ISR Italian Sociological Review
University of Verona, Italy
ISSN 2239-8589 | Editor in Chief Paola Di Nicola
Managing Editor Debora Viviani

Organised Irresponsibility in the Post-Truth Era: Beck's Legacy in Today's World at Risk

Maria Grazia Galantino

How to cite
Galantino, M. G. (2022). Organised Irresponsibility in the Post-Truth Era: Beck's Legacy in Today's World at Risk. [Italian Sociological Review, 12 (8S), 971-990]
Retrieved from [http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v12i8S.598]

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v12i8S.598]

1. Author information
Maria Grazia Galantino
Department of Social Sciences and Economics, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

2. Author e-mail address
Maria Grazia Galantino
E-mail: mariagrazia.galantino@uniroma1.it

3. Article accepted for publication
Date: June 2022

Organised Irresponsibility in the Post-Truth Era: Beck's Legacy in Today's World at Risk

Maria Grazia Galantino*

Corresponding author:
Maria Grazia Galantino
E-mail: mariagrazia.galantino@uniroma1.it

Abstract

The notion of 'organized irresponsibility', developed by Ulrich Beck in the eighties in relation to environmental risks, highlights the pervasiveness of decision-making processes in which it is no longer possible to identify an agent to whom cause and guilt can be attributed for the negative consequences of an action. This article claims that this concept remains analytically relevant for interpreting the transformations of responsibility in today's process of oscillation between de-politicization and hyper-politicization. On one side, de-politicization represents decisions about the definition and management of global risks as technical, apolitical or even value-free, removing them – along with their corollary of responsibility – from the political arena. On the opposite side, the rhetoric and practices of hyper-politicization, based on the delegitimization of expert knowledge, reconfigure the decision-making space, revitalizing the role of the politician as a protagonist and opening the way to post-factual politics. The article argues, however, that coexistence of forms of post-factual politics and pressures towards the de-politicization of contentious issues produces what is only apparently a paradox. In both these processes, the responsibility for political decisions is significantly weakened and emptied of meaning, often making it impossible to assign recompense and blame, and opening the way to political action that is increasingly heedless of responsibility for consequences.

Keywords: risk, responsibility, organised irresponsibility.

* Department of Social Sciences and Economics, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy.

1. Introduction

A range of scholars, analysts and commentators agree that we are living in a 'post-truth era' (Keyes, 2004; McIntyre, 2018). Beyond its chronological connotation, the term refers to a political and cultural context in which truth seems so outdated as to have totally lost its relevance. Emphasized and popularized in contemporary political debate following the pro-Trump and pro-Brexit campaigns in the United States and the UK, the post-truth concept and the linked concept of post-factual politics indicate the rise of a politics oriented toward the pursuit of specific policy interests and preferences regardless of the evidence and in spite of any factual refutation. Paradoxically, however, with the Covid-19 'data-driven pandemic', a seemingly opposite concept – that of 'evidence-based policy' – has firmly taken hold in the public arena. 'Policy has to follow the science' has been the mantra repeated in every corner of the globe by politicians, experts and citizens faced with the need to respond promptly and urgently to the spread of the contagion.

As this article will attempt to show, the coexistence of forms of post-factual politics and pressures towards evidence-based policy produces what is only apparently a paradox, to be understood in the frame of the oscillation between de-politicization and hyper-politicization that typifies the contemporary political sphere. The article examines these tendencies from the perspective of their implications for the notion of responsibility, beginning with Weber's classic definition as 'responsibility for the consequences of an action.' In this context, the concept of 'organized irresponsibility,' developed by Beck at the close of the 1980s, is still helpful to understanding the continuous oscillations between de-politicization and hyper-politicization in decision-making concerning the management of global risks.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, in the light of a theoretical-interpretive framework that draws from the approach of the sociology of risk and uncertainty, it outlines the implications of the social and technological transformations that challenge the concept of responsibility in its basic assumptions of attributability, accountability and foreseeability. It then introduces the Beckian concept of 'organized irresponsibility' as a key to interpreting processes in which it is no longer possible to identify a decision-making agent to whom cause and blame can be attributed for the negative consequences of an action. It then moves on to discuss the transformations of responsibility within the opposing but concomitant trends that characterize contemporary politics. On one front, the process of de-politicization represents decisions as technical, apolitical or even value-free, removing them – along with their corollary of responsibility – from the political arena. On the opposite side, the rhetoric and practices of hyper-politicization, based on the delegitimization

of expert knowledge, reconfigure the decision-making space, revitalizing the role of the politician as a protagonist. In the concluding section it is suggested that in both these processes the responsibility for political decisions is significantly weakened and emptied of meaning, often making it almost impossible to assign recompense and blame, and opening the way to political action that is increasingly heedless of responsibility for consequences.

2. Responsibility in the risk society

In defining the concept of responsibility, we must begin with Max Weber's definition of the ethics of responsibility, according to which 'one has to give an account of the foreseeable *results* of one's action' (1946[1919]: 120). In keeping with its Latin etymology (*respondeo*), the German word *Verantwortung* connotes the idea of responsibility as an answer, but as has been capably argued, it contains at least two intertwined elements (Arnaldi, Bianchi, 2016)[1] that are both called into question in the contemporary political sphere.

The first of these is attributability or imputability – that is, 'the possibility of tracing back the origins of an action to an agent as its causal factor' (Pellizzoni, 2004: 546). The second is accountability or answerability, in the sense of having to answer 'for the concrete results of one's own actions' (Cavalli, 1997: 23). This second dimension of the concept highlights the fact that responsibility cannot find its raison d'être exclusively in a belief system, be it religious or universally ideological, outside the system of action and the actors who interact with it. Responsibility therefore, as noted, inevitably has a meaning that is '*responsive* or *relational*, each actor being *responsible for the other and to the other*' (Franzini Tibaldeo, 2012: 198).

