

Risk in the age of information

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'In advanced modernity the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks' (Beck, 2009: 19). The opening statement of Beck's contribution to literature on the concept of a 'risk society' tells us that the very notion of a risk society is heavily associated with the issue of the production of wealth. The concept of a 'risk society' is most commonly associated with the German sociologist Ulrich Beck (2009) who has argued that the development and 'progress' of the post-modern society has led to an increase of risks within society, whether it be associated with technological progression or the production of wealth in the modernization of society.

Beck (2009) argues that the reflexive nature of our society is having a major impact on risk evaluation within society as society becomes more reflexive and individualized it simultaneously creates more risks for those within society. In his book 'Risk society: Towards a new modernity' Beck describes the struggle for 'daily bread' as losing its urgency as throughout the first half of the 20th century. For him, it was categorised by the social issues of hunger and poverty, and as you can imagine, today, much of the third world faces tremendous issues of hunger and

starvation which is heavily bound up with the production of wealth and the ways in which some countries are considerably deprived of basic necessities of human life.

'This development, however, withdraws the legitimizing basis from the modernization process, the struggle against obvious scarcity, for which one was prepared to accept a few (no longer completely) unseen side effects.' (Beck, 2009: 20)

Risk and uncertainty is a defining aspect of the post-modern epoch and the development of technologies which allow for the access and distribution of information and knowledge plays a key role in the globalization of risk. Beck notes during the pioneering of human exploration by the likes of Columbus, risks

were taken and understood on a personal level as opposed to the level of risks created in contemporary modernity with regard to the harnessing of

nuclear power and weaponry which creates uncertainty for the future of mankind.

It is also arguable that the development of modernization and globalization leads to greater levels of personal risks which while may not be as globally as significant as nuclear



development, still have a major impact on the general wellbeing of young people today. While risk and uncertainty may appear to define the modern era, it is not as though *risk* is an invention of modernity, risk always existed to individuals and societies in the past but however the interconnectivity of the world in which we live in makes risks seem a lot closer to home and certainly creates fear of the future of the world.

It is also said that late modernity revolves around the belief that individuals are personally

responsible for the way in which their life turns out, due to the many opportunities that individuals have today compared to previous eras of society irrespective



of class: 'Although social structures, such as class, continue to shape life chances, these structures tend to become increasingly obscure as collectivist traditions weaken and individualist values intensify' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1999: 138).

Developments such as the internet as a source of information and the ways in which it has increased interconnectivity between individuals, is not necessarily a negative thing for society. Although, regarding this, individuals are exposed to much more information regarding risks than in previous years. Knowledge is almost a currency in contemporary society as countries and nations compete for the highest standards of knowledge within education. This is a result of the increasing need for a more highly skilled

and educated work force to keep up with the technological developments occurring within society every year.

In previous eras of society, particularly in the industrial period, labour and work heavily relied upon physical or manual labour in the mines and factories for example which dominated the labour market throughout the 19th and early 20th century. As many sociologists have argued, we are entering into an entirely new era of society, one which is no longer categorised strictly by a working class vs

ruling class social structure. Marx's interpretation of society was heavily based upon the economic inequalities of society and the exploitation of workers by an upper ruling class.

In today's society, post industrialism, post modernity and class is a

much more complex structure of society. Social changes in the labour market and the availability of goods has meant traditional descriptions of class no longer apply to contemporary society. The production of wealth however, brings about a multitude of risks for individuals in society, as well as stripping away solid social class from society. Furlong and Cartmel (1999: 2) note: 'all that is solid about organised capitalism, class, industry, cities, collectivity, nation-states, even the world, melts into air'.

Furthermore, when relating to the development of information technologies, it is arguable that the young people today are the best informed group of individuals to have ever lived due to the availability of information to almost all members of society. Regardless of

social class, even in the last 100 years, ago the poorer people in society had significantly less opportunities than the lower classes today. Individuals do have many more life chances which can provide the social mobility to traverse the social ladder.

The development of new technologies has brought society into a 'new way of living' (Webster and Blom, 2009: 9), which is dominated by technology and interconnectivity through the use of instant messaging, emails, text communications etc. the people of today are vastly more connected to one another informationally than ever before. Webster, in 'An Information Society' views the development of such technologies as the coming of a new 'information revolution': 'since the mid 1990s many commentators have come to believe that the merging of information and communications technologies (ICT's) is of such consequence that we are being ushered into a new sort of society' (Webster and Blom, 2009: 10).

But the question is, to what extent does this new age of information play as a pivotal role in the creation of a risk society, knowledge of risks and the world creating feelings of anxiety and worry over the state of the world? In the past, risk would still exist but the universalisation of knowledge of these risks does have a negative impact on individuals' outlook on the world, especially with mass media sources which update everyone immediately. This fear of the future has come



to dominate people's lives especially following the events of 9/11 which shook the Western world to its core.

In his book 'Risk' Dan Gardner (2009) touches upon the events which transpired on that day with regard to the ways in which the information was so immediately available to everyone across the world. He writes that 'it also made an enormous difference that we had seen televised images so clear, immediate and graphic is was as if we had watched everything through the living room window' (Gardner, 2009: 296).

Here Gardner touches upon a fundamental aspect of the nature of the information society, through the mass media events are so vivid and real whilst not being directly affected, the people watching from home feel genuine fear. Our world is defined by fear and violence, whether it be terrorist attacks in

Western countries, mass shootings in the US, bombings in the East or the political tension which exists with North Korea, there are so many things for individuals to worry about and the mass media brings those worries to life, especially the feelings of constant negative imagery coming from news outlets, natural disasters and violence has always happened but we currently live in an age where such information is streamed so instantly and so clearly that it is almost as if these events are taking place in our own street.

The modernisation of contemporary society creates an abundance of technological and

environmental risks as Beck notes that modernisation undermines individual's senses of social security in two very distinct ways. 'On one hand, the use of scientific technologies by government and industry has led to large scale technological and environmental risks' (Jaeger et al., 2013: 209) which cannot easily be understood by ordinary individuals in society. 'On the other hand, the manifold processes of individualisation in modern society have eroded the reliability of the social networks in which human life is embedded' (Jaeger et al., 2013: 209).

This process of individualisation in society means that while technological development means individuals are more connected than ever before, social networkings within many corners of society are being gradually destroyed by modernisation. The feelings that such images give to individuals are largely negative but Hampus Lyttkens makes a suggestion about the general state of the human psyche in the modern world through the analysis of social structures, institutions and the ways in which modernisation has broken down many institutions leading people to feeling anxious of their own existence. In his contribution to *Risk and Society*, Lyttkens notes how the removal of religion in contemporary society has led to people to feeling a loss of meaningful context within their lives.

For example, 'religion used to give people strength to carry through illness and suffering by means of religious explanations' (Sjöberg, 1987: 123). The secularisation of society is a direct result of societal development. Throughout the Enlightenment period, traditional beliefs were questioned and scientific explanations of human existence

were superior but now in post modernity, even science is questioned by people leading individuals to feel a sense of anxiety about their circumstances. Similarly, Lyttkens argues that the workplace has lost its ability to provide meaning to one's life as 'work is done merely for survival but cannot give the individual personal self-satisfaction' (Sjöberg, 1987:123). It could be argued that this development is attached to capitalism and for the necessity of consumption in contemporary society and so individuals must work, commonly doing something that does not fulfil them, in order to make a wage to survive which, in turn relates to Beck's (2009) views of the negative implications of wealth production.

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