

A portrait of Ulrich Beck, an older man with white hair, wearing a dark jacket over a dark shirt. The background is a solid light blue.

Sociology

Shortcuts

*No.1:
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*Ulrich
Beck*

A-Level Sociology

*Risk
Society*

Beck's complex and at times convoluted arguments around the concept of Risk Society arguably make it one of the more-difficult theoretical areas to cover at A / High School level. This tends to mean it's covered in a piecemeal way that focuses on one or two dimensions and manifestations of risk in contemporary societies, while also lumping it into a general "postmodern narrative".



While this is understandable - many of the ideas and arguments Beck raises around areas like identity or uncertainty have a distinctly postmodern feel to them - one of the key things about Risk Society is how it can be used, among other things, as a criticism of postmodernity and postmodern society.

Key Concepts

Risk, 1st and 2nd modernity, Goods and Bads, reflexive modernisation; individualism, institutionalisation of individualism, globalisation, detraditionalisation, organised irresponsibility.

There's a tendency to think about the evolution of human society in linear terms, as a general line of development that flows from something like:

- the *primitive* to the *complex*,
- *religion and superstition* to *science and rationality*,
- *ignorance and scarcity* to
- *progress and plenty*.

Sociologically, this sense of linear development is frequently reflected in the idea of three broad historical epochs, each with their own particular and peculiar developmental characteristics:

1. Premodern or feudal societies are mainly agricultural, local in scope, involve collective identities inherited and fixed at birth, from Noble Lords and Ladies, to lowly Peasants and even lower Serfs, given a sense of order by notions of rights and responsibilities derived from God and generally held together by powerful, organised, religions.

2. Modern or capitalist societies are industrial, national and international in scope, where people develop increasingly individualistic identities centred around work and the workplace and ordered through a democratic politics based around the application of science, rationality and technology.

3. Postmodern or post-capitalist societies are post-industrial, advanced technologically, global in scope, highly-individualistic in terms of identities that form around diffuse lifestyles and increasingly fragmented across categories like class, age, gender, ethnicity and sexuality.

Locating the work of Ulrich Beck into this loose schema appears relatively straightforward given that he talks about contemporary Western societies in terms of concepts like risk, uncertainty, fear and the individualisation of biographies that involve people trying to make sense of their lives and their place in a world cut-adrift from the certainties of modernity: the nation state, stable governments, technological progress that seems to bend nature to its will, community, clearly-defined individual life courses and the like.

It's Modernity, Jim, but not as we knew it

Beck rejects the idea of a simple linear evolutionary narrative for two main reasons:

Firstly, it fails to capture the messy and contradictory nature of social development. While modernity - the explosion of scientific, philosophical, religious, political, economic and sociological ideas that developed around the 16th century in Western societies - challenged and to some extent fatally undermined many of the old beliefs and certainties of premodernity, it didn't completely destroy them.



The modernisation of society involved the replacement of feudalism with the new economic form of capitalism, the development of industrial forms of production and consumption and a wide-range of science-based ideas about the nature of the world that challenged the dominant ideas and explanations of premodernity.

Contemporary Britain, for example, retains elements of premodernity in things like the power of its landed aristocracy, a monarchy and nobility still enjoying ancient birth rights and privileges, a second chamber of government, the House of Lords, based on hereditary principles and political appointments...

Secondly, in common with contemporaries such as Giddens ([Late-modernity](#)) and Bauman ([Liquid Modernity](#)), Beck argued that while modern societies in the late 20th - early 21st centuries were clearly different from their predecessors we should see them not as radical departures from modernity but rather as “modernity writ large”; that is, in terms of how two of the fundamental processes introduced by modernity - the modernisation of both Self and Society - were being taken to their logical conclusion in what he termed “2nd modernity”.

The modernisation of The Self is less discussed, but equally important, in two main ways:

Firstly, capitalism did away with the economic relationships of premodernity, replacing the Estates system with one in which individuals either worked for wages or employed others in this capacity - something that transformed people's ideas about individual rights and freedoms (what Mead called the "I" aspect of The Self).

Secondly, as people came to see themselves as "individual beings" who were (relatively) free to make choices and decisions about their lives (as opposed to, by-and-large, having them made for them by others in premodernity) this transformed their social and cultural (the "Me" aspect of The Self). Family life, for example, has changed throughout modernity and although the precise meaning of changing family roles, for example, is disputed it's evident that male and female roles in 2nd modernity are significantly different to those in pre or 1st modernity.