Tenaciously anchored to the actions of humans in the world, then, the ethics of responsibility acquires meaning within the historical and social context in which the action is manifested, and is embedded within the process of rationalization and autonomization of the spheres of action characteristic of modernity. Fundamental in this regard is the distinction between politics and science, the former setting normative requirements with respect to the ends of action – what must be – while the latter, on the contrary, 'stands on the ground of the rigorously empirical determination of what *is*' (Campelli, 2018, 207). Science, and socio-historical investigation in particular, offers 'the actor the opportunity to weigh the unintended and intended consequences of an action

[1] The conceptualization of responsibility in two main dimensions seemed the most parsimonious and useful for our purposes. For a more articulated classification that takes into account both the temporal dimension and the justification for the action itself, see Pellizzoni (2004).

against each other, and thus to answer the question: what does it "cost" to achieve the intended purpose, in terms of the foreseeable loss of other values?' (Weber, 1958 cit. in Campelli, 2018: 208). Science, however, cannot *relieve* a person or politician of the burden of choosing among different paths of action.

Speaking of it today, however, this distinction between the doer and the knower, the decider and the evaluator of the impact of the decision may seem normatively desirable but empirically susceptible to mixed feedback. The complexity that characterizes the relationship between science and politics in our societies leads us to reflect on the actual separation and separability of the spheres of knowledge and action, and on the meaning that the ethics of responsibility assumes in contemporary times. How, that is, do the transformations in the present global society, especially in the field of science and technology, impact and transform the sphere of responsibility?

The theory first developed by Ulrich Beck in his groundbreaking work *Risikogesellshaft* (1992a [1986]) is in our opinion particularly useful as a key to understanding the challenges responsibility faces in the contemporary world. Born from a perceived need to control the future, the concept of risk can be understood as a product of the modern processes of rationalization and intellectualization. The technical conception of risk that dominated modernity assumed that it was possible to deal with uncertainty rigorously, rationally, and neutrally according to canons of calculability that link means and ends, causes and effects (Castel, 1991; Douglas, 1985; 1992; Luhmann, 1993; Beck 1992a, 2008). In the world of technical risk, that is, it was still possible to differentiate roles and responsibilities clearly. The expert is accountable for analyzing foreseeable risks, but cannot be blamed for eventual negative consequences of his or her decisions. Decision-makers, on the other hand, are answerable for their choices (based on the experts' analyses), and they alone are responsible for any harm deriving from their implementation. Furthermore, as Mary Douglas observed, the widespread acceptance of a negative idea of risk, understood only as the probability of harmful effects, has to some extent simplified the complex job of policymakers, who 'have no headaches about how to compare harms with benefits' (1985: 20) – the intended and unintended consequences with the costs of a decision, that is – as Weber had on the contrary advised politicians to do: 'Since, in the vast majority of cases, every goal that is striven for does "cost" or can "cost" something in this sense, the weighing of the goal in terms of the incidental consequences of the action which realizes it cannot be omitted from the deliberation of persons who act with a sense of responsibility' (Weber 1949: 53).

Risks in contemporary society, however, are mainly manufactured risks (Giddens, 1990), produced by human manipulation of nature. Paradoxically, *progress* itself, of which science and technology are the *driving force*, 'creates as

many uncertainties as [it] dispels' (Giddens, 1999: 4). Put another way, reflexive modernization does not proceed in a linear way, but leads us to come to terms with the limits and contradictions of the modern order – with what Beck calls the 'side-effects' of human action (Beck, 1992a). Unlike the dangers of pre-modernity, generated (or allocated) outside the social system, 'only in the case of risk does decision making (that is to say contingency) play a role' (Luhmann, 1993: 23). Contemporary risk is thus made up of two elements: the agency and the intentionality of actors who, by making choices and decisions, produce consequences that are intended and unintended and may also be harmful (Battistelli, Galantino, 2019). In a society of manufactured risks, therefore, the connections between risk, responsibility and decisions alter (Giddens, 1990, 1999).

As early as the 1970s, Jonas (1985 [1979]) identified the main transformations due to scientific and technological development that directly challenge the two pillars of attributability and accountability that the concept of responsibility rests on. The first of these is *the scale of the transformative power of human action* and therefore the magnitude of the sphere of a decision and, often, its urgency (Pellizzoni, 2010). The concept of the Anthropocene, somewhat controversial but increasingly widespread, invites a consideration of nature as no longer external to humans but rather a product of their own actions, thus blurring the separation between humanity and nature and in some ways superseding it (see, for example, Steffen et al., 2011). Nature itself becomes a human responsibility since anthropic impact produces a widening of the sphere of human responsibility to the point that 'an object of an entirely new order – no less than the whole biosphere of the planet has been added to what we must be responsible for because of our power over it' (Jonas, 1985: 7).

The idea of responsibility is further transformed by the *(spatial-temporal) distance of the consequences* (positive or negative) from the action. The Chernobyl accident in 1986, which immediately lent substance to Beck's hypotheses in *The Risk Society*, demonstrated the extension in space and time of the catastrophic effects of human action. The damages due to radioactive contamination affected an area of over 200,000 square kilometers, involved over 5 million people, and more than 30 years later required the installation of a steel arch in order to proceed with the dismantling and clean-up, which will go on for the next hundred years. Human decision-making responsibility is no longer limited to the here and now, to nearby spaces and to the short term, but encompasses global spaces and a virtually infinite time frame. This is a challenge to the mindset of politics, which is often oriented towards short-term consensus or electoral competition, and the future becomes a significant horizon for the present (Jonas, 1985).

