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► **To cite this version:**

Ulrich Beck. Risk, class, crisis, hazards and cosmopolitan solidarity/risk community - conceptual and methodological clarifications. 2013. halshs-00820297

**HAL Id: halshs-00820297**

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Preprint submitted on 3 May 2013

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## **Risk, class, crisis, hazards and cosmopolitan solidarity/risk community – conceptual and methodological clarifications**

Ulrich Beck

N°31 | avril 2013

This paper discusses four problems. (1) Risk and class: why 'class' is too soft a category to capture the explosiveness of social inequality in World Risk Society? (2) Risk and crisis: how do these two concepts relate to each other? (3) Risk and hazards: by hazards I mean material substances that are sources of threat. (4) Risk and cosmopolitan community/solidarity: how do climate risks liberate politics from given rules and enemy images and/or produce new ones?

**Working Papers Series**

# Risk, class, crisis, hazards and cosmopolitan solidarity/risk community – conceptual and methodological clarifications

Ulrich Beck

April 2013

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## About this paper

This text was written for a workshop on « Risk and Climate Change: The Shaping of a Cosmopolitan Future », held in Paris on 10-11 December 2012, in the frame of the Chaire of Ulrich Beck entitled « Cosmopolitan Risk Communities » at the Collège d'études mondiales.

## Citing this document

Ulrich Beck, *Risk, class, crisis, hazards and cosmopolitan solidarity/risk community – conceptual and methodological clarifications*, FMSH-WP-2013-31, avril 2013.

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## Abstract

This paper discusses four problems. (1) Risk and class: why 'class' is too soft a category to capture the explosiveness of social inequality in World Risk Society? (2) Risk and crisis: how do these two concepts relate to each other? (3) Risk and hazards: by hazards I mean material substances that are sources of threat. (4) Risk and cosmopolitan community/solidarity: how do climate risks liberate politics from given rules and enemy images and/or produce new ones?

## Keywords

classe, cosmopolitanism, risk society, climate risks, crisis

## Risque, classe, crise, dangers et solidarité cosmopolitaine/communauté de risque. Clarifications conceptuelles et méthodologiques

### Résumé

Ce papier discute quatre problèmes. (1) Risque et classe : pourquoi la catégorie de « classe » est-elle une catégorie trop molle pour capturer l'explosion des inégalités sociales dans la société mondiale du risque ? (2) Risque et crise : comment ces deux concepts sont-ils liés l'un à l'autre ? (3) Risque et dangers : par dangers [hazards] je vise des éléments matériels qui sont sources de menaces. (4) Risque et communauté/solidarité cosmopolitaine : comment les risques climatiques affranchissent-ils les politiques des règles données et des représentations de l'ennemi et/ou en produisent de nouvelles ?

### Mots-clefs

cosmopolitisme, classe, société du risque, risque climatique, crise

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## 1. Risk and class

Why 'class' is too soft a category to capture the explosiveness of social inequality at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

In my book 'Risk Society' (25 years ago) I used the metaphor: 'Hunger is hierarchical, smog is democratic.' (an ongoing discussion) Dean Curran attempts in his article, 'Risk Society and the Distribution of Bads' (Curran 2013) to chart how the growing social production of risk increases the importance of class. He argues, that my theory of the risk society contains the basis of a critical theory of class relations in the risk society. He tries to show "how not only is the 'risk society thesis' not antithetical to class analysis, but that in fact it can be used to reveal how class antagonisms and associated wealth differentials will gain even greater importance as risks continue to grow" (Curran 2013). This is undoubtedly an important step which is apt to make the sociology of class, whose self-understanding is rooted in the experiences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, receptive to the new realities at the beginning of the twenty-first century. My objection is: Even if this might be helpful at the national level, 'class' is too soft a category to capture the transnational, cosmopolitical explosiveness of social inequality in world risk society.

What I mean by this becomes clear when one thinks of the major risk events of recent decades – Chernobyl, 9/11, climate change, the financial crisis, Fukushima, the euro crisis. Three features are common to them all. (1) Because they give rise to a dramatic radicalization of social inequality both inter-nationally and intra-nationally, they cannot continue to be conceptualized in terms of the established empirical-analytical conceptual instrumentarium of class analysis as 'class conflicts in the class society'. By contrast, they indeed vary the narrative of discontinuity as contained in the theory of the world risk society. (2) Before they actually occurred, they were inconceivable. (3) They are global in character and in their consequences and render the progressive networking of spaces of action and environments tangible. These 'cosmopolitan events' were not only not envisaged in the paradigm of the reproduction of the social and political (class) system, but they fall outside of this frame of reference in principle and as a result place it in question. In contrast, the theory of the 'world risk society' consciously starts from the premise of the self-endangerment of modernity and attaches central importance to the question of how, in view of the impending catastrophe, the nation-state social and political system is beginning to crumble.