A significant feature of Self-modernisation is Beck's argument that increasing individualisation means "the individual has to construct his or her own biography". That is, people are increasingly cut-adrift from the pressures and controls imposed by social identities such as gender or sexuality. In the past, for example, gender biographies were generally constructed around either masculinity or femininity; in the present we are presented with an increasing range of gender possibilities from which we by-and-large pick-and-choose - or reassemble in new and different ways.

*what if
we
"get it
wrong"?*

The upside of this is much greater levels of individual freedom to "be yourself" and express this sense of being in a wide variety of unconstrained ways.

The downside is the sense of uncertainty, confusion and impermanence surrounding things like identity choice:

The Goods, the Bads and the Uglies

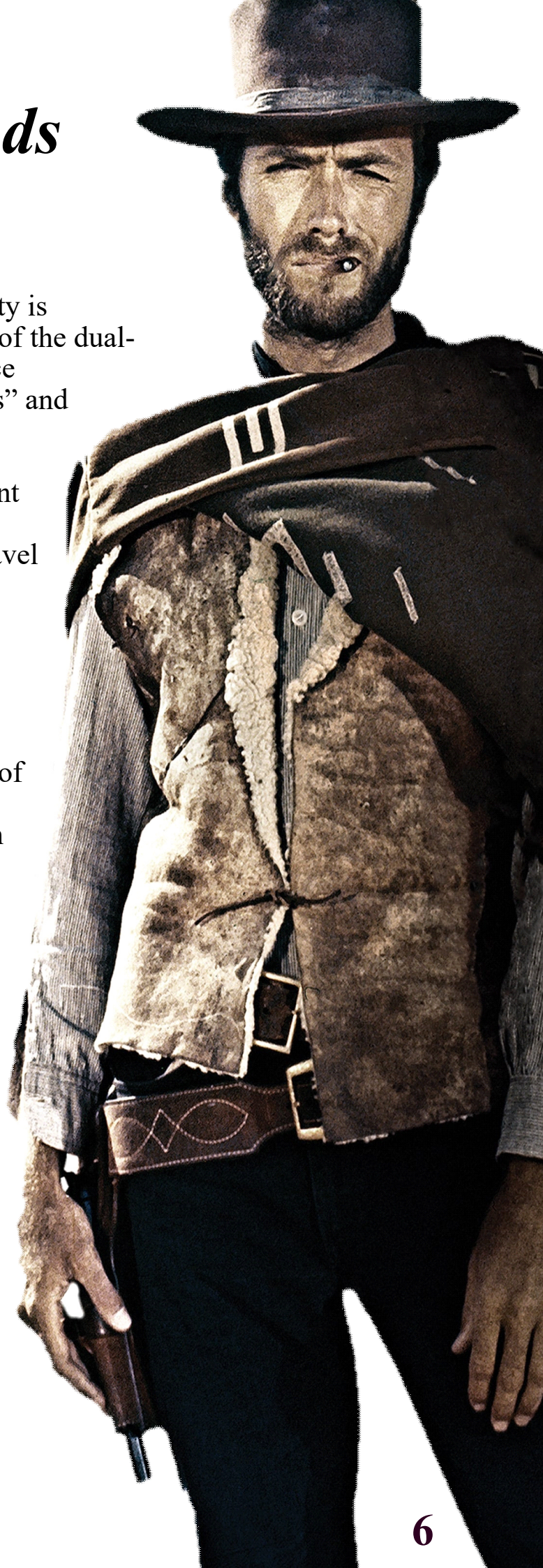
Beck captured the notion that 2nd modernity is characterised by an increasing recognition of the dual-nature of our individual and social existence through his distinction between “the Goods” and “the Bads” of modernisation.

“Goods” has both a literal - the development of all kinds of consumer products and services, from cars and computers to air travel - and metaphorical meaning: the belief, for example, in science, progress and the idea “things could only ever get better”.

“Bads”, however, refer to our increased realisation about “the backside of Goods”: things like climate change, the destruction of the physical environmental and global pandemics such as Covid-19 linked to such changes.

For Beck, the key idea here is that in 2nd modernity we’ve started to understand that “the Bads” are not just a by-product of modernisation, problems we can solve through the greater application of science, for example.

The ugly truth is that “Bads” are endemic to modernisation, such that we cannot have the one without the other, an idea expressed and explained through the concept of reflexive modernisation.



This involves the idea that modernisation, as a social and technological process, is not a simple, linear, process. The development of motorised vehicles, for example, produced huge social benefits (“goods”) in terms of speeding-up the transport of raw and finished materials and giving individuals hitherto-tied to their immediate locality a freedom of movement unrecognisable in 1st modernity.

