

Editorial: The Risk Society thesis in environmental politics and management – a global perspective

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When finishing the manuscript to his initial book on ‘Risk Society’ in 1986 Ulrich Beck could not have expected his thesis to gain such popularity in a comparatively short period of time. In fact, the crucial element that helped its success was the catastrophic incident in Chernobyl bestowing upon Beck the rare luck of a social scientist having ‘tested’ his theses in a huge, real-world, full scale ‘experiment’. When the book left the press in May 1986 most countries of Western Europe had just witnessed the severe risks inherent in the ‘peaceful’ use of nuclear power and, in the aftermath, the political incapacity to tackle the consequences of the disaster. Though Beck finished the preface by saying that he had wished his book to be a warning against a potential future scenario rather than a blunt description of present day reality (Beck, 1986, p. 11) this undoubtedly made his ideas popular in a way that transcends the impact of academic publications in general.

However, this success might also be regarded as having come at a price. In some respect, Beck suffered the biblical fate of a prophet who is ‘not without honour, save in his own country and in his own house’. As to what might be called ‘his house’: his impact on German sociology has been at best ambiguous and sometimes Beck has been labelled more an essayist rather than a serious academic. His still undoubtedly high popularity in Germany though is more rooted in his active engagement in various public debates in society during the last 15 years (see as an early example the essays in Beck, 1991). His reception in the academic community *outside* his ‘own country’, on the contrary, has been far more visible, most notably in various academic debates in British sociology and political science during the last ten years. It could be argued that the most extensive and influential results of Beck’s work have come out of his writings together with various British social scientists (Beck *et al.*, 1994, 2000; Lash *et al.*, 1996). This does not only pertain to the original ideas around risk and ecological modernization. Moreover the influence of British political scientists in his recent work on globalization is as explicit as it has broadened the focus of his approach (see for example Beck, 1999; 2000b).

Beck’s ideas have met with a vivid impact across the social sciences, such as social (e.g. Beck *et al.*, 2000), legal (e.g. Bora, 1999), political (e.g. Hajer, 1997; Hood *et al.*, 1999) and – to a lesser extent though – business studies (e.g. Shrivastava, 1995; Matten, 1996; Priess, 1998; Fitchett and McDonagh, 2000). Not only did the coincidence of the publication of Beck’s first book and the Chernobyl accident boost the popularity of his ideas, but there was also a considerable number of ‘new’ risks coming up in the course of the 1990s which again made the whole notion of the Risk Society more and more popular (Van Loon, 2000). Today, there is a vast body of literature in dialogue with Beck’s original work which has used his framework for a great variety of issues, such as

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employment (Ekinsmyth, 1999), labour markets (Perrons, 2000), regional planning (Gleeson, 2000), genetic engineering (Augst, 2000) drug politics (Moldrup and Morgall, 2001), farming (Kaltoft, 2001) and global warming (Bulkeley, 2001), just to name some of the more recent examples.

The main argument of most of Beck's critics though focuses on a common misunderstanding of his work. As Beck's concept is rather broad, one of the frequent objections consists of the lack of empirical underpinning for his ideas (e.g. Dingwall, 1999; Wilkinson, 2001). The evidence provided by Beck, these critics argue, is anecdotal and incoherent and many of his claims call for further validation by solid data. This criticism leads to the questioning of the innovative character of various fundamental claims in Beck's work, such as the new phenomenon of 'risk' in the Risk Society (e.g. Bennet, 1999; Abbinnett, 2000), the notion of institutional (governmental) failure (Dingwall, 1999) or the specific treatment of the expert and lay perceptions of risk in Beck's rendition of reflexivity (Wynne, 1996). Further objections are based on more sociological grounds: in identifying risk as the new equalizing and unifying element in modern societies, some argue that this democratic character of risk is more a hyperbole than a reality and that Beck's work suffers from discarding traditional sociological categories in the analysis of social inequalities based on factors such as race, gender, class or the notion of needs (Fischer, 1998; Reimer, 1998; Ekinsmyth, 1999). In trying to label many of Beck's propositions as speculative his critics either regard them as too optimistic with regard to the potential of modern societies for institutional innovation (Bennet, 1999; Rose, 2000) or too pessimistic with regard to environmental problems and the present institutional failure of tackling risk (Dingwall, 1999). In fact, quite a significant number of authors regard Beck's account as a perception of environmental problems through the lens of a specific societal context and assess his theory to be a rather 'German' approach to the topic, which lacks transferability into differing cultural and institutional settings (Goldblatt, 1996; Dingwall, 1999; Scott, 2000).

