



In the Context of Sociological Conceptualizations of the Risk Society. A Historical Perspective

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The article is an attempt to discuss the idea of risk society from the perspective of historical sociology or, to be more precise, the theory of social becoming developed by Piotr Sztompka. In this sense, the societal reality of risk society seems to be characterized by a specific innate dynamism rendering possible the discrepancy between objective volume of experienced risk and the perceived intensity of social uncertainty.

Risk society. The theory of social becoming. Historical sociology. The Social Amplification of Risk Framework.

Risk: from Objective Facts to Social Constructs

Historically speaking, the advent of industrial modernity paved the way for the ultimate realisation of the Enlightened project of a new social order that would eradicate the shortcomings of human existence previously experienced in the reality of pre-modern society. In this particular sense, technology, bureaucratic rationalisation and administration as well as the ubiquity of scientific expertise were conceived as pillars, to use Anthony Giddens' apt term, of the modern sense „ontological security“, an experience of relative certitude implying that risks and contingencies of everyday life could be bracketed off by means of a knowledgeable insight into the nature of social organisation. As opposed to the era of pre-modern traditional culture the emergent order of industrial modernity was meant to constitute a secure haven deprived of the all-pervading spirit of uncertainty. However, the modernist sense of ontological security seems to be a fragile and wavering phenomenon. Despite the unparalleled technological and social progress that has been noticed since the advent of modernity, nowadays one may perceive the intense preoccupation with danger and risk which, as Giddens teaches us, „has nothing directly to do with the actual prevalence of life-threatening dangers“.[1]

From the phenomenological perspective, Western societies of developed modernity seem to fall within the logic and discourse of the so-called „risk society“. The term designates a novel, post-industrial model of social order in which uncertainty reduction as well as contingency and crisis management are perceived in terms of factors rendering the re-organisation of public understanding of modernization and its social as well as cultural consequences. In this sense, the partisans of the risk society thesis postulate an image of modernity as a system being in the process of reflexive self-transformation to the point at which „the industrial will not be able to deal with the consequences of risk society“.[2] Consequently, the risk society thesis is based upon a firm conviction that uncertainty is an element deeply inscribed in both the transformation of social systems and individual identities.[3] It is, to put it otherwise, a core concept outlining the hermeneutic of modernity which indicate social ways of experiencing the realm of modern society. Moreover, in the context of public response to technological modernisation, risk society seems to be endowed with its inherent logic of dynamism, peculiar social forces rendering the growth of hiatus

between objective conditions of life and the societal perception of risk in the context of late modern societies.

The article is an attempt to debate upon the idea of risk society from the perspective of the contemporary post-progressive visions of society. In this sense, the societal reality of risk society seems to be characterized by a specific innate dynamism rendering possible the discrepancy between objective volume of experienced risk and the perceived intensity of social uncertainty. This process can be expressed in terminology based upon the notion of the „historical coefficient“[\[4\]](#) postulating that the morphogenesis of risk society resembles a series of iterative historical processes of conflict and negotiation in which individuals exercise their agency in the context of determining – both constraining and enabling – influence of history. Needless to say, from the sociological perspective, the process assumes a form of interplay between the determining influence of social structures as well as possibilities of change conceived as a parade of counterfactual possibilities. From this ontological perspective, when perceived through conceptual lenses of the historical coefficient, societal reality is endowed with its inherently temporal dimension postulating that social change resembles a series of sequential and cumulative processes powered by individual and collective agency.

The Historical Coefficient of Reflexive Modernity

The idea of history, or to be more precise, history-making has become central to the discourses of contemporary sociology in which it has become assumed that „all contemporary social states are endowed with its own processual and historical genealogy. There are no social objects which have a stable and unchangeable character“.[\[5\]](#) In order to comprehend the changeable nature of social organisation, the idea of historical coefficient has been introduced to the contemporary theoretical insights into the ontology of society.[\[6\]](#) The concept, to put it in a nutshell, gestures towards the agential conceptualisation of historical change in which diverse social processes are seen as „the accumulated effect of the productive and the reproductive efforts of human actors, undertaken in the structural conditions shaped by earlier generations“.[\[7\]](#) The idea of historical coefficient has been central to historical sociology which is based upon the following premises: 1) social reality is a temporal and dynamic process; 2) social change is a joint result of multiple processes and tendencies; 3) society is deprived of a solid character and resembles a fluid network of relations; 4) historical change has a sequential and cumulative character; 5) historical processes are rooted in the faculty of human agency; 6) society is constructed on the basis of given structural conditions.[\[8\]](#)

