

Reflexivity as Non-linearity

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ULRICH BECK'S theory of 'reflexive modernization' presumes the existence of two modernities: a 'first' or 'simple modernity', and the modernity at stake in this section of this issue of *Theory, Culture & Society*, which is a second, or 'reflexive' modernity. I think it makes sense to understand the first modernity as comprising predominantly a logic of structures. Then the second or reflexive modernity, if we are to follow Manuel Castells (1989), involves a logic of flows. Beck's notions of unintended consequences, of ever-incomplete knowledge, of not irrationalism but a rationality that is forever indeterminate is comfortable in the logic of flows. Beck's chronic indeterminacy of risk and risk-taking, of living with risk is much more of a piece with, not the determinacy of structure but the partial, the elusive determinacy of flow.

So we need to ask ourselves, along with Ulrich Beck, what can reflexivity mean in an age of flows? What can reflexivity mean in the transition from industrial to the second, informational modernity? Beck's notion of reflexivity, it seems to me, stands rather in contrast to apparently similar notions in the work of Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens. This is because it has a markedly different genealogy. In many respects both Habermas and Giddens wrote from dissatisfaction with the structural functionalism, the linear systems theory of Talcott Parsons, and the dominance of Parsonsian sociology in the post-war decades. Both Habermas and Giddens had affinities with Marxism. Both featured a stress on the importance of agency in contrast to structure. This is perhaps the key to understanding reflexivity in the second modernity. It has little to do with the reflection of structure on agency. It equally has little to do with the (partial) determinacy of agency by structure. Indeed, it is not about reflection at all. First modernity reflexivity was a matter of reflection. Indeed Habermas's communicative action might be paradigmatic, of not reflexive but '*reflective modernization*'. Second modernity reflexivity is about the emergent *demise* of the distinction between structure and agency altogether. It is not about

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reflection at all. I also do not think it is predominantly about reflex. Second-modernity reflexivity presumes a move towards immanence that breaks with the dualism of structure and agency. Bruno Latour (1993) has wonderfully captured this immanence in his work. Only for Latour, whose work, for me, is as much anthropological and philosophical as it is sociological, this is more or less an ontology. It is the way things are and have always been. It is the modernity 'we never were'. It is pre-modern, modern and contemporary. Beck's view and my view tend to be more traditionally sociological: in the tradition of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel, who thematized social change. For us this change from the dualism of reflection to this immanence or monism of reflexivity is not an ontology, but instead the defining thematic of the second modernity.

Back to Habermas and Giddens and the idea of reflexivity in terms of the increasing independence of agency from structure.¹ This was the position from the late 1970s when the two theorists came to hegemonic positions in German and Anglo-Saxon sociology. Beck comes effectively from another generation. He came to a position of predominance in the late 1980s in Germany. This was an era that had defined itself against Habermas and corporatist and Marx-influenced social democracy. Indeed, Beck came to prominence among a generation, for whom no longer Habermas, but *Niklas Luhmann* was the guiding figure. It is significant that Giddens's two most influential younger colleagues and co-workers have been John Thompson and David Held, two Habermas-influenced sociologists who have produced an impressive corpus of work. Beck, in contrast, came to prominence against the grain of Habermas and with Luhmann. Surely, in the early years of the present millennium, the outbreak of dogmatic Luhmannism in Germany is something Beck feels distinctly uncomfortable with. Beck is clearly not a *Luhmannianer*. Yet a generation of German students have come to maturity in an ambience that is given shape to by both Beck and Luhmann, and this ambience is characterized no less by conflict than by convergence of their respective conceptual frameworks.²

