Living Dangerously? A Critical Examination of the Risk Society Thesis

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Contents

Introduction

The latter half of the twentieth century in western society has been described as a period of flux, uncertainty and rapid cultural change (Bauman, 1983; Giddens, 1990; Marwick, 1990). Distinct transformations in the structure and functions of social institutions are said to have generated a complex mix of liberties and constraints (Giddens, 1991; 1994; Hughes and Fergusson, 2000: 3). As the process of globalization continues to disperse through economies, cultures and political institutions, the connectivity between global and local activities has become more perceptible (Beck, 2000a: 27; Robertson, 1992, Tomlinson, 1999; Waters, 1995). These properties of global convergence, rapid fluctuation and routine indeterminacy are accentuated by the phenomenon of risk. In contemporary culture, risk has become a ubiquitous social issue, casting its spectre over a wider range of everyday practices and experiences (Adam and van Loon, 2000: 2; Lupton, 1999: 14). At a global level, current concerns about the development of genetic technology, the expansion of environmental pollution and the spread of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) are all underscored by risk.

Despite such omnipresence, the meaning of risk remains indeterminate, being fiercely contested by experts, academics and the general public. Since the Enlightenment period in Europe, the development of scientific, technological and medical knowledge has facilitated an assemblage of expert practices of risk calculation, assessment and management. Indeed, the application of knowledge about risk has enabled western cultures to eliminate a consecution of threats to public health that blighted earlier

epochs (Giddens, 1991: 116).[1]

The proliferation of technical and scientific knowledge has undoubtedly fostered more acute forms of public risk consciousness. In addition, the extension of public knowledge about risk has engendered discernible lifestyle changes, particularly in relation to health, fitness and diet (Beck-Gernsheim, 2000; Lupton, 1999a: 62). However, despite improved health and longevity, society is currently confronted by a batch of risks of immense magnitude, such as nuclear power, biotechnology and global warming. In this sense, the implicit bargain for technological development and enhanced risk consciousness appears to be an amplification of uncertainty within everyday life:

> Today, active citizens must add the monitoring of their risks of physical and mental ill-health, sexual health, dependency (on drugs, alcohol, nicotine, welfare or personal relationships) of being a victim of crime, of their own and their children's education, of low self-esteem and so on (Dean, 1999: 146).

Certainly, advancements in knowledge about risk have not resulted in a more secure social climate. As the means of combating certain threats are promulgated, more complex questions and issues emerge. In matters of risk, it would seem that 'the more we know, the less we understand' (van Loon, 2000: 173). This paradox perhaps enables us to appreciate why individuals in the West live comparatively longer and healthier lives, whilst simultaneously feeling less safe and secure (Pidgeon, 2000: 47).

In the last three decades, the dissemination of information about risk has been aided by the diffusion of media technologies. The broader circulation of risk communications has undoubtedly enhanced awareness of risk and intensified public scrutiny of social institutions (Wynne, 1996; Fox, 2000: 1). Further, the rising cultural profile of risk has also catapulted forward fundamental concerns about the

[1] It is estimated that for every death from disease today there were well over a hundred in the middle ages. Statistic cited in 'Risky Business', part of the *Equinox* series screened by Channel Four on Monday 12th April 1999.

relationship between individuals, institutions and society. In this respect, it is probable that contestation and deliberation about risk have acted as a conduit for the articulation of broader ethical concerns (ESRC Report, 1999: 20; Vera-Sanso, 2000: 112). These social trends indicate that risk is now interpreted as both a political and a moral issue within western cultures (Caygill, 2000: 155).

The intensification of interest in risk within the public sphere has been mirrored by a fascination in the subject within academia. Scholars of economics, employment relations, politics, science, health and the environment have all contributed to a lively and expanding debate about risk. Whilst the language of risk may be prolific, the concept itself remains cloaked in ambiguity. This residual confusion about the constitution and the social impacts of risk have made it an irresistible subject for social and cultural theory.

In conceptualising risk, three dominant paradigms have evolved within the social sciences (Lupton 1999; 1999a).[2] Firstly, inspired by the experimental work of Mary Douglas (1966, 1982, 1985, 1992), anthropological approaches to risk have emerged. Over the years, Douglas has investigated variations in risk perceptions between individuals, groups and cultures around the globe. In recent times, the anthropological approach has been revitalised by the efforts of Caplan (2000), Bujra (2000) and Nugent (2000).

Secondly, a governmentality approach to risk has been developed by a collection of theorists deploying Michel Foucault's writings on the disciplinary effects of discourse (Foucault, 1978, 1991). Utilising a governmentality perspective, theorists such as Castel (1991) and Dean (1999) have accentuated the role of institutions in constructing understandings of risk and explored the way in which discourses of risk

[2]It must be recognised that within these paradigms significant differences of emphasis have materialised. For example, Beck's project is firmly anchored by the concept of risk, whereas Giddens's academic interests are more diffuse.

restrict and regiment human behaviour.

Thirdly, the risk society thesis assembled by Beck (1992) and advocated by Giddens (1998, 1999) has sought to model the general effects of risk on everyday life. Both Beck (1999: 111) and Giddens (1998: 28) maintain that the process of modernization has spawned a unique collection of 'manufactured risks'. For Beck, the deleterious consequences of manufactured risks span the globe, giving rise to radical changes in social structure and cultural experience.

In the last decade, the risk society thesis has been hugely influential, serving as a stimulus for academic, environmental and political dialogue (Caplan, 2000: 2; Adam and van Loon, 2000: 1). Beck's extensively referenced *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1992)[3] is considered by many to be a significant landmark in social and cultural theory (Adam and van Loon, 2000: 2; McGuigan, 1999: 125). The risk society argument has also captured the imagination of the media and the public, enhancing Beck's status as a 'zeitgeist sociologist' (Skinner, 2000: 160). Not only does the risk society thesis deal with the relationship between risk and social uncertainty, it also serves as a reflection on the modern condition and a sweeping narrative of social change. Whilst Beck's ambivalent mode of narration may have a postmodern quality, the content of the risk society argument is indisputably modernist (Dryzek, 1995). Beck's thesis is an attempt to capture the essence of social experience along the paths previously trodden by Marx and Weber:

> What I suggest is a model for understanding our times, in a not unhopeful spirit. What others see as the development of a postmodern order, my argument interprets as a stage of radicalised modernity...where most postmodern theorists are critical of grand narratives, general theory and humanity, I remain committed to all of these, but in a new sense...my notion of reflexive modernity implies that we do not have *enough* reason (Beck, 1998a: 20).

[3]The book was originally entitled *Risikogesellschaft: Auf Dem Weg in ein andere Moderne* and was first published in West Germany in 1986. Henceforth, I shall abbreviate the title to *Risk Society* (1992).

Whilst the modernist rationale which underpins the risk society thesis has been questioned (Bujra, 2000), there is little doubt that Beck's work has been instrumental in forcing risk onto the academic agenda. The risk society idea has been pivotal in the evolution of debate in the disciplines of sociology, cultural studies, politics, geography and environmental studies. As a result, a medley of multi-disciplinary collections have mobilised Beck's theory of risk as a touchstone for broader discussion about the role of technology, health and politics in society (Adam et al, 2000; Caplan, 2000; Franklin, 1998). A further clique of theorists have sought to examine specific strands of the risk society thesis, such as the portrayal of reflexivity, the construction of the media or the logic of political distribution (Lash, 1994; Cottle, 1998; Scott, 2000). Concomitantly, several more detailed and progressive reviews of Beck's contribution to social theory have appeared (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Goldblatt, 1995; McGuigan, 1999).[4]

Taking account of Beck's prolificacy and academic status, the current absence of a systematic review of the risk society perspective is quite remarkable. This study will seek to address this void by fulfilling conjoint objectives. Firstly, I intend to critically evaluate the credibility of the risk society model, drawing upon a blend of theoretical and empirical evidence. Secondly, I will employ the risk society thesis as a vehicle for discussion about the wider impacts and effects of risk. Whilst the prime objective of this inquiry is to unpack and interrogate the risk society perspective, the breadth of this study will extend beyond the realms of Beck's project. In scrutinising the relationship between risk and lived experience, anthropological and governmentality approaches will be utilised as tools for comparison and critique.[5] In addition to

[4]In my opinion, these three pieces of work are the most thorough and comprehensive assessments of Beck's work currently available. However, it should be recognised that - rather than revolving around the risk society thesis *per se* - these contributions are situated within specialised projects. Furlong and Cartmel are centrally concerned with the experience of contemporary youth, Goldblatt focuses upon the representation of environmental issues in social theory and McGuigan provides an eclectic review of theories of (post) modern culture.

[5]For example, in chapter four I draw upon the anthropological approach to enrich Beck's understanding of risk perception. In chapter five, the governmentality perspective is mobilised to illuminate the relationship between risk, discourse and politics.

critically evaluating the risk society perspective, this study also seeks to engage with the general features, functions and ramifications of risk in contemporary culture. In operationalising these concurrent objectives, I shall draw upon both micro and macro levels of analysis.

The thesis does not seek to provide a historical examination of perspectives on risk within social and cultural theory. Nor is this study intended as an exhaustive general review of Beck's academic achievements. At the risk of recapitulation, the project explicitly focuses upon the credibility and value of the risk society model as a vehicle for interpreting contemporary patterns of social experience.

In its entirety, this study challenges the risk society thesis by exploring and re-evaluating the relationship between risk, social structures and lived experience. In particular, I will dispute the claim that the emergence of manufactured risks heralds a radically 'new mode of societalization' (Beck, 1992: 127). In critically analysing the everyday negotiation of risk, it is hoped that the thesis will constitute a novel contribution to the developing body of literature on risk and provide a long overdue analysis of the risk society perspective. In fulfilling these criteria, I intend to shadow Beck's approach, applying the risk society thesis to crucial areas of social experience such as employment, personal relations, the mass media, politics and the environment.

I commence this study by outlining the framework of the risk society thesis and introducing the concept of risk. An exegesis of *Risk Society* (1992) will provide a platform for debate about the production and distribution of risk in contemporary western society. This formative discussion brings to the surface rudimentary issues to be investigated in subsequent chapters.

In chapter two, I begin to systematically analyse the institutional dimensions of risk.

At an empirical level, the relationship between employment and risk production will be analysed with reference to current labour market trends and changing patterns of work. Theoretically, I mobilise the concept of individualization and the related notion of distributional logic to track alleged subterranean shifts in social experience.

The institutional dimensions of the risk society thesis will be further developed in chapter three with reference to the definition and mediation of risk. Herein, I shall examine the operations of government, science and the legal system in the representation and communication of risk. Furthermore, I seek to educe the role of the mass media as a dialogic forum for risk communication. In particular, it will be argued that the risk society thesis presents an impoverished account of the process of risk communication which undervalues the capacity of the media as an interlocutor of risk in contemporary society.

The penultimate chapter of the thesis signals a shift in emphasis away from institutional analysis and towards the more abstract issue of risk perception. Building upon the findings of preceding chapters, I examine the nature of public understandings of risk, applying Beck's theory to existing empirical research. Having exposed significant flaws in the risk society thesis, I argue in favour of a more holistic model of risk perception which captures the changing dynamics of lay-expert relations in contemporary society.

Finally, I focus my attention on the association between risk and political activity. In this section, I will draw upon global political trends to address the alleged shift from a 'politics of class' to a 'politics of risk'. At this juncture, contemporary patterns of political engagement will be interlinked with Beck's notion of 'subpolitics' (Beck, 1992: 233; 1997: 94). The alleged union between risk and politics will be evaluated, using the current disputation around genetically modified organisms as an exemplar. In conclusion, the limitations of Beck's theory of subpolitics will be highlighted by

counterpoising the emancipatory potential of subpolitics with the discursive approach to risk.

1

The Production and Distribution of Risk

1.1 Introduction

Since the mid-1980s, the concept of risk has acted as a fulcrum for the sociological project of Ulrich Beck. The seminal *Risk Society* (1992), first published in 1986, has been widely acclaimed as the centrepiece of Beck's work. The book, which has sold over 60,000 copies worldwide, has propelled Beck into the academic spotlight and produced significant reverberations within the public sphere (Rustin, 1994; McGuigan, 1999). Following on from the publication of *Risk Society* (1992), the concept of risk has been omnipresent in Beck's writing (Beck, 1994; 1995; 1997; 1998a; 1999; 2000). In a nutshell, the relationship between qualitative changes in the nature of risk and shifting patterns of social experience have provided the focus for Beck's pioneering approach (Beck, 1992; 1994; 1995). In more recent offerings, Beck has mobilised risk as an articulation point for debate about the restructuring of employment relations (2000), the diversification of political activity (1997; 1999) and the contents of globalization (2000a). Despite focusing on such an extensive range of subject areas, Beck has retained risk as a vital theoretical referent. In the midst of considerable criticism, Beck has consistently maintained that contemporary western society is embedded in a culture of risk which has profound impacts upon the nature of everyday life.

In chapter one - as in the thesis as a whole - the key subjects of discussion will be Beck's most renowned works, *Risk Society* (1992) and *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995). At this formative stage, it is worth pointing out that Beck's position

between these texts is reasonably consistent, even if his argument *within* each book is not (Cottle, 1998). Certainly, a number of significant concepts broached in *Risk Society* (1992) are developed and refined in *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995).[6] Nevertheless, there are also notable differences in the style and content of each book. *Risk Society* (1992) is a comparatively broad-based text which reviews changes in employment and social relationships in relation to risk. In contrast, *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995) has a much narrower base, being more acutely focussed on the impacts of environmental risks on the natural environment. Whilst in the latter text risk is invariably yoked to ecological concerns, the former contains a more capacious and diverse approach to risk.

It is also worth raising the inevitable problems of interpretation which arise in relation to Beck's work (Smith et al, 1997: 170). The bulk of these hermeneutic difficulties stem from Beck's ambiguous and oscillating style of writing (Goldblatt, 1995: 154). In the first instance, Beck's ideas are often pitched at a highly abstract and speculative level (Cottle, 1998: 10). To further obfuscate matters, Beck is also rather partial to switching between tenses within the chapters of a text.[7] On occasion, such a mixed style of communication makes it difficult to decipher whether Beck is describing the past, the present or the future. Indeed, Beck often writes in what one might refer to as a hypothetical present tense, 'as if' the scenario recounted were actually taking place. At other junctures, a series of future scenarios are presented to the reader (Beck, 1992: 223-235; 1997: 90-94; 2000: 150-179). As I will seek to illustrate, whilst this strategy has certain benefits, Beck's frequent variations of style do tend to come at the expense of theoretical clarity.

In order to properly appreciate the depth and resonance of the risk society thesis, it is first necessary to form a clear understanding of the shifting nature and meaning of

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[6]For example, in *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995) Beck fleshes out his understanding of risk distribution, risk calculation and the 'polluter pays' principle.

[7]See, for example, the use of multiple tenses in chapter seven of *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995).

risk. Hence, I shall begin by succinctly tracing historical definitions of risk. This discussion will be intermeshed with a capsule account of the risk society argument. It is intended that the descriptive framework constructed in chapter one will form a suitable structure for the rigorous analysis which follows in subsequent chapters.

In outlining the risk society thesis, particular attention will be accorded to historical variations in the nature of risk. The substance of alleged epochal transitions will be reviewed with reference to the vital issues of risk production and risk distribution. Thus, in the opening chapter of the thesis I intend to travel along two intersecting paths. Firstly, the fluctuating dynamics of the process of risk production will be evaluated. Secondly, I shall compare and contrast patterns of risk distribution in traditional and contemporary societies. In sections 1.6 and 1.7, the affinity between risk production and risk distribution will be emphasised, drawing upon the theories of individualization (Beck, 1992: 127; 1994: 57) and distributional logic (Beck, 1992: 19). This thin discussion will pave the way for a richer, more critical examination of the risk society thesis in chapter two.

1.2 Defining Risk

Prior to unpacking the body of Beck's thesis, it may first prove instructive to briefly trail the etymology of risk. As Lupton (1999: 8) notes, risk is a word which is commonly used to indicate threat and harm. In everyday parlance, the term 'risk' is used as 'a synonym for danger or peril, for some unhappy event which may happen to someone' (Ewald, 1991: 199). Whilst this definition is apt, it must be recognised that understandings of risk have varied substantially over time. In many respects, the concept of risk is a relatively new phenomenon, which has gradually seeped into European culture through the last four hundred years. The word risk is said to derive from the Latin word *risico* and was first used in the seventeenth century as a

navigational term by sailors entering uncharted waters (Ewald, 1991: 199; 1993: 226, Giddens, 1999: 1, Lupton, 1999: 5). Although risk was originally conceived as a spatial term, it later became associated with time and money through the activities of investors and bankers. In this sense, risk came to refer to the probable outcomes of investment for borrowers and lenders. Indeed, in modern times, risk is still strongly coupled to the economic world through forms of statistical calculation, probability and acquisitions. As Giddens (1999: 2) points out, the concept of risk remains inseparable from notions of probability and uncertainty. Theoretically speaking, a risk only arises when an activity or event contains some degree of uncertainty: 'the essence of risk is not that it *is* happening, but that it *might* be happening' (Adam and van Loon, 2000: 2).

In contemporary discourse, the properties of probability and uncertainty have been supplemented with the notion of futurity. Risks are now commonly perceived to be hazards or dangers which are associated with future outcomes (Beck, 1992: 73; 1999: 3; Giddens, 1998: 27, Lupton, 1999: 74). Thus, the idea of risk is indexed to a desire to control and predict the future:

> To calculate a risk is to master time, to discipline the future. To provide for the future does not just mean living from day to day and arming oneself against ill fortune, but also mathematizing one's commitment (Ewald, 1991: 207).

Whilst the offerings of Ewald and Giddens give us a flavour for the meaning of risk, I do not intend to delve deeper into the etymology of risk.[8] Indeed, the arduous task of accurately defining risk is a problematic exercise for at least three reasons. Firstly, as noted previously, the meaning of risk has - and will - differ considerably over time and place (Hinchcliffe, 2000; Lash and Wynne, 1992). Secondly, the indeterminate character of risks ensures that understandings of risk will invariably be contested between individuals and social groups (Caplan, 2000; Fox, 1999). Given the

[8]For a detailed discussion of the changing meaning of risk, see either Lupton (1999: 1-13) or Ewald (1991; 1993).

polysemic nature of risk, it is perhaps misguided to search for a single encompassing meaning. As Luhmann points out, what are deemed to be 'risks' for some, can be perceived as 'opportunities' by others (Luhmann, 1993: 71). Thirdly, in aiming for comprehensiveness, catch-all definitions of risk often concede concrete meaning. Putting aside epistemological issues, in closing down the meaning of risk we are in danger of losing sight of the various takes on risk which illuminate Beck's work. Ultimately, general definitions tell us little about the changing context of risk, or about how risk is interpreted and experienced in everyday life. Hence, restricting our understanding of risk might be construed as contrary to the usage - and the spirit - of risk in Beck's work. These qualifications may explain Beck's reluctance to offer a compact definition of risk.[9] In order to arrive at more nuanced appreciation of risk, we are arguably better served by recognising the polysemic quality of the concept and attempting to illuminate the socio-historic context which risks both arise out of and shape.

In line with dominant cultural and institutional definitions, Beck describes risk as the possibility of exposure to danger, physical damage or loss (Beck, 1992: 21). More crucially, Beck contends that the composition of risks has fundamentally altered in the last quarter of a century (Beck, 1992a; Franklin, 1998: 1). For Beck, risks are no longer unavoidable accidents visited upon society by nature. Rather, in contemporary culture, risk is increasingly associated with human decisions and actions (Beck, 1995: 2). In contrast to pre-modern times, contemporary risks are precipitated by socio-economic and technological processes. For example, global warming, radioactive waste and new variant Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease (*nv* CJD) are all endogenously produced. Thus, it is argued that risks are *systematic* dangers and uncertainties, induced by the ongoing process of modernization (Beck, 1992: 21).

[9] As will be discussed in chapter four, Beck perceives risk through a variety of different lenses. In *Risk Society* (1992) and *World Risk Society* (1999) Beck oscillates between realist and social constructionist understandings of risk. On this point, see Alexander and Smith (1996), or Lupton (1999) p. 59-62.

In *Risk Society* (1992) and *Reflexive Modernization* (1994), Beck situates his understanding of risk within the context of a more expansive historical narrative. In these two texts in particular, Beck claims that we are witnessing the beginnings of a very distinctive form of 'reflexive modernity'. Reflexive modernization refers to the way in which patterns of cultural experience are uprooted and disembedded by radical changes in the structure of class, gender, the family and employment (Beck, 1994: 2). Beck reasons that the structural certainties previously provided by social and cultural institutions have all but evaporated. The development of a reflexive society means that people *have* to make decisions and choices about the future. As a consequence, individuals become more acutely responsible for the consequences of their choices and actions.

For Beck, the changing nature of risk is melded to the broader process of reflexive modernization. It is argued that, through the process of reflexive development, a nascent system of unmanageable risks has appeared. Further, the increasingly ubiquitous profile of contemporary risks means that individuals can no longer obviate danger. The pervasiveness of anthropogenic risks effectively *forces* society to confront the unintended 'side effects' of human actions (Beck, 1999: 9).

Of course, the concept of risk is absolutely central to the process of reflexive modernization. Indeed, Beck often uses the terms 'reflexive modernization' and 'risk society' interchangeably.[10] If the two states can be differentiated, the risk society perhaps refers to the most developed phase of reflexive modernization, in which the potential for human self-destruction becomes apparent (Beck, 1995: 67; Lupton, 1999: 66). To maintain analytical clarity, others have referred to reflexive modernization as the *process* of development and risk society as the *outcome*

[10]Following Beck, the two periods will be considered as coterminous for the purposes of this thesis. However, it should be noted that the meaning of the term reflexive modernization has been the subject of a complex debate within academia. See, for example, Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) or Alexander (1996).

(Goldblatt, 1995: 157). Whatever the intricate distinctions,[11] the crux of Beck's argument seems to be that changes in the composition of risks, allied to underlying structural transformations, have facilitated a transition from industrial modernity towards the risk society. Without doubt, the contention that western society can collectively be characterised as a 'risk society' has proven to be the most hotly disputed aspect of Beck's work (see McMylor, 1996; Smith et al, 1997; Wynne, 1996). Beck describes the risk society as:

> A phase of development of modern society in which the social, political, ecological and individual risks created by the momentum of innovation increasingly elude the control and protective institutions of industrial society (Beck, 1994: 27).

As will be discussed, the alleged movement towards the risk society is underpinned by a series of propositions about the changing nature of risk. These propositions have been seized upon by several critical theorists, who have outlined the pitfalls of linking epochal changes to the changing nature of risk (Dryzek, 1995; McMylor, 1996). In particular, controversy surrounds the suggestion that contemporary risks are fundamentally discrete from the risks and hazards experienced in previous epochs (Furedi, 1997; Scott, 2000). Hasn't risk *always* been a prevalent feature in western society? Cannot all epochs and cultures be defined as 'risk societies'?

As we shall see, Beck is at pains to answer these questions in the negative. For Beck, far from remaining static, both the constitution and the effects of risk have fluctuated markedly. Beck urges his audience to recognise that risks are no longer simply an arbitrary but inevitable aspect of social development. Qualitative variations in the nature of risk are said to mean that dangers produced by the system can no longer be contained. Instead, risks fostered by the momentum of innovation breed with such intensity that existing mechanisms of risk management become swamped (Beck,

[11] Indeed, at times Beck himself seems somewhat uncertain about the differences. Beck's most systematic exposition of the theory of reflexive modernization appears in his three-way discussion with Lash and Giddens. See, Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994).

1996: 27). Thus, Beck argues that incessant economic, scientific and technological development has resulted in the creation of serial risks (Beck, 1995: 115).

In many respects, the risk society thesis is predicated upon the distinction between hazards and dangers of 'pre-industrial', 'industrial' and 'risk society' (Beck, 1995: 78; Goldblatt, 1995: 157). Drawing upon a fairly light historical contextualisation,[12] Beck alludes to two paradigmatic forms of risk. Firstly, Beck refers to 'natural hazards', such as drought, famine and plague. These natural disasters are associated with the pre-industrial era. At the level of risk consciousness, natural hazards are attributed to external forces, such as gods, demons or nature (Beck, 1992a: 98). In the period of industrial modernity, natural hazards are complemented by a growing set of humanly produced risks which stem from industrial or techno-scientific decisions (Beck, 1992a: 98). Finally, in the movement into the risk society, these 'manufactured risks' prevail and come to dominate social and cultural experience. In short: 'the risk society begins where nature ends' (Beck, 1998a: 10). In stark contrast to natural hazards, manufactured risks are decision contingent and endogenous entities which are generated by the practices of 'people, firms, state agencies and politicians' (Beck, 1992a: 98). Thus, Beck focuses his attention on the impact of manufactured risk on patterns of everyday life. For Beck, the threat of risk runs like a ribbon through an increasing number of social spheres, such as the family, employment, health and personal relationships.

Throughout his work, Beck employs a number of theoretical constructs to differentiate between manufactured risks and natural hazards. In amalgamating Beck's work, three qualitative indicators can be identified which enable us to conceptualise the shifting character of risk. These are: the association between risk, time and space, the catastrophic nature of risk and the breakdown of mechanisms of institutional liability.

[12]For further explanation of these epochal transformations, see Beck (1995:78; 1992a).

1.3 The Extension of Time and Space

The changing relationship between risk, time and space is a central plank of the risk society thesis. In precis, Beck argues that pre-industrial and early industrial cultures were prey to forms of risk which were geographically and temporally contained (Beck, 1999: 143). In the movement towards the risk society, threats to public health develop a more open aspect, both in time and in space. A short comparative example will enable us to map out the substantive differences between closed hazards and open risks. Being an inhabitant of Valparaiso, Chile, at the turn of the twentieth century might retrospectively be considered to be a high-risk activity. In 1906 an earthquake measuring 8.6 on the Richter scale killed over 20,000 people living in the city. Despite being an incontestably horrific and harrowing experience, Beck argues that natural hazards generally remain tightly bound by time and space. Those killed or injured in the tragedy would have resided in close proximity to the epicentre and the physical suffering incurred in the initial incident would have been relatively instantaneous.

For Beck, natural hazards such as earthquakes still threaten human life throughout the globe.[13] However, in the West, the detrimental effects of natural hazards have been partially alleviated by producing shock resistant buildings and avoiding construction in volatile areas. Furthermore, in western cultures, natural hazards such as drought and famine have all but been banished (Giddens, 1991: 116). However, Beck believes that in the transition from pre-industrial to risk society, residual natural hazards are augmented by an aggregation of man-made risks (Goldblatt, 1996). These socially fabricated risks are more mobile and oblique than traditional forms of danger.

