Risk Society and Reflexive Modernisation: Can Our Generation Have Total Fulfilment?

Elle Shaw, Sociology

We face risk on a daily basis, from the mundane “I’ll cross on the red man because there’s no cars coming that I can see” to the life-changing “Should I take on £27,000 plus in university loans so I better myself?”. We can never truly calculate outcomes of risks, but what we can do is make informed decisions, using reason and logic. Perhaps the thought process is not quite as conscious in the moments we are making decisions, but it is there, a ‘background phenomenon’ (Giddens, 1991: 181). We, the generation I am part of, have been skilled to balance risks, to assess the good and the bad, the pros and the cons of all of our decisions. It is the price we have paid for being brought up in a risk society, the niggle in the back of our minds, the consequences of our actions.

It is not just individuals, who exclusively face risks; collectives, governments, corporations, all have risks but with much more to lose, with implications on an individual, national and global level. There is a fine line between promoting the successful economic growth of a country and spending or borrowing so much that nations collapse under debt they cannot pay back. The economic knife-edge that Greece have found themselves precariously balanced upon is a perfect example of the fragility of this late modern period (Giddens, 1991). If bailout deals and global strategies to save Greece fail, it will have disastrous ramifications, not only for the countries positioning within the global market but on every individual, family and business who calls Greece home.

As Beck characterises it, risk society is the interplay between creating and fixing problems that modernity has created, bound up with a shift from modernity to the next stage of our society, late or reflexive modernism (Beck, 1992). It is how we respond to such risk and uncertainty, the way in which we engage with current and future risks which is different to modernity (Giddens, 1990). There is a balancing act that we all must master. Whilst we still have some grounding in grand narrative structures
(Beck, 1992), as individuals we have a freedom to explore ‘the self’, to manage our own identities. We do not, in theory at least, have any barriers to creating a self-designed lives.

It is not that external structures do not influence us, but they have to an extent been removed by such individualisation. We still live in a world where outside forces are part of our future risks. Beck demonstrates just how easily a global danger such as a nuclear disaster could be life changing for all of us (Beck, 1992). But how do we plan for something so catastrophic, the short answer is that we do not. We ‘bracket out’ these risk factors and accept that they are not near experiences, and risk planning for these events falls to someone else like governments (Giddens, 1991, pp 183). The transition to this reflexive period is not a standalone phenomenon, it has brought with it a host of changes to work, leisure and lifestyle, which allows us the license to pick and choose the life that we desire, tailor made to our own specification. We can work in any country that we wish, go to the gym and practice Pilates or Judo and then go home to a swanky penthouse in some inner-city suburb and eat Italian food.

Late Modernity has brought with it a hopefulness, especially for women, there has been expansion in the opening of the labour market to women, and an increase in the number of young women entering university, there were 92,4530 female attendees in UK universities between 2013/2014. (Higher Education Statistics Agency, n.d) An emerging feminised service sector has grown rapidly and has helped place an emphasis on encouraging young women to continue in education and make the most of their abilities (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997), to escape from the confines of domesticity. “Self-confrontation” (Beck, 1994: 6) has showed us the down fall of how we guided women in the work force previously, mothers and grandmothers who were told that women’s work was into the home, or as a secretary or hairdresser in their careers meetings. A new breed of young, driven women has emerged, graduating from university, entering the business world climbing the corporate ladder, and creating future which is bright and prospect full. Now there is talk of more opportunities for women, one’s that previous generations could have only dreamed of. Young women, my own age, have so many more choices than women did a couple of generations ago, we have the ability to have ambitions to be at the top of our field. This is by no means saying that there is equality between men and women, the glass ceiling is still very much intact, but now 20.4% of FTSE 100 directors are women (Brian Groom, 2014) there are women coming through in to high power positions in big corporations.

However, with the good comes the bad, and this new social world has brought, the good, the bad and the ugly. With more choices now present for women there are more risks, the two go hand in hand together, it appears that in order to achieve fulfilment in one area of life, your career, then other areas suffer. Now we have created our very own personal paradigm, and are having to modernise our way out of modernisation (Beck, 1994) by gaining access to more areas of the labour market, as women, we have created a whole new set of barriers in our domestic life.

One big area of uncertainty and risk, especially for women, is the topic of fertility and
reproduction. It is a tangible future risk for women who want to work their way up in business, or indeed have career goals which take numerous years to achieve. It is a medical fact that once a woman reaches thirty-five her fertility and therefore chances of conceiving drops dramatically (NHS, 2014). It always has
been and still remains the domain of women to control and take responsibility for conception (Kramer, 2011). If you take the cut off point for having biological children naturally at thirty-five then it means women have a limited window of opportunity to satisfy desires in both the domestic and work spheres.

If you talk through the dilemma in the organised and systematic way that risk society has taught us it is clear to see how some individual risks are not that simple to organise or evaluate; ‘I want children and a career, so I need to pick one to have first. Positives of having children now before I embark on a fulfilling career, I will not be discriminated against for having to take maternity leave for twelve months, and I will have a much better chance of being able to have a baby. Negatives of having a baby before career, they cost money which I do not possess because I do not have the job I desire or the stability to provide a home for a child. So if that does not work I will get to where I want to be in my work life first. Positives I will have the money and stability, and I shall also most likely have stronger support network which will be needed. But wait, I now cannot naturally conceive because I have worked so long to achieve my career ambitions, I have now found myself in a position where I can have one but not the other. I will not be able to have it all’. Solution, ask Facebook or Apple, who as a ‘perk’ of being their employee, will pay to have your eggs frozen for you, and throw in a few extra months of maternity leave, or even pay for your adoption or surrogacy fee’s (Independent, 2014). They have seen a ‘gap’ in the market, and used a treatment intended to help women who have to have eggs removed due to illnesses such as cancer, to fix a social problem. It costs approximately £13,000 to have eggs harvested and then additional fees every year for storage, something which very few women would have the opportunity to do without the support of these companies. Cleverly, such corporations have closed in on the lack of female employees in the technology sector, which is notorious for being male dominated, Apple reports a 70% male workforce while Facebook reports 69% (Tran, 2014). They have realised that to make their companies enticing they need to provide more, fertility treatment is just one way of encouraging a more female rich workforce, in what is possibly their most productive years, their twenties and thirties.

Drawing the conversation back to the loosening of social structures, this is an example why they have not completely gone. For women to even consider working for companies like Facebook or Apple in high powered positions suggest that they are not women you would come across on a day to day basis, instead they are from an elite, the best of the best in their fields. Perhaps the reason that they ‘need’ such perks is because of the hours associated with such jobs, or the stress, or constant travelling, the salary which puts them in much higher economic positioning which they do not want to give up. And who says that they should not attempt to
have both, with the prevalence of live in nannies, and flexible working hours, they could manage work and home, though one may suffer.

Are we just being cynical? Generations before us have never actively planned and planned again for future risks which may never happen and they have not blown the world up. Instead they managed risks when they came up, and found situational solutions. Maybe we are so aware of possibilities that we cannot enjoy our lives because we have to save money for rainy days or watch how much sugar we eat in case we become obese. One thing for sure is that no job should be chosen on the basis of what fertility procedures they offer, it is backwards to solve structural problems in companies and society by steering the behaviours of individuals.

**Bibliography**


Groom, B. (2014) *Proportion of women on FTSE 100 boards tops 20%* [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/e981f88c-7eb0-11e3-8642-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3ubzX1c8Z> [Accessed 12th December 2015]

Higher Education Statistics Agency (n.d) *General Student Numbers* [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/stats> [Accessed 11th December 2015]


Image

http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/4775301


https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cryopreservation