Despite, or in a certain sense: because of this criticism the authors of this special issue are attracted to the Risk Society thesis as a valuable *framework* provide a conceptual basis for empirical work in late modern societies. After all, as even some of his critics admit (Goldblatt, 1996), Beck's ideas are more of a provocative and conceptual nature rather than a minute empirical proof of certain social changes. Therefore much of the methodological critique misses the focus and character of Beck's work. For the context of environmental management the value of Beck's work lies in providing an interdisciplinary explanatory framework for the new character of environmental problems and the institutional failure of modern societies in tackling risk. Especially from a corporate perspective, the Risk Society provides a very helpful perspective on new corporate roles and functions as a consequence of the developments, which Beck describes in rather broad terms. As Beck himself concedes in reaction to his critics, the interdisciplinary character of his work requires the application of his ideas in the respective disciplines and rather than questioning his general conceptual approach, the issues brought forward by his critics should be regarded as potential fields of further research. As a response to his critics Beck has outlined potential lines of further inquiry:

I argue for the opening up to democratic scrutiny of the previous depoliticized realms of decision making and for the need to recognize the ways in which contemporary debates of this sort are constrained by the epistemological and legal systems within which they are

conducted. This then is one of the themes I would like to see explored further, preferably on a comparative transnational, transcultural, potentially global level. It would entail that we reconstruct the social definition of risks and risk management in different cultural framings, that we find out about the (negative) power of risk and risk management in different cultural framings, that we find out about the (negative) power of risk conflicts and definitions where people who do not want to communicate with each other are forced together into a 'community' of shared (global) risks, and that we therefore combine it with the questions of *organized irresponsibility* and *relations of definition* in different cultural-political settings. This, it seems to me, would be a worthwhile new conceptual and political social science.

(Beck, 2000a, pp. 226–27)

It is exactly this agenda into which the contributors to this Special Issue frame their research. The papers thus are committed to achieve three main tasks of which Beck talks in the above cited quote.

The papers have originally been produced in the context of a special symposium at the 9th international conference of the Greening in Industry Network in January 2001 in Bangkok. Consequently, as a *first* task, all the papers draw on the Risk Society thesis by examining issues of environmental management from a more or less business oriented perspective. In focusing on industry and corporate actors the papers, in Beck's words above, look exactly at one of 'the previous depoliticized realms of decision-making' in society. Companies in general have taken quite a long time to recognize their political responsibility and still are in many respects far from assuming an active political role in handling environmental risk. In choosing this approach, the papers are highly innovative: the literature in corporate environmental management is strongly under-theorized and there is a demand for theoretically-based, conceptual approaches to environmental issues in business. In using Beck's approach for business studies the authors deliberately try to transcend the 'constraints' in which most of the current debates in this discipline are conducted.

Second, the contributions in this Special Issue explore the issue of risk management from a global perspective, integrating cases from the industrialized world ('first' world), the former eastern block ('second' world) and developing countries ('third' world). The papers are indeed an attempt to 'reconstruct social definition of risks and risk management in different cultural framings' and to 'find out about the [. . .] power of risk and risk management in different cultural framings'. In doing so, this Special Issue does not only assemble research which individually explores Beck's ideas in different cultural, political and social contexts but in presenting these findings together it allows an exciting view of the ongoing relevance of the concept of Risk Society for different 'risk societies', if one may say so.

Third, in taking a global perspective on risk management and risk politics, the papers link the debate on risk and Risk Society with the more contemporary agenda of 'globalization'. The academic debate on risk started roughly 30 years ago when the (most notably environmental) hazards of industrial societies made their way on to the public agenda (Renn, 1997). In linking the debate on 'risk' to the academic agenda on 'globalization' the papers do not only trace an important path in Beck's more recent writings. Furthermore, they put a perspective on globalization that reveals its close connection with risk and the entailed problems of risk politics and risk management. Different 'relations of definition in different cultural-political settings' emerge and the research of this Special Issue reveals that Beck's identification of 'organized irresponsibility'

in the area of risk management still is an agenda setting topic in the age of globalization. It is especially this last aspect that makes the papers topical for the *Journal of Risk Research*: Globalization by no means has obliterated the old and well established debate on risk. On the contrary, it influences, reshapes and refines the discourse on risk, and it is exactly this transition on which the papers shed light.

