

The CREOGN Research Notes

French Gendarmerie Officers Academy Research Centre

Issue 50 – May 2020

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FROM CHERNOBYL TO COVID: THE SOCIOLOGY OF RISK AS A FRAME OF REFERENCE

The sociology of risk has invaded the fields of public health where the usual interpretive frameworks had become inoperative. Since the 1980s, this sociology has tried to provide answers to the issues and challenges posed by the advances of society. In this sense, the different schools of thought have noted the consequences of a disregard of expert knowledge on which public action is based. Public action must take advantage of this loss of influence in the scientific sphere, to escape from its dependence and regain a form of legitimacy within public interest. It is also at this price that science will recover its complete autonomy and its power of demonstration.

In their respective analyses of a modern society, Anthony Giddens (1994) and Ulrich Beck (2015) state bluntly that new risks are generalized in their consequences and effects. The Covid crisis is not an exception. It is unprecedented, we are told? This deserves a prudent reserve, because first of all, this crisis lacks references of proximity for at least three reasons: historically, it is distant, since our society has not been confronted with it in such a brutal way since the end of the Second World War; geographically, it is also distant, because although many crises (SARS, H1N1, BSE, etc.) occurred since the end of the Cold War, their spread within our society remained at a considerable distance; finally, it is distant in a practical sense, because they haven't had the same impact on our society as they only disturbed our daily lives in a very superficial way.

However, this crisis is particular in that it is part of the sequence of major disasters encountered since the end of the Cold War: with Chernobyl and Fukushima, the Covid crisis shares a risk that affects a society in all its components, in the face of an invisible enemy that strikes indiscriminately, that knows no boundaries and for which societies rely on the knowledge of science.

It was quite late, in the mid-1980s (Le Breton 2017; Peretti-Watel 2005), that the sociology of risk developed in an attempt to provide keys to understanding a society that had become hypersensitive to the issue of risk. It is true that risk was originally approached exclusively by economics. But the work of Wildawski (Duclou 1987), Douglas (1986), Beck (1986), Lagadec (1988) and Giddens (1991) has opened the way to a sociology in which the social nature of risk is placed at the center of the factors explaining the evolution of societies. These authors observe a society that has never been so protected but which, conversely, has never been so sensitive to risk. This new modernity then questions the relationship between public action and science.

I) Risk at the heart of the human condition (Le Breton)

The sociology of risk distinguishes between two approaches, because risk is a social representation; the first is concerned with understanding the perception of risk, the second with the meaning of activities to prevent it. It is impossible to evoke risk without referring to threat and danger. For Le Breton (2018), risk is "the random consequence of a situation" subject to a threat and coupled with a possible harm. Danger differs from risk in that it is the consequence of a very real threat to which an individual is exposed; in contrast, risk is potential, i.e. it is constituted around the probability from exposure to

danger. Thus, the intimacy of the three notions is clearly established in a timeline where the threat appears first, then comes the danger and, finally, the risk.

At this stage, we distinguish three types of universes in which the stakeholders of a society are active: a risky universe in which the individual is aware of a possible event because it is probable; an uncertain universe in which the same individual knows the event is possible but is unable to evaluate the probability of its occurrence; and finally, the indeterminate universe in which it appears uncertain or impossible to evaluate the threat, the danger and ultimately the risk. For Bourdin (2003), risk is defined as a possible event, the consequences of which the stakeholders doesn't wish to be confronted. Covid seized French society by making risk calculable.

The work of Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) provided a theoretical framework by placing the notion of risk at the center of the explanatory factors of society's evolution. These two currents are distinguished by an explanatory approach to the constituents of modern society, whereas the second builds its demonstration in the perspective of self-destruction, notably with the rupture of scientific legitimacy and its reflexivity.

II) A new view on structuring theory

Giddens qualifies modern risk through a "range" of seven characteristics for which he develops a tree of risk exposure. What is modern risk? He proposes a new view of structure theory. Modernity has generated changes in the *modus vivendi* that break away from previous models; the generalization of interrelations constitutes a fundamental characteristic of the modern world in the same way that the discontinuity of social systems happens from rapid change. Thus, modernity translates a vertical and horizontal social upheaval - i.e. in an extended spatial framework but on a shortened scale of time - from social groups, sometimes without direct connections, to the individual in their daily intimacy.

