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ULRICH BECK—A SHORT INTRODUCTION

When German sociologist Ulrich Beck passed away on a New Year's Day stroll in the "English Garden" park in Munich three years ago, his book *The Metamorphosis of the World*¹ was not quite finished. His wife together with several colleagues contributed the final touches to get it published in early 2016. After the publication of the German version a year later, we at *Verbum SVD* decided to take up the book's inspiration and provocation and invited some authors to reflect on it. In these first pages I venture to introduce Ulrich Beck briefly through some of his outstanding books in order to contextualise his *Metamorphosis*.

Biographical Notes

Ulrich Beck was born in May 1944 in the Pomeranian city of Stolp—then a German town, now Słupsk in Poland—, son of a naval officer and a nurse. After the war, the family left for Hanover (Germany). After high school and military service, Beck went to the south of Germany and enrolled at the University of Freiburg to study law.² At that stage, young Ulrich Beck's plans were simple: He wanted to become a fiction writer but thought that practising law would more easily provide the means for sustaining his literary career. However, in his law studies he ran into conflicts regarding the notion of "reality" and turned to philosophy in order to understand the world. He went to Munich and studied the German idealism with philosophers

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¹ Beck, Ulrich, *The Metamorphosis of the World*, Cambridge: Polity 2016. – See the book review in *Verbum SVD* 58 (2017) 141-142. – There are also versions at least in German (*Die Metamorphose der Welt*. Aus dem Englischen von Frank Jakubzik, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2017) and Spanish (*La metamorfosis del mundo*. Traducido por Fernando Borrajo Castanedo, Barcelona: Paidós 2017).

² For biographical reference see Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's Foreword in *Metamorphosis* (vii-x) and Mads P. Sørensen/Allan Christiansen, Ulrich Beck: An Introduction to the Theory of Second Modernity and the Risk Society, in: Ulrich Beck (ed.), *Ulrich Beck. Pioneer in Cosmopolitan Sociology and Risk Society*, Heidelberg: Springer 2014, 7-13.

like Kant and Fichte. These were the late 1960s with the student revolts, so it may not come as a surprise that again it was the concept of “reality” which caused Beck to look for a different approach: “Philosophy, Beck believed, was much too occupied with its own concepts and terms. It had a tendency only rarely to allow reality even so much as to enter its highly theoretical domain.”³ He eventually built his new choice on a minor elective course he had taken: sociology. “It was here that he found the particular kind of intellectual scrutiny of, and preoccupation with, reality that he sought.”⁴ In 1979, Beck submitted a doctoral dissertation on the construction of reality, but because of perceived neo-Marxist tendencies it was almost rejected by the faculty and as a matter of fact, it was never published.

During his student years in Munich, Beck met Elisabeth Gernsheim, today also a sociologist renowned in her own field who became his first and most important critical dialogue partner. They married in 1975. They were both hired at the University of Münster in 1979, but already in 1981, Beck went to Bamberg University to set up the institute of sociology there. In 1992, he returned to the University of Munich (LMU) as professor of sociology and stayed there until retirement. He also held positions at the London School of Economics and Political Science (from 1997; there, he put together his *Metamorphosis*), at the Centre for Advanced Studies at the LMU (from 2008), the Senior Loeb Fellowship of Harvard University (since 2009), as Professor at the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, Paris (since 2011), and from 2013 onwards with a European Research Advanced Grant “Methodological Cosmopolitanism—In the Laboratory of Climate Change.” On New Year’s Day 2015, Ulrich Beck died of a heart attack.

Reading and re-reading some of Beck’s works I get the impression that these are the pillars of his entire sociological work: the quest for *reality*, a *philosophical* approach and dialectic thinking with particular attention to dilemmas and paradoxes, and his captivating manner of *writing* (though not fiction) which paved his way to newspaper *feuilletons* and a wide reception of his ideas: “Without much exaggeration it could be said that Beck [...] with his views defined to a large extent the *feuilleton* debate on risks in modern societies, on the phenomena of individualisation and the consequences of globalisation, even if there was considerable critique from the field of sociology. Ulrich Beck [...] succeeded in establishing a book series he edited at Suhrkamp [publishers] under the heading of ‘Edition Second Moder-

³ Sørensen/Christiansen, Ulrich Beck, 10.

