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*Andrea Antonilli*

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### **1. Author information**

*Andrea Antonilli*

Department of legal and social sciences, Gabriele D'Annunzio  
University of Chieti–Pescara, Italy

### **2. Author e-mail address**

*Andrea Antonilli*

E-mail: [andrea.antonilli@unich.it](mailto:andrea.antonilli@unich.it)

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# *World Risk Society and Ulrich Beck's Manufactured Uncertainties*

Andrea Antonilli\*

Corresponding author:  
Andrea Antonilli  
E-mail: andrea.antonilli@unich.it

## **Abstract**

The aim of this contribution is to pursue Ulrich Beck's line of thought with particular reference to the rise of the 'world risk society' triggered by globalization and by the metamorphosis of nature and risk features in early modernity. Globalized risk appears to be a feature specific to second modernity and a useful instrument for the interpretation of the social transformations now under way. Risks undergo a process of hardly reversible universalization: wherever produced, their distribution, and therefore their effects, will impact not only on a limited local dimension but will interest the whole global community. Speaking of world risk society means considering the extended range of the consequences coming from new risks which appear to be delocalized across space, time and societies, and to be incalculable and not subject to compensation. The inadequacy of the various branches of expert knowledge in foreseeing and confronting these new forms of risk sets in motion a series of paradoxical actions that appear in the spread of what Beck calls fabricated uncertainties, i.e., insufficiently thought-out decisions produced by organizations of knowledge in an attempt to contain those uncertainties already in existence; the effect of this is a failure to guarantee an on-going choice between a risky option and a safe one, but to select that option that may cause the least possible damage. Introducing the distinction between uncertainties fabricated either unwittingly or on purpose, this contribution focuses on an analysis of the author's conception of the globalized terrorism of Islamic origin.

Keywords: world risk society, manufactured uncertainties, global terrorism.

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\* Department of legal and social sciences, D'Annunzio University of Chieti–Pescara, Italy.

## **1. Ulrich Beck: the sociologist who challenged the risk**

About forty years after the publication of 'Society of risk', there are no doubts about the extraordinary predictive character that Beck's considerations on risk have had in the field of social sciences and beyond (think of decision-making processes in the political and economic fields). Faced with the great political and social evolutions that have taken place in recent decades, primarily those linked to the advent of economic and technological globalization and the consequent geopolitical changes, the German sociologist cannot fail to recognize the merit of having identified - among the first - risk as a key to interpreting the processes of modernization and evolution of contemporary society. Beck interpreted the transition from a first to a second modernity as the result of a profound discontinuity characterized by the lack of an idea of uniform and constant (inexhaustible?) Of progress and by the overwhelming advent of its exact opposite, that is the risk itself, with its ability to undermine the foundations of the solid rationality of linear modernity. In fact, modern societies "are built on the ground of insecurity, because they are societies of individuals who cannot find a guarantee of protection either in themselves or in the immediate entourage" (see Castel, 2004). Its constant production, its pervasiveness and its increasingly difficult calculability (crisis of the Weberian principle of rationality with respect to purpose) make complex - if not fallible - the operations - traditionally experienced by "expert knowledges" - of anticipation, control and of estimation of that spectrum of uncertainties that characterized the first phase of modernity. Therefore, Beck's first element of merit lies in having identified a new semantics of risk, still valid today, which considers it an alarm bell that should make evident the contradictions (discontinuities) widespread in social contexts. This aspect takes on even greater importance when, during the first years of the 21st century, the scholar - probably stimulated by some criticisms received from the scientific community - reformulates his perspective in the light of the advent and results of globalization and the consequent globalization. risk. The scholar, in fact, reworks his theoretical framework by building a critical theory of the society of risk, identifying a close connection between national realities, civil society and political decisions on the one hand and the production of new global risks on the other. In this sense, Beck identifies the category of "fabricated risk", which is distinguished from any other risk traditionally understood, as the result of a process of social construction. Beck therefore identifies new and complex categories of risk, such as natural disasters (climate change and its consequences); the technical risks deriving from the incessant technological and IT progress; a different form of risk, namely the terrorist threat. The topicality of these manufactured uncertainties is tragically found, for example, in the

spread of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic: it is now an incontrovertible fact that the Coronavirus has become a global phenomenon and that its effects are affecting contemporary institutions: the damage done to the economies of states and their political decisions are proof. In Beck's words, the emergence of the pandemic "generates a dynamic of political and cultural change that undermines state bureaucracies, challenges the dominance of science and reshapes the boundaries and battles of contemporary politics" (Beck, 1999b: 45).

The global nature of the new risks produces two main effects: on the one hand, it discredits the effectiveness of national policies in being able to face and overcome them; on the other hand, it creates a sort of community of destiny that has the effect of aggregating all those individuals gripped by the same risks and of giving life to a new ethics of planetary responsibility oriented towards the future (Beck, 2008a). And here Beck sees the world risk society as a sort of regulatory ideal of social communities.

Despite the indisputable relevance of the theoretical contribution of Stolp's sociologist, there are some aspects that step on the side of critical observations. In particular, we intend to refer on the one hand to a series of refined, eclectic and in-depth reflections (diagnostic orientation) which, however, do not produce exhaustive answers and solution proposals, so much so that some have argued that they are the only point of view of risks, in many respects, does not seem to allow (after all, like the many interpretations of the globalized world produced) an explanatory analysis of the contemporary globalized and capitalist society; on the other hand, its approach to risk, which is only theoretical and can only be referred to a negative value of the risks themselves.

With regard to the first question, an example is represented by the cosmopolitan thrust which, generated by the common need to defend oneself from global risks ('community of destiny'), would lead to the overcoming of the individual policies of the nation states ('methodological nationalism') and to the construction of an innovative form of political legitimacy of a federal nature, a sort of transnational state capable of expressing a 'politics of globalization' and producer of an international law that regulates and settles disputes between individual states. According to some critics, this vision - albeit valid in a general sense - would not be feasible in the contemporary globalized world, in which there are already supranational collaboration initiatives that have, up to now, disregarded the objectives of peace and order. The constant economic, political and military conflicts that grip Europe and the rest of the world bear witness to this. More than a policy of globalization, these transnational bodies are expressing a policy of fragmentation, an inevitable consequence of the contingent diversity between states and national groups.