Beck maintains that the uncontrollable effects of manufactured risks were graphically illustrated by the Chernobyl disaster (Beck, 1992: 7). In comparison with the natural

[13]This is vividly illustrated by the recent earthquake in Gujerat, India which killed a similar number of people to the Valparaiso disaster.

disasters which typified pre-industrial life, the risks engendered by the reactor explosion shattered geographical boundaries. The hazards created by the explosion of the chemical plant were not tied to locale, endangering citizens far and wide. Whilst the toxins which seeped from the plant severely affected the population in Belarus and the Ukraine, radiation also glided over national and international boundaries, producing unknown global effects (Beck, 1992: 7; Wynne 1996: 62). Drawing upon the Chernobyl case, Beck contends that the mobile nature of the risk actively negates the principle of geographical limitation. Alarmingly, contingency safety plans for a nuclear accident at Chernobyl only covered a radius of 25 kilometres (Beck, 1995: 78).

In addition to transcending spatial limits, Beck argues that contemporary risks cannot be temporally limited. The deleterious consequences produced by manufactured risks are not necessarily manifested instantaneously (Adam and van Loon, 2000: 5). In the Chernobyl case, the devastating effects of exposure to poisonous gases did not take their toll immediately. Years after the initial explosion, thousands of Ukranians and Belarussians have developed serious cancers and breathing disorders. More disturbingly, given that nuclear fall-out cannot be destroyed, toxins harboured underground and in the atmosphere may be continually producing damage to future generations: 'the injured of Chernobyl are today, years after the catastrophe, not even all born yet'[14] (Beck, 1996: 31).

The number of 'knock-on' risks associated with the Chernobyl accident bear testament to the seriality of manufactured risks. A decade after the reactor explosion, British scientific experts confirmed that radiocaesium was present in dangerous levels

[14]Nearly 750,000 people are thought to have died as a result of the Chernobyl disaster. For further details about the diverse and catastrophic nature of the risks produced by the nuclear explosion see, www.chernobyl.org.uk. The Red Cross report that the incidence of thyroid cancer in Belarus and the Ukraine has risen rapidly in recent years. In Britain, Communities Opposed to Environmental Pollution (COTEP) have noted that an abnormally high number of residents on a housing site close to a toxic landfill dump in Wales have been affected by breathing disorders. More ominously, a disproportionate number of local babies have been born with Gastroschisis, a condition in which the inner organs are positioned outside the body (personal correspondence).

in soils in Cumbria in the North-West of England (Wynne, 1996: 62). Government scientists confirmed that the situation was directly related to chemical fallout from the Chernobyl accident. In the Cumbrian case, radioactive soil contamination generated a kaleidoscope of risks to the natural environment, grazing animals, local residents and farmers. Furthermore, the possibility that soon to be consumed livestock may have become contaminated illuminates the dilatory quality of manufactured risks.

Beck believes that incidents such as Chernobyl restructure social understandings of risk (Beck, 1995a: 504). The dangers attached to modern risks are not subject to temporal restrictions and defy geographical enclosure (van Loon, 2000: 169). Many hazards - be they nuclear, chemical or genetic - are invested with a potential for destruction which is only partly manifested at the site of the risk (Beck, 1999: 3). Indeed, in certain cases, such as AIDS, cancer or *nv* CJD, the actual source of the risk remains nebulous. As will be illustrated, the uncertain component of contemporary risk has the effect of ramifying public uncertainty (Caygill, 2000: 167).

By contrasting disparate examples, we can begin to understand why Beck is motivated to distinguish between pre-modern and contemporary risks. At a superficial glance, it appears that contemporary risks do adhere to a different time/space format than pre-modern hazards.[15] In this context, we can begin to appreciate Beck's reference to contemporary risks as 'galloping accidents' (Beck, 1992a: 99).

1.4 Risks as Worst Imaginable Accidents

The diverse threats presented by manufactured dangers also illustrate a second characteristic of contemporary risk. Beck avers that the effects of manufactured risks are relatively multitudinous and catastrophic (Beck, 1992a: 100). Manufactured risks

[15] I shall interrogate this claim in greater depth shortly.

are said to be fundamentally more *apocalyptic* than the natural hazards which prevailed in previous eras. Beck's most commonly used icons of destruction are nuclear power, environmental despoliation and genetic technology (Beck, 1992: 39; 1995: 4). According to Beck, each of these technological developments are capable of yielding the 'worst imaginable accident' (WIA), which may ultimately result in the eradication of the planet (Beck, 1999: 53). In recent times, biotechnologists have uncovered the tools necessary for human cloning, with rogue scientists grotesquely competing to create the first genetically reproduced human being.[16] In the case of nuclear power, a single atomic explosion would be sufficient to annihilate civilisation. As Irwin notes, technologies such as atomic energy effectively break the barriers of risk management, defying traditional practices of insurance and aftercare (Irwin et al, 2000) Similarly, Beck points out that the safety of nuclear reactor plants is testable only *after* they are constructed (Beck, 1992a: 108). Meanwhile, the incontrovertible evidence of global warming is gradually being accepted by politicians and citizens throughout Europe (Hulme, 2000). Such an apparently high-risk cultural climate leads Beck to conclude that technological modernization has transported society to the brink of collective self-destruction:

> In spite of the inevitable disagreement over what, why, in what respect and for whom something constitutes a 'risk', there would probably soon be unanimous agreement on one basic historical fact: namely, that the second half of the twentieth century has distinguished itself by virtue of the interplay of progress with the possibility of annihilation by the ecological, nuclear, chemical and genetic hazards we impose upon ourselves (Beck, 1995: 83).

Beck believes that it is within human capabilities to destroy *all* that we have created, with *that* which we have created (Lupton, 1999a: 4). Not only are manufactured risks potentially catastrophic, they are also cumulative in their effects (Caplan, 2000: 167). The massification of risk is aptly illustrated by the threat to public health currently posed by toxic substances in the atmosphere. Arguing along paths well trodden by

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[16]See *The Sunday Times* article by John Follain, entitled 'Italian doctor prepares to clone first human being'. 28th January 2001 p. 30.

ecologists, Beck contends that the toxicity of contemporary forms of environmental pollution is quantitatively much larger than in either pre or industrial modernity. Cyclical industrial and technological 'developments' have resulted in the amplification of toxins in the atmosphere. Crucially, the harmful effects of these toxins on the individual and the environment are irreversible. Leaning heavily on the three icons of destruction for examples, Beck concludes that western cultures are currently living under the penumbra of self-annihilation via worst imaginable accidents.

1.5 The Breakdown of Institutional Liability

Throughout his work, Beck implies that the unmanageable quality of manufactured risk has adversely impacted on the social institutions charged with regulating risk (Beck, 1992; 1995; 1998). Of particular interest to Beck is the manner in which governing institutions have deciphered liability claims and organised compensation packages. The historical aspect of Beck's argument is most fully developed in *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995). Here, Beck compares risk assessment and risk liability procedures in industrial modernity with the present day, drawing upon the work of François Ewald. Elaborating on the framework developed in *Risk Society* (1992), Beck demonstrates that the rate and momentum of technical development is growing exponentially, leading to the generation of large-scale risks. The scope and prevalence of manufactured risks are said to usher in a plethora of problems for the institutions responsible for insuring the public against risk. Again, Beck contrasts the volatility of hazards in the risk society with the more institutionally manageable risks of the simple industrial epoch. Unfortunately, Beck has rather little to say about methods of risk calculation in pre-modern society. This omission is indicative of a broader tendency to shift between analyses of different epochs without

adequately explaining the bases of distinction.[17] Nevertheless, reading between the lines, one might surmise that in pre-modern cultures, organised systems of liability and compensation were scarce and that methods of conceptualising risk involved a blend of fate and blame. Pre-Enlightenment, Christian understandings of existence in the West might typically have featured a hierarchical and immutable 'chain of being'. As social consequences were largely understood in relation to fate, it is likely that many individuals perceived danger to be an unpleasant but unavoidable aspect of life (Beck, 1992a: 98).

Post-Enlightenment, with the development of a secular evolutionist cosmology, Beck believes that citizens increasingly demanded both explanations and compensation for risks. These demands were institutionalised in the nineteenth century via the development of the 'safety state' (Beck, 1995: 107; Ewald, 1986). It is argued that the development of welfare systems within nation states was based upon two common needs. Firstly, welfare systems acted as an antidote to the inevitable problems produced by rapid technological, economic and social change. Secondly, the welfare state provided citizens with a vehicle for processing various demands for safety and security. In response to such citizenship demands, organised systems were developed in health and welfare, the economy, law and insurance. For Beck, the legitimacy of government thus became dependent upon the ability of the state to fulfil security pledges (1995: 109).

Of course, such a sweeping narrative of the development of the western welfare system is disputable. For example, critical social theorists have highlighted the capacity of the welfare system to maintain social order and defuse class tensions (Goldblatt, 1996: 168; Hillyard and Percy-Smith, 1988; Offe, 1984). Rather than

[17]Throughout his work Beck refers to a wide range of epochal distinctions, including: pre-modernity; pre-industrial high cultures; simple industrial modernity, classical industrial society, industrial risk society, reflexive modernization, residual risk society and the risk society. The grounds for these distinctions are most coherently explained in *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995: 78). A digestible review is provided by Goldblatt in *Social Theory and the Environment* (1995: 167).

engaging with these competing explanations, Beck instead proceeds to map out the welfare functions of the structures of risk management.

Playing off Marxist terminology, Beck refers to the institutions involved in the assessment and management of risk as the 'relations of definition' (Beck, 1995: 116). The relations of definition are essentially an arsenal of institutions - such as government, the civil service, the legal system, the mass media and scientific organisations - which produce 'the rules and capacities that structure the identification and assessment of environmental problems and risks' (Goldblatt, 1995: 166). As will be explained in chapter two, the multiple functions of the relations of definition are absolutely crucial in informing and moulding public understandings of risks (Adam and van Loon, 2000: 4).

In industrial society, the relations of definition were said to be capable of managing issues of risk liability and risk compensation. During this period, insurance claims were economically resolved in relation to an actuarial system. By utilising calculative methods of assessment, the relations of definition acquired expertise and legitimacy in matters of risk. For example, the probability of a risk materializing could be statistically calculated, appropriate compensation measures employed and, if necessary, the guilty party could be penalised with legal sanctions. Thus, Beck argues that in the early and mid parts of the twentieth century, the risks and dangers produced by modernization could be adequately managed by existent systems of causality, liability and insurance. The tangible nature of hazards produced in simple industrial society complemented the methods of risk assessment and management: 'if a fire breaks out, the fire brigade comes; if a traffic accident occurs, the insurance pays' (Beck, 1995: 85).

This relatively risk-secure environment begins to mutate as society moves into the transitional period between industrial society and the risk society. Throughout this

phase - roughly from the 1970s onwards - western society becomes increasingly plagued by risks that the system cannot properly address or eliminate. The interregnum between industrial society and the risk society proper is referred to by Beck as 'industrial risk society'. In industrial risk society the natural hazards common to earlier epochs are complemented by a volatile collection of manufactured risks which transcend traditional boundaries of time and space. This theoretical comparison of the composition of risk enables Beck to maintain that the evolution of nuclear, chemical and genetic technology has revoked the principles of liability, leading to a climacteric situation:

> In all the brilliance of their perfection, nuclear power plants have suspended the principle of insurance not only in economic, but also in the medical, psychological and cultural sense. The residual risk society has become an uninsured society, with protection diminishing as the danger grows (Beck, 1992: 101).

Rather sidestepping several important phenomenological issues,[18] Beck's separation between manufactured risks and natural hazards is unequivocal. In contemporary culture, the continued development of non-limitable catastrophic risks infers that social institutions cannot adequately manage or insure citizens against risk. Beck postulates that existing systems of civil liability are solely designed to deal with risks and injuries of undisputed origin, such as accidents or acts of violence. Such risks generally involve identifiable injuries, victims and guilty parties. Given the oblique nature of manufactured risks, such forms of legislation are no longer functional or appropriate.

The kernel of Beck's argument appears to be that a social mismatch has materialised between the unmanageable nature of manufactured risks and the apparatus which have historically developed to contain risks. For Beck, the existing relations of definition were founded in an earlier epoch and were constructed to deal with a

[18] For example, Beck rarely touches upon the issue of public understandings of risk, assuming homogenous perceptions of risk within and between historical eras. The wider significance of this omission will be made explicit in chapters three and four.

discrete collection of risks. Thus, western institutions are said to be applying nineteenth century methods of security to twenty-first century risks. Again, Beck provides anecdotal support for his claims, drawing upon a series of select examples (Beck, 1995: 59; 1998a; 1999: 155). Beck believes that the emergence of manufactured risks throws the dominant system of risk calculation and accountability into sharp relief. Contrary to systems of blame attribution in pre-modern and industrial cultures, *nobody* appears to be individually responsible for technological risks. In many instances, questions of liability and compensation are obscured by the indeterminate and multi-causal nature of manufactured risks (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998: 106). In effect, searching for culpable parties becomes akin to identifying the toxic vegetable in a *pot-au-feu*:

> No one any longer has privileged access to the uniquely correct way of calculation, for risks are pregnant with interests, and accordingly the ways of calculating them multiplies like rabbits (Beck, 1995: 135).

In many cases, the obscurity and doubt surrounding contemporary risks enables guilty parties to eschew the burden of blame, amplifying social uncertainty. To illustrate his argument, Beck uses the example of environmental pollution. In 1985 the German legal system investigated 13,000 incidents of environmental contamination. Of this number, only 27 convictions with prison terms were secured, 24 of which were suspended and 3 of which were dropped (Beck, 1995: 134). Whilst such statistics might be read-off as indicative of a lenient sentencing system, Beck believes that failure to establish culpability for risk is embedded within the structure of the legal system. Given that legislation is predicated on the principle of absolute liability, crimes such as environmental pollution effectively slip the net of legal accountability. The multi-causal nature of environmental risks feeds a climate of indeterminacy, with the proximity of other polluters often acting as a mitigating factor. Beck claims that factory owners whose premises lie in built-up industrial areas are well practised in deflecting the burden of blame onto other neighbouring plants. Given that legal

liability rests upon the tenet of absolute proof, 'holding a single individual liable is comparable to trying to drain the ocean with a sieve' (Beck, 1995: 2). Further, the extant relations of definition require proof of environmental toxicity on a *post hoc* rather than a *pre hoc* basis. This suggests that the stakes are necessarily loaded in favour of the polluter and that culpability for the risk becomes neutralised:

> Note the consequence: the pollutants pumped out by everyone are pumped out by no one. The greater the pollution, the less the pollution (Beck, 1995: 135).

For Beck, at the precise moment at which risks appear to be more harmful and dangerous, the regulatory relations of definition become less capable of mitigating against risk. The risk society is thus a society which is *beyond* insurance and liability (Adam and van Loon, 2000: 7).

As we shall see in chapter three, Beck posits that the systemic inability of the relations of definition to cope with contemporary risks has resulted in varying degrees of institutional obfuscation. Beck refers to these practices of denial as 'organised irresponsibility' (Beck, 1999: 54; 1995: 63). This seemingly paradoxical process describes the way in which the relations of definition circumnavigate and subvert issues of risk. Beck believes that the process of organised irresponsibility is systematically conducted and produces manifold outcomes (Beck, 2000c: 224). In the short term, a concatenation of guilty parties escape punishment and financial liability for the production of risks. In the long term, manufactured risks are anonymized and rendered invisible, causing further deleterious consequences.

To summarise, Beck contends that the nature of risks has altered dramatically. In pre-modern societies, natural hazards such as disease, drought and famine were prevalent. In contemporary western society, whilst many of these basic risks have been overcome, such hazards have steadily been replaced by an unceasing collection of manufactured risks. At a first glance, WIAs might be perceived as risks 'at a

distance'. However, the tentacles of manufactured risk also extend into diverse cultural spheres, such as food choice, sexuality, employment and health. As western cultures move into the risk society proper, the institutional mechanisms for handling risks falter, producing a systemic crisis within the relations of definition. Ultimately, these relations were designed to deal with the basal risks of industrial modernity and are remnants of a previous epoch. Hence, Beck believes that manufactured risks have overrun methods of insurance and compensation, engendering a crisis of institutional accountability (Beck, 2000c: 224). This enforced institutional intransigence leaves the relations of definition with little option but to engage in the otiose performance of organised irresponsibility, resulting in the denial and mystification of risks and the reproduction of public uncertainty. The somewhat farcical result of institutional intervention is that, far from being curtailed, manufactured risks are actually exacerbated.

1.6 Risk Distribution and Transitional Logics

Having outlined the descriptive basis for the risk society thesis, in the remainder of chapter one, I wish to trace the key processes which underpin alterations in the composition and distribution of risk. In this section, the interplay between the production of hazards and the formulation of wider social understandings of risk will be broached. Here, the notion of distributional logic, a vital aspect of Beck's theory of risk will be visited and primed for development in subsequent chapters.[19] In section 1.7, the association between individualization and the destabilization of social structures will be outlined. However, at this juncture, discussion will revolve around the possible implications of transitions in the composition of risk for patterns of social and economic distribution. This review will provide the platform for a more meticulous examination of the relationship between risk and the individualization process in chapter two.

[19] In particular, see sections 2.6 and 5.5.

Beck's understanding of patterns of economic and social distribution is inevitably coloured by his assumptions about the fundamentally unique character of contemporary risk. Without affirming the qualitatively distinct nature of risks over time, the theory of transitional distributional logics makes little sense. As such, for the moment, it is necessary for us to travel along with Beck and assume that the nature of risk has fundamentally mutated.[20]

In *Risk Society* (1992), Beck surmises that the creeping transition from industrial modernity towards the risk society has profound implications for the 'distributional logic'. This somewhat nebulous phase is ill-defined by Beck, who uses the term as an expansive phenomenon, encapsulating a series of ideas and processes. However, the distributional logic can arguably be conceived as an overarching set of organising social principles. These principles have implicit ideological dimensions, being linked to the way in which individuals perceive and relate to society in political terms. The distributional logic also has a material dimension, involving the dissemination of the spoils produced by economic and technological development. Hence, the distributional logic is translated via political engagement, which drives and is driven by the distribution of resources within society. For Beck, the distributional logic governs the distribution of socially positive 'goods' such as health, wealth and opportunities *and* socially negative 'bads' such as risk, infection and disease (Beck, 1992: 23). Beck maintains that political dialogue in the West has traditionally revolved around the efficacy of the distributional logic in meeting the diverse needs of individuals and social groups. However, Beck postulates that the ascending cultural profile of manufactured risk is restructuring social understandings of the distributional logic. In *Risk Society* (1992), Beck ties the two distributional entities to specific epochs (Beck, 1992: 36).

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[20] A failure to appreciate the synergistic nature of the risk society model has resulted in partial critique and de-contextualised representations of the risk society thesis. The brief article by North (1997) and the review by Smith et al (1997) typify such shortcomings.

Beck contends that the distributional logic of industrial society is bound up with the distribution of social goods (Beck, 1992: 20). In this sense, industrial society can legitimately be described as a 'class society' (Beck, 1992: 34). The developmental dynamics of class societies are fundamentally indexed to the ideal of equality, with the key political and social objectives in such cultures being the satisfaction of basic material needs and a rising standard of living. In industrial society, social concerns are said to be focused on the distribution of wealth, with dominant political issues revolving around the ownership of material goods, production and consumption, equal opportunities and job security (Beck, 1992: 49).

Beck's opposition between the industrial (class) society and the risk society is based around a binary distinction between scarcity and insecurity. Whilst industrial societies are characterised by scarcity, the risk society is earmarked by insecurity (Scott: 2000: 34). Beck believes that in class societies unjust distribution is apparent and socially observable:

> Misery needs no self-confirmation. It exists...the certainties of class societies are in this sense the certainties of a culture of *visibility:* emaciated hunger contrasts with plump satiety; palaces with hovels, splendour with rags (Beck, 1992: 44).

Beck reasons that dysfunctions in the distribution of social goods - be they deliberate or accidental - are inconcealable. However, as the frequency with which manufactured risks appear quickens, social and political concerns alter and the distributional logic transmutes. In the movement from industrial to risk society, the distributional logic no longer exclusively revolves around how the 'cake' might be divided up. In contrast, it becomes evident that the cake has become poisoned (Beck, 1992: 19). The very principles of large-scale modernization such as mass production, consumerism and techno-scientific development are said to have nurtured unmanageable 'side effects'. For Beck, the random manifestation of side effects forces society to confront the

problem of an undersupply of goods *and* an oversupply of bads. In a hostile political climate, conflicts emerge around issues of production, liability and management of risk:

> They erupt over how the risks accompanying goods production - nuclear and chemical mega technology, genetic research, the threat to the environment, overmilitarisation and the increasing immiseration outside of western industrial society - can be distributed, prevented, controlled and legitimised (Beck, 1994: 6).

By definition, global problems cannot be properly regulated at a national level. Whilst industrial goods distributing societies were essentially nationally bounded entities, the generation of social bads explodes territorial boundaries. Risks which cross national borders have served to disembed and unsettle political and economic interests (Lash and Urry, 1994: 33). Beck believes that changing patterns of risk distribution question long held assumptions about the nature and the objectives of politics. Historically, the issue of wealth distribution has - with considerable pressure from the Labour Movement – at least been written into the manifestos of western democratic parties. In recent times, successful political parties have come to power on a promise of enhanced wealth distribution via improvements in health, education and employment. Whilst such promises do not appear to have significantly closed the class divide, liberal democratic organisations have been keen to pay lip service to the theoretical logic of more equal forms of wealth distribution.[21]

Somewhat controversially, Beck believes that an undivided emphasis on social goods is fundamentally misguided at a political level. By contrast, Beck believes that political energies should be redirected towards the elimination of social bads. As Beck points out, western societies already cater for the basic survival needs of the vast majority. Furthermore, even allowing for the kind of egalitarian distribution of

[21] For example, in Britain, the Labour Party claimed a landslide victory in the 1997 General Election with a manifesto based around the modernisation of key social institutions and the development of a 'stakeholder society'. Nevertheless, the gap between the richest and the poorest classes in Britain has continued to expand. On this point, see Mackintosh and Mooney (2000).

resources envisaged by Marx, contemporary western society would still fail to meet the physical and existential security needs of citizens. On these grounds, Beck questions the political dominance of the logic of wealth distribution, calling for a new 'politics of risk' (Beck, 1996a; 1997; 1999). I will return to evaluate the political dimensions of the theory of distributional logic in greater detail in chapter five. Suffice it to say at this juncture that Beck avers that the twin processes of risk distribution and individualization re-route the trajectory of western politics.

Beck claims that the ubiquity of risk has fuelled a discernibly negative and defensive political logic. For him, the production of extraordinary and catalytic risks forces political parties into unknown discursive territory. Politicians schooled in the principles of goods distribution are rendered inert by indeterminate and unquantifiable bads. Through a veil of intransigence and denial, politicians continue to pursue social goods, whilst temporarily sidestepping the burgeoning problem of bads. On the horizon, the generation of risks and the individualization process continue unabated, redefining everyday cultural experience. For Beck, this shift from class relations to risk relations is currently gaining momentum, producing new antagonisms between those who produce and those who consume risk (Beck, 1997: 19).

In many respects, Beck's theory of distributional logics marks a significant departure within social theory (Lash and Wynne, 1992). The macro theories of the 'founding fathers' of sociology were focused primarily upon on the issue of wealth distribution. Both Marx and Weber sought to reveal how socially produced wealth was distributed in an essentially unequal fashion. Rather than deploying class or status as the key determinant of social experience, Beck instead focuses upon the concept of risk, positing that the process of individualization has loosened the ties of class-based identities and collective social experience.

In chapter two, I will seek to explain exactly *how* and *why* Beck's concept of

distributional logic is theoretically problematic. However, it is worth noting that several theorists have rather traduced the risk society thesis by suggesting that Beck's argument rests upon the substitution of social goods for social bads (McMylor, 1997; Smith et al, 1997). Whilst this has been a ubiquitous criticism of Beck's work,[22] rigid application of abstract ideas to social practice rather misses the hypothetical dimension of Beck's 'projective social theory'. Indeed, in the second chapter of *Risk Society* (1992), Beck explicitly presents a *series* of possible scenarios. Here, Beck sketches out a three stage transitional model. In the industrial society - broadly encompassing the first two thirds of the twentieth century - the production of social goods dominates social and political life. In the transitional period between the industrial society and the risk society - for Beck around 1970 onwards - concerns about social goods are augmented by social bads, with the latter in the ascendance (Beck, 1992: 20). Finally, as society moves into the risk society proper,[23] the material effects of manufactured risk become unavoidable and social bads dominate the social, political and cultural landscape.

Unfortunately, Beck does rather invite criticism by leaving the boundaries between various epochs rather hazy and by randomly switching nomenclatures.[24] Indeed, it is not entirely clear from reading *Risk Society* (1992) whether contemporary society is best described as a 'risk society' or an 'industrial risk society'. Whilst the paradoxical and ambiguous style of Beck's writing is refreshing to read, it also lends itself to inconsistency and misinterpretation. Nevertheless, the richness and breadth of the risk society model suggests that it should not simply be dismissed on the grounds of an imperfect fit (Scott 2000: 34).

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[22] See also, Scott (2000) and Goldblatt (1995).

[23] In *Risk Society* (1992), Beck provides no specific time frame for the movement into the risk society. Whether or not Beck believes that western cultures have entered the risk society is something of a moot point. However, in recent works, Beck does imply that contemporary society can reasonably be described as a risk society (Beck, 1999; 2000).

[24] For example, 'industrial risk society' and 'residual risk society' are coterminous periods.

For Beck the current clash between the positive logic employed in wealth production and the negative logic of risk breeds confusion, distrust and insecurity. Living with risk means a radical change in normative values and social expectations. To substantiate his argument Beck compares the experiential dimensions of 'class positions' with 'risk positions' (Beck, 1992: 53). Class positions relate to the ability to attain socially produced wealth and risk positions refer to the likelihood of exposure to risk due to social, economic and geographical circumstance. Beck has it that the manufacture of extraordinary risks and the intensification of de-traditionalization nurture the endemic distribution of social bads. As manufactured risks spread, class positions are superseded by risk positions, with the distributional axis no longer revolving around issues of *equality*, but issues of *safety.* At a political level, the social project of eliminating scarcity is replaced by that of eliminating risk (Beck, 1992: 38). In effect, social bads reformulate the nature of social and political conflict, generating 'safety needs' for minimisation, prevention and monitoring of risks. Because class logics are defined by ownership, they are invariably a site of contestation. Ownership and non-ownership of wealth is conspicuously signified and is productive of inter-class antagonisms. Hence, in theory at least, class positions are open to question and reformulation via conflict between the resourced and resourceless. However, these relatively direct forms of conflict are obscured as manufactured risks establish risk positions. These risk positions uproot social hierarchies and re-map understandings of conflict: 'anyone affected by them is badly off, but deprives the others, the non-affected, of nothing' (Beck, 1992: 40).

