

Chapter 2

Ulrich Beck: An Introduction to the Theory of Second Modernity and the Risk Society

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2.1 Introduction and a Short Biography

One afternoon, during his first year as a law student, as Ulrich Beck was walking around the South German university town of Freiburg and contemplating the nature of reality, he was suddenly struck by the realization that it was not actually the nature of reality *as such* that he was attempting to grasp at all.¹ Rather, it was his own view or notion of what he believed reality *to be*. Reality as such, it dawned on him, he could not really know anything about. This sudden realization came as quite a shock to him—as did, in its wake, the exhilarating vertiginous feeling that he might, in fact, be the first person ever to think, ever to have *reached*, this particular thought. A fellow student, however, later eased his mind by letting him know that the very same notion had already been entertained a couple of centuries previously by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Still, this did little to change the gravity with which Beck perceived the significance of his metaphysical insights. It was because of this particular epiphanic moment (of which Beck today speaks with a marvellous amount of self-deprecation) that he was led away from his law studies and towards philosophy. So what he did, plain and simply, was to quit his law studies and start reading Kant. However, perhaps his realization led to more than a mere change of educational trajectories. This would seem to be the case, at least, as the fundamental problem of *reality* has kept him occupied ever since. It was this same problem which was responsible for his later abandonment of philosophy in favour of sociology when philosophy, under close scrutiny, turned out to be much more occupied with its own concepts than with reality—a tendency which Beck also believes persists in certain parts of sociology; particularly with respect to the system theories of Niklas Luhmann and Talcott Parsons; theories which Beck, consequently, has never cared much for. Beck has always, he says of himself, felt a keen sense of responsibility towards his own concepts and for

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making sure that they correspond as closely to reality as they possibly can, without making false claims of actual representation. Beck realized early on exactly how harmful poor, bad and stale concepts and theories can be and how much their application can distort reality around them. As he was working on his dissertation (Beck 1974), he became increasingly aware of how vital the values and notions which sociology entertains about the world—the same values and notions on which it bases so many of its questions and so much of its research—really were. Should the basic notions and values of sociology and research turn out to be wrong, they would render all subsequent answers and research futile and useless. The results would resemble nothing more than a distorted mirage, a funhouse mirror representation of reality in itself. Beck, therefore, has adamantly insisted that it is an imperative, core responsibility for sociologists to make sure their theories correspond closely with the reality they intend to describe. Thus, when Beck today takes such sharp issue with what he calls the methodological nationalism—that is sociological theory's tendency to assume that the world can be divided into nation-state containers with each container holding its respective people, territory and society within it—he does so because it is exactly the kind of notion that presents a distorted version of reality. We can simply no longer coherently view the world as something to be divided into containers of nation-states. It is not reality. Societies today are interconnected across national borders and it is one of Beck's main points of argument that the society of today is a world risk society. In his view, then, methodological nationalism is simply working from a distorted view of reality: the national borders no longer exist in reality; they exist purely in our minds. This realization must, necessarily, serve as a starting point for all further research into the matter. Should the researchers instead choose to cling to methodological nationalism, they will inevitably end up reproducing traditional representations of a false reality. It is this same line of thought which is behind Beck's work with the theory of risk society and second modernity. Reality has shifted, and so now, in order for us to be able to grasp reality at all, we must create new concepts and theories for our approach. What we need now, in other words, is a *new sociology* which is prepared to approach and reason about reality, *as it is*.

This, in short, is the project of Ulrich Beck. He wishes to create a sociology which functions in accordance with the reality we all live in and experience daily. He calls his own sociology a *science of reality*. Note that most sociologists will, all things considered, probably want to claim that they, too, are conducting a kind of science of reality but the fact is that many of them are really, according to Beck, merely conducting a particular kind of fruitless *zombie science* (or the 'science of unreality', as he would probably prefer to call it today; e.g. Beck 2006: 21). This is the case for the sociologists in whose works the antiquated sociological preconceptions and ideas still—much like zombies—remain active after death; a science in which distorted beliefs and notions about what constitutes the real world remain on their feet, shuffling about and causing all kinds of intellectual havoc, long after their actual demise. Needless to say these kinds of picturesque characterizations have not exactly contributed in any particularly positive way to Beck's popularity amongst his fellow sociologists. His sociology in general, as we shall discuss

further, later on in this book, has also been surrounded by much debate. However, Beck is nonetheless widely considered part of the absolute world elite of contemporary sociology. His books—first and foremost *Risk Society*—have been translated into more than 35 different languages and have seen large print runs throughout most of the world. Beck is without a doubt one of the most productive and innovative sociologists of our time. He has not halted his continuous production of books and articles, in spite of recently becoming professor emeritus, and he is still writing articles, editorials and comments for newspapers and journals worldwide. Throughout the last 25–30 years he has, several times, proven himself able to produce new, thought-provoking theory drafts which have then gone on to set the sociological agenda, changing how the broad social sciences have understood and discussed various topics. This began as early as the 1970s when he helped introduce a new, subject-oriented perspective into the field of sociology as a science; momentum really started to gather throughout the 1980s and 1990s as Beck engaged himself in his theory of individualization, globalization and risk society, propelling each field to a point where it went on to receive widespread public recognition and debate. Beck has continued his productivity throughout the late 1990s and into the 2000s, which have seen his critique of the methodological nationalism of the social sciences and his cosmopolitan project of re-enlightenment.

