There has been good reason to fear that ‘post-modern’ and ‘post-industrial’ currents of thought have been sweeping away the foundations of radical critiques without offering to put anything very substantial in their place. It is all very well criticising the limitations of social democracy, the welfare state, trade unionism, and social classes as agents of change, but what other institutions does the left have to depend on once these have been thrown into crisis? It has seemed reasonable in the circumstances to hang on to what remains of these established frameworks of critical thought on a principle of theoretical economy: don’t abandon an established theory until one appears which offers superior explanations and strategies.

However, Ulrich Beck’s remarkable book *Risk Society* gives one cause to think again about whether a new model might not be becoming available for thinking about our times, in a not unhopeful spirit. Beck’s book, published in Germany in 1986 and successful enough there to have sold more than 60,000 copies and turned its author into a regular columnist in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, is characteristically West German in its formation. It is informed theoretically by Habermas and his critical account of modernity (which Beck turns to his own original purpose); and by the anti-productionist concerns of the Greens, who have acquired in West Germany a unique degree of representation and influence; and by a well-grounded sociology of German society which is highly sensitive to contradiction and disequilibrium. The latter has developed from the critical assimilation of American systems theory into post-war German sociology, evident in the writings of Luhmann, Habermas and Offe. The holistic ambitions and awareness of causal complexity of American functionalism have been infused, in these West German assimilations, with an underlying sense of potential conflict and tragedy.

Rationality, for the West German sociologists, is a precarious value, threatened by instrumentalisation and regression to more primitive kinds of association, and imposing a burden of self-sufficiency and autonomy on individuals which more conservative writers see as unnatural and unsustainable without grounding in more ‘organic’ or sacralised social forms. The legacy of the Frankfurt School sensitised the German school to the limitations and tragic potentialities of ‘modernity’. The Cold War and division of Germany also had its effects on this tradition. The choice of functionalism rather than Marxism as an idiom of radical social critique was influenced by the fact that Marxism had become the official ideology of the DDR. The somewhat philosophical and abstract quality of German critical social theory was a strategy of survival in face of the conformist ideological climate of the earlier post-war years, as it had been in previous historical epochs. Beck’s work, whilst still idealistic in its presuppositions, is a welcome departure from this abstract mode. It probably owes this more programmatic and concrete quality to the emergence of an alternative politics with a popular base – the Green movement – which has provided the support of a large activist constituency for critical theory for the first time.

Ulrich Beck’s thesis describes an epochal shift currently in mid-course from ‘industrial society’ to what he calls ‘risk society’. We are therefore concerned no longer exclusively with making nature useful, or with releasing mankind from traditional constraints, but also and essentially with problems resulting from techno-economic development itself. Modernisation is becoming reflexive; it is becoming its own theme.

This argument, which is addressed primarily to a new radical public of the left, reinterprets what others see as the development of a ‘post-modern’ order as the next stage of development of modernity. Whereas most post-modern theorists are critical of the ideas of directionality, grand narrative, general theory, or human emancipation, Beck remains committed to all of these. Where for many contemporary philosophers, ‘rationality’ has become synonymous with ‘discourse’, and devoid of absolute norms or foundations, Beck’s concept of ‘reflexive modernity’ implies the attainability of rational consensus once the conditions for democratic deliberation throughout civil society are created. In ‘reflexive modernity’, which embeds

Habermas’s rather abstract idea of critical reason in the concrete social world, Beck evokes the possibility of a fully conscious, rational society, able to take full responsibility for its development and for its relationship to nature. (Beck’s concept of reflexivity is convergent with that of Anthony Giddens, though more sociologically concrete.)

The ‘risks’ of Beck’s title are in the first instance ecological: the unforeseeable and barely controllable consequences for human life of the scientific and technological revolutions. But more original than Beck’s somewhat rhetorical discussions of actual risks, ecological and other, is his re-reading of the process of modernisation and of the nature of ‘modernity’ itself. Here he offers a remarkable synthesis of changes taking place in many spheres – work, science, politics, class, and family – each of which manifests similar attributes of partially-realised rationality. Although Beck links some institutions in causal terms – arguing for example that the subordination of women in the family in industrial society is a function of male domination of the work-sphere – it is the idea of an incompletely realised rationality, manifested across a range of institutional settings, that holds his historical model together. Beck presents this as a theory of ‘post-industrial modernity’.

Beck summarises his thesis in his preface as follows:

Just as modernisation dissolved the structure of feudal society in the nineteenth century, and produced the industrial society, modernisation today is dissolving industrial society and another modernity is coming into being. ... the counter-modernistic scenario currently upsetting the world – new social movements and criticism of science, technology and progress – does not stand in contradiction of modernity, but is rather an expression of reflexive modernisation beyond the outlines of industrial society. (p. 10)

Beck’s idea, then (he says that the reader might see between the lines the sparkling of the lake beside which he wrote his book), is that modernity is still essentially incomplete.

