

RISK SOCIETY, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND RELIGION

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Summary

The Risk Society thesis warns us not only about the rise and change of type of risks that the whole world is facing, but also about everyday life people's knowledge of it and its consequent rise in anxiety. Looking at the arguments about sustainable development and change within the field of religion, in the light of this Risk Society thesis, this entry argues that sustainable development must take into account the warnings from this thesis and that development, when creating 'goods' (e.g. wealth), must avoid the emergence of 'bads' (e.g. risks); that is development must move towards a 'reflexive developmental' approach. Contrary to the mainstream opinion that religions are not involved in this kind of dialogue, this entry underlines the fact that there are religious groups who are active in sustainable and reflexive development (e.g. Ecotheology and neo-pagan groups), and some (e.g. fundamentalist groups) offer some island of security to people's rise of anxiety. This entry then raises the assumption that if, among other factors, sustainable and reflexive development fail to stop the rise of risks and of people's anxiety about them, religious fundamentalist groups might grow.

1. Introduction

Concerns that have emerged over environmental risks have increased not only within the scientific and political spheres but also within the public. A recent report on changes within our natural environment, the fourth since 1990, developed by an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and overseen by the United Nations, concluded that there is a 90 percent chance that human-caused emissions are the main factor in warming since 1950. Leaks of the report have been found in various media outlets where findings range from the Arctic Ocean becoming devoid of sea ice during

summer later in the century, to Europe's Mediterranean shores becoming barely habitable in summers. The predicted rise in temperature of between 3.5 to 8 degrees Fahrenheit forecasts an uncertain future for the vast majority of the global population, where environmental refugees are expected to be in the millions. As John Holdren, the president of the American Association for the Advancement of science and an energy and climate expert at Harvard states: "We basically have three choices: mitigation, adaptation and suffering [...] we're going to do some of each. The question is what the mix is going to be. The more mitigation we do, the less adaptation will be required and the less suffering there will be" (Kanter & Revkin 2007, A13).

This report, the product of scientific teams and governmental representatives from more than 100 countries, which has become available to the public at large, is a clear example of Ulrich Beck's Risk Society thesis. The world of risk for the general population of Western societies and increasingly developing countries is full of hazards and risks that are not as clear cut as previous generations. Risk society, according to Beck (1992), is an inescapable structural condition of advanced industrialization where the produced risks of that system undermine and/or cancel the established safety systems that nation states and large companies were seen to be able to provide in the past (Beck 1996, 31).

Because of this, Beck et al. (1994) argue that the central problem of Western societies is not the production and distribution of goods such as wealth and employment in conditions of scarcity, but the prevention or minimisation of risks. As quickly mentioned above, individuals are daily bombarded with debates and conflicts, which proliferate over these risks. Bauman (1998, 65) illustrates this point well when he states:

it [risk] is now dissolved in the minute, yet innumerable, traps and ambushes of daily life. One tends to hear it knocking now and again, daily, in fatty fast food, in listeria-infected eggs, in cholesterol rich temptations, in sex without condoms, in cigarette smoke, in asthma-inducing carpet mites, in the dirt you see and the germs you do not.

Accordingly, individuals in contemporary societies have moved towards a greater awareness of risks, deal with them on an everyday basis, and are far more sensitive to what they define as 'risks', or threats to their health, economic security or emotional wellbeing than they were in previous eras (Lupton 1999). These risks, paradoxically, are an outcome of western industrial development (see below), and this might thus raise some concerns about future development in the world, no matter how sustainable the development is. Indeed, by working on developing all countries of the world towards an industrial model, even if it alleviates poverty, it can possibly create more risks than wealth. While addressing this conundrum, this entry will also ponder on the role of religion in this debate. Can religion help us towards a sustainable development that does not create stronger perception of risks than we have at the moment? Are religions partly the source of the solution or of the problem? Or perhaps, as societies, and especially the western ones, have moved toward the risk society because of cultural and structural changes, religions might have simply followed the same path and have changed as well? This encyclopaedic entry will first detail what the risk society is, and more specifically, its influence on the rise of anxiety and sense of insecurity in, at least, the western world. This sense of insecurity is the focus of this entry which links together the notions of risk

society, sustainable development and religion. It will be argued that failing to have a sustainable development attuned to the warnings from the risk society thesis, among other factors such as the war against terror (Spence 2005), increases levels of insecurity. Because of this sense of insecurity, it is argued that religion can act as islands of security and can also work directly on offering remedies to the challenges of sustainable development.