Another feature of contemporary transformations is the *cumulative nature of actions and the multiplication of actors* in the decision-making process, which make mechanisms of causal imputability (the origin of the decision) and especially personal imputability (who decided, who is responsible) scarcely feasible. According to Beck, the highly specialized division of labor together with systemic interdependence amount to general complicity and irresponsibility. 'Everyone (being) cause and effect, and thus non-cause' (1992a: 32).

But probably the most radical challenge to the concept of responsibility is posed by the failure of its basic assumption – foreseeability, in the sense of the ability to perceive, know in advance, or reasonably anticipate the possible outcomes of an action (Pellizzoni, 2018).

Increasingly, human action develops in a *condition of permanent uncertainty*, which produces consequences of an action that are unexpected, unforeseen and ultimately unforeseeable, making it impossible to establish relationships of attribution and direct imputation. As Beck reiterated with ever-increasing urgency in his last articles, the condition is one of *radical uncertainty* that forces us to come to terms with *unknown unknowns*. First made popular in the context of the war on terror[2] and then during the Covid pandemic, the notion of unknown unknowns limits attempts to calculate risk in probabilistic terms because, as John Maynard Keynes (1937) had previously observed, the peculiar feature of uncertainty is not simply the distinction between what is known with certainty and what is only probable, but its intrinsic incommensurability. The question is not, that is, simply one of making a decision with absent or insufficient information, as Simon's limited rationality model postulated, but also in situations where knowledge appears to be conflicting and self-contradictory, or in circumstances in which we simply 'don't know'[3]. This sort of *radical uncertainty* cannot be resolved by scientific or technological innovation – indeed, as we have seen during the pandemic, it 'is instead the result of more knowledge' (Beck, 1999: 5). The result of a decision is therefore necessarily the outcome of a particular mix of knowing and non-knowing, of knowledge and ignorance, in a combination that will vary with changing times, contexts and actors (Giddens, 1990).

[2] Recall the proverbial response of the US Secretary of State, Donald Rumsfeld, to a question about the lack of evidence of a direct link between terrorist organizations and the Iraqi government: 'As we know, there are known knowns; there are things that we know that we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know'.

[3] This expression was characteristic, for example, of expert analyses of the spread of new infectious diseases even before Covid (cf. WHO, 2005: III).

3. Organized irresponsibility and de-politicization

Together, these transformations generate a context that Beck, in a work published a few years after *Risk Society*, defines as 'organized irresponsibility', i.e. a system of social interaction in which actors collectively produce and distribute risks for which they manage to avoid being held responsible (1995 [1988]). Put another way via an effective metaphor: 'Society has become a laboratory with nobody responsible for the outcome of the experiment' (Yates, 2016: 101).

Writing in the wake of the Asian crisis of 1998, Beck finds an emblematic example of this dynamic in the global market, with the emergence of 'a new form of "organized irresponsibility" because it is an institutional form so impersonal as to have no responsibilities, even to itself' (Beck, 1999: 6). No component of the market is strong enough to change the overall flow, none is in a position to control risks, and none, in particular, can be blamed for harmful social and political effects (Curran, 2015). From this perspective then, the risk society approach brings together analytical developments in systems theory and complexity theory on one hand, and on the other the legacy of classic studies of technocracy as a process of the rationalization of society with the aim of controlling the future.

An initial formulation of 'organized irresponsibility' was present in the seminal work of C. Wright Mills on the structures of power in the modern American system (1951, 1956). Focusing particularly on the relationship between the elites and the masses, Wright Mills identifies in the transformations of this relationship the peculiar characteristic that power takes on in modernity:

> Organized irresponsibility, in this impersonal sense, is a leading characteristic of modern industrial societies everywhere. On every hand the individual is confronted with seemingly remote organisations […]. In pre-capitalist societies, power was known and personal. The individual could see who was powerful, and he could understand the means of his power. His responses, of obedience and fear, were explicit and concrete; and if he was in revolt, the targets of that revolt were also explicit and concrete [...] In an impersonalized and more anonymous system of control, explicit responses are not so possible: anxiety is likely to replace fear; insecurity to replace worry. The problem is who really has power, for often the tangled and hidden system seems a complex yet organized irresponsibility (1951: 111, 348-349).

Leaving aside the heated debate that the works of Wright Mills have aroused in sociology since the 1950s, the analytical lucidity of these considerations is undeniable, as is their ability to 'imagine' scenarios that have

in recent years become increasingly concrete and evident.[4] The unattributability of decisions (and of the sphere where decision-making power resides) is thus not just an unexpected effect of rationalization but a constitutive feature of it. In Beck's words, unattributability becomes a system (Beck, 1995: 133-136). Borrowing from Luhmann the perspective of systemic complexity, Beck also highlights the relationship between the political and legal spheres, directly linking political (ir)responsibility (for the consequences of decisions) to legal (ir)responsibility (organised non-liability), and pointing out the near impossibility of legally prosecuting the perpetrators of actions that cause damage to things and/or persons when they cannot be traced back to a single agent, be it an individual or an organisation. (Beck, 1992b, 1995; Curran, 2018).

