**1. INTRODUCTION**

*‘More than ever, we need ideas and theories that will allow*

*us to conceive of the new which is rolling over us in a new way, and*

*allow us to live and act within it’*[[1]](#endnote-1)

The quote above was written over thirty years ago and appears in the introduction to Ulrich Beck’s *Risikogesellschaft: Auf Dem Weg in Eine Andere Moderne*, first published in 1986. Following on from having what Lash and Wynne[[2]](#endnote-2) describe as a ‘meteoric impact’ in Germany, the book was published in English by Sage in 1992 under the title *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity.*[[3]](#endnote-3)Largely written whilst the author was perched high on the Bavarian hills above Lake Starnberg - *Risk Society* (1992) served, in equal parts, as a critique of capitalist modernization, a methodological challenge to social scientists and a clarion call for societal reformation. By any measure that one cares to use, the book has proven to be remarkable. Prior to appearing in English, the German versionhad already sold over 60,000 copies, with the monograph going on to be translated into more than 35 languages.[[4]](#endnote-4) The academic ripples produced by *Risk Society* are reflected in the exceptional number of citations amassed. At a conservative estimate, the English translation alone is currently referenced in more than 50,000 books and articles. Setting such quantitative indicators aside, the book produced reverberations both within and outwith academia.[[5]](#endnote-5) One of the chief reasons why Beck’s thesis has been as controversial as it has in the social sciences is because it looks anew at the enduring structure/agency conundrum that classical theorists such as Marx, Durkheim and Weber had previously grappled with. Using risk as a master concept, Beck sought to connect together institutional transformations and challenges to the micro-politics of everyday life in the fields of health, the economy, the environment and security.[[6]](#endnote-6) Focusing on the risk society perspective explicitly - rather than Beck’s otherwise notable forays in other areas of social, political and cultural analysis - in this article I wish to provide a retrospective evaluation of the merits and weaknesses of the risk society thesis. Having outlined the key components of the argument, I will go on to consider reception to Beck’s argument, noting substantive areas of critique. Following on from this, I wish to emphasize the value of elements of the risk society thesis for contemporary risk research, both in conceptual, methodological and empirical terms.

**2. CONTEXTUALIZING THE RISK SOCIETY THESIS**

To appreciate the novelty of Beck’s thesis - and to locate it within the broader tapestry of risk research - it is first important to provide appropriate historical context and to consider major developments in the field. The origins of risk analysis can be traced back to the 1950s and attempts to understand possible hazards via assessment of expected frequency and magnitude of threat. From this point forth, a culture of probabilistic risk analysis steadily flourished, founded primarily on estimations of hazard. Various forms of statistical modeling developed within engineering and mathematics were augmented in the 1970s by contributions within decision science and, later in the early 1980s, those focused on risk perception. In particular, advances in psychology were made in terms of identifying common heuristic and biases that affect the judgments of lay people.[[7]](#endnote-7) Under the auspices of the ‘psychometric paradigm’, further work by Paul Slovic and colleagues[[8]](#endnote-8) enabled classification of the elements of risk which individuals were most fearful of. Advances in decision science and psychology in the 1980s highlighted the need to better understand human perceptions, motivations and anxieties. Alongside these developments, a focus on the significance of cultural factors emerged in anthropology, sociology and media studies. In this vein, scholars drew on Mary Douglas’s[[9]](#endnote-9) pioneering work on risk and blame which attempted to connect together processes of risk definition, perceptions of harm and the reproduction of social order. While those working in the psychometric tradition were busy producing cognitive maps of hazards to explain how members of the public perceived various risks, others began to focus in more intently on the communication of risk. To this end, the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF), minted by Kasperson et al[[10]](#endnote-10) is considered a landmark model in terms of elucidating the interconnections between the processes of risk definition, representation and reception. Kasperson et al[[11]](#endnote-11) posited that specific aspects of risk events, the ways in which they are cognitively comprehended and how they are portrayed in the mass media can serve to attenuate or amplify public perceptions of risk. Drawing from both Douglas’s anthropological approach and Kasperson et al’s SARF - and arising in part as a response to key incidents such as the Chernobyl disaster and the BSE crisis - later work in the social sciences sought to analyze the ways in which risk incidents served as vents for individual and social anxiety. For researchers such as Altheide[[12]](#endnote-12) and Furedi,[[13]](#endnote-13) a culture of fear was recursively being generated by social institutions, most notably a mass media bound up with the manufacture of ‘scare stories’ and a political culture overwhelmingly focused on threats to society.

