

# Living in the world risk society

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## Abstract

In a world risk society, we must distinguish between ecological and financial dangers, which can be conceptualized as side effects, and the threat from terrorist networks as intentional catastrophes; the principle of deliberately exploiting the vulnerability of modern civil society replaces the principle of chance and accident.

Keywords: risk; catastrophe; not-knowing; enlightenment function of world risk society; *cosmopolitan realpolitik*.

The narrative of risk is a narrative of irony. This narrative deals with the involuntary satire, the optimistic futility, with which the highly developed institutions of modern society – science, state, business and military – attempt to anticipate what cannot be anticipated. Socrates has left us to make sense of the puzzling sentence: I know that I know nothing. The fatal irony, into which scientific-technical society plunges us is, as a consequence of its perfection, much more radical: we do not know what it is we don't know – but from this dangers arise, which threaten mankind! The perfect example here is provided by the debate about climate change. In 1974, about forty-five years after the discovery of the cooling agent CFC, of all things, the chemists

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Rowland and Molina put forward the hypothesis that CFCs destroy the ozone layer of the stratosphere and, as a result, increased ultraviolet radiation would reach the earth. The chain of unforeseen secondary effects would lead to climate changes, which threaten the basis of existence of mankind. When coolants were invented no one could know or even suspect that they would make such a major contribution to global warming.

Whoever believes in not-knowing (like the US government) increases the danger of climate catastrophe. Or put more generally: the more emphatically the existence of world risk society is denied, the more easily it can become a reality. The ignorance of the globalization of risk increases the globalization of risk.

The greatest military power in history shields itself with an anti-missile defence system costing billions of dollars. Is it not also a bitter irony that this power should be struck to the heart of its security and self-confidence by an action that was utterly improbable according to every logic of risk, when suicide terrorists succeeded in turning commercial passenger aircraft into rockets, which destroyed symbols of American world power? The irony of risk here is that rationality, that is, the experience of the past, encourages anticipation of the wrong kind of risk, the one we believe we can calculate and control, whereas the disaster arises from what we do not know and cannot calculate. The bitter varieties of this risk irony are virtually endless; among them is the fact, that, in order to protect their populations from the danger of terrorism, states increasingly limit civil rights and liberties, with the result that in the end the open, free society may be abolished, but the terrorist threat is by no means averted. The dark irony here is that, while very general risk-induced doubts in the benevolence of the promises of governments to protect their citizens lead to criticisms of the inefficiency of scholarly and state authorities, critics are blind to the possibilities of erecting (or expanding) the authoritarian state on this very inefficiency.

Perhaps now you will recognize what the question which I have raised and want to address in this lecture is aiming at: I want to investigate the irony of risk. Risk is ambivalence. Being at risk is the way of being and ruling in the world of modernity; being at global risk is the human condition at the beginning of the twenty-first century. But, against the grain of the current widespread feeling of doom, I would like to ask: what is the *ruse* of history which is also inherent in world risk society and emerges with its realization? Or more tightly formulated: is there an *enlightenment function* of world risk society and what form does it take?

The experience of global risks represents a shock for the whole of humanity. No one predicted such a development. Perhaps Nietzsche had a kind of premonition, when he talked of an 'age of comparing', in which different cultures, ethnicities and religions could be compared and lived through side by side. Without being explicit he, too, had an eye for world historical irony, that in particular it is the self-destructiveness – not only physical, but also ethical – of unleashed modernity, which could make it possible for human

beings to outgrow both the nation-state and the international order, the heaven and earth of modernity, as it were. The experience of global risks is an occurrence of abrupt and fully conscious confrontation with the apparently excluded other. Global risks tear down national boundaries and jumble together the native with the foreign. The distant other is becoming the inclusive other – not through mobility but through risk. Everyday life is becoming cosmopolitan: human beings must find the meaning of life in the exchange with others and no longer in the encounter with like.

To the extent that risk is experienced as omnipresent, there are only three possible reactions: *denial*, *apathy* or *transformation*. The first is largely inscribed in modern culture, the second resembles post-modern nihilism, the third is the ‘cosmopolitan moment’ of world risk society. And that is what I am going to talk about. What is meant by that may be explained with reference to Hannah Arendt. The existential shock of danger – therein lies the fundamental ambivalence of global risks – opens up unintentionally (and often also unseen and unutilized) the (mis)fortune of a possible new beginning (which is no cause for false sentimentality). How to live in the shadow of global risks? How to live, when old certainties are shattered or are now revealed as lies? Arendt’s answer anticipates the irony of risk. The expectation of the unexpected requires that the self-evident is no longer taken as self-evident. The shock of danger is a call for a new beginning. Where there is a new beginning, action is possible. Human beings enter into relations across borders. This common activity by strangers across borders means freedom. All freedom is contained in this ability to begin.

