

## THE SOCIETY OF FEAR

Ulrich Beck

POSITION



ULRICH BECK is a German sociologist, a political philosopher, who holds professorship at both the Munich University and the London School of Economics. He has contributed a number of new concepts in the field of sociology, including 'reflexive modernization', 'second modernity' and 'risk society'. Beck is the author of the following books: 'World Risk Society' (Cambridge, 1998; Russian edition in 2000), and 'What is Globalization?' (Cambridge, 1999; Russian edition in 2001)

■ *In your works, you have written that today, such categories as 'need' and 'necessity' have been replaced by 'fear'. How is such fear changing our society, and in particular, how is it affecting the state, including the democratic state and the social relations within it?*

First, I would like to make a distinction. I am not quite sure what such a distinction should be called in English. In German, we have two terms: *Angst* and *Furcht*. I do not know how to translate them properly into English, but *Angst* is very much related to your own

existential situation, and it depends on your particular economic situation and on the threats you are experiencing in relation to violence on the part of others and other such acts. *Angst* means that you have to react immediately in order to cope with those realities that are challenging you. *Furcht* is something different. *Furcht* means that existential problems, not only for yourself, but maybe for the common good of the nation and maybe even for humanity, form the basis of the concerns that you have.

■ *So, in your opinion, which one of these terms is relevant in terms of the state, for the political sphere, and for society at large?*

I think that both of them are relevant and this is actually the point. It is maybe not easy to distinguish and separate these two aspects, but I think **we should talk about those different aspects separately in regards to their political consequences.** *Angst*, which means that your own personal life, your economic existence, and your family is threatened by all kind of dangers – such as economic dangers, maybe by poisoned food and things like that – means that you yourself have to react immediately. And it often occurs that this reaction is not rational, but rather irrational; at the same time, you try to solve the problems you face by concentrating on your life and trying to push back those economic

empower populist and rightist goals and which really try to define the nation as a basic unit for politics, as they tend to offer quick recipes.

In general, these more reactionary answers to the situation regarding risk also involve us. At the same time, in relation to climate change, for instance, and other long-term risks that we are confronted with, we can observe the emergence of different attitudes. It is not only about your personal life either, but it may also concern the future generations, and not only in terms of your own national context but in transnational terms, in which your concern for the future is being articulated, which is to a degree organised, and maybe is even becoming effective in relation to political parties and movements.

■ *My next question is about the correlation between fear and the process of globalisation. Do you think that fear is some kind of obstacle in the way of globalisation for either the state or for society, or is it, on the contrary, a positive factor that may gradually push a given state or a society towards globalisation?*

I think my answer to this question depends on what you mean by globalisation. I think that today, for many people, globalisation is a threat in and of itself. They mainly feel threatened because their way of life, their world picture, their

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interests. Of course, in many ways, this can be used in our current society to advance specific political movements – specifically political movements, which

way of acting in everyday life is ultimately questioned. Suddenly, you are confronted with a global 'other' in everyday spheres. For example, you experience the

notion that financial risks that originated in a totally different country and maybe even on a different continent, have somehow become part of your own life and your own existence on the labour market, in the economy and so on.

You are suddenly experiencing a highly interconnected world, in which your vision and your interests in terms of the economy and sovereignty is undermined. I also think this is a threat to most people

cooperating and maybe even building institutions to resolve serious global problems. An example of the last cosmopolitan imperative – cooperate or fail – is, for example, the meeting of the G-20 states, at which participants tried to find answers to such transnational risk problems.

■ *I would like to ask about the way the Western media use fear as a tool. Is it correct, in your opinion, to say*

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all over the world and therefore, **there is a huge temptation in terms of anti-globalisation movements and movements that are attempting to pose a challenge to globalisation**, which are building new walls and which try to emphasise local and nation-specific recipes for people's identity. At the same time, we do have a good number of risks that are indeed global, such as climate change, many environmental problems and, of course, the financial crisis. To some extent and on a different level, we have the threat posed by terrorists as well.

If you look at the sociological logic behind these risks, you have to make a distinction yet again. Such global risks are not about catastrophe; rather, they are about the anticipation of catastrophe – the anticipation in the present about the possible future, which has to be counter-acted. **Therefore, there is a huge mobilisation power in the anticipation and staging of global risks, which actually overcomes national borders**, which forces national governments and national parties to interact and cooperate with national unions and national civil society movements. To some extent, those global risks induce a cosmopolitan imperative: cooperate or fail. Either you cooperate or you fail. And in order to get ahead, to find solutions, which you don't find on the local or on the national level, there has to be openness to the world in order to find new ways of

*that Western mass media have abused such fear? Perhaps it is that they have not only heightened the sense of fear among people, but that they have also brought some more fears than there actually exist in reality. What do you think?*

I think there is a problem, because for the mass media to cope with or describe risks and possible catastrophes, this is a matter of business. The more you can stage possible catastrophes, the more you try to gain the readers' attention and peak the attention of the general public. Thus, there is indeed a strong relationship or maybe even some kind of marriage between the staging of catastrophes, actual possible catastrophes and the media. We do have the impression that there are always many kinds of catastrophes lurking around the corner, even if it may be the case that we are currently living in a world that does not have as many wars and as many catastrophes as there used to be in the past.

I think one example, which makes this even more plausible is the existence of a terrorist threat. I think that the Al-Qaeda movement has been, to some extent, gaining in importance and its position in terms of world power even by the acknowledgement by the US president that it is enemy number one in the twenty-first century. **This means that, according to the degree of danger he poses, Bin Laden has been**

**compared to the Nazi regime prior to the Second World War and the Communist threat that followed the war.** Because of this acknowledgement and due to the mass media coverage of possible terrorist attacks, these terrorist threats have been constructed and enforced both socially and politically.

■ *The last one in this series is about the relationship between religion and fear. It is believed that one of the reasons for the secularisation of society was that science and modern society have helped humans to overcome their fears and insecurities about their lives, health and property, and that these fears and insecurities constitute the roots of religious sentiment. Thus, if we assume that our society is actually full of fear, should we expect to see a new rise in terms of religiousness?*

I think that the expectation that the more modernisation there is, the less power that religion will have, which is the main theory behind secularisation, is actually false. In many corners of the world, even in Europe, there is a new development – I would not say revival – of religion. This is something that I would call religiosity. It concerns the principle of neo-liberalism, but at the same time, it also concerns basic rights, political rights, civil rights, and social rights, which are all addressed to the individual and essentially means that the individual himself has to take responsibility, not only for his own actions and his own consequences, but also maybe even for system-level problems such as unemployment.

**Even global risks now have to be, to some extent, resolved at the individual level.** Because of this ongoing individualisation process, there are all kinds of beliefs as answers to those challenges become important once again. And I think we are currently seeing a revival, not only of religions, but also of various kinds of mixed religiosity, as answers to those threats of globalisation concern individualisation as well. ■

*Ulrich Beck was speaking with Yulia Netesova*