Beck believes that citizens are, to varying degrees, enabled by the distribution of goods to possess differing degrees of wealth. By contrast, nobody actively seeks possession of social bads (Beck, 1992: 23). Hence, the logic of the risk society is based not on possession, but avoidance:

> The dream of class society is that everyone wants and ought to have a *share* of the pie. The utopia of the risk society is that everyone should be *spared* from poisoning...the driving force in the class society can be summarised in the phrase *'I am hungry!'* The driving force in the risk society can be summarised in the phrase *'I am afraid!'* (Beck, 1992: 49).

Despite an unabashedly hyperbolic style, Beck is not exclusively arguing that risk logics have *replaced* class logics. This is a common but nevertheless partial interpretation of Beck's thesis. On the contrary, on occasion, Beck notes the close association between poverty and risk, arguing that inequalities based on the social distribution of risk tend to interface with existing inequalities: 'risks seem to strengthen, not to abolish the class society' (Beck, 1992: 35). Although the dispersal of risks does differ from the distribution of wealth in the risk society proper, in the transitional period between industrial and risk society the two features often tend to interlock with the undesirable side effects of modernization gravitating towards the most impoverished. In this phase, those with the financial wherewithal are able to buy their way out of risk environments and situations whilst the poor continue to suffer:

> The proletariat of the global risk society settles beneath the smokestacks, next to the refineries and chemical factories in the industrial centres of the Third World (Beck, 1992: 41).

However, Beck goes on to claim that, in the risk society, risk and class logics can diverge as well as converge. Whilst in industrial society wealth and risk distribution generally coincide, in risk society the logics also bifurcate. The changing nature of risk skews the neat fit between class and risk. Given that modern businesses and institutions are a conduit for global risks, even the affluent are ultimately threatened (Beck, 1992: 37). To explain this phenomenon, Beck discusses the effects of 'boomerang effects', which transcend traditional boundaries of class and nation. The boomerang effect refers to 'a pattern of risks...which catches up with those who produce or profit from them' (Beck, 1992: 37). Boomerang effects such as environmental pollution are a prime example of the unplanned side effect, threatening

capital accumulation, throwing expert systems into turmoil and producing universal anxiety.

To summarise, Beck is arguing that the generation and dissemination of risks undercuts social positions and institutions, challenging traditional methods of distribution and prevalent understandings of conflict. Chemical, nuclear and genetic threats undercut social hierarchies, sometimes pitching labour against labour or capital against capital (Beck, 1997: 159). As 'mega-hazards' stretch the boundaries of time and space, risks return to their initial producers. Given the mobile and cumulative nature of global risks, ultimately even the wealthy cannot help but be affected. As Beck puts it: 'there are no bystanders anymore' (1996a: 32). In the final analysis, insuring against exposure to manufactured risks is impossible: 'wealth, privilege, status and economic power provide no escape routes' (Goldblatt, 1995: 161). Whilst, in industrial society risk and class positions more or less intersect, in the risk society this situation alters dramatically. Beck is arguing that contemporary risks are imbued with a *circularity* which negates established patterns of affluence and poverty. Sooner or later perpetrator and the victim become identical (Beck, 1992: 38):

> The threat of pesticide poisoning and toxic accumulation in the food chain effects the suburbs as much as the inner city; nuclear meltdowns are of such scope that rich and poor, North and South are threatened alike (Goldblatt, 1995: 161).

Beck postulates that risk positions are characterised by an element of fate in their distribution. In this sense, social bads are theoretically egalitarian. Only a refusal to engage in basic biological necessities could effectively shield the affluent from risk. Beck argues that - given that we all need to breathe, eat and drink - everyone is open to potentially catastrophic hazards: 'reduced to a formula: *poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic'* (Beck, 1992: 36).

1.7 The Individualisation Process and Transitional Logics

In questioning the relevance of the logic of wealth distribution, Beck casts himself as something of a heretic. Both Marxist and Ecologist critics have suggested that Beck's perspective is empirically untenable and politically liberal (Dickens, 1997; McMylor, 1996; Smith et al, 1997). However, it might be argued that the theory of distributional logic has been represented in a rather misleading fashion, particularly in review articles.[25] Contrary to popular academic belief, Beck is not simply contending that social class is a disappearing objective phenomenon. Indeed, Beck emphasises that class stratification is likely to *increase* rather than decrease in the near future, with the reproduction of social inequalities demonstrating 'an amazing stability' (Beck, 1992: 91).

It would appear that the point Beck is striving to make is a rather different one than has generally been assumed. For Beck, whilst the ties of material resourcelessness still bind lived experience, they do so increasingly at a *personal* as opposed to a *collective* level. Thus, although class is unarguably an objective feature of social existence, Beck believes that it no longer carries the subjective significance of previous epochs. This particular observation is reasonably commonplace within social theory and is robustly supported by empirical and theoretical research (Crompton, 1998; Evans, 1992; Bradley 1995). Extending these findings, Beck contrasts the relatively fixed and entrenched class identities of traditional industrial society with the disjointed and diverse experience of the risk society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996). In the risk society, common associations, social structures and patterns of identity are all cast into doubt. Beck unpacks these far reaching changes with reference to the process of individualization. Individualization refers to the way in which social experience has become *de-traditionalized,* resulting in individuals no longer being moulded by the same cultural, political and economic structures and processes as their forebears:

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[25]See, for example, 'Goods and Bads', by Peter McMylor (1996) in *Radical Philosophy* no. 77, or 'The Risk Zone' by James Heartfield in the *Living Marxism* archives at www.informinc.co.uk/LM/LM80-Books.html.

> Biographies are removed from the traditional precepts and certainties, from external control and general moral laws, becoming open and dependent on decision-making, and are assigned as a task for each individual (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 5).

Beck believes that contemporary self-identities are constructed, mobile entities which are vitally connected to individual decisions. Traditional gender roles, the nuclear family, personal sexuality and employment paths all become open to question, decision and modification (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 6). In this respect, there are striking similarities between the work of Beck and that of Anthony Giddens (1990; 1991; 1994). In a similar vein, Giddens suggests that modernity is characterised by profound transformations in social structures, habits and experiences. Leaving these comparisons aside,[26] at this juncture I wish to explore the marriage between individualization and distributional logics.

Beck argues that in contemporary western society experience of risk has become individualized. By this he means that the hazards and choices which we face in day-to-day existence are broached in personal rather than collective terms. The gradual loosening of the structures and networks of tradition forces social actors to confront risks foremostly as individuals rather than as members of a collective group (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 27). Beck believes that this process of individualization has been accentuated by the erosion of the welfare state and the failure of the relations of definition to regulate risk (Beck, 2000: 21).

It is argued that whilst industrial society is relatively ordered and predictable, late modernity is unstable and chaotic, epitomised by the incessant burden of risk. Indeed, it has been widely recognised that the socialisation of youngsters in the new millennium will vary substantially from that experienced by today's adults (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Wyn and White, 1996). Although we might reasonably expect

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[26] For a lucid and concise comparison of the work of Beck and Giddens, see Lupton (1999) p.58-83.

each generation to experience a different cultural reality, Beck believes that we are currently on the brink of a historical watershed (Beck, 1998: 11; 1995: 17). Contemporary adolescents – or, 'freedom's children' (Beck, 1998: 1) - are forced to negotiate a barrage of risks, decisions and choices that would have been unimaginable to their grandparents. The fluctuating nature of social experience is said to apply to all young people regardless of race, class or gender (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 28). As we shall see in chapter two, Beck argues that the fairly tight temporal transition from the school to the workplace has all but disappeared. Growing up at the turn of the millennium involves the negotiation of a series of risks and decisions which are far from determined. A selection of different lifestyle routes currently offer themselves up for negotiation, with a fluid transition from school to permanent full-time employment becoming less and less prevalent. Youth unemployment has risen steeply in most European countries and training schemes, further education, and a desire to travel have dislocated the pathways of collective mass experience:

> Prior to the late 1970s, there was a strong demand for relatively unqualified school leavers in large industrial units: since the mid 1980s patterns of labour demand have changed significantly and opportunities for young workers are increasingly located in small work units. The demand for flexible specialisation and the increased use of part-time and temporary employment contracts have weakened collective employment experiences and can be associated with the process of individualisation and the sense of insecurity and risk identified by Beck (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 30).

In *Risk Society* (1992), Beck argues that the flexibilization of the labour market and the decline in manufacturing and heavy industry have dissolved the bonds of collective experience, leading to more atomised forms of existence. Whilst industrial society is structured through the composition of social classes, risk society becomes individualized (Beck, 1992: 91). Thus, Beck believes that a social logic which focuses solely upon the issue of wealth cannot properly address the concerns and dilemmas currently faced by social actors. Therefore, the logic of wealth distribution is running out of kilter with the diverse processes of risk management, decision and choice undertaken by individuals in western society. Concomitantly, the process of de-

traditionalization transcends the existing boundaries of goods distribution and generates a new axis of risk distribution. At the level of everyday cultural experience, individualization effectively *nullifies* the reproduction of stable and secure biographies rooted in collective institutions and networks.

1.8 Summary and Conclusions

To recap, Beck posits that the social cleavages inherent to the risk society cannot be understood in relation to traditional sociological categories of 'haves' and 'have-nots'. The emergence of boomerang effects indicates that previously clear-cut divides between those who gain and those who lose from risk have become blurred. Given the lingering spectre of WIAs, everyone eventually ends up cohabiting in the latter camp. This said, it must be noted that Beck's position on the distributional logic is somewhat ambiguous. Beck does acknowledge that risk positions can be relative, particularly in the transitional period between industrial and risk society:

> It may be that everyone is in the same boat in the flood of hazard. But, as is often the case, here there are captains, passengers, helmsmen, engineers and people drowning (Beck, 1995: 142).

Beck recognises that in the early stages of transition from industrial to risk society, risk and class positions tend to merge, leaving the materially disenfranchised most endangered by risk. As society enters the risk society proper, class-versus-class cleavages are steadily replaced by conflicts between various groups and sectors. Beck postulates that as the production of manufactured risks increases, the distributional logic within society mutates. This calendrically indistinct point signals that risk positions no longer relate exclusively to wealth, but are also mediated by fate and location (Beck, 1995: 154).

As has been demonstrated, the individualization process and contemporary risk

distribution indicate a radical restructuring of the ideological logic of political parties and of the social characteristics of lived experience. The wide-ranging political ramifications of Beck's argument will be picked up in chapter five. In the following chapter, I intend to prise open the institutional and personal dynamics of risk, in relation to individualization and the distributional logic. Utilising patterns of employment as a basis for discussion, it will be argued that living with risk also means coming to terms with insecurity and diversity. As risks manifest themselves, social actors are forced to confront a plethora of hazards and choices which restructure the nature of social experience. Whilst identities in traditional societies were based upon relatively fixed positions and tasks, modern western cultures demand the *construction* of selfhood.

In conclusion, our attention in chapter one has been focused on the changing characteristics of risk, with particular emphasis placed on the catastrophic nature of manufactured risks. It has been noted that the risk society thesis portrays a model of radical social change in which the darkening cloud of nuclear, chemical and genetic technologies threatens human existence. For Beck, the appearance of catastrophic dangers implies that rationalization of risk as an exogenous entity is no longer a viable option. Whilst WIAs are emblematic of the risk society, it must be noted that the experience of contemporary risk is not simply about 'fear at a distance'. For Beck, a cluster of risks have seeped through everyday experiences of work, leisure, love and friendship (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 6). As we shall see, in this sense risk has become a routine feature of everyday experience (McGuigan, 1999: 125).

2

Working and Living With Risk

2.1 Introduction

As outlined in chapter one, the risk society thesis is based on the diffusion of two intersecting processes. The first process involves the negotiation of individualized life paths that are increasingly reliant on individual choice and reflexivity. The second runs along the lines of risk distribution, indicating a gradual transformation of the distributional logic in society (Beck, 1992: 87). It is argued that these processes commingle, generating the emergence of a culture of risk and uncertainty. Having described the key components of the risk society thesis, I now intend to cultivate a more focused and critical discussion of individualization and risk distribution, drawing upon empirical and theoretical evidence. In undertaking this task, the sphere of employment will act as a conduit through which macro changes in social structure will be assessed.

For Beck, work acts an articulation point for a range of processes which are integral to the risk society thesis. The sphere of employment is depicted as both a site of individualization and a motor for risk distribution (Beck, 1992; 1998; 2000). In addition, Beck contends that changing patterns of work are inextricably tied to wider shifts in class structure, the family and interpersonal relations. Beck believes that such underlying structural shifts themselves feed back into the system of employment, constituting a move away from the 'Fordist regime' and towards a 'Risk regime' (Beck, 2000: 67).

Following the pattern established by Beck in *Risk Society* (1992) and revisited in *Democracy Without Enemies* (1998) and *Brave New World of Work* (2000), trends in employment relations will be evaluated as a means of computing the possible movement towards the risk society.[27] In particular, the degree of connectivity between labour market transitions, individualization and risk distribution will be utilised as a touchstone for debate. Throughout the chapter, evidence of opaque cultural transitions in class, gender and family structure will be fed into a broader debate about the cohesiveness of the risk society thesis.

Whilst the primary objective of this chapter is to practically apply the risk society thesis, I will begin by engaging with current debates about the nature of work in contemporary society. In the following section, Beck's understanding of contemporary employment relations will be reviewed in the light of the contributions of other prominent critical commentators (Braham, 1997; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Hyman and Ferner, 1998; Hutton, 1996).[28] This preliminary review will provide a general understanding of the changing nature of the labour market in Western Europe, setting the context for an examination of the correlation between work, risk and individualization. In sections 2.4 and 2.5, the processes of individualization and risk distribution will be directly related to the formative employment experiences of young people in the British labour market. This case study will serve to ground the risk society thesis and to calibrate the extent to which Beck's theory is reflected in cultural reality.

In sketching the contours of the risk society, Beck makes three major assertions about employment relations. Firstly, Beck argues that the sphere of employment in western

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[27] In *Brave New World of Work* (2000) Beck outlines overarching structural changes within contemporary employment relations and offers a range of 'visions of the future'. By contrast, in *Risk Society* (1992) Beck's argument is more tightly married to the risk society thesis.

[28] The following discussion does not seek to provide a synchronic overview of the world of work. Such a detailed analysis of contemporary workplace relations lies elsewhere. See, for example, Edwards, (1995) or Hyman and Ferner (1998). The more limited objective here is to set the context of employment relations within which Beck's theory of risk can be understood.

capitalist society is characterised by a sweeping process of individualization. Secondly, he contends that changes in the relationship between capital and labour have facilitated shifts in the distributional logic within society. These two sub-claims form the basis of a third general contention that formal paid employment is enmeshed in a wider culture of risk (Beck, 1992: 127; Beck 1998: 58; Beck, 2000). Captured in model form, the distributional logic and individualization form diametric corners of a triangle, with risk society situated at the apex.

In the following discussion I wish to pose four overarching questions. Firstly, what is happening to the labour market in Western Europe? Secondly, does the available evidence suggest that individualization is reinforced by employment experiences? Thirdly, do fluctuations in the labour market suggest transformations in risk distribution? Fourthly, does the current context of employment relations in Europe herald the arrival of a risk society?

2.2 Employment, Flexibility and Risk

Given his background in Industrial Sociology, it is unsurprising that Beck should refer to work as a central plank of human existence: 'wage labour and an occupation have become the *axis of living* in the industrial age' (Beck, 1992: 139). With recent social history in mind, it would be unwise to dispute such a claim. In the twentieth century, several consequential political conflicts have been consolidated by demands for the restructuring of working practices.[29] In contemporary times, democratically elected political parties in Britain, Germany, Italy and Spain strive for the panacea of full-time paid employment for all. In so called post-industrial society, what one does for a living is still seen through the looking glass of employment, with the ageing process being defined in relation to occupation: 'old age begins where the world of work

[29]For example, the Polish *Solidarnosc* movement and the Paris uprising in 1968.

discharges people - no matter if they feel old or not' (Beck, 1992: 139). In contemporary western society, the unemployed demand the right to work, whilst many of the employed keep an anxious eye out for the twist of fate which may familiarise them with the peculiarities of the welfare system. For many people, the contingency arising from employment experiences has engendered a series of risks and dilemmas. Indeed, responding to the insecurities associated with contracts, wages and child-care has become the 'stuff of life' at the turn of the millennium.

Whilst such asseverations may strike a cultural chord, they do not necessarily attest to the substantive link between employment and risk made by Beck. In considering the validity of the risk society perspective, the crucial issue revolves around whether a 'radical rupture' has occurred in the sphere of work, or whether current instabilities are part of an integral process of flux in employment.

In conceptualising the rather complex area of employment relations in Western Europe, Beck identifies a raft of structural trends that impact upon the formation of patterns of risk. Thus, the following discussion will be necessarily selective, focusing on the most salient sites of risk distribution and individualization. In this section, the main topics of discussion will be patterns of flexibility, labour market segmentation and the impacts of computerisation and automation on employment practices.

In *Risk Society* (1992) and *Brave New World of Work* (2000), Beck traces a gradual shift from manufacturing to service based employment in Western Europe and North America. Indeed, the ongoing transformation from manual labour towards the service sector has been one of the most notable structural changes in patterns of employment in recent times (Blyton and Turnball, 1994; Hyman and Ferner, 1998; Thirwall, 1982).[30] In Britain, between 1971 and 1992, employment in the manufacturing industry fell by 43.1%, whilst service sector employment rose by 33.8% (Blyton and

[30]For further details, see the DfEE Report (1998) *Labour Market Trends 104* London: HMSO.

Turnball, 1994: 46). Such evidence leads Beck to argue that the world of work has been transformed by sizeable growth in flexible service sector employment (Beck, 1998: 56). The shift towards a service economy is said to be indexed to a broader trend of flexibilization within employment. Drawing upon the groundbreaking work of Piore and Sabel (1984), Beck argues that structural changes in the global economy throughout the 1970s and 1980s generated the need for a mobile workforce to work within more flexible systems of production (Beck, 1992: 215; 1999: 12). A range of macro processes are pertinent to the development of flexibility, including the globalization of production, the appearance of a new international division of labour and a reformulated financial order. However, rather than dwelling on the evolution of flexibility, Beck chooses instead to illuminate the current relationship between flexibility and risk.

Following academic tradition, Beck takes the term 'flexibility' to refer to a loosely bound set of working practices. For analytical purposes, flexibility can be generally dissembled into the *flexibilization of labour* and the *flexibilization of production.* In certain cases, the contents of flexibility have been woven into a wider debate about Post-Fordist structures of organisation (Kern and Schumann, 1984). In this oeuvre, theorists have argued that Post-Fordist methods of production are constitutive of a broader system of 'Flexible Specialisation' (Curry, 1993). Flexible Specialisation involves a radical shift in production in the core industrial sectors from mass production to more fragmented and specialised forms, utilising flexible manufacturing techniques (Braham, 1997: 156). These techniques include the use of advanced technologies such as Computer Aided Design (CAD) and Computer Aided Manufacturing (CAM), allied to shorter production runs serving segmented consumer markets. The much-publicised development of 'Just-In-Time' (JIT) methods has been central to the flexibilization of production. The implementation of JIT has enabled manufacturers to optimise resources, with necessary production materials arriving as close as possible to the time of manufacture (Braham, 1997: 157). As a result of such

transformations, Beck believes that methods of production have become increasingly individualized and specialised (Beck, 1992: 147; 2000: 70).

However, given his desire to meld flexibility to risk, Beck focuses predominantly on the effects of flexible production on the labour market itself. It is argued that employee time, skills and capacities have been significantly influenced by the rapid rise in flexible forms of employment (Beck, 2000: 84). In the 1980s, a highly competitive global market led to organisational changes, such as the increasing use of computer technology and automated production methods.[31] Beck believes that the infusion of new technologies into the workplace has had detrimental repercussions for employment contracts. Aligning himself with the work of André Gorz (1982; 1988; 2000), Beck contends that the use of automated machinery has generated de-skilling and led to substantial reductions in labour requirements (Beck, 1998: 58; 2000: 5). For Beck, the most significant outcome of technological flexibility is the production of unemployment and the individualization of risk:

> Here we have the new law of productivity that global capitalism in the information age has discovered: fewer and fewer well-trained and globally interchangeable people can generate more and more output and services. Thus, economic growth no longer reduces unemployment but actually requires a reduction in the number of jobs (Beck, 1998: 58).

In recent times, the debate about the impact of new technologies on working practices has been particularly heated (Gorz 2000; Gallie et al, 1998; Gallie, 1988). In concordance with Beck, it would appear that increased automation in industry and manufacturing has tended to erode manual labour requirements. However, it must also be noted that skilled employment has been created by the so called 'communications explosion', which has opened up technical employment within the fields of computing and visual technologies. Furthermore, in certain instances, the

[31] For example, much has been made of the 'flexibly specialized' workshops in North-Eastern Italy, where well trained, multi-skilled workers engage in a wide range of tasks, often working in smaller units (Braham, 1997: 157; Murray, 1988).

flexible use of new technologies has provided skill benefits for some workers (Belussi, 1991).

On balance, it is tempting to concur that automation and computerisation have eliminated more jobs than have subsequently been created. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that a *constellation* of factors have heightened the risk of unemployment in Western Europe. The rise of the so-called East Asian 'tiger economies', financial mismanagement, union weaknesses and state intransigence have all played an important role in generating current job insecurities in the West (Hutton, 1996: 257-85). As will be illustrated, Beck's desire to knit employment patterns to risk disregards the diverse factors which have created current labour market uncertainties.

In situating work within a culture of risk, Beck focuses primarily upon the effects of flexibility on individual employees. It is argued that the drive toward flexibility has resulted in employees being forced to work additional or shorter hours on demand (Beck, 2000: 79). Further, employee requirements for contractual flexibility are said to have driven increases in part-time work, temporary contracts and self-employment (Beck, 2000a: 61). In countries such as Britain, only a third of people who are able to work are currently employed in full-time permanent occupations (Beck, 1998: 56). For Beck, the flexibilization of contracts is a pervasive condition, being prevalent across Europe, North and South America and Asia (Beck, 2000a).

Certainly, empirical evidence can be marshalled to support Beck's argument. Over six million people in Britain are employed on a part-time basis, and the use of part-time contracts is prevalent in the service industries throughout Europe (Rubery and Fagan, 1994: 147). In addition, self-employment has become a firmly embedded working practice, with 3.5 million people currently being self-employed in Britain (Denscombe, 1997: 41). Although still predominantly located within manual and

service industries, self-employment has also seeped into the professions, with employment agencies supplying lecturers, accountants, and computer analysts on demand. Beck reasons that the increasing casualization of contracts has fuelled a massive rise in the number of people involved in 'grey work', between full employment and unemployment (Beck, 2000: 91; 2000a: 59):[32]

> Flexibility is demanded everywhere - or, in other words, an employer should be able to fire employees more easily..the jobs available become more and more short-term and 'renewable'- which is to say 'terminable' (Beck, 1999: 12).

Employment levels in Europe provide a neat example of the insecure culture of work in contemporary society. OECD statistics suggest that, within the 'advanced' European countries, unemployment rates average out at around 11%. This is to say nothing of individual cases such as Spain (25%) or Finland (15%), where the risk of unemployment is more marked (Denscombe, 1998: 30). Indeed, these statistics are themselves somewhat massaged, referring solely to those who are registered unemployed by state agencies (Beck, 2000: 104). With this restriction removed the picture becomes far bleaker. For example, in Britain it is estimated that one in four males of working age are without employment (Hutton, 1996: 1).

In addition to reformatting the temporal structure of work, flexibilization has also produced cost benefits for employers. The utilisation of self-employed, temporary and part-time staff has allowed various employment costs to be transferred to individual workers. As Beck points out, sick pay, training and pension provisions have become the responsibility of the temporally flexible employee, rather than the employer and/or the state (Beck, 2000: 53-54).[33] With the general decline in collective bargaining in

[32]Beck estimates that approximately a third of individuals are involved in grey employment in western countries (Beck, 2000: 56).

[33]In the British case, the flexibilization of labour was underpinned by the deregulation of employment law in the 1980's. Under Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative government pushed though a notorious range of anti-union legislation, including the Employment Acts of 1980, 1982, 1988, and 1990. Most overtly, the Trade Union Reform Act of 1993 legalised full postal balloting, a notice period prior to strike action, the removal of ACAS's requirement to encourage collective bargaining and the abolition of the 26 wages councils (Blyton and Turnball, 1994: 165).

Europe, the obligations and responsibilities of employers have diminished. This is particularly pertinent in the areas of contract rights, pay bargaining and national insurance contributions.

Along with Beck, it seems reasonable to argue that the flexibilization of labour has promoted greater employer power and shifted the burden of risk and responsibility onto the employee. Additionally, the flexibilization process has facilitated a general segmentation of the labour market. Extending Beck's analysis, it might be argued that the labour market in Europe is dividing into three broad categories: a core of full-time permanent employees, a periphery of part-time, temporary workers and a further section of short-term and long-term unemployed (Blyton and Turnball, 1994: 53). Again, empirical evidence does indicate that employers are cutting labour costs by recruiting from the 'grey area' and minimising the costs of core employees.[34] As will be highlighted, these flexible labour patterns are especially prevalent amongst young people entering the labour market for the first time (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 30).

In line with Blyton and Turnball, Will Hutton has recently described contemporary Britain as a 'forty, thirty, thirty' society (Hutton, 1996: 14). Hutton believes that approximately forty percent of the British workforce are in stable full-time employment, a further thirty percent are insecurely self employed, part-time or casual workers, with a final swathe of thirty percent either unemployed or working undeclared for poverty wages:

> The privileged class is favoured with education, jobs, housing and pensions. At the other end of the scale more and more people discover they are the new working poor, or live off the state in semi-poverty. Their paths out of this situation are closing down as the world in which they are trapped becomes meaner, harder and more corrupting. In between there are growing numbers of people who are insecure, fearful for their jobs in an age of permanent 'down-sizing', 'cost-cutting' and 'casualization' and are ever more worried about

[34]The current core workforce in Britain is calculated at less than 15 million. Perhaps more tellingly, of the new jobs created since 1993, only 38% have been for permanent full-time employees, with the number of males involved in temporary labour rising by 74% since 1986 (Denscombe, 1998: 31).

their ability to maintain a decent standard of living (Hutton, 1996: 3).

Despite being more socially encompassing than the work of Blyton and Turnball, Hutton's model reproduces the notion of a segmented labour market. In Hutton's 'forty, thirty, thirty' model we can identify the full-time employees with associated privileges, the peripheral part-time, temporary and home workers and the short and long-term unemployed. In recent times, Beck has tentatively offered an alternative model, which emphasises the growth of the middle thirty in Hutton's 'forty, thirty, thirty' equation. In *Democracy Without Enemies* (1998) Beck highlights the plight of a burgeoning group of 'neither-nors', who are neither unemployed, nor with a stable and secure source of income (Beck, 1998: 57; 2000a: 61). Beck believes that there are currently two labour markets in operation, one a remnant of industrial society, the other a harbinger of the developing risk society:

> A new division of the labour market is created between a uniform standard industrial society labour market and a flexible, plural risk society market for underemployment, where the second market is quantitatively expanding and dominating the first (Beck, 1992: 145).