Regarding the second observation, there are those who believe (see Dean, 1999) that Beck, instead of conceiving risk in an all-encompassing way, it would

be preferable to focus on a concrete and empirical analysis of this, in order to formulate techniques and strategies to contain the risks. its negative effects. Just as risk can be understood as an artifact of society, the latter can also be a reality built on it. Furthermore, another trait criticized is Beck's tendency to decline risk negatively (pure risk), considering it exclusively as a potential damage, while isolating its other nature, namely that of opportunity, of the possibility of giving rise to positive and advantageous consequences (speculative risk).

However, despite the critical points raised, Ulrich Beck's theoretical reflection was both a break with preceding narrations on the mutation of social systems and a new interpretation of the society of his time. Through his lucid ability to read social phenomena, his aim was to analyse western society and highlight – ferociously at times – its critical points and contradictions, managing also to outline possible remedial horizons. His risk society is still today taken as a reference point throughout the western world to better explain the current dynamics of our cosmopolitan society, and to better clarify the issues linked to modernity. It is therefore in this interpretative framework that Ulrich Beck carries forward his attempt to make an overall analysis of the society of his time, taking the topic of risk as the cornerstone of his theoretical construction.

## **2. Risk as a tool for analyzing contemporary society**

While originating in medieval times<sup>1</sup>, over the centuries the term “risk”<sup>2</sup> has seen its own semantic range evolve, until it has been applied in an enormous variety of ambits. The main changes in the use of the risk category are linked to the shift to modernity, a process starting in the seventeenth century and gathering momentum in the eighteenth.

Understood as the way of 'life or social organisation that emerged in Europe from about the XVII century onwards then extending its influence to almost all the world' (Giddens, 1994: 15), modernity is founded on the idea elaborated by the Enlightenment that at the root of human progress and the social order there is an over-riding objective vision of the world, pursued in a positivist manner through scientific investigation and instrumental, rational thought. Furthermore, the rise of the probability theory and statistics stimulated the modern elaboration of the risk category, identifying fundamental instruments for calculating and weighing it. In this sense, the idea came about that rational criteria would overcome the uncertainty of decisions, in some way making

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<sup>1</sup> In reference to marine insurance, the term 'risk' was used to indicate any perils that might endanger the passage.

<sup>2</sup> As Mary Douglas says, risk is the probability of an event combined with the dimension of all losses and profits that the event itself will entail (cf. 1996).

unknown future factors foreseeable. It is in fact since the XVIII century that risk has been tackled in scientific terms, with recourse to the mathematical-probabilistic and statistical disciplines. The modern era has seen its definitive evolution in a mainly technical-engineering acceptance, in reference to the probability of an event happening and flanked by its economic outlook based on a cost-benefit analysis.

In the social sciences, the topic of risk has become preponderant only since the 1960s 'to the point of generating specific theorizations and the identification of the evaluation and management of situations of risk as one of the central problems of contemporary society' (Bucchi, Neresini, 2001: 181). In fact, affirms Luhmann (cf. 1996), the task of sociology is to offer a different theory from that of other disciplines, in that risk in contemporary societies is above all a social issue. Frequently we approach risk considering the evaluations that are made upstream and the willingness to accept it. We have to orientate ourselves on the selection mechanisms which lead us to consider certain risks rather than others, just because that process is regulated by social factors and not by individual decision. For this reason, risk is a distinctive feature of modern society, capable of undermining the mechanisms of the institutions themselves.

The approach to risk analysis and study, therefore, is a complex operation since setting it in context becomes of fundamental importance, i.e., identifying a specific conceptual framework in which to place and analyse it.

In the ambit of the social sciences, there are different approaches to risk study, among which the social-cultural approach (so-called social constructivism), which focuses precisely on the social context, that is, the place of choice in which the social construction of risk takes place. Therefore, social constructivism refers to the role of social processes in the construction, representation and perception of risk. The macro-sociological approach – called "risk society" – in which Ulrich Beck has a front-line role, studies risk in the light of social, economic and political changes in the contexts in which it appears, and therefore in the perspective of social macro-structures, its political implications and the conflicts it generates.

This approach states that the individual in late modernity lives in the so-called "risk culture" in consideration of the destructive effects of new risks with their unimaginable impacts, and that this has thrown contemporary society into a state of profound, constant uncertainty totally unknown to previous eras. This approach is typical of critical structuralists since 'they tend to favour criticism of the ways in which social institutions (and in particular the State, the economic system and the juridical system) exert their power over individuals, limiting their margins of action and their autonomy' (Lupton, 2003: 32). Beck is of the opinion that in modern societies there are structures independent of the individual's awareness and, therefore, able to limit the action of the social actor.

Furthermore, according to the author's vision, risk takes on new characteristics and its consequences are potentially boundless, especially through certain phenomena of universal effect, primarily globalization. Hence, the (global) risk appears as the specific feature of today's society and a useful instrument to interpret the social transformations in act.

### **3. The risk horizon in Ulrich Beck: from linear modernity to second modernity**

After the publication of *Risikogesellschaft* (1986), Beck devoted many works to the genealogy of risk and its manifestations in contemporary society.

The rise of risk society in his view regards the outcome of the passage from a first (linear) modernity to a second (reflexive) modernity, a process in which fundamental assumptions, insufficiencies and antinomies of the first modernity and its industrial development come to a crisis and are queried.

In the opinion of the German sociologist, in traditional society any event, even potentially catastrophic, was experienced as something preordained, triggered by an outside entity. The natural trait of danger, understood as an external happening not connected with the decisional rationality of any individual, placed it in a different position to that of risk: risks are produced, dangers happen (cf. Jarvis, 2007). Later, society began to experiment with attempts to control risks, with the aim of constructing a certainty that could be foreseen and planned for: that is when the consequences of risks become a political issue, and that is the turning point.

