

BOOK REVIEW BY WILLIAM LEISS: PUBLICATION INFORMATION

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Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society, Towards a New Modernity*, translated from the German by Mark Ritter, with an Introduction by Scott Lash and Brian Wynne. London: Sage Publications, 1992, 260 pages [German text originally published in 1986].

THE FULL TEXT OF THIS BOOK REVIEW IS INCLUDED IN THIS DOCUMENT

The text now forms the opening section in the E-book by William Leiss, *Black Holes of Risk: Collected Papers on Risk Management, 1995-2017*, Volume I: The Ubiquity of Risk (Kindle Direct Publishing, 382 pages, November 2017).

THIS E-BOOK MAY BE PURCHASED ON AMAZON.COM, AMAZON.CA,
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BOOK REVIEW OF ULRICH BECK, *RISK SOCIETY*, BY WILLIAM LEISS

This is three books in one and only the intelligence and courage of the author holds them together, forging them into a single spirited essay on broad themes that has proved to be attractive to readers in its original language (it qualifies as an academic best-seller in Germany and already has gone through three editions) and will do so, albeit to a lesser extent, to the readers of this translation.

The three books are as follows: (1) a worthy contribution to the theory of industrial society and the concept of "modernity," situated within the long tradition that stems from Marx and Weber and runs primarily through Critical Theory; (2) a critique of the role of science and instrumental rationality in modern society that, like so many others, draws its inspiration from those two extraordinary works from the "Frankfurt School," *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Eclipse of Reason* (although the latter is not cited); and (3), a theory about a distinctive form of society, "risk society," that includes a specific perspective on the way in which we experience risks to health and the environment today. Given its wide scope Beck's book could only have been written in essay form, as a series of essentially declarative sentences -- *obiter dicta*, as it were --

that requires the reader to fill in the blanks and to accept a good deal on faith. In this style of presentation fragments from the empirical world can intrude only as illustration or example, which is assumed to be representative of the full picture.

Book number one, the theory of industrial society and the concept of "reflexive modernity," will have the broadest appeal and indeed, as the authors of the Introduction note, its perspective finds solid support in the analogous but independently formulated views of such a prominent authority as Anthony Giddens. The excellent point it makes is that the first full phase of industrial society (say 1800-1950?), with its radical transformations in so much of everyday life, concealed its heavy dependence on traditional social forms, particularly the maintenance of old gender and family roles. In its newer phase these forms are undergoing equally radical change: For example, as women enter the paid work force in great numbers and challenge the pervasive gender stereotyping still deeply entrenched there, within a larger context in which highly stratified class and status inequalities persist.

Beck names this the progressive "individualization of social inequality." Other changes are sketched here which have become more widely noted in the past few years, such as structural unemployment, the shift from full-time to part-time employment, and the erosion of lifetime job security in both blue-collar and white-collar occupations; all observers agree that these are momentous developments for the industrialized world, but like Beck, most are reduced to simple speculating about what it all means for the underlying longer-term economic and political development of these societies.

The second book, which pops up here and there in the text and receives one full chapter entitled "Science beyond Truth and Enlightenment?" will have a more restricted appeal. The question-mark is well placed and indicative of the tentative nature of Beck's conclusions. For the sake of continuity in his chief thread of argument Beck in fact is required to contend that natural science also becomes "reflexive," as it is "dethroned" because its "monopoly" on truth is challenged. Here the lack of detail and example begins to tell. If the concern here is to attack (again) the philosophy of "scientism," which I understand to be the unsupportable claim made by some advocates of the natural sciences, to the effect that these provide the only solid basis for true knowledge in all domains, then fine, I and others can accept this.

And if the concern is to undermine the practical effect of scientism in society, which is the claim that the practitioners of science ought to occupy a privileged position with respect to political decisions about the management of risks and other things (the contemporary variant of the old technocracy), then fine, I and others can accept this too. Yet in Beck's book, as in others in the same tradition (Jürgen Habermas, too, wrestled with this problem before giving up), there always seems to be more to the questioning of science, and, in the end, the reader is hard-pressed to know what it is. Beck ends by calling for a new "pedagogy of scientific rationality," but it is impossible to tell what this would accomplish or even why we need it.

The third book is the most curious but in some ways the most innovative. Beck was well ahead of his time in calling attention to the importance of the concept of risk and the practice of risk management as essential features of modern society, and he is to be congratulated for his foresight. Developments since he first completed his work have confirmed his view of that importance, and there is little doubt that in the future the centrality of risk debates will be amplified steadily. But he wants to do much more, and if there is a failing here, it may be one that is inherent in German social theory, namely to wish to transmute every newly discovered sociological phenomenon into the latest chapter of the world-historical dialectic (the French seem to do the same with psychological phenomena).