2.2 From Slupsk to Sociological World Fame: A Short Biography

Born in Slupsk in the Pomeranian province of Poland in 1944, the son of a nurse and a German naval officer, and being the youngest out of five siblings, Ulrich Beck did not seem immediately destined to eventually go on to become one of the most influential sociologists of our time. In 1945 the family had no choice but to flee westwards as a consequence of the new political rumblings and demarcations that were being drawn throughout and across Europe at the time. The family found a new home in Hanover, where Ulrich Beck grew up and spent his childhood. One of Beck's best friends from his time in Hanover is the painter Jobst Günther, who today resides in Berlin and, in various works, has drawn inspiration from, and commented upon, Beck's sociology and writings. The one year of his youth he spent attending an American high school also remains one of Beck's fond memories. In 1966, having served 2 years of military service, Beck moved to Freiburg and enrolled in law school. He had ambitions of one day becoming a fiction writer and had decided that practising law would provide the means necessary for supporting a writing career.

It was not long, however, before Beck gave up on his law studies, as well as on his notion of writing fiction. His literary ambitions, however, still run like a vein through his books to this day. Beck has been called a poet of modernization, a pet

name which can easily be seen as an approving nod towards his unorthodox prose, his fluid style of writing and his use of metaphors, which are often as whimsical as they are thought provoking. It is clear to see, then, that Beck, in his writings, has drawn much inspiration from the essays of Gottfried Benn, as well as from the sheer power of language in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. In 1967, having broken his bonds with law school once and for all, Beck turned to philosophy. He wished for yet another fresh start in a new place, and this time he chose Munich. He based his choice primarily on the fact that the philosophical milieu in Munich at the time was the most attractive. Once in Munich, Beck dedicated himself wholly to philosophy, both analytical and continental. His main interest, however, was German idealism and his preferred philosophers were Kant and Fichte. He also followed additional courses in psychology, social studies and sociology. Beck recalls with particular fondness two teachers of philosophy: Andreas Konrad, who tutored Beck in logics and analytical philosophy, and the Fichte scholar Reinhard Lauth, whose lectures on Fichte thrilled Beck greatly. The relationship between Lauth and Beck, however, would eventually be ruined by a disagreement about what else?—*reality*, as Lauth, much to Beck's dismay, refused to relate to or concern himself with the questions of student politics that were being discussed at the time and opted to stick with the theoretical world and philosophical concepts of Fichte. Beck, on the other hand, saw Lauth's behaviour—his refusal to relate to the *real* world—as a symptom of the state of philosophy in general, of a more general kind of ailment. Philosophy, Beck believed, was much too occupied with its own concepts and terms. It had a tendency only rarely to allow reality even so much as to enter its highly theoretical domain. Increasingly, Beck began to focus on what had initially started out as one of his minor elective courses: sociology. It was here that he found the particular kind of intellectual scrutiny of, and preoccupation with, reality that he sought. Especially responsible for introducing Beck to the world of sociology, for drawing him in, as it were, was the professor of sociology, Karl Martin Bolte, the one person who may well have had the single largest impact on Beck's career and work.

Beck and Bolte first met during Bolte's office hours, the week before that year's courses were scheduled to begin. Beck, then a second-semester sociology student, had sought out Bolte to let him know exactly how poorly he felt Bolte's upcoming teaching schedule had been planned out. Bolte listened politely to the complaints of the young student and then, once Beck finally fell silent, asked him to make a personal appearance in one of the courses, where he would be given the opportunity to deliver a presentation and expand on his criticisms. Beck showed up, delivered his presentation and received a devastating barrage of criticism from the other students following the course. However, Bolte, as Beck was leaving the room, grabbed the young disenfranchised student by the elbow, pulled him aside and told him that he himself had very much liked the presentation and thought Beck perhaps ought to consider following the course from that point on. Beck did so and, in the years to come, Bolte became his mentor. They kept working together long after Beck's time as a student had come to an end. After Beck finished his dissertation studying with Bolte in 1972, Bolte hired him to work on research

project SFB 101, titled (roughly Theoretical Framework for Labour Market and Workforce Research in the Social Sciences). Here Beck eventually ended up working with Michael Brater, with whom he went on to develop a fruitful cooperative relationship throughout the 1970s. The two of them shared an interest in exploring the relations between different aspects of the construction of identity and the choice of vocation and occupation, that is, of working in certain lines of work or holding particular jobs. It was during this period that Beck took the first steps towards his later thoughts of individualization. Beck worked under Bolte up until 1979, when he submitted his dissertation on the construction of reality through vocation to the faculty of social sciences at Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich. It only barely passed and it has never been published. The conservative faculty council did not at all care for what they felt were clearly the neo-Marxist tendencies of the dissertation. However, Bolte came to Beck's aid and, thanks to Bolte's intervention and defence, Beck's work was accepted after all. Beck never did turn completely Marxist during his student years, although many of his peers eventually did. His theoretical role model during those years was Jürgen Habermas, whereas the older parts of the Frankfurt School did not really have much of an impact on him. What fascinated Beck about Habermas was his ability to bridge the gap between philosophy and sociology.

