The Dark Society
Two Decades Later – Ulrich Beck and His Publication Risk Society Towards a New Modernity

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ABSTRACT

Ulrich Beck, a German sociologist who does not need previous presentation, casts his diagnosis about risk society as a new emerging ethos where social class and hierarchies blurred before the figure of risk. Although he shed light on the post-industrial society of the 90s, today the society he studied seems to be pretty different. Hence, a new fresh insight should replace it. This article introduces readers to the conceptual foundations of Thana Capitalism, as it was critically debated in our book The Rise of Thana Capitalism and Tourism. Per the author’s conception, the risk society sets the pace to a new facet of capitalism where the other’s pain remains as the main commodity to exchange. Far from being a more egalitarian society, as Beck said, in the days of Thana-capitalism a ruling elite governs the destiny of a precaritized workforce. The novel The Hunger Games represents perfectly how this society works.

KEYWORDS
Dark Consumption, Risk Society, Thana Capitalism, Ulrich Beck

INTRODUCTION

Doubtless, social scientists in general and sociology, in particular, should pay homage to Ulrich Beck not only in view of his main innovative contributions to the fields of modern sociology but also because his ideas shed light on the postmodern sociology. The ideas and concepts introduced by Beck in the fields of sociology was of paramount importance to imagine a society marked by higher levels of uncertainty and fear. In 1992, Beck published the first edition of Risk Society: towards new modernity where he unfolds elegantly all his genius to expand the current understanding of global modernity. For some reasons, which are very hard to precise here, Beck dates back the origin of risk society to Chernobyl’s accident. As he notes, Chernobyl should be understood as a founding event which laid the foundations of a new stage of capitalism. This society has made from the notion of risk its centrepiece. As an accident of global impacts, Chernobyl created a paradoxical situation where the same technology disposed to make of human life safer led gradually toward an apocalyptic disaster. This paradox seems to be no other thing than the essence of technology in a risk society, as Beck adheres.

Starting from the premise that risk became in the epicentre of the world, Beck holds the thesis that the organization of society resulted in an egalitarian line of authority, which defied the already-existent hierarchies, paving the ways for the rise of a collective culture, where risks mediated between citizens and social institutions. Although Risk Society inaugurated a set of different studies revolving around risk perception, no less true is that the already existent sharp contrast between probabilists
and culturalists has been enlarged. Today’s sociologists do not agree with a unified conception about risk. While probabilists understand the risk as an objective condition that places the system or the self in jeopardy (Bernstein, 1996; Sunstein, 2005)—no matter than it is perceived or ignored—culturalists dangles the cultural nature of risks, which not only are linguistically conditioned but resonates differently depending of culture and context (Douglas & Wildavsky 1983; Slovic 1993; Boholm, 2003; Korstanje 2015). Equally important are the assumptions formulated by German sociologist Niklas Luhmann in cataloguing risks as inherently enrooted into the principle of contingency. That way, Luhmann presents the distinction between risk and threats as his tug-of-war in the discussion ignited with other sociologists. Risk, paragraphing Luhmann, should be defined as something else than a simple calculation—as probabilists do—or a cultural construal. Since ancient civilization fleshed out different techniques and protocols to mitigate the negative effects of quakes, floods and so forth, they were unable to produce risks. It is important not to lose the sight for Luhmann, the risk is created by a previous decision-making process which is open to the contingency -this means that it can be avoided. Instead, threats are often externally imposed on the self or community without any possibilities for victims to elude them. Such a provoking-thought argument envisages that while the privileged ruling elite creates the risks, the rank-and-file workers face the aftermaths (Luhmann, 1993). Hence, though Luhmann blames Beck to be alarmist in the diagnosis, he recognizes that only modern cultures produce risks. Produced-Knowledge is the key factor that explains risks. Whether ancient cultures devoted their loyalties to the cult of Gods, modern society appealed to reason to understand its environs. At some extent, risk assessment adjoins to a much deeper process of secularization initiated during the Industrial Revolution (Korstanje, 2015). This moot point was widely criticized by another Senior sociologist, Sir Anthony Giddens, who not only opposed to Luhmann’s thesis but also interrogated on the nature of risk as ever-present in society, no matter the responsibilities of decision-maker. As Giddens (1991) eloquently observes, in a society where information and knowledge are systematically produced, packaged and disseminated to all classes, there is no place to surmise-as Luhmann precludes- that risk is strictly subject to individual or collective decision-making processes. Who would escape to the hegemony of risk? Giddens asks. Through the hyper-connected society, in the digital days, we are deciding even when we stop to do it. In consonance with Beck, our British sociologist acknowledges that “we are living our days” in runaway capitalism, where complexity and reasoning opened the doors to a process of reflexibility, unless duly-regulated by the risk-prevention programs and risk-management, may very well usher mankind in an imminent tragedy (Giddens, 1999, 2011).

As the previous backdrop, some intriguing points of convergence in Giddens and Luhmann still remain open, which suggest that risks seem to be a modern-sounding theme, unknown by our ancient ancestors. The turn of the century witnessed the rise of different risks and threats, which range from terrorism towards lethal virus outbreaks without mentioning devastating quakes and tsunamis, which over recent years placed the public opinion in the alert. The urgency to formulate an all-encompassing model that orchestrates the strongholds and weaknesses of culturalists and probabilists is one of the chief goals of the present edited book. The chapters selected -through peers blind-review process- shed light on some aspects of risk-research as well as particular study-cases that focus on risk-formation and perception. On the first section, we place the main studies around risk under the critical lens of scrutiny. Later, an in-depth review of gathered chapters is proffered in order for readers to challenge their earlier stereotypes, beliefs and preconceived ideas about risk.

Last but not least, we, the editors, conclude that historically societies have longitudinally elaborated different terms to denote the stability of environment. Once settled in sedentary cultures, societies -no matter their means of subsistence- demarcated the borders between a secure-base situated physically as an exemplary centre and the outside world. This suggests, as Skoll and Korstanje held, that the gravity of culture rests on an imagined sense of security, which legitimates the interplay between a centre and its periphery. One of the paradoxes of Western civilization consisted of the