The intervention of society by means of political decisions, says Beck, transforms incalculable danger into a calculable risk, hence possible decisions. Therefore, with the advent of industrial society, risk calculability becomes essential – although not totally achievable – also for an understanding of the socio-political dynamics characterizing the XX century. Every more frequently, new risks replace the old dangers (cf. Beck, 2000a).

As of the 1950s, however, this virtuous mechanism seems to grind to a halt whenever the result of risky decisions, due to the excessive range of phenomena, brings about high levels of incalculability and therefore a lack of prediction and control.

It is at this point that Beck identifies the premises for the advent of a second stage of modernity, capable on the one hand of completing certain processes begun in the first modernity, on the other of radicalizing such processes to the point of bringing under discussion the premises themselves (cf. Beck, 2000b).

If in linear modernity economic processes aiming at enrichment produced consequences that were negative though calculable, today development

proceeds in the opposite direction since the unexpected effects produced cannot be calculated *ab origine*: 'due to the fact that their nature cannot be pinpointed and their effects are potentially unlimited, risks in later modern society prove of difficult calculability' (Lupton 2003: 70). Once upon a time, risks were connected to nature and the impossibility of containing external events; today they derive from endogenous processes mainly linked to technology. Within his study parabola, the author develops his main theory identifying in technological development the primary cause of risk proliferation: 'The growth of the power of technical-economic "progress" is increasingly over-shadowed by the production of risks' (Beck 2000a: 18). In times past, low technological development determined a series of dangers which, up to now, appear connected to excessive production: the distribution of riches goes hand-in-hand with the distribution of risks in all those contexts in which the forces of production fully manifest their power, causing the expansion of unknown, self-destructive risks (cf. Beck, 2000a) that point to 'an uncertainty and insecurity that today go beyond what existed in the first, solid modernity' (Pitch, 2008: 182).

The various technologies may have devastating global effects in their application, and the consequences produced appear unexpected and not immediately recognizable. From this point of view, the change coming about in the rationality of science is highly important. This monopoly seems in fact to be compromised, since there can be no risk experts, given that it is no longer possible to quantify the threat and to measure the risk danger objectively (cf. Beck, 2000a). Equally, new risks have to confront scarce or insufficient forms of calculability. Previous means of foreseeing risks have collapsed, since 'if we distinguish between calculable and non-calculable threats, under the surface of risk calculation, new forms of imponderability and threats produced by industrial choices multiply in the picture of globalized high-risk industries, for objectives both of war and of peace' (Beck, 2000a: 29). From this viewpoint, technological development has 'reached a threshold beyond which political, juridical and economic structures for the control and compensation of collateral effects from man's manipulation of the environment are ineffective' (Campesi, 2009: 108). With the failure to control man-made risks – and the consequent incapacity of man to direct events – according to the sociologist, a society of non-knowledge comes about, in which the efforts of those possessing knowledge are vain to hold back phenomena that are utterly autonomous and no longer governable.

A front-line role – in determining this state of things – is that of globalization, that is, 'the evident loss of boundaries for everyday action in the various spheres of the economy, information, ecology, technology, transcultural conflicts and conflicts in civil society, so basically something familiar yet

inconceivable, difficult to grasp, but something which radically transforms daily life with unequivocal strength, forcing everyone to adjust, to find answers' (Beck, 1999: 39). The globalizing aspect is found in the fact that wherever risks are produced, their distribution – and hence their consequences – will not concern only a local, confined dimension but will impact on the entire global community: risk undergoes a universalization process, extremely difficult to reverse: 'the machine has thrown its driver to the ground and rushes haywire across space. At the height of the rationalization process, reason has become irrational, stupid' (Horkheimer, Adorno, 2010: 113).

It is just at this moment of crisis – as of the 1950s – that the virtuous mechanism that upheld linear modernity seems to have shuddered to a halt: the infallibility of science and the State's claim to control totter when confronted with the lack of their (deluded) capacity to contain the negative consequences of the risks they had consciously taken. Through their excessive zones of influence and the impossibility of taking into consideration all the intervening variables, risks present high levels of incalculability and imponderability. Thus the certainties of modernity are certain no longer and risk becomes the inevitable horizon for human action and an element of social reproduction: 'Modern societies "are built on the ground of insecurity since they are societies of individuals who can find no guarantee of protection, either in themselves or in their immediate entourage"' (cf. Castel, 2004). In contemporary society especially, unknown or unwanted consequences of action become dominant and the risk/opportunity ratio is pushed to the extreme. Modern risks – the consequences of which are often unforeseeable and harmful – present two main characteristics: they become manifest both specifically and locally, and non-specifically and universally.

#### **4. The world risk society and the reflexive profile of the contemporary world**

The phenomenon marking the passage from industrial modernity to the world risk society comprises the appearance of global risks, those 'dangers produced and anticipated by man which allow for no delimitation, whether spatial, temporal or social. Thus the basic conditions and the fundamental institutions of first modernity, of industrial modernity – class conflicts, national statehood and the idea of linear technical-economic progress – are cancelled' (Beck, 2008b: 132). The basic singularity of global society is the cumbersome presence of science and technology, fields which no-one – experts aside – is able to understand fully, let alone to govern: 'the typical aspect of the risks of today's civilization is that they escape human perception and are found in the

sphere of physical and chemical formulae' (Beck 2000b: 25). Risks are perceived when they make themselves visible (unseen things cannot be confronted), when the so-called "expert knowledges" (science, technology, politics) bring them to the attention of the community. The nature of contemporary risks is above all to be found, according to Beck, as well as in their catastrophic potential, in their invisibility: "They can only become "visible" when socially defined within knowledge or knowledge-processing for a such as science, the legal system and the mass media' (Cottle, 1998: 8).

