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## **The contribution of Stuart Hall and Ulrich Beck to the sociological understanding of contemporary society**

Stuart Hall

He was born in the year 1932 in the Jamaican city of Kingston. Many scholars have termed him as a genius and an academic giant in the field of sociology. He is remembered as among the founders of the popular British movement of the mid 1960's which went by the name " British Cultural Studies". In the movement, Hall viewed Britain as a country that is incessantly in conflict with itself and other nations of the world on such matters as freedom of speech, rule of law and freedom of conscience (Curtis, 2006). He was also cynical about the British culture which he viewed as one that was marred with Euro scepticism and racialism. To him, Britain was still haunted by the spirits of the slave trade and the other evils that characterised the human species in the 17th and 18th centuries. According to him, his days at the University of Oxford gave him a lot of experiences concerning the British view of the society. The rise of capitalism, bourgeoisie classes, violation of human, civil liberties and the violation of consumer rights.

Hall published many writings on the crucial area of social justice and was one of the founders of cultural studies. One of his greatest ideas was to have a society that was educated, open, transparent, and able to access all social amenities without any restriction. Hall had the gift of playing around with the human dialect as he interacted with them on a day-to-day basis (Frantz, 1986). Concerning racialism, Hall in his writings posited that it brings out a dichotomy between the thoughts of various races of people and also affects the cultural values of that society. Hall continued to state that cultural values

of the various categories of people have a big role to play in the political climate of the country that they live in. Thus, in Britain, the differences between the whites and blacks had a role to play in the way in which the whites treated the blacks.

Hall writes that the whole question of ethnicity has penetrated deep into the social structure of the people, and it has its roots firmly anchored among the societal values and experiences. He writes that the ethnicity is deeply entrenched among the society members and has both historical and cultural context. The term, according to him, fits the British situation inasmuch as there is a clear-cut difference in the way blacks are treated by the whites. A sociological view of the society does not end here. There are also other aspects as gender values and sexuality. According to him, all these have a role to play in reshaping the human view of the society.

According to Hall, inasmuch as human beings continue to express their opinions from a given perspective, at a given period and given place on the earth, the idea of ethnicity will remain for ever (Hall, 1992). There is no way that the human species will fail to represent a certain group of people, and this means that there is an element of ethnicity. For example, concerning the white-black struggle that he was passionate about, Hall writes that the conflict had two facets one being the fact that the black people had problems accessing their rights and the second being the fact that marginalization of the black people by the whites was at its peak. This was depicted by the films that were associated by the black people and those that were associated by the whites. In this perspective of the contemporary society, therefore, hall saw a society that was largely racist, ethnic and

separatist. This shows why he started the revolutions while he was in the University of Oxford.

Hall is also passionate about the idea of cultural Thatcherism, as he calls it. Concerning this, he writes that the black people will have to struggle more for their rights if at all they would wish to fit in what he calls the new politics. In his book "New Ethnicities", Hall is of the view that though nothing may change from the traditional view of the ethnicity and the society, the black people will have to be more vigilant about their rights because the ethnic tendencies of the white people have been redefined. This, again, is seen in the way black artists are racially discriminated against by the white people in the film industry. He writes that the politics of representation have taken a new dimension in the pre-existing conflict between black cultural politics and the Eurocentric cultural politics. He says that the later has been marred with untold disdain and racism towards the black people while the former faces many challenges of postmodernism post cultural tendencies and feminism (Hall, 1992). He wonders why is it that the black people are the only ones that are discriminated against while the white people have their way as they wish. He is looking upon a change in the way whites relate with the blacks as we redefine ethnicity.

Hall, therefore, is of the view that the contemporary society is not one to be proud of, but one that is marred with separatism and ethnicity as shown by such terms as "black skin, white masks".

## **Ulrich Beck**

Ulrich Beck was a popular German sociologist born in the year 1944 and was the pioneer of the famous sociological term the "risk society". One of his

famous arguments concerning the risk society was that, in the modern times, the traditional structure of the society was at the point of breaking apart. In his view, the traditional social structures that brought people together and the various classes that defined the society was gradually breaking down to pieces. Some of the contributing factors to the collapse of the pre-existing social structures was globalization, social vices like pollution, and unemployment. In his view, the rising case of unemployment among the youths was a contributing factor of the disintegration of the classes and that it was proving difficult to maintain the status quo.

Beck also viewed the various risks that the society is facing as falling in different categories. According to him, some risks were more dangerous than others because some of them were discussed over the mass media quite often than the others hence the growing popularity (Beck, 1992). He gave an example of terrorism that was discussed by the press almost on a daily basis and this discussion contributed to many people venturing into it. His view of the society is that the people have been unable to control the many societal problems they have created (Douglas, 1986). In this risk society, he argues that some societal problems such as pollution, terrorism, environmental hazards and others are the creation of the society and, therefore, the same society should come up with ways of solving them.

He also believes that there is a clear difference between danger and risk and that the two are not coterminous hence should not be confused. According to him, therefore, some of these world risks which are the creation of the society may be controlled and minimised through talks and discussions among the societies concerned (Bauman, 1993). The contemporary society

should, therefore, be able to solve their own problems when they arise. Beck is wondering how the success of modern society will be achieved amidst such vices as environmental pollution, corruption, terrorism and others. These problems, he argues, have been created by the same people who are now crying foul. He is of the opinion that the contemporary society should be able to eradicate the problems that they have created. Beck views the society in the perspective of modernity (Beck, 1992). He is more interested in the way the society responds to the changes in industrial modernization while maintaining societal ties. Moreover, he is keen on how science can make human life more comfortable as the society changes. He belongs to the realism of science. According to him, science has a big role to play in the way the contemporary society will respond to emerging trends such as environmentalism and politics

Concerning the idea of a risk society, Beck argues that the modern society is prone to many ills that are characterizing its existence. According to him, pollution, crime and diseases are the greatest challenges that the success of modern society must grapple with in order to be realised. To this end, Beck is of the view that the modern science has a role to play in eradicating these ills for the society to thrive. He also wonders how a risk society will be able to coexist with the hierarchies and strata of classes. According to him, these risks are not evenly distributed among the societies. The wealthy are able to fight this menace more than their poor counterparts can fight. This, according to him, has enlarged the gap between the poor and the wealthy, hence more class conflict (Curtis, 2006). This new phenomenon, he argues, will influence the quality of life in the new society.

In summation, Beck is of the view that the success of the contemporary society will much depend on how the society will cope with the risks and classes. He says that the wealthy have got no problem in putting up with the new developments, but the poor must fight their way out (Beck, 1992).

### **Comparisons between the views of both scholars**

Hall views the society in terms of new ethnicities as can be seen in his popular book " new ethnicities". He looks at the contemporary society as one that is largely affected by ethnicity and racism and he gives an example of a conflict between the whites and blacks. He is of the view that the blacks must fight their way out for their rights to be met. Beck, on the other hand, looks at the society in terms of risks. He is of the view that the society is largely affected by modernization and that science has a big role to play in addressing these risks. According to him, the society is the one that creates these risks and should, therefore, be able to address them accordingly.

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