At stake in this, and the defining thematic for me of this article, is a decidedly *non-linear* notion of reflexivity. In the first modernity, the modernity of structure, society is conceived as a linear system. Talcott Parsons's social system is such a linear system. Linear systems have a single point of equilibrium, and only external forces can disturb this equilibrium and lead to system change. The reflexivity of the second modernity presumes the existence of non-linear systems. Here system dis-equilibrium and change are produced internally to the system through feedback loops. These are open systems. Reflexivity now is at the same time system *de*-stabilization. Complex systems do not simply reproduce. They change. It is the 'chaos' or noise of the unintended consequences that leads to system dis-equilibrium. Beck does not use this sort of language, but this sort of non-linearity is at the heart of reflexivity in the second modernity. It breaks with the linearity of simple modernity. Indeed, it might be fair to suggest that Parsonsian systems-linearity was, in many respects, the other side of

Habermas's linearity of agency.³ By the same token, Luhmann's second-modernity non-linearity of system finds its parallel in Beck's non-linear blend of agency/structure.

In this sense also, the individual of the first modernity is *reflective* while that of the second modernity is *reflexive*. The idea of reflective belongs to the philosophy of consciousness of the first modernity. And, to be fair, Habermas was one of the first to note this. To reflect is to somehow subsume the object under the subject of knowledge. Reflection presumes apodictic knowledge and certainty. It presumes a dualism, a scientific attitude in which the subject is in one realm, the object of knowledge in another. Beck's work, from the very start, has presupposed a critique of such objectivist knowledge, a critique of such dualisms, be they Cartesian or Kantian. Beck's (1974) very first book, well before *Risk Society*, stemming from his doctoral work, addressed issues of knowledge and science. This work was already implicitly phenomenological, breaking with assumptions of the subject-object epistemology of the Enlightenment and positivism. For Beck, as for phenomenology, the knowing individual was already in the world with the objects of his/her knowledge. This subject could only grasp a certain portion of the object, in connection with what Husserl called the subject's 'attitude', in Beck's case the interest-constituted attitude of the knower. Thus the objectivity of simple-modernity knowledge is replaced by the *intentionality* of knowledge in the second modernity. This intentionality is again at centre stage in *Risk Society*, now tied up with the ecological *problématique*. Science and industry, for all their claims to objectivity, and to being somehow objective and outside of the world, are indeed in the world with their own proper interest-constituted intentionality. The problem here, although it is at the same time its saving grace, is that what is intended leads to the most extraordinary unintendedness, to side-effects, to unintended consequences.

The Cartesian subject of simple modernity, of Descartes' *Metaphysical Meditations*, is reflective. So is the Kantian subject of determinate judgement. Beck often describes today's non-linear reflexivity in terms of, not the 'I think therefore I am', but instead in terms of 'I am I'. 'I think, therefore I am' has to do with reflection. 'I am I' has more to do with reflex. And Beck often indeed works from the contrast of 'reflex' with reflection. Reflexive, he argues, has more to do with reflex than reflection. Reflexes are indeterminate. They are immediate. They do not in any sense subsume. Reflexivity, Beck notes, is characterized by choice, where previous generations had no such choices. What Beck often omits to say is that this choice must be *fast*, we must – as in a reflex – make *quick* decisions. In the second modernity we haven't sufficient reflective distance on ourselves to construct linear and narrative biographies. We must be content, as Ronald Hitzler (1988) has noted, with *Bastelbiographien*, with bricolage-biographies in Lévi-Strauss's sense. We may wish to be reflective but we have neither the time nor the space to reflect. We are instead *combinards*. We put together networks, construct alliances, make deals. We must live, are forced to live

in an atmosphere of risk in which knowledge and life-chances are precarious.

So what is at stake? The second modernity and its non-linear reflexivity are a result of the retreat of the classic institutions: state, class, nuclear family, ethnic group. The roles that reproduced linear agents and systems in the first modernity are progressively erased. Yet the result is not the disappearance of the subject, or a general irrationality. The subject relating to today's fragmented institutions instead has moved from a position of reflection to one of being reflexive. Yet this subject is so constantly in motion and so involved in the world that it makes little sense to talk about a subject-*position*. The subject is still with us and so is knowledge. Only knowledge itself is *of* uncertainty. What happens now is not non-knowledge or anti-reason. Indeed, in reflexive modernity we are better educated, more knowledgeable than ever. Instead, the type of knowledge at stake changes. It is itself precarious as distinct from certain, and what that knowledge is about is also uncertain – probabilistic, at best; more likely 'possibilistic'.⁴

