

What is Beck's risk society theory?

Society



Abstract

The essay looks at Beck's theory of the 'risk society', the idea that modern society is distinctly different from previous ages in the nature of risk, and attitudes to it. The theory also involves the idea that scepticism towards scientific reasoning and knowledge is increasing. Beck identified new types of risk associated with the modern age. These new risks have widespread potential repercussions, not restricted to one geographical location, to one particular time scale or to one social group. These new risks also require new strategies for management (Coaffee 2009). This essay will first briefly outline Beck's theory, then takes a critical and analytic perspective on his idea.

1. Introduction

The following looks at Beck's theory of the 'risk society', the idea that modern society is distinctly different from previous ages in the nature of risk, and attitudes to it. The theory also involves the idea that scepticism towards scientific reasoning and knowledge is increasing. Beck identified new types of risk associated with the modern age. These new risks have widespread potential repercussions, not restricted to one geographical location, to one particular time scale or to one social group. These new risks also require new strategies for management (Coaffee 2009). This essay will first briefly outline Beck's theory, then will take a critical and analytic perspective on his idea.

2. Beck's Theory of the 'Risk Society'

Beck proposed his idea of the 'Risk Society' in his 1992 publication 'Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity' (Beck 1992). His ideas emerged from the developing discipline of risk management, rooted in sociology.

There are several strands to Beck's idea as follows:

A transition from one type of modernity to a new type

The part played by the media in the construction of risk

The nature of reflexivity

The financial impact of new risk patterns

Coaffee (2009).

There is also a critique of science (Lyall et al 2009). This breakdown will be used to shape the following section.

For Beck, we are experiencing a new wave of modernity. In contrast with the simple modernity of the industrial age, contemporary modernity is reflexive, and is characterised by new risks with a "potentially global impact" (Ericson and Doyle 2003, p. 74). Modern society is increasingly critical of the underpinnings of industrial society (Beck 1995)

In terms of the role played by the media in creating risk, Beck suggests that "the mass media and the scientific and legal professions in charge of defining risks become key social and political positions" (Beck 1992, p. 22). The media also provide the site within which risk is contextualised and debated, with a new potential for conflict between those who create risk definitions and those who are affected by them (Coaffee 2003).

Another key concept for the notion of the risk society is 'reflexivity', or the ability of humans to reflect upon the past, and use this knowledge to influence what they do in the future. Widely taken up by the social sciences in general, for Beck, people in contemporary society have come to terms with the increasing amount of risk they face through reflexivity, balancing the opinions of experts with cultural considerations (Coaffee 2003)

Beck suggests that there is a financial impact of this change in the nature of risk. Traditionally, it has been acceptable to use insurance to secure against risks. However, in the risk society, insuring against all types of risk is not possible (Coaffee 2009). As danger grows, so protection diminishes.

As the new risk society emerges, the role and ability of science is played down. On the one hand, the scientific approach to managing risk, for Beck, is inadequate, as it is most useful in addressing natural risks, rather than risks created by decisions. On the other hand, Beck suggests that the supposedly neutral stance of the scientist should be questioned. Rather than objective observers, scientists have played a part in creating the new, risk-laden contemporary world. This role is often hidden by the institutions which have grown up around the scientific world (Lyall et al 2009). Scientists are also seen as in the service of corporate and financial interests. At the same time, people increasingly have to trust the opinions of scientific experts and the complex systems they devise to analyse risk. However, expert opinion is often marked by disagreement regarding the extent and best management of the risk, underlining Beck's point that scientific consensus is open to question (Coaffee 2003).

3. To What extent does Beck's Theory Provide an Adequate View of Contemporary Society

Beck seems to provide a comprehensive model of changing attitudes to risk, risk management, and society in general. Although his theory has its roots in concepts of risk management, it seems to offer a useful way of understanding modern society in general. Seen thus, it suggests that society as a whole is dominated by risks which both threaten physical life and livelihood, and also occupy the collective psyche. The existence of specifically modern threats such as global warming, increased mobility of disease and nuclear radiation seem to back up Beck's claims (Rosa 2006). Beck himself suggests that his model offers a certain degree of positivism and hope, whereby reflexivity can help overcome the problems associated with globalisation and increased risk. He also seems to suggest it offers a way whereby the ideals of the Enlightenment can be kept alive, albeit in a way infused with a post-modern irony and self-criticism (Beck 1998).