There is a nostalgia built into the foundations of European sociological thought, which has never disappeared. Perhaps, paradoxically, this nostalgia can be overcome with the theory of world risk society? My aim is a non-nostalgic, new critical theory to look at the past and the future of modernity. The words for this are neither ‘utopianism’ nor ‘pessimism’ but ‘irony’ and ‘ambivalence’. Instead of an either/or, I am looking for a new both one thing and the other: a means of keeping the two contradictory views within us – self-destructiveness and the ability to begin anew – in balance with one another. I would like to demonstrate that here in three steps (drawing on empirical research findings of the Munich Research Centre ‘Reflexive Modernization’):

1. Old dangers – new risks: what is new about world risk society?
2. Ruse of history: to what extent are global risks a global force in present and future world history, controllable by no one, but which also open up new opportunities of action for states, civil society actors, etc.?
3. Consequences: in order to understand the manufactured uncertainty, lack of safety and insecurity of world risk society is there a need for a paradigm shift in the social sciences?

**Old dangers – new risks: what is new about world risk society?**

Modern society has become a risk society in the sense that it is increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks that it itself has produced. That may well be, many will object, but it is indicative rather of a hysteria and politics of fear instigated and aggravated by the mass media. On the contrary, would not someone looking at European societies from outside have to acknowledge that the risks which get us worked up are luxury risks, more than anything else? After all, our world appears a lot safer than that, say, of the war-torn regions of Africa, Afghanistan or the Middle East. Are modern societies not distinguished precisely by the fact that to a large extent they have succeeded in bringing under control contingencies and uncertainties, for example with respect to accidents, violence and sickness? The past year has once again reminded us, with the Tsunami catastrophe, the destruction of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, the devastation of large regions in South America and Pakistan, how limited the claim to control of modern societies in the face of natural forces remains. But even natural hazards appear less random than they used to. Although human intervention may not stop earthquakes or volcanic eruptions, they can be predicted with reasonable accuracy. We anticipate them in terms of structural arrangements as well as of emergency planning.

At a conference in Great Britain on risk society a distinguished colleague confronted me with the question: is there not a ‘German taste’ to the risk society thesis, a taste of security and wealth? Britain cannot afford to be a risk society! The irony of risk decreed that a couple of months later the BSE crisis broke out in Britain. Suddenly Hamlet had to be re-invented: to beef or not to beef was the question then.

As true as all such observations may be, they miss the most obvious point about risk: that is, the key distinction between risk and catastrophe. Risk does *not* mean catastrophe. Risk means the *anticipation* of catastrophe. Risks exist in a permanent state of virtuality, and become ‘topical’ only to the extent that they are anticipated. Risks are not ‘real’, they are ‘*becoming real*’ (Joost van Loon). At the moment at which risks become real – for example, in the shape of a terrorist attack – they cease to be risks and become catastrophes. Risks have already moved elsewhere: to the anticipation of further attacks, inflation, new markets, wars or the reduction of civil liberties. Risks are always events that are threatening. Without techniques of visualization, without symbolic forms, without mass media, etc., risks are nothing at all. In other words, it is irrelevant whether we live in a world which is in fact or in some sense ‘objectively’ safer than all other worlds; if destruction and disasters are anticipated, then that produces a compulsion to act.

This in turn conceals an irony, the irony of the promise of security made by scientists, companies and governments, which in wondrous fashion contributes to an increase in risks. Finding themselves accused in public of countenancing risk, ministers jump into rivers or get their children to eat hamburgers, in order to ‘prove’ that everything is ‘absolutely’ safe and under control – from which

follows as sure as night follows day that every doubt cast, every accident violates the basis of the unshakeable right to security which appears to be promised.

In my first publication in 1986 I described *Risk Society* as ‘an inescapable structural condition of advanced industrialization’ – and criticized the ‘mathematicized morality’ of expert thinking and public discourse on ‘risk profiling’. While policy-oriented risk assessment posited the manageability of risks, I pointed out that ‘even the most restrained and moderate-objectivist account of risk implications involves a hidden politics, ethics and morality’. Risk ‘is not reducible to the product of probability of occurrence multiplied with the intensity and scope of potential harm’. Rather, it is a socially constructed phenomenon, in which some people have a greater capacity to define risks than others. Not all actors really benefit from the reflexivity of risk – only those with real scope to define their own risks. Risk exposure is replacing class as the principal inequality of modern society, because of how risk is reflexively defined by actors: ‘In risk society *relations of definition* are to be conceived analogous to Marx’s relations of production’. The inequalities of definition enable powerful actors to maximize risks for ‘others’ and minimize risks for ‘themselves’. Risk definition, essentially, is a power game. This is especially true for world risk society where Western governments or powerful economic actors define risks for others.