In this regard, Luhmann (cf. 1996) distinguishes two counterparts of the decisional process: the "deciders" whose task is to make the decisive "costs-benefits" calculation, and those "involved" who undergo the consequences of this calculation with no possibility of contributing. The problems arise mainly from the fact that the risk may be differently evaluated by the two sides, because for the former it is a sort of calculated risk, while for the latter it is a risky situation about which they are unable to estimate correctly every aspect and which is not in line with their hopes. Turner (cf. 1978) dealt with the social, cultural and technical obstacles to the correct perception of danger during the stage defined by the author as 'the incubation of disaster', wondering what the element may be that dissuades people from acquiring and using appropriate information and advice in such a way as to prevent accidents and disasters of various nature. Again following the author, there are two distinct orders of factors: the lack of foresight and the failure of foresight, factors which Turner tends to bring together. The first lack is due to humans' limited capacity to understand and predict certain specific dynamics of nature. The failure in foresight, however, happens every time the indications of risk are not recognized or held in sufficient consideration. Therefore, for whatever reason, individuals often do not have at their disposal a good basis of information regarding those same risks: 'Science ascertains the presence of risks, the population perceives the risks' (Beck, 2000a: 76). The tendency not to thematize risks that are not directly perceptible is an instrument that fosters those same risks and the risk society in general. In other words, risks seem to be 'social constructions defined according to precise strategies' (Beck 1996b: 4), defined publicly and culturally. Furthermore, as regards the ambit of risk communication, Beck finds a discrepancy between the language used and reality: we do not have a language able to inform future generations regarding the risks we produced in the past and continue to produce today through ever more sophisticated technology.

The modern world increasingly sees the contrast between the language used to describe calculable risks and non-quantifiable uncertainties (cf. Beck, 2002). In addition, institutional language, full of control and reliability in communicating how catastrophes are confronted, comes into conflict with the

mass media language that describes, in no uncertain terms, the destructive potential of the new risks that are turning the whole world upside down. When risk is perceived as being pervasively everywhere, possible reactions (cf. Beck, 2008b: 80) are: negation (the fruit of modern culture); apathy (expressed in post-modern nihilism); transformation (which is the cosmopolitan tendency of the world risk society).

However, although science and technology functioned as leaders and guides during the linear modernization stage in confronting and managing risks, with the rise of the globalization process their legitimation undergoes a serious setback caused by the impossibility of carrying out their traditional functions.

Unlike traditional risks, global risks undermine the socio-political and cognitive assumptions of modern society, since they bring to an irreversible crisis its two regulatory foundations: on one hand, technical-scientific knowledge with its predictive and calculation ability, on the other, the modern state with its regulatory and controlling power (cf. D'Andrea, Lo Russo, Zolo, 2009).

Watching the end of an age implies wondering how to build a new one: the on-going erosion of modern society (and of its social capital) has given rise to new forms and structures that lead to a self-transformation of industrial society, which Beck calls the second modernity and which is replete with reflexivity. 'Reflexive modernization' seems to be the result of a process marked both by continuity and by breakage. Modernity becomes reflexive through a secondary, unintentional effect (cf. Lupton, 2003), through constant self-criticism and the continual revision of the changes produced in carrying forward its project. In the autonomous and compulsive dynamics of reflexive modernity 'there is a sort of blindness towards risks and dangers, which take form and unfold automatically, leading people and society to a 'self-confrontation', in which society, on the horizon of a contrast between the old routine and a new awareness towards consequences and risks, becomes self-critical' (Beck, 2002: 81).

With the failure of those certainties on which we could previously count, individuals live in a state of disorientation: the high rate of risks produced by man is sufficient to determine serious consequences on the structure of society and interpersonal relations. The main one is that the principle of sharing (collective efficacy) has now given way to individualism: no longer having a shared system of norms and directions and the certainties that accompanied it, the individual constructs his own biography autonomously, being himself his only agent of social reproduction. The individual is forced to shape his own biography through self-reflexive, self-produced processes and the individual person becomes the reproduction unit of the social (cf. Beck, 2000b). The outcome of this is a reorganization in which parties relate to the

institutions through their own reflexivity and no longer through respect for traditional norms and roles. In this framework, the social structure is replaced by the individual search for personal meanings: this is new personal experimentation and a cultural innovation, in a social scenario full of the encroaching risks triggered by globalization. Reflexive modernization knows not only the expansion of risk categories but also a broadening of choice options and of opportunities for action. Leaving the road beaten out by traditions, individuals have to choose alternative paths of gratification that require an effort of commitment and arrangement that Beck calls 'the dialectics of disintegration and reinvention' (cf. Beck, 2000, 1996a). And this not only through a constant, simultaneous proliferation of risks ever new (an uncontrolled tide of uncertain scientific results), but above all following upon the failure of technical-scientific rationality typical of linear modernity: 'Usually the scientists dealing in risk behave as if there were not a century of difference between local nineteenth-century accidents and the potentials for catastrophe latent at the end of the twentieth century' (Beck, 2000: 29). The transition towards reflexive modernity and the relative demystification of science brings with it the institutionalization of doubt. In fact, if 'acquired knowledge has always been an instrument needed by the social actor to re-orientate his action, today it generates growing levels of insecurity and uncertainty, because – and here is the sense of reflexivity – man realizes that many of the looming risks are the result of human action (social and political) on the environment and that certain processes are irreversible' (Di Nicola, 2016: 8). Beck's vision of risk society is, therefore, essentially catastrophic, since the number and the entity of risky possibilities are sufficient to threaten contemporary civilization permanently.

##### **5. The world risk society: global risks and fabricated insecurities**

This condition underwent further transformation after the attack of September 11, 2001, in which the philosophy of safety and transnational policies radically changed both preventive and repressive strategies. In Beck's thinking, as expressed in *Un mondo a rischio* (2002), events such as the Chernobyl disaster, climate change and genetic manipulation have in common what may be defined as a system failure: there is nowhere to go to hide from the harmful consequences of the new risks. Not only due to the nature and range of the risks themselves, but due to the inadequacy of national institutions and expert know-how to face up to global problems. In fact, "The "risk society" era – which became discernible from the 1970s onwards for Beck – is characterized by an

end to public deference and an increasingly active mistrust of corporations, scientific institutions and government? (Burgess, Wardman, Mythen, 2018: 1-2).