Beck writes: "Risk may be defined as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself" (21). And: "In contrast to all earlier epochs (including industrial society), the risk society is characterized essentially by a lack: the impossibility of an external attribution of hazards. In other words, risks depend on decisions, they are industrially produced and in this sense politically reflexive" (183). Now, the very important point here, where we can agree with Beck, is that industrial society marks a transition, a watershed in human history, in fact, from a human condition where naturally occurring hazards (disease, flood, famine, and the like) -- along with socially determined hazards such as invasion and conquest, regressive forms of thought and culture, and rigid class structures -- molded the fate of individuals and groups, to one where increasingly our fate is bound up with risks that are deliberately undertaken -- for the sake of benefits conceived in advance, by means of our technological mastery over nature. So far so good. Thereafter the argument gets

murkier and the reader is never quite sure whether for Beck it is the nature of risk or of society which has undergone the change.

There are a number of specific and very important confusions in the text. (1) "Natural" versus technological or artificial: Surely in the age of AIDS we must confess that we are still subject to hazards originating in nature. (2) On the same theme, on a "new" risk such as "pollutants in foodstuffs": In industrial society, on the whole and on balance, the food supply is far safer than it was previously, since we are protected against potent, naturally occurring toxins. (3) Still on the same theme, now in terms of the alleged novelty of the global dimension of risk: It is estimated that the volcanic explosion of Mount Pinataubo in the Philippines put an amount of particular matter in the atmosphere equal to that attributable to the entire world history of industrialism to date. So? (4) Risks and benefits: whatever happened to the latter? Did Beck just forget to write about them? (5) The "toxic threat": average life expectancy in the industrial world continues to increase. There are particular threats, to be sure, but does this rather visible marker of human welfare count for nothing? (6) "Acceptable levels" of risk: goods such as pesticides and drugs (antibiotics) and many other useful chemicals (e.g., chlorine) are toxic by nature and design and depend for their utility on our being able to specify acceptable levels of exposure to humans, other animals, and the environment (64-9).

There are many other objections which could be made to this whole section, which has all the overtones of an irrational "zero-risk" mentality that is unworthy of (and probably unintended by) the author. These examples could be multiplied indefinitely.

The main problem is not just sweeping generalizations and a lack of balanced illustrations, but a lack of clarity about the target. I think that Beck wants to write a diatribe against risk management, in particular, against risk management as too many risk experts wish to practice it, namely, as an exercise in bureaucratic rationality, technocracy, and contempt for the public perception of risk. And if this is what he wants to attack, I and others can agree with him (although the situation is changing). But what he actually does is give us a one-sided, highly selective account of the mismanagement of a few technologically induced hazards, an account which simply cannot be

generalized. Yet more serious is the fact that Beck overlooks another dimension almost entirely (except for a few passing references without comment, for example on automobile fatalities), namely, voluntarily induced risks.

There is not a single mention of tobacco use, the single gravest risk to health in the industrialized world and a fast-rising candidate for this status even in "developing" countries as poor as China. Individuals have become aware of the magnitude of this risk only thanks to the science of epidemiology, which helps us to overcome the intuitive deception induced by the long latency period (20 years or more) for lung cancer and the other fatal diseases caused by tobacco use. (In industrialized countries it accounts for ten times the mortality of the next leading cause of death, which are traffic accidents.) Is this not a "toxic threat" of massive proportions? And yet this whole category of risk does not fit comfortably into the superstructure of the author's design and indeed threatens to explode it.

We should expect so adept a thinker as Ulrich Becker to seek to persuade the reader that indeed he has written one book and not three, and he does not disappoint us (153-4), for he maintains that both risk and individualization exhibit their unity as dimensions of the "reflexive modernization of industrial society." This is the logic: in the second phase of industrial society individuals are freed from their unselfconscious immersion in traditional group determinations and are challenged to come to terms self-consciously with (i.e., reflect on) their unmediated relation to society. At the same time, the formerly latent dimensions of producer-driven industrial risks are brought out into the open and can be apprehended for what they are, that is, as problems that (a) are formally constituted in scientific terms and (b) are a "new source of conflict and social formation" (99). There is a nice kernel of truth here, but it is insufficient to make anywhere near as sumptuous a meal as Beck would like.

In this book, the whole is less than the sum of its parts: the main reason is, I think, that Beck has not thought through his perspective on risk with sufficient care, nor has he devoted enough time and effort to presenting a balanced account of the trade-offs between risks and benefits in industrial technologies. (Many of these become enormously complicated affairs, especially when controversies over scientific risk assessments erupt, and they can require elaborate case study treatment.) In view of the

power and range of his thinking as it is exhibited in this book, however, we hope that he will return to these themes again.