Examples of this link, which prevents any effective attribution of responsibility and therefore fault, can be found in the case of workplace accidents. A critical analysis of public and media discourse surrounding one of the most serious workplace accidents ever to occur in Italy, at TyssenKrupp in Turin in 2007 (Galantino, 2010), shows how the complexity of organizational safety systems impedes the attribution of direct causal responsibility, resulting in the emergence of adversarial discourse in the friend/foe logic of a zero-sum game between two rights perceived as mutually exclusive: worker protection and business productivity. This is also reflected in the legal culture and the focus of investigations on individual responsibility rather than the social and organizational causes behind disasters (Centonze, 2005). Even though serious subjective responsibilities were brought to light during the trial, it is clear that from the standpoint of analysing social repercussions, the identification of a dangerous subject, or a category of dangerous subjects, excludes all co-responsibility (ours or other subjects') and at the same time leaves unchallenged the myth that technological, situational and environmental factors can be totally controlled (Turner, Pidgeon, 1997; Reason, 1991).

Regarding the recurring disputes over all sorts of issues that characterize our society, Giddens observes that the absence of responsible parties to blame for the consequences of actions is not a necessary outcome of organized irresponsibility. It is equally possible that anyone can be held potentially responsible, leading to the emergence of a 'litiginous society' (1999: 10) in which the obsessive search for a culprit can lead to the identification of scapegoats, thus decoupling compensation for harm suffered from causal responsibility. In both cases, responsibility, with its properties of attributability and

[4] In some ways, in fact, the idea of a system of power that is remote from individuals but coercive with respect to them, hidden and at the same time crowded with interconnected actors, seems to resonate in the most recent reflections on platform or surveillance capitalism (Srnisek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

accountability, tends to be diluted to the point of being swallowed up by a complex system of action in which interactions among multiple agents located at different levels and in various domains obscure individual acts and decision-making agents.

Another indicative example concerns the 2009 earthquake at L'Aquila in central Italy. Seven researchers, seismologists and engineers, members of the Major Risks Commission, were defendants in a trial meant to establish responsibility for the casualties and the grave damage suffered, and were convicted in the first instance of manslaughter. The judgment ruled that their 'negligence, imprudence, inexperience, [made their] assessment of risks related to the seismic activity taking place in the territory of L'Aquila after December 2008 *approximate, generic* and *ineffective* regarding their tasks and *duties of prediction and prevention*' (Amato, Galadini, 2013; Cocco et al., 2015)[5]. Widely debated by jurists, the trial above all highlights, from a sociological point of view, the complexity of communicating (and using in a courtroom) scientific knowledge which, based on probabilistic calculations, is by definition *approximate* and, like all scientific claims, *uncertain*. Most importantly, it reveals the shift in responsibility from the political to the technical sphere with respect not only to the duty of prediction but also to that of prevention. It is remarkable indeed that local administrators were held accountable neither legally (in court), nor even morally (in public debate) for failing to put in place measures to examine and improve the structural vulnerability of buildings or to prepare the population to deal with a seismic event.

Connecting decision, responsibility and guilt, Beck's notion of organized irresponsibility thus finds many points of contact with the more recent debate on processes of de-politicization, understood as the shift of the decision-making arena from the political to the technical sphere. (Flinders and Buller, 2006; Hay, 2007, 2014)[6]. In the Italian case and beyond, there has been an observable reorientation towards the technical and procedural aspects of the polity – consider, for example, the involvement of constitutionalists or political scientists – or towards the identification of practical policy solutions, as exemplified by the role of consultancy in various policy sectors (Bobbio, 2017).

[5] Six researchers were acquitted by the Supreme Court in 2015, while the ex-deputy department head of the Civil Protection Department, Bernardo De Bernardinis, was sentenced to two years imprisonment for manslaughter and injury due to 'informational misconduct'.

[6] Developed mainly in the field of political sociology and political science, the debate on de-politicization has rarely been related to the theoretical and research approach of the risk society. A notable exception is the work of Pellizzoni, some of which has already been cited in this essay.

According to many, it is politics that suffers, transformed from a place of ideological conflict into a venue for the solution and operational management of problems (Caniglia, 2001). In fact, as we have observed, these are not new processes but are fully traceable to the modern technocratic project, so much so that 'in modernity all politics is to some extent technocratic politics' (Antonelli, 2019: XIV). More recent thinking, however, emphasizes the exaggerated nature of current practices of de-politicization within a context of neoliberal hegemony and the crisis of traditional forms of representation (d'Albergo, Moini, 2017). The degree of intrusion of professional expertise in political and social life has led many to express concern over their role as 'self-serving monopolies' rather than 'forces for social equity and human betterment', and to decry the switch from the traditional commitments to serve the public to more market-oriented approaches (Fischer, 2009: 21).

Concerning the question of responsibility, the concept of de-politicization illustrates how the proliferation of actors and possible courses of action produces, on one hand, a shrinking sphere of decision-maker responsibility regarding the unforeseen or even unforeseeable consequences of decisions. Political decision-makers in modern society are left to depend on and trust the validity of the knowledge and competencies of the experts (Fischer, 2009), determining an expansion of the sphere of responsibility of the scientist (or, more often, the expert), who takes on the burden of delivering uncertain scientific knowledge to the politicians and communicating it (often directly) to the public. The *know how* of the expert, consisting of practices and experience more than knowledge, 'wins' over the *know why* of politics because by connecting technical rationality and practical rationality, means and aims, the being and the must be, expert judgments become persuasive narrations beyond discussion (Pellizzoni, 2011). At the same time, de-politicization increases the responsibility of individual citizens who, faced with the imperfect results of the systems of risk mitigation and redistribution developed by modernity (welfare, for example), are personally obliged to hedge against future risks. In this way, for example, so-called civil society in its organized forms (committees, associations, cooperatives, etc.) takes responsibility for projects aimed at strengthening the resilience of communities facing environmental challenges, thus assuming the risk (and responsibility) for possible consequences, in a process that often obscures the causes (and responsibilities) of the problems to be solved (d'Albergo, Moini, 2017).