Speaking of the world risk society means considering the extensive range of consequences coming from new risks/mega-risks (cf. Beck, 2008b: 86), which are delocalized in space, time and socially (they cannot be geographically circumscribed), incalculable (unquantifiable) and cannot be compensated for (irreversible processes). The reference is to ecologic-environmental topics and to those regarding labour, class structure and the family. In spite of the particular features of global risks, especially their incalculability and their being founded on a “couldn’t-have-known” element, there is a growing call for control and security on the part of the state institutions. This situation contains an obvious paradox: that of an attempt to control and limit something that is unknown, regarding the very existence of which there is doubt. The need for security always featured in modern societies is in fact broadened and consolidated by the uncertainty connected to global risks.

Moreover, such uncertainty causes a crisis in the old systems of “defining relations” of the risks themselves, whether national or international.

His aim is to develop a risk sociology along three main approaches (cf. D’Andrea, Lo Russo, Zolo, 2009: 702): risk globalization, risks in the sense of anticipating a catastrophe, their communicative “staging”, and the comparison between what he calls the logic of global risks (fabricated insecurities, whether ecological, economic or terrorist).

Beck underlines the importance of the distinction between risk and catastrophe and, as a result, the contrast between catastrophes «produced by collateral effects» and «intentional» catastrophes. In the main, this is the contrast between ecological or economic global risks that do not depend on the will of single parties or of organized groups, and ‘terrorism risks’ that do depend on the murderous intentions of clandestine organizations. An essential difference between ecological and economic dangers on the one hand, and the terrorist threat on the other, is that in the latter chance is replaced by intention. Ecological crises and economic dangers – beyond all their differences – feature one common aspect: they must be understood in the dialectics of the ‘goods’ and the ‘bads’, that is as the casual collateral effects of decisions made in the process of modernization. Another element in common between the above-mentioned forms of threat refers to the transversality of the negative consequences produced, able to cut across them, able to strike democratically at all individuals and, therefore, to level the differences of ‘belonging’: ‘Unlike in the past, such risks appear no longer limited to classes or contexts, they invest the whole of society, with no discrimination as to wealth or cultural origins [...]’ (Lombardino, 2016: 234). In this regard, Beck refers to the so-called boomerang effect, a process capable of overturning the class orders, since the

risk also impacts on whoever produces or profits from it. Modernization actors thus find themselves victims of their own actions: 'The most terrible disasters are those that can be traced back to the effort, past or present, to find rational solutions. The most tremendous catastrophes are caused – or are probably caused – by the war against catastrophes' (Bauman, 1992: 25).

If, for example, we take smog and therefore its consequences, we realize how its harmful effects strike even those citizens who live in the most highly-developed societies. Because of their mobility and pervasiveness, environmental risks cannot be limited by human boundaries. Even though some individuals are better 'equipped' to face the negative consequences of climate change, certain risks (atmospheric pollution and climate change) influence everyone in the same way: 'hunger is hierarchical, smog is democratic' (Beck 2002: 48). Therefore, the heroes of modernization become the victims of their own actions: 'Atmospheric pollution, climate change and other "ills" that cannot be confined within human boundaries (...) have a compensation effect' (Romero-Lankao, Qin, Borbor-Cordova, 2013: 111).

The "risk" and "catastrophe" categories do not appear to be synonymous, rather the two faces of one coin: risk refers to foretelling catastrophe and not to a concrete fact of contingent reality; catastrophe, therefore, comes about at the moment when risk becomes real. At the precise moment it turns into catastrophe, risk moves elsewhere, foretelling further catastrophes. A crucial aspect of this assumption is the fact that, hinting at future, disastrously destructive events, risk sets off decisional processes and premature, prejudicial lines of action based on the possible happening of an event and not on its concrete coming about: in that sense, risk could be a prophecy belying itself, a possible problem that is resolved before becoming problematic.

The tendency is to act preventively, before extremely negative consequences occur, in order to grasp at an intangible mirage of security, perhaps even bartering portions of freedom. As a consequence, the staging of world risk gives rise to a production and a social construction of reality. The staging, the experiences and the conflicts of world risk compenetrates and modify the foundations of cohabitation and action in all ambits, at the national and the global level: risk thus becomes the cause and the medium of society's reconfiguration.

Therefore, he leaves aside both what he calls «old risks», such as wars and industrial accidents, and natural catastrophes such as earthquakes and tsunamis, and he concentrates on new forms of gambling or risk logic, which he calls fabricated insecurities. Endogenous natural disasters (threats) and calculable risks do not come under this category: 'They are distinguished by being dependent on human decisions, by being created by society itself, by being immanent to society and therefore externalizable, enforced at a collective level

hence inevitable at the individual level: perception of them breaks with the past, breaks with risks experienced and with institutionalized routine; they are incalculable, uncontrollable and, in the end, they are no longer (privately) insurable' (Beck, 2009). In other terms, Beck describes what in the past was a sort of barrier capable of separating the controllable insecurities from the uncontrollable: the principle of insurance. The latter is an indicator of the controllability of insecurities: possession of a private insurance allows certain damage to be written off while also keeping in mind the severity of the danger. However, with the advent of late modernity, and with the new traits of risk, even risk insurers are subject to risk and, above all, the non-calculability of risks also implies their non-insurability. For this reason, Beck underlines how even the insurance principle has been hit by a crisis in the second modernity. This happens because 'confronted with the globalization of risks, the rules of attribution and causality set up by societies in early modernity are broken, and with them the series of safety systems thought up to protect from risks [...] Today's dangers can only be contained – the technological instruments we have cannot promise to eliminate them completely' (Lupton, 2003: 70). So, what Beck calls the residual risk society has become a society without insurance, whose insurance cover paradoxically diminishes as the danger increases.