Giddens proposes a matrix of modern risks in which he distinguishes all the dangers which, on the one hand, "alter the objective distribution of risks" and, on the other hand, "alter the perception of risks".

Concerning the first category, Giddens reminds us that the generalized distribution of risk in no way prevents inequality of exposure, or even inequality of sensitivity, particularly with regard to social aspects. He observes the globalization of risk, which is characterized by a greater occurrence of events likely to affect an individual. The "local" is subjected to the "global"; the local is robbed of the levers enabling it to counter the risk it is subjected to. Giddens also targets the consequences of human knowledge's intrusion in the natural organization of things. The ecological risk is clearly pointed out, and he joins Beck here too in this approach to the degradation of the relationship to nature from the effects of human knowledge.

Giddens identifies artificial universes, such as the institutional environment, as vectors for the development of risky environments. It is in this space of exacerbated competition that game or decision theories come to flourish, but Giddens insists on the relationship with the outside world, i.e. the consequences and constraints that the other universes undergo from it, without necessarily being aware of them.

Regarding all the dangers that "alter the perception of risk", he doesn't fail to underline the existence of a degree of acceptance of risk, beyond awareness, by individuals. This is for him the fundamental point that distinguishes modern risk from pre-modern risk. The sharing of knowledge about the danger by a community subjected to it is a particular characteristic of modern risk. Giddens regrets the effect of a kind of normalisation that leads to an artificial reduction of the sensibility to risk and to an alteration of its perception.

It is recognized that even specialists cannot provide a total mastery of risk. Therefore there is a collective and personal awareness of uncertainty. But the insufficiency detected by laymen lead to questioning the knowledge and the scope of the experts' analysis.

Finally, Beck and Giddens recall the divisions among experts, as numerous as those that separate laymen, whereas specialists should bring stability, i. e. rationality. The certainties and other hesitations about masks or chloroquine are some of the examples emerging from the Covid crisis.

III) Risk society: on the road to another modernity

Risk is the harbinger of catastrophe, Beck tells us, and it is no longer possible to distinguish the social production of wealth from the social production of risk. He notes the emergence of new risks resulting from a technological and scientific disorder: the changes in society brought by technological developments are controversial, because they generate new disorders where they aspire to the progress of society. At the same time, science discredits itself, Beck asserts, by exposing its own contradictions; it is disqualified from being an expert on the risks that it has itself introduced. Thus, the emergence of a counter-power to scientific expertise has become inexorable. Beck, finally, points out that beyond the globalisation of risk, the weakening of the democratic sphere constitutes another major characteristic of post-industrial society. Indeed, for him, industrial society is an intermediate stage in society's evolution, contesting Weber's approach

(Callens). In the end, Beck defines the "present period as a new process of civilization that operates at the level of the individual and of each state. " (Callens).

For Beck, it is not the modern era that invented risk, but there is a growing awareness of the terrible "secondary effects" of modernity. Beck defends the thesis that the transition from the industrial era to the post-industrial society leads to a disruption of the social and societal equilibrium, with a relative approach to the distribution of risks that has replaced the question of the distribution of resources. However, he observes a strong correlation between the access to modernity and the creation of globalized, undetectable risks and threats, instead of more personal and perceptible risks. Individuals and public authorities therefore adopt a strategy of avoidance in place of a strategy of appropriation.

Beck develops his approach to risk society in five complementary theses: the risk created by modernity is different in every aspect from the wealth produced by industrial society. In this case, the definition of risk falls within the realm of knowledge and allows interpretation to flourish. We are, as Beck says, in the midst of a "social definition process". Then, the increase in risk is accompanied by social situations with greater threats, with a negative effect that extends to the very origin of the risk. It is indeed the industrial society that creates risk and the political consequences that follow. In a situation of risk, Beck observes that it is no longer the being that characterizes consciousness but the opposite. In this case, access to knowledge and information is decisive.

Finally, a risk whose perception is shared is likely to generate a terrible social outburst. In this sense, the field of politics is singularly reconfigured. For Beck, class society and risk society have very broad issues in common: indeed, deficiencies of appropriation are added to deficiencies of security, which reinforces social inequalities. As a consequence, exposure to risk is unequal and differentiated; individual behaviors are then called upon to adapt according to the risk perceived by each person.

