



## The Beginning of Fear: a review of Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman's works

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KORSTANJE, Maximilian. The Beginnig of Fear: a review of Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman's works. Individual and Society, 2010, Vol. 13, No. 1.

This contribution is aimed at the debate about risk perception authored by Ulrich Beck. Author of this contribution points to some facts which are contrasted with Liquid Fears of Zygmunt Bauman recently published in 2008. Liquid Fear and Society of Risk are seminal pieces of immense quality and originality and very helpful in understanding the contemporary times in which we are living.

Ulrich Beck. Zygmunt Bauman. Society. Fear.

The present short piece is aimed at triggering the debate on one of pioneer projects authored by Ulrich Beck, regarding risk perception issues, which has been originally entitled *Risikogesellschaft, Auf dem weg in eine andere Moderne*, or in English *The society of risk, towards a new modernity*. A work of this caliber is contrasted in opposition to Liquid Fears of Zygmunt Bauman recently published in 2008. In a moment wherein the effects of capitalism are under debate, this piece presents an historical analogy with the end of reconsidering a classical conceptualization of progress and development. On his introductory chapter, Beck argues that the process of modernity has been suffered a shift up to the nuclear accident occurred in Chernobyl, Ukraine. Afterwards this tragedy, the perception of threats was radically changed. In the medieval world, the person evaluated the possible risks according to its own resources in the decision-making process. Nowadays, global dangers are represented as collective, catastrophic and chaotic beyond the possibilities of individual reaction. To put this in brutally, there is nothing one can do when the catastrophe is coming-up.

Under such a context, Beck suggests that a change of this magnitude is feasible in accordance with an increasing materiality as well as empowerment of productive forces. That way, threats are implicitly derived as a product of the economic development where society lies, but sooner or later a situation of extreme danger collapses the possibility of response of the system. In opposition to bourgeois society, which maintained the line between poverty and richness, modern societies face a new configuration of social order. Needs of mass-consumption in association with a growing sentiment of fear paved the pathway to the advent of a new spirit of capitalism. As a result of this, logic of appropriation that characterized classical the mercantilism in last decades is replaced by an antithesis, the logic of disavowal. It is not surprising that privileged groups occult the collateral damages caused by the mass-consumption; Beck emphasizes that practices of this caliber are supported thanks to the intervention of Science and Journalism.

The underlying problem here seems to be that whereas the responsibilities for the collateral damages are globalized to all stakeholders, an elite still manages the modes and structure of productions blurring the boundaries between the culprit and victimization. After further examination, Beck explains that in traditional society of class, groups configure their distinctions according to the style of consumption embodied in early socialization processes. Risks are conceived as well-known and experienced

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individually or internally whereas threats are external to the possibilities of people. On hands of journalism or biology authority, risks not only appear to be multiplied in last years everywhere, but also have declined the cognitive sovereignty of citizens. Basically, this reminds us that fears rise at the time the risks are hidden.

In order for alleviating the burden caused by perception of threats, the market sets forward a set of new products to enhance the sentiment of security in consumers. The main thesis of Beck is that the quality of living what is the community is being gradually transformed. From the passage from one to another type of society, terms such as equality, richness and democracy are substituted by security, conflict and fears. From this angle, the idea of hierarchical distinction as a product of personal hard-work drives towards a more complex symbolic construes wherein nobody feel safe. In successive chapters, Beck emphasizes that the production of risks is inverse proportional to the wealthy distribution. His main thesis is aimed at debating how global fears highlight previous material irregularities in economy. This is because the human's necessities are restricted to be satisfied and disabled for some awhile. Metaphorically speaking, the imposition of external risks in consumer minds comprises an unlimited oil-well because it can never be satisfied.

Centered in a historical background, Beck compares the transit from feudalism in Middle Age towards classical capitalism in centuries XVIII and XIX respectively. Starting from the premise that the material production implies some specific risks, which not only are ignored but also symbolically manipulated and perpetuated, Beck argues that whereas in Middle Age witchcrafts, evil and demons shaped the consciousness of theology in European societies, today "global risks" related to environment contamination plays a similar role in encouraging the consumption according to integrity of consumer concerns. We have so far discussed and analyzed in detail the more important points of Beck's contributions.