The three main risks highlighted by Beck (cf. 2002) are, as we said above, ecological crises, financial crises and transnational terrorist networks. In spite of the different features of these three phenomena, we can state that all three dangers present the same catastrophic potentials and, above all, the same political contradictions. National policy, in fact, has to give way to international agreements so as to favour united collaboration among the various countries.

Fabricated insecurities are produced by organizations in the attempt to contain those already existing; this means that there can no longer be the claim to choose between a risky alternative and a safe one. Rather, we have to move among the risky options to establish which of them may cause the least possible harm. The most appropriate example, the one most frequently recurring in Beck's theory, is that of science.

Public emphasis (mass-media and others) on fabricated insecurities strikes the most innovative sectors of science (such as human genetics and nanotechnologies). Since they refer to a future not (yet) in existence and therefore harbinger of uncertainty, these sectors risk seeing their research freedom threatened. However, the silver lining may be that, when risk is called on stage and catastrophes are evoked, glimpses may possibly be obtained of a possible future, not necessarily utterly disastrous. And so, 'catastrophes push us towards the new, they invoke new decisions which, beyond the particularity of the local tragedy, come under a new global cosmopolitanism that is not inspired by the mediatic construction of events but by the dialogue space in which

individuals must be placed' (Abignente, Scamardella, 2013: 85). The catastrophe represents that unfavourable event from which the common sense of the human and an acknowledgement of the other as possessor of universal rights may unexpectedly arise once more (cf. Jullien, 2010: 151).

## 6. The intentional catastrophe *par excellence*: global terrorism

Today, challenges and threats no longer come from one single direction, nor are they only military; they are multiple and of various nature. One of these threats, among the most imminent, is the so-called *globalized* terrorism, the post-September 11, 2001 terrorism, radically Islamic in origin, today represented by *Daesh*. A terrorism that marks the start of a new chapter in world history and that modifies the international scenario, leaving in its wake a trail of blood that goes beyond any logic, any reason. In this regard, the attacks on the heart of the United States showed tangibly for the first time the reach and the reality of international terrorism, marking the start of an epoch characterized by what Ulrich Beck, on the subject of risk theory, defines "globalization of the terrorist risk". In the world risk society, it is the perception of violence, the looming danger felt that gives input to the "globalization of terror". Actions such as that of 9/11 have dragged the world yet further into a new type of war: complex conflictuality. A conflictuality ever latent, lying in ambush, that comes forth in forms, ways, moments that are difficult to predict.

The devastating effect of the attack on the Twin Towers cannot be downgraded to the damage directly caused by the catastrophe, however enormous, but to the symbolical rupture that it brought about, compromising trust in the efficacy of the defence strategies of the western nations towards the terrorist threat. We had to face up to a new type of terrorism in which the Jihad extremists undertake violent suicidal action, breaking away from the 'traditional' ways of carrying out attacks<sup>3</sup>. '[...] Their terror is indiscriminate, blind, incalculable. The threat is asymmetrical in the most radical meaning of the term. The terrorists are not seeking victory, they want to create panic, annulling the national grammar of the army and of the war and spreading the antisocial, inhuman condition of terror beyond the confines of the attacked state' (Beck, 2008b: 69).

This overturns the certainties created with the war on terrorism as previously known, featuring attackers from specific territories and national motivations.

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, a great deal of scientific literature (cf. Roy, 2017; Persichetti, Almarai, 2006) recalls how martyrdom in the form of the suicide attack (*istishad*) has never been the Koranic prerogative of the Jihad, but an 'innovation' introduced and demanded by the leader of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden.

This means no recourse can be had to state instruments of force because “present everywhere and nowhere”: ‘the globalization of the terrorist danger is expressed first of all as the globalization of expectations of possible terrorist attacks at any spot on earth and at any moment: ‘In this global planetary space it is no longer possible to trace a frontier behind which it is possible to feel really and totally secure’ (Bauman, 2008: XIX). It is this expectation that has profound consequences for law, for the military set-up, for freedom, for the everyday life of people, for the stability of political order all over the world, since it destroys the guarantee of security of the basic institutions of the national state’ (Beck, 2008b: 67). As a consequence, one of the most evident results of the spread of the terrorist risk is ‘the crisis of the security paradigm centred in the national state. The threats to peace now come more from generic risks than from precisely identifiable enemies [...]’ (Campesi, 2009: 114). Hence, the world terrorist risk society has to be understood as a constellation of anti-state threats, in which the state of exception becomes the norm and therefore the states are deprived of their power and are invested with a new power, since the call for lost security prevails over any other consideration and justifies everything.

According to the German sociologist, the NGO of terror and violence produces a new ‘national grammar of armies and war’ (Beck, 2002: 21), since it takes on a transnational dimension. We are no longer facing localized terrorism but a terrorism that knows no frontiers of space and time and therefore generates globalized fear capable of threatening democratic institutions. Beck holds that terrorism extends the war and makes it global, cancelling not only the physical boundaries between states but also the abstract boundaries between civilians and the military, the innocent and the guilty, war and peace. According to his vision, this ‘world risk society’ produces fear, and that fear ‘produces an almost revolutionary situation’ (ibidem: 13) because ‘nations and alliances fighting among themselves unite against the common enemy represented by global terrorism’ (ivi). Terrorism thus creates global solidarity founded on risk reduction, through recourse to “wars from risk”. We are talking about ‘wars to avoid war’ perpetrated by the western international community against Islamic religious fundamentalism which in itself contain a double meaning: the first indicating those military interventions in more or less unstable foreign states with the aim of minimizing or controlling a “global risk” thereby installing real risk management; the second referring to the risk-transfer war, that is, the sharing of risk that minimizes self-threat and maximizes external threat. The problem lies in the fact that the enemy being fought is in this case partially immune from the laws on safety because he lacks those features differentiating him from the terrorists as historically confronted. Thus begins the search for security featured in world risk society through strategies which, according to Beck, vaunt control and security and inject a general sense of insecurity and

threat. The author's opinion is that, in spite of a number of casualties and attacks that is still fairly low, violence and war are maximized out of all proportion, making them explode in reality and on the media in places where the peace perceived is predominant: it is not the terrorist attack that destroys the West, but the reaction for fear of it. It instigates the war perceived in the minds and in the centres of the West (cf. Beck, 2008b).