Given the empirical evidence, it would be difficult to refute that flexibilization has facilitated a segmentation of the labour market into various pockets of privilege, whether one follows Piore and Sabel 'core-periphery' model, Hutton's 'forty, thirty, thirty' or Beck's 'industrial' and 'risk' markets. Reasonably stark divides currently exist between individuals in a fragmented labour market in Britain and in other parts of Western Europe. Thus, the flexibilization of labour and the restructuring of production methods does appear to have 'concealed and displaced, not cured, the disease of unemployment' (Beck, 2000: 59).

Although far from exhaustive, this contextual discussion has enabled us to situate Beck's understanding of the relationship between flexibility and risk within the broader context of contemporary European employment relations. It is now necessary

to focus on the specific implications of changing patterns of employment for the processes of risk distribution and individualization.

2.3 Individualization at Work

In sifting more rigorously through contemporary labour market trends, I wish to examine potential linkages between employment and individualization from a (macro) European perspective, and also from a (micro) British perspective. By combining macro and micro approaches, a balanced assessment of the relationship between individualization and employment relations will be offered. In tracing patterns of individualization and risk, I will also make reference to the work of Hyman and Ferner (1994; 1998), Ashton et al (1990; 1976) and Furlong and Cartmel (1997).

The theory of individualization is integral to Beck's model of society (1992: 127; 1997: 94; 1998: 169), being most eloquently explained in *Risk Society* (1992) and *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). As indicated in chapter one, individualization is a highly complex and multivalent term. The potential scope of the process has enabled Beck - amongst others - to apply the term to a range of subject areas, from personal relationships to political engagement (Heelas, 1996). The process of individualization is said to have significant impacts upon family structure, education and employment:

> Individualization means that each person's biography is removed from given determinations and placed in his or her hands, open and dependent upon decisions. The proportion of life opportunities which are fundamentally closed to decision-making is decreasing and the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally is increasing. Individualization of life situations and processes thus means that biographies become *self-reflexive;* socially prescribed biography is transformed into biography that is self-produced and continues to be produced (Beck, 1992: 135).

Beck is particularly keen to accentuate the importance of personal choice and reflexivity in the creation of 'do-it-yourself' biographies (Beck, 1994: 15). Moreover, the diffusion of individualization means that personal decision-making becomes an inescapable aspect of contemporary life: 'people are damned to individualization, using Sartre's terms' (Beck, 1998: 33). This approach towards contemporary identity construction is again consistent with the project of Anthony Giddens (1990; 1991; 1994). Whilst the open-ended nature of self-biographies presents individuals with greater scope for creative identity construction, it is also productive of tangible dilemmas: 'all too swiftly the 'elective', 'reflexive' or 'do-it-yourself' biography can become the breakdown biography' (Beck, 1999: 12). As individuals become untied from the certainties of collective structures, everyday life becomes contingent on an infinite process of personal decision-making.

Both Beck (1992; 1999) and Giddens (1994; 1999) maintain that individualization involves the stretching and disembedding of social relations, in both the geographical and the interpersonal sense. In late modernity, families and friends no longer necessarily live and work in close proximity to one another. Consequently, individuals must learn to live without the cohesiveness of traditional collective support networks and are compelled to rely upon self-resources and skills (Beck, 1992: 92). The stretching of social networks means that previously secure sites of solidarity collapse, as individuals turn toward personalised forms of monitoring and decision-making (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). Beck avers that individualization stimulates the self-management of lifestyles as opposed to the collective experience of social class, mass employment or the nuclear family (Beck, 1998: 35). It is argued that shifts in the standard of living and a rise in geographical mobility have dissipated class distinctions, leading to a distinct 'diversification of lifestyles' (Beck, 1992: 91). According to Beck, these alleged transformations in social structure are driven by the individualization process, presenting a radical challenge to prevalent social assumptions:

> What has manifested itself over the past two decades in Germany and perhaps in other industrial states as well can no longer be understood within the framework of existing conceptualisations. Instead it must be conceived of as the beginning of a new mode of societalization, a kind of 'metamorphosis' or 'categorical shift' in relation to the individual and society (Beck, 1992: 127).

But how complete is this 'metamorphosis' and how does individualization dovetail with employment relations?

Beck evinces that in the boom period of mass production western citizens 'bought in' to the capitalist system at an ideological and a material level. At this time, it is believed that the vast majority in western cultures supported the principles underpinning mass production and shared a general 'faith in progress' (Beck, 1998: 42). Consequently, a cultural consensus developed, based around a belief in the ability of technology and industrialism to provide a high standard of living for all (Marwick, 1990: 103). Beck indicates that the cementing of universal social interests in the West was demonstrated by relative harmony in labour relations and the acceptance by employees of standardised employment contracts, rights and obligations (Beck, 1998: 43). Hence, post-war industrial relations were said to be collectivised rather than individualized. In many respects, the development of collective regulations within large workplaces had the knock-on effect of facilitating social ties.[35] Beck contrasts this harmonious scenario with today's more indeterminate and diverse labour market. In contradistinction to the post-war period, employment in the new millennium no longer provides collective security and guaranteed welfare benefits. Instead, rising unemployment, the growth of grey work and the casualization of contracts have called into question the ability of the capitalist system to insure citizens against employment-related risks (Beck, 2000: 86).

Whilst this argument may be laudable, it must be remembered that labour market

[35]In the British case, trade unions, working men's clubs and miners welfares provided *social* as well as employment related support.

diversification has also produced salutary effects. For example, the well-documented shift from mass manufacturing to service sector employment does appear to have resulted in a broader range of available careers. As new technologies develop and consumer markets expand, a myriad of new types of employment have emerged.[36] The flip-side of this diversity is the uncertainty of career flexibility and the disappearance of a 'job for life'. In a competitive labour market, retraining or switching from one occupation to another become either an option or a necessity, dependent upon circumstance. For Beck, these flexible working patterns place increased responsibility on the employee for training, security benefits and personal pensions (Beck, 2000a: 60).[37] Beck believes that the transition from full-time stable employment to more varied and specialised forms is a vital component of the individualization process (Beck, 1998: 43). The majority of employees no longer labour on production lines with well defined hierarchies, and the formation of collective work-based ties has been dislocated by flexible employment patterns and decentralised working sites. Consequently, evidence suggests that the power and scope of collective bargaining in Britain and Europe has steadily contracted since the 1970s (Bean, 1994: 74).[38] In modern society, a lack of engagement in trade union activity is indicative of a more dispersed and atomised workforce. Trade unions - once an important source of class-consciousness - appear to have lost much of their ideological clout and political power. These branches away from collectivism are said to reproduce and nurture increasingly individualized life biographies (Beck, 1992: 149).

Beck contends that the multi-faceted nature of work means that entry into the labour market no longer takes place *en masse*, in a collective of friends or classes.

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[36]This is not to say that there are more employment opportunities *per se*, simply to argue that a wider range of job *types* exist today.

[37]The flexibilization of working practices has resulted in greater variation in employment hours with employees being invited to use 'flexi-time' and to work longer and shorter shifts as necessary.

[38]In 1979, 453 registered trade unions existed in Britain. This number declined steeply to reach 254 by 1993 (Denscombe, 1996: 32) In this period, trade union membership fell from 50% to 30% of all employees (Denscombe, 1998: 31).

Transformations in employment practices mean that work now *dissolves* as well as creates structural networks. Hence, taken for granted assumptions about employment, family responsibilities, friendships, space and place are thrown into question as the labour market operates as a catalyst for individualization:

> There has been a special surge of individualization of life situations and life paths...people are removed by mobility, education, competition, legal regulations, market relationships and so on from traditional commitments to the mileux of their birth and are turned over to their individual 'labour market fate' with all the concomitant risks (Beck, 1998: 45).

2.4 Patterns of Individualization: Young People in Britain

Having determined the theoretical constitution of the distributional logic and individualization, we are now in a position to relate these processes to contemporary society. In this section, I intend to explore the experiences of young people in Britain as a means of calibrating the applicability of the risk society thesis. Further, it is anticipated that in evaluating employment patterns amongst young people, wider social and cultural trends may be glimpsed. At a macro level, Beck contends that the individualization process steadily seeped through the labour market in Western Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. A more focussed analysis of youth employment patterns and experiences in this period will enable us to tease out the ambiguities which are embedded within the process of individualization.

Studies of youth culture in Britain have indicated that the lived experiences of young people have changed considerably in the last twenty-five years (Fornas and Bolin, 1995; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). Notably, young people today experience the demands of personal decision-making more intensely in almost all aspects of everyday life, with choice and reflexivity permeating the spheres of employment, consumption and personal relationships (Macdonald and Coffield, 1991; Giddens,

1990). Whilst the extension of personal choice has produced positive benefits, individualization has also intensified the pressure of decision-making and heightened individual responsibility for identity construction. These more burdensome dimensions of everyday reflexivity are well recognised within social theory (Beck, 1998a: 20; Giddens, 1990; 1994; Woodward, 1997) and have also been immortalised within works of popular fiction, such as Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*:

> Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin openers (Welsh, 1997: 3).

Whilst this quote aptly illustrates the *diversity* of reflexive choices stimulated by individualization, I shall be explicitly interested here in factors which relate to variations in employment experiences. In *Risk Society* (1992), Beck discusses three particular facets of employment which propel the individualization process. It is argued that the intensification of *competition and mobility*, coupled with a greater stress on personal *education*, facilitates a *decline in collective structures* and ultimately accentuates individualized forms of experience (Beck, 1992: 92). For Beck, each facet fluidly supplements the others, producing a series of multiple combinations: 'only by thus reinforcing each other do they cause the process of individualization' (Beck, 1992: 95).

Beck posits that since the 1980s the education system has been forced to respond to the needs of a diversified labour market, offering up a greater plurality of subject choices and exit points. Post-education, entry into the labour market has demanded flexibility and mobility, undercutting the stability of local networks and structures. The intensification of competition within the labour market is said to have encouraged individuals to advertise their qualifications, promoting difference and individuality (Beck, 2000: 3). For Beck, such dynamic processes are indicative of the 'hidden contradiction between mobility demands and social bonds' (Beck, 1992: 94). To what

extent is Beck's theory of individualization mirrored by current social trends? How significant is individualization in understanding the labour market experiences of young people in Britain?

In support of the risk society thesis, the British education system does appear to have opened up a more variable set of exit routes for young people in recent years (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 13). In the 1980s, the transition from school to work diversified considerably via the expansion of colleges, apprenticeships and youth training schemes. At the same time, fluctuations in the political order, the continued dissolution of Fordist work organisation and economic recession appear to have cemented the link between employment and risk.

As Furlong and Cartmel (1997: 37) note, the long-term sequale of such macro shifts has been the development of a more educated, mobile and flexible workforce. Academic and vocational qualifications have become increasingly valuable - if not obligatory - commodities for the contemporary employee. The number of young people and returning adults entering university has ballooned in the last fifteen years, with a vast range of post-compulsory courses currently available. In recent times, educational establishments have been encouraged by government to offer greater 'consumer choice' and 'value for money'.[39] Furthermore, in modern society greater stock is laid on self-improvement via educational choice, individualizing responsibility for success or failure.[40] Beck argues that patterns of flexible working serve to encourage competition within the labour market, demanding a broad 'skills set' and encouraging 'self development' via training courses and qualifications. Undoubtedly, competition between companies at a global level has spawned a more aggressive market, which in turn demands more intense forms of individual

[39]This is aptly illustrated by the introduction of school league tables and fee paying at universities.

[40]Reports suggest that the demand for highly qualified people is likely to continue rising into the foreseeable future. See, for example, part one of *The Institute for Employment Research Annual Report* (1996) published by The University of Warwick.

presentation and publicity.[41] As Beck notes, such developments generally tend to function in the interests of employers, who are able to accredit unemployment to 'insubstantial profiles' or 'poor motivational skills' (Beck, 1999: 12). In accordance with Beck's thesis, these pervasive undercurrents do seem to indicate that workers have become *individually* accountable for their actions in the labour market and are taking greater responsibility for the management of employment-related risks. Careful formative planning of educational and employment routes has now become an established cultural routine, particularly within affluent classes.

As Beck (1992: 93) points out, educational experience is a pertinent aspect of self-biography in contemporary times, with class specific paths from school to work fading. It appears that the transition between the two institutions became increasingly open-ended in the 1980s. In this decade, large group transitions from mass education to standardised Fordist workplaces disintegrated, with young people making the leap into a heterogeneous as opposed to an undifferentiated labour market (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 38).

As a consequence, many young people have become susceptible to the unsettling forces of mobility, competition and risk. Habitual fluctuations in education, employment and family life have acquainted young people with the effects of disembedding (Beck, 1994: 13; Giddens, 1990: 23). As Beck notes, broader spatial and temporal transitions have led to young people becoming uprooted and spatially distanced from families and friends:

> Paid employment is being chopped up both contractually and temporally, and with it the unifying time structure of social life in family, neighbourhood and community (Beck, 2000: 53).

Furthermore, as the shift from compulsory schooling to full-time work becomes

[41] The curriculum vitae acts a prime example of the self-marketing desired by employers in the contemporary culture of employment.

interspersed by a range of options,[42] individuals have become increasingly accountable for scripting their own biographies (Beck, 1994: 15; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 9).

In the British case, employment uncertainty amongst young people can be traced back to the collapse of the youth labour market in the 1980s (Ashton et al, 1990). During this time, the Conservative government promoted a range of policies to encourage reduced labour costs, employee flexibility and trade union instability. Great ideological stock was placed upon the need to train a young workforce to meet the skill and flexibility requirements of a global market. As a consequence, the much-maligned Youth Training Scheme (YTS) was introduced. One of the most notable effects of this scheme was to raise the number of young people entering the labour market at sixteen.[43] Whilst the scheme was marketed as a solution to the problem of global economic competition, the introduction of youth training schemes reduced unemployment statistics and provided a cheap source of labour for employers. Whatever the original intention, the actual outcome was a disparity between the number of young people entering the market and the labour requirements of employers (Ashton et al, 1990). As a result, competition in an already fragmented labour market intensified still further in the 1990s.[44] More recent assessments indicate that at least a fifth of 18-24 year olds are unemployed (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 31). The lack of employer demand for minimum age school leavers has also steered adolescents towards further and higher education (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 27). Despite a comparative rise in the number of academically qualified individuals, the labour market remains a hostile and competitive site (Beck, 2000a: 56; Mizen, 1995). At the very moment at which young people are exhorted to 'choose a job', the

[42]For example, further education, travel, training and voluntary work.

[43]The number of school leavers entering the labour market at sixteen increased by twenty percent in the three years between 1988 and 1991 (Payne, 1995).

[44]In 1995, the Department of Employment reported that only half of ex-YTS trainees were employed six months after completion of their apprenticeships. See the DfEE *Labour Market Quarterly Report* London: HMSO. Of course, this is to say nothing of the quality of the jobs held by those lucky enough to be employed.

deliverance mechanism of this choice becomes increasingly volatile and unpredictable.

In terms of the theory of individualization, contemporary patterns of youth employment hint at significant structural shifts. In the thirty-year period between 1950 and 1980, transitions from school to work appear to have been more distinct and predictable than in present times. Since the 1980s a plurality of options have been thrust upon young people, undermining standardised career routes (Roberts et al, 1994: 43). As Beck notes, today young people are expected to assume greater responsibility for their choices in the labour market and in the wider construction of self-identities:

> For a majority of people, even in the apparently prosperous middle layers, their basic existence and life-world will be marked by endemic insecurity. More and more individuals are encouraged to perform as 'Me & Co', selling themselves on the market place (Beck, 2000: 3).

Such an emphasis on personal planning - allied to a plethora of potential routes into employment - appears to have fostered the illusion of uniqueness and individuality amongst young people, rather than encouraging collective aspirations and motivations (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 7). These findings key in with empirical evidence which suggests that young people in Britain are experiencing more intense forms of individualization in the labour market than their forebears (Roberts, 1995). Pathways into work are no longer rigidly governed by ties of class, gender or familial proximity and the transfer from school to work has become multivarious. In agreement with Beck, the weight of empirical evidence does seem to suggest a symbiotic relationship between employment relations and the individualization process. But just how much does the risk society thesis actually tell us about the *lived dynamics* of individualization?

At this juncture it may be worth exploring a series of limitations of the theory of

individualization. In applying Beck's work to everyday practices, the amorphous nature of the subject comes to light. We might reasonably concur with Beck that the individualization process is multivalent and disseminates through a clutch of institutions. However, the all-embracing scope of such a definition problematizes the collection of reliable data and the subsequent formulation of robust theoretical assumptions.

As has been argued, the available evidence does appear to support the permeation of patterns of individualization amongst young people. It would appear that education and employment *are* vital engines of individualized experience in contemporary society. However, given the extensive boundaries of the *definition* of individualization, it is hardly surprising that supportive evidence can be marshalled. It is only in piecing together the risk society thesis that the full ambit of individualization becomes clear. For Beck, individualization is constituted by a rise in lifestyle choices; the fragmentation of cultural experience; a proliferation of social risks; greater personal responsibility and accountability; the undermining of class identities; social disembedding and the development of diverse and reflexive life paths.

Whilst such definitional imprecision may reflect the polymorphous nature of the process, it also raises questions of sociological validity. Of course, it would be difficult to falsify the diffusion of the individualization process. However, by the same token, it is equally difficult to 'prove'. Taking on board the breadth of Beck's understanding of individualization, one might reasonably expect to find a ready supply of supportive examples. The rather imprecise meaning of individualization in the risk society thesis leads to difficulties in calibrating the *extent* and the *effects* of individualization in contemporary culture.

In his defence, Beck does make some attempt to theoretically deconstruct the

elements of individualization. However, individualized experiences themselves are still tacitly assumed, rather than substantiated by rigorous empirical analysis. Thus, the issue of how *important* individualized experiences are *in relation* to collective experiences remains an untapped area of inquiry. In focusing exclusively on evidence supporting the diffusion of individualization, Beck offers a decidedly partial account of contemporary social relations.

Even if we are to overlook Beck's rather selective use of evidence, an important question mark still lingers over the actual social significance of the process. Whilst Beck contends that individualization *radically* alters the structure of society, it must be remembered that the development of modernity has been characterised by a variety of forms of social differentiation (Polanyi, 1973). Further, the diversification of life trajectories and the decline of tradition have been long-standing concerns within social theory. Indeed, the various dimensions of individualization are implicit in the classical sociology of Simmel, Durkheim and Weber. This does bring to the surface issues of continuity and relativity, particularly with regards to the *speciality* of the processes Beck describes. Are we currently witnessing a fundamental social transformation, or are current forms of individualization simply the continuation of a process which is centuries long?

Without doubt, Beck tends to present individualization - and risk more generally - as 'new' cultural experiences, which fundamentally alter human existence. However, both individualization and risk have a decidedly long history and are organic processes. Whilst I shall return to this point in conclusion, it already seems questionable that western society has entered the 'new modernity' ushered in by Beck over a decade ago (Beck, 1992). The less spectacular, but arguably more conceivable proposition, is that society is simply experiencing more intense forms of individualization than have previously been encountered.

A second significant fault in Beck's argument stems from his tendency to cite handpicked examples in support of *general* arguments. In reflecting upon the social circumstances said to be unique to the risk society, one can propound a range of counter examples which question the haecceity of contemporary patterns of individualization. In assessing the extent of individualization, social theory needs to be sensitive to experiences of *cultural continuity*, as well as change. In homing in on a select handful of cases, Beck runs the risk of overlooking the wider cohesion of social structures and flattening the complexities of social reproduction. For example, in *Risk Society* (1992) Beck sketches out the parameters of individualization:

> The place of traditional ties and social forms (social class, nuclear family) is taken by secondary agencies and institutions, which stamp the biography of the individual and make that person dependent upon fashions, social policy, economic cycles and markets (Beck, 1992: 131).

Even allowing for Beck's hyperbolic style, such generalised claims only serve to gloss over the evident continuities in patterns of social reproduction in western cultures. To argue that class and the nuclear family are losing *relative* cohesion as primary agents of socialisation is one thing. It is quite another to suggest that these structures are being *replaced* by 'secondary agencies'. In a time of rapid social change, it must be recognised that long-standing class divisions are still rife.[45] Despite nascent evidence of intergenerational social mobility, intra-generational mobility still remains a relatively rare phenomenon (Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1993). In most European cultures, social class remains an important cultural issue, which both limits and enables social action.

Similarly, familial forms are indisputably in flux, with an increase in lone parents, a decline in cohabiting extended families and a rise in reconstituted families (Sherratt and Hughes, 2000: 57). However, empirical evidence also indicates marked

[45] In Britain, the top 10% own almost 50% of total personal wealth, with the bottom 50% owning just 7% (Denscombe, 1998: 11).

continuities in the structure and cultural significance of the family. For example, a recent *Social Trends* survey (1999: 43) found that 79% of British families are couple families, living with or without children. Additionally, a number of studies have upheld the continued moral and ideological role of the family in influencing and ordering social life (McGlone, Park and Roberts, 1996; Sherratt and Hughes, 2000). Contrary to Beck's argument, empirical evidence indicates that young people are actually remaining dependent on their families for greater periods than two decades ago. Whilst the expansion of higher education has meant that young people will leave home at an earlier age than their forebears, 1 in 3 will subsequently return to their parental home to live (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 45).[46] Meanwhile, young people continue to 'put back' the average age of marriage, which again implies longer periods in the family environment (Jones, 1995).

The existence of continuities in class and familial structure highlight the problems of generality that bedevil the risk society thesis. It would appear that detailed comparative research is required for Beck's overarching claims to be properly substantiated. As Hutton's 'forty, thirty, thirty' equation indicates, different social groups will encounter contradictory employment and life experiences (Hutton, 1996). It seems reasonable to infer from this that the degree and intensity of individualized experiences will be mediated by existing structures of class, gender, ethnicity and age. In Beck's risk society, everyone seems destined to share a universal individualized experience. In reality, insecurity and risk are concentrated amongst the 'bottom' thirty percent of unemployed, part-time and temporary workers. As has been noted, a sizeable tranche of this sector will be young people, whose working experience is likely to be relatively individualized. But what of permanently employed professionals - the 'top' 40% in Hutton's equation? Is their lot as individualized as Beck implies? Whilst such questions can only be answered with reference to large-

[46] In this regard, the introduction of fee paying at Universities might well encourage more students to attend local study centres and to remain in the family home.

scale empirical research, it is reasonable to assume that the social coverage of individualization cannot possibly be blanket.

Unfortunately, this is a supposition which is not adequately acknowledged by Beck, who rather flattens cultural, economic and regional differences. In his desire to emphasise that individualization and risk are becoming universal phenomena, Beck elides that the *extent* or *degree* of exposure to individualization is related to geographical location. Whilst Beck makes reference to the 'global' spread of the individualization process, he rarely gets beyond describing cultural changes in his native Germany (Beck, 2000a: 145; Marshall, 1999: 155). The degree to which employment practices act as a catalyst for individualization can only be properly evaluated with reference to appropriate geographical, cultural, and economic contexts. Somewhat remarkably, even intra-European differences are poorly acknowledged by Beck.[47] Denmark, for example, is one of the most affluent countries in the world, exporting a variety of high quality goods worldwide (Scheuer, 1998). The country has a long history of tripartite corporatism with high levels of union density, currently covering over 80% of the workforce. Furthermore, Denmark has a high minimum wage with extensive coverage and strong employment rights. (Scheuer, 1998: 155). Whilst flexible working methods and the effects of global recession have challenged the so called 'Danish Model', Denmark has retained a comparatively stable labour market, with the unemployment rate of around 5% remaining the lowest in Europe (Due et al, 1994; Scheuer, 1998: 155). In sharp contrast, the Spanish economy has historically been based on a labour-intensive industry, with little use of technology, low productivity and weak international competitiveness. In Spain there is no minimum wage and the unemployment rate hovers around 25% - five times higher than in Denmark. Although Spanish industrial relations are slowly improving, many of the features of the Spanish labour market evolved under the Franco dictatorship

[47]Beck has recently made some attempt to account for cultural variations in employment patterns between different nations. See, for example, p. 113-115 of *Brave New World of Work* (Beck, 2000). However, the wider ramifications of such acknowledgements for the risk society thesis are yet to be addressed by Beck.

(Martinez Lucio, 1998: 426).

This admittedly cursory comparison indicates that systems of employment regulation and labour market structures are the products of past histories, discrete strategies and government policies. Significant disparities in the structural features of employment relations can be expected within Europe. Consequently, the degree to which employment experiences structure individualization cannot be assumed, but must be established in a way that is sensitive to national, regional and cultural variations.

In *Risk Society* (1992) Beck pays scant attention to locational difference, overlooking the complexities and variations in employment-related individualization. The omission of an appropriate social, political, economic and cultural context in which risk and individualization are situated leads to a loss of theoretical validity and analytical subtlety. The differences between employment systems globally attest that individualization is a multivarious rather than a homogenous process. Such a hiatus in Beck's thesis hastens the need for cross-cultural analyses of individualization. A more sophisticated understanding of the process is required, which places greater emphasis on the diverse range of cultural experiences generated by the spread of individualization.

To recap, the case study infers that the dynamics of education and employment are indeed impelling young people to confront the individualized challenges of competition, reflexivity and personal choice. Nonetheless, set against the specific criticisms raised here, the methodology used by Beck is questionable. In order to verify Beck's claims, focused primary research is required into the nature, experience and effects of individualization. What does individualization actually *feel* like? How do social actors *manage* the individualization process? How *important* are individualized as opposed to collective experiences in everyday life? In the absence of rigorous ethnographic research, such questions remain unanswered and Beck's thesis

cannot be properly validated.

In working towards a more complete appreciation of individualization, the *subjective* lived experience of individualization must be accorded precedence. The risk society thesis makes little reference to ethnographic research and simply converts macro processes into cultural experience. In applying risk and individualization to macro structures, Beck rather skirts around the depth and the vitality of *cultural practices.* Beck's account of the erosion of macro structures - such as class, gender and the family - leave his work somewhat 'depopulated', devoid of ethnographic observation of the very actors whose experience it purports to speak for. As Hall notes, ultimately only the *participants* in any given culture can give meaning to objects and events (Hall, 1997: 3). Contra Beck, material objects and processes themselves rarely contain a single and unchanging meaning.

