



### **The Risk Society and Beyond: Critical Issues in Social Theory**

B. Adam, U. Beck & J. Van Loon (eds.)

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In *The Risk Society and Beyond* Adam, Beck and Van Loon have brought together a series of essays that seek to critically negotiate some of the conceptual terrain mapped out in Ulrich Beck's *Risikogesellschaft*. That the collection, taken as a whole, should strike us as something of a scholarly cocktail — with essays from scholars working in fields as diverse as social theory, genetic engineering, cultural studies, medical sociology, communication, philosophy, biotechnology, cybernetics and utopianism — is, according to Adam's and Van Loon's introductory remarks, a necessary product of the fact that Beck's *Risk Society* raises issues and concerns which are simply irreducible to any one academic discipline (p. 6).

Reading the text selectively — and undoubtedly against the intuitions of its editors — I would signal out two essays that I found interesting from a political theory point of view: Scott Lash's 'Risk Culture', and Ruth Levitas's 'Discourses of Risk and Utopia'. We can briefly consider each of these essays in turn. Lash's concern is with positioning the concept of risk in a way that makes it more effective in the practice of 'social critique' (p. 47). He seeks to do this by displacing or, in Derridean parlance, supplementing Beck's notion of a 'risk society' with an idea of, what he calls, 'risk culture'. Where the notion of *society* presumes a determinate, institutional, normatively rule bound, hierarchical and utilitarian order, *risk cultures*, Lash contends, function in 'non-institutional' or 'anti-institutional sociations'. Risk cultures, to put it after a Kantian fashion, have a form of 'aesthetic reflexivity' that renders them capable of 'disordering' the social (p. 47).

Levitas formulates what is perhaps a more direct attack on the 'risk society' thesis. That is to say, the 'discourse of risk society' (and Levitas also refers to the work of Anthony Giddens in this respect) is, from this view, questioned because it is seen as politically cautious or ideologically conservative. Levitas presents us with an essentially two-pronged critique. Firstly, she suggests that the analyses of Beck and Giddens implicitly 'utopianize the present' and gloss over the fact that 'capitalist relations' and 'class' continue to exert a decisive influence in the contemporary polity (p. 205). Consequently, and secondly, the proposed political alternatives advocated to deal with the problems of the risk



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society are considered 'insufficiently utopian' because they seem to imply that 'capitalism is the only game in town' (p. 209).

The virtue of a collection like *The Risk Society and Beyond* would seem to be reflected in the fact that it provides an interdisciplinary perspective on issues that are of immediate socio-political concern (ie, economic (in)security, ecology, the future of biotechnology, etc). The interdisciplinary nature of the text will probably ensure a broad-based, if rather selective, reading of the essays on offer. This is not an implied criticism. Indeed, it brings to mind Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion that we should read texts in the way we listen to records: that is, read and engage with the arguments that move you, pass over the ones that leave you cold.

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