the more risks we have to negotiate. The more risks, the more decisions and choices we have to make. There is an important line of argument which connects the theory of risk society, in this context, to

complementary processes of individualization in the spheres of work, family life and self-identity, which I have explored elsewhere.  

The theory of risk society interprets the ways in which these two states of interconnected processes, the end of nature and the end of tradition, have altered the epistemological and cultural status of science and the constitution of politics. In the age of risk, society becomes a laboratory with nobody responsible for the outcomes of experiments. The private sphere’s creation of risks means that it can no longer be considered apolitical. Indeed, a whole arena of hybrid subpolitics emerges in the realms of investment decisions, product development, plant management and scientific research priorities. In this situation, the conventional political forces and representations of industrial society have been sidelined. Let’s look at these principles in more detail.

The notion of risk society clarifies a world characterized by the loss of a clear distinction between nature and culture. Today, if we talk about nature we talk about culture and if we talk about culture we talk about nature. When we think of global warming, the hole in the ozone layer, pollution or food scares, nature is inescapably contaminated by human activity. This common danger has a levelling effect that whittles away some of the carefully erected boundaries between classes, nations, humans and the rest of nature, between creators of culture and creatures of instinct, or to use an earlier distinction, between beings with and those without a soul.

We live in a hybrid world which transcends old theoretical distinctions, as Bruno Latour has convincingly argued. Risks are man-made hybrids. They include and combine politics, ethics, mathematics, mass media, technologies, cultural definitions and precepts. In risk society, modern society becomes reflexive, that is, becomes both an issue and a problem for itself.

Many sociologists (including Foucault, or Adorno and Horkheimer, critical theorists of the Frankfurt School) pictured modernity as a prison house of technical knowledge. We are all, to alter the metaphor, small cogs in the gigantic machine of technical and bureaucratic reasons. Yet risk society, in opposition to the image of the term, captures a world which is much more open and contingent than any classical concept of modern society suggests — and is so precisely because of and not in spite of the knowledge that we have accumulated about ourselves and about the material environment.

As François Ewald argues, risk is a way of controlling or, one could say, colonizing the future. Events that do not exist (yet) strongly influence our present affairs and actions. So risks are a kind of virtual, yet real, reality. The greater the threat (or to be more precise, the social definition and construction of the threat), the greater the obligation and power to change current events. Let us take ‘globalization risk’ as an example. It says, if you want to survive in the global capitalistic market, you have to change the basic foundations of modernity: social security, the nation-state, the power of the unions and so on. The greater the threat, the greater the change which has to be undertaken in order to control the future. This deeply politicizing meaning of the risk society argument can be used not only by environmentalists but also by global capital, and more effectively too. As Giddens and I have pointed out, there is another central paradox that we have to understand, which is that the more we try to colonize the future, the more likely it is to spring surprises on us. This is why the notion of risk moves through two stages.

In the first instance, risk seems no more than a part of an essential calculus, a means of sealing off boundaries as the future is invaded. Risk makes the unforeseeable foreseeable, or promises
to do so. In this initial form, risk is a statistical part of the operation of insurance companies. They know a lot about the secrets of risk which change society, even though nothing has yet happened. This is risk in a world where much remains as ‘given’, as fate, including external nature and those forms of social life coordinated by tradition. As nature becomes permeated by industrialization and as tradition is dissolved, new types of incalculability emerge. We move then into the second stage of risk, which Giddens and I have called manufactured uncertainty. Here the production of risks is the consequence of scientific and political efforts to control or minimize them.

There are two aspects to this. There was once a time when a risk was something you indulged in for a bit of excitement. A bet on the Grand National, a spin of the wheel—it was all meant to add a bit of spice to an otherwise orderly and predictable life. Now manufactured uncertainty means that risk has become an inescapable part of our lives and everybody is facing unknown and barely calculable risks. Risk becomes another word for ‘nobody knows.’ We no longer choose to take risks, we have them thrust upon us. We are living on a ledge—in a random risk society, from which nobody can escape. Our society has become riddled with random risks. Calculating and managing risks which nobody really knows has become one of our main preoccupations. That used to be a specialist job for actuaries, insurers and scientists. Now we all have to engage in it, with whatever rusty tools we can lay our hands on—sometimes the calculator, sometimes the astrology column. The basic question here is: how can we make decisions about a risk we know nothing about? Should we ignore it and possibly get hurt or killed? Or should we be alarmed and stop or exclude all likely causes? Which course of action is ‘rational’, the first or the second option?