Modernisation within the paths of industrial society is being replaced by a modernisation of the principles of industrial society. ... It is this antagonism opening up between industrial society and modernity which distorts our attempt at a ‘social mapping’, since we are so thoroughly accustomed to conceiving of modernity within the categories of industrial society. ... We are witnessing not the end but the beginning of modernity – that is of a modernity beyond its classical industrial design. (p. 10)

Beck develops this model by demonstrating the numerous presuppositions of the pre-modern world which have continued as essential structures of industrial society, but which are now progressively called into question as the logic of ‘reflexive modernity’ proceeds. He provides a synoptic reading of a wide range of institutions of industrial society, seeing these as aspects of an essentially incomplete and arrested process of modernisation. It is his separation of the industrial from the modern, and his positing of a further stage of ‘reflexive rationality’ within each of these social spheres, which makes this book the pathbreaking synthesis that it is. It is worth looking at each of these institutional spheres in turn.

**Gender**

A key case is the position of women in industrial society, which Beck describes as having been essentially a status of ascribed feudal dependency, organised by the sacrificial institution of the family which was dedicated to unequal gender relations. Various changes are undermining women’s dependent ‘feudal’ status which was linked in the pre-modern ideology of patriarchy to a wider system of social subordination. These changes include increasing life-expectancy – the ‘demographic liberation of women’ as one of Beck’s sources, Imhof, put it; restructured and intensively capitalised housework; the tendency to intentional motherhood, via the availability of family planning and abortion; the equalisation of educational opportunity for girls and women; the frequency of divorce and separation freeing women from lifelong support by husbands, and often threatening them with poverty as a result; and the increased entry of women into the labour market, linked to all the above processes. ‘These changes express the liberation of women from the dictates of their modern female status fate’ (p. 111).

**Class**

A second core dimension of this analysis, key to the theory of individualisation, is the declining significance of class and status. Beck’s thesis on class has implications for socialist perspectives which he does not fully draw out. I shall try to elaborate them within his framework. Beck’s argument is that both Marx’s and Weber’s accounts of the salience of class and status are far more relevant to industrial than they are to ‘reflexively modern’ societies. Men and women are being increasingly positioned by modern economic systems as individuals, not as class subjects. Casualisation and flexibilisation of the work-process, and a combination of differentiation and globalisation of consumption patterns are dissolving the cultural solidarities of class systems, especially in West Germany and Scandinavia. (Beck makes an exception which may no longer be correct for what he sees as the more class-ridden culture of the United Kingdom. However, class solidarities seem to have been eroded here too, not least because of the prolonged and determined attacks on them by the Thatcherite state.) ‘To put it in Marxist terms,’ he says, ‘we increasingly confront the phenomenon of a capitalism without classes, but with individualised social inequality and all the related social and political problems.’ (This in fact seems to be more a post-Marxist than a Marxist definition of the situation.)

The persuasiveness of this argument lies in its theoretical economy and scope, not in any detailed evidence
which Beck provides for it. In the framework of his thesis, the very existence of class solidarities can be seen to derive from the survival within industrial societies of the status hierarchies of feudalism. Class memberships and identities re-worked pre-existing senses of social difference and subordination, sometimes giving them a different direction (relations of opposition rather than submission), but nevertheless building on what was perceived as the naturalness of status divisions to construct the class cultures of industrial society. Not only status inequality, but even the oppositional and utopian forms of reaction to it — the socialist idea of equality itself — were thus products of the pre-bourgeois social order. It was, of course, the truncating and dispersal of this feudal history which made American society so different and apparently ‘abnormal’. If the social world does come to be composed largely of individual and not of class subjects, then North America may come to seem to be in the vanguard of modernity, not an aberration from the European norm, as socialists used to see it.1

In the light of this thesis, one might say that the process of normative emancipation involved in ‘modernity’ — the idea that rights and opportunities should be available to all individuals, regardless of birth or class position — undermines the solidarities of class on which the idea of equality has depended as its collective bearer. Once ‘subordinate class subjects’ cease to feel subordinate or inferior in their sense of self-worth — once they have achieved a certain level of emancipation — class and status memberships are felt to be demeaning. These identities become perceived as signifiers of inequality and as stigmas of injustice, no longer as a collective resource for achieving justice and equality.