While the above represents a somewhat cursory summary of key historical trends in risk research, it indicates just how novel Ulrich Beck’s thesis was when it arrived and offers some clues as to why it caused such consternation amongst critics. It should be appreciated from the outset that *Risk Society* (1992) was not designed to appeal to scholars of risk and uncertainty. Indeed, on emergence it was way out of kilter with prevailing debates in risk-focused journals. While dominant research currents in risk studies had sought to focus on specific aspects of analysis - such as representation, perception and decision-making - *Risk Society* broke the mould. Of course, the significance of the issues that had defined the field of risk research was not lost on Beck. He shared a common concern with the social construction and communication of hazards, the efficacy of risk management practices and the constitution of public perceptions of danger. Yet his risk society thesis evolved separately and largely in isolation from the developments detailed above. Indeed, *Risk Society* is bereft of references to debates featuring in practitioner and policy based journals aroundpublic health and safety, environmental analysis, model validation or risk evaluation.Evidently,Beck’s thesis was not designed to make a contribution to the field of risk research, nor to improve practitioner understandings of the complexities inherent in the risk assessment process. Rather, *Risk Society* was oriented towards a different audience and inclined toward a more provocative purpose. Where excursions in risk studies had been largely focused on distinct elements of risk - such as cognition, analysis, decision, perception and regulation - Beck attempted to offer an integrated macro social theory which placed risk both front and centre. It reads as a jarring account of the sweeping environmental, economic, social and political transformations that defined the late twentieth century and an impassioned critique of the systemic production of unmanageable risks that the author claimed had endangered society.

In many senses, *Risikogesellschaft* appeared in a world which was primed and ready for its arrival. In 1986 the shock waves of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster were being felt across Europe and a rising tide of public awareness of environmental issues was developing, spurred on by the actions of NGOs such as *Friends of the Earth* *Greenpeace*. Another salient trend crystalizing at this time was a growing distrust of expert systems by an increasingly informed and skeptical public. Partly this stemmed from the failure of regulatory institutions to manage major risk incidents, partly it came from fears about the impacts of rapidly developing science - for example, the production of GM foods, human cloning and nanotechnology. Whereas in preceding epochs science and technology were largely seen as motors of progress and development, Beck (1992) avered that the dark sides of techno-scientific development and capitalist modernization were becoming increasingly visible. While his thesis may be familiar to many, it is worth outlining the central tenets before offering an appraisal of its impact, value and implications for risk studies.

**3. LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY: DEFINING THE CONTOURS OF WORLD RISK SOCIETY**

The risk society thesis rests on two crucial propositions about the nature of threats in contemporary society. Firstly, Beck posits that the composition of major threats has fundamentally mutated over time. Secondly, he argues that the increasingly hazardous quality of risk has generated consequences for the planet which are potentially apocalyptic. In *Risk Society*,[[14]](#endnote-14) *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk*[[15]](#endnote-15) and *World Risk Society*,[[16]](#endnote-16) Beck considers transformations in the nature of threats within the wider framework of historical developments. Distinguishing between three epochs - ‘pre-industrial society’ (traditional society), ‘industrial society’ (first modernity) and ‘risk society’ (second modernity) - it is argued that the changing composition of threats, coupled to underlying societal transformations, has propelled a transition from pre-industrial to industrial modernity and, latterly, into the risk society. To render these epochal distinctions concrete, Beck[[17]](#endnote-17)differentiates between ‘natural hazards’, ‘industrial accidents’ and ‘manufactured risks’. He argues that natural hazards - such as drought, famine and plague - are defining threats of the pre-industrial period which are attributed to external forces, such as gods, demons or nature. By contrast, in industrial society, the development of science, medicine and technology enables a degree of control of natural hazards, which can be regulated by institutional regulation, law and policy-making. In industrial modernity, extant natural hazards are said to be supplanted by a burgeoning group of dangers that result from human error, such as occupational injuries and transport accidents. During the movement into the risk society - from the late 1970s onwards in advanced capitalist nations - the unremitting production of environmental risks forces society to confront the harmful environmental side effects of capitalist techno-scientific development.[[18]](#endnote-18) In as much as ‘industrial accidents’ are not eradicated and continue to exist in the risk society, they are superseded in magnitude and scale by a group of manufactured risks - such as nuclear and chemical leaks and global warming - that stem from developmental goals of modernisation and are socially rather than naturally produced. Resulting from the goals of economic and scientific progress, manufactured risks are indicative of the ‘victory crisis’ of capitalist modernization.[[19]](#endnote-19) The risk society can thus be described as:

A phase of development of modern society in which the social, political, ecological and individual risks created by the momentum of innovation increasingly allude the control and protective institutions of industrial society.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Beck’s argument is supported by three ‘pillars of risk’ which pertain to transformations in the relationship between risk, time and space; the changing nature of risk and the breakdown of institutional mechanisms of insurance.[[21]](#endnote-21) In terms of risk, time and space, Beck[[22]](#endnote-22) believes that pre-industrial and early industrial cultures were vulnerable to threats that were geographically and temporally contained. For Beck, although natural hazards possess force, they are, nonetheless, temporally and geographically limited. Further, in western cultures, the development of welfare systems, critical infrastructures and risk management processes has tempered ill effects. For example, the deleterious consequences of earthquakes have been lessened by legally enforceable restrictions in volatile areas and the siting of shock resistant buildings. As pre-industrial cultures are succeeded by industrial society, the incidence of accidents that result from faulty human decisions rises. Nevertheless, such accidents are scattered and random rather than systemic and universal. Finally, in the risk society, the appearance of manufactured risks that imperil society indicates that previous boundaries of geography and time have been shattered. For Beck, instances like the Chernobyl disaster are characteristic of temporally unfolding global risks. Importantly, the harmful effects of such episodes show that impacts do not occur instantaneously. Radiocaesium stemming from the chemical fallout at Chernobyl was found in locations hundreds of miles from the accident site.[[23]](#endnote-23) Many years after the explosion, thousands of Ukranians and Belarussians developed serious cancers and breathing disorders as a direct result of pollution leaking from the reactor explosion with hundreds of children being born with multiple deformities.[[24]](#endnote-24) In addition to possessing temporal and spatial mobility, Beck argues that manufactured risks are of a much greater scale and magnitude than hazards in previous epochs. His most commonly used examples are terrorist attacks, global warming and endemic financial crisis.[[25]](#endnote-25) For Beck, the materialisation of a ‘worst imaginable accident’ (WIA) could result in the extinction of human life on the planet.[[26]](#endnote-26) Such a high-risk environment leads Beck to conclude that processes of economic and technological modernisation have ushered society toward the precipice of self-annihilation. The third pillar on which the risk society stands connects to the capacity of social structures to ensure the safety and well being of citizens. Beck consistently maintained that the volatility of manufactured risks rendered extant regulatory institutions incapable of effective risk management. He believed that taken for granted systems of liability and insurance were antiquated and had become defunct. In effect, the scope and prevalence of damaging technological, economic and environmental side effects presents systemic problems for public institutions responsible for insuring against hazards. Echoing the view of the social historian François Ewald,[[27]](#endnote-27) Beck believes that the evolution of industrial modernity and the development of the ‘safety state’ was designed to cater for citizens health and welfare needs.[[28]](#endnote-28) In as much as the legitimacy of government therefore became contingent upon the ability of the state to fulfill security pledges, with the dawning of the risk society, State institutions become overrun by a range of seismic risks which are geographically mobile and transcend the boundaries of time and space. Beck connects his argument about the breakdown of insurance and welfare to the changing character of threats and the prevalence in particular of manufactured risks in contemporary society. Far from being hypothetical and remote, Beck considers manufactured risks to be pervasive, cutting across everyday spheres, such as consumption, the environment and employment. At the same time, structural incapacity to properly manage risk leads to institutional actors involving themselves in dramaturgical displays of risk management. For Beck, such displays amount to nothing more than cosmetic treatment of risks, exacerbating rather than alleviating the problem. In such an insecure climate, public uncertainties are amplified and risk-regulating institutions become party to public critique and distrust.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the focus on Beck’s work in Europe and North America has centred on his deployment of the concept of risk.[[29]](#endnote-29) Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate that the risk society perspective comprises two interlinked theses: one pertaining to risk, the other relating to individualization. In the latter strand, Beck - working in tandem with his life partner Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim - explored the ways in which everyday interactions have become de-traditionalized due to shifts in social structure and patterns of enculturation. To this end, broader processes of globalization and reflexive modernisation are seen to disrupt and undo social structures, traditional associations and static identities. The fluctuating dynamics of the risk society propels individuals into a perpetual processes of making choices about the future:

Biographies are removed from the traditional precepts and certainties, from external control and general moral laws, becoming open and dependent on decision-making, and are assigned as a task for each individual.[[30]](#endnote-30)

As a consequence, traditional family and relationship structures, gender roles and employment routes become open to reflection and choice.[[31]](#endnote-31) Beck believes that the effects of individualization have been accentuated by globalization, the erosion of the welfare state and the failure of social institutions to regulate risk. Through the production of risky products and unpalatable side effects, the cornerstones of capitalist modernisation - mass production, consumerism and techno-scientific development - become dislodged. Vitally, the iterative loosening of structures forces social actors to confront risks as individuals rather than as members of a collective:

In contrast to primary industrial modernity which was characterized by the safety, security, predictability and permanence of inherited traditions such as class location, gender roles, marriage, family, lifetime employment and secure retirement, the risk society is characterized by a dislocation, disintegration and disorientation associated with the vicissitudes of de-traditionalization.[[32]](#endnote-32)

The risk and individualization theses connect to a central proposition regarding the underlying shift in distributional logic in society, away from conflicts around the provision of ‘social goods’ - such as wealth and educational opportunities - toward avoiding ‘social bads’, such as toxic waste, air pollution and terrorism. According to Beck[[33]](#endnote-33) while industrial society is bound up with issues of scarcity, the risk society is characterized by insecurity. In as much as industrial goods distributing societies were bounded entities, the generation of social bads undoes the regulatory power of the nation state. Contemporary risks cross international borders, disembedding and unsettling political and economic interests. Thus, whilst industrial modernity is fundamentally a class society, the second modernity can be categorized as a risk society. Here it is argued that a universalizing process of risk distribution has loosened the ties of class-based identities and collective social experience as the material effects of manufactured risks become unavoidable: ‘the social circumstance which matters most in our intolerably jumbled modern condition is risk: all of us who inhabit the earth at the end of the twentieth century - rich and poor, high and low, young and old - live equally in the embrace of the risk society’.[[34]](#endnote-34) To substantiate his line of reasoning, Beck contrasts the differential experiences of being situated in ‘class positions’ as opposed to ‘risk positions’. Class positions relate to the ability to attain socially produced wealth, whereas risk positions refer to the probability of exposure to risk due to social, economic and geographical circumstance. Hence, the logic of the risk society is one which is based not on possession, but avoidance*:*

The dream of class society is that everyone wants and ought to have a share of the pie. The utopia of the risk society is that everyone should be spared from poisoning ... the driving force in the class society can be summarized in the phrase ‘I am hungry!’ The driving force in the class society can be summarized in the phrase ‘I am afraid!’[[35]](#endnote-35)

While industrial society is structured through the composition of social classes, the risk society is individualized. For Beck this means that the divisions and tensions which inhere in the risk society cannot be properly analyzed using traditional analytical prisms of class, gender and age. Risk positions no longer relate exclusively to wealth, but are also mediated by fate and geographical location. The penumbra of risk threatens all and disrupts the capacity of the wealthy to buy their way out of dangerous situations: ‘under the roof of modernization risks, perpetrator and victim sooner or later become identical’[[36]](#endnote-36) In Beck’s estimation, the individualization process and changing patterns of risk distribution herald a radical restructuring of the public sphere. Risks are, for Beck, politically reflexive. To this end, the processes of individualization and risk distribution not only force social actors to confront a plethora of uncertainties and choices, in addition, political ideologies and governmental policies become increasingly subject to public scrutiny and critique.

**4. THE CRITIQUE OF WORLD RISK SOCIETY**

From the mid 1990s onwards, Beck’s risk society thesis has been the subject of widespread critique.[[37]](#endnote-37) Even the staunchest of Beckian acolytes would concede that this critique has not been without foundation. Using standard barometers of academic evaluation - marshaling of empirical evidence, theoretical coherence and comprehensiveness - there are flaws and snags in the risk society framework - several of which Beck himself acknowledged.[[38]](#endnote-38) The bulk of the criticisms leveled at Beck over the last two decades gravitate around the generality of the risk society thesis and its insensitivity to historical, geographical and cultural differences. As Mythen, Burgess and Wardman point out, the ideational concept of ‘world’ risk society suggests a universality of hazard distribution and a shared experience of danger which is not mirrored by contemporary reality.[[39]](#endnote-39) Indeed, if one takes any major quantifiable threat to human existence in the modern world - famine, disease, warfare, terrorism - it is clear that the global distribution of harms is uneven and unequal. Taking the latter instance, despite the deluge of media coverage of terrorist attacks occurring in Europe, the risk of being a victim is palpably higher in other areas of the globe.[[40]](#endnote-40) Statistics compiled by the *Global Terrorism Database*[[41]](#endnote-41) in 2016 indicate that just five countries - Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan and Syria - accounted for almost three quarters of the 29,376 deaths attributed to terrorism in the preceding year. It is unsurprising then that critics have suggested that the risk society thesis presents something of a Westocentric perspective, focusing as it does largely on threats and anxieties in the Global North rather than the South.[[42]](#endnote-42) In areas severely affected by drought and poverty, the pressing priority of survival takes precedence over future concerns about the longevity of the planet. Indeed, one might argue that the realm of necessity also dictates much of the purposive action of individuals in the affluent West, rather than concentrated anxieties about the ‘mega hazards’ on the risk society horizon. The routine tasks housed within the realm of necessity - formal paid employment, raising children, caring for relatives and maintaining family homes - tend to preoccupy the time, energies and efforts of most people, most of the time. While the risk society thesis draws attention to large-scale environmental hazards such as nuclear power leaks and global warming, it remains the case that most people are bound up with managing day-to-day insecurities associated with ensuring that basic human needs are met. As Bergkamp[[43]](#endnote-43) correctly observes, the risk society hypothesis is thus built around the making real of a collection of dystopic potentialities. Yet the examples that Beck expands on - human cloning, nuclear warfare, global warming - are arguably orientation points for dialogue about pre-emptive action. They are both indicative of Beck’s *modus operandi* and his desire to develop a method of bringing the present into view in the future. Akin to the novelist John Buchan, reflecting on the plot of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*,[[44]](#endnote-44)the risk society narrative describes an environment ‘where the incidents defy the probabilities and march just inside the borders of the possible’.