In the context of historical sociology, society becomes deprived of its supposedly solid or static character. It is rather an amalgamation of multiple agents and voices competing and cooperating with one another in their quest for achieving social or cultural dominance. From the perspective of the historical coefficient, the traditional distinction between diachronic and synchronic analysis seems to cease to exist: time becomes an essential factor of social existence: all social actions take place between the rigidity of bygone experiences and the orientation to the future conceived as a risky venture into the unknown. The aforementioned historical or processual interpretation of society and its ontology seems to constitute a new impetus to the European perspective on the sociology risk as it has been simultaneously developed by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. Their aim is to provide a new hermeneutic of modernity signalling an innovative interpretation strategy in which societal experiences of uncertainty and risk gain central place. In this context, risk is a phenomenological correlate to late modernity, a developmental stage of industrial society characterised by 1) the separation of time and space; 2) the multiplication of disembedding mechanisms; 3) the intensification of institutional reflexivity.[\[9\]](#) Late modernity is, thus, discourses describing global society in which social actions has been lifted up from local context and are subjected to rational regulation and control. The discourse of risk society is an attempt to make sense out of the crisis of industrial modernity in which the proliferation of man-made, technological risks has paved the way for more general social transformations affecting social structures, on the one hand, as well as individuals and their biographies on the other hand. In this context, the concept of risk is often discussed within the framework of reflexive modernisation indicating a confrontation between the foundations of modernisation and its consequences.[\[10\]](#) The discourse of reflexive modernisation seems to be founded upon the idea of perpetual crisis affecting the social organisation of modernity. In this sense, the aforementioned hiatus between the objective, material conditions of living and social responses to risk may be subsumed within the idea of „anomie of success“ affecting the system of industrial modernity. As Ulrich Beck bitterly observes: Should we not, after the end of the cold war and the rediscovery of the bitter realities of ‘conventional’ warfare, come to conclusion that we have to rethink, indeed reinvent, our industrial civilization, now the old system of industrialized society is breaking down in the course of its own success?[\[11\]](#)

Hence, the concept of risk has been applied in order to wage an *ideological war* against the very idea industrial modernity, the historical era which is now conceived as, to use Jürgen Habermas words, the „unfinished project“. The risk society thesis, consequently, becomes an attempt to understand and operationalise the dynamic - one may say dialectic - character of late modernity in which the opportunity and uncertainty sides are mixed together into an inseparable alloy of reflexive modernisation.

One may assume that the notion of reflexive modernisation is in itself deeply rooted in the methodology of historical sociology. The term suggests a dynamic, processual character of modern industrial society conceived as a social system in the process of self-confrontation with the consequences of its own success. Consequently, in this sort of discourse, the future change cannot be seen from the early modernist perspective of the Hegelian march towards the end of history but, contrariwise, is an isolated possibility extracted from the potentially infinite range of counterfactual projects. In the era of reflexive modernisation, existential certitude has been increasingly remote from the routine of social experience and social reality is perceived as „a fluid network of relations, pervaded by tension as well as harmony, by conflict as well as cooperation“. [12] In this sense, the inherently reflexive character of modernity is evident in the perpetual process of conflict and negotiation taking place among myriads of individual and collective actors willing to gain the upper hand in the social dissemination of knowledge concerning risk matters.

Since, „the political site of world risk society is not street, but television“ [13], the era of reflexive modernity resembles an ongoing, global debate concerning the future shape of such fundamental matters as modernisation, environment, global organisation of production and consumption. In this sense, the global arena of risk societies becomes a perfect reflection of methodology applied by historical sociology: it is a network of processes powered by agency of myriads of political actors equipped with their own distinct political agendas and willing to take decisive actions in order to gain the central position in the public debate. Consequently, the societal reality of risk society resembles a fluid network of discourses which know no point of convergence since from the very onset have been structured as being funded upon dissimilar economic and political interests.

Risk Society at Work: Social Movements and the Risk Amplification Process

The sociological insight into the problem of social movements makes possible the further explication of the risk society as it is perceived with the use of historical coefficient. Since, a social moment „effects or at least attempts to effect changes in the external structure of society to which it belongs“ [14], they may be conceived as important vehicles of historicity as Alain Touraine aptly calls the ability of changing social structures by means of using history in order to create history. [15] In this sense, the historical coefficient of the risk society may be discussed in terms of the morphogenetic potential - both constructive and destructive - implicit in ecological social movements. In this sense, contemporary social movements, as Manuel Castells observes, are historically productive in a way that they exert substantial pressure on both social awareness of ecological problems as well as the political agenda of parties taking part in the public debate. [16]