On the other hand, manufactured uncertainty means that the source of the most troubling new risks we face is something most of us would regard as unequivocally beneficial—our expanding knowledge. It is partly because we know more about the brain that we now know that people in a persistent vegetative state may be conscious and so should not have their life support machines turned off. Yet, as scientific knowledge opens up new opportunities for us, it also makes the world more complex and unknowable, at least by any one individual, often for experts too. How many hamburgers do you need to eat to catch the deadly CJD? Fifty, a hundred, two hundred, a thousand? In what amount of time? Two of the first victims of CJD in Britain had been vegetarians for the five years before they caught it—before that, they had been addicted to hamburgers.

As knowledge and technology race ahead, we are left behind panting in ignorance, increasingly unable to understand or control the machines we depend on and so less able to calculate the consequences of their going wrong. Environmental science has encouraged us to be less short-term in our thinking. We now worry about the consequence of our actions for future generations in far-flung places. But this admirable long-termism also makes it more difficult to calculate the risks of our decisions. What is the risk that your grandchildren’s environment will suffer if you use that aerosol or car too much?

Many believe that in the age of risk there can be only one authority left, and that is science. But this is not only a complete misunderstanding of science, it is also a complete misunderstanding of the notion of risk. It is not failure but success which has monopolized science.
One could even say that the more successful sciences have been in this century, the more they have reflected upon their own limits of certainty, the more they have been transformed into a source of manufactured reflexive uncertainty. Sciences are operating in terms of probabilities, which do not exclude the worst case.

This is even more true in identifying and managing risk. In the case of risk conflicts, politicians can no longer rely on scientific experts. This is so, first, because there are always competing and conflicting claims and viewpoints from a variety of actors and affected groups who define risks very differently. So producing conflicting knowledge on risk is a matter of good and not bad experts. Secondly, experts can only supply more or less uncertain factual information about probabilities, but never answer the question: which risk is acceptable and which is not. Thirdly, if politicians just implement scientific advice, they become caught in the mistakes, modes and uncertainties of scientific knowledge. So the lesson of the risk society is this: politics and morality are gaining—have to gain!—priority over shifting scientific reasoning.

There used to be a clear division between research and theory, on the one hand, and technology, on the other. The logic of scientific discovery presupposes testing before putting into practice. This is breaking down in the age of risky technologies. Nuclear technologies have to be built in order to study their functioning and risks. Test-tube babies have to be born in order to find out about the theories and assumptions of biotechnologies. Genetically engineered plants have to be grown in order to test the theory. The controllability of the laboratory situation is lost. This causes serious problems.

Scientists are becoming lay persons. They do not know what will happen before they begin their research. At the same time they need the support of the politicians and the public to finance their research and for this reason they have to claim that everything is under control and nothing can go wrong.

As Karl Popper once said, the basic rationality of science is that we should learn from our mistakes. In risk society, mistakes mean that nuclear reactors leak or explode, test-tube babies are born deformed, people are killed by CJD. So scientists cannot make mistakes any more, sorry. But they do make mistakes and more than ever they reflect upon them.

Society becomes a laboratory but there is no one responsible for its outcomes. Experiments in nuclear energy and biotechnology, for example, become inconclusive in the dimensions of time, space and the number of people involved. There is, however, no experimenter in charge, no decision-maker to decide on the validity of the initial hypothesis with scientific authority.

So what is the role of politics? The fact is that no direct decisions are made about technology in the political system (with an exception of nuclear power plants). But on the other hand, if anything goes wrong, the political institutions are made responsible for decisions they didn’t take and for consequences and threats they know nothing about.