Following the basic tenets of social constructionism, it might be argued that the individualization process *itself* is not inherently risky. Patterns of individualization only acquire 'riskiness' in relation to the responses of social actors, who are themselves rooted in everyday cultural contexts. To follow a hypothetical scenario, the manager of a large factory announces that the workforce will be on short time for six months, with working hours reduced from forty to twenty five hours per week. On paper, this example may scream out uncertainty and risk. However, the riskiness of the event cannot be read-off from the manager's decision itself. The actual *experience* of risk and/or individualization depends upon the socio-economic context of actors, access to resources and cultivated values and beliefs. The middle-aged married employee with a mortgage to pay may respond negatively to the decision. For her, the outcome will be financial insecurity, debt and uncertainty. Meanwhile, the decision may be a blessing for the young epicurean employee living with his parents. In contrast, he will still acquire enough money to get by *and* have an extra chunk of free time to engage in leisure activities.

Of course, this is not to crassly argue that employer's decisions to work short time and cut wages are generally in the interests of employees. Nonetheless, the above example does warn against making a *hermeneutic leap* from objective evidence to assumed subjective experience. Throughout his work, Beck has a tendency to construct preferred readings of complex situations. Hence, a discernible breach appears in the risk society thesis in accounting for the *lived experience* of individualization. If we conceive of objective and subjective responses to individualization as two connecting parts of a circle, Beck seems to be offering half a circle as evidence of the whole.

It can be argued then that Beck pays too little attention to both the *range* and the *dynamism* of cultural practices. Concrete evidence of the nature and effects of the individualization process are rooted in the mutable relationship between structure and agency. As it stands, Beck rather imputes meaning to cultural agency on the basis of structural shifts. To gain credence, Beck's sweeping claims require validation by both small-scale ethnographic studies *and* large-scale empirical indices:

> Given Beck's inattention to real world cases or to summary evidence related to the trends he describes, it is hard to assess the empirical veracity of his claim that we are witnessing transition to a wholly different kind of society (Dryzek, 1995: 237).

As Dryzek implies, in practical application the risk society thesis generates more questions than answers. However, using the case study as a prompt, we can speculate on the possible advantages and drawbacks of the risk society model. In support of Beck, there is some evidence to suggest that social structures and practices are becoming more individualized in the West. Furthermore, the experience of employment-related individualization appears to have become part and parcel of everyday life for many young people in contemporary society. It is evident that a dialectical relationship exists between the labour market and individualization, with employment relations both driving and being driven by the individualization process.

On the minus side, a number of trenchant criticisms have been raised, which challenge the overall solidity of the risk society thesis. It has been argued that Beck's examination of individualization is empirically incomplete and would benefit from theoretical revision. Much greater emphasis on empirical research is needed to come to terms with individualization in appropriate cultural, economic and social contexts. Sustained comparative research would enable us to unearth the differentiated nature of individualization, with particular reference to social cleavages of class, gender, ethnicity, age and location. In future empirical work, due attention must be paid to *continuities* as well as disjunctures in social reproduction. This research might contribute toward filling the interstice between individualization as macro process and individualization as cultural experience. Whilst it is evident that routes of enculturation are in flux in Western Europe, Beck marshals little concrete evidence to verify the existence of a 'new mode of societalization' (Beck, 1992: 127).

2.5 Work and the Distributional Logic

In considering the relationship between the labour market and the individualization process a string of objections to the risk society perspective have been recounted. Having summarised the theory of distributional logic in chapter one, the relationship between work and transitions in the distributional logic will now be examined.

In permeating several areas of social and cultural life, the theory of distributional logic is redolent of its counterpart theory of individualization. In addition to employment, the notion of a shift in distributional logic also interrelates with class, politics and the environment. The theory of distributional logics is most fully outlined in *Risk Society* (1992: 19-50) and *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995: 128-157). In the latter, Beck yokes the idea of distributional logics to the production of

environmental risks, in the former greater emphasis is placed on the relationship between distributional logics, employment and class. Thus, in discussing the distributional logic a degree of conceptual crossover is unavoidable, given the bridge between employment-related aspects of the distributional logic, social stratification and environmental issues. As such, the following sections will inevitably throw open broader changes in class structure and the dynamics of risk distribution. The loose ends that are left untied here will be revisited and integrated into a more specific analysis of the theory of risk distribution in chapter five. It must be remembered that the prime rationale at this stage is to develop an understanding of the relationship between employment-related change and shifting patterns of risk distribution.

Beck argues that the period in Western history between 1930 and 1970 can aptly be referred to as an epoch of wealth distribution. By this, Beck infers that the collective purpose within western culture was to produce sufficient material goods to be socially distributed - albeit rather unequally in practice. These social goods are constituted by a number of basic positive goals and benefits, including wages; full-time employment; material possessions; housing and healthcare facilities. Beck maintains that during this period, institutional structures within western society were based around the production, accumulation and dispersal of goods. Ineluctably, political conflicts surfaced between those enjoying a large slice of the 'cake', those with smaller slices, and those making do with the crumbs. However, despite obvious disparities between cake-holders, Beck maintains that the overall purpose of the wealth distributing society was to eliminate scarcity by producing enough 'goods' to go around. Hence the central dynamic - or logic - of such a society is organised around the concept of *class*.

As discussed in chapter one, Beck reasons that the distributional patterns of the class society were interrupted in the 1970s, when distinct fluctuations began to appear in the logic of wealth distribution. At this time, the distribution of 'social goods' became

augmented by a collection of 'social bads'. Alongside the production of social goods, western societies were now steadily producing a palette of risks such as mass pollution, chemical leaks and nuclear technology (Beck 1998a: 10).

Underlying the separation of goods and bads is the significant 'logical' distinction between the two modes of existence. Whilst class societies are primarily bound up with issues of scarcity, risk societies are plagued by the problem of insecurity (Beck, 1992: 49). Beck suggests that the recent proliferation of 'bads' indicates that the logic of class is gradually being overtaken by a creeping logic of risk (Levitas, 2000: 203). Whilst the basic *material* needs of citizens in western societies are sated, their *safety* needs are denied (Beck, 1992: 49). For Beck, we may not yet inhabit the risk society proper but we also no longer live solely within the distributional patterns of a scarcity society:

> In the highly industrialized world, the despoliation of nature leads the social schematism of wealth distribution - call it the 'class struggle' for simplicity's sake - to be freighted with and undercut by..the regional strife of risk civilisation (Beck, 1995: 152).

In *Risk Society* (1992), Beck avers that contemporary lived experience is permeated by a confluence of class and risk logics, with the latter currently in the ascendance. But how do transformations in distributional logic relate specifically to employment? Firstly, it is argued that contemporary labour markets are becoming more susceptible to patterns of risk. Secondly, employment practices themselves are said to catalyse new risks, which undermine social structures and threaten established cultural practices.

Throughout his work, Beck has consistently maintained that employment relations are in the midst of a process of radical change (Beck, 1992; 1998; 2000). As has been illustrated, full-time permanent employment can no longer be guaranteed. The fragmentation of the labour market in Europe has served to invest employment

experiences with tangible elements of risk. Beck believes that the key manifestation of intensified risk is the social diversification of joblessness: 'unemployment is no longer a marginal fate: it affects everyone' (Beck, 2000a: 58). Beck believes that the threat of unemployment has become generalised, irrespective of class, gender and age.

Despite being suggested as a model for harmonious industrial relations, as many as one in three Germans were unemployed between 1974 and 1983 (Beck, 1992: 89). Similarly, in Britain, only a third of the population are currently employed on a full-time permanent contract (Beck, 1998: 56; Hutton, 1996: 14). Hence, unemployment and job insecurity no longer simply blight the poorest and least academically qualified groups in society. In times of cyclical recession *everyone* becomes vulnerable to labour market fluctuations and the threat of redundancy: 'you can run into anyone down at the unemployment office' (Beck, 1998: 55). The relative rise in cross-class unemployment in Europe leads Beck to the apocalyptic conclusion that post-industrial nations are moving towards a form of capitalism without work:

> Insecurity on the labour market has long since spread beyond the lower classes. It has become the mark of our times. The old 'lifetime profession' is threatened with extinction. No one wants to admit that with it an entire value system, a society based on gainful employment, will disappear. Capitalism is killing off work (Beck, 1998: 55).

The social diffusion of unemployment, combined with the flexibilization and casualization of labour, leads Beck to postulate that the logic of the wealth distributing society is faltering. As risk and security become endemic features of the employment system, the distributive motor of the class society misfires, leading to endemic insecurity. For Beck, this anxiety and uncertainty precipitates a material and ideological void: 'the notion of a class society remains useful only as an image of the past. It only stays alive as there is not yet any suitable alternative' (Beck, 1992: 91).

It must be noted that the effects of social goods and social bads must be understood

within the broader context of individualized experience (Beck, 1992: 100). The personalization of social relations is said to undermine previously embedded patterns of wealth distribution, such as the standard employment relation. Indeed, the most prominent manifestation of the relationship between employment and distributional logics is inextricably embedded in the broader process of individualization. Beck contends that as the process of individualization gnaws away at class identities, employment wanes as a 'loci (sic) of conflict and identity formation' (Beck, 1992: 99). In the risk society, new inequalities and unions emerge, founded on the logic of risk rather than the logic of class. As a consequence, individuals are forced to endure fragmented, messy patterns of employment:

> The workers exchange a bit of freedom from work for new types of constraints and material insecurity. Unemployment disappears, but then reappears in new types of generalized risky underemployment. This all means that an ambiguous, contradictory development is set in motion in which advantages and drawbacks are indissolubly intermeshed, a development whose far-reaching consequences and risks are not calculable for political consciousness or action either. That is precisely what is signified when one speaks of a *risk society* system of underemployment (Beck, 1992: 144).

Beck posits that the globalization of capital and the instability of economic markets have radically altered the internal structure of the labour market. As has been noted, employers are demanding increased flexibility from workers with fewer assurances of job security. The trend towards de-collectivization and the de-traditionalization of experience is thus reinforced by fluctuations in the employment relationship. Traditional collective identities forged between the workplace, social class and the family are in the process of being transposed by 'an individualized society of employees' (Beck, 1992: 100). Employment-related risks are now said to travel across the gamut of occupational classes, becoming a universally familiar experience. As a corollary of this, the motor of wealth distribution is overridden by incessant bouts of instability, fluctuation and insecurity.

The suggestion of a radical rupture in the sphere of work is not peculiar to Beck's

work. Various forerunning theories, such as 'Post-Industrialism' (Bell, 1973) and 'Post-Fordism' (Aglietta, 1979; Dawson, 2000) have sought to identify subterranean shifts in the nature of work (Goldblatt, 2000). Beck does acknowledge these theories, but casts them as merely part of the 'backdrop to the theory and sociology of work in the second modernity' (Beck, 2000: 68). Along with Bell and Aglietta, Beck concurs that the shift from manufacturing to service sector employment has made knowledge and communication skills indispensable facets. However, Beck insists that employment transformations are best understood through the paradigm of risk.

In recent work, Beck has extended his analysis of the affinity between employment and risk, counterpoising the 'Fordist regime' which existed in industrial modernity with the 'Risk regime' currently in place (Beck, 2000; 2000a). In *Brave New World of Work* (2000) Beck argues that the Fordist regime - which dominated from the 1950s to the 1970s - was characterised by full employment, rising living standards and job security. Furthermore, employee rights were relatively strong, being supported by trade unions, free collective bargaining and Keynesian macro-policies (Beck, 2000: 69). For Beck, Fordist organisation is inextricably linked to the wider distribution of social goods:

> The Fordist regime, for instance, rests upon the fact that the principle of mass standardization applies to both production and consumption. Labour and production are geared to large model runs of cars, refrigerators, washing machines and the like, which allow rapid increases in productivity and profits and, via rising wages, also in mass consumption. This form of production, work and consumption created a society in which peoples lives were as highly standardized as the sheet metal from which the cars were welded together (Beck, 2000: 68).

Here, the principle of standardization is not only applied to the structure of work, but also to wider cultural forms such as the family consumption and leisure activities. Beck argues that the collapse of the Fordist regime in the 1970s was signified by the disappearance of a job for life, rising unemployment and redundancies (Beck, 2000: 2). In the transitional phase between regimes, the prevalence of such social bads

provides a glimpse of the changing logic of society. Whereas the Fordist regime is characterised by the standardization of work and universal social welfare, the risk regime involves the individualization of work and the personalization of insecurity (Beck, 2000: 70). Whilst the Fordist regime is still open to national governance and intervention, the risk regime is globally dispersed and uncontrollable. As the risk regime extends, collectivism collapses and individuals are forced to take full responsibility for their own life plans and decisions:

> The ongoing debate on the rise and fall of Fordist mass production, mass consumption and standardized full employment, as well as the corresponding picture of a standardized society and the political formula of Keynesianism, belong to the paradigm of the first modernity. In the second modernity, however, the risk regime prevails in every field: economy, society, polity. Here the appropriate distinction is therefore not between an industrial and post-industrial or Fordist and post-Fordist economy, but between the securities, certainties and clearly defined boundaries of the first modernity, and the insecurities, uncertainties and loss of boundaries in the second modernity (Beck, 2000: 70).

To recap, Beck argues that employment practices are linked to the distributional logic in two fundamental ways. Firstly, in the transition from Fordist to risk regimes, the spoils of labour power mutate as traditional social goods are augmented by social bads. Secondly, under the Risk regime, insecurity becomes endemic. In such a climate the labour market universally channels risk through employment insecurity, questioning the workings of a previously embedded work ethic: 'the social structure in the heartlands of the West is thus coming to resemble the patchwork quilt of the South, characterized by diversity, unclarity and insecurity in people's work and life' (Beck, 2000: 1).

2.6 The Distribution of Risk: Logical Continuities?

Although several outstanding appraisals of Beck's work have emerged (see Goldblatt, 1995; Lupton, 1999; McGuigan, 1999), a specific critique of the theory of distributional logic has not appeared. In the following review, a series of objections to Beck's portrayal of the relationship between employment and social distribution will be developed. A denser critique of the broader theory of distributional logics will be undertaken in chapter five. Here, our discussion will be more acutely focused around the impacts of transformations in work on the social distribution of risks and opportunities.

In reviewing the empirical evidence, it seems likely that an increase in patterns of flexible working has accentuated the degree of risk involved in acquiring and maintaining employment. As has been noted, in modern society employees are required to be adaptable and receptive to change in a fluctuating labour market. Hence, a capacity for handling risks and a willingness to retrain are becoming necessary qualities for contemporary employees. Additionally, a wider range of potential employment 'choices' mean that individuals are encouraged to consider the consequences of their actions more intensely. Along with Beck, it might be argued that engagement in the culture of work demands an ongoing 'self confrontation with the effects of risk' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 37). Nevertheless, as far as the wider development of a risk regime is concerned, the crux of the matter revolves around the extent to which the changing distribution of risk radically alters patterns of social reproduction. Is there substantial evidence to suggest that the distributional logic of class is being replaced by that of risk?

Of course, this kind of question can be answered in any number of ways. If we approach the question with reference to 'objective' empirical criteria, the logic of class demonstrates remarkably continuity. The poorest in society have remained poor.

Recent global research suggests that the divide between the affluent and the impoverished is ever increasing (Pogge, 1999).[48] Within Europe, long-standing material inequalities remain solidly entrenched. In Beck's native country, the richest 10% of households own 49% of total personal wealth, with the bottom 50% possessing a mere 2.4% (Beck, 1998: 61). At a cursory glance, it seems probable that inequalities of class are still defining and structuring life around the globe. Given the extent of poverty worldwide, it would seem that the traditional needs of scarcity still dominate those of manufactured risk for the global majority.[49] Whilst Beck does appreciate that class divides continue to exist, he is keen to maintain that class positions are being superseded by risk positions. For Beck, class has lost its traditional grip on personal subjectivity, being displaced by individualized personal identities.

In critique of Beck, in the first instance, it is debatable whether such a clear-cut distinction between class as objective measurement and class as subjective experience can be sustained. Objective access to resources invariably feeds into personal experiences and plays an important role in the structuring of individual subjectivities. Furthermore, research suggests that the unequal distribution of goods remains a pressing public concern. For example, a recent British Social Attitudes survey indicated that almost three quarters of the population believed that a person's social class affected his or her opportunities 'a lot' or 'quite a lot' (Jowell et al, 1995). Whilst these findings do not provide sufficient grounds to categorically reject the theory of distributional logic, it is apparent that the alleged decline in class identity needs to be enriched by more detailed empirical evidence.

With specific reference to employment, whilst labour markets in Western Europe

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[48]The United Nations *Human Development Report* (1998) demonstrates that the 37 million dollars annually spent on perfumes, cosmetics and pet foods in North America and Europe could provide sanitation, water and education for 4.4 billion people living in developing countries.

[49]This issue will be revisited in greater depth in chapter five.

might well have become uncertain domains, it is unlikely that the diversification of risk has *equalised* employment experiences. Despite the occasional appearance of boomerang effects, the relationship between social class and employment prospects remains strong. As far as the distributional logic is concerned, there is little evidence to suggest that employment-based class inequalities have evened up since the 1970s (Marshall and Swift, 1993). On the contrary, empirical work suggests that those from working class backgrounds still feel the effects of job insecurity most acutely.[50] In 1992, just 2% of school leavers whose parents were from professional occupations were unemployed the following spring. For those with parents in manual occupations, over 10% were jobless (Courtney and McAleese, 1993). Cognate layers of employment stratification are still following the fissures of ethnicity and gender. For instance, the British unemployment rate for White males is 9%, for Black-African men it is around 28% (Denscombe, 1998: 14). Meanwhile, the average female wage in Britain is just over three quarters of the male average (Denscombe, 1997: 12). Thus, employment paths in Britain still appear to be strongly determined by class, ethnicity and gender. Whilst the sphere of employment can be depicted as a site of individualized experience, actual life chances remain tightly structured along the grooves of traditional inequalities:

> Although changing school to work transitions have led to an increased risk of marginalisation, risks continue to be distributed in a way which reflects social divisions characteristic of the traditional order. In other words, it is still possible to predict labour market outcomes fairly accurately on the basis of social class (via educational performance) and gender. Indeed, while the breakdown of collectivist traditions created the illusion of individuality, these changes have had little effect on processes of social reproduction (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 109).

As Furlong and Cartmel suggest, fluctuations in the labour market have failed to radically alter patterns of risk distribution. Disadvantaged classes still tend to experience higher levels of unemployment, are more likely to constitute peripheral

[50] See, for example, Furlong and Cartmel (1997: 27-40) or White and McRae (1989).

workforces, and habitually live with job insecurity. This implies that - even if we are to go along with Beck's theoretical separation - the actual dispersal of employment risks follows existing class cleavages. At the very least, it would seem premature to equate a rise in patterns of individualization with a tangible shift in distributional activity. Contra the risk society thesis, there is scant evidence to suggest a shift from a differential class-based logic to a universalising logic of risk. Indeed, along with Dryzek, it is more likely risks gravitate towards poverty and exacerbate existing inequalities:

> Class politics may be waning in its importance, but unemployment and inequality attendant upon deindustrialization and economic globalization mean that class differences are actually increasing in developed societies. Indeed, the very same factors noted by Beck as leading to the decline of the solidarity of the working class are also responsible for the immiseration and isolation of its members (Dryzek, 1995: 237).

As Dryzek intimates, a clutch of methodological issues arise out of the distinction between social goods and social bads, particularly in relation to everyday experience under the logics of class and risk (Scott, 2000). In analysing contemporary society, Beck's insistence on a pervading logic of risk leads him to view society almost exclusively through the *lens of risk.* This somewhat blinkered approach serves to disguise the inherent problems involved in separating out the effects of class from those of risk. A brief example will elucidate both the dangers of overusing the lens of risk and the pitfalls of treating class and risk as dichotomous entities.

In Galashiels, Scotland, one thousand workers at an electronics plant owned by Viasystems were recently made redundant. These job losses came despite the fact that the company made 2.5 billion pounds profit in the last financial year.[51] If we decide to approach the example through the lens of risk, a number of salient issues crop up. Firstly, the company claimed that the job losses were the unpredictable outcome of

[51] For further details of the Galashiels case, see *The Guardian 2* Monday October 5th p.3.

unsettled markets and the globalization of production: a prime example of global competition turning the arena of work into a progressively risky environment. Secondly, the Galashiels case provides further evidence that the model of a secure job for life is disappearing. Thirdly, the job losses themselves are likely to have triggered a series of knock-on risks for those made unemployed. For example, a lack of financial security, inability to meet mortgage payments and so on. Taken at this level, the example functions well as an illustration of the logic of risk at work.

However, the same example might also be approached through the lens of class. In the first instance, one might identify the evident power relations between the working class and the ruling class. In Marxian terms, the owners and controllers of the company have dispensed with the labour of their employees, despite having extracted a hefty amount of surplus value. The example also indicates that the working class will bare the brunt of economic recession in terms of job losses. Whilst job insecurity has undoubtedly touched the middle classes, unemployment is both more prevalent and more entrenched within working class culture.[52] The engine of wealth distribution is clearly visible in the Galashiels case, with the reproduction of material inequalities between the rich (profit making owners and executives) and the poor (redundant manual employees) being upheld.

This example demonstrates that in practical application Beck's binary distinction between distributional logics becomes nebulous. Quite where the logic of class ends and the logic of risk begins is difficult to determine. It appears that much depends upon the way in which a particular event is interpreted, or 'made to mean' (Hall, 1997: 3). As du Gay et al (1997: 14) point out, 'meaning is constructed - given, produced - through cultural practices; it is not simply 'found' in things'.[53]

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[52]This is illustrated by the visible decline of British towns and cities built around manual occupations such as mining, docking, steel working and textile manufacturing.

[53]As will be elucidated in chapter three, meanings of risk are vitally tied to the processes of representation and interpretation.

At the very least, the risk society thesis underplays the substantial complexities involved in separating out class logics and effects from risk logics and effects. As Marshall notes, Beck is imprecise about the criteria for movement out of the goods distributing society: 'material needs are not defined, the sufficient and necessary level of needs that must be met are not identified, and what proportion of society must have its needs met is not mentioned' (Marshall, 1999: 268). The construction of the two ideal types and the subsequent attachment of these types to differential experiences, leaves little room for the ambiguities of cultural experience. As such, Beck's presentation of the two logics is somewhat reductionist with his vista of culture being exclusively interpreted through the lens of risk. The significance of this oversight for the cohesiveness of the risk society thesis will be qualified in chapter five.

The reification of distributional logics is further compounded by the dialectical character of Beck's writing, with the use of paradox being particularly pronounced in *Risk Society* (Beck, 1992). Here Beck manoeuvres back and forth between a series of contradictory positions on the distributional logic. In chapter one, Beck begins to outline the links between risk and class logics. There are, Beck argues, an abundance of 'class specific risks', such as unemployment and the development of employment related illnesses (Beck, 1992: 35). At this juncture, Beck stresses that risks follow the well-worn lines of class distribution. However, only a few pages later, under the heading; *Risk Positions are not Class Positions,* Beck sets out the divergent trajectories of class and risk logics. At this stage, Beck supports his argument with reference to air pollution, toxic accidents and unsafe foodstuffs. In stark contrast, the suggestion here is that the logic of risk tends toward universalization:

> There exists a kind of *risk fate in developed civilisation,* into which one is born, which one cannot escape with any amount of achievement, with the small difference that we are *all* confronted similarly by that fate (Beck, 1992: 41).

To further confuse matters, Beck goes on to focus upon situations where class and risk logics overlap (Beck, 1992: 42). Thus, Beck effectively travels full circle, arguing that class and risk logics work in tandem, are at times opposed and at other times overlap:

> On the one hand, the rule continues to hold that wealth rises to the top while risk sinks to the bottom...on the other hand, the industrial system is taking belated revenge on those who have enjoyed its fruits until now (Beck, 1994: 137).

In defence of Beck, it is quite conceivable that such an array of situations mirrors the diverse patterns of distribution within society. However, acknowledgement of such diversity sits rather uncomfortably with Beck's otherwise resolute insistence on a divergent logic of goods and bads.

Clearly, there *is* method in Beck's ambiguity. By sketching out a series of projections, Beck is able to present a range of future scenarios. In this sense, the inconsistencies in Beck's argument are born out of purpose rather than naïveté. In dealing with the concept of risk, one is inevitably drawn into a contentious and complex domain. Certainly it would be imprudent to suggest that *all* social situations tend towards either the logic of class or the logic of risk. Furthermore, Beck's dialectical approach towards the distributional logic is in keeping with his provocative and unconventional style of writing.

Nonetheless, despite these qualifications, Beck's theory of distributional logic ultimately amounts to something of an academic magic trick. In offering up each and every possibility, Beck is able to assume an unfalsifiable position. However, ultimately Beck's thesis becomes marred by inconsistency:

> Beck would presumably argue that such ambiguities are an inevitable consequence of theory's attempt to mirror a contemporary world dominated by simultaneity, multiplicity, uncertainty and above all ambivalence...but this will not stop the cynical from wondering whether the main role of ambiguity in

> Beck's recent works actually is to render his sociological ship impervious to critique (Smith et al, 1999: 171).

Whilst the ambivalence embedded in Beck's work does afford him theoretical manoeuvrability, it also serves to undermine the risk society model. Beck cannot realistically hope to maintain a distinct divide between the logics of class and risk, whilst conceding that the empirical evidence refutes such a position.

So, where does this leave us in terms of our understanding of the theory of distributional logics? Firstly, it is clear that the binary theoretical opposition between class and risk is far from satisfactory. Secondly, given the lack of attention to concrete evidence, the thorny issue of proof again seems to puncture the risk hypothesis. In seeking to cover all available angles, Beck effectively destabilises his own theoretical model.

2.7 Summary and Conclusions

In concluding, detailed analysis of the association between employment and the two pillars of risk has generated a plethora of significant issues. In concordance with the risk society thesis, it has been noted that patterns of individualization are increasingly funnelled through the labour market. Further, the theory of individualization is attuned to the constant assessment involved in the 'planning project' of contemporary life (Lupton, 1999a: 67). Nevertheless, a coherent programme of empirical research is needed to establish both the *extent* and the *effects* of the individualization process. Whilst labour market trends amongst young people indicate that individualization is now an integral feature of employment experiences, more detailed cross-cultural research is required. In particular, greater attention must be paid to forms of social stratification and the contextual 'lived' dimension of individualized experience. Here, it has been argued that embedded layers of stratification and cultural identities of class, gender, ethnicity, age and region will significantly influence the experience of

individualization.

As far as Beck's second pillar of risk is concerned, the application of employment relations to the distributional logic has raised serious theoretical and methodological concerns, which challenge the overall validity of the concept. Firstly, in slavishly relating his argument to risk, Beck rather overlooks significant social patterns, choosing instead to sift for evidence of risk. This tendency to focus on cultural practices through the lens of risk, leads to an under emphasis on traditional forms of social stratification.

Secondly, apparent continuities in the distribution of goods *and* bads negate the idea of an equalising distributional process. On a global level, it would appear that the traditional burden of poverty remains the key determinant of social action for most. The unrelenting reproduction of inequalities suggests that class remains a significant yardstick of life chances in contemporary society. It is unlikely that the trends outlined in the risk society thesis constitute a radical restructuring of cultural experience. This, in turn, questions the *speciality* of risk as a specific feature of contemporary existence. As Day points out:

> Much of what Beck describes...has long been standard for those without much money or control over their lives. Many, perhaps most, individuals have traditionally found it difficult to read the future, to remain in one place with their families and friends; in brief, to determine their own lives (Day, 2000: 51).