During his student years at the Institute of Sociology in Munich, Beck met Elisabeth Gernsheim, who is today also an internationally renowned sociologist. They married in 1975 and in 1979 they were both hired at the University of Münster. Here, in 1980, he was appointed co-editor of the journal *Soziale Welt*. However, the cooperative atmosphere between Ulrich Beck and Heinz Hartmann, who was the leader of the Institute of Sociology at Münster, soured after a couple of years, prompting Beck to seek new challenges elsewhere. These turned out to come in the shape of a position as professor with the relatively new University of Bamberg, where Beck, along with two colleagues, were given the responsibility for establishing an Institute of Sociology from the ground up. During his time as a professor in Bamberg, such people as Christoph Lau and Wolfgang Bonß were among his assistants. Beck arrived at Bamberg in 1981 and stayed there until 1992, when he applied for and received a professorship of sociology at his old university in Munich. It is here where he is today a professor emeritus. Additionally, Ulrich Beck was also, during his time as a professor in Munich, head of the large research project on reflexive modernization called SFB 536, which started in 1999 and continued until 2009. SFB 536 financed by the German Research Council and other research foundations—saw continuous participation from a large number of researchers from both German and foreign universities, including five universities from the general Munich area: LMU (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität), Bundeswehr University Munich, University of Augsburg, Institut für Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung e. V. and Technical University of Munich. Since 2013 Ulrich Beck is Principal Investigator of the European Research Council (ERC) project: *Methodological Cosmopolitanism—In the Laboratory of Climate Change*. Today, Beck is affiliated with the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), serving as *British Journal of Sociology* Visiting Centennial Professor, a

professorship he has held since 1997 and which entails him spending some weeks in London every semester, teaching and conducting research, working at the same institute as such people as Richard Sennett, Nikolas Rose and Saskia Sassen. At the LSE, Beck has also collaborated closely with his good friend and colleague Anthony Giddens, who for a number of years served as Director of the LSE. Since 2011 Beck is also Professor at the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris.

All things considered then, Beck is part of the elite of contemporary, international sociology. As is apparent from the bibliography at the back of this book, he has not come to his status by a stroke of luck or simple good fortune. He has, throughout the years, remained a highly active sociologist. His productions span more than 45 books and over 250 research articles. In addition to this, he is a stalwart contributor to various European newspapers.

Over the years, he has been a visiting fellow at a number of universities in and outside Germany (Essen, Berlin, Cardiff and Harvard among others) and has received honorary doctorates from eight universities: University of Jyväskylä in Finland (1996), University of Macerata in Italy (2006), University UNED Madrid in Spain (2007), University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt in Germany (2010), Varna Free University in Bulgaria (2011), University of Lausanne in Switzerland (2011), University of Buenos Aires (Universidad Nacional de San Martín) in Argentina (2013) and St.-Kliment-Ohridski University in Bulgaria (2013).

He has received a number of awards for his work and his involvement as intellectual commentator—such as *Kultureller Ehrenpreis der Stadt München* (Cultural Honorary Award of the City of Munich) (1997), *Cicero-Preis für öffentliche Reden* (Cicero award for public speaking) (1999), *German-British Forum Awards für besondere Verdienste um deutsch-britische Beziehungen* (German-British Forum awards for contributions to German-British relations) (1999), *Preis der Gesellschaft für Soziologie (DGS) für herausragende Leistungen auf dem Gebiet der öffentlichen Wirksamkeit der Soziologie* (German Society of Sociology award for outstanding achievements in the field of the public effects of sociology) (2004), *Schader-Preis der Schader-Stiftung für Geisteswissenschaftler* (Schader Foundation award for the humanities) in 2005, 'Mondi Migranti-Carige', international prize for Migration Studies of the Universities of Milan and Genoa (2006) and Prize for outstanding achievement awarded by the Research Institute of the Nobel Museum in Stockholm (2006).

Ulrich Beck has, throughout the years, been a member of various think tanks and a participant in different state commissions. In 2010, he was appointed senior fellow at the American think tank The Breakthrough Institute. He is a past member of the *Kommission für Zukunftsfragen der Freistaaten Bayern und Sachsen* (Commission for questions about the future of Bavaria and Saxony) in which he served from 1995 to 1997. And in 2011—curiously, the year of the 25th anniversary of his book *Risk Society*, which was first published in 1986, a book in which it is the danger of radioactive leaks from nuclear power plants, more than anything else, that serves as a symbol of the emergent risk society—Beck was appointed to serve in German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Ethical Commission for

a Safe Energy Supply, which was formed in the wake of the nuclear disaster at the Fukushima plant in Japan. With its final report of May 2011, the commission was amongst those to recommend the swift and complete phasing-out of nuclear power in Germany, which the government and Bundestag initiated that same year.

Ulrich Beck

Pioneer in Cosmopolitan Sociology and Risk Society

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