In relation to the state and Parliament, industry possesses a double advantage. It has autonomy in investment decisions and a monopoly on the application of technology. Politicians are in a bad position, struggling to catch up with what is going on in technological development. Most MPs get their information about technological developments through the media; in spite of all the support for research, the political influence on the goals of technological development remains secondary. No votes are taken in Parliament on the employment and development of
micro-electronics, genetic technology and the like. Most of the time, MPs vote in support of them in order to protect the country’s economic future and jobs. Thus the division of power leaves the industries with the role of primary decision-maker without responsibility for risks to the public. Meanwhile, politics is assigned the task of democratically legitimizing decisions that it has not taken and doesn’t know about, especially since the privatization of industries which were previously run by the state. What happens to the security standards of the privatized railway system? Of privately run nuclear power plants? Has the state really shed the responsibility in the eyes of the public?

So, risks are nobody’s responsibility. Neurotechnologies and genetic engineering are reshaping the laws that govern the human mind and life. Who is doing this? Scientific experts? Politicians? Industries? The public? Ask any of them and the reply will be in each case: nobody. Risk politics resembles the ‘nobody’s rule’ that Hannah Arendt tells us is the most tyrannical of all forms of power, because under such circumstances nobody can be held responsible. In the case of risk conflicts, bureaucracies are suddenly unmasked and the alarmed public becomes aware of what they really are: forms of organized irresponsibility.¹³

Given that risks are no longer attributable to external agency, industrial societies have developed institutions and rules for coping with unforeseen, unintended consequences and the risks they produce. The welfare state can be seen as a collective and institutional response to the nature of localized risks and dangers, based on principles of rule-governed attribution of fault and blame, legally implemented compensation, actuarial insurance principles and collectively shared responsibility. The classic example of this would be the creation of compensation and insurance schemes for accident and injury at work and unemployment.

However, under the impact of modern risks and manufactured uncertainties, these modes of determining and perceiving risk, attributing causality and allocating compensation have irreversibly broken down, throwing the function and legitimacy of modern bureaucracies, states, economies and science into question. Risks that were calculable under industrial society become incalculable and unpredictable in the risk society. Compared to the possibilities of adjudging blame and causality in classical modernity, the world risk society possesses no such certainties or guarantees.

In terms of social politics, the ecological crisis involves a systematic violation, or crisis, of basic rights, and the long-term impact of this weakening of society can scarcely be overestimated. For dangers are being produced by industry, externalized by economics, individualized by the legal system, legitimized by the sciences and made to appear harmless by politics. That this is breaking down the power and credibility of institutions only becomes clear when the system is put on the spot, as Greenpeace, for example, has tried to do. The result is the sub politicization of world society.

In the second part of my paper, I shall switch sides to tell you about some of the refutations my risk society theory has provoked. In a conference in Cardiff in March 1996 Professor Hilary Rose said that she felt that risk society had a distinctly German background and that Britain could not afford to be a risk society. To her, the theory of risk society presumes a degree of wealth and security typical of postwar Germany. It is certainly one of the very few attempts to open up the social sciences and social theory to ecological questions, and it is the case that being ‘green’
is part of the German national identity. On the other hand, testing atomic weapons may be part of the French national identity, and eating roast beef on a Sunday lunchtime may be part of the British culture. Who knows? The important point to make here is that risk conflicts are not only intracultural conflicts. They cross cultural boundaries and are even more conflicts of contradictory certainties. People, expert groups, cultures, nations are having to get involved with each other whether they like it or not. It may not be completely wrong to say that a European public has been born, unintentionally and involuntarily, over the conflict over British beef. It is the 'mad-cow disease Europe' where everybody is quarrelling with everybody else, not only on a general technocratic level but also on an everyday level. If you visit, for example, a Wirthaus (a small local restaurant) in southern Bavaria and read the menu you will find a photograph of the local farmer and his family trying to build up trust in his 'good' beef which has nothing to do with the 'bad' British beef.

