Written in the Stars? The occult as risk management in the Age of Aquarius

Charlotte Hackett

The times in which we live are punctuated by events of unrest, uncertainty, and fear for many in society. Although many theories seek to explain the turbulent landscape of modern life, Beck’s theory of Risk Society (1992) is one that is often explored when one aims to understand contemporary socio-political crises. Alongside its exploration of the theory of Beck’s ‘Risk Society’, this paper will begin to understand occultism, or what Christopher Partridge (2004: p.4) calls “Western ‘occulture’”. For Partridge, “occulture” includes a ‘vast spectrum of beliefs and practices, sourced by Eastern spirituality, Paganism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, alternative science and medicine, popular psychology, and a range of beliefs emanating out of a general interest in the paranormal’ (Ibid.). This paper explores the use of occultism in the search for new knowledge, as a form of risk management in modern society, as well as providing insight into its growing popularity and commercialisation over the past decade.

Beck’s (1992) description of a new, complex modernity, characterised by risk and uncertainty, explores late-modern life through the lens of three interlinked principles: reflexive modernisation, risk, and individualisation. Reflexive modernisation seeks to solve the problems caused by techno-economic development.

Modern, industrial times brought about development in all areas of human life which have led to the proliferation of modern day, man-made, problems, or ‘risks’. Modernisation is, as Beck puts it, “its own theme” (1992: p. 19), as late-modern society pays penance for modern industrialization in the form of risk. For example, in pre-modern times, many lived in societies of scarcity, where the average family earned little money and had few possessions. However, we now face an environmental crisis partly caused by the overconsumption and overproduction of modern industrialisation. Beck sees risks as a way of “dealing with the hazards” caused by modern life (Beck, 1992: p. 21). However, what is and is not seen as a hazard is defined by a very specific section of society. Science and knowledge in modernity often saw the upper middle classes, the professional classes, become
the gatekeepers of risk, which is easily ‘changed, magnified, dramatized or minimized’ by those with the power to define and construct it (ibid.: p.23).

However, as society becomes more aware of the social construction of risk and knowledge, the certainty brought about by modern science is removed, and replaced with widespread uncertainty. We can no longer believe the professionals or rely on the calculability and rationality of modernity.

Growing risk for individuals is one of three key reasons for individualisation, according to Beck. Loss of stability of lifestyle choices, in regard to gender, sexuality, or career, for example, leads individuals to become the “invokers and advocates of former certainties” (Beck, 1992: p. 134). The loss of security by means of ‘practical knowledge, faith and guiding norms’ (ibid.: p. 128) is also of paramount importance here, as it leads the individual to develop a sense of accountability for their own future, rather than relying on institutions and social systems to provide answers.

Bauman’s (2000, p.20) theory of a post-modern ‘liquid modernity’ also explores the idea of a ‘state of uncertainty’ caused by the abandonment of traditional societal norms and rules. He declares that “all future tools of certainty […] cannot but be crutches” (Bauman, 2000: p. 21). The theory of liquid modernity considers that modern life is no longer ‘solid’ and is instead in a “fairly advanced state of disintegration” (Bauman, 2000: p.3). Where Beck considers that we have lost the means through which we used to attain certainty, Bauman seems to suggest that we have lost certainty altogether, by whichever means. The second factor of individualisation Beck considers is ‘liberation’, both in the form of ‘emancipation’ from society and community, as well as changes in the rights and roles of women (Beck, 1992: p. 129).

Where the globalized labour market allows for the free movement of people and culture, many people end up removed from class, neighbourhood, or familial boundaries, instead becoming individualised. For women, this comes in the form of suffrage and the cutting loose of ties that expect every woman to be a housewife, to not vote, and to act simply in her husband’s interest. Thirdly, Beck considers ‘reintegration’, which sees our individual reflexive biographies as key to the social systems which they are argued to be beginning to supersede.

However, Beck considers that our subjective life experiences are not as personal or as private as we may think they may be. In fact, he argues, they are “institutionally dependent individual situations” (Beck, 1992: p. 130). If our institutions do not allow for individualised life patterns, we cannot individualise.