Risk makes its appearance on the world stage when God leaves it (van Loon). Risks presuppose human decisions. They are the partly positive, partly negative, Janus-faced consequences of human decisions and interventions. In relation to risks there is inevitably posed the highly explosive question of social accountability and responsibility, and this is also true where the prevailing rules allow for accountability only in extremely exceptional cases. The acknowledged, decision-governed social roots of risks make it completely impossible to externalize the problem of accountability. Someone, on the other hand, who believes in a personal God has at his disposal a room for manoeuvre and a meaning for his actions in the face of threats and catastrophes. Through prayers and good works people can win God’s favour and forgiveness and in this way actively contribute to their own salvation, but also to that of their family and community. There is, therefore, a close connection between secularization and risk. When Nietzsche announces: God is dead, then that has the – ironic – consequence that from now on human beings must find (or invent) their own explanations and justifications for the disasters which threaten them.

The theory of world risk society maintains, however, that modern societies are shaped by new kinds of risks, that their foundations are shaken by the global anticipation of global catastrophes. Such perceptions of global risk are characterized by three features:

1. *De-localization*: its causes and consequences are not limited to one geographical location or space, they are in principle omnipresent.

2. *Incalculableness*: its consequences are in principle incalculable; at bottom it is a matter of ‘hypothetical’ risks, which, not least, are based on science-induced not-knowing and normative dissent.
3. *Non-compensability*: the security dream of first modernity was based on the scientific utopia of making the unsafe consequences and dangers of decisions ever more controllable; accidents could occur, as long as and because they were considered compensable. If the climate has changed irreversibly, if progress in human genetics makes irreversible interventions in human existence possible, if terrorist groups already have weapons of mass destruction available to them, then it is too late. Given this new quality of ‘threats to humanity’ – argues Francois Ewald – the logic of compensation breaks down and is replaced by the principle of *precaution through prevention*. Not only is prevention taking precedence over compensation, we are also trying to anticipate and prevent risks whose existence has not been proven.

Let me explain these points – de-localization, incalculableness, non-compensability – in greater detail.

The de-localization of incalculable interdependency risks takes place at three levels:

1. *Spatial*: the new risks (e.g. climate change) do not respect nation-state or any other borders;
2. *Temporal*: the new risks have a long latency period (e.g. nuclear waste) so that their effect over time cannot be reliably determined and limited.
3. *Social*: thanks to the complexity of the problems and the length of chains of effect, assignment of causes and consequences is no longer possible with any degree of reliability (e.g. financial crises).

The discovery of the incalculability of risk is closely connected to the discovery of the importance of not-knowing to risk calculation, and it is part of another kind of irony, that surprisingly this discovery of not-knowing occurred in a scholarly discipline which today no longer wants to have anything to do with: economics. It was Knight and Keynes who early insisted on a distinction between predictable and non-predictable or calculable and non-calculable forms of contingency. In a famous article in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (February 1937) Keynes writes:

by ‘uncertain knowledge’, let me explain, I do not mean merely to distinguish what is known from what is merely probable. The sense in which I am using the term is that in which the price of copper and the rate of interest twenty years hence, all the obsolescence of a new invention are uncertain. About these matters there is no scientific basis on which to form any calculable probability whatever. We simply do not know.

However, Keynes' admonition to open up the field of economic decision-making to the unknown unknowns was entirely neglected in the subsequent development of mainstream economics (including mainstream Keynesian economics).

The crucial point, however, is not only the discovery of the unknown unknowns, but that simultaneously the knowledge, control and security claim of state and society were, indeed had to be, renewed, deepened and expanded. The irony lies in the institutionalized security claim, to have to control something even if one does not know whether it exists! But why should a science or a discipline concern itself with what it does not even know? There is certainly a conclusive sociological answer to that: because in the face of the production of insuperable manufactured uncertainties society more than ever relies and insists on security and control; and because the argument about the knowing and not-knowing of global risks cancels the established national and international rule systems. It sounds really ironic, but it is precisely unknown unknowns which provoke far-reaching conflicts over the definition and construction of political rules and responsibilities with the aim of preventing the worst. For the time being the last and most striking example of that is the Second Iraq War, which was, at least also, conducted in order to prevent what we cannot know, that is, whether and to what extent chemical and nuclear weapons of mass destruction get into the hands of terrorists.

As this example shows, world risk society is faced by the awkward problem (here one can no longer talk about irony) of having to make decisions about life and death, war and peace, on the basis of more or less unadmitted not-knowing – because the dilemma lies also in the fact that the option which relies on there being no danger is equally based on not-knowing and is equally high risk, in the sense that terrorists really could acquire weapons of mass destruction and do so precisely because we believe in not being able to know and hence do nothing. In other words: the non-compensability irony comes to a head in tragic fashion: if risks are held to be non-compensatable, the problem of not-knowing is radicalized. If catastrophes are anticipated whose potential for destruction ultimately threatens everyone, then a risk calculation based on experience and rationality breaks down. Now all possible, more or less improbable scenarios have to be taken into consideration; to knowledge, therefore, drawn from experience and science there now also has to be added imagination, suspicion, fiction, fear. Francois Ewald writes:

the precautionary principle requires an active use of doubt, in the sense Descartes made canonical in his *meditations*. Before any action, I must not only ask myself what I need to know and what I need to master, but also what I do not know, what I dread or suspect. I must, out of precaution, imagine the worst possible, the consequence that an infinitely deceptive, malicious demon could have slipped into the false of apparently innocent enterprise.

