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Thirtieth Anniversary of Ulrich Beck’s *Risk
Society***

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“Living on the Volcano of Civilization”. For the Thirtieth Anniversary of Ulrich Beck’s Risk Society

Fabio D’Andrea*, Andrea Lombardinilo**

The English translation of Ulrich Beck’s *Risk Society* appeared in 1992. Since then, the book has never ceased to influence contemporary sociologists, thinkers, scholars and students, thanks especially to Beck’s foresight in analyzing our social disorders. Through the risk society metaphor, Beck probed the new contradictions of our technological world and shed light on the economic, cultural, religious, political and communicative shortcuts afflicting our post-modern uncertainty.

Risk Society is an attentive and stunning representation of the public “bads” produced by progress and industrialization, as Beck carefully highlighted in *World at Risk* (2007) and *The Metamorphosis of the World* (2016). The dialogue with Bauman, Giddens, Habermas, Huntington, Lash and Luhmann inspired in him a scrupulous reflection on the causes and effects of secondary modernization. Thus, *Risk Society* laid the foundations of a sociological engagement pivoted on the concepts of reflexive modernization, individualization, institutionalization, standardization, the end of traditionalism, generalization of science and politics, desacralization.

Furthermore, Beck dealt with the visible and invisible risks produced by an utter faith in modernization which differs from past faiths by predicting negative effects. This is why Beck pointed out that our crises are the results of our achievements, to the extent that progress implies both improvement of quality standards and pauperization of values.

This is a sociological process that Beck fueled inspired by Adorno and Horkheimer’s works and Luhmann’s theory of complexity, with the purpose of

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revealing the new collective and individual risks fed by globalization: climate change, social inequalities, emancipatory catastrophism, digital risks, religious and political terrorism, communicative hypertrophy and speechlessness. Theorizing the risk society means reflecting on the new forms of social metamorphosis and observing the way we behave in a shifting scenario dramatically re-shaped by the pandemic. Physical isolation and remote relations seem to be the most effective vaccine to contrast this sudden enemy, with which only scientific research and behavioral responsibility can cope.

Hence the need to focus - in this special issue of “Italian Sociological Review” - on Beck’s prophetic insights, not only in the light of the pandemic, but also in the presence of the side effects produced by pollution, deforestation and poverty, without scrupulous attention to ecological and social sustainability: “On the international scale it is emphatically true that material misery and blindness to hazards coincide”. This assessment deals with the logic of wealth and risk distribution, in line with the geopolitical balances that have kept on evolving over the last three decades. In re-reading Beck’s masterpiece today, it is possible to detect the risks looming over the public and private spheres, in order to emphasize the different kinds of risks that human beings are facing in the era of predicted disasters, in accordance with the cult of the instantaneous reproducibility of human experience.

In his essay (*World Risk Society and Ulrich Beck’s Manufactured Uncertainties*) Andrea Antonilli focuses on the new forms of risk which set in motion a series of paradoxical actions that appear in the spread of what Beck calls fabricated uncertainties, i.e., insufficiently thought-out decisions produced by organizations of knowledge in their attempt to contain those uncertainties already in existence. Introducing the distinction between uncertainties fabricated either unwittingly or on purpose, this contribution focuses on an analysis of the author’s conception of the globalized terrorism of Islamic origin.

While analyzing the *Gods of “Second Modernity”: Religion and Spirituality from Ulrich Beck’s Sociological Perspective*, Antonio Camorrino discusses the question of desecularization and the distinctive features of religion and the new forms of spirituality, suggesting a possible defining line of demarcation between the two phenomena. Thus, he probes the main characteristics of the “risk society”, in line with Beck’s greatest contribution to the sociology of religion, highlighting a number of similarities and differences with previous theories and, therefore, Beck’s original contribution.

While wondering *How Side Effects Can Be Positive. A Reading of Beck’s Metamorphosis*, Fabio D’Andrea points out that Beck’s idea of metamorphosis aptly describes what is happening to Western culture. What is currently beginning to crumble is the primordial paradigm – referring to the *Ur-Paradigma*, a set of generative cultural traits whence issues most of the form and trajectory

of a given culture – that has influenced and (mis)directed the course of history so far. This leaves social actors without tools or theoretical frameworks that are up to the task of understanding the sense and direction of global events.

Maria Grazia Galantino investigates *the Organised irresponsibility in the post-truth era: Beck's legacy in today's world at risk*, in relation to the environmental risks and the pervasiveness of decision-making processes in which it is no longer possible to identify an agent to whom cause and fault can be attributed for the negative consequences of an action. Galantino's article argues that the coexistence of forms of post-factual politics and pressures towards depoliticization of contentious issues produces what is only apparently a paradox.

While investigating the *Memories of future. Risk and prevention: the difference that defeats indifference*, Mihaela Gavrilă demonstrates the relevance of Beck's thought with regard to the interpretation of complex phenomena such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The reflection on risk as an intrinsic dimension of contemporary societies is associated with the call for the development of a collective and individual future more attentive to the cultivation of empathy, solidarity and a new humanism as a dimension of the solidity of a society.

In conclusion, Andrea Lombardinilo (*Isolated Mass Hermits: Individualization and Communication in the Risk Society*) gives an insight into the effects of cosmopolitan individualization that Beck investigates in Chapter 5 of *Risk Society*, thus anticipating some of the sociological findings in a number of his last books, e.g. *A God of One's Own* and *The Metamorphosis of the World*. Beck's 'isolated mass hermits' are the prelude to the diffusion of an "isolated mass audience", whose social impact can be surveyed through the analysis of institutionalized biographical narrations.

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Memories of Future. Risk and Prevention: the Difference that Defeats Indifference
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"Isolated Mass Hermits": Individualization and Communication in the Risk Society.