So, as Barbara Adams argues, a distinction between knowledge and impact can be made which leads to a distinction between two phases of risk society. In the first phase, which we can call 'residual risk society', the impacts are systematically produced, are not the subject of public knowledge and debate and are not at the centre of political conflict. This phase is dominated by the self-identity of 'goods' of industrial and technological progress, which simultaneously intensifies and legitimizes as 'residual risks' hazards resulting from decisions. In the second phase, a completely different situation arises, when the hazards of industrial society dominate public and private debates. Now the institutions of industrial society produce and legitimate hazards which they cannot control. During this transition, property and power relationships remain constant and industrial society sees and criticizes itself as risk society. In the first phase, society still makes decisions and acts on the pattern of simple modernity. In the second phase, debates and conflicts which originate in the dynamic of risk society are being superimposed on interest organizations, the legal system and politics. So modernity becomes reflexive.

In all my books I try to demonstrate that the return to the theoretical and political philosophy of simple modernity, in the age of global risk, is doomed to failure. Those orthodox theories and politics remain tied to notions of progress and benign technological change, tied to the belief that the risks we face can still be captured by nineteenth-century, scientific models of hazard assessment and industrial notions of hazard and safety. Simultaneously, the disintegrating institutions of industrial modernity—nuclear families, stable labour markets, segregated gender roles, social classes—can be shored up and buttressed against the waves of reflexive modernization sweeping the West. This dominant attempt to apply nineteenth-century ideas to the late twentieth century is the category mistake of social theory, social sciences and politics. It is this point which I try to make in all my work. So let me sharpen this central idea and mention the core notions of organized irresponsibility, the relations of definition, and the social explosiveness of hazards.

The idea of organized irresponsibility helps to explain how and why the institutions of modern society must unavoidably acknowledge the reality of catastrophe while simultaneously denying its existence, cover its origins and preclude compensation or control. To put it another way, risk societies are characterized by the paradox of more and more environmental degradation, perceived and possible, and an expansion of environmental law and regulation. Yet at the same time no individual or institution seems to be held specifically accountable for anything. How can
this be? To me the key to explaining this state of affairs is the mismatch that exists in risk society between the character of hazards, or manufactured uncertainties, produced by late industrial society and the prevalent relations of definition which date in their construction and content from an early and qualitatively different epoch.

The notion of relations of definition is the parallel notion to the relations of production (Karl Marx) in the risk society. They include the rules, institutions and capacities that structure the identification and assessment of risks; they are the legal, epistemological and cultural matrix in which risk politics is conducted. I focus here on four relations of definition:

1. Who is to determine the harmfulness of products or the danger of risks? Is the responsibility with those who generate those risks, with those who benefit from them, or with public agencies?
2. What kind of knowledge or non-knowledge about the causes, dimensions, actors, etc., is involved? To whom does that proof have to be submitted?
3. What is to count as sufficient proof in a world in which we necessarily deal with contested knowledge and probabilities?
4. If there are dangers and damages, who is to decide on compensation for the afflicted and on appropriate forms of future control and regulation?

In relation to each of these questions, risk societies are currently trapped in a vocabulary that lends itself to an interrogation of the risks and hazards through the relations of definition of simple, classic, first modernity. These are singularly inappropriate not only for modern catastrophes, but also for the challenges of manufactured uncertainties. Consequently we have to face the paradox that at the very time when threats and hazards are seen to become more dangerous and more obvious, they simultaneously slip through the net of proofs, attributions and compensation with which the legal and political systems attempt to capture them.

Of course, everybody asks who is the political subject of risk society? I have put a lot of thought into answering this question, but my answer has not yet been acknowledged theoretically or politically. My argument is as follows: nobody is the subject and everybody is the subject at the same time. It might not be very surprising to you that this answer has not been recognized. But there is more to it. What I propose comes very close to Bruno Latour's theory of quasi-objects.

To me the hazards themselves are quasi-subjects; this acting-active quality is produced by the contradictions in which institutions get caught up in risk societies. I use a metaphor to explain this idea: the social explosiveness of hazard. It explores the ways in which awareness of large-scale hazards, risks and manufactured uncertainties sets off a dynamic of cultural and political change that undermines state bureaucracies, challenges the dominance of science and redraws the boundaries and battle-lines of contemporary politics. So hazards, understood as socially constructed and produced quasi-subjects, are a powerful uncontrollable actor to delegitimize and destabilize state institutions with responsibilities for pollution control, in particular, and public safety in general.