Beck has written extensively about globalization, about cosmopolitanism, in the years since the publication of *Risk Society* (1992) and *Reflexive Modernization* (Beck et al., 1994). Indeed, cosmopolitanism itself presumes a certain movement of strategic locus both extensively and intensively away from the nation-state. This intensive shift will have implications for the family. What happens more generally is, to a certain extent, a generalized outsourcing. In Beck's *Risk Society* or what John Urry and I (1987) at about the same time called 'disorganized capitalism', there is a generalized outsourcing of functions, of operations. The hierarchical economic organization begins regularly to make decisions, not to 'make' but to 'buy'. A whole host of functions of the firm are outsourced in this age of vertical disintegration. The welfare state begins to outsource functions to private and charitable sector organizations. There is, it seems, also an outsourcing of the family. This is not just a disorganization and destruction of the family. It is, on the one hand, a distantiation: hence the increasing gift of mobile phones from parents to pre-teen and teenage children. This is so parents can keep track of children at a distance. Children, for their part, tend to use these same phones for other objectives. Consider the fragmentation of the family through divorce or separation, or even the long-distance couples connecting London and Los Angeles, Paris and New York. Here divorce and separation can mean that children have, not no family but two or three families, to whom they are connected by long-distance telephony, transport and the Internet. Thus there is, not so much the destruction, as an outsourcing of the family. At stake then is first an anomic disorganization but then a new normalization, which again is a normalization that institutionalizes abnormality, institutionalizes not the normal but the state of exception (as Carl Schmitt might have it). It is, in a sense, a routinization of Weberian charisma that winds up not as bureaucracy but instead as somewhat more regularizable *charisma*.

What is happening, however, is not just an outsourcing but also an

insourcing. Giddens (1993) of course has written extensively about this. A number of properties, functions and activities previously attributable to the nation-state, the welfare state, the hierarchical firm, the family, the centralized trade union have been otherwise located. Some of them have been extensively displaced onto global instances, while others have been intensively displaced to more private instances. The shift of activities onto small firms has been such an *intensification*. Today's start-ups – not so much the dot.coms, but patent-generating technology firms and copyright-generating new media firms – have very private, personal and intense characteristics. They are not, so to speak, paternalistic as they were in the bygone days, not least because women now run a number of them. It has to do with the fact that so many of the employees are freelancers and subcontractors. It has to do with the eminently non-paternalist charisma of firm leaders. These are not, so to speak, 'leaders of men', but may instead be risk takers.

So there is in our times an outsourcing of governance functions of the state, of national rights to become global rights, of accountancy organizations, of economic functions onto supra-national economic bodies, and supra-national cultural instances like the world-wide spread of biennales. There is just as much an offloading of functions onto private instances. These are the two constitutive features of the second modernity. In the first modernity the (reflective) subject was constituted in consonance with a set of roles in a variety of institutions. Now these institutions are in crisis, and functions which were once taking place at the interface of institution and role are now taking place much more intensively and closer to the subject. What has happened is that there has been a de-normalization of roles. The subject has become, and Beck too uses this word, 'nomadic'. There has been a move toward complexity, indeed towards 'chaos'. But it is somehow a regularizable chaos. The 'roles' of the first modernity depended very much on what Kant called determinate judgement, on prescription, on determinate rules. Now the subject must be much more the rule-finder him- or herself. Determinate judgement is replaced by 'reflective judgement'. Reflective judgement is not *reflection* because there is now no universal to subsume the particular. In reflective judgement it is we who must find the rule. Reflective judgement is always a question of uncertainty, of risk: it also leaves the door open much more to innovation. Thus Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's *Das ganz normale Chaos der Liebe* (1990) has appeared perhaps misleadingly in English as *The Chaos of Love*. The German title translates literally as *The Totally Normal Chaos of Love*. Love here becomes dissociated from roles and hence chaotic, while this chaos becomes totally normal, becomes regularized in a fashion. Becomes, even, more or less predictable. Yet at the same time it remains nonetheless chaos. Chaotic love, regularizable chaotic love is non-linear love and part and parcel of non-linear reflexivity.