Let me give you a short overview how class is being theorized in world risk society.

Figure I: Theorizing class in world risk society

		Classe	
		Reproduction	Transformation
Distribution of	Goods without bads	Bourdieu (1984), Goldthorpe (2002), Scott (2002), Atkinson (2007): The continuity of class in national societies	Therborn (2011): The return of class in the age of global inequality
	Goods and bads	Gabe Mythen (2005): Risk reinforces the logic of class distribution	Dean Curran (2013): Risk radicalizes/trans-forms the logic of class distribution

We can distinguish four positions on the continuing, or maybe even increasing, relevance of the category of class at the beginning of the twenty-first century depending on the extent to which they accord central importance to (1) the reproduction or (2) the transformation of social classes with regard to (3) the distribution of goods without bads or (4) the distribution of goods and bads. The first group of 'reproduction theories' can be defined by the fact that they ignore the unequal distribution of bads/risks and define the differentiation between classes solely in terms of the distribution of 'goods', i.e. of wealth. Here the 'narrative of continuity', the resistance of classes to transformation throughout all upheavals, is emphasized. My critique of the antiquatedness of the category and theory of class is rejected by appeal to the empirical fact of the enduring strong connection between class positions and income and educational differences (Atkinson 2007; Bourdieu 1984; Goldthorpe 2002; Scott 2002). Thereby the class theorists and researchers normally miss the cosmopolitization of the poor (but also the middle classes and, of course, the elites), their multi-ethnic, multi-religious, transnational life forms and identities (Hobbs 2013).

This debate suffers from the fact that class theorists, trapped in the 'class logic', can conceive of the antithesis to the persistence of classes only in terms of the 'disappearance of classes' – specifically, in terms of a decrease in inequality and an increase in equality. However, that is precisely not my perspective. The antithesis to the sociology of class that I propose and develop attaches central importance, on the contrary, to the *radicalization* of social inequality. This forces us to overcome the epistemological monopoly of the category of class over social inequality and to uncouple historical classes from social inequality, something which is evidently inconceivable for analysts of class.

The second position, which appears here under the heading of the 'Transformation of Class', is represented by Göran Therborn's *The Return of Classes in the Age of Global Inequality*:

"We are experiencing a historical turn, not only in geo-politics but also in terms of inequality. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century international development of underdevelopment meant, among other things, that inequality among humans became increasingly shaped by where they lived, in developed

or underdeveloped areas, territories, nations. By 2000, it has been estimated that 80 percent of the income in equality among households depended on the country you live in (Milanovic 2011: 112). This is currently changing. Inter-national inequality is declining overall, although the gap between the rich and poor has not stopped growing. But intra-national inequality is, on the whole, increasing, albeit unevenly, denying any pseudo-universal determinism of 'globalization' or of technological change. This amounts to a return of class as an increasingly powerful global determinant of inequality... Now, nations are growing closer, and classes are growing apart." (Therborn 2011: 3)

What makes Therborn's argument so challenging and interesting is that he combines the re-transformation of global inequality with the return of national classes. The dramatic increase in income disparity between 'the richest 1% and the rest' is in fact a dramatic development that places the legitimacy of capitalism in question, as the globalized Occupy movement importantly demonstrates. In the USA in particular – as Joseph Stiglitz (*Vanity Fair*, May 2012) has highlighted – the richest 1 per cent owns 40 per cent of the national wealth; moreover, almost a quarter of the annual national income flows into their pockets and this richest 1 per cent controls almost all of the seats in the US Congress. Yet it is questionable whether this dynamic can be appropriately conceived in sociological terms as a 'return of class' and whether it is not instead an exemplary case of the radicalization of social inequality through individualization – where individualization must be understood as a precondition of radicalization.

Therborn's own characterization contains some pointers for this interpretation that these developments involve a post-class society aggravation of social inequality. It "would derive its primary dynamic from the heterogeneous popular classes of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and their, perhaps, less forceful counterparts in the rich world. Empowered by a rise of literacy and by new means of communication, the popular class movements face great hurdles of division – ethnicity, religion, and particularly the divide between formal and informal employment – as well as the dispersion of activities, for example in street hawking and small sweatshops ..." (Therborn 2011: 5).