(Ewald 2002)

The boundary between rationality and hysteria becomes blurred. Given the right invested in them to avert dangers, politicians, in particular, may easily be

forced to proclaim a security which they cannot honour – because the *political* costs of omission are much higher than the costs of overreaction. In future, therefore, it is not going to be easy, in the context of state promises of security and a mass media hungry for catastrophes, actively to limit and prevent a diabolical power game with the hysteria of not-knowing. I do not even dare think about deliberate attempts to instrumentalize this situation.

*From trustee to suspect* Global risks are the expression of a new form of global interdependence, which cannot be adequately addressed by way of national politics or by the available forms of international co-operation. All of the past and present practical experiences of human beings in dealing with uncertainty now exist side by side, without offering any ready solution to the resulting problems. Not only that: key institutions of modernity such as science, business and politics, which are supposed to guarantee rationality and security, find themselves confronted by situations in which their apparatus no longer has a purchase and the fundamental principles of modernity no longer automatically hold good. Indeed, the perception of their rating changes – from trustee to suspect. They are no longer seen only as instruments of risk *management*, but also as a *source* of risk.

*Tragic individualization* As a consequence everyday life in world risk society is characterized by a new variant of individualization. The individual must cope with the uncertainty of the global world by him- or herself. Here individualization is a default outcome of a *failure* of expert systems to manage risks. Neither science, nor the politics in power, nor the mass media, nor business, nor the law or even the military are in a position to define or control risks rationally. The individual is forced to mistrust the promises of rationality of these key institutions. As a consequence, people are thrown back onto themselves, they are alienated from expert systems but have nothing else instead. *Disembedding without embedding* – this is the ironic-tragic formula for this dimension of individualization in world risk society. For example, responsibility for the decision on genetically modified foods and their unforeseeable, unknowable long-term consequences is ultimately dumped on the so-called ‘responsible consumer’. (Consumer choice rules.) The appeal to ‘responsibility’ is the cynicism with which the institutions whitewash their own failure. However – and this is also part of the tragic irony of this individualization process – the individual, whose senses fail him and her in the face of ungraspable threats to civilization, who, thrown back on himself, is blind to dangers, remains at the same time unable to escape the power of definition of expert systems, whose judgement he cannot, yet must trust. Sustaining an individual self of integrity in world risk society is indeed a tragic affair.

World risk society produces new lines of conflict. Unlike the national industrial society of first modernity, which was marked by socio-economic



conflicts between labour and capital, and unlike the international conflict constellations of the East–West conflict, which were characterized by questions of political security, the lines of conflict of world risk society are *cultural* ones. To the extent that global risks evade calculation by scientific methods, are a matter of not-knowing, then the *cultural perception*, that is, the post-religious, quasi-religious *belief* in the reality of world risk, assumes a key significance.

Central, however, are not, as with Huntington, traditional religiously grounded ‘civilizations’, but opposing risk belief religions. We are dealing – to adapt Huntington – with the *clash of risk cultures, risk religions*. So, for example, the dominant risk belief and risk tendencies of Europe and the US government are drifting very far apart, because the risk religions contradict one another, Europeans and Americans live in different worlds. For Europeans risk belief issues like climate change, perhaps even the threats which global financial movements pose for individual countries, are much more important than the threat of terrorism. While, as far as the Americans are concerned, the Europeans are suffering from an environmental hysteria, many European see the Americans as struck by a terrorism hysteria. The reversal of the terms secularism and religiosity is also striking. It seems that religious cultures are marked by a ‘risk secularism’. Whoever believes in God is a risk atheist.

Like religious wars in pre-modernity or the conflict of interest between capital and labour in first modernity, that is, class conflicts, the clash of risk cultures is the fundamental conflict of second modernity:

1. This is a matter of life and death, not of individuals or individual nations, but potentially of everyone.
2. Precisely these decisions central to the physical and moral survival of mankind have to be made within a horizon of more or less admitted and disputed not-knowing, and they are socially not assignable.
3. In many areas the experimental logic of trial and error breaks down. It is impossible to permit just a small amount of genetically modified food, just a small amount of nuclear energy, just a small amount of therapeutic cloning. Given the cultural differences in risk perception the question is posed: how much tolerance in the face of the ignorance of others can we afford? Or: how can binding procedures and standards of regulation be agreed given cultural differences in perception and not-knowing with respect to the consequences of decisions which change the anthropological character of being human? Here two contradictory risk philosophies come into conflict: the philosophy of *laissez-faire* – it is safe, as long as it has not been proven to be dangerous; and the philosophy of *precaution* – nothing is safe, as long as it has not been proven harmless.