⁴ Ibid.

nity' which introduced authors with views like his own to large audiences," in Joas and Knöbl's evaluation.⁵ "All things considered then, Beck is part of the elite of contemporary, international sociology. As is apparent from the bibliography at the back of this book, he has not come to his status by a stroke of luck or simple good fortune. He has, throughout the years, remained a highly active sociologist. His productions span more than 45 books and over 250 research articles. In addition to this, he is a stalwart contributor to various European newspapers."⁶

Risk Society

After several publications on topics related to the division of labour and social inequality, on the social construction of professions, the sociology of work and questions of sociological theory and practice, in 1986 Ulrich Beck published his *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*.⁷ He sets out on a reflection on the little word "post" as the topic of his study:

The topic of this book is the inconspicuous prefix "post." It is a key word of our times. Everything is "post" [...]. It is the code word for a helplessness trapped in fashion. It indicates something beyond which cannot be named and stays with the topics it names *and* at the same time negates, a fixation on what is known. *The past together with "post"*—that is the fundamental formula in which we confront in verbose and obtuse incomprehension a reality that seems to have been turned upside down.⁸

The central concern is with risks and their emergence within the modernisation process in society:

⁵ Hans Joas/Wolfgang Knöbl, *Sozialtheorie. Zwanzig einführende Vorlesungen*. Aktualisierte Ausgabe, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 42013 [2004], 650.

⁶ Sørensen/Christiansen, Ulrich Beck, 12. – For a fairly complete list of Beck's publications up to early 2014 see Beck (ed.), *Ulrich Beck*, 15-48.

⁷ Ulrich Beck, *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 232016 [1986]. There are translations into English (1992), Korean and Danish (1997), Japanese, Swedish and Spanish (1998), Slovenian, Italian and Russian (2000), French and Serbian (2001), Polish (2002), Hungarian and Chinese (2003, Taiwan 2004), Czech (2004), Estonian (2005), Arabic (Lebanon) (2009), Portuguese (Brazil) (2010), Turkish (2011): cf. the bibliography in Beck (ed.), *Ulrich Beck*, 15f.

⁸ Beck, *Risikogesellschaft*, 12 (my translation from German).

Beck argues that there is an epochal shift from industrial to risk societies. The former were based upon industry and social class, upon welfare states, and upon the distribution of various *goods* organized and distributed through the state, especially of good health, extensive education, and equitable forms of social welfare. [...] By contrast the concept of risk society is based on the importance of bads. Risk societies involve the distribution of bads that flow within and across various territories and are not confined within the borders of a single society. Nuclear radiation is the key example of this, something few sociologists had ever examined.⁹

At first, there was no indication that this book would become a sensational international bestseller. However, Beck succeeded in “summarising the most diverse empirical evidence regarding the development tendencies of modern industrial societies and to condense them into a diagnosis of our time which, due to a historical event, became particularly plausible: The accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the same year, 1986, with its thousands of victims and the resulting radioactive contamination of vast territories were perceived as a confirmation of Beck’s thesis in this book that today we do not live in a class society any more but in a risk society.”¹⁰ As a matter of fact, Beck added a note before the preface to his book shortly after the Chernobyl accident, indicating that as with previous catastrophes in the 20th century, this time the distance to the others had been erased: “All the suffering, misery, all the violence inflicted by human beings on other human beings, up to now happened in the category of ‘the others’—Jews, blacks, women, refugees, dissidents, communists etc. There were fences, camps, townships, military blocks on the one side, and on the other one’s own home—real and symbolic borders within which the apparently unaffected could retreat. All of that still exists and does not exist anymore after Chernobyl. It is the end of ‘the others’ [...]”¹¹

With the shift from industrial society and its expression in the welfare state to risk society, Beck observes several developments: The risks are being distributed among *all* sections of society, class does not save the members of society any more: Hunger etc. used to be “distributed” to the exploited classes and countries, but risks—e.g. nuclear fallout—do not respect national settings anymore and affect

⁹ John Urry, Preface, in: Beck (ed.), *Ulrich Beck*, vi.

¹⁰ Joas/Knöbl, *Sozialtheorie*, 640.

¹¹ Beck, *Risikogesellschaft*, 7.

rich and poor equally: “To resume: *Misery is hierarchic, smog is democratic*,” Beck states.¹² It is the nature of risks to remain *hidden*. Particularly on an international level, “material poverty and blindness to risks coincide.”¹³ However, the risks are often human-made and are direct results of scientific progress and the new *nature of science*. Therefore, Beck also analyses the changed performance and position of the sciences: While they develop their progress, the sciences cannot evaluate ethical and other consequences of this progress, nevertheless they are also necessary to help the citizen discover the potential or real threat of this progress. Beck states a double consequence—one of his favourite paradoxes: As the sciences perform perfectly, they produce their own invalidation: “It is not the failure but the *success* of sciences which has *dethroned* them. It can even be affirmed: The more successfully the sciences have performed in this century, the more quickly and deeply their claims to validity have been eroded.”¹⁴

After the first chapter on risk society proper, in the following chapters Beck analyses several related aspects: politics in a society based on knowledge, the social distribution of inequality and the subsequent dissolution of class and stratum, the consequences for family and partnership,¹⁵ the possible practice of solidarity in individualised contexts, the loss of standards in labour, the diminishing importance and influence of formation and education for employment and labour, and the political relationship to science and truth—in fact, vast fields of concern. Another horizon for contextualising the risks and the development of modern societies is globalisation, a further key concept for Beck’s analyses which he discusses in several publications.¹⁶

¹² Ibid., 48.