The staging of the terrorist catastrophe allows national and international political organizations to set in motion many limitations to political and social rights, legitimating such coercive power in the name of a rediscovered cosmopolitanism, child of clear-cut dichotomization, and translatable in the expression 'the West and the rest'. This rigid duality is therefore silenced and hidden behind the mask of the "civility" existing within a harmonious cosmopolitan community that feels it is held together by norms and rules.

According to the German thinker, it is moreover needful for the states to find a form to legitimize their own repressive action which may derive either from authorization on the part of the main western political institutions (the UNO and the EU) or from a national consensus obtained in the name of the annihilation of a world risk or of a crime against humanity.

In spite of such instrumental implications, Beck criticizes Al-Qaeda's global terrorism defining it '[...] the response to the fact that, despite having been for some time part of the West, the countries of the Third World are unable to accept that the West models this world in its own likeness'. (Beck, 2008b: 176). Together with others, such statements betray a merely western conception of the terrorist phenomenon that should be observed through the lens of western society as an attempt to annihilate its cultural values.

In order to contest and prevent similar catastrophic events, according to Beck it is necessary to lay down and ratify an international convention against terrorism, a convention that does not stop at clarifying concepts but that offers a juridical basis for the interstate search for terrorists, creating a universal, common juridical space which would also foresee the compulsory ratification of the statute of the international court by all states. The aim would be to render terrorism punishable as a crime against humanity. The states that refuse this convention would have to reckon with the global potential of sanctions imposable by all the other states.

## **7. Dethroning science and technology: trials of reflexivity and cosmopolitanism**

The history of twentieth century events has made increasingly evident modern society's incapacity to foresee efficiently all the effects that might

possibly derive from human decisions. In the midst of reflexive modernity, the pervasiveness and the non-calculability of global risks produce a demystification process of scientific knowledge's ability to supply the safety required by the population in order to reduce its own anxieties and fears: 'Reliable, non-problematic knowledge dissolves in an aggregate of opinions, loosely connected with one another, that is no longer binding. Firm interpretations of reality become hypotheses; convictions become questions of taste; commandments become proposals' (Berger, Luckmann, 2010: 82-83). No longer do science and technology seem able to function as referee or breakwater: 'Risk is not only a calculation in this view, but also a complex amalgam of emotions, interests and values'. Trust in those institutions that once guaranteed through rationality and security gives way to suspicion, and what we are left with is the individual who has to count on himself and on alternative sources of knowledge giving rise to new forms of biographies: identity becomes a challenge ever more bound to resources and to the capacities of the single individual. Through the weakening normative force of institutions and the increasingly precarious nature of labour relations and contracting welfare, the contemporary world forces individuals into an on-going re-programming of the Self. The interpretative frameworks supplied by traditional institutions, such as the family or the class to which one belongs, are no longer valid (or at least are constantly under attack) and the individual is forced into a continual labour of self-reflection and re-adaptation of his own ego: and this is the process of individualization of biographical paths. The concept of individualization is the basis on which Beck constructs his vision of the new modernity, a new personal experimentation and cultural innovation, in a social scenario teeming with growing risks, dangers, reflexivities and globalization<sup>4</sup>.

By individualization, Beck means 'the disintegration of certainties' and 'the need to find and invent new certainties [...] and do without the old ones' (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1999: 13). Therefore, 'when fixed, binding norms of tradition fail as do the certainties that go with them, individuals construct their own biographies by themselves, choosing among the new, ever-changing ways of life' (ibidem: 14). This dynamic, which he maintains represents the private counterbalance of globalization, consists of three main dimensions: the unleashing by which the individual frees himself of pre-constituted social forms and bonds (social class, family); disenchantment, featuring the loss of traditional certainties (the work environment, religious sphere etc.); reintegration

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<sup>4</sup> The elements that in Beck's opinion mainly undermine modernity and modernization are irrelevant when taken one by one yet decisive taken as a whole. They include five inter-related processes: 1) globalization; 2) individualization, 3) the gender revolution; 4) under-employment; and 5) global risks (ecological, financial) (cf. Beck, 2000b).

consisting in the construction of a new social equilibrium based on the single individual as the only agent of social reproduction. Furthermore, in the reintegration effort, individualization is accompanied by the standardization process, to be accounted for by the fact that the individual indeed forges his own destiny but is incapsulated by the logic of the global market which makes him similar to everyone else.

Analysing the connection between risks and individualization, we see how the traditional buffers that previously reduced the subject's sense of disorientation now no longer function and the individual feels alone in confronting the single events that threaten his everyday life. Individualizing biographies implies a parallel individualization of the perception of risk (cf. Ghisleni, Privitera, 2009).

We must, however, note how the German sociologist does not see such a process solely from the negative viewpoint as a set of paths of social fragmentation or unbridled forms of selfish individualism (cf. Privitera, 2015: 18), if not of personal failure. In fact, referring again to Parsons' contribution, Beck holds that it is a question of a type of institutional individualism (which the American sociologist counterbalances with a type that is utilitarian in nature) formed in line with the general types of social integration and consisting in a legitimate desire – by regaining possession of the single biographical paths – to pursue one's own interests, within the area of the juridical and moral principles present within one's own social context. In this sense, individualization and socialization are the two sides of the same coin. The individual is again committing himself to the construction of his own identity and to taking part in the preservation and valorisation of the community to which he belongs (cf. Bauman, 2001). Individualization is the presence of a new, positive subjectivity, for Beck 'the most surprising and least understood social phenomenon of recent decades' (2008b: 75). The individual renews himself, he comes together with others, he takes part directly and in a new way in the political forum. In seeking to create his own biographical pathway, all he does is set up relations and links with others. The individualization process, as described by Beck, 'therefore also poses the rise of new forms of dependence, among them the need of each to plan personally his own path of social inclusion. In this sense individualization', says Beck, 'paradoxically becomes the most progressive and modern form of socialization' (Chicchi, 2001: 75).