From the quantifiable environmental destruction caused by road building or road deaths, to the less quantifiable, almost invisible, Bads of air pollution, respiratory illness, wider climate destruction caused by oil extraction and the like that are embodied in this Good.

We can’t continue to enjoy the Goods produced by cars without also acknowledging - and perhaps tacitly accepting - the Bads, because they are, reflexively, two sides of the same coin.

But they also produced “Bads”.



To use a contemporary example, the Goods of social media - the free sharing of ideas and information, the development of friendships across the globe, the maintenance of family contacts and histories and so forth - are accompanied by the Bads: the loss of privacy, the selling of personal information for profit, online bullying, the spread of false information around vaccinations, the conspiracy theories.

The problem, in this respect, is that there’s no easy way to square this circle: by enjoying the goods you potentially have to suffer the Bads.

Ultimately, therefore, the major question being played-out in 2nd modernity is the extent to which our increased knowledge and understanding of potential Bads - the downside of modernisation - influences our perception of Goods?

Is, for example, climate change, pollution and environmental destruction a price we’re willing and able to pay in order to continue to enjoy the benefits of an ultimately destructive consumer lifestyle?

*a price
worth
paying?*



Reflexive modernisation

Reflexive modernisation, as Beck (2003) argues, refers to the idea “modernity has begun to modernize its own foundations. It has become directed at itself”.

2nd modernity, in other words, represents the “modernisation of modern society” - and to understand how and why this has come about, we need to look at three general processes associated with reflexive modernisation.

One of the key characteristics of premodernity was the collective nature of identity: in pre-modern (feudal) society people are defined by their roles and attendant social statuses - as peasant, noble, knight and so forth - and such statuses conferred certain rights and responsibilities: the higher your status the greater your rights and the fewer your responsibilities...

In modernity, identity becomes more-individualised, partly because Capitalism, as an economic system of production and consumption, encourages it in the relationships it creates and partly because social actors start to acquire the kinds of rights (political and legal, for example) that similarly encourage a sense of individualism; we are less constrained by who “society says we are or who we are supposed to be” and there’s greater freedom to develop our own individual sense of Self.

The downside here is that in contemporary modern societies individualisation has developed to the extent we are, as Beck argues, “left to our own devices” in terms of how we construct individual biographies: coherent and cultivated “life stories” for both ourselves and others that express both our individuality and identity.

As we each go through life “creating our own story” we make use of certain pre-existing or ready-made scripts: collective ideas about how, for example, to play certain roles, such as “male or female”, “mother, father, son, daughter” and so forth. In the past such scripts were highly prescriptive: they gave individuals largely unbreakable cues about how to play these parts and such scripts were reinforced by a wide range of social sanctions for deviance.

Scripting

In premodernity, for example, to be born “a peasant” was a highly-scripted status that governed all aspects of your biography - from where and how you worked and lived, through the education you could expect (none), to who you could and could not marry.

In modernity, to be born male or female involved a similar, if much looser, set of scripts that governed how you were expected to behave in terms of these socially-ascribed statuses. In post-war Britain and America, for example, male and female identities were much more tightly scripted than they are now.



In 2nd modernity scripts that can be adopted into our individual biographies still exist, but a key feature of individualisation is that such scripts become many and varied: there are, for example, many different ways in contemporary to “be male” or to “be female”, some of which relate to traditional (modernist) norms and values, some of which reject these conventions and some of which combine the two in a “pick-and-mix” fashion. A lesbian or gay couple, for example, may play out some forms of traditional masculinity and femininity in their relationship - including marriage in some counties such as Britain.



Risk Society

In this respect, while 1st modernity changed the gender identities and relationships of premodernity, in 2nd modernity the “modernisation of modern society” changes them further, creating in the process what Beck calls “Risk Society” - a type of society in which people are freed to reflect on and remake individual and collective choices and identities, the backside of which is the increased risk of making choices that cause us pain, unhappiness and suffering.