Whereas in the earlier post-war period, claims of social justice were mostly asserted in collectivistic terms, during the 1980s it has proved politically effective to invoke the idea of individual rights against existing forms of social provision — for example the welfare state, trade unions, political representation — which had earlier seemed their main guarantors. Thatcher appealed to ‘individuals’ (famously, in the swing-voter categories of skilled industrial workers) to throw off the chains of their subordination to trade union bosses and government bureaucrats, to become house-owners rather than council tenants. This idea of the individual subject (‘equal’ in freedom but not in distributive outcome, of course) was counterposed, successfully, to the former solidaristic identities of class, or, as Sir Keith Joseph put it, of ‘dependence’. Social altruism diminished as a consequence, where it politically counted most, in the willingness to pay taxes for the social good. When asked their opinions, a majority of voters protested their commitment to public services. When it came to elections, they voted (as they thought) for lower taxation. In this sense, the Thatcherite revolution in Britain, and perhaps the parallel right-wing ascendancy in the United States, has been an authentically ‘modernising’ movement, appropriating in populist and individualist terms universalist claims which had in their more collectivised version belonged previously to the political left.

Just as the family is viewed in this perspective of ‘reflexive modernity’ as a ‘feudal’ survival, so the institutions of the welfare compromise (and those of State socialism in the East) have been revealed by their recent crises to be deeply compromised by inegalitarian, bureaucratic and indeed authoritarian attributes. Whilst these institutions were claimed to be instruments of social justice, they also unavoidably continued to be distributors of unequal advantage to middle class consumers.2 Whilst ostensibly devoted to ideals of public service, they also advanced the interests of their professional functionaries. The populist right was thus able to appeal successfully to the people over the heads of the elected or appointed defenders of its interests.

‘Socialism’, as a project of universal emancipation and equality, is thus being pushed out of its former institutional cradle. Certainly, there is evidence that class identifications and class-based voter alignments are diminishing everywhere in the West. Although in Germany amalgamation with the former DDR is providing a major assimilation problem, as the ‘other’ of a nation ideologically constituted as a society of the working class is incorporated into the bourgeois ethos of the Federal German Republic in conditions of mass unemployment and economic disruption. If we want to retain some conception of a possible socialism, it would have to be, in the light of Beck’s argument, a ‘socialism without class’.

Science

A third sphere in which Beck develops his thesis of ‘incomplete modernisation’ is that of scientific and technological transformation. This is given particular emphasis by his ecological, risk-informed perspective. Beck’s central antithesis between ‘classical’ and ‘reflexive’ modernisation (the initial modernisation of tradition and the subsequent modernisation of industrial society) is worked out in the domain of science as the contrast between wealth production and risk production. The argument is that while in classical industrial society the ‘logic’ of wealth production dominates the ‘logic’ of risk production, in the risk society this relationship is reversed. The productive forces have lost their innocence in the reflexivity of modernisation processes. The gain in power from techno-economic progress is being increasingly overshadowed by the production of risks.

Beck argues that these now amount to ‘non-class-specific global hazards’, the product of a situation where the whole of nature, and the spheres of both production and reproduction, are constituted through science-based interventions.

The most fundamental argument here asserts ‘the end of the antithesis between nature and society’, viewed in industrial society as spheres which are external to one another. Whereas the control of nature was seen in the Enlightenment as a means of human liberation, Beck now argues that this control has become a source of potential
catastrophe. Because of this we need to move ‘from the solidarity of need to solidarity motivated by anxiety’, a potentially classless solidarity since all are equally threatened by the new kinds of risk. There is now no ‘nature’ that is not deeply affected by scientific intervention, and no ‘society’ that is not being transformed by the outcomes of science’s conquest of nature.

It is not merely the so-called ‘natural world’ of forests, climate, species, which is affected by technological interventions, but the social world too. Work is being transformed by electronics. The family is threatened by the potential of in vitro fertilisation and genetic engineering. And of course, technology applied to warfare threatens total destruction. ‘Risk society is a catastrophic society,’ argues Beck, ‘in it the exceptional condition threatens to become the norm’ (p. 24). At an earlier stage of industrial society, science and technology sometimes did limited damage, and piecemeal remedies could be sought when such damage occurred. Now, the cumulative effects of scientific interventions provide the agenda for whole scientific industries. Beck thinks we should be looking holistically at causes, and not symptoms: for example, at the environmental causes of diseases, and not drugs to control them; at containing the role of the automobile, not merely cleaning up its engines; at reducing demand for energy, not finding more ways of generating it.

Cumulatively, the litany of ‘risks’ cited by Beck – global warming, chemical toxicity, the extinction of species, radiation, genetic engineering – becomes compelling, though Beck is less sensitive to the cultural and even quasi-religious shaping of this ‘risk agenda’ than he might be. But more compelling than Beck’s rather random enumeration of actual risks is the application of his ‘incomplete modernity’ idea to the whole sphere of scientific discourse. He points out that science’s legitimisation claims depend on the fallibility of its findings, and on their constant reference to rational argument and empirical evidence. Yet, he points out, scientific institutions have normally operated in a two-fold manner, exploiting the unquestioned authority of experts in their dealings with the public sphere even whilst basing this authority on the provisional and falsifiable nature of science in contrast to pre-modern forms of knowledge. What is now happening, argues Beck, is that this bluff is being called. The claims of rational critique asserted in classical modernist mode against pre-modern beliefs is now being made in a spirit of reflexive modernity against science itself.