All this would have as a consequence the reactive result of an aggregation in the name of the involvement of global risk contexts, incapable of producing risk management policies shared by the various nations (global cohesion versus a political vacuum). Risk society goes well beyond social differences, since the consequences of global dangers interest everyone, including even those who originated them (cf. Beck, 2008b: 40). The 'either-or' formula typical of

nationalistic thought is today replaced by the term 'both-and' which determines and represents the peaceful cohabitation of differences within the integration process (cf. Beck, 1999). Paradoxically, this desire to come together at global community level (the cosmopolitan tendency) in order to fight a common public – and often supranational – battle coincides with a profound modification in the society-individual relationship, consisting in a progressive distancing from belonging to a class to detachment from cultural and normative bonds of the local type: 'suddenly the problems are facing everyone, with no justification: pure, explosive challenges for action [...]. The "collateral effects" take the floor, they get organized, go to court, take a stand, can no longer be set aside' (Beck, 2000b: 101). The planetary dimension of risk creates a need for cosmopolitical responsibility: the world risk society marks the end of the distancing from the other who, albeit an outsider, shares the same fate as the rest of humanity, which is to say being exposed to global risks and generating 'a new ethic of planetary responsibility orientated towards the future' (Beck, 2008b: 30). In this sense, counter-reactions arising from grassroots would be generated to contest both national political decision-makers and the various branches of expert knowledge, constituting what Beck defines as a global sub-political action. In effect, risk society seems 'a world everlastingly on the brink of uncontrollability, in a conflictual framework where the social actors intervene with no little possibility of influencing the course of events' (Privitera, 2009: 55).

Thus a new risk awareness is created, opening up fresh spheres of action for the other social actors (the process of reflexive politicization): the individual is in a position to become self-aware only within a public sphere where open debate is given free rein (cf. Habermas, 2006). In this way, science experiences a crisis of public credibility that favours the rise of alternative opinions (the process of reflexive scientization) capable of proposing diametrically different interpretations – however frequently fallible – of forms of risk, generating a new expansive movement of science<sup>5</sup>. Beck is referring to the genesis of new social and scientific movements that are coming forward as alternative voices to the traditional political institutions. From the viewpoint of carrying out a role of resistance towards the power of the state, they may be made up of people from the technical-legal world, or the worlds of science, economy, mass-media, or simply of the man-in-the-street: they all gain the right to speak. In the need to confront innumerable risks, therefore, the request and the search – ever more extreme – for security become constant, and this is not stressed sufficiently by science or by politics. In other terms, reflexive modernity has to measure up to

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<sup>5</sup> In any case, Beck notes the non-delegable role of science in rendering threats visible, thanks to recourse to theories and instruments of rational measurement.

other aspects, among them a new concept of democracy with which states must occupy themselves. In particular, the political power of the state, traditionally founded on the top-down systems of government typical of the advanced nations – not always but frequently identifiable with democracies – has undergone real loss of power through a multitude of factors, such as the involvement of the community and social participation, together with the transfer of the State's power to local bodies and social organizations. Therefore, 'Beck suggests that citizens themselves can actively challenge scientism and begin to create and nurture a new kind of reflexivity. This is possible in Beck's view for the new and specific reason that our increasing freedom from the structural constraints of the past allows the flourishing of individualism' (Burgess, Wardman, Mythen, 2018: 3).

## 8. Conclusions

At the time of the first theories regarding risk society, the globalization of risk had not yet arisen and therefore was not perceptible. This is why Beck, perhaps stimulated by certain criticism addressed to him over the years, revised his analysis and, with the globalization process in full flood, identified new, transnational types of risk, bearers of a peculiarity with respect to the past: the consequences, whether positive or negative, of decisions taken at the local level are yet potentially capable of resounding worldwide. What conditions choices is the catastrophic potential hidden behind every risk when made recognizable, constantly constructed by the fallible knowledge of the experts and re-echoed by mass media narration to the point that the risk, or rather its representation, becomes the anticipation of the catastrophe itself. In other terms, the intention is to state that contemporary risks are the result of a social construction (the so-called relations of definition), a process making visible certain risks while hiding others (perhaps potentially more dangerous). The German sociologist believes that such reiterated anticipation would have a double-edged fallout: on the one hand, it would bring into being a society in which the risk entity is enough to threaten civilization permanently and inescapably and, on the other, it would produce a collective incentive to act in order to prevent the destruction and would provide an opportunity to accept the unforeseen, to try something new, something unknown. And here emerges Beck's tendency to found a *costruens* criticism of late modern western society: out on the horizon of the end to great narrations (Lyotard, 2002), he allows a glimpse of possible salvation, a way forward towards a possible change. At the moment of becoming real, however, risks change into catastrophes. As well as catastrophes that are natural, climatic or the progeny of scientific and technological progress – a consequence not

deliberately linked to intention – the author identifies a different profile of the catastrophic event, progeny of the desire to produce the greatest harm to the greatest number of individuals. An emblematic example is the globalized terrorism of Islamic origin, by Beck considered the real threat to political stability in the West. He shares the idea that terrorism of Islamic origin expresses the intention to annihilate democratic, civil western society, placing it at the centre of the world and underlining its supremacy in culture and value. In this way he lays himself open to those who criticize him and who question the superficial nature of his sociological analysis of global risks in general and terrorism in particular, reminding him that, given the complexity of the phenomenon, a more in-depth study was needed on the contingent causes of the evolution of the terrorist doctrines worldwide. In spite of this, the German sociologist identifies yet again in the tragedy and destruction of terrorist attacks an opportunity to reinforce the positions of the various nations and their ability to react together to confront a common enemy in the name of cosmopolitical awareness and, therefore, of a civil culture of responsibility.

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