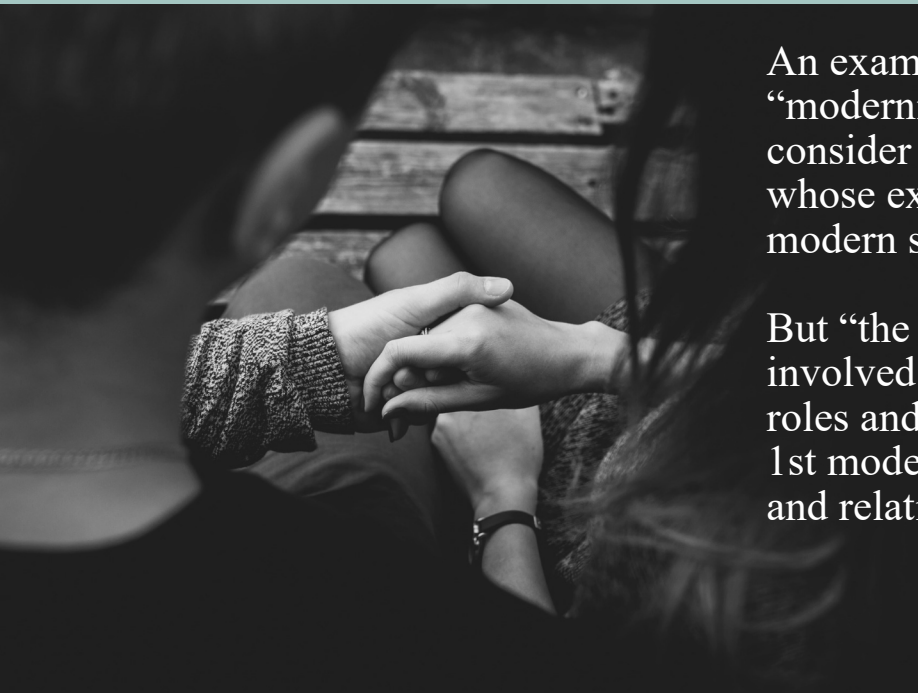
In general, therefore, reflexive modernisation allows for a rethinking and remaking of, for example, the traditional gender identities, roles and regulations characteristic of 1st modernity.

The upside here is the liberation of women from a highly-restrictive gender identity, but one downside is the fragmentation and proliferation that make collective identities and actions much more difficult.

Beck refers to this process as “Detraditionalisation”, the idea that the “traditional ways of being and doing” are no-longer relevant reference points in Risk Society, something that does, of course, increase both our personal and collective sense of risk - the sense of unease, for example, that the world is a much riskier and dangerous place now than in the past. This follows because, for Beck, the modernisation of modernity means

“there’s no actually traditional way of acting, so under conditions of risk society and under conditions of an individualising society the answers which tradition seemed to offer us to solve our everyday problems, don’t work anymore”.

The “modernisation of modernity”



An example to help understand the “modernisation of modernity” is to consider “the family”, a social institution whose existence spans pre-modern and modern societies.

But “the family” of premodernity involved a very different set of social roles and relationships to “the family” of 1st modernity and yet another set of roles and relationships in 2nd modernity.

This leads us towards a second, larger, dimension of individualisation in risk society:

For Beck, the “risk” here is that we no longer know or understand the concept of “a family” as it was traditionally constituted; “a family” becomes, in effect, whatever different people in different situations consider it to be - and while this is neither “a good” nor a “bad” (it can be both simultaneously) it does mean this individualistic ambivalence is unsettling, destabilising and increases the risk of family dissolution at the individual level.

The institutionalisation of individualism

“All social institutions related to things like civil, legal, social and political rights are framed by and focused on ‘the individual’”.



The institutions that developed in modernity - from the mass media, to education systems and democratic forms of government - did so to impose and manage a collective sense of social organisation; they operated, as it were, to encourage a collective sense of social responsibility and solidarity.

If, as Beck argues, these institutions no longer perform these general social functions as they did in the past, because they are increasingly focused on the rights and freedoms of individuals, rather than “the collective good”, it follows that a second dimension of reflexive modernity is the development of increased forms of

Risk

In important ways, therefore, we can characterise the various “institutions of modernity” that developed in 1st modernity as being overly concerned with risk management; they represented, among many other things, a way for emerging modern societies to manage the social risks associated with the rapid cultural and technological changes and challenges of modernity.



The problem, as Beck saw it in relation to the *modernisation of modernity* occurring in the late 20th - early 21st century, was one of “*organised irresponsibility*”; there was not only an increasing institutional inability to confront and solve the problems associated with new forms of risk, such as the emerging global power of new technology corporations that operated outside of individual government controls or various forms of environmental destruction, but in many ways institutions like

governments were seen as either in denial of these risks or, worse still, complicit in their propagation.

“Organised irresponsibility”, therefore, refers to the idea the institutions, such as environment agencies, that are supposed to control and manage risks either denied the risk itself or denied their lack of control over forms of risk, such as climate change or global pandemics.

