

Sociology essays - risk society theory



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Risk Society Theory

What are the main features of Ulrich Beck's 'Risk Society' theory? To what extent does it challenge the explanations of inequality based upon class, gender and race?

This essay will give brief context to the term coined by Ulrich Beck (1992), 'risk society', before it discusses the main characteristics of Beck's theory; risk, individualisation and reflexive modernity, characteristics that all intertwine with one another. Demonstrates a realist approach to risk, throughout some of his writings however he demonstrates a weak version of social constructionism. (Lupton)

"Society is increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk" (Giddens 1999: 3). Ulrich Beck (1992) coined the term 'risk society', which is used to describe the type of risks that have primarily been created as a result of the industrialisation and modernisation processes. Beck (1992) examined the hazards of pre-industrial society to see whether they are just as damaging as the risks that we are facing in modernity.

He concludes that we are not progressing towards a post-modern society as Baudrillard and Lyotard argue, but instead we are moving into an era that he calls 'the second modernity'. He continues to say that 'manufactured risks' (Giddens, 1999), which are products of human activity, have possibly become more 'deadlier,' than the epidemics which plagued our society in the pre-modern epoch. However it is Elliot (2002) who states that Beck is not

implying that we now live in a more hazardous society, but that he acknowledges the types of risks in society have altered.

Beck et al (2003) states that modernity has not been replaced but that it has become more problematic. Beck (1992) however is not as pessimistic as other theorists such as Weber, Foucault or Adorno; he states that for society to evolve then modernisation must become 'reflexive'. Therefore introducing 'Reflexive modernity' as a central feature of Beck's 'risk theory', which is a process whereby development is attained through reform.

At this point questions begin to arise because the concepts of post-modernity and reflexive modernity tend to overlap and thus it is necessary to explain the differences between postmodernism and second-modernity. Although post-modernity and second-modernity share some similarities, they have one clear distinction; second-modernity is focused more on evolutionary advances, thus reforming the society; rather than the radical idea that postmodernist put forward, the idea of revolution.

'Risk' itself, Beck argues has become increasingly central to our global society:

" Indeed, in a world that could literally destroy itself, risk managing and risk monitoring increasingly influence both constitutions and calculations of social action"

(Elliot, 2002: 8)

He, like most of society uses the term 'risk' as a synonym for danger, a danger that is caused through the need of 'controlling' certain aspects of

society, in aid of heightening social security (Elliot, 2002). However Beck (1999) had previously stated that ‘ultimate security’ is unattainable to human beings. This ‘new risk’ according to Beck differs from the ‘risk’ experience by pre-modern society; instead of ‘risk’ being generated by natural disasters, which were seen as a ‘stroke of fate’, it has derived through the evolution of technology, and individual choice. The latter is seen as crucial to Beck’s debate, as it “*is societal intervention, in the form of decision-making that transforms incalculable hazards into calculable risks*” (Elliot, 2002: 3) thus Beck’s theory of risk society has become a political debate.

For Beck the “*production of risk has become more important than the production of wealth*” (Albrow, 1996: 9). Here Beck introduces another key element to his debate, the idea of ‘globalisation’. He argues that the risk of nuclear radiation, many modern technologies, the greater mobility of diseases, global warming, and invasive species affects everyone, globally. Supported by Elliot (2002) who points out; that Beck mention even; the rich and powerful are unable to avoid hazards such as global warming. Thus creating what Beck (1992) describes as the ‘*boomerang effect*’, which simple means that even those who produced or once profited from certain risks, will sooner or later be effected by them, thus, in effect, eliminating the element of class inequalities.

Bringing the essay back to a more political content; class, race and gender have conventionally been seen as the main political conflicts within society; however Beck argues that this has been replaced with ‘*new globalising conflicts*’ (Elliot, 2002: 11). This universal theory that Beck has created

states that no one is safe from the harmful risk that new-modernity predicted, it has emerged on a global scale, making boundaries seem irrelevant, and for Beck this global scale was a by-product of 'reflexive modernisation'. Thus seen as a positive step forward on dissolving social inequalities, however with globalisation occurring, and the blurring of boundaries it led to social agents becoming more individualised.