Thirdly, as the case study of young people implies, methodological problems arise in distinguishing between the distributory networks of class and risk. It would appear that the theoretical boundaries erected between the two logics are more fluid in social reality, with the effects of class and risk being inextricably woven together. Unfortunately, Beck's theory of distributional logic does not allow for sufficient differentiation in both the manifestation *and* the experience of risk. Collectively, these

criticisms indicate a sizeable gap between the risk society thesis and the cultural practices which constitute everyday life.

3

Defining and Mediating Risk

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, potential shifts in risk production were broached via application of the theories of distributional logics and individualization. Shadowing the risk society thesis, the sphere of employment was utilised as a device for trailing the impacts of risk on social experience. Whilst this analysis endorsed certain aspects of Beck's argument, a distinct gap was identified, apropos the way in which risks are constructed and understood by individuals in everyday lived environments. In particular, it has been argued that Beck's abstract concept of risk assumes a uniformity of cultural experience which is not supported by empirical evidence. The hermeneutic gap left open by the risk society thesis will be more rigorously pursued in this chapter, drawing upon the critical objections raised by Alexander and Smith (1996), Goldblatt (1995) and Lupton (1999). Latterly, a range of empirical studies will also be deployed to explore the complex dynamics of the social construction of risk (Eldridge, 1999; Hansen, 1990; Macgill, 1989; Reilly 1999).

The prime rationale of this section will be to critically scrutinise the social construction of risk as outlined in the risk society narrative. Thus, in section 3.2, a broad-brush account of Beck's historical analysis of the institutional dimensions of risk definition will be developed. Tracing the pattern of the risk society thesis, I will attempt to decipher whether institutional mechanisms of risk assessment are currently in crisis. Subsequently, a series of critical objections to the risk society thesis will be

considered and developed. In particular, it will be argued that Beck's binary understanding of the relationship between lay individuals and expert institutions is imprecise and inapt.

In the second half of the chapter, I examine the role of the mass media in the social construction of risk in western cultures. Here, it will be argued that Beck possesses a distinctly unsophisticated grasp of the structure and functions of the media in contemporary society (see Anderson, 1997; Cottle, 1998; Tulloch and Lupton, 2001). The severity of this oversight will be elucidated by re-examining the role of the media in the formation of cultural understandings of risk. In the light of this analysis, a broader appraisal of the social construction of risk will be produced.

Prior to homing in on the media, I will begin by evaluating the operations of the social institutions involved in risk definition and risk assessment. For Beck, these 'relations of definition' are central to the social construction of risk and are vital in informing public interpretations of risk (Beck, 1995: 130). Preliminary examination of the relations of definition will also provide the basis for a more acute examination of the relationship between 'experts' and 'lay actors' in forthcoming chapters.[54] If we are to capture the essence of risk, it is imperative that we arrive at an understanding of the means by which risks are culturally formulated and socially produced. What is the role of social institutions in the construction and mediation of risk? How are social risks routinely defined and portrayed?

3.2 The Relations of Definition and the Social Construction of Risk

In a number of texts (Beck, 1992; 1995; 1999; 2000), and a raft of journal articles (Beck, 1987; 1992a; 1996) Beck focuses on the social construction of risk in western

[54]In chapter four, the contracting space between 'expert' and 'lay' actors will be examined. In chapter five, I explore the implications of recent modifications in the form and content of politics for expert-lay relations.

cultures. Undoubtedly, the central theoretical feature of Beck's work on the construction of risk is the notion of 'relations of definition' (Beck, 1992: 227; 1995: 116). The 'relations of definition' is a multi-faceted concept, which perhaps explains Beck's reluctance to offer a lucid definition of the term. The closest Beck comes to explication is in *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk*:

> The relations of definition are...basic principles underlying industrial production, law, science, opportunities for the public and for policy. Relations of definition thus decide about data, knowledge, proofs, culprits and compensation (Beck, 1995: 130).

It would seem that the relations of definition is best understood as a collective term, referring to a panoply of social institutions involved in the construction of public understandings of risk. Beck considers science and technology, national governments, the legal system and the mass media as the key social institutions implicated in the definition of risks (Beck, 1995: 61). Allied to responsibilities for risk definition, such institutions are also charged with risk assessment and risk management. For example, national governments, scientific experts and actors within the legal system are involved in determining levels of risk acceptability *and* deciding upon appropriate compensation packages in cases of harm. But how did these relations of definition develop and how effective are such institutions in managing and containing risks?

In *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995) Beck attempts to answer these questions, fleshing out the historical context in which the relations of definition materialised. Following the work of François Ewald (1986; 1991) Beck contends that, post-Enlightenment, dominant methods of defining and managing risks moved away from religious ideology and towards technical and scientific rationality. It is argued that a distinct form of state developed in the nineteenth century in western nations, whose *raison d'etre* was to protect citizens from potential dangers. As noted in chapter one, this entity is referred to by Ewald (1986) and Beck (1995: 108) as the 'safety state'. Beck postulates that the ideology of the safety state was instrumental in

fostering the development of the relations of definition in the West (Beck, 1995: 116). Beck believes that the relations of definition have been developed in order to enhance the safety of citizens and to eliminate possible social risks. Given the historical emphasis on technical and scientific rationality, these relations have been dominantly constructed on a calculative basis (Beck, 1995: 85). This actuarial model of risk attribution cultivated by scientists and economists is referred to by Beck as the 'calculus of risk' (Beck, 1995: 77). The calculus of risk can be understood as an economic paradigm, in which methods of risk assessment are inextricably tied to the principles of mathematics and probability. For example, in the West, calculative insurance systems arose to determine the probability of accidents and liability for compensation payments. Further, national legal systems were gradually introduced and the welfare state evolved to protect and improve the health and safety of citizens. Beck contends that the dominance of the calculus of risk in institutional development ensured that social hazards were effectively collectivised and objectivised. Ewald explains matters thus:

> Regardless of the size of a workforce or the turnover of its recruits, a given mine or factory will show a consistent percentage of injuries and deaths. When put in the context of a population, the accident which is taken on its own to be random and unavoidable, can (given a little prudence) be treated as predictable and calculable. One can predict that during the next year there will be a certain number of accidents, the only unknown being who will have an accident, who will draw one of existence's unlucky numbers (Ewald, 1991: 202).

Following Ewald, Beck asserts that models of insurance in 'simple industrial modernity' were based on actuarial principles in which the probability of an accident taking place could be calculated. Hence, in the period between the early nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, the rules and regulations constructed by the relations of definition were geared towards handling tangible and attributable risks. In 'simple industrial modernity', sources of risk can be identified, guilty parties can be punished and compensation packages can be awarded to victims (Beck, 1995: 85). Thus, in simple industrial modernity, the accumulated body of knowledge about risks, allied to the rules and regulations that limited harm, enabled the welfare state to

provide a situation of relative security for its citizens.

For Beck, the dominance of the calculus of risk in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was fastened to the expansion of economic and scientific thought. Post-Enlightenment, notions of human development were very much bound up with advances in science, technology and medicine (Polanyi, 1975). To this end, the use of assorted machinery in the production process, the manufacture of various vaccines and the emphasis on the space race serve as apt examples. Accordingly, Beck believes that the first half of the twentieth century was characterised by public faith in technological progress (Beck, 1992: 155). During this period scientific and technical discourse firmly dictated discussions about risk, which were predominantly debated within the parameters of economics and the natural sciences (Beck, 1992: 24).

As discussed in chapter one, Beck identifies a radical rupture in the early 1970s, as western societies move from 'simple industrial society' into the 'industrial risk society'. At this point, the relationship between scientific experts and the lay public begins to diversify and social conflicts emerge. In contemporary times - for Beck somewhere between industrial risk society and the risk society proper - the very development of science and technology serves to *produce* rather than eliminate potential risks to health. Vitally, these manufactured risks are relatively imperceptible to the human senses and break through the traditional boundaries of time and space (Beck, 1992: 27). In contrast to pre-modern times, in contemporary society risks are increasingly mediated and perceived through the relations of definition rather than via religious ideology or immediate social experience (Beck, 1992: 27). As such, within public institutions, discussion about the nature of risks focuses upon the identification of risks and the quantification of threats to the public. Meanwhile, the so-called 'lay public' are said to increasingly recognise risks through the dissemination of discourses, images and symbols (Beck, 1995: 141; Harris and O'Shaughnessy, 1997: 32; Stevenson, 1999). However, Beck reasons that a transformation in the nature of

risk communications does not necessarily loosen the ideological grip of science and technology. Paradoxically, it is possible that individuals have become *more* rather than *less* dependent upon scientific and technical experts:

> That which impairs health or destroys nature is not recognizable to one's own feeling or eye, and even where it is seemingly in plain view, qualified expert judgement is still required to determine it 'objectively'...hazards in any case require the 'sensory organs' of science - *theories, experiments, measuring instruments - in order to become visible, or interpretable as hazards at all* (Beck, 1992: 27).

In asserting that risks can only be formally identified through scientific inquiry, Beck infers that the general public are ultimately reliant on science, regardless of whether risks are visible or not. However, at other junctures, Beck seems to suggest that public belief in science is becoming more conditional and labile (Beck, 1992: 157). Despite such ambiguity, it is clear that the principles of science and technology have historically acted as a cornerstone for the ideological development of the relations of definition. In this regard, the ideological functions of science and technology are absolutely central to the risk society critique (Goldblatt, 1995: 161). Firstly, scientific experts govern the *identification* of risks and, by dint, the initial content of the debate about risks. Secondly, science and technology are directly responsible for the *manufacture* of certain risks, such as nuclear and chemical technology. Thirdly, it is ultimately only through the process of scientific inquiry that *solutions* to risks - for example, *nv* CJD or AIDS - can be created.

3.3 A Crisis in Risk Definition?

In identifying science as a cornerstone of the relations of definition, Beck raises a cluster of critical issues about the relationship between lay public groups and scientific experts. In *Risk Society* (1992) and *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995) Beck implies that in simple industrial modernity and industrial risk society the

dominant direction of power and information about risk flows from expert assessors to the lay public. In *Risk Society* (1992), a clear distinction is established between 'scientific rationality' and 'social rationality' (Beck, 1992: 29). Scientific rationality is the dominant discourse of risk definition utilised by scientific experts. Conversely, social rationality is inscribed in cultural evaluations of risk and constructed through everyday lived experience. As we shall see, the incongruity of these two rationalities fosters ideological conflict, which becomes manifest in the transition from industrial risk society to the risk society proper.

For Beck, the seeds of conflict between social and scientific rationality can be traced back to the early workings of the safety state. As has been noted, according to Beck the calculus of risk became the tried and tested mechanism of assessing and managing risks from the eighteenth through to the mid-twentieth century. However, in the late twentieth century, the legitimacy of the calculus of risk is threatened as science and technology manufacture unmanageable 'side effects' that challenge the prevailing methods of risk probability and liability. These side effects cannot be adequately regulated or managed by existing techniques of risk assessment:

> The studies of reactor safety restrict themselves to the estimation of certain *quantifiable* risks on the basis of *probable* accidents...in some circles it is said that risks which are not yet technically manageable do not exist - at least not in scientific calculation or jurisdictional judgement (Beck, 1992: 29).

Consequently, the very mechanisms constructed to contain hazards are incapable of limiting the production of manufactured risks. In *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995), the pervasiveness of manufactured risks and the impotence of extant relations of definition are illustrated with reference to 'acceptable levels' of pollution. At well-publicised global summits, scientific experts and politicians decide upon acceptable levels for air contamination and international regulatory limits are set. The parties involved in risk definition insist that such legislation will prevent threats to public health linked with poor air quality, such as asthma, bronchitis and cancer. Should

acceptable regulatory levels be broken, guilty parties can be bought to court and punished by restitutive law. Further, victims may be awarded compensation and the sentence passed will serve as a warning to other would-be offenders.

However logical in theory, the process inevitably breaks down when applied to manufactured risks. Beck contends that governments and scientific experts are establishing 'acceptable levels' with a calculus of risk which has long since become defunct. It is argued that the relations of definition - in particular science and the legal system - have made a 'category error' in obdurately measuring risk in terms of probability and percentages. Given that manufactured risks such as air pollution are localized *and* globalized, the calculus of risk loses applicability: 'at least as long as the 'safety' or 'danger' has anything to do with the people who swallow or breathe the stuff' (Beck, 1992: 26). Beck believes that in assessing manufactured risks, scientific and technical experts have reached a plateau of paralysis. Pressing public questions about safety, regulation and responsibility for risk remain unanswered. The paralysis of scientific rationality is exacerbated by the appearance of manufactured risks which refute the logic of direct causal connection. As in the example of air pollution, the sources of risk are *multi* rather than *mono* causal:

> It is obviously impossible to bring individual substances into a direct, causal connection with definite illnesses, which may also be caused or advanced by other factors as well. This is equivalent to the attempt to calculate the mathematical potential of a computer using just five fingers. Anyone who insists on strict causality denies the reality of connections that exist nonetheless (Beck, 1992: 63).

Beck avers that in persisting with outdated methods of risk assessment cultivated in previous epochs, the relations of definition are simply masking the ongoing social manufacture of risks. Following the rules of the calculus of risk, the responsibility for establishing harm rests with the victim. Thus, in establishing a causal relationship between a given ailment and, say, air pollution, guilty parties are actually privileged by law. More disturbingly, the structure of the contemporary legal system is powerless

in *preventing* air pollution, given that this would require proof of *pre hoc* rather than *post hoc* toxicity. To further tilt the scales of justice, individual victims seeking to prove toxicity invariably have fewer resources, less access to vital information and less knowledge about the workings of the legal system than the offending parties which are, by and large, profit making companies.

Employing the example of air pollution, Beck argues that a direct causal relationship between the cause of harm (asthma, bronchitis, lead poisoning) and the source of the risk (contaminated air) cannot be proved in a court of law. Firstly, the pollution may have been produced miles away from the site of contamination. Secondly, once in court, the search for individual culpability enables companies to blame other local agents, particularly in heavily industrialised areas (Beck, 1995: 135). The sad consequence for the public is that 'proof trickles through our fingertips' and air quality continues to deteriorate (Goldblatt, 1995: 155).

In *Risk Society* (1992) Beck intimates that the relations of definition fulfil a paradoxical role in relation to risk. Whilst the relations of definition are held responsible for risk management and assessment, threats and dangers are also discharged through institutional practices. Consequently, Beck believes that the state, scientific and technological agencies have an in-built tendency to conceal and deflect hazards (Beck, 1995: 86). For the relations of definition, accepting responsibility for the manufacture of risks *and* admitting to an inability to contain hazards would be potentially disastrous. The systematic institutional response to this uncomfortable situation is 'organised irresponsibility' (Beck, 1995: 61). As discussed in chapter one, the concept of organised irresponsibility is a result of a mismatch between contemporary risks and the safety capacities of the relations of definition. Organised irresponsibility essentially refers to the way in which institutions must admit the reality of catastrophic risks whilst simultaneously refuting and deflecting public concerns:

> Thus what is at issue is an elaborate labyrinth designed according to principles, not of non-liability or irresponsibility, but of simultaneous liability and unaccountability: more precisely, liability as unaccountability, or organised irresponsibility (Beck, 1995: 61).

In order to address the complexities of organised irresponsibility, Beck sketches out a range of strategies used by the relations of definition in the exercise of obfuscation. The most notable of these are denial, misinformation and mystification (Beck, 1995: 64). The use of such methods has been crystallised in governmental responses to the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis in Britain. For over a decade - and despite being furnished with a range of information to the contrary - the Conservative government consistently denied the link between BSE in cattle and a new variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (*nv* CJD) in humans. Following the first wave of public concern about the possible transmission of BSE from cattle to humans in the late 1980s, the government, fearful of a loss of consumer confidence and a subsequent fall in export profits, recruited scientific experts to play down the possible connection between BSE and *nv* CJD in humans (Harris and O'Shaughnessy, 1997). In an exceptionally distasteful incident, the Environment Minister John Gummer was filmed by the media feeding beef-burgers to his four year-old daughter. This was, of course, a rather desperate attempt to allay fears about the risk of eating British beef and to inveigle the public into further consumption. As discussed by respondents in Reilly's study, the blanket denial of potential risks by senior politicians such as Gummer was particularly disingenuous and misleading (Reilly, 1999: 135). Given the range of scientific information available to government ministers at the time, the conclusion that eating British beef presented no risk whatsoever to public health was either grossly incompetent or simply mendacious. In flatly refuting the existence of potential risks, Gummer and his colleagues were, in effect, lying to the British public (Reilly, 1999: 135).

Beck refers to such attempted strategies of risk diffusion as 'symbolic detoxification' (1992: 65; 1995: 84). Symbolic detoxification involves the 'staging and perfecting of a cosmetic treatment of risks' and is employed as a method of reassurance *and* mystification (Beck, 1995: 84). As illuminated in the handling of the BSE crisis, symbolic detoxification functions via a mixture of denial on the basis of 'scientific evidence' and reassurances of future control through more stringent safety measures (Adam and van Loon, 2000: 13; Beck, 1995: 85).

In considering the examples of BSE and air pollution levels, it becomes clear that the social construction of risk by the relations of definition is part of a broader hegemonic project. Governmental responses to the BSE crisis can be understood as an attempt to conceal contradictions and to maintain consumer confidence in the market. In the case of air contamination, the very idea of 'acceptable levels' of pollution masks the despoliation of the environment in the name of profit. The ideological connotations of 'acceptable' levels of pollution are not lost on Beck:

> The subject of this decree then, is not the prevention of, but the *permissible extent* of poisoning. *That* it is permissable is no longer an issue on the basis of this decree...the really rather obvious demand for non-poisoning is rejected as *utopian.* At the same time, the bit of poisoning set down becomes *normality.* It disappears behind the acceptable values. Acceptable levels make possible a *permanent ration of collective standardized poisoning* (Beck, 1992: 65).

If successful, the ideological exercise of symbolic detoxification is potentially deleterious to public health in two ways. Firstly, it is possible that sections of the public may be placed in danger by presuming that certain dangerous activities are actually safe (Reilly, 1999: 134). Secondly, the active concealment of hazards may serve to foster the unchecked development of risks (Beck, 1995: 75).

To recap, Beck maintains that the relations of definition are fundamentally incompatible with the risks they are charged with containing (Beck, 1995: 160). The volatile and unpredictable nature of manufactured risks allied to the impotence of

existent institutional mechanisms means that the collective safety of citizens has been compromised. As manufactured risks grow, the apparatus of definition become increasingly defensive, forced into various strains of organised irresponsibility. In the risk society, public recognition of the compliance of science and technology in the production of dangers becomes widespread and the relations of definition suffer continual bouts of instability. As Beck facetiously comments: 'science has just lost the truth - as a schoolboy loses his milk money' (Beck, 1992: 166).

Beck believes that the crisis of confidence in the relations of definition is intensified as risks 'socially explode', detonated by the mass media (Beck, 1995: 96). The 'social explosiveness of hazards' means that social institutions are left forcing a finger into a dam that has long since collapsed. As society enters the risk society phase, the 'latency period' of risks comes to an end, forcing the relations of definition to admit defeat (Beck, 1992: 55). Whilst Beck does not specify an exact time frame for such developments, he does nevertheless intimate that society is fast approaching the 'end of latency' (Beck, 1992: 56; 1999: 89).

Again, the BSE case and the polemic surrounding it aptly illustrate the effects of socially exploding hazards. Buckling under the unbearable weight of evidence, the Conservative government eventually admitted the link between BSE and *nv* CJD in March 1996 (Reilly, 1999: 134). Even today, with the EU Commission having declared that British Beef is entirely safe, the German and French governments have stalled on accepting imports.[55] Ironically, cases of cattle infected with BSE have recently been found in Germany, France and Spain. Beck believes that as risks such as BSE are illuminated by the mass media, public confidence in expert systems is corroded (Beck, 1998a: 13). Contemporaneously, the legal system functions only at a perfunctory level, passing laws that do little to ensure public safety and welfare. In the

[55]The news media have reported that British farmers have been forced to sell calves at market for as little as one pound. *BBC Five Live* 12 o'clock News Bulletin, 5th August 1999.

light of socially exploding hazards, national governments continue to reassure the public with safety claims about risks that are increasingly out of their orbit of control.

In the light of recent high profile episodes, such as the BSE imbroglio, it is tempting to concur that the relations of definition *are* increasingly struggling to contain the force of manufactured risks. It does seem reasonable to argue that the combined actions of social institutions have not succeeded in ensuring a safe society. In questioning the methods of risk assessment deployed by dominant institutions, Beck finds himself in good company (see Douglas, 1985; Thompson; 1989; Wynne, 1989; 1996). Traditional scientific models of risk assessment have been widely criticised for their rigid assumption of linearity between objective risk, risk perception and social action. As Lupton notes, the scientific model of risk has erroneously portrayed individuals as calculative and emotionless actors (Lupton, 1999: 10). Institutional reliance on quantitative scientific methodology has led to a failure to appreciate the cultural referents used by lay publics in developing understandings of risk (Mythen et al, 2000: 6). Further, given that manufactured uncertainties are invariably unearthed *post hoc*, scientific and legal institutions appear to be working with an inflexible and outmoded paradigm. Of course, institutional solutions to risk are generated in specific cultural, technological and economic contexts. Public institutions within capitalist cultures cannot be insulated against market forces and the drive for profit. As a result, it is probable that lay publics are wont to receive the most administratively convenient methods of risk management rather than the most effective ones (Thompson, 1989: 141).

Having provided a sympathetic reading of the relations of definition, I now wish to turn to several pertinent objections which have been directed towards Beck's understanding of the social construction of risk. As has been noted, Beck postulates that manufactured risks are created by and mediated through the relations of definition (Beck, 1995: 110). Whilst this assertion is doubtless valid at a generic level, Beck

does tend to approach the relations of definition as an *institutional bloc*, rather than a field of interactive relationships. For instance, in *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995), Beck claims that 'hazard situations arise from the connection between economy and science, economy and law, economy and state' (Beck, 1995: 182). Such an accent upon the power of institutional control draws inevitable parallels with Weber's iron cage (Weber, 1930). In risk assessment and management, institutional bureaucracy and the power of hierarchies are instrumental in stifling the implementation of effectual preventative measures. Whilst Beck does attempt to support his position with reference to anecdotal examples, such a heavy inflection on the *structural* functions of the relations of definition is problematic. In accentuating the systemic features of the relations of definition, the risk society thesis veers decidedly close to reification. To conceive of the relations of definition as an anonymous power bloc eviscerates what are, after all, cultural institutions. Beck's emphasis on the systemic production of risk overlooks the day-to-day activities of social actors. To infer that institutional structures act in issues of risk, rather than a *conglomeration* of institutions, individuals and processes, glosses over the indubitable fact that public institutions are peopled by animate, cognitive individuals.

To argue for Beck, he does occasionally make reference to the active role of individuals within the relations of definition. Nevertheless, even at these moments occupational roles and social characteristics still remain somewhat exaggerated (Beck, 1992: 155-183). Beck's tendency to engage in reification is exacerbated by his unrefined conception of the lay-expert relationship. As Wynne (1996) points out, Beck exaggerates the divide between the 'good citizens' of the lay public and the 'malevolent experts' working within social institutions. This shortcoming is aggravated by the theoretical separation of 'social' and 'scientific' rationality (Beck, 1992: 30). In reality, the boundary between expert and lay knowledge is rather more fluid and dynamic than Beck is willing to acknowledge. At the very least, it must be recognised that ideas and values about risk are publicly generated as well as

institutionally disseminated (Wynne, 1996: 76). As will be elucidated in chapter four, the boundaries between lay and expert groups interface considerably. Rather than being conceived as fixed and frozen, lay-expert relations are open to fluctuation and hybridity. Unfortunately, Beck fails to recognise that the 'done to' lay public are also the 'doers' working within the relations of definition.

Beck's rigid lay-public demarcation contributes towards a rather caricatured depiction of the relationship between structure and agency in the process of risk definition. As will be made apparent in chapter five, high levels of bureaucracy within institutions can serve to police and restrict the gamut of possible responses to risk. Nonetheless, at each stage of the chain of risk - in manufacture, definition and regulation - human beings are present and, to varying degrees, *active* in the decision-making process. In assigning overarching power to the *structure* of the relations of definition, Beck removes responsibility for social risks from individuals, save the rather vaguely defined 'experts' acting within the confines of institutional guidelines. It is important to remember that methods of hazard calculation, such as the calculus of risk, did not arbitrarily appear in western culture. Social institutions within western nation states - such as the legal system, education and the health service - are at least notionally based on consent. It is even possible that a significant proportion of individuals in the West are generally supportive of public institutions, particularly set against the backcloth of cultural forms around the globe. Furthermore, it is possible that risk generation might be conceived as an inevitable feature of social development: 'what situation is there, of which one can be certain that it harbours no risk, no uncontrollable or unpredictable chance feature?' (Castel, 1991: 289). Indeed, it has been suggested that risks might be construed by some as a 'faustian bargain' for the benefits of modernization (Irwin et al 2000: 95). At the very least, institutional methods of managing risk have developed recursively, as a result of social conflict *and* social consent. Of course, certain parties might be more culpable than others in relation to the ideological goals of social institutions and the mismanagement of risk.

However, the public themselves have also been complicit in the development of the methods and mechanisms of risk management. Ultimately, only *people* can people institutions, such as the legal system and government. Thus, at least a grain of responsibility for the current crisis of risk management lies in the hands of the public. It is not only institutions which produce environmental risks, but individual actants themselves. We would do well to remember that in the region of 40% of carbon monoxide fumes are produced by motor vehicles which belong to the public. Additionally, personal consumption has multiplied by an average of six times in the last twenty-five years. Beck himself fails to properly acknowledge that - in the manufacture and the mismanagement of social risks - the public can be cast as both victim and accomplice.

In methodological terms, Beck's attempt to proselytise abstract thought into everyday cultural practice is somewhat questionable. The generality of the relations of definition in the risk society thesis cannot possibly do justice to the variability of social institutions in different countries (Goldblatt, 1995; Marshall, 1999: 266). For example, most would agree that the Swedish welfare system has been more effective than the Russian model in providing material security for its citizens. In legal terms, the risk of smoking cannabis is deemed to be much greater in Britain than in Holland (Goldblatt, 1995: 184). As Marshall points out:

> The generalisability of the risk society is contingent on the specific structural conditions of an advanced social welfare system that Beck assumes will emerge in other nation-states and will be sustained in Germany and Scandanavia (Marshall, 1999: 267).