Faced with ‘scientific evidence’ for or against some project or process, citizens now routinely locate their own sources of qualified advice. Whether the issue be the state of the ozone layer, the population of whales, or toxins in food, there is now invariably more than one informed and articulate side to each debate. These contests have also made evident that what underlies the arguments between scientists are ethical and social commitments, which set many research agendas in the first place. Furthermore the ‘problems’ which are now the subject of scientific and political controversy (for example the implications of nuclear power generation or tropical deforestation) are themselves the outcome of earlier science-based programmes of economic and technical development. ‘Reflexive modernisation’ brings this entire system and its legitimating ideologies into the sphere of critical debate. This process, Beck suggests, is now so far advanced that science can no longer advance its authority claims in particular spheres without these claims being inevitably challenged. Beck quotes Feyerabend’s observation that now, in the field of arguments about scientific truth, ‘anything goes’.

**Politics**

Finally, Beck brings the political sphere within the scope of his ‘incomplete modernity’ thesis. Elective government makes only a small concession, he points out, to the idea of full democratic responsibility. His arguments have some similarities with those of radical constitutional reformers in Britain. Ultimately, he says, the monopolisation of democratically constituted decision-making rights is founded on the contradictory image of a democratic monarchy. The rules of constitutional democracy are limited to the (infrequent) choice of political representatives and to (minority) participation in forming political programmes. Once in office, it is not only the ‘monarch for a term’ who develops dictatorial leadership qualities and enforces his decisions in authoritarian fashion from the top down: the agencies, interest groups and citizens’ groups affected by the decisions also forget their rights and become ‘democratic subjects’ who accept without question the state’s claims to dominance. (p. 191)

Beck sees this situation as unstable for two opposite reasons. On the one hand, the most important decisions which affect human lives are made not by politicians, but in the dispersed scientific and corporate centres in which technological innovations are planned. It is the development of new forms of production – whether of drugs, electronics, bio-engineering, or machinery – which shape man’s future. The role of the state in relation to these is merely that of an ineffective, post-facto regulator. The declining significance of party politics to citizens is in part a recognition of the irrelevance of centralised national state structures to these processes of technically-based change which are both dispersed and global in their effects.

On the other side, the reflexive practices which are morally most significant are also decentralised and specialised, usually taking place within social movements outside the sphere of political parties. The guarantors of a genuinely democratic process are legal rights upholding freedom of expression, mass communications systems providing access to the public sphere, and educational resources which give citizens some cognitive resource for acting upon their situation. We could add that these ‘guarantors’ are themselves incomplete and frail. Although they assign some rights of democratic participation and deliberation to citizens, they do so in radically unequal
ways. In Beck’s view, not the redistribution of material resources (he assumes that the welfare state has become somewhat obsolete through its success in guaranteeing standards of life) but safeguards against ‘risk’ have become the central issues.

To respond to these problems, a more dispersed and differentiated kind of politics is called for, not the now-futile attempt to orchestrate interests into a centralised party system. The institutions which thus become crucial are the judiciary, with its potential for protecting citizens and their rights to know; the mass media, with their power of publicity; a private sphere, arising from the ‘detraditionalisation of life-worlds’ allowing space for a ‘personal politics’; and new citizens’ initiatives and social movements, such as those which have been developed in response to ecological dangers. Beck envisages a dispersed and ubiquitous form of participation, pressing the claims of ‘modernity’ to the point where all claims can be questioned and in which choices based on rational deliberation take the place of habitual conformity.

Society is seen as evolving towards the form of a variety of networks, linked laterally as well as vertically, rather than as hierarchical chains of command. Beck’s argument has affinities with the theses of ‘Post-Fordism’ and of ‘Disorganised Capitalism’. He argues in an interesting practical conclusion for the importance of information disclosure and of deliberation and critique at an institutional level: ‘The right to criticism within professions and organisations, like the right to strike, ought to be fought for and protected in the public interest.’ One reason for this is that risks cannot be detected, let alone methods found to avoid them, without technical expertise. He argues for example that there needs to be a ‘medical parliament’, to debate the ethics of medical technologies.

**Reflexive Modernity**

How valuable is Beck’s theory of ‘reflexive modernity’? I shall argue in the last section of this article that Beck’s thesis provides a valid defence of the idea of a ‘rational’ society against post-modern critics who have attacked this view as inherently elitist if not tyrannical. Beck sees ‘modernity’ as the goal of an immanent process by which both natural and social worlds may be brought within the spheres of understanding and choice. It is consistent with his view to see the culture and ideology of ‘high modernism’ as itself a merely transitional moment. Just as science asserted the claims of reason but then insisted on its unquestioned authority over uninformed publics, so the technocratic elitists of modernism sought to ‘legislate’ (to use Bauman’s term) for mankind on the grounds of their superior cultural understanding. Beck makes the claim, through his advocacy of an active, devolved civil society, that reason, and thus modernity, is inherently democratic. The post-modern critique of the ‘authoritarianism’ of modernist culture is based, on this view, on a mistaken generalisation from what was in fact merely a transitional phase.