Hazards themselves sweep away the attempts of institutional elites and experts to control them. Governments and bureaucracies, of course, exercise well-worn routines of denial. Data
can be hidden, denied and distorted. The gap between knowledge and impact can be exploited. Counter-arguments can be mobilized. Expert-systems can be adjusted. Maximum permissible levels of acceptance can be raised. Human error, rather than systematic risk, can be cast as the villain of the piece and so on. And last but not least, Europe can be made responsible for the mad-cow disease crisis. However, states are fighting a battle where victories are temporary because they offer nineteenth-century pledges of security to the age of world risk society. We can see this happening all around us.

These ideas are, of course, bound to the notion of the safety or provident state, to be found in the work of François Ewald. To me, his theory represents a basic shift in the interpretation of the welfare state. While the majority of social scientists have sought to explain the origins and construction of the welfare state in terms of class interests, the maintenance of social order or the enhancement of national productivity and military power, this argument understands the provision of services (health care), the creation of insurance schemes (pensions and unemployment insurance) and the regulation of the economy and the environment in terms of the creation of security. In relation to industries and technologies, of course, technical experts do play a central role in answering the question of how safe is safe enough. This model of the modern capitalist state as a provident state has been challenged. One of the critiques is that the notion of a safety state is much more closely correlated with the institutions and procedures of continental Western European states than with either the states of Anglo-American capitalism or the social democratic states of Scandinavia.

Finally, I should like to point to two implications of this thesis. The first is that risk society is not about exploding nuclear submarines falling out of the sky; it is not, as you might assume, one more expression of the ‘German angst’ at the millennium. Quite the opposite. What I suggest is a new model for understanding our times, in a not unhopeful spirit. What others see as the development of a postmodern order, my argument interprets as a stage of radicalized modernity. A stage where the dynamics of individualization, globalization and risk undermine modernity and its foundations. Whatever happens, modernity gets reflexive, that means concerned with its unintended consequences, risks and foundations. Where most postmodern theorists are critical of grand narratives, general theory and humanity, I remain committed to all of these, but in a new sense. To me, Enlightenment is not a historical notion and set of ideas, but a process and dynamic where criticism, self-criticism, irony and humanity play a central role (the theme of my current research). Where for many philosophers and sociologists ‘rationality’ means ‘discourse’ and ‘cultural relativism’, my notion of ‘reflexive modernity’ implies that we do not have enough reason (Vernunft).

Secondly, previously depoliticized areas of decision-making are getting politicized through the perception of risk, and must be opened to public scrutiny and debate. Corporate economic decisions, scientific research agendas, plans for the development and deployment of new technologies must all be opened up to a generalized process of discussion, and a legal and institutional framework for their democratic legitimation must be developed. To me, technical (or ecological) democracy is the utopia of a responsible modernity, a vision of society in which the consequences of technological development and economic change are debated before the key decisions are taken. The burden of proof regarding future risks and
hazards and current environment degradation would lie with the perpetrators rather than the injured party: from the polluter pays principle to the polluter proves principle. Finally, a new body of standards of proof, correctness, truth and agreement in science and law must be established. So what we need is nothing less than a second Enlightenment which opens up our minds, eyes and institutions to the self-afflicted endangerment of industrial civilization.

Many theories and theorists do not recognize the opportunities of risk society. Moreover, we have to recognize the ways in which contemporary debates of this sort—by which the nuclear and biotechnology industries, for example, have been forced to justify and defend their activities in the public domain22—are constrained by the epistemological and legal systems within which they are conducted.

So this could be one of the themes which I would like to see explored, maybe on a comparative and European level. It implies that we reconstruct the social definition of risks and risk management in different cultural frameworks; that we find out about the (negative) power of risk conflicts and definitions in contexts where people are forced together who do not want to speak to each other, but still have to. All this is familiar and already takes place. But to combine it with the questions of organized irresponsibility and the relations of definition in different European cultures and states might be worthwhile and a new adventure.

Notes
8. Ibid.
9. Giddens, Beyond Left and Right.
13. Ibid. 92–105, 133–46.
16. Goldblatt, Social Theory, 166f.