BSE is an explosive reminder of the inability of both nation-states and transnational decision-making bodies like the EU to manage risk in a chaotically interacting world risk society. But this is only the beginning. In developing the technologies of the future – genetic technology, nanotechnology

and robotics – we are opening up a Pandora's box. Genetic modification, communications technology and artificial intelligence, now also being combined with one another, undermine the state's monopoly of the use of force and leave the door wide open to an individualization of war – unless effective measures are taken soon at global level to bolt it shut.

Let me summarize: the theory of world risk society addresses the increasing realization of the irrepressible ubiquity of radical uncertainty in the modern world. The basic institutions, the actors of first modernity – science and expert systems, the state, commerce and the international system, including the military – responsible for calculating and controlling manufactured uncertainties are undermined by growing awareness that they are inefficient, their actions even counter-productive. This does not happen haphazardly, but systematically. Radicalization of modernity produces this fundamental irony of risk: science, the state and the military are becoming part of the problem they are supposed to solve. This is what 'reflexive modernization' means: we are not living in a *post*-modern world, but in a *more*-modern world. It is not the crisis, but the *victory* of modernity, which, through the logics of unintended and unknown side-effects, undermines basic institutions of first modernity.

**The ruse of risk: global risk is an unpredictable and impersonal force in the contemporary world, triggering events to which the human response is to organize on a global scale.**

I have talked about the ambivalence, the bitter and tragic irony, which assume a world historical significance with the advent of global risk. But how, on the other hand, does the proclaimed enlightenment function of global risks express itself? What empirical evidence is there for that, what against? Is it perhaps pure cynicism, which attempts to strike one last spark of hope from the collective distress at uncertainty? Is it anything more than wishful thinking? I try to answer this very justified scepticism in terms of six components, which make up the 'cosmopolitan moment' of world risk society: 1) involuntary enlightenment, 2) enforced communication across all differences and borders, 3) the political power of catharsis, 4) enforced cosmopolitanism, 5) risk as a wake-up call in the face of the failure of government and 6) the possibility of alternative government in a globalized world.

1) *Involuntary enlightenment* Hurricane Katrina was a horrifying act of nature, but one which simultaneously, as a global media event, involuntarily and unexpectedly developed an enlightenment function which broke all resistance. What no social movement, no political party and certainly no sociological analysis, no matter how well grounded and brilliantly written (if such things existed!), would have been able to achieve happened within a few days: America and the world were confronted by the repressed *other* America, the largely

racialized face of poverty. TV dislikes images of the poor, but they were omnipresent during the coverage of Katrina. Likewise the television pictures of the Tsunami disaster brought the first law of world risk society into every living room, which goes: *catastrophic risk follows the poor*. Global risks have two sides: the probability of possible catastrophes and *social vulnerability* through catastrophes. There is good reason to predict that climate change will cause devastation especially in the poor regions of the world, where population growth, poverty, the pollution of water and air, inequalities between classes and genders, AIDs epidemics and corrupt, authoritarian governments all overlap. It is also part of the ambivalence of risk, however, that in addition to the globalization of compassion – measured by the unprecedented readiness to donate to the relief effort – at the same time the Tsunami victims were categorized and discussed politically in *national* terms. Furthermore, the many other catastrophes, which were not at all or only briefly reported in the West, are indicative of the egoistic selectivity with which the West responds to the threats of world risk society.

How can the relationship between global risk and the creation of a global public be understood? In his 1927 book *The Public and its Problems*, John Dewey explained that not actions but *consequences* lie at the heart of politics. Although Dewey was certainly not thinking of global warming, BSE or terrorist attacks, his idea is perfectly applicable to world risk society. A global public discourse does *not* grow out of a consensus on decisions, but out of *dissent* over the *consequences* of decisions. Modern risk crises are constituted by just such controversies over consequences. Where some may see an over-reaction to risk, it is also possible to see grounds for hope. Because such risk conflicts do indeed have an enlightenment function. They destabilize the existing order, but the same events can also look like a vital step towards the building of new institutions. Global risk has the power to tear away the facades of organized irresponsibility.

The state and technological culture may be under attack, but they are striking back. Global risks are not their enemies, although they are not entirely trustworthy allies in colonising the future either. Risks are the likely *battle grounds* for the somewhat hazy power space of global domestic politics.

2) *Enforced communication across all differences and borders* Egoism, autonomy, autopoiesis, self-isolation, improbability of translation – these are key terms which, in sociological theory, but also in public and political debates, distinguish modern society. The communicative logic of global risk can be understood as the exact opposite principle. Risk is *the* involuntary, unintended compulsory medium of communication in a world of irreconcilable differences, in which everyone revolves around themselves. Hence a publicly perceived risk compels communication between those who do not want to have anything to do with one another. It assigns obligations and costs to those who refuse them – and who often even have current law on their side. In other words, risks cut through the self-absorption of cultures, languages, religions and systems as

well as the national and international agenda of politics, they overturn their priorities and create contexts for action between camps, parties and quarrelling nations, which ignore and oppose one another.