Aside from issues focused around the uneven nature of risk distribution across the globe and everyday priorities, the broad-brush strokes of Beck’s historical narrative are questionable. While Beck seeks to conceptually index qualitatively different types of threat to distinct epochs, in practice the distinctions are far from clear-cut. In the same way that ‘natural hazards’ of the pre industrial era are, in many senses, ‘manufactured’ by humans, it is arguable that the foremost threats of contemporary society are enduring and historically rooted rather than novel. Of course, the wide-angle lens that Beck adopted was never likely to capture the diverse dynamics of epochal phases, nor indeed the specificities of the development of capitalism.[[45]](#endnote-45) Nevertheless, when considering the many criticisms leveled at Beck, it is important to appreciate not only his galvanizing political principles, but also the purpose of his academic endeavor. While he has been much maligned for failing to validate his thesis with recourse to appropriate evidence, such activity rather flies in the face of his well-documented ambition to develop a ‘projective social theory’.[[46]](#endnote-46) Beck was chiefly concerned to build new frameworks with capacity to simultaneously tap in to the multiple underlying dynamics of the modern age and glimpse nascent contours. As Sznaider[[47]](#endnote-47) observes, Beck’s vista was very much trained on ‘the future as the horizon of the present’. He was a *querdenker*, or lateral thinker, whose writing was essayistic in style, roaming in scope and prone to hyperbole.[[48]](#endnote-48) Far from being an assiduous empiricist, he tended to deliberately flit between examples, high theory and polemic.[[49]](#endnote-49) As Curran[[50]](#endnote-50) notes, Beck offered ‘multiple overlapping analyses of the same phenomena, which may not always be completely consistent with each other’. All of this made him an easy target for those loading the slingshots, but it was also an important indicator of his intellectual bravery. Beck actively opened up dialogue with his doubters and, as Kaldor and Selchow[[51]](#endnote-51) note, he never shied away from debate: ‘for his conviction he was willing to endure criticism from colleagues’. In seeking to both challenge and provoke his readers Beck accepted both praise and criticism with calm equanimity.[[52]](#endnote-52)

**5. ADVANCING RISK RESEARCH: APPRECIATING BECK’S METHOD AND MÉTIER**

Having mapped out the components of the risk society thesis and considered some of the most common general criticisms directed toward Beck’s perspective, it is now necessary to drill down to the contribution made to risk studies in particular. Given the palpable cross-disciplinary influence of the risk society thesis, Beck’s work has met with a decidedly muted response in the inter-disciplinary field of risk research. Indeed, a search through the forty-year annuls of this journal for articles with the term ‘risk society’ in the title or abstract yields no returns, while no more than a handful of articles reference Beck’s work directly. In work published in other risk research journals, Beck’s thesis has featured more frequently, but has largely been met with quizzical bewilderment. Typical in the regard is Bergkamp’s[[53]](#endnote-53) strident critique, in which the risk society thesis is described as ‘a loose set of vague ideas, feelings and hunches rather than a theory’, that is ‘devoid of empirical content and analytical tools’ and promotes ‘a simplistic precautionary anti-industrial environmental and safety ethic’.[[54]](#endnote-54) While this is not the place to correct what are otherwise rather stark hermeneutic errors, it is fair to say that Beck’s work has largely been treated with a mixture of hostility and disdain in risk studies, notwithstanding some recent notable exceptions.[[55]](#endnote-55) So how might we explain this apparent anomaly? How can it be that arguably the most well-known and frequently discussed theory of risk in modern social science has customarily been shunned by scholars in risk studies?