In pre-modern society it was stated that our lives were pre-destined, based on the chances given at birth. However under the notion of Beck's 'risk society', he argues that society is reshaping its social structure and thus creating more individualised social agents, as he concludes: "*individuals must then, free of these structures, reflexivity construct their own biographies*" (Beck, 1992: 3), making individualisation another main feature of Beck's theory. Individualisation, as Lupton mentions is the '*private side of globalisation*' (2002: 83).

Individualisation was seen as a positive step forward into post-modernity. However it is Elliot (2002) who states that individualisation itself has become problematic because what may be seen as beneficial to individuals today, can become problematic tomorrow. This is supported by advance technology being able to test the genetic health of the unborn, seen as a positive advancement, however it was argued by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim that it became problematic for the parents, as they saw it as a compulsory to use 'such technologies' in order to give their offspring the best possible start in life (1995).

Individualisation leads to an increasing demand upon individuals, as well as increasing choice, especially as there has been a breakdown of traditional certainties that were originally structured through age, gender and social class, enabling society to be set free from the social forms of industrial society. Generating more risk including “ *unemployment or underemployment, marital instability and family breakdown, accompanied by high levels of anxiety and insecurity.*” (pg 85).

Therefore beginning to answer the second part of this question ‘...to what extent does it challenge the explanations of inequalities...?’ Inequality within society has always been a widely controversial issue; for Beck it is part of every day society, and thus is a feature for his theory of risk. As questions have been raised such as; are certain types/groups of people more affected by these ‘ new risks’? Does that differ from the inequality found in pre-modernity?

Beck does state that certain groups of people are affected more than others by the distribution and growth of risk. However ‘ risk’ has not surpassed problems of inequality and distribution of goods, it has intensified them. For Marxist theoreticians the situation has become ambivalent; on the one hand income inequalities have remained unaltered, however the importance of the social class system seems to have been significantly reduced.

He spoke of a new kind of capitalism; ‘ capitalism without class,’ focusing more on the capitalism of the individual, the result is the problems of the system have lessened politically and transformed into a ‘ novel of personal experimentation’ (Elliot, 2002: 7) allowing the ‘ risk’ personal failure.

Gender, Beck (1992) argued has also altered within society, there has been a breakdown of the strict stereotypical ideologies. This is primarily reflected through the increasing acceptance of divorce within society, which Beck argues is the 'trap door' through which women fall into 'new poverty' as their support and in essence stability is being reduced, and as a result; 'risk' has become part of 'family life'.

Equality therefore, is challenged by 'risk' because as a result of more decision making within the family, there has become more of a need for the correct balance of their desires of autonomy and self-expression, with their need for dependence and emotional stability that is established through the dependence of a secure relationship. For Beck refers to the 'omni-dimensional' (1992: 103) inequality of genders; arguing that the 'epochal changes' that we have encountered regarding law and education, are more apparent 'on paper' than the behaviour and beliefs of society, and rather than increasing equality, the paradoxical effect has intensified inequalities, with that new 'personal risks', like that of the insecurities related to employment and economy within new modernity.

Individualization is therefore burdened with risk (ibid.). With the breakdown of many of the traditional certainties structured through age, gender and social class, a plurality of new risks are generated, including unemployment or underemployment, marital instability and family breakdown, accompanied by high levels of anxiety and insecurity. Life becomes less certain even while it is placed more under one's control.

This move towards individualization does not mean that social inequalities or structuring of opportunities through such attributes as class, gender or ethnicity have disappeared. Rather, in the face of individualization the influence of these structures have become less obvious and acknowledged as affecting life chances. Inequalities have become primarily viewed as individualized, perceived as 'psychological dispositions: as personal inadequacies, guilt feelings, anxieties, conflicts, and neuroses' (Beck 1992b: 100).