The Study of Risk in the Light of Social Changes: Beck and Giddens

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Abstract

U. Beck and Giddens play a leading role in the development of new academic research field called 'theory of the risk society' that studies the risk in the light of social, economic and political contexts in which it manifests itself. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck starts from the assumption that globalization and technological progress are changing not only the way of understanding and addressing the risk but also its very nature. In postmodern society, rapid technological progress, coupled with an increasingly dense network of global connections, goes hand in hand with the production of new risks, such as those generated by atomic, genetic and chemical. Anthony Giddens, like Ulrick Beck, believes that modernity has led to a deep uncertainty that previous eras had never known. The prospect of Giddens differs from that of Beck in relation to the concept of trust that the British sociologist reserves particularly important, according to him, the global expert knowledge must regain the lost confidence, considering the fact that the risk can also be understood as opportunities, such as stakes in order to achieve certain results. Confidence is a psychological condition necessary to cope with risks, which otherwise would stop the action, making anxiety attack.

Keywords: risk, globalization, society

"The risk society is also the possibility of a self-criticism company"

Beck 2000

The process of globalization has turned the world into a unique production space, the growing interdependence conditions made each mutually influenced by economic, technological and social change taking place even thousands of kilometers away, the new risks differ significantly from those of past eras for global consequences that threaten ripple effects in an unlimited succession.

With the extension of the global village, in fact, every event obeys the law of the domino effect influencing and involving actually geographically and culturally distant.

In the post-modern society the reality is always presented less programmed and predictable, it is in this society that everyone lives in a state of constant fear from the production of new risks such as those generated by atomic, genetic and chemical.

And since the eighties that develops a new paradigm of risk analysis in which they find space attention to the socio-cultural context in which the subject is moving, the individual considered not as isolated, a vision of rationality as influenced by factors internal disturbances (existential lived) and external (social and cultural elements).

It was probably Beck first to face this concept in sociology with Anthony Giddens. Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens play an important role in the development of a macro-sociological approach called risk society, an academic research that studies the risk in the light of the cultural, economic and political.

Sociologists of the risk society analyze the concept of risk of late modern societies. Among these processes they fall within that of reflexive modernization and the individualization.

The thought of Ulrich Beck has entered fully into the contemporary sociological debate after publication of his work "risk society" published in 1986 after the explosion of the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl, this work represents an attempt to describe the different points crisis of industrial society, marked the beginning of a profound reflection on the risk society.

In this opera Beck did follow other studies including the essays collected in the book "reflexive modernization" written in collaboration with Giddens and Lash.

The German sociologist notes that the current one is a transition period that marks the transition from the industrial society to the so-called global risk society.

When he speaks of the risk society it refers to the formation in the transition to a new phase of modernity, of a new social configuration whose all traditional terms of social practices are questioned.

In this sense, the risks would be identified as the product of the modernization process, Beck points out that
industrial society is turning into the risk society. In this transition phase, it goes hand in hand with the production of wealth production risks have increased as a result of the modernization process.

Unlike the pre-modern societies where individuals could see the action of supernatural entities the late modern societies recognize that the dangers and risks are generated by human beings, the idea of human responsibility marks another important difference between the old dangers type and contemporary risks.

The risk society regards the crisis of all institutional reality that served as regulators of modern social life: work, family, politics.

Emerging risks from the risk society threaten the power that often proves unable to face them causing the collapse of a science that is not able to respond effectively to the dangers emerging from the most advanced technological developments, the post-modern society becomes reflexive because it puts a critical review their certainties, doubts and questions looking forward to propose alternative solutions.

The risks to which it relates are those produced by modernity bring into serious question the survival of the planet and therefore involve across the whole population and those who are differently distributed on different portions of society by founding a new social stratification logic only partly it overlaps with that based on the distribution of wealth typical of industrial society.

The risk society can be argued according to Beck through five main introductory thesis:

1. The risks produced by late modernity fee often irreversible consequences, often they remain undeciphered causing a competition between expert knowledge and between them and the new common social knowledge. The result is a multiplicity of risk interpretation;  
2. With the spread of risks form new social situations of exposure to risk and therefore new vulnerable social groups which in part reinforce the traditional logic of wealth distribution but partly instead subvert. In addition they acquire global dimensions ignoring the limits of the nation state (world risk society);  
3. The risks are functional to capitalist development are according to Beck of big business. Until it develops a political potential able to hinder this process will draw the economic system, just from the creation of the risks, a new potential for expansion of aggregate demand;  
4. Within the risk society the knowledge acquires a new significance that needs to be developed and used to create a new critical awareness of the risks;  
5. it is born a new political potential disaster. The need to counter the new risks for Beck is the best stimulus for a possible reorganization of powers and social skills.

These five arguments that the author introduces into the work of the risk society are not sufficient to provide a clear and consistent configuration of the new social configuration provided by Beck to fully understand the potential of this model analysis is also necessary to analyze the terms of the process that accompanies the formation of the new risk society that the author defines as a process of individualization.1

The risk society the individualization theory is the true center of the whole systematic processing of Beck.2

The link between individualization and risk society can be so explained. The risk society is such only as perceived by social actors as a bearer of risk. Only when social actors acquire a feeling that the side effects of industrialism to consider them as a permanent problem of political life, we get really into the risk society.