Even if his description is clear and illustrative by respecting to social effects of this new capitalism, there is a methodological contradiction in Beck's development that should be re-considered; namely, questions as to whether the own society is feed from those risks she virtually creates, are still unresolved. In fact: Why should society disappear?, On what empirical basis supports Beck his thesis?. Secondly, this book has been enriched in many rhetoric expressions that balk the comprehension. At any rate, reading of this interesting text opens the doors for a potential hypothesis which will be tested in a near future; „risk perception“ takes more presence in people who find employed than other ones such as retired or pensioners. Thus, Milenarism in combination with economical factors would explain the reasons as to why public opinion claims their life are continuously in danger in spite of technologies advances at their disposal in security issues.

In sharp contrast with Beck, Z. Bauman considers that fears are related to the performance of economy but leave aside to modernity. Basically, Bauman argues that, in contrast to animals (which feel basic fears like a kind of impulse to escape in specific situations), men have the ability to elaborate a secondary fear characterized by being „socially and culturally“ recycled. Oddly, *„the fear is more terrible when it is diffuse, dispersed, not very clear; when it floats freely elsewhere, without bonds, anchors, home or a clear cause“* (Bauman, 2008, 10). Simply, human fears transcend the boundaries of time and space while they remain in our fantasy.

This lies in the ground of conscience which regulates the behavior among human beings even when no direct threat exists (derivative fear). Dangers and „derivative fears“ can be classified in three types: a) those that threaten the person physically, b) those that threaten the durability of the social order where a person lives in, and c) those that threaten the phenomenological person's place in the world. Although a derivative fear does not imply an imminent danger, feeling of insecurity can be channeled by means of other mechanisms applying the principle of cooperation. In fact, modern State is in charge of their citizen's security; however, when its own possibilities are exceeded, responsibility is assigned to other spheres such as capital market.

Following this explanation, human beings usually try to reduce the undesirable consequences of sudden events, transforming fears in risks. Philosophically, risks are characterized by being calculable while certainness focuses on the „visible and possible dangers“. Likewise, Bauman outlines that no catastrophe is harder than impossible. In the collapse of „civilization“, the state of nature (according to hobessian thesis) prevented people from fighting by means of common material resources. That way, civilized life is presented as a form of sheet, beyond the limits of disorder and barbarism. In the so-called „Titanic

syndrome“, Bauman explains the paradox of panic in modern liquid modernity. Titanic disaster, like the luxurious transatlantic, represents the social order while iceberg symbolizes the vulnerability of humanity. Following this, modern societies are being devastated by the same fears which wreak gradually havoc in the daily life. Thanks to the selfishness and progressive social fragmentation each citizen faces these types of fears individually. This is the case of modern „terror to death“ in which Bauman emphasizes that the message of modern television (like Big Brother) programs show human weaknesses in public; survival is only possible for one person while condemnation is part of the majority's fate. In accordance to Bauman, Big Brother works as a „moral story“ in which punishment and recompense become more important than solidarity.

Again and again throughout the book, Bauman assesses that, from all animals in the planet, only human beings fear to the presence of death. This feeling not only is innate but also suggests a conscience intended to anxiously find the sense of being in this world. From all deeds that humans are afraid of, death has always been the less known for them. In this regard, culture works as a mechanism that helps humanity to bear her inevitable presence every day. That way, the so-called „original sin“, „the redemption“ and consequent salvation are essential issues in human being's world. Beyond the recompense, each person chooses how to live its own life. In turn, like salvation, fame is our destiny and demands an appropriate sacrifice. Unlike a hero who individually looks for his own fame and salvation, religion provides the opportunity of transcendence whenever people might not access to the benefits of personal immortality. In the threshold of French Revolution, Bauman sustains France adopted the ancient roman *pro patria* formula. As a result of this, modern State and its citizens created a bridge towards solidarity and reciprocity so that their own survival was granted. The society's welfare was more than important for those who died in the field of battle anonymity. This example helps understanding the reasons why citizens are devoted to redemption as a vehicle to reduce anxiety. If hobessian and durkheimian thesis are correct, humankind founded the society (Leviathan) as a sacral entity in opposition to the action of mystery.