2. Risk Society Thesis

Beck's theory of risk creates a new periodisation of modern history that is divided into traditional society, simple modernity and reflexive modernity. Each of these periods contains risks and hazards of their own, but as Lash and Urry (1994) point out there are qualitative differences between the types of risk involved in each. The concept of risk in traditional societies (e.g. during the Middle Ages) seemed to exclude the idea of human culpability and responsibility. "At that time, risk designated the possibility of an objective danger, an act of God" (Luhmann, 1993, 226). Risk was perceived to derive from natural events such as a storm, flood or epidemic rather than a human creation. Here, risks were seen to come from some 'other' – gods, nature or demons. Accordingly, individuals could do very little but to take steps to reduce its impact. Risks were not man made, they were seen as natural and if they were constructed, such as wartime casualties, they did not follow from technology or economic progress. Simple modernity (let's say between 1789 and the 1960s) saw the industrialisation of society, which involved the unequal creation of wealth, the formation of new social classes and an inequality of risk distribution (e.g. working classes being more at risk than the upper classes because of the difference in their work conditions and/or the place where they lived). In the early days of industrialization, risks were evident to the senses - they could be smelt, touched, tasted or observed with the naked eye (e.g. explosion in a factory, collapsing of a coal mine). These risks were evaluated, predicted and calculable.

Since, let's say the 1960s, reflexive modernity (also called High Modernity by Beck), by distinction, involves the distribution of 'bads', that is, new patterns of status inequality and the democratisation of risks. In contrast to the dangers of modernity in its industrial heydays, many of the major risks today (e.g. toxins in foodstuffs or the nuclear threat) largely escape perception and calculation. They are no longer constrained within the constructed boundaries of nation states (e.g. the explosion of Chernobyl which has affected diverse countries in the world and which we are still suffering from its unknown consequences). The risks of reflexive modernity are invisible, uninsurable, systematic, generic and democratic (Turner 2001). Beck argues that there has been an introduction of global risk parameters that previous generations have not had to contend with. This reality is due to the failure of modern institution in their attempt to control the risks that have been created. A clear example is the ecological crisis that the report mentioned in the introduction of this entry details; not only must we prevent these risks from this ecological crisis but we must also acknowledge that it is human kind interference with nature that has created these risks.

The risk society thesis might seem absurd for some on first examination. After all, our contemporary world, that is reflexive modernity, appears so much safer than that of

previous times. We have learned to control most contingencies, for example relating to diseases, accidents or violence. As Van Loon (2002) indicates, even natural hazards appear less random than they used to be. Although we cannot stop the hurricane or earthquake we can reasonably predict, and therefore make the necessary structural arrangements as well as emergency planning. Further examples can obviously be cited here, however, it is safe to summarize that life in modern western societies is now safer than ever. Whilst this form of sentiment is quite sensible it does miss the obvious point in the Risk society thesis; the risks of reflexive modernity are not ‘real’, they are ‘becoming real’ (Beck 1992; 2000; Van Loon, 2002). To adequately describe the ‘risk society’ environment, we can turn to the creator of the thesis, Beck (1998: 12):

We no longer choose to take risks; we have them thrust upon us. We are living on a ledge – in a random risk society, from which nobody can escape. Our society has become riddled with random risks. Calculating and managing risks which nobody really knows has become one of our main preoccupations. That used to be a specialist job for actuaries, insurers and scientists. Now we all have to engage in it, with whatever rusty tools we can lay our hands on – sometimes the calculator, sometimes the astrology column. The basic question here is: how can we ignore it and possibly get hurt or killed? Or should we be alarmed and stop or exclude all likely causes? Which course of action is ‘rational’, the first or the second option?

Beck is arguing that we live in a world that we have grown to understand as increasingly more risky; a world in which technological change is rapid, people and places are more intricately connected and in a time where there appears to be even more of which to be afraid. We only have to glance at a newspaper to see headlines of terrorism or new deadly viral outbreaks.

Globally, we are not only concerned with health epidemics such as AIDS and SARS, health issues such as the overuse and misuse of antibiotics and the growing resistance of infectious agents to them, but also to environmental issues such as El Nino and global warming. The list can of course be extended to concerns over crime, toxins and carcinogens in the food we eat, bacteria in the water we drink, reproductive technologies and the increase in multiple births and reported birth defects, radiation, malnutrition, overeating, driving, flying, taking a train or ferry, mass production and pollution, the return of diseases such as tuberculosis; and the list goes on and on. The risk society thesis, therefore, depicts our current society in which inhabitants are exposed to not only high technological innovation and scientific development but also to the ramifications of them – positive (wealth as ‘goods’) and negative (risks as ‘bads’).

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Biographical Sketches

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Alpha Possamai-Inesedy has recently completed a PhD on the sociology of reproduction and the risk society at the University of Western Sydney. She has published on this topic and on the sociology of religion. She is one of the editors of *The Chameleon and the Quilt: A Cross Disciplinary Exploration in the Social Sciences* published in 2005. In 2006, she co-organized a workshop sponsored by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia on 'Risking Motherhood in the 21st century: The Politics of Maternity Care in a "Risk Society"'. This workshop resulted in the publication of a special issue of the *Health Sociology Review* of which Alpha was also a co-editor.