Some people might even read Therborn's 'return of national class' as an *empirical* justification of 'methodological nationalism' (Beck 2006; 2007;

Beck and Grande 2010), hence of the unreflective choice of the nation-state class society as the unit of research. But that would certainly be a mistake. For Therborn's approach actually *confirms* the critique of methodological nationalism – namely, that the nation-state orthodoxy of class analysis must first be broken through by a global analysis of inequality in order to (possibly) confirm his thesis of the 'return of class'.

My decisive objection is a different one, however (and here I take up Curran's critique of class analysis). Like Goldthorpe and others, Therborn only captures a partial aspect of the new problematic of inequality. This is because *everything* that is confounding not only the nation-state class system but also the global system, both at the categorial and the empirical level, is left out of account by his theoretical framework and image of the world fixated on this class difference. It was the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy four years ago that actually plunged the global financial system into a crisis that threatened its very survival. Combined with the global climate risk, the global financial risk – now also exacerbated into the threat to the existence of the euro and of Europe – has generated a new kind of transnational redistribution from above, which the paradigm of class theory and class analysis fails to grasp. For this is a matter of state-mediated redistributions of risk across nation-state borders which cannot be forced into the pigeonhole of 'class conflict'. The risks posed by big banks are being socialized by the state and imposed on retirees through austerity dictates. Risk redistribution conflicts are breaking out between debtor countries and lender countries across the world – or between countries which produce risk and those countries being affected by the risk production of other powerful countries.

Both the epistemological monopoly of class analysis on the diagnosis of social inequality and the methodological nationalism of the sociology of inequality have contributed essentially to the fact that established sociology is empty-handed and practically blind and disoriented in the face of the radicalized, transnational and post-class society power shifts and conflicts of climate change which rightly agitating the global public.

## 2. Risk and crisis

Normally people speak of 'crisis' in relation to climate change, financial turbulences etc. Why do I

speak of 'risk'? How do these two concepts relate to each other? The term 'risk' goes beyond the term 'crisis' in three respects.

First: The concept of crisis blurs the distinction between the (staged) risk as the future-in-the-present and catastrophe as the present-in-the-future (of which we can ultimately know nothing). The talk of crisis may be said to 'ontologize' the difference that is central here, between an anticipated catastrophe and an actual one.

Second: The use of 'crisis' deceives us into imagining that by overcoming the crisis today we shall be able to revert to a pre-crisis state of affairs. In contrast, 'risk' exposes the 'secular difference' between the impending global threat and the responses to it available to us in the framework of national policies.

And – third – that implies, that risk is – unlike crisis – not an exception but rather the normal state of affairs and hence will become the engine of a great transformation of society and politics.

## 3. Risk and hazards

The notion of risk society puts onto the sociological agenda the very nature of the physical world and the need to create a sociology of-and-with the environment. No longer is it possible to believe that there is a pure sociology confined and limited to exploring the social in-and-of itself. The distinction of society and nature dissolves. The thesis of risk society brings out that most important phenomena within the world are social-and-physical, such as global warming, extreme weather events, global health risks such as AIDS, biological warfare, BSE, nuclear terrorism, worldwide automobility, nuclear accidents, and so on. None of these is purely social but nor are they simply physical either.

I think there is a problem in the way our research project is designed and heading: the more we concentrate on the *mediation and medialization* of risk, the more we are in danger to ignore the nature-society-synthesis of risk society. Here the notion of *hazards* becomes important: I quote from a paper I reviewed; referring to risk society theory, the authors argue:

"As useful as these insights are, however, they offer little guidance about how to move from general theoretical claims about risk society to empirically grounded research with testable

propositions. One reason for this shortcoming lies in the theory's emphasis on risks rather than *hazards*. For Beck risk is a statement about the likelihood of future harm, and its essence lies in the anticipation, expectation and potential action that this anticipated harm produces among social actors. Yet unlike most risk analysts, Beck collapses the distinction between *actual* (i.e. scientifically produced) risk and *perceived* risk (Slovic 2000), instead treating risks and social definitions of risk as equivalent. This approach permits a reflexive account of the unintended consequences of risk, but it also paradoxically renders the theory of risk society – which is premised on the increasing diffusion and intensity of real and present ecological threats – *fundamentally non-ecological*. This trade off is unnecessary.