This all leads to the question of institutions. Today's debates around globalization and cosmopolitanism have led to a considerable literature on the extensive outsourcing of, in this case, sovereignty. The pursuing, for

example, of governance as discussed by David Held, of economic functions, as discussed by Saskia Sassen, of rights (Homi Bhabha). But what about institutions that regulate the above-mentioned *insourcing* of functions? What kind of institutions can regulate what Beck since the early 1980s has understood under the heading of 'a life of one's own' (*Eigenes Leben*) (Beck et al., 1997)? What kind of institutions can regulate subjects whose *differ-entia specifica* is precisely not to be determined by the rules of institutions? What institutions can enable us to be reflexive in the sense of being rule-*finders*? At issue here are subjects that are not so much anomic as *auto-nomic*. This may be the pivotal contradiction as it were of reflexive modernization. Governance of second-modernity flows is always going to be very different from governance of first-modernity structures. Perhaps at stake is a question of institutions so different that for us they are almost unrecognizable as institutions. It may make sense in this context to think in terms of two types of institutions: of institutions that proffer us two types of rules. Let us go back to the distinction between constitutive and regulative rules. Constitutive rules are those that let us play the game, much akin to constitutional law. Without them there is no playing field. Regulative rules are more prescriptive. What kind of constitutive rules, we may ask, are consistent with a set of regulative rules that do not regulate? What type of constitutive rule is consistent with a set of rule-finding, as distinct from rule-determining, activities? Perhaps new second-modernity institutions must be comprised *primarily* of, not regulative but constitutive rules. And in this sense they may not be recognizable to us as institutions.

It has become commonplace to say that in the global information age, in the second modernity, power and inequality operate less through exploitation than exclusion. Beck is very cognizant of this with his notion of 'Brazilianization'. The point I am trying to make here is that exploitation takes place through regulative rules, while exclusion take place through constitutive rules. This is consistent with Hardt and Negri's (2000) argument in *Empire* that the transition from one mode of production to another is governed less by class struggle than by 'lines of flight'. Here the subordinate class *escapes* literally as flight, flow or flux away from the dominant class and its institutions. So perhaps the key institutions at stake in the second modernity are those that govern exclusion. And here is where I have my strongest quibble with Beck's work. I think that a great number of these characteristically second-modernity institutions, if that is the word for them, are now not solely social, but socio-*technical*. Now this is completely consistent with the technologization of science thesis that has been so prominent in Beck's work. Pivotal for me among the socio-technical (constitutive more than regulatory) institutions that govern contemporary power relations are the likes of platforms, operating systems, communications protocols, standards, intellectual property and the like. There is a certain awareness of such socio-technical institutions also in Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) work on genetic databases. But I do not think that the technological dimension is sufficiently taken on

by (Ulrich) Beck. Nor are the dimension and extent to which social relations are mediated through the (now interactive) mass and non-mass media of communications. Reflexive modernization, the Becks argue, is a question of 'place-polygamy'. The point is that such place-polygamy is always necessarily technologically mediated, by cheaper air flights, by mobile phones, by microprocessors in various smart boxes, by protocols and channels enabling communication at a distance between individuals.

This brings me back to the centrality of non-linearity in Beck's notion of reflexivity. The first modernity was linear, the second non-linear. The first modernity a question of determinate judgement and rule-following, the second a matter of rule-finding and reflective judgement. There is, as I argued above, a very loose and implicit notion of complex (open in both senses) and non-linear systems in Beck's work. But these are always *social* systems. The point I want to make is that there has been a shift here, which again is implicitly addressed in Beck's work. In the first modernity we were faced with relatively mutually exclusive and exhaustive systems: of (Parsonian) social systems on the one hand, and engineering-like technical systems on the other. The second modernity's totally normal chaos is regulated by non-linear systems. It is also regulated by an extraordinarily powerful interlacing of social and technical systems: by, precisely, socio-technical systems. It is at the interface of the social and the technical that we find the second modernity's reflexivity. It is at this interface that we take on the precarious freedom of a 'life of our own'; that we 'invent the political', that we take on ecological responsibility. Reflexivity in the second modernity is profoundly socio-*technical*.