In the first instance, it is fair to suggest that there has historically been a tendency for the key journals in risk studies to be practitioner focused and to home in on specific cases, processes and incidents. Of course, there is much to commend a practice-based orientation that seeks to inform policy making in areas around health, security and the environment. A concentration in risk studies on measurable benefits in terms of public safety is to be applauded. Nevertheless, it has arguably reproduced a tendency to overlook the big picture in terms of macro-social processes and the cultural, economic and political context out of which particular cases, processes and incidents eventuate. While it is vital to that a focus on acquiring accurate probabilistic information about hazards is continued, it is important recognize that both risk assessment practices and policy making around risk are vitally connected to specific contexts, sets of values and political positionality.[[56]](#endnote-56) Somewhat regrettably, the separate trajectories assumed by those such as Beck busy beavering away building theories of risk and those engaged in more applied, practitioner focused forms of risk analysis has resulted in something of a ‘never the twain shall meet’ situation. To understand the apparent dialogue gap between proponents of the risk society thesis and scholars in risk studies, it is important to appreciate the divergent paths taken by social scientists seeking to apply the methodological tool kit proscribed by Beck and predominant currents in risk research. In some respects, judging each by the trajectory and ambitions of the other is something of a fatuous exercise. In thinking through what the risk society thesis might have to offer to both practitioners and scholars in risk studies it does seem that some rather off beam questions have been asked. Thus, ‘evaluating whether risk society is an acceptable model for risk regulation’[[57]](#endnote-57) is a *canard.* Such an exercise is akin to lambasting an electronic engineer specializing in the dynamics of power generation for producing an argument of insufficient philosophical nuance to woo a sociologist with a penchant for postmodern theory. Beck clearly did not intend his thesis to be either a model for risk regulators nor a device for technical assessors or practitioners working in risk industries. In this regard, the question of whether ‘risk managers’ should or should not ‘rely on risk society theory in designing and implementing risk management structures and regulations’[[58]](#endnote-58) is as inapt as it is redundant. To be clear, this does not mean that aspects of the risk society cannot be purposively deployed to understand either the broader context of uncertainty in which decision-making often takes place, nor the particular factors that impact upon the risk perceptions of either scientific experts or the public. What it does mean is that any attempt to simply map the grand narrative of the risk society onto the workaday practices of risk practitioners is doomed to failure. Rather than attempting to answer the narrow question of whether risk society is a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ model for risk regulation, it may be more fruitful to consider which elements of the risk society thesis can be deployed to understand particular processes, situations and scenarios. Indeed, to this end there is ample evidence that many of the concepts that Beck bequeathed the social sciences have utility and can be fruitfully applied across a diverse range of domains, from the regulation of terrorism[[59]](#endnote-59) to global futures trading[[60]](#endnote-60) and the management of space junk.[[61]](#endnote-61) As we shall see, the uptake of Beckian concepts across multiple subject areas has promoted inter-disciplinary dialogue amongst those researching risk and uncertainty. Outside of academic circles, it is also possible to cite instances where elements of the risk society thesis have impacted positively on policy-making, for instance in law,[[62]](#endnote-62) business regulation,[[63]](#endnote-63) environmental policy[[64]](#endnote-64) and risk governance practices.[[65]](#endnote-65) In addition, as Vammen-Larsen indicates, there is merit in considering further the wider effects of the turbulent and uncertain conditions of the second modernity that Beck describes on tools of risk analysis, such as Strategic Environmental Assessment and Environmental Impact Assessment.[[66]](#endnote-66) Notwithstanding these possibilities, in considering the extent to which the risk society thesis addresses ‘real-world’ problems, it is important to be cognizant of Beck’s mode and his métier. He was a genuine public intellectual who had little time for academics who remained cossetted in the ivory towers. Always motivated to talk directly to political power brokers, Beck strove to connect with the populous through contributions in mass circulation European newspapers, including *Le Monde*, *La Repubblica*, *Die Zeit* and *The Guardian*. In this way, he bought his thoughts to bear on ways of hooking into and grappling with contemporary risk issues, from forced migration and terrorism to the global economic crisis. He also strove to influence Government through his involvement in various State Committees and Steering Groups. For instance, under Gerhard Schröder he was a member of the *Future Commission for Saxony and Bavaria* and in 2011 - post the Fukushima disaster - he was appointed to the *Ethical Commission for Safe Energy*, which recommended the phasing out of nuclear power in Germany - a policy since initiated by Chancellor Merkel. In the light of the above, it would be disingenuous to suggest that Beck’s thesis is loftily detached from reality. Notwithstanding historically partisan views about the value of STEM related subjects relative to Social Science disciplines, the dialogue gap alluded to previously represents something of a missed opportunity. Distinct disciplines could work more closely together to progress context sensitive understandings of risk.[[67]](#endnote-67) Closer working across disciplines and the establishing of synergies between the natural and the social sciences in recent years has illustrated the value of developing more holistic approaches to the study of risk. This is a tradition to be encouraged. Rather than continuing down parallel tracks of either theory or practice focused approaches, the future for risk research should be focused toward opportunities for fusion, such that both macro level context and micro level applications can be ushered closer together.