The sub-politics of risk

One upshot of organised irresponsibility combined with the individualisation of institutions, is that many people feel alienated from mainstream society: they no-longer trust the institutions that are supposed to keep them safe to act responsibly anymore.

This has led to the development of various forms of *subpolitics* whereby groups develop and operate outside of the conventional arenas of mainstream democratic politics to confront the many and varied risks they perceive.



For some of these groups, such as the American Civil Rights Movement that began in the 1950's with acts of individual and collective defiance of the institutionalised discrimination and racism endemic in US society, to the Black Lives Matter movements that began in America and spread across the globe in the past decade, the objective was real forms of tangible risk management: social, political and economic changes to overcome the risks experienced by black minority groups.

For others, such as “anti-government” social movements - from white supremacists, through anti-vaxxers, to conspiracy theorists spread across social media - the objective was more “magical” forms of management. This involved trying to change people's perceptions of the world by revealing the “underlying truths” of that world, whatever a particular group perceived them to be (secretive cabals that “actually run the world”, Bill Gates promoting a Covid vaccine that injected people with surveillance software...).

In reflexive modernisation, therefore, institutionalised forms of individualism make the world appear riskier because people are thrown-back on their personal situations and resources rather than being part of a much-larger and more-powerful collective response to risk. The institutionalisation of individualism appears to place the individual at the centre of the world while actually weakening - in some cases fatally - their ability to come to terms with and deal with the problems created in and by that world.

In Risk Society, therefore, perceptions of risk are both conceptualised at the individual (am I in danger?) and the institutional (are we in danger?) level and also reflexively give rise to the potential for risk aversion: for some people the risks involved in something like fluid individual and cultural identities lead them to develop risk averse solutions based on “fundamentalist ideas” relating to gender, sexuality, age, class, religion or whatever.

Two further dimensions to risks in 2nd modernity involve, for Beck, their universality - they stretch and spread everywhere and, in consequence, cannot be escaped as they may have been in the past - and their “future uncertainty”. This relates, for example, to the unknowable risks involved with certain actions. When, for example, governments and scientific institutions engage in various forms of genetic engineering - on plants, insects, animals and human beings - there is no certainty that the environmental or health risks are both known and containable. These might, for example, be indirect, slow, long term and potentially irreversible.

universality

future

uncertainty

This, for Beck, contributes to Risk Society in the sense that the unknown consequences of our behaviour are more-important than the known consequences - something that feeds in to the extent to which we believe we can trust the various institutions of the nation state to handle potentially catastrophic forms of risk in an increasingly globalised world.

Globalisation

A third dimension to reflexive modernisation is the globalised nature of contemporary individuals and societies that amplifies a range of “risk paradoxes” - the idea that even as we become more-aware of something like the risks involved in the practices that threaten our individual and collective safety, such as climate change, we continue to reproduce those risks.

Globalisation, in this respect, serves to amplify our sense of risk, both individual and collective, by loosening our perception of control. We come to see both the individual and, more-significantly the national institutions of modernity as relatively powerless in the face of a range of global risks. And this, in turn, feeds back into our perception of risks that cannot be controlled.

The speed at which the world moves in 2nd modernity, through social media, for example, provides a further amplification of risk in the sense that we are increasingly more-immediately aware of potential risks to things like our well-being and way of life - the Covid-19 pandemic being an obvious case in point.

Globalisation highlights the dual nature of existence in 2nd modernity, one that produces both Goods - the things we need, like and want - and Bads: the various problems, from pandemics to famines, that flow from our consumption practices.

And these are reflexive: the more we individually and collectively consume the more we produce and reproduce the very risks that threaten our continued ability to consume. *Risk is not somehow a by-product of how we live, but absolutely embedded within it.*

“Risk is not a by-product of how we live, but absolutely embedded within it”.

For Beck, reflexive modernisation has two meanings and two consequences:

On the one hand, our individual knowledge and understanding of possible risks is greater than at any time in the recent past, thanks in part to globalised forms of digital media, while on the other the *institutionalisation of individualism* has meant the different institutions of modernity - from nation states and governments to transnational corporations - are not-only ill-equipped to address, confront or resolve these risks but, in some respects, are an integral part of their global production.

At the precise moment we are most aware of the risks of modern life we are contra-factually, less well-placed to overcome them. As Beck argues:



“Suddenly we, as individuals who are completely out of control of our own lives, are supposed to save the world through changing individual consumption patterns”.

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