This very 'Latourian' point leads me back to considerations of Bruno Latour's contribution to this *Theory, Culture & Society* 'round table' on reflexive modernization. Very often Beck and Latour have been juxtaposed to each other as realism versus constructionism, with Beck the realist and Latour the constructionist. Latour's otherwise compelling contribution to this issue does have some constructionist echoes. But I think this is more or less just an inconsistency that emerges from time to time in his work. This is because, for me, the distinctive feature of the 'turn' in science studies from the Strong Programme takes place indeed with Latour's *break* with constructionism. The Strong Programme has been a thoroughly constructivist sociology of knowledge, in which knowledge is constituted through what is effectively a positing (individual or collective) subject. This was a welcome departure from the naïve subject-object realism that was previously dominant in sociology. It was a departure, of course, from previous (Mertonian and indeed Popperian) positivism in a hermeneutic or phenomenological direction. The problem however was that constructionism tended to repeat the subject-object dualism of realism in another register, in fact giving more power to the now-constituting subject than even the previous Cartesian assumptions. Latour's departure and the subsequent paradigm-shift in the sociology of science were in his powerful 'objectualism', which is not objectivism. In this objectualism previously dualist objects and subjects become

quasi-objects and quasi-subjects in a monist plane of actor-networks. Latour is at his worst when constructionist. He is at his best when his immanentism breaks with dualisms of both constructionism and realism.

Beck, for his part, oscillates between realism and immanentism. Beck's non-linearity comes from implicit Luhmannian assumptions of self-reproducing, environment-scanning systems. Latour's actor-networks are situated in a *problématique* of flows and 'stoppages', in Duchamp's sense, of 'lines of flight' and 'plateaus'. He doesn't use the language of systems, but surely actor-networks can be more or less systemic. Latour is also not uninfluenced by information theory, in his case coming not through Luhmann but instead Michel Serres. In *Another Modernity, A Different Rationality* (1999), I criticized Latour for assumptions of instrumental rationality. This was wide of the mark. The driving logic of actor-network immanence is of course to break with dualisms of instrumental and substantive rationality, of exchange-value and use-value. Let me revise this again. In his moments of backsliding towards constructionism, Latour's actor-networks do take on instrumentally rational colours. Equally, when Beck backslides into realism he once again moves back into the first modernity's *problématique* of reflection. All this said, the main thrust of Beck's and Latour's work does seem to converge in this pox-on-houses of both realism and constructionism. For both Beck and Latour are situated in registers of such monism and non-linearity. And this is what the second, reflexive modernity is all about.

Notes

1. To be fair there is a dimension of this idea of reflexivity in both Beck's work up until the mid-1990s and indeed in my section of *Reflexive Modernization* (Beck et al., 1994). That is the wonderful thing about the notion of reflexivity and reflexive modernization. I develop the notion again beginning from Garfinkel in the chapter on 'Technological Phenomenology' in *Critique of Information* (Lash, 2002). What that is leading to, and is perfectly consistent with, is the idea of non-linear reflexivity addressed here.
2. This article draws on a number of long discussions with Jakob Arnoldi and June Hee Jung. I am grateful to them for a number of points here. The judgements, however, are my own, and they should not be held responsible for them.
3. To be fair to Giddens, his notion of agency has important dimensions of non-linearity, especially with the centrality of unintended consequences and the individual as experiment in his work.
4. This position is to my knowledge most fully developed by Jakob Arnoldi in his PhD thesis on uncertain knowledge, University of London, 2002. I am indebted to Arnoldi for these ideas.

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