In this sense, the release from lockdown could, within the framework of Covid, brutally fuel the emergence of an outcry against of this inequality.

The holistic or structuralist approaches of Beck and Giddens, respectively, make it possible to give a social definition of risk and delimit its perimeter. However, the comprehensive analysis of human sciences is built on the basis of a presumption of rationality on the part of stakeholders (Le Du 2019) and the "risk society" does not provide useful context clues to clarify individual behaviors. To remedy this, the call for methodological individualism (Boudon 2012a, 2012b) to make sense of individual action can be a valuable solution. Indeed, dealing with the question of risk inevitably leads to exploring the question of rationality.

IV) Public action

Initially, evaluations of public policies carried out by sociologists focused on the discrepancies between political intentions and the results obtained on the social problems encountered. These analyses highlighted the error of attributing an unquestionable legitimacy to a public policy, built around an authority which is undeniable, by default. (Lascoumes, Le Galès, and Singly 2018). Beck, in his analysis of risk society, calls for more "big politics", the ones that govern in a globally accepted way the daily life of citizens, and strongly denounces "small politics". This gap between democratic aspirations and practice is a source of tension and conflict, he says, because disaster produces social norms (Callens). In this sense, the close relationship between technological progress on the one hand, and the consequences for modern societies on the other hand, requires a new relationship to science and the prevention of disasters from the political powers, of which risk is the precursor.

Perez-Diaz (2003, 2009) raises the question of the relationship between science and public action by putting forward the hypotheses of an institutional action reacting to the scientific demonstration of the existence of a risk. Thus, a risk assessment model would lead to an action model, as soon as the public authorities rely on this first model to develop their preventive communications.

Hiriart and Martimort observe the recurring motifs of public authorities in risk management through, on the one hand, the overestimation of risk and, on the other, the overprotection of individuals. In return, disproportionate costs, far from instrumental rationality, are encountered.

However, Hiriart and Martimort caution that public action should not be assessed in terms of its effectiveness, but as the result of regulation between pressure groups, stakeholders and policy professionals. Rather than a negative approach, this perspective reflects a form of rationality. Indeed, the tendency to overprotect is the result of interactions between key players.

V) The dismissal of science

For Giddens, scientific knowledge confiscates all forms of justification outside the field of technical rationality. Beck also underlines the collapse of trust in specialists. He vigorously criticizes the lack of independence towards which science has slowly slipped with respect to political discourse and the interests of the economic world. Thereafter, the access to information will feed a process of social recognition for which "*the order of the world changes*". Science loses the private access to knowledge and becomes insufficient to establish the truth.

Then, in political action, the important thing is no longer about sharing the diagnosis but the social acceptability of the decision; the important thing is no longer legitimacy but acceptance.

Peretti-Watel (2005) emphasizes that if the call for science to enlighten decisions is part of an optimization logic, or even a rationalization of choices, it appears that the scientific contribution suffers from critical shortcomings that annihilate its impact. It is in this sense that Beck (2015) explains in detail the mechanisms that led to discrediting science as the creator of risks to which it must provide a response (reflexivity principle). Bourdin agrees with this observation: social systems share the same desire for control (to avoid hazards) in which "*fear prevails over hope*", without omitting to specify the political and social dangers that accompany such a posture.

In risk society, Beck forcefully affirms that risk identification must be the result of the synthesis of daily rationality and experts' rationality; he thus observes the duality of rationales and the need to bring them together. Indeed, for him, "*when it is a question of defining the risk, science loses the monopoly of rationality*". For this reason, he distinguishes the fracture between scientific rationality and social rationality, which are however, he recognizes, interdependent.

But scientific rationality is also supposed to inform social rationality (Beck 2015): "*science observes the risk*", "*the population becomes aware of the risk*". To promote this awareness spread, preventive action relies primarily on communication; the meaning given to words can also disqualify the message.

Beck invites a change of perspective to find political solutions for risk reduction. To this end, it is clearly up to science to make the necessary efforts to regain trust by analyzing the "*political implications of its work*".

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Translated by ASP Delphine CORREARD and the French Gendarmerie Officers Academy Language Department

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