Probably more than anything else, it is the Covid experience that has offered an opportunity to observe the processes of de-politicization in action in the public arena. Undoubtedly, scientific and expert communities have played a leading role in dealing with the multiple risks generated by Covid-19, earning renewed trust among citizens around the world. Since the beginning of the

spread of the virus, strong emphasis has been put on 'scientific evidence' (and its corollary of categories, numbers and statistics) as objective grounds for decisions and policies – so much so, in fact, that many have dubbed it the 'first data-driven/data-centered pandemic.' Through numbers, algorithms and automated procedures, choices became evidence-based, neutral and freed from ideologies and social pressures. In February 2020, the Italian Minister of Health, in response to questions asking whether members of parliament should wear face masks during their assembly, freely affirmed: 'The measures to be taken against the coronavirus are decided by scientists and not by politics.' This is just one example from the chorus of declarations by political decision-makers that the policy choices made to address and contain the pandemic and its consequences in different social sectors are simply 'led by the science.'

Rather than what may look like a widespread conversion to a radical empiricist view, what we are witnessing is a shift of responsibility from the political-democratic system to the context of technical-scientific non-politics. The obscuring of the political nature of choices aimed at solving social problems leads to the triumph of 'technological solutionism,' i.e. the idea and belief that by using the right tools (be they codes, algorithms, robots, etc.) technology can solve any human problem in an 'efficient' way – leaving the aims and implications of the application of technological solutions unquestioned (Morozov, 2014). David Lyon (2021) clearly shows how Covid pandemic was embedded in the digital context: in an 'era loaded with digital devices and systems,' these – deployed by global corporations together with states – have become the way to address the problem. The case of tracking and self-tracking devices is emblematic of the excessive optimism invested in technological solutions aimed at curbing symptoms when little care is taken to verify their fitness-for-purpose or weight them against other fundamental values in democratic societies besides health. Again, with Weber, not questioning the costs in terms of loss of other values.

In addition, the myth of data-driven science signals an epistemological and ontological return to a form of naïve empiricism based on inductivism and conveys a false sense of objectivism that considers data as neutral observation of reality (Aragona, 2017). Empirical evidence thus becomes a truth in itself, 'a sacralised evidential truth' (Furedi, 2020), and no consideration is given to the fact that categories, numbers and data are themselves artifacts constructed and negotiated in the scientific field, a locus of competitive struggle for scientific credit (Bourdieu, 1975; Brown, Galantino, 2020). Accordingly, if policy presupposes science, then scientific debates become political debates, because experts' decisions become the unalterable premises of decision making. The diffusion of an ideology of 'dataism' (van Dijck, 2014) thus hampers the

comprehensive knowledge and assessment of reality that decisions should be based on.

4. Organized irresponsibility and (hyper)politicization

As early as the 1980s and recurrently in his work, Beck (1992a, 1994, 2001, 2008) had argued that shifting the locus of decision-making from the political system to the techno-economic system does not produce neutral results, nor does it lead automatically or exclusively to de-politicization. On the contrary, it can create politicization of a new and different type. An interesting reading of this opposite but concomitant trend is offered through the concept of 'sub-politicization' – 'an opening of the boundaries of politics' that leads, on one hand, to the demand for political participation outside the political system (by civic groups, movements, individuals), and on the other to the politicization of expertise. Technical-scientific development loses its non-political character, Beck argues (2008), because it is from technical-economic action, rather than parliamentary debates, that the decisions that produce social change and prefigure future society emerge. But it is also because 'the direction of development and the results of technological transformation become the object of discussion and are expected to acquire legitimacy.' Economic and technical-scientific action thus acquires a 'new political and moral dimension.' In the thinking about responsibility, therefore, the double role of science in social production emerges, in the sense of both the (explicit) production of knowledge capable of transforming the life and experience of individuals and the (implicit) cultural production of norms and values concerning what is good for society itself (de Vries, 1989). The social impact of a decision, which should be at the forefront of the politician's concerns, can no longer be an afterthought even for the scientist.

In the political sphere as well, partly as a remedy for these same processes of de-politicization, rhetorical and practical approaches are reconfiguring the political space by re-assigning leading roles to politics and politicians. What emerges is a process of hyper-politicisation, 'a sort of super-agency in which politicians claim to be almighty and able to easily solve the most complex problems' (Bobbio, 2017: 631). This dynamic is visible not only in the field of the polity, where we see continual switching between 'governments of politicians and governments of technicians, the one being viewed as the way to remedy the disasters caused by the other' (Bobbio, 2017), but also in the area of policy. An emblematic case is security policy. After substantial de-politicization under the banner 'neither right nor left' and an emphasis on technical and technocratic solutions (video surveillance, environmental control,

predictive policing softwares, etc.) these have become a highly political issue both at the discursive and substantive level, representing the identity emblem of a specific group (right-wing parties), and the main stake in the electoral competition, moving, as an apt synthesis has it, 'from the earth of policies to the heavens of politics' (Battistelli, Lucianetti, 2010).