Practical examples of engagement and impact aside, what Beck’s work does offer to risk studies - and this is an aspect which has very much been underappreciated - is a grasp of both the context and defining processes of the contemporary modern age.[[68]](#endnote-68) To this end, the many concepts that he developed over time to understand the social construction, regulation and management of risk have been largely overlooked and this constitutes a missed trick. In this regard, there are several conceptual tools that Beck developed as part of the architecture of the risk society thesis that have clear functionality. To illustrate this point I will touch on just three concepts. First, in his earlier work, in considering the production of environmental harms, Beck developed the concept of ‘organised irresponsibility’ to expose ‘the contradiction between hazards produced by and within the system, and those unattributable to the system, which is neither responsible for them nor capable of dealing with them’.[[69]](#endnote-69) Flagging up the weakness of institutional frameworks to mitigate against environmental risks such as air pollution, Beck describes the process by which private companies and State institutions routinely engage in performances of risk management. Organised irresponsibly is thus constituted by strategies of absorption, techniques of neutralization and practices of obfuscation, all of which conceal the inefficacy of risk regulation. While the key example Beck[[70]](#endnote-70) alludes to is the failure of law to regulate corporate pollution in industrial areas, it is clear that there are different versions of ‘organized irresponsibility’ in train across a range of domains of risk prevention - from child sexual exploitation prevention campaigns to counter-radicalisation policy. Further, it is the case that some practitioners working in such areas may feel restricted in their capacity to meet safety and security expectations due to the limited frameworks of action within which they are operating.[[71]](#endnote-71) Thus, as Curran indicates, there would appear to be scope to explore further the applicability of the concept of organized irresponsibility and the limits to risk regulation across a range of sectors.[[72]](#endnote-72) Second, in his later work, Beck’s[[73]](#endnote-73) consideration of transformations in the social construction of risk and the cultural and political trend toward futurity, led him to describe a process of ‘reälitatsinszenierung’ or ‘staging of the reality’ through which various hypothetical risk scenarios are played out. Contra neo-Marxist approaches, Beck argued that this process is not about the deliberate falsification of reality by powerful institutions. Instead it is representative of a need to symbolically play threats out in public as a mode of pre-emption, such that ‘future catastrophe becomes present’.[[74]](#endnote-74) The process of staging worst-case scenarios is described by Beck[[75]](#endnote-75) as ‘a huge force of imagining, motivating and mobilizing’. To this end, the various mediated modes of imagining future terrorist attacks serve as a case in point - from emergency training drills staged around bombs exploding in urban areas to documentaries oriented around the potential effects of deliberate poisoning of water supplies. There can be little doubt that both public perceptions and policy decisions are, in part, influenced by the playing out of various WIAs designed, in theory, to prepare critical incident attenders and to raise awareness of possible dangers amongst the public. By deploying the idea of the reälitatsinszenierung of global risk, Beck is able to both identify a prescient and growing cultural trend and to tread in an epistemological space between realism and constructionism in his analysis of risk. Furthermore, there is doubtless mileage in studying both the content of staging acts and the cognitive effects of such forms of representation on people’s perceptions of risk and understandings of safety. Third, Beck indubitably offers much for risk analysts grappling with the constitution of uncertainty and its relationship to risk. Here, his reflections on the condition of ‘nichtwissen’ (not-knowing) are highly instructive. Situations of incomplete knowledge present management conundrums for institutions and agencies involved in risk governance. While the advancement of science and technology has enabled earlier detection of dangers to public safety, embedded uncertainties often remain, making the task of risk communication and pre-emptive intervention a complicated business.[[76]](#endnote-76) Whether the threat be from terrorist attacks, global financial instability or health pandemics, the evidence on which risk assessments are made is often imperfect. As Randall[[77]](#endnote-77) notes, there is a sizeable difference between random chance due to the natural unpredictability of outcomes and ‘uncertainty due to our failure to know everything that is knowable’. The problem of managing uncertainty has been paramount in the development of risk research across natural and social science disciplines over the last three decades, from environmental studies to engineering. Moreover, the communication of uncertainties - or, moreover, which uncertainties should reasonably be communicated and to what end - has proven to be a practical dilemma that practitioners involved in risk regulation have routinely grappled with. Beck’s observations about non-knowledge and his reflections on how to respond in conditions of nichtwissen are worthy of further scrutiny in this regard. What Beck contributed here was an understanding of the different types of uncertainty, ranging from ‘provisional non-knowing, unacknowledged non-knowing, willful ignorance and conscious and unconscious inability to know’.[[78]](#endnote-78) Concentrated study of such typologies - and the conditions in which they emerge - would be of clear benefit to risk analysts and policy makers alike. Similarly, it would also be advantageous to develop more detailed knowledge about cultural differences in terms of how people react to different types of uncertainty.[[79]](#endnote-79)