For example, the anticipation of catastrophic side-effects means that big companies are increasingly faced with anticipatory resistance to their decisions: no power plant is built without protest from nearby residents, no oil field explored without critical scrutiny by transnational NGOs, no new pharmaceutical drug hailed without qualifications about the known and unknown risks associated with it. In other words, global risks enforce an involuntary democratization. Through public debate of consequences, a range of voices is heard and there is participation in decisions which otherwise evade public involvement.

3) *Political catharsis* ‘Who would have thought before, that tears would become our common language,’ exclaimed a Turkish TV reporter in Athens into his microphone. These words were his comment on the incomprehensible surprise that two big earthquakes one after the other at the end of the twentieth century had reconciled the two traditional enemies who had been feuding for 180 years: the Turks and the Greeks. Peace in Banda Aceh, public spirit in New Orleans, opening of the border in Kashmir: the catastrophes of 2005 reflected worldwide as global events have also displayed the power to produce political catharsis. But this is no one-way street to more freedom, democracy and peace. As the risk of terrorism shows, radical change, removal of the old, the glint of the new, in short, the world historical power of global risks, are in principle ambivalent. The ruse of history does not have to be a ruse of reason, it can also become a ruse of unreason or anti-reason – and often it is all of these things at once (e.g. the ‘war on terror’).

4) *Enforced cosmopolitanism* In themselves, even global risks can be rationally explained, anticipated and controlled through appropriate action. The ability to isolate individual lines of risk which that assumes is contradicted, however, by the trans-systemic, trans-national, trans-disciplinary dynamic of world risk society. The history of risk corresponds to the (hi)story of the race between the hare and the hedgehog (or was it a tortoise?). The risk that was here only a moment ago and had one face is now already over there and has taken on quite a different face within various cultures, systems, regions, scholarly disciplines. It is the permanent transformation, accumulation and multiplicity of distinct, often spurious risks – ecological, biomedical, social, economic, financial, symbolic and informational – that characterizes the ambivalence and incalculability of world risk society.

That is what ‘enforced cosmopolitanization’ means: global risks activate and connect actors across borders, who otherwise do not want to have anything to do with one another. I propose, in this sense, that a clear distinction be made

between the philosophical and normative ideas of cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and the 'impure' actual cosmopolitanization on the other. The crucial point about this distinction is that cosmopolitanism cannot, for example, become real only deductively in a translation of the sublime principles of philosophy, but also and above all through the back doors of global risks, unseen, unintended, enforced. Down through history cosmopolitanism bore the taint of being elitist, idealistic, imperialist, capitalist; today, however, we see that reality itself has become cosmopolitan. Cosmopolitanism does not mean – as it did for Immanuel Kant – an obligation, a task, that is to order the world. Cosmopolitanism in world risk society opens our eyes to the uncontrollable liabilities, to something that happens to us, befalls us, but at the same time stimulates us to make border-transcending new beginnings. The insight that in the dynamic of world risk society we are dealing with a cosmopolitanization under duress robs 'impure' cosmopolitanism of much of its ethical attractiveness. If the cosmopolitan moment of world risk society is both at once: deformed and inevitable, then seemingly it is not an appropriate object for sociological and political reflections. But precisely that would be a serious mistake. As I hope I have been able to suggest with these few roughly sketched notes, it is also worth, in addition to everything else, inquiring as to the enlightenment function of global risks, to open it up conceptually and to research it.

The birth of a global risk consciousness is a trauma for humanity; it combines the experience of an anthropological shock and of a cosmopolitan common fate with the happy presentiment of an ability to start anew, collapse with new departures. That need not mean *Mit der Gefahr wachst das Rettende auch* – 'With danger, what saves also grows us' – because, faced with the alternative 'freedom or security', the vast majority of human beings seem to prioritize security, even if that means civil liberties are cut back or even suffocated. As a result of the experience of the risk of terror, there is an increasing readiness, even in the centres of democracy, to break with fundamental values and principles of humanity and modernity, e.g. with the principle 'There can be no torture' or 'Nuclear weapons are not for use', that is, to globalize the practice of torture and to threaten so-called 'terror states' with a preventive nuclear strike.