Thus, it can be argued that deployment of the relations of definition as a vehicle for understanding the social construction of risk is problematic in three regards. Firstly, Beck's argument reifies and depopulates social institutions. Secondly, utilisation of the relations of definition steers Beck towards an uncultured separation between lay and expert groupings. Thirdly, the relations of definition appears to be too blunt a tool

of analysis to fully grasp cultural and institutional variations between western nation states. These shortcomings necessitate a more detailed review of the relationship between the public, the government and science in modernity.

3. 4 Science, Reflexivity and Public Knowledge about Risk

In *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995) Beck describes the social construction of risk by exploring the relationship between science, media discourse and public understandings of risk. As we shall see, in the risk society thesis, the mass media is depicted as both an *example of* and a *motor for* reflexivity. Media potential for institutional reflexivity is exemplified by counter-expert scientific and political information carried within the pages of newspapers and broadcast on news bulletins. In the risk society narrative, media products have the capacity to stimulate enhanced forms of public reflexivity in relation to risk issues. In particular, it is argued that the mass media has the power to destabilise and unbind the assumptions of scientific inquiry, challenging the legitimacy of expert systems (Beck, 1992: 154).

Whilst Beck maintains that social actors remain dependent upon information produced by scientific experts, he also acknowledges that uniform mediation of risks has become unrealisable. As uncertain manufactured risks surface, contradictory theories emerge and debate amongst experts diversifies: 'if three scientists get together, fifteen opinions clash' (Beck, 1992: 167). This point is aptly illustrated by the furious speculation that has surrounded the likely cause of BSE in cattle (Ratzan, 1998; Reilly, 1999; Wylie, 1998). Given that indeterminate risks stimulate a rash of competing truth claims, expert constructions of risk become pluralized. Beck believes that the diversification of scientific opinion has been fastidiously documented by the media and has encouraged the public to catechise and reprove expert discourses of risk (Beck, 1987: 158). As lay actors become increasingly frustrated and disenchanted

with the intransigence of the relations of definition, the conflicting goals of the two parties clash. To twist Thomas Kuhn's phrase (1970), a clear case of 'paradigm incommensurability' exists:

> The two sides talk past each other. Social movements raise questions that are not answered by the risk technicians at all, and the technicians answer questions which miss the point of what was really asked and what feeds public anxiety (Beck, 1992: 30).

Beck asserts that the public sphere is distinguished by an ongoing conflict of meaning between experts who use scientific rationality to define risk, and the lay public whose everyday experience leads them to perceive risks through the lens of social rationality. Naturally, Beck is highly critical of expert bodies, particularly those that assume the superiority of scientific rationality over social rationality.[56] Beck avers that scientific experts are guilty of equating social rationality with naïveté, assuming that lay publics simply require more 'hard facts' about risk (Beck, 1992: 30; Macgill, 1989: 48). As the logic of risk seeps through society, active public engagement with scientific discourse enables individuals to develop a theoretical or 'scientized' consciousness in relation to everyday risks (Beck, 1992: 28). This reflexive consciousness is informed and nurtured by the media and results in the objectivity and purpose of science being cast into doubt: 'the true-false positivism of clear-cut factualist science, at once this century's article of faith and its terrifying spectre, is at an end' (Beck, 1995: 119).

Beck contends that as public reflexivity blossoms, protest groups and counter experts begin to delve deeper into the relationship between science, politics and business.[57] Every revelation of incest and corruption between the parties of definition destabilises scientific logic: 'it is no exaggeration to say that in the way they deal with risks in

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[56]For a classic exposition of scientific rationality see, *The Royal Society Report on the Public Understanding of Science* (1986) London: Royal Society. The report claims that the single most important source of antagonism between experts and the public is public miscomprehension of science. For an excellent critical review of the report, see Wynne, (1989a: 34-36).

[57]The close connections between this triumbula of risk definers was laid bare by sections of the media during the BSE crisis in Britain. See, for example, Wylie (1998) or 'Mad Cows and Englishmen', the excellent three part documentary series screened by BBC1 in 1998.

many areas, the sciences have squandered until further notice their reputation for rationality' (Beck, 1992: 80).

Essentially, Beck is arguing that as the 'reflexive constellation' gains credence, the contradictory dynamic within science is revealed. In the risk society, science and technology - hitherto extolled as the saviours of society - become recognised as the *source* of risk manufacture. In Beck's terms, science is acknowledged as a 'taboo constructor' as well as a 'taboo breaker' (Beck, 1992: 157). Accordingly, in matters of risk assessment, science becomes demystified and de-monopolised. At a wider level, since there is no definitive authority on risk, public belief in the scientific model erodes and lay actors themselves become 'small, private alternative experts in the risks of modernization' (Beck, 1992: 61). In such conditions of 'reflexive scientization', the mobilisation of beliefs is pivotal to the success or failure of competing truth claims about risk (Beck, 1992: 169). For Beck, reflexive scientization empowers the public in their struggle for safety and equality, enabling lay actors to challenge dominant relations of definition: 'to speak up, organise, go to court, assert themselves, refuse to be diverted any longer' (Beck, 1992: 77). In such a scenario, public debate heightens political consciousness and intensifies contestation about risk.

Of course, sweeping claims such as these demand elucidation and interrogation. How credible is Beck's understanding of the relationship between experts, the media and the public? Is science truly in decline and reflexive scientization in the ascendancy? In testing the validity Beck's claims, a cluster of familiar problems arise. Again, Beck is far from rigorous in empirically substantiating his thesis, preferring instead to rely upon critical anecdotal offerings and acerbic prose. Despite being sharply crafted and often amusing, Beck does not furnish the reader with robust evidence of widespread public distrust in science. Moreover, whilst science is unquestionably an increasingly contested domain (Lupton, 1999: 11; Irwin, 1995; Pidgeon, 2000: 47), scientific, medical and technological institutions still assume a central role in the construction of

discourses of risk. It is debatable whether institutional mismanagement of risk has triggered widespread reflexivity amongst lay publics, let alone a radical restructuring of society. In the risk society thesis, scientific agencies are perceived to be under fire from a politically active and critical public. However, this channel of Beck's argument is steadfastly anchored in theory and fails to engage at an empirical level. Bearing this omission in mind, it has been argued that Beck's vision of pervasive political reflexivity amongst lay publics is somewhat sanguine, if not unfounded (Abbinnett, 2000). Conclusive evidence of a radical rupture within the relations of definition requires much more than a mixture of meta-theory and anecdotal evidence. Even assuming that Beck's reflexive lay public does exist, it must be remembered that western institutions have proven to be remarkably resilient in the face of oppositional actions. As will be discussed in chapter five, effective political challenge generally requires the kinds of material resources which are not readily available to lay publics (Lodziak, 1995: 53; Culpitt, 1999: 120).

In support of Beck's thesis, there does appear to be general recognition of a broad decline in public trust in the relations of definition (Grove-White, 1998; Macnaghtan and Urry, 1998: 262; Prior et al, 2000: 111). In recent years, public distrust in science and government has been widely reported. For example, a 1995 MORI survey suggested that well under half of the British population had either a 'fair' or a 'great deal' of trust in scientists working for industry or government. In contrast, 82% claimed to trust information provided by environmental groups (Anderson, 1997: 113). However, other research studies have produced equivocal results. Drawing on empirical research, Dickens (1996: 95) refutes Beck's suggestion that the legitimacy of science is in question. In an environmental study undertaken in June 1992, over a third of respondents believed that science offered a 'good explanation' of the relationship between individuals and the environment, without any critical qualifications (Dickens, 1996: 96). The bulk of respondents believed that science offered a 'good explanation' with a variety of qualifications, such as 'it is often used

by governments and industry' (12.8 %) and 'there are conflicting views within science' (16.4%). Most notably, less than 3% of the sample believed that we should 'reject or be very suspicious of science' (Dickens, 1996: 96).

Although dated, the study used by Dickens indicates that the relationship between lay publics and scientific experts is not as cut and dried as Beck implies. Recent empirical research strongly suggests that the relationship between lay publics and scientific agencies is ambiguous and multi-layered (CSEC Report, 1997; ESRC Report, 1999). Whilst further inquiry of an ethnographic bent is needed to establish the dispersal of patterns of public trust, outright public dismissals of science are exceptional. Whilst the fallibility of scientific rationality might well be increasingly recognised, we should not infer from this that the scientific paradigm itself has been abandoned by the public. Indeed, large sections of the public still see science as an authoritative source of information about risks (CSEC Report, 1997). Reworking Beck's metaphor, it would appear that the 'milk money' belonging to science has been mislaid, rather than irretrievably lost. Therefore, we should perhaps take heed of the caveat offered by Dickens:

> It is tempting to suggest that the thoroughgoing critique of science in which many critical sociologists regularly engage is being inaccurately projected onto the population as a whole (Dickens, 1996: 100).

Dickens is justified in arguing that the relationship between the lay public and scientific agencies is more complex than Beck would have us believe. Rather than routinely rejecting knowledge from within the relations of definition, lay publics respond to risk communications in multiple and contradictory ways (Dickens, 1996: 101; Tansey and O'Riordan, 1999). Nevertheless, in fairness to Beck, Dickens does rather imprecisely apply specific environmental studies to the risk society thesis. Certainly the surveys drawn upon by Dickens were not designed to directly probe the

nature of the lay-expert divide, apropos issues of risk.[58] Thus, whilst carrying undoubted weight as a yardstick of public opinion about science, such surveys do not have the capacity to provide us with explicit knowledge about the lay-expert divide, as articulated through specific discourses of risk.

To return full circle, this criticism is equally applicable to the risk society thesis. As will be verified in chapter four, one of the principal problems with Beck's account of risk knowledge relates to his realist assumption of 'truth'. Beck is understandably keen to question truth claims about risk that are generated by the relations of definition, particularly when set within a climate of economic and political uncertainty. Undoubtedly, the balance between disclosure of risks and the protection of capital interests is a precarious one for capitalist governments to negotiate. Nonetheless, Beck overstates the case by disregarding culturally relevant and practical information about risks which may be disseminated by the relations of definition (Dean, 1999: 144). In the risk society narrative, the hidden economic agenda of the relations of definition continually propels institutions out of synchronisation with public demands. At times, Beck is scathing about the objectives of techno-scientific development, intimating endemic collusion and corruption: 'technology and natural science have become one economic enterprise on a large industrial scale without truth and enlightenment' (Beck, 1995: 119).

In such passages Beck argues that the dual purpose of 'scientific rationality' is to ensure continued capital accumulation and to deceive the general public. Whilst the connections between science and big business are well established, at times, Beck's writing tends towards the conspiratorial. It must be remembered that scientific inquiry has historically produced a number of social benefits that are only tangentially linked to profit making. For example, the development of vaccines for tuberculosis, whooping cough and meningitis have all improved public health and longevity. One

[58]The studies were not focused upon the perceived accuracy of information about risk, or the differential dissemination of risk knowledge.

cannot reasonably make the general assumption that expert risk claims are universally misleading, whilst public claims are ingrained with absolute truth. Rather, 'scientific rationality', and 'social rationality' are both potentially fallible discourses.

In *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995) Beck contemplates the possibilities of a blossoming social rationality that is environmentally aware and politically proactive. For Beck, environmental pressure groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth are central to the future development of an emancipatory politics (Beck, 1995: 154). However, regardless of whether the public support the general principles of the green movement, it cannot be assumed that such organisations are the arbiters of absolute truth. Beck himself assumes that green knowledge about risks is uniformly superior to that disseminated by the relations of definition. By their own admission, agencies such as Greenpeace cannot possibly hope to work within the parameters of perfect information, particularly given their commitment to swift and direct action. The Greenpeace-Shell Oil dispute in 1995 illustrates this point succinctly. After discovering that Shell Oil was intending to sink the Brent Spar oil platform in the North Sea, Greenpeace instigated a number of direct protests, imploring the public to boycott Shell products. The key issue of concern was the quantity of hydrocarbons on the oil platform, which Greenpeace described as 'dangerously high'. Conversely, both the company and the British government claimed that the level of hydrocarbons on the platform was low and constituted a negligible risk to public health. Eventually, Greenpeace activists occupied the oil platform and succeeded in preventing its submergence. However, with respect to the competing truth claims about risk, the story has a distinct twist in the tail:

> While Greenpeace estimated that the amount of hydrocarbons was in the region of 5,000 tonnes, an independent investigation by the Norwegian certification company, DNV (Det Norske Veritas), revealed there were only around 75-100 tonnes of oil on board. Shell's original estimate of around 50 tonnes of oil thus proved to be considerably closer to the final figure. Greenpeace wrote to Shell apologizing for the error (Anderson, 1997: 112).

This example nicely highlights the difficulties in assuming that truth about risk 'belongs' to certain organisations and not to others. Taking account of the uncertainty and unpredictability associated with manufactured risks, such an assumption would appear to be misguided. Ironically, Beck argues that the relations of definition quell the input of diverse interest groups in defining risk, only to go on to assume an omniscient position in relation to the effects of risk. In the risk society thesis, the threats produced by the risk society are presented as 'objective social facts' (Alexander and Smith, 1996: 254). Beck - in association with counter experts and the Green movement - credits himself with accurate knowledge about risk. Thus, the assumptions of the Green movement in relation to, say, global warming or genetically modified food are assumed rather than critically evaluated. If we are to arrive at a balanced understanding of the effects of indeterminate risks, it is essential that both sides of the debate are at least aired. Simply replacing one absolute with another seems a peculiar form of environmental democracy. Therefore, the risk society thesis would be enriched by greater sensitivity to the partiality of *all* truth claims, rather than simply those which stem from within dominant institutions. Contra Beck, it cannot be assumed that either experts, counter experts or the public have access to complete veracity in relation to risk.

In extending the explanatory potential of the risk society thesis, the contingent and organic nature of knowledge about risk needs to be factored in to the equation. Rather than dealing in absolutes it would seem to be more appropriate to conceive of truth about risk as being housed along a continuum. Thus, we might think of accurate information about risk as located at various points of a piece of rope. The piece of rope is often subject to a tug-of-war, contested by experts from within the relations of definition and counter experts outside of these boundaries. To further confuse matters, sections of the public may be tugging both *for* and *against* the relations of definition. As such, at certain points one 'party' may be seen to be holding more of the rope than the other. However, the rope itself is not static, being prone to violent tugs in the

opposite direction. Furthermore, in this game, the team members themselves are not averse to swapping sides, leading to swings in public perceptions of risks.

Metaphors aside, the essential point being made here is that knowledge and understandings of risk cannot possibly be final and absolute. In opposition to Beck, we should not assume that experts within the relations of definition are the source of universal misinformation about risks, whilst protest groups are the bearers of objective truth. Of course, such a concession fetches up a matrix of complex questions about the construction of risk as a social discourse. Are issues of risk attached to a broader 'regime of truth'? Does the discourse of risk reinforce self-discipline or facilitate public reflexivity? The political ramifications of these important questions will be thoroughly addressed in chapter five.

In drawing this discussion together, it is clear that Beck's polemical style produces both deficiencies and advantages. On the positive side, Beck has been instrumental in keeping environmental issues on the political and academic agenda. As a result of Beck's risk society thesis, greater emphasis has been placed on risk within the disciplines of sociology, cultural studies, health studies and social policy. More specifically, in relation to the social construction of risks, Beck has captured the incommensurability between current systems of risk management and manufactured risks. To this end, the concept of 'organised irresponsibility' provides an invaluable critical insight into the techniques of mystification that are routinely employed by social institutions.

On the negative side, Beck can be criticised for underplaying the social benefits provided by social institutions, overstating the degree of public mistrust in the relations of definition and reifying public institutions. The combined weight of these three oversights leaves the risk society thesis looking rather dented. In this respect, the abstract and general nature of Beck's argument bypasses the intricacies and subtleties

of cultural practices. Nowhere is this disparity between theory and everyday practice more evident than in Beck's understanding of the role of the media in contemporary society.

3.5 Communicating Danger: Media Representations of Risk

Beck's analysis of the role of the media in the representation and communication of risk is essentially sporadic, rather than systematic (Cottle, 1998; Anderson, 1997: 188). Beck discusses the media most extensively in *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995) and *The Anthropological Shock: Chernobyl and the Contours of the Risk Society* (1987). In both of these works, Beck grounds his argument by claiming that the vast majority in western cultures are unlikely to come into direct contact with catastrophic risks, such as chemical leaks or nuclear reactor explosions. Nevertheless, citizens world-wide may still be party to the diffusion of various toxic side effects stemming from accidents such as Chernobyl and Bhopal (Beck, 1987). Because these risks are distantly experienced, the media becomes an increasingly vital tool of risk definition and risk information. It is argued that risks can only be perceived when they are socially constructed within public discourse (Beck, 1995: 91; Cottle, 1998: 7). Further, in the late modern age, public discourse has become reliant upon the interpretation of symbols, images and meanings communicated by the mass media (Beck, 1995: 9; Reilly, 1999: 188; Stevenson, 1999). As such, public understandings of risk are formulated in relation to the range of information provided by the media (Hargreaves, 2000: 18). However, recognition of this does not imply that cultural analysis need focus on the functions of the media in isolation. Risk communication should not be conceived as a one-way process. As we shall see, media coverage of risk is informed by public concerns and influenced by the various cultural interpretations formulated by lay publics.

In *Risk Society* (1992: 197) Beck claims that the media fulfil an ambiguous function in relation to risk consciousness. The media is depicted as *part* of the dominant relations of definition *and* the apparatus by which prevailing relations of definition may be *challenged.* In certain instances, Beck portrays the media as a vehicle for the translation of information about risk from expert bodies to the lay public (Beck, 1995: 96). In this guise, the media is very much part of the established relations of definition, channelling risk knowledge from scientific, governmental and business experts to lay social actors. Performing from within the relations of definition, the media defines, visualises and amplifies the preferred messages of politicians, business analysts and scientists (Beck, 1992: 32). This acquiescent role was demonstrated by media complicity in symbolic detoxification during the BSE crisis. In the early stages of the crisis, the British government attempted to use the media as a propaganda tool to deny the existence of a risk to public health.[59] Conversely, Beck also recognises that the media has the capacity to act 'outside' of the relations of definition, as a mouthpiece for social critique (Alexander and Smith, 1996: 255). In this capacity, the media is characterised as a 'public watchdog', guarding against corruption and championing human rights. In such a context, the media possesses the power to challenge the dominant relations of definition in the production, identification and management of manufactured risks (Beck, 1995: 140; Anderson, 1997: 166).

On balance, Beck implies that the mass media predominantly function in the role of public guardian in issues of risk. For him, the media are increasingly open to the informed opinion of protest groups, counter experts, maverick scientists and the lay public (Beck, 1995: 141). Supportive media articulation of public opinion - or 'social rationality' - serves to directly challenge and undermine perceptions of risk promulgated by government and business experts.

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[59]For example, the infamous incident where John Gummer fed his daughter a beefburger was carefully stage-managed, with the press being tipped off prior to the event. Interestingly, this misguided attempt to win back public opinion has served to symbolise the incompetence of the Conservative government in addressing the BSE problem. For further details, see Harris and O'Shaughnessy's (1997) excellent review of the key moments of the crisis.

Beck maintains that manufactured risks induce a form of 'cultural blindness', working 'downright mysteriously, since nothing has changed for the eyes, nose, mouth and hands' (Beck, 1987: 154). It is argued that this tendency towards 'cultural blinding' generated by the invisible quality of manufactured risks can be counteracted by effective publication of hazards in the mass media. As Alexander and Smith note:

> The result of increased media focus as Beck sees it, would be the increase in objective information, and he appears confident that this information will automatically register on contemporary consciousness (Alexander and Smith, 1996: 255).

Because contemporary risks are distanciated and intangible, the voices of counter experts are essential in facilitating public democracy. By pursuing and criticising institutional information about risk, the media serve to 'explode hazards', making risks visible to lay actors. By way of illustration, Beck refers to the Chernobyl disaster: 'what would have happened if the mass media had remained silent, if the experts had not quarrelled with one another? No one would have noticed a thing' (Beck, 1987: 154). The Chernobyl incident is described by Beck as a 'pure media event', which symbolised the power of the media in facilitating public debate about risk (Beck, 1995: 96).

Undoubtedly, the mass media do have the capacity to select and frame risk issues and to act as a vital vehicle for public discourse. However, as will be demonstrated, Beck's tendency toward hyperbole leads him into a curious position of media-centrism. At times, it seems that everything turns on the mediation of risk. For instance, in *The Anthropological Shock: Chernobyl and the Contours of the Risk Society* (1987) Beck claims that we are approaching the 'end of perceptiveness' and the 'beginning of the social construction of risk realities', in which 'information equals reality' (Beck, 1987: 156). At such moments, the media is portrayed as *the* discursive space in which the construction and contestation of risks takes place:

> The social and economic importance of knowledge grows...and with it the power of the media to structure knowledge (science and research) and disseminate it (mass media). The risk society in this sense is also the *science, media and information society* (Beck, 1992: 46).

Unarguably, the mediation of risk has significant connotations for public understandings of risk and political actions in the public sphere. In the Chernobyl example, media reporting was central in opening up the issue of nuclear energy to public debate. Beck believes such oppositional constructions of risk in the media have raised uncomfortable questions in the public domain about the broader safety of nuclear power (Beck, 1995: 97).

However, as has been noted, Beck also casts the media as a funnel for institutional information about risk. In this scenario, the media fulfils its established function within the relations of definition, acting as a mouthpiece for government, science and industry. In this capacity, the media is complicit in the obfuscation and mystification of risks. For Beck, it would appear that the contradictory role of the media inexorably feeds the reflexive quality of news reporting, but also is reflective of a drive towards certainty within expert systems. This paradox is nicely captured by Stevenson:

> Evidence of greater reflexivity has helped release repressed questions associated with modernity (particularly those connected with gender and ecology) but has also fostered more reactive attempts to construct certainty. For every television programme concerning the growing ecological crisis there is the hired spokesman offering calm assurance and an unproblematic belief in the nature of experts (Stevenson, 1999: 118).

In accounting for the dualistic role of the media, Beck is alert to such ambiguities. However, he is nonetheless inexorably drawn into focusing on the emancipatory potential of the media in relation to risk communication. By consequence, a thorough understanding of the political economy of the mass media goes somewhat awry. In this respect, Beck's understanding of the media is at best embryonic, at worst, rather naive.

3.6 Filtering Risk: Ownership, Control and the Media Production Process

Having recounted the role of the media in the risk society thesis, I now wish to identify the missing dimensions which are overlooked in the risk society thesis. In working towards a considered understanding of the social construction of risk, it is essential that we arrive at a more nuanced account of the role of the mass media in contemporary society. At a broader level, the relationship between the media and the public ushers in a series of consequential issues. Firstly, the media is undoubtedly an important source of information and sense making within the public sphere. It has been well documented that the mass media are capable of strengthening and reinforcing existing social norms (Lodziak, 1986; Negrine, 1994; Tulloch, 1999: 35). Secondly, the heavily discussed explosion of media technologies in the 1980s - in particular cable and satellite, the internet, e-mail and mobile phones - has expanded the profile of media technologies in culture, presenting the public with a potential vortex of communication systems (du Gay et al, 1997; McNair, 1998). Thirdly, the media is commonly acknowledged to be a crucial site of consensus building and contestation in western cultures (Cottle, 1998: 5; Hargreaves, 2000; Stevenson, 1999: 60). As the scope and the boundaries of the mass media expand, so too do the opportunities for both the manufacture and the dismantling of hegemony.

Along with Beck, it seems reasonable to argue that the mass media has become a prominent source of risk communication and a crucial purveyor of risk avoidance strategies (Anderson, 1997; Philo, 1999; Sjöberg and Wahlberg, 1997). Since the late 1980s, the media does appear to have seized upon the theme of risk, leading to a general intensification in the coverage of risk-related affairs (Eldridge, 1999). In this respect, Beck's argument is supported by quantitative longitudinal studies. For example, Lupton performed a comparative assessment of the prevalence of the term 'risk' in national newspapers in Australia. In 1992 'risk' appeared 2,356 times in the main text and 89 times in headlines. By 1997, risk appeared almost 3,500 times in the

text and in 118 headlines (Lupton, 1999: 10). Whilst the methodology utilised here is admittedly crude, few would disagree that risk has become an area of increasing concern in the media and society as a whole (Adam and van Loon, 2000; Caplan, 2000; Giddens, 1999). By way of example, the risks surrounding BSE and GM foods have become two of the most periodic and long-running 'stories' featured in the British media in recent years.

The rising cultural profile of risk issues has led to media forms performing an increasingly important social function in relation to the definition and amplification of risks (Cottle, 1998; Douglas, 1985: 65; Nelkin, 1987). However, exactly *which* risks become the focus of public concern and which risks escape scrutiny is critically dependent upon the flow of information entering and exiting media outlets (Bennett, 1998). This suggests that the capacity of the media to uniformly represent and communicate risks cannot be taken for granted. As will be elucidated, contextual issues such as the ownership and control of the media and the media production process act as vital filters to risk information.

Despite hinting at the increasing influence of the media in informing public understandings of risk, the crucial role of information systems in informing public opinion about risk is generally glossed over by Beck. By and large, the media appears as a 'bolt-on' to the risk society thesis, rather than being afforded systematic analysis. As a consequence, Beck's account of the media is largely abstracted out of appropriate social context. In its entirety, Beck's analysis of the media is ephemeral, empirically unsubstantiated and relies heavily upon selective examples.

As Cottle (1998: 6) notes, Beck's perspective on the media is difficult to interpret, being both amphibolous and contradictory. Rather than being central to the risk society thesis, reference to the media is scattered across Beck's work (Beck, 1987; Beck, 1992: 197; Beck, 1995: 141). The patchy attention afforded to the media in the

risk society thesis fails to do justice to the vital role of the media in the process of risk communication (Cottle, 1998).[60] The following critique will allude to and develop the theoretical work of Anderson (1997), Bennett (1998), Cottle (1998) and Hargreaves (2000). The missing empirical dimensions in Beck's argument will be replenished with reference to a collection of case studies into the relationship between the media and public understandings of risk (Eldridge: 1999; Hansen, 1991; Reilly, 1999; Reilly and Kitzinger, 1997).

In the risk society narrative, the mass media are generally presented as acting in the public interest, unmasking risks and challenging the dominant relations of definition (Alexander and Smith, 1996: 255; Beck, 1992: 115). This liberal pluralist position is counterbalanced by occasional reference to the economic context in which media outlets operate in the West. For instance, in *Risk Society* (1992), Beck notes that the media are, 'limited and checked by the material conditions on the production of information and the general legal and social conditions' (Beck, 1992: 196). Whilst this is undoubtedly true, unfortunately Beck fails to weave this appreciation of the context of media production into his general analysis. Instead, the crusading role of the media in heightening risk consciousness and public reflexivity is emphasised. As has been discussed, Beck's tendency toward exaggeration periodically projects him into a position of media-centrism, in which *all* cultural knowledge about risk is reduced to media representation: 'No mass media information, no consciousness of risk' (Beck, 1987: 155). Such sweeping comments seriously interfere with the trajectory of Beck's argument and usher in a clutch of pressing questions. If the media *is* of such import in the social construction of risk, why is it afforded such scant attention by Beck? How accurate is Beck's dichotomous representation of the media? Moreover, just how much does Beck's work tell us about the critical issue of *meaning making* in relation to risk?