We contend that it is possible to retain *something of the ecological basis of risk society* theory by shifting analytical attention from risks to *hazards*. By hazards we mean the material substances (e.g. industrially produced toxins) and biophysical conditions (e.g. floods, hurricanes, contaminated soils) that are the actual sources of threat. From this perspective, hazards presuppose risk. [As risks presuppose hazards.] Moreover, because they exist in actual time and space, whereas risks characterize future possibilities, *hazards are empirically measurable in ways that risks are not*. Thus, shifting attention from risks to hazards provides a way to recover the ecological basis of the risk society while at the same time providing firmer ground for empirical analysis. In making this analytical shift, we theorize hazards not merely as discrete outcomes of modern industrial production but as spatial and historical *processes of urban-ecological change* that have become increasingly 'unbounded' in time and space, compounding uncertainties about how, where and when they come to do harm (Beck 1992). Focusing on these urban change processes is where recent research on environmental inequalities becomes useful for our framework." (*The Historical Nature of Cities: A Study of Urbanization and Hazardous Waste Accumulation*, pp. 7f.)

I do think this is an important objection/observation, because of many reasons; one of them is bridging between natural climate sciences and social science.

Along with this there goes an important observation: *social and natural inequality fuses in the course of climate change*. Climate change, held to

be anthropogenic and catastrophic, occurs in the shape of a new kind of synthesis of nature and society. The inequality of life chances arises from the ability to dispose of income, educational qualifications and passports, and their social character is very evident. The radical inequality of the consequences of climate change takes material form in the increasing frequency or exacerbation of natural events – such as floods or tornadoes – which are in principle familiar natural occurrences and are not self evidently the product of societal decisions. The expression 'force of nature' takes on a new meaning: the natural law evidence of 'natural' catastrophes produces a naturalization of social relations of inequality and power. The political consequence is that the conception of the natural equality of human beings tips over into the conception of a natural inequality of human beings produced by natural catastrophes.

The facts are well known – global warming, melting polar ice caps, rising sea levels, desertification, increasing numbers of tornadoes and all of it usually treated as a natural catastrophe. But, nature is not in itself catastrophic. The catastrophic character is only revealed within the field of reference of the society affected. The catastrophic potentials cannot be deduced from nature or from scientific analyses, but reflect the social vulnerability of certain countries and population groups to the consequences of climate change.

Without the concept of social vulnerability it is impossible to understand the catastrophic content of climate change. The idea that natural catastrophe and social vulnerability are two sides of the same coin is familiar wisdom to a way of thinking that sees the consequences of climate change as a co-product. In recent years, however, social vulnerability has become a key dimension in the social structural analysis of world risk society: social processes and conditions produce an unequal exposure to hardly definable risks, and the resulting inequalities must largely be seen as an expression and product of power relations in the national and global context. *Social vulnerability* is a sum concept, encompassing means and possibilities, which individuals, communities or whole populations have at their disposal, in order to cope – or not – with the threats of climate change (or financial crises).

A sociological understanding of vulnerability certainly has a crucial relationship to the future, but also has historical depth. The 'cultural wounds'



that, for example, result from the colonial past, constitute an important part of the background to understanding border-transcending climate conflicts. The more marginal the available economic and political options are, the more vulnerable are a particular group or population. The question that allows the unit of investigation to be determined is this: what constitutes vulnerability in a particular context, and how did it become what it is?

#### 4. Risk community/ Cosmopolitan solidarity

I repeat, risk society theory refers to catastrophes that are still to come and that we have to anticipate and forestall in the present. Thus we discover the *catastrophic subjunctive* that forms the conceptual framework of our theory and project. Many people confuse *risk* society with the *catas-trophe* society. An example of the latter would be something like a ‘*Titanic* society’. Such a society is dominated by the motto ‘too late’, by a fated doom, the panic of desperation. World risk society is concerned to demonstrate, to stay within the metaphor, that the cliff can still be avoided if we change direction. In this sense there is a certain affinity between the theory of the risk society and Ernst Bloch’s *Principle of Hope*.

Risk implies the message that it is high time for us to act! Drag people out of their routine, drag the politicians out of the ‘constraints’ that allegedly surround them. Risk is both the everyday insecurity that is no longer accepted and the catastrophe that has not yet occurred. The global medialization of global climate change risks opens our eyes and also raises our hopes of a positive outcome. That is the paradox of fatalism and encouragement we derive from global risks. To that extent global climate change risk is always also a political category since it liberates politics from given rules, institutional shackles and enemy images.

This is a very important point for the architecture of world risk society theory. Actually we have to distinguish three possible responses to global risk: first *denial*, second *fatalism* and third *new beginnings* (Hannah Arendt); or what I called before the elective affinity between the theory of world risk society and Ernst Bloch’s *Principle of Hope* – ‘the global risk paradox of enforced encouragement’, ‘cosmopolitan moment’, ‘cosmopolitan imperative: cooperate or fail!’.