The first paper by *Dirk Matten* sets the scene for the contributions by analysing key results of the Risk Society thesis and its development during the last one-and-a-half decades. He links his analysis of Beck's initial work from the second half of the 1980s to current phenomena in environmental politics and shows that the Risk Society thesis has found concrete manifestations in the political framework for environmental management. The areas of reflexive regulation as well as symbolic politics are examples of 'subpolitics' which Beck identified as the emerging key arena for environmental risk politics. The following papers will further explore these two areas from different angles. The second part of the paper identifies the inherent conceptual and empirical links between the debate on risk and the current discourse on globalization. As a result the analysis shows that the decrease of political power of nation-states in the age of globalization accelerates and intensifies social developments that have already been manifest in the context of Risk Society.

Following this more conceptual paper *Suzanne Benn* provides an empirical analysis of the Risk Society using the case of the Australian chemical industry. The paper shows that the Risk Society thesis by no means has been a reflection of simply European or even German experiences. The paper sheds specific light on patterns of institutional failures in managing risk as well as on concrete trajectories and strategies of risk regulation and management in Australia. The lessons drawn from Benn's analysis help to sharpen the understanding of the notion of subpolitics as it becomes evident in the reflexive interplay between governments, corporations and communities in order to regain public trust for an industry with still a notorious reputation.

Jo Crotty and *Andrew Crane* shift the perspective from Western-style industrialized countries to a transitional economy. Their analysis is based on extensive empirical data gathered in numerous qualitative interviews in various former industrial conglomerates in Russia. The paper helps to redefine the notion of risk and its public perception in former communist countries. They identify considerable similarities between the 'Western' concepts of Risk Society and the Russian experience. However, they also provide significant insights into the necessary reframing of basic ideas of risk regulation and risk management in the Russian context. Their analysis is specifically helpful in identifying uniquely Russian approaches to risk management. They identify a key role for corporate actors as their deep embeddedness into local communities provides them with particularly strong credentials to engage in subpolitical processes of environmental management.

Along the same lines, the work by *Phung Thuy Phuong* and *Arthur Mol* continues to provide a unique view on the global spread of Risk Society patterns. Using data from various cases in Vietnam they show that subpolitics is a phenomenon that is by no means confined to the so-called developed world. In developing countries – and here the authors endorse a finding already presented in the previous paper from the Russian context – it is especially the local community that assumes an active role in environmental risk management. Furthermore, they reframe the idea of institutional failure in a developing country and show the relevance of Beck's ideas in analysing environmental risk management in this context.

The last paper is certainly the most innovative and versatile analysis of Beck's ideas from a theoretical angle. *Dallas Hanson* and *Robert White* present a case study of an Australian multinational enterprise that links the debates on risk and globalization. The authors show the interrelatedness of both topics from the perspective of a company and produce empirical evidence that both issues are continuing to be high on the agenda. By focusing on reporting they examine one area of corporate involvement into subpolitical processes. Furthermore, in order to sharpen their analytical approach to their empirical data the authors refine the notion of 'risk' by linking Beck's work to Mary Douglas' cultural theory.

The main purpose of the papers consists in the analysis and interpretation of the Risk Society thesis for environmental management. As such, the authors see themselves more as 'users' of the theoretical framework. Though they are aware of the fact that Beck's ideas have to be analysed and 'imported' with critical scrutiny it is not the primary purpose of the Special Issue to provide a critique of Beck's work. They see it as their main goal to use his approach in analysing problems of risk management from the perspective of industry. Based mostly in Business Schools, the authors are convinced that – notwithstanding various objections to Beck's thoughts from a sociological perspective – the Risk Society thesis provides an important input for their discipline. It is in this spirit, finally, that this Special Issue tries to present interdisciplinary research in the best sense of the word.

Epilogue

The editor of this Special Issue would like to thank Ragnar Löfstedt for his support in getting the papers published. He would also like to thank the authors for their enthusiasm and effort to contribute to this Special Issue. The papers have greatly benefited from the comments and suggestions by various anonymous referees. The joy of seeing these articles published now is however overshadowed by the fact that one of the authors, Robert White, did not live to see this in print. His untimely death is a loss to us all.

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