The aforementioned morphogenetic potential of social movements manifests itself as the discursive pressure exerted on public debate. In this sense, ecological organisations participate *en masse* in the creation of „risk atmosphere“ typical of the era of reflexive modernisation. The social mechanism resulting in emergence of this all-pervading aura of uncertainty may be perceived from the perspective of risk amplification. The concept has been funded upon a firm conviction stressing that „events pertaining to hazards interact with psychological, social, institutional and cultural processes in ways that can heighten or attenuate perceptions of risk and shape risk behaviour“. [17] In the context of social amplification processes, risk events are not only treated as objective phenomena but also in terms of social constructs possessing social existence on their own. The Social Amplification of Risk Framework (the SARF) aims to explain the origins of public panic in contemporary societies. From this perspective, even limited hazardous events may become amplified by a number of „amplification stations“ (individuals and institutions which disseminate information about risk) and, consequently, may acquire a rank of a serious, global disaster. To listen to Roger E. Kasperson: The amplification process, as we conceive it, starts with a physical event (such as an accident) or a report on environmental or technological events [...]. Some groups and individuals also, of course, actively monitor the experimental world, searching for hazard events related to their agenda of concern. [...] Social groups and individuals process the information, locate it in their agenda of concerns, and may feel compelled to respond. Some may change their previously held beliefs, gain additional knowledge and insights, and be motivated to take action; others may use the opportunity to compose new interpretations that they send to original sources or other interested parties; and still others find the added information as confirming long-held views on the

world and its order.[18]

In the context of the SARF methodology, it becomes apparent that a risk event may cause an array of different interpretations obliging actors to take diverse actions on the matter. However, as the historical sociology asserts, actions cannot float free in a social void and are anchored in the structural circumstances of history. In this sense, amplification stations always act according to their long-lasting systems of values and beliefs from the perspective of which their responses to risks are seen as functional. As Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky put it: „people who adhere to different forms of social organisation are disposed to take (and avoid) different kinds of risk“.[19] Hence, it is the historically generated sphere of values and norms that predispose individuals to amplify or attenuate their responses to technological and environmental hazards and take action against them or, contrariwise, turn a blind eye on the matter. Risk amplification processes, thus, are anchored in the inter-subjective reality of social structures which exert pressure on individuals acting as actors (and possible amplification stations) on the arena of risk society.

The aforementioned morphogenetic potential associated social movement is elaborated within the cultural theory of risk developed mainly in the context of American sociology. Here, the concepts of risk perception and risk selection are perceived in the wider political context of ongoing debate over the postulated projects of social and moral order. Quite similarly to historical sociology, the cultural theory of risk sees modernity as a site of conflict and cooperation taking place among various institutionalised and non-institutionalised social actors. In the context of the cultural debate, risk is seen as a political tool enabling the preferred lifestyle and values to be reinforced.[20] Environmentalist movements are seen as the principal social actors (the principal amplification stations) taking part in the process of relating contingencies and uncertainties to the moral discourse of blame and responsibility. It is the world environmentalist utopia that sees entrepreneurs and government political bodies in terms of the main culprits responsible for the grim consequences of technological development. In this kind of discourse, „ambition for big organisation has endangered mankind and the new technology represents all that is most reprehensible - social distinctions, the division of labour, materialist values, unfeelingness for individual suffering“.[21] The organizational and economic blindness with reference to the problem of technological risk is, consequently, seen as a functional mechanism taking part in securing vital interests of governments and companies.

The dynamics of risk society is, to a large extent, anchored in the achieved hegemony in the field of public discourse. The influence exerted by environmentalist organisations is not, however, limited to the realm of ideologies and beliefs. The environmentalist discourse is an attempt to capture and suppress all other viewpoints under the all-pervading idea of political correctness. Hence, the real achievement of social movements operating under the rationality of risk society is relating their own ideology to the rank of a universal truth obliging people to accept it and follow. Once the battle over ideology is won, the battle over social control commences. In this context, as Deborah Lupton observes, individuals „police themselves; they exercise power upon themselves as normalised subjects who are in pursuit of their own best interest and freedom“.[22] In this sense, the amplification process is competed: individuals actively participate in the environmentalist discourse, reproducing ideological structures of the risk society. In other words, the influence exerted by environmentalist movements is so powerful that its acceptance seems to constitute a natural way of thinking and acting which obliges individuals to monitor their behavior in order to meet cultural standards of political correctness defining the contemporary citizen as a person who is deeply concerned about the problems of environment. It makes perfect sense in the simplified world of environmentalist ideology in which all different viewpoints on the problem of technological risk are automatically perceived as the economically motivated lack of empathy for human suffering and the planet's best interest.