Beck considers that in face of risk, and feelings of accountability, individuals implement different methods of ‘risk management’, to offset the effects of techno-economic development on themselves and their families. For many, spiritual practices offer the feelings of safety needed to offset the fear of modern risks. Occultism is described as concerning
the ‘immaterial and non-rational’ aspects of human belief (Buck, 2018). Historically, occultism aimed to pursue the unknown, or hidden knowledge, but since the early seventeenth century it has come to be associated with many spiritual and esoteric practices. Most prevalent of these practices in the modern day is astrology, although the psychic services industry, worth around $2 billion annually, also “includes [...] aura reading, mediumship, tarot-card reading and palmistry, among other metaphysical services” (Paul, 2017: n.p.).

Over the past decade, the ancient spiritual practices of occultism have seen a cultural rebirth, with a 2% growth in the psychic services industry between 2011 and 2016 (Paul, 2017), and websites like The Cut seeing a 150 percent growth in traffic on horoscope posts between 2016 and 2017 (Beck, 2018). For those living through the modern crises of global warming, polarised politics, and the news that for the first time in 100 years, “the current generation of workers [...] are doing worse than the generation before them”, ancient spiritualism has become spiritual certainty in tumultuous times (Edwards, 2017: n.p.).

For Beck, belief in the occult would be a method of ‘risk management’, a way of finding rational in the irrational, or the certain in uncertain times. As the growth of the psychic services industry over the past decade, as we continue to face turmoil following the 2008 economic collapse, shows us: in times of uncertainty, many of us are looking for certainty elsewhere. Not only do occult practices provide certainty for those who put faith in them, but they rid many believers of feelings of accountability. In the example of astrology, the position of the planets at any given time can be where blame is placed for things going awry. Missed emails are blamed on ‘Mercury retrograde’, hot-headed anger is blamed on the fact that you’re just ‘SUCH a Scorpio’! For many, individuals can no longer be blamed for their actions, and instead we should look to the stars for explanation, as well as for advice on what to change.

Adorno (1974: p. 13) is highly critical of astrology and its place in risk management, particularly in its ‘crippling of capacity to look beyond the limits of self-interest’. However, the self-interested nature of astrology can often be pinned on the individualised nature of late modern society. Beck’s ideas of individualisation can help to understand why we are drawn to something as individualised as astrology. We have lost the certainty that comes with organised religion, science, and knowledge, all of which have foundations built upon community, and shared interest.

Astrology however, provides a new community, in which a shared faith is held, but the outcomes for each individual are entirely separate, reliant on the exact time and place of their birth. Often, in late modernity, we are very aware of the separate life paths that each of us will take, and this is reflected well by the widely variable nature of each person’s birth chart.

In the 21st century, matters of the occult highly profitable. In turning to the occult in times of stress, those with faith in it are
offered an endless choice of paraphernalia swathed in images of tarot cards, crystals, or their astrological sign, with stores like Urban Outfitters selling sage (which has its roots in traditional ‘indigenous cleansing ceremonies’) “for $18 a pop” (Paul, 2017: n.p.). The reliance on the occult to bring certainty to certain demographics can be seen to be heavily capitalised upon by many businesses – whether these are high street stores, or independent astrologers charging for their chart-reading services.

For post-modern theorists like Baudrillard, the commodification of occult matters is incredibly telling of the consumer society in which we live. Baudrillard (1998: p. 191) sees that “commodity logic has become generalised” and governs every part of our lives (“culture, sexuality, and human relations” included). What Beck sees as a form of modern-day risk management, Baudrillard (1998: p. 80) sees as a consumerist tactic: the more scared we are, the more susceptible to ‘systematic exploitation’ we will be, and the more we will buy.

In exploring Beck’s theory of risk society and its relevance to modern life, it is perhaps unsurprising that so many people choose to put faith into occultism when faced by uncertainty. Regardless of where we find peace, Baudrillard would argue, our certainty can be commodified, exploited, and made a commercial product. The seemingly unstoppable growth in popularity of astrology, tarot-reading, and other occult matters, speaks volumes about where many of us are searching for answers. Personally, I see that life in a world characterised by intense change and risk would lead many to search for answers as far removed from their everyday lives as possible; and nothing is quite so far from Earth as space.

Bibliography


Pictures:
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/d1/Zodiac_woodcut.png/762px-Zodiac_woodcut.png