If we have a look at our research project all three working packages are on this line; Anders’ ‘greening cosmopolitan urbanism’ is looking “for the emerging global moral geography of carbon emissions, and the way cities construct themselves as ‘responsible actors’ within it”. David is looking for ‘cosmopolitan innovations’ and Dani and Joy are looking for ‘medialization of climate risk creating cosmopolitan risk communities’.

My first point is: Those three responses are also strategies of action and in order to study the strategies of new beginnings we have also to study the strategies of denial and fatalism.

We have to understand the dialectics between, on the one hand, denial and fatalism and, on the other hand, making the unimaginable imaginable, the impossible possible.

Fatalism and denial are only perceptions. The power of new beginnings consists of more than perception, namely a package of three components: *knowledge*, *vision* and *action*. Its motto could be: ‘save the world through transgressing borders!’

My second point is: In order to understand the politics of new beginnings we have to answer the question (to theorize the problem): What does ‘cosmopolitan solidarity’ mean and how does it become real? In order to conceptualize and study ‘cosmopolitan solidarity’ (or ‘cosmopolitan risk communities’) we have to distinguish two inter-related dimensions – first: *cosmopolitan empathy*; second: the *(sub)politics of cosmopolitanism from below*.

#### Cosmopolitan empathy

I am not sure at all what cosmopolitan empathy does include – this actually is an important research question. But here are some necessary conditions and ingredients: public, pictures (art), a language creating a language which bridges the geographical distance and the national differences.

The horror has a face *for us*, it has many faces and all of them look *like our own*. How does this identification of ‘our faces, my face’ with the ‘faces of distant others’ become real? There must be a specific quality of images (language, art) which creates this planetary sense of pain and suffering. May it be images and narratives of faces that break the world’s collective hearts? How is the knowledge/image being created that the face of

the tragedy could have been our own? Of course, these are open questions.

### Cosmopolitan empathy is not enough, 'work' in networks of a cosmopolitanism from below creates 'cosmopolitan solidarity'/'risk communities'

Mediation and medialization of climate change risks in all its forms is necessary but not sufficient to create cosmopolitan risk communities, as Fuyuki Kurasawa argues. As important are transnational modes of 'work' ('praxis') whereby actors construct bonds of mutual commitment and reciprocity across borders through public discourse and socio-political struggle. In other words, the crux of the matter lies in grasping the work of constructing and performing a cosmopolitanism from below via normatively and politically oriented forms of global social action. I follow Fuyuki Kurasawa by claiming that this work-oriented perspective of (sub)political actor-networks allows us to question three of the main assumptions imbedded within previous versions of global solidarity, namely cultural homogenization, political fragmentation, and social thinness. Hence, against the argument that 'integration' requires a difference-blind cultural assimilationism, I argue, that the recognition of global cultural pluralism is becoming a *sine qua non* for establishing viable solidaristic ties.

Why is the category of 'work' necessary? Because this kind of work connects local-urban and national conditions and histories with transnational actor-networks of global publics. Only if those working groups in their specific contexts succeed in creating local and national coalitions with institutional actors on the level of community, businesses etc. and transnational corporate networks connecting different world cities 'thick' cosmopolitan risk communities can be established.

What I actually want to say is: the creating of cosmopolitan bonds and solidarity depends very much on the work of local actor-networks redefining or (as we say) 'greening' the self-description, self-images and self-consciousness of world cities or nations, which then, thereby and therefore are intimately connected to 'greening Others'. My assumption is that the local and national resistance to the domination of denial and apathy can be only successful if this resistance is intimately tied to the search for inclusion of others.

'Greening' that is changing the worldview and self-consciousness of urban and national actors can be only successful if its worldview is deeply engrained in the right to cultural difference and the idea that strength lies in diversity, principles that are strategically useful as rhetorical antidotes to the cultures of denial and apathy. What the study of the work and work conditions in the urban and national contexts in the name of a greening cosmopolitanism from below could – I say could! – demonstrate the embrace of global cultural heterogeneity must not occlude the existence of socio-economic asymmetries.

To give this argument a turn which connects it to ongoing climate change conference in Doha its consequence is: those global conferences are becoming useless, they are more or less of only symbolic value. Why? Because they are looking for universally binding norms, neglecting the importance of local-national-urban activities as starting points for constructing cosmopolitan solidarity and risk communities.

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