Beck’s central argument is that the condition imagined as ‘modernity’ has not yet arrived, and that the institutions of ‘industrial society’ represent only a partial assertion of the claims of rational self-determination as a universal principle. The superseding of the typical institutions of ‘industrialism’ – full-time work, women’s subordination within the family, the elitist authority claims of scientific knowledge, restricted constitutional democracy – are in principle, Beck suggests, to be welcomed, in so far as they open the way to a more fully democratic and self-created social order. Beck’s argument transposes the Marxian model of historical transition. It identifies the continuing legacies of ‘arbitrary’ feudal authority and traditionalism within industrial capitalism, and looks forward to the continuing working-out of the emancipatory potential of the norms of rationality and freedom. One might say that Beck proposes the full elaboration of the potentials of the bourgeois revolution, as a precondition for a situation that he still seems to think of as socialism.

Beck’s argument is of value in identifying many contradictions between the normative claims generated within industrial society and the limits which its institutions impose on these claims. Beck’s view of industrial society as a merely partial modernisation proves able to bring many different fields of social action within its theoretical scope.
He enables us to see the crisis of several of the institutions of industrial society in a positive way, as their unequal and undemocratic forms become exposed to critique from the point of view of their own immanent norms.

Beck’s approach, following Habermas and a long German tradition, is, however, essentially idealist in its assumptions. The shaping force in his account of change is the rationalising mode of thought itself. This has achieved its first partial transformation of the world through the forms of ‘industrial society’. Industrialism is seen as only a partial step towards the idea of a world shaped by human reason, the condition of ‘reflexive rationality’ which Beck upholds as his central value and social goal. Marshall Berman’s epigraph from The Communist Manifesto, ‘All that is solid melts into air’, could be the epigraph to Beck’s book as well. Many of the changes that Beck draws attention to, especially from an ecological point of view, are deeply threatening. Beck conceives the remedy for, as well as the diagnosis of, this condition in idealist terms. The problems are caused by the effects of partial and incomplete rationality, embodied in certain forms of arbitrary social power. Prospective solutions to these problems lie in reflexive rationality, which is envisaged as dispersed in a variety of citizen communities with access to legal and cultural resources. It is this form of deliberative, critical social action – clearly related to the arguments and campaigning of the ‘new social movements’ such as feminism and the Greens – which is offered as the necessary response to a world of ‘risk’.

Some things can be said in defence of Beck’s immanent rationalism, before some problems in his argument are considered. The first is that the grounding of political programmes in universal norms to which historical destiny is attributed has long been a normal and perhaps indispensable resource of radical and socialist politics. There are few options available for the justification of ethical and political commitments which do not depend, in the last resort, on some foundational norms of the kind Beck postulates. Whilst Marxism grounds its conceptions of the potentiality of self-determining, creative human existence in a materialist historical account, the motive-spring of the development Marx describes is, nevertheless, the capacity of human actors to choose rational solutions to the problems posed for them by scarcity, oppression, and alienation.

The attempt by Althusser and his followers to construct a Marxist theory of change which eliminated rational agency, and which attempted to characterise merely philosophical arguments as innately ‘bourgeois’ in their form, failed. Objective analysis of causal chains and explanations, even including the explanation of social norms and beliefs themselves, cannot escape the necessity to find a normative grounding for political action, even if this is posed in Marxist mode in relation to historical ends rather than to absolute and timeless principles. It is characteristic of the socialist, and the more historicist parts of the liberal tradition, that such norms are both assigned validity and grounded in theories which explain their own historical emergence.

It is a particular merit of Beck’s work that he grounds his normative conceptions and programmes in substantive models of social change. When Beck discusses modernity and reflexivity one is not left in any doubt about what concrete social institutions and practices he might actually be talking. His synoptic sketches of the contemporary social totality are illuminating and informative, in both historical and systemic terms. Beck’s argument has some serious limitations, but these are not consequences of its normative core.

Norms and Power

What is much more problematic in a model of this kind is the causal weight that is implicitly assigned to norms and ideas and their innate logic of development, rather than to other agencies and powers. As a programme, Beck’s emphasis on the normative, on reflexive, responsible action by citizens, makes sense. Most radicals are obliged to appeal to conscious agency, and contrast the essence of shared ideals and principles with their compromised existence in actuality. Beck thus defends ‘modernity’ as a still incomplete form of emancipation. He imagines democratic, participative communities taking conscious responsibility for their relations with nature and for the social world. His programmatic aim might be said to be provide citizens with a map of the social world and its dangers which shows them where, historically, they are, and where they can find scope for action. This is not very different from what socialist
writers have always sought to do, though the collective subject invoked by Beck is no longer primarily a class subject.