It has been no different in the field of immigration. On one hand, the affirmation and popularity of the concept of 'migration management' at the expense of other notions (i.e. immigration policy), shifts the processes of migration governance into both technical (i.e. international organizations or courts) and market arenas (i.e. the outsourcing of border control) (Bigo, 2002; Geiger, Pécoud, 2013). And at the same time, immigration has become the most political and conflictual of issues, where elections are won or lost, national sovereignty is invoked, and where the political leader of the moment 'stakes his claim' and demands autonomy in making choices based on his own ideology of reference—regardless of, and sometimes in contrast to, the empirical evidence produced by expert knowledge.

A similar fluctuating pattern between de-politicization and hyper-politicization is identifiable in policies for addressing the pandemic emergency. The various and often opposing choices of national governments concerning containment measures, seemingly 'technical' because they are 'evidence based,' are in reality eminently political and, as such, steeped in ideology (Battistelli, Galantino, 2020). The forceful entry into the public arena of 'science in action' (Latour, 1998) has revealed to decision-makers and the public the probabilistic, provisional, and conventional nature of scientific evidence, creating a context that has facilitated processes that tend to hyper-politicize the pandemic. Faced with a variety of evidence that is often controversial if not openly conflicting, in fact, policy makers have taken two main paths. The first is exploiting the scientific evidence (or rather, one particular piece of evidence) to back up their political arguments and decisions without assuming responsibility for their own actions. In the United States, for example, various studies have shown how state governors have used different sources to pick and choose the data that would best back their intended course of action (Shelton, 2020).

Alternatively, politicians have dismissed scientific knowledge altogether, encouraging systematic scepticism or even indifference to factual arguments. The statements addressed by President Trump to the head of the White House Coronavirus task force, Anthony Fauci, offer a widely known repertory of examples of this strategy. In a context that has been defined as the 'post-truth era,' the boundary between facts and opinions becomes fuzzy and scientists' assertions can be deemed as valid (or invalid) as common-sense opinions, both becoming simply a matter of belief. The delegitimizing of expert knowledge, in fact, is what processes of hyper-politicization are based on. In many countries

and on numerous issues, there has been a real deflation of epistemic authority manifested in a systematic skepticism towards experts, who are seen as colluding with 'occult powers.' In the most striking cases this can result in open anti-intellectualism (with a semantic repertoire of collective categorizations such as *pseudo-intellectuals*, *so-called experts*, *mass media pundits*, etc.) or even complete indifference to factual arguments.

In terms of responsibility, therefore, it might be said that the hyper-politicization of issues and policies restores the attributability of choices (the causal relationship), since the origin and cause of decisions can be traced back to the political sphere and even to a specific political party or leader. Nevertheless, such responsibility appears devoid of its dimension of accountability, which would entail assessing the consequences of an action. If the factual arguments offered by epistemic communities are as valid (or invalid) as any other opinion, and if all opinions rise to the status of facts precisely because they are indifferent to them, then the evaluation of the consequences of an action also becomes a matter of belief. Ultimately, determining whether the consequences of identified solutions are positive (and should therefore reward the policymaker) or negative (and thus should punish him/her) falls within the realm of conviction. What is more, the person responsible is traceable only in the case of decisions that lead to positive or desirable consequences and becomes untraceable or identifiable elsewhere (outside the political sphere, in another political party, at some other level of government) in the case of decisions that cause negative consequences. The 'riddle of responsibility' is becoming more difficult to unravel today than when Beck described it in 1998 in reference to pollution: 'both culpability and innocence are provable under the prevailing rules of proof. […] In the confusion that results, the good and the evil, plaintiffs and defendants, spectators and participants, all become increasingly difficult to tell apart' (1995: 133).

5. Conclusions

In this article we have discussed how the world of manufactured risk challenges and transforms the concept of responsibility as enunciated by Weber at the beginning of the last century. The calculability of relations of cause and effect is reduced by the scale of the transformative power of human action, the spatial-temporal remoteness of the consequences of such action, and the condition of permanent uncertainty, bringing responsibility for decisions into question from the standpoint of both imputability and accountability. Most importantly, however, these factors highlight the centrality of the radical uncertainty that characterizes decision-making and the significance not only of

unforeseen consequences, but particularly those that are also *unforeseeable* (Pellizzoni, 2018). In this context, the Beckian concept of organized irresponsibility represents a key that is still valid today for interpreting processes in which the responsibility and blame for harmful consequences cannot be traced back to specific actions or agents.

Organized irresponsibility is visible, and has been discussed in this paper, within the oscillatory dynamic involving the de-politicization and hyper-politicization of decisions concerning the definition, management, and control of global risks. Through processes of de-politicization that shift the sphere of decision-making towards expert, scientific and/or technical arenas, choices lose their political nature and take on an appearance of necessity and of being value- and conflict-free. The empirical evidence offered by experts is reified and presented in the form of 'factual truths' that not only *inform* but actually *determine* policy choices. Despite this, policymakers are at the same time increasingly called upon to make decisions in areas where scientific knowledge is incomplete, provisional, and highly contested. Indeed – and paradoxically – scientific knowledge becomes more important politically the more controversial the issues are and the more they require prioritizing some values at the expense of others while at the same time accepting, rejecting or imposing possible costs.

One of the first consequences of this, as Beck warned, is the sub-politicization of expertise which, by joining in the political conflict between opposing positions, interests and values, takes on the burden of identifying politically and socially acceptable solutions without taking responsibility for their implementation. In parallel with this, and pointing in the opposite direction, practices and rhetorical expressions of hyper-politicization are emerging and gaining ground, claiming for politics and politicians the prerogative of deciding all possible issues, regardless of – if not at odds with – the facts.