¹³ Ibid., 55.

¹⁴ Ibid., 266.

¹⁵ Ulrich Beck and his wife Elisabeth Gernsheim-Beck dedicated several studies to family and gender topics: Ulrich Beck/Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Das ganz normale Chaos der Liebe*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1990; English: *The Normal Chaos of Love*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1995; translations into Italian (1996), Spanish (1998), Chinese (Taiwan) (2000), Korean (2005), Slovenian (2006) and Turkish (2011). – Ulrich Beck/Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Fernliebe. Lebensformen im globalen Zeitalter*, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2011; English edition: *Distant Love*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2014; translations into Spanish and Italian (2012), Polish (2013).

¹⁶ Ulrich Beck, *Was ist Globalisierung? Irrtümer des Globalismus – Antworten auf Globalisierung*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1997. – English version: *What is Globalization?*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2000; translations into: Swedish and Spanish (1998), Greek, Chinese (Taiwan), Italian, Finnish and Arabic (Lebanon) (1999), Korean (2000), Russian (2001), Bulgarian (2002), Romani-

Joas and Knöbl evaluate: “In critical appreciation of Beck’s writing it can be affirmed that his analyses regarding the high-tech risks have become enormously fruitful, that his work—including his *Gegengifte*¹⁷—has introduced, in the best enlightenment manner, the field of sociology as well as a wide interested audience into the relevant problems of modern industrialised societies.”¹⁸

A God of One’s Own

Some of the major patterns of risk society have to do with the process of individualisation and of cosmopolitanism. In this context of modernisation it comes as no surprise that Beck turned specifically to religion. Already in several of his books he had referred to religion as a basic structure (of the market, of the sciences etc.). In the wake of German Egyptologist Jan Assmann’s 2003 highly controversial thesis about the “mosaic distinction,” which deals with the rise of monotheism and its intrinsic connection to religiously motivated violence,¹⁹ Ulrich Beck published a book on religion.²⁰

Beck does not pretend to discuss religion lightly or arrogantly, even if he admits that “a fair bit of metaphysical innocence is required to coin the term a ‘god of one’s own’²¹ and to develop it. [...] In principle, however, the religious relates to the sociological like the fire to the fire fighter’s water.”²² As a sociologist, he affirms his secu-

an, Croatian, Slovenian and Georgian (2003), Slovakian (2004), Hungarian and Japanese (2005), Chinese (2008).

¹⁷ Ulrich Beck, *Gegengifte. Die organisierte Unverantwortlichkeit*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1988. English: *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1995, with additional translations into Finnish (1990) and Spanish (1998).

¹⁸ Joas/Knöbl, *Sozialtheorie*, 650.

¹⁹ See Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaik Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus*, Munich 2003 (in English: *The Mosaic Distinction or The Price of Monotheism*, 2009). Assmann has developed his views further and modified them to some degree.

²⁰ Ulrich Beck, *Der eigene Gott. Von der Friedensfähigkeit und dem Gewaltpotential der Religionen*, Frankfurt am Main und Leipzig: Verlag der Weltreligionen 2008. – English edition: *A God of One’s Own: Religion’s Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2010; translations into Spanish, Italian and Slovenian (2009); Japanese (2011).

²¹ Taking up an inspiration in Virginia Woolf’s 1929 essay *A Room of One’s Own*, where such an enclosure is the condition for creative thought and analysis: “The god of one’s own could be the religious frame for one’s own life, for one’s own space”: Beck, *Der eigene Gott*, 28.