But it is one thing to urge that such norms ought to be or could be acted upon by subjects, that is to invoke them prescriptively, and another to assume their primacy at the level of explanation of the social order we actually have. Beck states that institutions have made only partial concessions to the norms of rationality and democracy, but he does not offer any explanation of what it is in them which has resisted these pressures, or what forms of power continue to be deployed against democratic subjects. The kind of explanation most consistent with this idealistic account would refer only to other, antithetical normative principles, and this is the crux of the methodological problem in Beck’s argument. The fact is that norms and ideas are only one source of power in society, not the sole or even main source of power. ¹¹ Emancipatory rationalists prefer this source of power, and seek to enlarge its scope. Revolutionary upheaval, as Furet has demonstrated for the French Revolution, ¹² may dramatically transform the conditions within which deliberative power can be exercised, giving it a moment of temporary omnipotence. But this is not to be equated with the normal condition of society, in which coercion, scarcity, and subjection to the taken-for-granted also have a large part in the maintenance of social order. Each of these modes of micro-social compliance has its equivalent institutional agency – armies, churches, corporations, etc. Beck’s model of rule by norms privileges the discursive form of power with which emancipatory radicals feel most at home. It does not accurately describe societies as they are.

Beck discusses a range of institutions, but he is reluctant to acknowledge that some of them in fact hold much more power than others. It is one thing to recommend that power and rationality be dispersed throughout society; it is quite another to demonstrate that this dispersal has already occurred. Beck’s critique, especially in chapters 1 and 2, is directed towards ‘techno-scientific rationality’, not to the institutional power of capital, as if he thinks that it is the mode of scientific thinking itself rather than its sponsoring corporate agencies which is the decisive agent of change. The economic sphere is often referred to in Risk Society as a ‘techno-economic system’, in contrast to the ‘polity-economic’ realm in which democratic decision-making is the supposed norm (e.g. p. 183).

Beck points to the similarities of a number of key social institutions, in so far as a sort of achieved partial democracy or rationality is concerned. Economy, family, polity, culture, he implicitly says, have all been affected by the forces of rationalisation and democratisation, although dominant powers within them have also been able to stand out against them, preserving a large degree of essentially arbitrary power. This is an illuminating description, as far as it goes. But this analysis of the similarities of social institutions, and of their common normative origins, is at the expense of a consideration of their causal relations with each other. We might say that the functionalist tradition which has so shaped West German sociology has led Beck to assume that social institutions are arranged as the complementary levels of a unified social system, governed by common norms (in this case the norms of incomplete rationality), rather than organised in dependent hierarchies dominated by specific sources of material and physical power. Constitutional democracy is partial democracy in part because of the power of property; scientific development is inflected by the corporations who pay for it; social classes are dispersed and dissolved partly because it has been the strategy of capital to disperse them. Of course, these relations are interactive and complex, but a central organising principle of our world is missed if such causal connections and loci of power are not examined.

The centre of power which seems above all to need this attention, all the more clearly after its triumph over Communist Eastern Europe in 1989, is the system of corporate capitalism. Beck consistently avoids the conventional socialist attribution of power to the forces of corporate capital, describing these as powerful largely in their capacity to direct technical change, but he does still refer to the desirability and feasibility of a ‘socialism of everyday life’ (p. 221).

Beck has realised, correctly, that the forms of agency by which socialists sought to confront capitalism and oligarchy have changed to such a degree that they cannot now themselves sustain a transformative programme. But, whilst this oppositional agency may have changed, in part as a result of its emancipation by capitalist democracy itself, this is not to say that capitalism itself has changed to the same degree. To destroy one’s enemy is not necessarily to transform oneself, though no doubt to do so must have some reflexive consequences.

There seems in Beck’s argument a tendency, in part politically driven, to gloss over the actual concentrations and dynamics of power in modern capitalism. The need to identify and speak to collective subjects broader than the working class agency of old, now that this seems to have been largely incorporated or defeated, leads to the displacement of traditional ‘socialist’ forms of argument. Explanation of this may lie in the difficulties of explicit reference to the Marxist tradition in the political circumstances of West Germany. The search for new ‘universal’ social subjects may make sense at a programmatic level, but it has a price if it leads to a misrepresentation or underestimation of the major dynamic forces which drive and hold together the actually existing social system.