Post-factual politics and hyper-politicization, however, are not in opposition to de-politicization. The irrelevance of facts in the presentation of policies does not reflect a rejection of data, numbers, or info-graphics – the empirical evidence, in short, that depoliticized policies claim to be based on. On the contrary, 'the foundations of a "post truth" society inhere in data itself' (Shelton, 2020: 5). It is precisely the proliferation, reification, and de-contextualization of scientific data that determines its delegitimization and enables its selective and exploitative use by politicians, who can in this way choose the data that is most in line with their policy preferences and affords them greater consensus.

De-politicization and hyper-politicization, tech-solutionism and post-factualism thus appear deeply intertwined and (re)produce and reinforce each other, leading to a 'crisis of responsibility' (Giddens, 1999). De-politicization

dilutes the decision-making space into multiple, interconnected systems of action, depriving responsibility of its foundation of attributability and making it impossible to trace a determinate causal agent. Even in the case of decisions that concern the distribution of risks, benefits and costs, and which are therefore eminently political, anyone can potentially be responsible and therefore no one is.

Hyper-politicization, on the other hand, apparently safeguards the imputability of choices. In this case, as is often said, the politician 'steps up.' But, in post-truth society, the cure may turn out to be worse than the disease. In a political culture where the boundary between opinion and fact, belief and evidence, and science and non-science is completely blurred, political and communicative conflicts become largely based on the emotional dimension, poorly connected to the analysis of facts and concrete evidence, in such a way that any attempt to counter political statements through fact-checking is simply ignored (Boccia Artieri, 2019). The matter is not merely that 'truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other', as Hannah Arendt (1967) famously put it. It is an epistemological turn that promotes indifference to justification as a condition for beliefs and opinions to constitute knowledge. Rather than on science and reason, postfactual politics bases its legitimacy on feelings and emotions (Davies, 2019). Inverting Weber's admonition, post-factual politics is conducted with the gut rather than with the head. In this context actions may be imputable but agents become unaccountable. As the assessment of the outcomes of an action is in itself a matter of belief, the question—and the normative duty—of having to account for such outcomes is not only obsolete, but appears entirely irrelevant.

References

Amato, A., Galadini. F. (2013), Gli argomenti della scienza nel processo dell'Aquila alla "Commissione grandi rischi", *ANALYSIS Rivista di cultura e politica scientifica*, 3-4, 1-37.

Antonelli, F. (2019). *Tecnocrazia e democrazia. L'egemonia al tempo della società digitale*, Roma, L'Asino d'oro.

Aragona, B. (2017), New Data Science: The Sociological Point of View. In Lauro N.C., Amaturo E., Grassia M.G., Aragona B. and Marino M. (eds), *Data Science and Social Research. Epistemology, Methods, Technology and Applications*, New York: Springer.

Arendt, H. (1967) Truth and Politics, *The New Yorker*, February 25, p. 49.

Arnaldi, S., Bianchi, L. (2016), Una prospettiva sociologica sulla responsabilità nella scienza e nella tecnologia, *Studi di Sociologia*, 3, 193-216.

Battistelli, F., Galantino, M.G. (2019), Dangers, risks and threats: An alternative conceptualization to the catch-all concept of risk, *Current Sociology*, 67(1), 64–78.

Battistelli, F., Galantino, M.G. (2020) *Sociologia e politica del coronavirus. Tra opinioni e paure*, Milano, Franco Angeli.

Battistelli F., Lucianetti L.F. (2010), La sicurezza tra politics e policy. In Pajno A. (ed), *La sicurezza urbana*, pp. 75-110, Rimini, Maggioli.

Beck, U. (1992a). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*, Engl. tr. London: Sage.

Beck, U. (1992b), From industrial society to the risk society: Questions of survival, social structure and eco-logical enlightenment. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 9 (1), 97-123.

Beck, U. (1994), The Reinvention of Politics: Towards a Theory of Reflexive Modernization. In Beck, U., Giddens A., Lash S., *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Beck, U. (1995), *Ecological politics in an age of risk*. Engl. tr., Cambridge, Polity Press.

Beck, U. (1999). *World risk society*. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Beck, U. (2008) *Conditio humana. Il rischio nell'età globale*, it. tr., Bari, Laterza.

Bigo, D. (2002) Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease, *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 27/1 suppl.: 63–92

Bobbio, L. (2017), Neither Completely Political nor Completely Unpolitical. The Third Way of Deliberative Arenas, *Partecipazione e conflitto*, 10 (2), 13-35.

Boccia Artieri, G. (2019), La realtà della post-verità e le fake news: polarizzazioni tecnologiche o forme espressive culturali? In Bistagnin G., Fumagalli C. (eds), *Fake news, post-verità e politica*, Milano: Feltrinelli.

Bourdieu, P. (1975), The specificity of the scientific field and the social conditions of the progress of reason, *Social Science Information*, 14 (6), 19-47.

Brown, P., Galantino, M.G. (2020) Theorising – Problematising Categories: Understanding the Covid-19 Pandemic through the Sociology of Risk and Uncertainty, *European Sociologist, 4*.

Campelli, E. (2018), *Da un luogo comune. Introduzione alla metodologia delle scienze sociali*, Roma, Carocci.

Caniglia, E. (2001) Sul ruolo sociale della scienza Il coinvolgimento degli esperti nella politica contemporanea, *Il dubbio*, 1.

Castel, R. (1991) From dangerousness to risk. In Burchell G, Gordon C., Miller P (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, pp. 281-298, Chicago, Chicago University Press.

Cavalli, L. (1997) Introduzione. La vocazione della politica. In Weber, M. (1997) *La politica come professione*, tr. it., 7-28, Armando Editore, Roma.