**6. CONCLUSION**

This article has sought to reflect on the key principles of the risk society perspective and to consider its explanatory value as an enduring strand of social science theory. Alongside airing some of the key criticisms leveled at Beck’s thesis, attention has been drawn the catalytic nature of his work and its capacity to generate constructive interchanges between different stakeholders sharing an interest in risk. Aside from the impact of the risk society thesis in sociology, the risk society thesis has become a *lingua franca* across social science disciplines and stimulated collective reflection between academics in different nations, leading to notable interdisciplinary advances. These advances have been galvanized by the formation and flourishing of international research networks enthused and motivated by Beck’s work.[[80]](#endnote-80) Alongside the theoretical contribution, it is important to acknowledge the more practical dimensions of Beck’s work. In many respects, he was a social problem focused thinker. Indeed, the last major research project led by Beck involved researchers from different disciplines gauging the impacts of climate change in different parts of the globe and exploring the possibilities of new methodological tools of analysis.[[81]](#endnote-81) Those inspired by him have been encouraged to approach social problems with tenacity and creativity. Aside from attracting a coterie of emergent thinkers deploying the conceptual apparatus of the risk society perspective in both empirical and theoretical studies, the provocative nature of Beck’s thesis has stimulated critiques that have led to a fuller and rounder understanding of the impacts of risk in the modern world. Yet, despite a spike in interest in risk studies since his untimely passing,[[82]](#endnote-82) there are scarce few examples where the depth and resonance of the risk society has been properly appreciated. Rather, there has been a marked tendency to throw the conceptual baby out with the theoretical bath water. There are, of course, flaws and blemishes in the macro theory of world risk society, but this is expectable given the scale and range of its subject matter. To this end, it is important to fully appreciate the purpose and trajectory of Beck’s thesis and to cogitate on the conceptual dimensions of the risk society architecture that have resonance and efficacy.[[83]](#endnote-83) I have suggested here specific elements of the risk society thesis that have use value and are ripe for further exploration in risk studies. Beck has added greatly to the production of knowledge about the nature of risk and institutional modes of regulating it. During his lifetime, through direct engagement with key stakeholders and power brokers - and as a result of the ripples that his arguments produced - he stimulated political and public discourse and facilitated richer understandings of the management of risk and uncertainty. His contribution has advanced interdisciplinary research and stretched the thoughts and practices of those involved in frontline risk management. If Bergkamp’s observation that ‘risk society theory has entered the thinking of risk managers policy-makers’[[84]](#endnote-84) is correct, this should be no cause for lament. While the risk society thesis is not designed to be deployed as an applicatory tool for hazard analysis, the thematics and concepts that Beck cultivated have resounded widely. The entreaty to test his ideas via empirical investigation of ‘middle-range’ theories demonstrates a desire not just to connect with the real world, but to progressively change it through developing deeper understandings of human behavior, institutional structures and the lived environment.[[85]](#endnote-85) It remains vitally important that scholars in risk studies continue to assess the merits and drawbacks of concepts and theories through application to particular sites, outcomes and processes.[[86]](#endnote-86) The academic impact of the risk society thesis and its possibilities for influencing and shaping policy should not be considered as concluded. Whether one travels with the risk society thesis or not, it has to be acknowledged that the underlying and powerful currents of transformation that Beck heralded some thirty years ago have indeed swept across the world producing jolting and dramatic effects. In a world defined by health, environmental, economic, security and political crises, it is imperative that concerted attempts are made to search for solutions to fundamental societal problems.[[87]](#endnote-87) This endeavor demands the attention and energies of critical risk researchers, policy makers, politicians and practitioners alike.

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