**Risk and Subjectivity**

A similar point can be made about Beck’s emphasis on ‘risk’ as the unifying category which defines the central social crisis. What Beck does with this concept is to replace traditional radical concerns over the prevalence of oppression and scarcity with a more generic idea of systemic crisis, and especially ecological crisis. This is held to have emerged because of the imbalance between technological power (deployed to transform our biological conditions of life, the natural environment and the social world) and human
capacities to reflect upon and make deliberative choices about its use. Here, critique is both of the unequal access of citizens to knowledge and decision-making procedures, and of the fact that in conditions where debate about alternatives is restricted, optimal decisions are unlikely to be made.

Whilst one of the worst aspects of the state of generalised ‘risk’ Beck describes is that it potentially threatens all citizens, this may also seem to be a hopeful feature of this analysis from the point of view of prospective social arousal. The ‘positive’ side of the concept of risk is that it appears to make it possible to construct a universal subject whose members are equally menaced by such phenomena as global warming or nuclear toxification. This situation is, in part, a real one, both in regard to immediate biological dangers, and in respect of a more general social condition of interdependency and exposure, sometimes summarised as the effects of globalisation. If social agents are constructed by their experience of common life situations and the possession of common interests, then liability to impending ecological catastrophe does seem to provide the basis for a universal idea of human citizenship. The idea that knowledge — whether of legal rights or nuclear waste — should be widely shared and deployed to further the interests of citizens worldwide is one that few on the left could disagree with. It also reflects the social practice of many new kinds of social agencies, including environmental campaigns, human rights organisations, and the international aid charities.

But the imperatives of political mobilisation do not necessarily lead to the most searching kinds of social analysis. There is a danger that the theory of ‘risk’ is being unduly driven by its immanent concept of agency: that is, by the hope of the universal social subject that it promises to construct. ‘Reflexive modernity’ is here ushered into existence before its time, because if it can be imagined, it may generate active, discursive, participatory citizens as its natural concomitants. It is, I think, indicative of this drift in Beck’s argument — its over-determination by the experience and hopes of the German Greens — that his writing on current ecological dangers is emotive and diffuse in a way that his historical and theoretical analysis is not. He seems inclined in places to ‘talk up’ these risks because of what might follow if people take them seriously. Socialists (unlike Beck) have sometimes become involved in the environmental movement not because they themselves believe environmental issues to be paramount, but because they wish to be part of and have access to what appears to be a rising social force, not be wholly tied to a declining and defeated one.

Should ‘reflexive modernity’ and its collective subjects be understood as a diagnosis or a programme? Beck’s argument is to a degree utopian in its attributions of capability and agency to whole hosts of dispersed social groups and micro-institutions, in a world which is dominated by immense concentrations of power. The fact, for example, that corporate economic power has largely escaped the constraints of the nation-state reduces rather than increases its accessibility to the demands of citizens. Beck evokes new individual and collective subjects, as replacements for the sites of resistance within industrial society — the working class, socialist parties, one could even add, the family. The present inadequacy of these new agencies for the tasks which Beck assigns to them reveals some weaknesses in his method of analysis.

This analysis points to the potentials of a fully-realised modernity, seen as a condition of universal access to a process of rational decision-making. (This vision plainly draws on the Habermasian ‘ideal speech situation’ and its imagined social embodiments). But it is possible to interpret some of these tendencies in a less hopeful spirit.Whilst Beck defends a vision of ‘modernity’ against the fragmentation and incoherence of a ‘post-modern’ view of the world, it is not clear that the alternatives he evokes to the existing forms of ‘industrial’ organisation are viable ones, or even necessarily improvements on it.

A particular problem arises from the centrality given to the individual, ‘post-class’ subject, and the extent to which rational self-determination is located in such subjects and in whatever associations they choose freely to enter. The dissolution of all pre-given and imposed social ties and relationships might inaugurate an era of individual and social fulfilment. It might also amount mainly to a state of competitive and conflictual anomie. It is not after all so clear that the reflexive subject of Beck’s account is so distinct from the individualist subject of capitalism.

More concretely, will individuals released from the unquestioned roles and obligations of families, and free to negotiate their own fundamental relationships, escape loneliness and expendability? Is the serial or multiple choice of partners by individuals who may deploy very different bargaining resources necessarily an improvement on conventional monogamy, which demands at least some formal reciprocity of obligation? Does the flexibilisation of employment mean that material existence and employment will be structurally separated from each other (for example, via a basic income entitlement), or merely that large minorities will once again be forced into economic uncertainty and intermittent poverty? Isn’t the present erosion of ‘Fordist work patterns’ in the West leading mainly to social polarisation and the expulsion of a significant part of the population from any economic role whatsoever? How is the ethos of ‘flexibilisation’ not to lead merely to the casualisation and atomisation of a previously more solidaristic and mutually-supported workforce?

Beck suggests that challenges to scientific authority mean that reason is becoming generalised, and society more actively responsible for its future. An alternative possibility is that ‘knowledge’ is becoming more exclusively the property of the particular interests it serves — less a source of objective insight and more a means of advancing particular interests. Something similar might be said of the law, despite all attempts to democratise access to its procedures. Nor is it clear that the dispersal of political life to Beck’s preferred sites of legal contest, media debate, and citizens’ networks, is going to compensate for the decline of the more concentrated ‘countervailing powers’ of parties and labour.
unions, as defenders of the majority interest.