Centonze, F. (2005), *La normalità dei disastri tecnologici. Il problema del congedo dal diritto penale*, Giuffrè, Milano.

Cocco, M. et al. (2015) The L'Aquila Trial. In Peppoloni, S., Di Capua, G. (eds) *Geoethics: The Role and Responsibility of Geoscientists*, London, Geological Society, Special Publications 419.

Curran, D. (2015) Risk Illusion and Organized Irresponsibility in Contemporary Finance: Rethinking Class and Risk Society, *Economy and Society*, 44 (3), 392-417.

Curran, D. (2018) The Organized Irresponsibility Principle and Risk Arbitrage. *Critical Criminology,* 26 (4), 595-610.

de Vries, G. (1989) La separazione di "fatti" e "valori" come fondamento e prodotto della differenziazione culturale. In Cannavò L. (ed), *Studi sociali della Scienza*, Roma, Goliardica.

d'Albergo, E., Moini, G. (2017) Depoliticizing Public Action by Politicizing Issues, Practices and Actors. The Role of Resilience Thinking in a Program of the Cariplo Foundation, *Partecipazione e conflitto*, 10 (2), 381-420.

Davies, W. (2019), *Nervous States: Democracy and the Decline of Reason*, New York: Norton & Company.

Douglas, M. (1985) *Risk Acceptability According to the Social Sciences*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Douglas, M. (1992) *Risk and Blame*, London and New York: Routledge.

Fischer, F. (2009), *Democracy and Expertise. Reorienting Policy Inquiry*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Flinders, M., Buller J. (2006) Depoliticization: Principles, Tactics and Tools, *British Politics*, 1, 3: 293-318

Franzini Tibaldeo, R. (2012) Responsabilità, *Lessico di etica pubblica,* 3: 183-200.

Furedi, F. (2020) Why the government should not always 'follow the science', *Spiked*, 20 May, https://www.spiked-online.com/2020/05/20/why-the-government-should-not-always-follow-the-science/

Geiger, M., Pécoud A. (2013) (eds.), *Disciplining the Transnational Mobility of People*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Galantino, M.G. (2010), *La società della sicurezza. La costruzione sociale della sicurezza in situazioni di emergenza*, Roma, Franco Angeli.

Giddens, A. (1990) *The consequences of modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Giddens, A. (1999) Risk and Responsibility, *The Modern Law Review* 62 (1), 1-10.

Hay, C. (2007) *Why We Hate Politics*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Hay, C. (2014) Depoliticisation as process, governance as practice, *Policy and Politics*, 42 (2): 293-311.

Jonas, H. (1985), *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Engl. tr., Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Keyes, R (2004), *The post-truth era: dishonesty and deception in contemporary life*. New York: St. Martin's Publishing Group.
Keynes, J.R. (1937) The general theory of employment, *The quarterly journal of economics*, 51, 2: 209-223.
Latour, B. (1998) *La scienza in azione. Introduzione alla sociologia della scienza*, it. tr., Torino, Edizioni di Comunità.
Luhmann, N. (1993), *Risk: A Sociological Theory*, Engl. tr., Berlin and New York: de Gruyter.
Lyon, D. (2021) *Pandemic Surveillace*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
McIntyre, L. (2018), *Post-Truth*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press
Mills, C.W. (1951), *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Mills, C.W. (1956), *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Morozov, E. (2013) *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*, New York, Public Affairs.
Pellizzoni, L. (2004), Responsibility and Environmental Governance, *Environmental Politics* 13 (3): 541-65.
Pellizzoni, L. (2010), Risk and Responsibility in a Manufactured World, *Science and Engineering Ethics*, 16 (3): 463–78.
Pellizzoni, L. (2011), Introduzione. La politica dei fatti. In Pellizzoni L. (ed), *Conflitti ambientali. Esperti, politica, istituzioni nelle controversie ecologiche*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
Pellizzoni, L. (2018), Responsibility and Ultimate Ends in the Age of the Unforeseeable: On the Current Relevance of Max Weber's Political Ethics, *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 18 (3): 197–214.
Reason, J. (1991) *Human error*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
Shelton, T. (2020) *A Post-Truth Pandemic?*, Big Data & Society, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951720965612.
Srnicek, N. (2017), *Platform capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
Steffen, W.J., Grinevald P.C., McNeill J. (2011), The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 369: 842–867.
Turner, B.A., Pidgeon, N.F. (1997), *Man-made disasters*, 2nd ed., Oxford, Butterworth-Heinemann.
Van Dijck, J. (2014), Datafication, Dataism and Dataveillance: Big Data between Scientific Paradigm and Ideology, *Surveillance & Society* 12 (2): 197–208.
Weber, M. (1981), *Economia e società*, Volume I, tr. it., Torino, Edizioni di comunità.
Weber, M. (2004), La scienza come professione, in ID, *La scienza come professione. La politica come professione*, tr. it. Torino, Einaudi.

Weber, M. (1946), Politics as a vocation, In Id. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, engl. tr., pp. 77-128, New York: Oxford University Press [1919]
Weber, M. (1949). The Methodology of the Social Sciences. Engl. tr., New York: The Free Press [1904].
WHO (2005) *WHO outbreak communication. WHO handbook for journalists: influenza pandemic*, Geneva.
Yates, Y. (2016), An Interview with Urlich Beck on Fear and Risk Society, *The Hedgehog Review*, Fall 01: 96-107.
Zuboff, S. (2019) *The age of surveillance capitalism*, London, Profile Books.