However, there are a number of criticisms which can be made of the notion of the 'Risk Society': some have condemned it as overly deterministic, with little scope for bringing about change (Hughes and Edwards 2002). Bluhdorn sees Beck as proposing a historical determinism which is Marxist in feel, as industrialisation and its associated form of modernity gives way to the risk society (Bluhdorn 2000). Others have dismissed it as a passing fad rather than an academic approach with lasting influence (Dingwall 1999)

Some question whether Beck's model is adequate to capture the nature of risk. Beck's approach has been called "utilitarian and objectivist" (Alexander

1996, p. 135); that is, it relies upon a definition of risk that draws upon what works, and which assumes the objective reality of the concept. He fails to take into account the multiplicity of ways in which individuals understand the notion of risk, and apply it. Perhaps a more appropriate model would have a more complex understanding of the role played by social structure and perceptions of risk (Elliott 2003). Relatedly, Beck has also been criticised for ignoring any psycho-analytic interpretation of human action and motivation (Hollway and Jefferson 1997), and for failing to understand that human subjectivity is embodied (Petersen 1996). In other words, “Beck's theory cannot grasp the hermeneutical, aesthetic, psychological and culturally bound forms of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in and through which risk is constructed and perceived” (Elliott 2003, p. 26).

Others have questioned the extent to which Beck generalises in a way which is not supported by the facts. Beck sees the spread of contagious diseases as one of a wholly new set of risks for modern society. However Turner (1994) points out that the globalisation of disease is not a new phenomenon, but one which has been in existence since trade and world travel started. Others point out that the only change is in the type of disease which spreads rapidly and offers risk: at one point it was the plague, at others syphilis, while today offers BSE and bird flu (Ihlen 2009). Turner (1994) also suggests that Beck is mistaken in his description of the ways in which standardisation and regulation have changed. Although global risks introduce a new level of uncertainty, evidence suggests that there is still an over-riding attempt to standardise worldwide (Martin and Johnson 2001)

Another criticism asks whether the mechanisms for greater public 'voice' and participation in decisions that Beck seems to envisage in his model actually exist. Fairhead and Leech, for example, argue that he makes "assumptions about the capacity for new forms and institutions of public engagement to emerge and have influence" (Fairhead and Leech, p. 225)

A particularly damning critique is that Beck's account is garbled and contradictory, particularly in reference to the ecological and environmental parts of his discussions. In 'Risk Society', for example, he tries to argue both that the planet is increasingly at risk of harm from objective factors, and also that these factors are socially constructed and therefore not part of the objective world (Lidskog 1993). There is also some tension in his work between analysing the situation and advocating activism as a solution, with descriptive and prescriptive approaches often running side by side. Beck also confuses the concepts 'risk' and 'hazard', in some places suggesting that they are separate ideas, and at others assuming they are equal terms (Hannigan 1995, p. 24). A similar criticism is that the notion of the risk society is too vague to be of use: for example, his discussion of the role played by the media is not based on factual research or published data (Mooney and Evans 2007)

Finally, criticisms have been made of the idealistic and utopian slant of Beck's ideas. It is a large scale attempt to understand the nature of the world as a whole, and to suggest what the world should be like. Deuchars suggests that there is an element of cultural imperialism in Beck's suggestions, with a hidden assumption that the enlightened residents of the developed world (who have already been through the process of industrialisation) need to set

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an example to other countries using reflexivity to address problems of risk (Deuchars 2004). Others suggest that the aim to explain so much undermines the success of his smaller-scale analyses (Mythen and Walklate 2006)

4. Conclusion

Certainly, Beck's theory is a persuasive and powerful one. It has had repercussions not just for the understanding of risk and risk management but in diverse other fields particularly studies of ecology, the environment and sociology. It is complex, and includes different ideas including an analysis of how the perception of risk is distinct to the modern era, the role played by the media, and the nature of reflexivity in determining how we manage risk. While the theory has benefits, there are also a number of problems which mean it should be approached with caution. Particularly, it seems to involve a somewhat naive and objectivist concept of reality which ignores the role played by subjective experience, it is rather fatalistic and deterministic about historical change, and its underpinnings in thorough research are questionable.

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