V kontexte sociologických konceptualizácií rizikovej spoločnosti. Historická perspektíva

Článok je pokusom diskutovať o myšlienke rizikovej spoločnosti z perspektívy historickej sociológie, alebo presnejšie o teórii sociálneho vývinu Piotra Sztompku. V tomto zmysle je možné sociálnu realitu rizikovej spoločnosti charakterizovať na základe jej vlastného jedinečného dynamizmu vyjadrujúceho možný nesúlad medzi objektívnym množstvom zažitého rizika a vnímanej intenzity sociálnej nestálosti. Tento proces môže byť vyjadrený terminológiou založenou na pojme „historického koeficientu“, ktorý predpokladá, že morfogenéza rizikovej spoločnosti sa podobá skupine historických procesov konfliktov a jednaní, v ktorých osobnosti uplatňujú ich pôsobnosť v kontexte determinácie histórie. V tomto kontexte dynamický charakter rizikovej spoločnosti môže byť diskutovaný z hľadiska sociálneho rozširovania rizikového systému.

[1] GIDDENS, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1991, pp. 115.

[2] BECK, Ulrich. Ponowne odkrycie polityki: przyczynek do teorii modernizacji refleksyjnej. In: BECK, Ulrich - GIDDENS, Anthony - LASH, Scott (Eds.). *Modernizacja refleksyjna. Polityka, tradycja i estetyka w porządku społecznym nowoczesności*. Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2009, pp. 18.

[3] BAUMAN, Zygmunt. *Dwa szkice o moralności ponowoczesnej*. Warszawa : Instytut Kultury, 1994, pp. 27-36. See: BECK, Ulrich. *Spółeczeństwo ryzyka. W stronę innej nowoczesności*. Warszawa : Wyd. SCHOLAR, 2002.

[4] SZTOMPKA, Piotr. *Socjologia zmian społecznych*. Kraków : Wydawnictwo Znak, 2005, pp. 199-201

[5] SZTOMPKA, Piotr. *Socjologia. Analiza społeczeństwa*. Kraków : Wydawnictwo Znak, 2002, pp. 528.

[6] The concept has been developed, among others, by Norbert Elias, Charles Tilly and Theda Sockpol. The article utilises concepts applied by Piotr Sztompka in his „theory of social becoming“, a discourse clearly embedded in the methodology based upon the idea of historical coefficient.

[7] SZTOMPKA, Piotr. *Society in Action. The Theory of Social Becoming*. Cambridge : University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 26.

[8] SZTOMPKA, P. *Socjologia zmian...*, pp. 200.

[9] GIDDENS, A. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1990, pp. 17-45.

[10] BECK, U. *Ponowne odkrycie polityki...*, pp. 17.

[11] BECK, U. The Reinvention of Politics. Toward a Theory of Reflexive Modernization. In: :BECK, Ulrich - GIDDENS, Anthony - LASH, Scott (Eds.). *Reflexive Modernization. Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*. Stanford : Stanford University press, 1994, pp. 1.

[12] SZTOMPKA, P. *Society in Action...*, pp. 25.

[13] BECK, Ulrich. *World Risk Society*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 1999, pp. 44.

[14] SZTOMPKA, P. *Society in Action...*, p. 153.

[15] TOURAINE, Alain. Wprowadzenie do analizy ruchów społecznych. In: *Władza i społeczeństwo*. SZCZUPACZYNSKI, Jerzy (Ed.). Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 1995.

[16] CASTELLS, Manuel. *The Power of Identity*. Oxford : Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 168-169.

[17] KASPERSON, Roger E. The Social Amplification of Risk: Progress in Developing an Integrative

Framework. In: KRIMSKY, Sheldon - GOLDING, Dominic (Eds.). *Social Theories of Risk*. Westport : Praeger, 1992, pp. 157-158.

[18] KASPERSON, R. E. *The Social Amplification of Risk...*, pp. 159.

[19] DOUGLAS, Mary - WILDAVSKY, Aron. *Risk and Culture. An Essay on the Selection of Technological and Environmental Dangers*. Los Angeles and Berkeley : University of California Press, 1983, pp. 9.

[20] See especially: DOUGLAS, M. - WILDAVSKY, A. *Risk and Culture...*, DOUGLAS, Mary. *Risk and Blame. Essays in Cultural Theory*. London and New York : Routledge, 1994.

[21] DOUGLAS, M. - WILDAVSKY, A. *Risk and Culture...*, pp. 127.

[22] LUPTON, Deborah. *Risk*. London and New York : Routledge, 2006, pp. 88.