5) *Global risk serves as a wake-up call in the face of the failure of government in the globalized world* There is a surprising parallel between the reactor catastrophe of Chernobyl, the Asian financial crisis, 9/11 and the consequences of Hurricane Katrina for the American self-image. In each case they led to world-wide discussion of the question as to what extent the dynamic of world risk society must be regarded and evaluated as a historic refutation of the neo-liberal conception of the minimal state. For example, a result of the jolt given by the revelation of the hidden Third World face of the United States has been that, despite the sceptical attitude of many Americans to the state, there has been an opening up of the question as to an appropriate role of government. In this way the old opposition between left and right finds new forms of

expression. On one side, it is emphasized that the power of the Federal Government exists to minimize the threats and risks which individuals face; on the other, this definition of the state is dismissed as mistaken and misguided. There is an interesting exception: military security. Whereas individuals are expected to cope with issues of social security and to make provision for the event of a catastrophe, the importance of external security and with it the need to expand military apparatuses is dramatized. A social contract? A public good? At best an option, not a duty. President Bush's campaign manager argued: the agency that would be responding to Katrina would best be described as 'an oversized entitlement programme, squandering money and programmes better delivered by organizations like the Salvation Army'. Barack Obama, the Junior Senator for Illinois, himself an African-American, responded: 'The ineptitude was colour blind. Whoever was in charge,' he went on, 'appeared to assume that every American has a capacity to load up the family in a car, filled with \$100 worth of gasoline, stick some bottled water in the trunk and use a credit card to check into the hotel and safe ground.' It is this scepticism with respect to the state which drives forward the individualization of its citizens, particularly the weakest – in the face of global dangers – which from a European perspective is so difficult to understand.

6) *Possibility of alternative government* Important as all these arguments are, the decisive question is a different one: to what extent does the threat and shock of world risk society open up the horizon to a *historic alternative of political action* – first of all, admittedly, for a change of viewpoint, which allows the fundamental transformation of national/international, state and non-state politics, which is occurring, to be even adequately conceptualized, understood and researched by the social sciences in its range, its ambivalences, its strategic options for action and its immanent contradictions? Not until this key question as to an alternative is answered would a new critical theory with cosmopolitan intent, which overcomes the mistakes of methodological nationalism, be a possibility. It is precisely these questions that I have tried to answer in my book *Power in the Global Age* which has just appeared in English translation. Here I can only outline the basic idea.

Two premises: 1) world risk society brings a new, historic key logic to the fore: no nation can cope with its problems alone; 2) a realistic political alternative in the global age is possible, which counteracts the loss to globalized capital of the commanding power of state politics. The condition is that globalization must be decoded not as economic fate, but as a strategic game for world power.

A new global domestic politics that is already at work here and now, beyond the national-international distinction, has become a meta-power game, whose outcome is completely open-ended. It is a game in which boundaries, basic rules and basic distinctions are renegotiated – not only those between the national and the international spheres, but also those between global business and the state, transnational civil society movements, supra-national organizations and national

governments and societies. No single player or opponent can ever win on their own; they are dependent on alliances. This is the way, then, in which the hazy power game of global domestic politics opens up its own immanent alternatives and oppositions. The first one, which is dominant today, gives the priority of power to global capital. The goal of the strategies of capital is, in simplified terms, to merge capital with the state in order to open up new sources of legitimacy in the form of the *neo-liberal state*. Its orthodoxy says: there is only one revolutionary power, which rewrites the rules of the global power order, and that is capital, while the other actors – nation-states and civil society movements – remain bound by the limited options of action and power of the national and international order. This dominant coalition of capital and national minimal state is not only not in a position to respond to the challenges of world risk society, it becomes fundamentally implausible in the experiential space of believed global risks.

The strategies of action which global risks open up overthrow the order of power, which has formed in the neo-liberal capital-state coalition: global risks *empower* states and civil society movements, because they reveal new sources of legitimation and options for action for these groups of actors; they *disempower* globalized capital on the other hand, because the consequences of investment decisions contribute to creating global risks, destabilizing markets and activating the power of that sleeping giant the consumer. Conversely, the goal of global civil society and its actors is to achieve a connection between civil society and the state, that is, to bring about what I call a *cosmopolitan form of statehood*. The forms of alliances entered into by the neo-liberal state instrumentalize the state (and state-theory) in order to optimize and legitimize the interests of capital world wide. Conversely the idea of a cosmopolitan state in civil society form aims at imagining and realizing a robust diversity and a post-national order. The neo-liberal agenda surrounds itself with an aura of self-regulation and self-legitimation. Civil society's agenda, on the other hand, surrounds itself with the aura of human rights, global justice and struggles for a new grand narrative of radical-democratic globalization.

This is not wishful thinking; on the contrary, it is an expression of a *cosmopolitan realpolitik*. In an age of global crises and risks, a politics of 'golden handcuffs' – the creation of a dense network of transnational interdependencies – is exactly what is needed in order to regain national autonomy, not least in relation to a highly mobile world economy. The maxims of nation-based realpolitik – that national interests must necessarily be pursued by national means – must be replaced by the maxims of *cosmopolitan realpolitik*. The more cosmopolitan our political structures and activities, the more successful they will be in promoting national interests and the greater our individual power in this global age will be.