²² *Ibid.*, 13.

larised enlightenment identity. Thus, he thinks the secularisation thesis cannot be avoided in sociology: The premiss of secularisation as “the idea that with the advance of modernisation religion will be starved out, cannot be easily removed from sociological thinking, even if this prognosis should be historically refuted.” On the basis of a methodological secularism looking at religious phenomena resulting from societal reasons and functions, Beck intends to take seriously his doubts about the certainty of sociology as he looks at the re-enchantment of reality through religion. The methodological secularism of sociological procedure may be unable to understand properly and decipher “not only the religious but also the social and political power of ‘one’s own god.’ Thus, this book sets out on the probably futile search for a covenant of fire and water—at the service of both: the demand for understanding of sociology, but maybe also the self-comprehension of religion.”²³

When talking about religion, Beck looks particularly at Christianity and Islam, he does not refer to other religions. The religious phenomena prompt him to explain a series of paradoxes and contradictions. In his view, the basic paradox in Christianity lies in its fundamental orientation to universality—opening up to cosmopolitanism—and at the same time the demand for belief and conversion:

[Christianity’s] religious universalism represents the counter principle to hierarchical subordination of the other. Universal Christianity—as conception of humanity and as missionary commission—is built around the programme of transcending borders. According to the scriptures, the faithful are liberated on the grounds of their faith from any mortal powers and inequalities. Their “society” is based on the kingdom of God which transcends the earthly things, not least any particular nation state, all class differences between poor and rich, men and women, young and old. Accordingly Paul announced: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” (Gal 3:29).²⁴

However, this fundamental unity introduces a new distinction: On the one side “we” who believe in this global unity, and on the other side the “others” who do not believe.²⁵ The previous divides of Jews and Greeks etc. are abolished, but then redrawn according to faith and belief vs. non-believers. This paradox comes to the fore again

²³ Ibid., 13f.

²⁴ Ibid., 75.

²⁵ Ibid., 77 and passim.

when Beck reflects on tolerance as a major imperative for peaceful coexistence. How can you tolerate people who are intolerant, concede human rights to manifest abusers of human rights?²⁶ In this discussion Beck employs philosophical procedures more than sociological analyses. But this is also the moment to return to his fundamental thesis on the individualisation processes in modern society and the demand for cosmopolitanism in order to overcome nationalism, or rather to come to terms with a reality which is articulated much more in a cosmopolitan fashion than within national frameworks.

The “god of one’s own” is seen as a (necessary) result of individualisation,²⁷ starting from the Bible itself and going through the Reformation processes, the importance of fundamentalist perspectives (with Pope Benedict’s warning against the dictatorship of relativism) and the development of modernity into a second modernity—another of Beck’s insights to name the new configuration of society.

The way out of fundamentalisms and the inherent tendency of religions to violence on the grounds of one’s own definitive truth is not easy for Beck, since, admittedly, these questions don’t lend themselves to sociological analysis but rather demand a (philosophical and) ethical orientation. Beck wishes for tolerance and discusses the position of truth claims: The quest is for multiple approaches to truth. From literature, he draws on Lessing’s parable of the three rings which postulates the prevalence of peace over a limited truth claim (here again, the need to avoid “national” options vs. a cosmopolitan framing of the truth and other perspectives becomes important).

The Metamorphosis of the World

Somehow, Ulrich Beck’s last book takes up many of the threads of his life-long research and thinking; a few of them I have tried to review in this introduction. Maybe, the confession of a sociologist’s perplexity and inadequacy in the face of the complex developments of modern societies is a good starting point for reality:

Even though I have been teaching sociology and studying the transformation of modern societies for many years, I was at a loss for an answer to the simple but necessary question “What is the meaning of the global events un-

²⁶ See *ibid.*, 150ff; 224f.

²⁷ Beck, *Der eigene Gott*, dedicates an entire chapter to this elaboration: “Häresie oder die Erfindung des ‘eigenen Gottes’” [Heresy or the invention of a God of one’s own], 123-175.

folding before our eyes on the television?”, and I was forced to declare bankruptcy. There was nothing—neither a concept nor a theory—capable of expressing the turmoil of this world in conceptual terms, as required by the German philosopher Hegel. [...] This turmoil cannot be conceptualized in terms of the notions of “change” available to social science—“evolution,” “revolution” and “transformation.” For we live in a world that is not just changing, it is metamorphosing.²⁸

Beck saw the challenge to go beyond the sociologist’s toolbox of concepts and procedures. Probably his own early meandering through law and philosophy kept returning on him. In his *Metamorphosis*, he returns to topics like climate change—actually a theoretical iceberg, where only a small fraction is visible at the moment—, power and politics, the increasing number of major catastrophes and their potential for positive consequences, digitalisation, international networks and cosmopolitan communities in risk societies.

This metamorphosis is not anymore the domain of the sociologist alone in his perfectly charted field, it is an invitation also to other disciplines to contribute their aspects and observations. It is a pity that Ulrich Beck himself is not available any more to take part in the conversation, but his inspirations, intuitions and challenges are invitations that last.

²⁸ Beck, *Metamorphosis*, 3.