Another interpretation can be offered of this whole development. According to this, it is not abstract rationality which is its driving force, but rather the instrumental rationality of capital. It is the commodification of everything which is transforming the world, desacralising what was formerly sacred (the family, the natural world), breaking up those institutions (welfare states, trade unions, entrenched employment rights) which offered resistance to capital accumulation, instrumentalising even knowledge itself. The fundamental right on which this system is based, which Beck hardly refers to, is the right to property. It is 'shareholder democracy' – one share one vote – not citizen democracy – 'one person one vote' – which rules our world, and reason and science are deployed mainly as its instruments.

Most of the institutional changes which Beck describes – to the family, work, and politics – may thus be the effects of the pervasive intervention of markets into hitherto unpenetrated or resistant spheres. Even 'globalisation' is driven not merely by technology in the abstract, but by the deployment of technology for corporate purposes. It does follow from the fact that the earlier institutions of resistance – mass political parties, trade unions, churches or even national governments – can no longer resist these processes effectively that some better form of 'resistance' in the form of dispersed critique within civil society, is waiting round the corner to take their place. The forms of mobilisation which Beck proposes are undoubtedly positive, but whether they are a match for the unending capitalist transformation of the world is another matter.

**Conclusion**

The problem posed by Ulrich Beck's thesis is how to relate his powerful normative critique of the incomplete realisation of the ideal of the rational subject, across a variety of institutions, to analysis of the material forms of power which obstruct its fulfilment. There may be good scientific as well as tactical reasons for Beck to have avoided this second form of discourse. A rigorous and unifying analysis of the contradiction between immanent rationality and its arrested realisation in many institutional spheres is certainly a major contribution in itself. *Risk Society*, despite its idealist foundations, displays a real sociological imagination.

However, suppose one holds that this process of 'modernisation' is being driven largely not by its own internal logic, but by the system of capital accumulation. Can one locate, within the evolution of capitalism itself, the kind of contradiction between norm and realisation which Beck sees as the basis of progress elsewhere? If one could, then it might be possible to bring these two levels of argument, the normative and the explanatory, together. One might then also find some way of re-connecting the agencies which resisted and mitigated the consequences of the capitalism of Beck's 'industrial society', with those which Beck points to as the sites of critical rationality in post-industrial society.

What is probably fundamental to this is the concept of capital itself, largely ignored in Beck's account. It is the contradiction between the development of capital, as a (necessary) force for material production and transformation, and the human purposes which this process is supposed to serve, which needs to be identified and opened up. Only if capital, property, the rights of ownership, are brought within the sphere of rational critique, is there any prospect of bringing this juggernaut of transformative power under human control. It is the unchallenged identification of the power of capital with the good of mankind which remains the ideological key to many of the problems, including those of ecological 'risk', which Beck evokes.

To say that the category of capital needs to be brought within the sphere of critique, and its own immanent potentials and contradictions explored, does not necessarily mean reiterating conventional socialist theories about it. We have all learned too much about the failings of institutions intended to deliver democracy, justice, and emancipation, merely to repeat the arguments for them. It is not any longer even clear what it would mean to bring the system of material production under rational control, or what role markets, different forms of ownership (both individual and collective), political regulation, and the associations of civil society should have in this.

What is quite clear is that an analysis which evades this issue fails to recognise the major source of power of our society. *Risk Society* can be criticised for its silences and glosses in this sphere. Even the transition from 'industrial' to 'post-industrial' society, an essential foundation of Beck's theory, cannot be understood without recognising this key dimension of economic agency. But it may be that by subjecting the sphere of capital to the kinds of critique which Beck deploys in regard to other institutions of 'blocked' or incomplete rationality, this major limitation of his argument can be addressed.

**Notes**


4. Beck's argument about the origins of inequality in the inheritance of pre-industrial society, drawn from Marx and Weber, leaves implicit the origins of socialism as a reaction to this same social order. Beck, however, is clear that the ideals of egalitarian solidarity have now lost most of their appeal. The values of individuality and difference, products of the dissolution of class society, are proposed in their place. This might signify a final emancipation from feudal preoccupations with status inequality. But it might also be taken to indicate no more than the triumph of a fully bourgeois world-view.


Beck’s view of ‘modernisation’ as a process driven by its own immanent logic places him in the tradition of Hegel, via its assimilation by the Frankfurt School and Habermas, though with a sociological substance derived from systems theory. The relative neglect of material powers in this account reflects the continuing distance between both idealist and sociological traditions, and Marxism. This theoretical divide and the silences it involves limits the scope of Beck’s argument.