Nonetheless, in our liquid modern society of consumers, strategies are deployed in marginalizing or disregarding all that is long-lived; from this perspective, people look forward to devaluing all own experiences shaped in the immortality. Unlike a couple of centuries ago, our modern views are not aimed at accessing eternity but a transitory style of life (profane). In *deconstructionism* of death, negative and disastrous consequences are left behind; in consequence, humankind is experiencing an increase in the level of panic because of its possible destructive aftermaths. In other words, the fear of dying is not other feeling than horror to being excluded, abandoned, and forgotten by the neighbor. Under these circumstances, humanity is continuously being fragmented due to individualism and egoism; that way, our obsession of living forever is converted in a vehicle towards disaggregation. If, in fact, a community was united and rooted in the belief that death was an external and extraordinary issue, nowadays individualism calms down such a concern trivializing the importance of emotional bondages. In short, whenever social linkages weaken, a likelihood of considering mortality as a remote event emerges.

In the course of reading, Bauman deals with the relationship between evil and fear. Human Beings are aimed at scaring the negative consequences of their motivations and thoughts. Meaning of evil would work as a kind of rational explanation in which people would understand and justify „god's wills“; unpredictable catastrophes or events do not happen at random; otherwise, they are part of a divine plan in response to human's sins. Everything that happens in this world would be (implicit or not) caused by human's behaviors. Underpinned by the Second World War's crimes and Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem where extermination was supposedly justified by his smart lawyers arguing that it was a decision made by the top of Nazi's hierarchal Bureaucracy, the main thesis in Bauman outlines that rational allegation continuously reminds the presence of evil in our life (not only a Tsunami but also the ethnic genocides).

Basically, anxiety arises whenever human relations collapse because the sense of world turns unpredictable. Culturally, natural disasters like Katrina showed that the poor had been more prejudiced than others in American society. Following the example of Katrina hurricane, Bauman assures that most inhabitants in New Orleans were „black or Latin American“. Furthermore, more than a fourth part of the population lived under the limit of poverty. Quite aside from Katrina, the victims had been excluded from economic progress long time ago. Modernism as well as American capitalism had already promised humankind the immunity before the authoritarian desires of nature but this was evidently selective and exclusive just for a few people. In other words, the catastrophes or climate disasters cut the world in two, emphasizing the previous cultural frontiers where there are persons who deserve to be saved and others who do not.

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Enrooted in the belief that modern bureaucracy not only ethically affects the responsibility for actions in the different gears in organization but also takes moral reciprocity subduing emotions onto a secondary role, Bauman examines how in the course of the twentieth century, humankind replaced the moral opinion by instrumental methodologies that have been put in hands in order to make the decision-making's process more efficient. Once the appropriate abilities to consider how to use it rationality are deteriorated, technology's advances had the intention of reducing the costs of freedom. The suspension of ethical order in conjunction with a moral responsibility's declination appears to be predominant in liquid times. In other terms, technological fetishism performs the role of a political mechanism in substituting the modern guilty (because of a lack of observance of moral issues) by the need of being constantly informed. In other words, information and technos equilibrate and purify our bad actions and decisions. The paradox of technology reminds us that even though there is an immensurable speed in our technical advances, our moral did not evolve from Eva and Adam's times.

Taking part of his cue from R. Castels and Beck, Bauman outlines that the increase of risks and insecurity's feeling in people is not the result from the protection's shortage but a lack of clarity as regards fate. A sinister motivation became a mirror of our own impossibility to make firm and durable linkages and substitute them by a more impersonal modern trademark. Historically, fears have in fact accompanied humankind but in the liquid modernity the dangers are beyond the response of Nation-States. The continuous competition that characterizes the modern market contributed to the declination of social bondage, which not only affects the solidarity but also potentiates the impact of threats in the social imaginary. In ancient times the societies were prepared because the work of prophets who lived for announcing the advent of bottom-day. Inversely, in the virtualization of catastrophe the Mass-consumption societies remain vulnerable to the effects of their own acts. This is because in modern times there are no boundaries between fantasy and reality. The negative modern globalization would imminently turn into a real catastrophe thanks to the lack of prophesies. As the last financial crisis in United States has then showed, after a long period of stability any minimal change or disruption can be taken as a sign of disaster accelerating the social fragmentation and triggering the theorem of Thomas. Considered as more than important works for all scholars who are concerned with topics of this caliber, *Liquid Fear and Society of Risk* are an unavoidable piece of immense quality and originality fruitful to understand the times we are nowadays living.

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