By virtue of the slackening of the current company social cohesion, become weaker family ties, the identity of a local nature and the individual on the one hand "liberated" by a series of more or less binding rules on how they should live the other is left to himself in his new freedom.

The risk society is not the one with more risks than the others but one in which individuals are quite individualized can subjectively grasp the gravity of the situation in which they find themselves.

Individualization is the subjective aspect of the risk society. The dangers related to air quality, water and land, which run according to the places in which we live, the things we eat, the objects that surround us take on the role of risk only in society of individuals, ie in complex social settings which involve a strong degree of individualization.

According to Beck in today’s society to change is an internal world of social roles, family memberships, and gender identity in crisis and leaves only the face of society in the individual. The institutions with hinge function between the individual and society (trade union, party) tend to lose the integrative function and deliver the individual to society without any intermediate filter.

In this framework it is exacerbated in the individual awareness of having to watch alone from the risks that threaten

1 F. Chicchi “Derive sociali precarizzazione del lavoro, crisi del legame sociale ed egemonia culturale del rischio” Franco Angeli, Milano, 2002;  
2 W. Privitera “tecnica, individuo e società”, Rubbettino, 2004, p. 51;
Consequences of modernity" introduces the concept of globalization in its social theory. It imposes a "particular set of risks and threats that is typical of modern social life". Interpretation of them is disseminated through the media.

Modern risks are different from the past, are produced by industrial progress and become increasingly exacerbated by the progression of its development, are manufacturers of irreversible damage and invisible in most cases, are not easily measurable so subject to interpretation and therefore determine the influences social depending on their interpretation of them is disseminated through the media.

The risk status as a peculiar condition of today is also supported by Giddens points out that in advanced modernity imposes a "particular set of risks and threats that is typical of modern social life".

The positions of the two authors converge in tracing an evolution of modernity that simple has become reflexive and that translates into a radicalization of some aspects that characterized the first, Giddens treated as Ulrick Beck, it believes that modernity has led to a deep uncertainty that previous eras had never known.

Giddens sees globalization as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities causing local happenings are shaped by events occurring thousands of kilometers away.

This phase of modernity is characterized by the social effects of the risks caused by man. In his work "In The Consequences of modernity" introduces the concept of globalization in its social theory.

The vision of globalization according to Giddens is not peaceful. Modernity involves various forms of risk. On each dimension of globalization we encounter possibility of risk, 1) on the economic dimension, the collapse of economic growth mechanisms 2) on the political dimension of the growth of the totalitarian system 3) on the military dimension of the nuclear conflict on a large scale 4) on the industrial dimension degradation and ecological disaster. The risks that arise are different from the risks of the past being determined by human activities.

As Beck also Giddens emphasizes the aspect of risk globality stating that "there are risk scenarios that globally affect a large number of individuals or even all the inhabitants of the earth, as in the case of an ecological disaster or nuclear war ".

Yet Giddens points out that the risk is increasingly institutionalized in special environments such as the Stock Exchange within which they assume the central character in its business.

Giddens sees the risk as one of the typical characteristics of modern society, it is engaged in the definition of "risk profile" typical of our society, stating the characteristics and objective (nature of the risks) and subjective (perception). In the first place the scope and global distribution of risk factors while in the second a greater spread of risk awareness and less confidence in the corrective capacity of science.

Aware of being responsible for the risks that haunt them, the individual lives of late modernity, in what has been dubbed by Giddens "risk culture" in view of the destructive effects of the unprecedented scale of new risks.

The Back thesis and Giddens largely coincide. They link the emergence of risks to the profound transformation of society, so the Giddens' perspective differs from that of Beck in relation to the concept of trust that the British reserves

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3. F. Masi, M. Vicinanza "Emergenza, rischio e decisione," Guida, Napoli 2004; pag 61;
4. A. Giddens, "le conseguenze della modernità", il Mulino, Bologna, 1994 pag 111;
5. Sociologi e Ambiente Atti del IV Convegno nazionale dei sociologi dell'ambiente Torino, 19-20 settembre 2003;
6. V. Cesareo "le dimensioni della globalizzazione", Franco Angeli, Milano 2007;
7. J. Tomlinson "sentirsi a casa nel mondo", Feltrinelli, 1999;
8. G. Scidà "ragionare di globalizzazione", Franco Angeli, Milano, 2007;
9. S. Poloni, "preadolescenti a rischio", Franco Angeli, Milano, 2006;
particularly important sociologist, according to him, the global expert knowledge must regain confidence lost, in consideration of the fact that the risk can also be understood as an opportunity, such as stakes to achieve certain results.

Confidence is a psychological condition necessary to cope with risks, which otherwise would stop the action, making anxiety attack.

Confidence in global expert systems is accompanied by a deep uncertainty to which individuals react by demanding more from the expert knowledge and returning to visually reports that basing trust on people known personally this leads to the restoration of a re-aggregation system.

Confidence according Giddens could be the means to psychologically cope with the risks on the one hand paralyze the action and on the other develop feelings of anguish, fear and anxiety.10

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10 L. Napoli “la società dopo moderna: dal rischio all’emergenza” Morlacchi, Perugia, 2007, pag. 79-80;