It is, of course, important to look at the unwanted and unpredicted side-effects of this *Cosmopolitan Vision* (Beck 2006): the call for justice and human rights is used to legitimate the invasion of other countries. How can one be in favour of cosmopolitan legitimacy when it leads to crises and wars and thus to the bloody refutation of the idea itself? Who will rein in the side-effects of a cosmopolitan

moral principle that speaks of peace while facilitating war? What does ‘peace’ mean when it generalizes the possibility of war? It is necessary to make a clear distinction between *true* and *false* cosmopolitanism and yet such clarity is hard to achieve because it is the comparative legitimacy of cosmopolitanism that makes it so tempting to instrumentalize the latter for national-imperial purposes. Fake cosmopolitanism instrumentalizes cosmopolitan rhetoric – the rhetoric of peace, of human rights, of global justice – for national-hegemonic purposes. There are numerous examples of this in history; the Iraq War is only the most recent. The ideological ambivalence which is inherent from the beginning in the idea of cosmopolitanism is the reason why, in the last chapter of my book on *Power in the Global Age* in an (ironic) self-critique, ‘A brief funeral oration at the cradle of the cosmopolitan age’, I warn against the abuse of cosmopolitanism.

### Consequences for the social sciences, perspective

It is evident, that the taken-for-granted nation-state frame of reference – what I call ‘methodological nationalism’ – prevents sociology from understanding and analysing the dynamics and conflicts, ambivalences and ironies of world risk society. This is also true – at least in part – of the two major theoretical approaches and empirical schools of research, which deal with risk: on the one hand in the tradition of Mary Douglas, on the other in that of Michel Foucault. These traditions of thought and research have undoubtedly raised key questions and produced extremely interesting detailed results as far as understanding definitions of risk and risk policies is concerned, work which no one can dispense with and which will always remain an essential component of social science risk research. Their achievement is to open up risk as a battle for the redefinition of state and scientific power.

An initial defect lies in regarding risk more or less or even exclusively as an ally, but failing to perceive it as an *unreliable* ally and not at all as a potential antagonist, as a force hostile both to nation-state power as well as to global capital. This exclusion is analytical, deriving from the theoretical approach itself. Surprisingly the research traditions of Douglas and Foucault define their problem in such a way that the battle over risk always comes down to the reproduction of the social and state order of power. As a result, they are taken in by the only apparently effective surveillance state, a self-misconception of that state itself – because the nation-state which attempts to deal with global risks in isolation resembles a drunk man, who on a dark night is trying to find his lost wallet in the cone of light of a street lamp. To the question: did you actually lose your wallet here, he replies, no, but in the light of the street lamp I can at least look for it.

In other words, global risks are producing ‘failed states’ – even in the West. The state structure evolving under the conditions of world risk society could be characterized in terms of both inefficiency *and* post-democratic authority. A clear distinction, therefore, has to be made between rule and inefficiency. It is quite possible that the end-result could be the gloomy perspective that we have



totally ineffective and authoritarian state regimes (even in the context of the Western democracies). The irony here is this: manufactured uncertainty (knowledge), insecurity (welfare state) and lack of safety (violence) undermine *and* reaffirm state power beyond democratic legitimacy. Given the maddening conditions of world risk society, the older critical theory of Foucault is in danger of becoming simultaneously affirmative and antiquated, along with large areas of sociology, which have concentrated on class dynamics in the welfare state. It underestimates and castrates the communicative cosmopolitan logic and irony of global risks; consequently the historic question, where politics has lost its wallet, that is, the question of an alternative, is analytically excluded by the vain searching in the cone of light of the nation-state street light.

A cosmopolitan sociology, which faces up to the challenges of global risks, must also, however, shed its political quietism: society and its institutions are incapable of adequately conceptualizing risks, because they are caught up in the concepts of first modernity, nation-state modernity, which by now have become inappropriate. And it has to face the question: how can non-Western risk society be understood by a sociology, which so far has taken it for granted, that its object – Western modernity – is at once both historically unique and universally valid? How is it possible to decipher the internal link between risk and race, risk and image of the enemy, risk and exclusion?

In conclusion I return to the title of my lecture: how to live in times of uncontainable risks? How to live, when the next terrorist attack is already in our heads? How worried should we be? Where is the line between prudent concern and crippling fear and hysteria? And who defines it? Scientists, whose findings often contradict each other, who change their minds so fundamentally, that what was judged 'safe' to swallow today, may be a 'cancer risk' in two years time? Can we believe the politicians and the mass media, when the former declare there are no risks, while the latter dramatize the risks in order to maintain circulation and viewing figures? Let me end with an ironic confession of non-knowledge. I know that I, too, simply do not know. Perhaps I may add something 'off the record', a postscript to my lecture, as it were: knowledge of the irony of risk suggests that the omnipresence of risk in everyday life should also be treated with sceptical irony. If irony were at least the homeopathic, practical everyday antidote to world risk society, then there would be less need to worry about the British, about the Germans. At any rate this piece of advice is no more helpless than the current hope of finding the lost wallet at night in the cone of light cast by the nation-state street lamps.

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