[60]The issue of risk communication will be more tightly meshed to public understandings of risk in chapter four.

I would contend that Beck's strategy of randomly attributing dichotomous functions to the media leads not only to inconsistencies, but also to a superficial analysis of the social and economic context of the mass media. Moreover, Beck's understanding of the social construction of risk is denuded by closer examination of the changing relationship between media production and media consumption.[61]

Whilst Ulrich Beck is certainly a social theorist rather than a scholar of media theory, his assertions about the media should not be exempt from critical scrutiny. For Beck, the mass media is fleetingly cast as a key source of risk definition, risk contestation and public information. However, in the risk society thesis, the media is weakly represented and portrayed as free-floating and contextless. In particular, Beck's consideration of the media is not appreciative of either the political economy of the mass media, or the routine practices of journalists and reporters. In short, acute issues of how media content is routinely produced and culturally regulated are simply elided. In this section, it will be demonstrated that the processes of production and regulation are significant factors in determining the quality and the range of public information about risks. Accordingly, discussion will centre on the pertinence of political and economic imperatives, news values, sourcing and media format.

Beck's contention that the mass media function to promote risk consciousness is buttressed by the media's evident capacity to 'socially explode' risks. This has been made acute in recent years in relation to *nv* CJD and GMOs. In these instances, the media might reasonably be conceived as a guardian of the people, seeking out risks and striving to inform and educate the public. However, lurking underneath Beck's utopian vision of the media rests the erroneous assumption that all occurrences have an equal chance of being reported. This assumption stems from an inadequate understanding of the complex structural interactions which take place *prior to* media

[61]Following Beck, this inquiry will focus predominantly upon the implications of news reporting practices for the social construction of risk. Whilst new media technologies such as the internet are gaining in cultural significance, the vast majority of individuals in the West still gather the bulk of information about risk from television and newspaper news reports (Anderson, 1997: 181; Reilly, 1999).

representations of risk. As Douglas reasons, 'something is happening to fasten attention on particular risks and to screen out perception of others' (Douglas, 1985: 60). But what exactly *is* this something? Why is it that relatively 'minor' risk events may receive disproportionate coverage in the media, whilst other significant risks are ignored?

It must initially be recognised that the production and distribution of news takes place in large hierarchical organisations which are technically complex and oriented towards the generation of profit (Negrine, 1994: 118).[62] In addition, a myriad of global media interests are owned and controlled by just a handful of individuals (Croteau and Hoynes, 2000: 38; Stevenson, 1999: 112). Thus, a formidable degree of economic and cultural power lies in the hands of proprietors of media empires, such as Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch. The global companies owned by these media magnates are chasing the dream of 'synergy', in which ownership of an array of interlinked media forms is established (Negus, 1997: 84). It is likely that media convergence and the digitalisation of information will further increase the geographical scope and potential influence of the elite few who own and control the global media (Porter, 1996).

Beck himself is reluctant to acknowledge that news organisations are part of vast global media organisations. Obviously, the concentration of media ownership raises concerns about cultural and political domination (Croteau and Hoynes, 2000: 48; Tomlinson, 1997: 126). Furthermore, due to extra-media ownership by media magnates, a series of conflicts of interest have surfaced. It has been revealed that General Electric, a company which was involved in the production of parts for bombs used against Iraq, also owned a significant chunk of NBC News. The uncomfortable implications for news reporting of the Gulf War hardly needs to be spelt out here. In

[62]In Britain, Public Service Broadcasting is the exception to this rule. However, Public Service productions cannot be insulated against a competitive market and are still partly driven by viewing ratings. This was recently made explicit when BBC News changed its regular 9pm time slot in an attempt to attract viewers of the ITN Nightly News.

another well-documented example, Tiny Rowlands, the former owner of *The Observer*, outlawed negative reporting of domestic affairs in Zimbabwe because of the risk to his economic interests within the country (Curran and Seaton, 1989: 93). The continued privatisation of the media, combined with a rise in cross and extra-media ownership, question the ability of the media to fulfil the public watchdog role envisaged by Beck. It must be remembered that many developing media forms, such as cable and satellite television and the internet, rely heavily upon advertising revenue to produce profit. More traditional media forms, such as national newspapers are also reliant upon advertising revenue, which makes up approximately three quarters of total profits for broadsheets and just under half for tabloid newspapers (Barwise and Gordon, 1998: 20; Negrine, 1994: 67).

In a delicate economic environment, conflicts of interest have also arisen between media outlets and advertisers. Obviously, it will not be in the interests of large media organisations to discourage the advertising revenue of global businesses (Collins, 1992). This, of course, has important implications for the reporting of a range of issues, including risk.[63] It is worth pointing out that state institutions are amongst the largest newspaper advertisers. In Britain, the government also grants the BBC its public service licence and sets the level of the licence fee. Cumulatively, these observations suggest that media representations of risk should not be sequestered from the political and economic context of media production. As Negrine notes:

> The economic and political needs of media organizations - the need to survive, to maximize profit, to increase sales, to increase advertising revenue, to maintain a political line, to placate politicians - form an important backdrop to the study of the production of all media content (Negrine, 1994: 118).

Unfortunately, the cultural, economic and political context in which the media operates is conspicuously absent in Beck's analysis of the mediation of risk (Cottle,

[63]For instance, it would be unlikely that a tabloid newspaper would carry a story about the depletion of the rainforest which directed its readers to share newspapers with friends and relatives.

1998). The risk society thesis fails to appreciate that news media outlets in different countries are influenced by various political and economic forces, which may obstruct or enhance the reporting of news events. The reporting of risk by news organisations will also be influenced by source availability and selection (Coleman, 1995: 68; Reilly and Kitzinger, 1997: 324). On a daily basis, news organisations are dependent upon a constant supply of information (Palmer, 1998). One of the ways in which news organisations ensure a ready supply of news is by attempting to routinize the flow of news. The routinization of news requires - amongst other things - an accumulated bank of reliable and consistent sources (Schlesinger, 1990). Consequently, news journalists are routinely placed within institutions such as law courts, police stations and parliament. It is worth noting that these are the very institutions which constitute Beck's relations of definition. In Britain, selected journalists sit in the lobby of the House of Commons where they are free to mingle and converse with government and opposition ministers. For many political journalists, the lobby is a major source of information about risk. However, alliances forged in the lobby can be somewhat fragile and volatile. At times politicians have been known to deliberately mislead reporters. On occasion, journalists have misquoted their sources (Negrine, 1994: 134). Of course, lobby journalists are understandably wary of offending potential news sources in their reporting, leading to uncomfortable inferences of bias. This situation has obvious implications for the reporting of risks and also for the wider question of political democracy. Lobby correspondents are a vital conduit of political information in Britain. This, in turn, has important ramifications for the social construction of risks.

Given the reciprocal relationship between journalists and politicians in lobby, the likelihood of the open and oppositional reporting of risk that Beck alludes to may be limited. For example, anti-government reports by journalists about the handling of the BSE crisis would be unlikely to meet with further snippets of information by MP's, who may instead decide to cut the supply of information. Journalists must tread

carefully in presenting risk issues in a way which is sensitive to government interests. In Britain, the distance between the media and politics has contracted still further in recent years with the emergence of 'spin-doctors' and 'issues-management' consultants plying their trade around Millbank.

At a wider level, the general use of institutional sources is of particular importance in the construction and representation of risk in the media. As Coleman notes, power brokers within science and government are the most frequently used sources by journalists reporting on risk issues (Coleman, 1995: 68). Furthermore, press releases distributed by institutional agencies involved in risk management can form a partial basis for news reporting (Kitzinger and Reilly, 1997: 319).[64]

In addition to information garnered from institutional sources, news organisations also routinise news flows by reporting on set events taken from the 'diary'. Again, the reliance of news journalists on diary events impacts upon the reporting of risk. As Anderson notes: 'some news stories have a much greater likelihood of being covered than others because they accord with organisational norms, pressures and routines and/or they possess particular conventional features' (Anderson, 1997: 120). Far from arbitrarily reporting risk events, journalists will understandably depend on routine sources - such as scientists and politicians - who have provided information in the past. The constant pressure of deadlines steers journalists towards building up a small number of well-known contacts from within the relations of definition, rather than drawing from an amorphous range of sources (Anderson, 1997: 129). These findings are robustly supported by the empirical work of Anders Hansen (1990; 1991). Focusing on news reporting of environmental risks, Hansen identifies a clear imbalance in the ideological range of sources utilised by journalists. Using comparative analysis of environmental affairs reporting in Britain and Denmark,

[64]The production of press releases is common practice within government departments such as the Department of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Hansen discovered that 23% of primary sources were drawn from public authorities, 21% from government, 17% were independent scientists and just 6% were representatives of environmental organisations (Hansen, 1990). Implicit within these findings is the suggestion that news reporters are unhealthily dependent upon sources from within the relations of definition.

The evidence from within media and cultural studies indicates that the routine 'explosion of risks' which Beck describes is far from guaranteed. Beck's emphasis on the media as a reflexive agent implies that the media increasingly challenge the relations of definition. However, whilst the media as a whole is theoretically capable of opposing the status quo, in practice this may happen only up to a critical point. It must be appreciated that a significant chunk of news reporting relies upon the input of institutional sources, with many journalists routinely reporting from directly within the relations of definition. As such, certain boundaries are occasionally stretched, but rarely transgressed. Contrary to the risk society perspective, as a consequence of the routinized practices of journalists within media organisations, the interests of dominant groups within the relations of definition are not habitually opposed.

A further salient feature of the media production process is the reproduction of 'news values'. Essentially, news values are a set of assumptions based upon knowledge about the audience, dominant assumptions about society and a professional code or ideology (Hall, 1973). In order to maintain audience interest and cultural relevance, news stories must broadly fit the criteria of 'newsworthiness'. The contents of newsworthiness will, of course, vary over time and place. In their seminal study, Galtung and Ruge (1974) attempted to pinpoint the specific contents of news values, focusing on twelve decisive factors, including frequency and amplitude of events, cultural relevance and degree of personalization. The greater the number of news values an event concurs with, the greater its chance of being reported (Palmer, 1998: 378). With specific reference to risk, Greenberg's content analysis of American

television suggests that media coverage of risk follows the pattern set by news values (Greenberg, 1989). In particular, news journalists will gravitate towards spectacular incidents such as plane crashes, which can be readily visualized (Sjöberg and Wahlberg, 1997: 4). The employment of photographic imagery can have significant impacts on the meaning which is made of risk events (Jones et al, 1997). Again, this indicates that news outlets will be necessarily selective in their reporting of risk.

In recent times, a framework for predicting the reporting of risk has been developed by Peter Bennett (1998). Bennett argues that the likelihood of a risk being reported can be indexed to the presence or absence of a series of 'media triggers' (1998: 16). These include, cover-up, blame, human interest, conflict, signal value and visual impact. A thorough application of these factors is beyond the ambit of this inquiry. However, research has demonstrated that the media triggers suggested by Bennett do tessellate with high profile risks such as *nv* CJD (Mythen et al, 2000: 41-44). Whilst Bennett's concept has greater potency as a descriptive rather than an analytical tool, it nonetheless acts as a useful heuristic in predicting the reporting of risk issues.

For Bennett and for Galtung and Ruge, ambiguity is of central importance in news reporting. The less ambiguous and contradictory the information, the greater the likelihood of it being reported. The news media in particular tend to gloss over or neglect information which is contradictory and equivocal (Negrine, 1994: 120). Naturally, newspaper journalists are more comfortable reporting completed and certain events, rather than indefinite, ongoing issues. As Anderson (1997) and Hargreaves (2000) note, journalists placed under pressure by editors may be coerced into constructing 'certainty' about risks - even at the cost of accuracy:

> Although headline writers mostly deal with the appearance of certainty, they know that there is no such thing as a single indivisible 'truth', any more than there is a single media...but the communication of uncertainty doesn't sit easily with three-word, 72-point headlines (Hargreaves, 2000: 3).

Because of the indeterminacy of manufactured risks, news journalists have the arduous task of representing uncertainty with clarity (Friedman et al, 1999; Mythen et al, 2000: 44). Such conditions may lead to risk issues either being marginalised, under reported or simply ignored. This perhaps enables us to understand why the level of reporting of a particular risk is not necessarily equivalent to its harmfulness (Kitzinger and Reilly, 1997: 320; Hansen, 1990; Macintyre et al, 1998). Contra the risk society thesis, we need to distinguish *between* different risks in media reporting (Cottle, 1998: 17). Risks possess different levels of cultural resonance, and cannot possibly be uniformly exposed (Bennett, 1998; Hansen, 1991). An assemblage of practices and interventions within the media production process limit the flow from risk occurrence to headline news:

> Every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections as to what items shall be printed, in what position they shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy, what emphasis each shall have. There are no objective standards here (Lippmann, 1965: 223).

In failing to probe the culture of media organisations, the risk society thesis falls short of analysing the dominant social and cultural backgrounds of journalists and news reporters. Traditionally, journalists have not been widely recognised as the socially concerned and oppositional agents portrayed by Beck. As Negrine (1994: 129) points out, 'journalists, like everybody else, carry ideological baggage and so cannot report events in some pure or universally truthful way'. Even assuming Beck's libertarian bent, journalists are still routinely practised in self-censorship, being marshalled by the boundaries of editorial or proprietal lines. This is pertinent, given that journalists have the power to represent risk situations in an exaggerated or distorted fashion (Anderson, 1997: 115; Sjöberg,and Wahlberg, 1997: 4). Beck's risk society thesis assumes that the media is increasingly devoted to 'objectively' uncovering environmental risks. By contrast, event-centred journalists will be actively selective in the representation of risk, sometimes to the detriment of accurate information (Eldridge, 1999; Singer and Endreny, 1987). Obviously it would be wrong to argue

that journalists are in the business of deliberately misleading the public in the reporting of risk (Jones et al, 1997: 8). As Hargreaves (2000) explains, the ambiguous character of manufactured risks makes them extremely difficult to pin down in news reports. This presents journalists, who are not necessarily schooled in environmental and scientific affairs, with the daunting problem of what to 'say' about risks. Predictably, empirical studies have demonstrated that a significant degree of confusion exists amongst journalists reporting environmental issues. For example, Bell notes that media reports often fail to distinguish between, or simply conflate, ozone depletion and the greenhouse effect (Bell, 1994). Further, content analysis of television newscasts about the Chernobyl disaster have revealed that news reporting of the disaster was uninformative and contradictory (Friedman et al, 1987). Further, Wilkins and Patterson (1987) suggest that initial news about Chernobyl was poorly historically contextualized, trivial and lacking in comparative examples and figures.

Allowing for the diversity of readings of a given risk event, a degree of inaccuracy and ambiguity is unavoidable in risk reporting. However, Beck fails to acknowledge the *routine* fashion in which risk issues are presented in news reports. This is particularly evident with regards to the manner in which expert and lay discourses are constructed and represented (Cottle, 1998: 19). It has long been established within media theory that broadcast news tends to be imbued with an ideological slant which is supportive of dominant social groups (Hall, 1973; Negrine, 1994). Whilst this ideological slant may be less clear-cut since the introduction of narrowcasting, it undoubtedly still exists within most broadcasting networks. Consequently, risk issues are often presented in a formulaic manner in the media, particularly on television news bulletins.

It might be argued that the dominant formula of presentation in newscasts mirrors the classic narrative structure of an epic film drama. The report may begin with the manifestation of the risk as *problem*; say, the continued manufacture of genetically

modified maize in Britain. It may continue to outline the *conflict* which has arisen following the initial identification of the risk; for example, Greenpeace protesters attempting to destroy genetically altered crops in test centres. We then move on to focus upon the doleful *victims* of the conflict; the farmers whose crops have been destroyed. Finally, the *resolution* or 'happy ending' arrives, as government experts dismiss campaigners as alarmist, refute any evidence of risk and promise greater protection of GM test sites in the 'public interest'.

Of course, this is not to argue that lay publics passively accept preferred readings of television news. The ideological effects of news reporting can only be properly gauged by accessing the meaning made of the media by audiences. Nevertheless, the dominant structure of broadcast news reports about risk does seem somewhat removed from Beck's understanding of the media as an oppositional agent.

Indeed, media information about risks can be deliberately unhelpful and misleading. In certain instances, wilful misinformation about risk has served to amplify social concerns about risk issues. With reference to the reporting of AIDS, Eldridge notes that several tabloid journalists vigorously denied that heterosexuals were at risk and were disparaging about safe sex campaigns. A tabloid newspaper editorial entitled 'AIDS - The Facts Not The Fiction' ran as follows:

> At last the truth can be told. The killer disease AIDS can only be caught by homosexuals, bisexuals, junkies or anyone who has received a tainted blood transfusion. *Forget* the television adverts, *Forget* the poster campaigns, *Forget* the endless boring TV documentaries and forget the idea that ordinary heterosexual people can contract AIDS. They can't.[65]

This passage serves as a stark example of the media's potential to obscure issues of risk and to misinform the general public. It might be added that the publication in question is Britain's largest selling daily newspaper. The reporting of risk in tabloid

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[65] *The Sun* editorial column, 17th November 1989, as cited in Eldridge (1999: 113).

newspapers raises another serious flaw in Beck's understanding of the media. Whilst Beck refers to the media as a homogenous body, it is worth pointing out that information about risks can be mediated in a number of different ways, with varying implications (Cottle, 1998; Hargreaves, 2000). Information, images and ideas about risk will tend to vary between media formats (Adam, 1998: 167; Sjöberg and Wahlberg, 1997: 11). Certain media technologies will be better equipped to set the historical context of risk, others will prefer to focus on visual dramatisation (Kitzinger and Reilly, 1997: 340). Differences in the structure, style and presentation of risk will oscillate between media forms such as television, radio, newspapers and the internet (Mythen et al, 2000: 43). Television producers, for example, tend to prefer risk stories that are visually stimulating and dramatic (Anderson, 1997: 121; Negrine, 1994: 121).[66] In support, Greenberg et al's (1989) study of risk representation suggests that television news tends to focus on visual disasters, being largely 'event' rather than 'issue' led. A focus upon image and the presentation of risk as 'event' enables journalists to 'frame' stories and to side-step sticky contextual issues (Anderson, 1997: 21).

The televisual presentation of risk is of great import, given the continued reliance of the public on television as a source of information about risk.[67] Furthermore, the notion of 'risk as event' interfaces with broader arguments about the prevalence of figural regimes of signification within contemporary culture (see, Thompson, 1997). As Postman (1985) indicates, the extension of television as a source of entertainment can serve to marginalize and trivialise political information. The routine portrayal of risk as spectacle and drama seems to cast doubt on Beck's perception of the media as a generator of more 'rational' environmental concerns. By contrast, the dramatisation and sensationalisation of risk issues may serve to trivialise dangers, with risk issues

[66] As a BBC News environmental correspondent interviewed by Anderson (1997: 121) states: 'we're about pictures...we're about words as well, but words are captions to pictures, essentially'.

[67] Anderson (1997: 181) cites a MORI poll conducted on behalf of the Nature Conservancy Council which estimated that three quarters of the population who were 'very interested' in conservation, claimed that TV was their main source of information about the environment.

being portrayed as random 'one- off' events (Sjöberg and Wahlberg, 1997: 5).

This said, representations of risk will vary immensely between different media formats. For instance, broadsheet journalists may be expected to provide historically accurate accounts of risk situations. In broadsheets, depth and detail of reporting are attributed greater value than sensationalistic 'scoops'. Thus, whilst reading a daily newspaper might well amount to 'an exercise in technology critique' (Beck, 1992a: 116) much will depend upon the media *form* and the style of presentation *within* this form. It is worth pointing out that the sizeable majority of newspapers purchased in Britain are tabloid, as opposed to broadsheet newspapers.[68] As has been indicated, the reporting of risk in tabloid newspapers cannot be readily equated with broadsheet coverage. These are salient issues which have important ramifications for the mediation and perception of risk.

As will be illustrated in chapter four, public understandings of risk will vary substantially and are influenced by access to and choice of media forms. Public knowledge about risks will also be affected by the relationship between the government and news media outlets (Eldridge, 1999: 114). It is logical then that risk research should focus upon dominant sources of public information, such as newspaper and television news coverage (Hargreaves, 2000: 8). However, it is *illogical* for this research to address the media as a monolithic block, rather than a differentiated system. As far as the risk society thesis is concerned, the media should not be perceived as acting in favour, *or* indeed against, the relations of definition in the unqualified manner assumed by Beck. Unfortunately, Beck's tendency to 'lump the media together', leads to a one-dimensional understanding of media output (Anderson, 1997: 188).

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[68] In February 1997, The Audit Bureau of Circulations reported that approximately 10 million people daily were reading tabloid newspapers, as opposed to just 3 million taking broadsheets. For further details see, Denscombe (1998: 44).

As Hansen's work indicates (1990; 1991), we can expect significant cross-cultural variations in media output. Beck himself declines to sustain his recognition that the selection and the degree of coverage of risk issues will reflect economic, industrial and cultural circumstances.[69] It is clear that we must be aware of cultural differences in the representation of issues of risk in different spaces and places. Cross-cultural studies have highlighted distinct variations in the form and content of news coverage (Linne and Hansen, 1990). Beck's inattention to the diversity of media forms *is* a significant omission, given that the risk communications will differ substantially between global, national and local outputs. In opposition to the risk society argument, it would appear that pressure to acquiesce to the values of power-holding institutions is ingrained in the media production process. News sourcing, news values and journalistic preferences will all shape the content and range of media output. These structural factors suggest that the reporting of risk does not take place on a level playing field. Rather than acting in direct opposition to the relations of definition, media professionals may be more likely to simply accept that the game has to be played on a slanted pitch.

3.7 Reading the Media

Having explored the missing contextual dimensions in Beck's work, I wish to conclude by scrutinising the relationship between media representations and public understandings of risk. This inquiry will form the basis for a more complex discussion of public risk perception in chapter four. In relation to cultural representations of risk, the mass media is undoubtedly located in an ambiguous position. As Giddens notes, in many respects, public demands for objective information about risk are almost insatiable. Moreover, the dividing line between alerting the public about risk and

[69]Via cross-cultural content analysis Hansen discovered that reports on nuclear energy were more prevalent in English rather than Danish news bulletins. The likely reason for this disparity is that Denmark is bereft of nuclear industry, whilst nuclear power is still an important source of wealth generation in Britain.

generating moral panic is decidedly fine:

> People must be persuaded that the risk is real - a fuss must be made about it. Yet if a fuss is indeed created and the risk turns out to be minimal, those involved will be accused of scaremongering (Giddens, 1999: 4).

Of course, such a definitive dilemma can be traced back to the unquantifiable nature of risks. If the impacts of risks are truly unpredictable, how can one possibly report risk in an objective and responsible way? As Lupton notes, in some respects publicising risk might be seen as part of a wider strategy of coping with uncertainty. Nonetheless, increased risk awareness can ultimately serve to manufacture rather than to dispel anxiety (Lupton, 1999: 13; Pidgeon, 2000). Additionally, enhanced public risk consciousness has a knock-on effect on the assessment and treatment of risks. In the case of breast cancer, medical professionals have claimed that media campaigns to increase awareness of the disease have led to the system becoming overloaded, endangering actual victims.[70] Despite the negative possibilities of moral panic, Giddens (1999) argues that a degree of scaremongering about risk - be it intentional or otherwise - may be justified in developing public awareness and preventing the production of future hazards. Others, such as Anderson (1997: 167) and Reilly (1999: 131) are somewhat more reticent about the benefits of media amplification. Drawing upon ethnographic research, Reilly (1999) argues that routine exposure to mediated risks may encourage lay publics to become blasé about the possibility of personal danger. With reference to the first wave of media interest in the BSE crisis, a number of respondents became so exasperated by the constant blizzard of information that they resorted to routinely switching channels. In the early stages of the crisis, respondents believed that the media coverage of the BSE crisis was 'sensationalist' in relation to a subject which 'no-one, not even the experts really knew anything much about' (Reilly, 1999: 132). In Reilly's first study in 1992, almost half of the sample group actively rejected alternative media information on BSE because of the

[70] See, for example, the article entitled 'Cancer Drive is Risking Lives' by Nicole Veash in *The Observer* 30th May 1999.

possibility of sensationalism (Reilly, 1999: 132). One respondent summed up the general mood by referring to the BSE crisis as 'yet another media food scandal that we were all sick to the back teeth of' (Reilly, 1999: 131).[71]

Of course, it could be argued that a desire to 'shut out' risk illustrates that the general public are naive about the dangers of manufactured risks. The severest of critics might infer from this that audiences have short attention spans and are generally politically apathetic. However, we might more usefully surmise that social actors are less prone to be concerned about the potentialities of risks if lived experience over time indicates that the chances of them being affected is minute. It is perhaps more likely that social actors will focus their energies on avoiding more 'mundane' risks, such as the threat of losing one's partner, one's job or one's house. Regardless of the level of media exposure, certain risks may be construed as beyond the range of action of ordinary individuals.[72] Thus, prolonged coverage of risk by the mass media does not ineluctably facilitate public reflexivity. Media representations of risk can also invoke pragmatic and fatalistic responses. Reilly's study suggests that, in certain contexts, media amplification cements perceptions of risk to 'scaremongering' and 'false alarm' at the level of public consciousness. In opposition to Beck's thesis, the accentuation of risks in the mass media may contribute towards public scepticism about the existence and potential of manufactured risks (Anderson, 1997: 167; Reilly, 1999).

In other contexts, the media is capable of raising public consciousness about risk in the manner advocated by Beck and Giddens. For example, Macgill's (1989) study of residents living near the Sellafield nuclear plant is indicative of the close links between risk communication and public perceptions of risk. Macgill argues that a

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[71]This phase of Reilly's research was undertaken after the first wave of media concern about BSE in 1992. As the full seriousness of the situation became apparent, later research in 1996 indicated much higher levels of public concern.

[72]This is particularly pertinent to risks which emerge *post hoc*, where damage to personal health may already have occurred.

Yorkshire Television documentary about the Windscale power plant was particularly vital in raising awareness of the potential risks associated with nuclear power. The programme - which highlighted that levels of leukaemia in children around Sellafield were ten times the national average - was watched by three million people nationally. Macgill (1989: 50) contends that the ideological potency of the programme roused the British government into prompt action. Responding swiftly to allay public concern, the Conservative administration set up an inquiry team within twenty-four hours of the programme being broadcast.

The conflicting results produced by ethnographic research studies indicate that public consumption of the media is heterogeneous. Media representations of risk can be expected to invoke a diverse range of public responses. It is clear that much will hang upon both the context in which media messages are encoded and the cultural environment in which they are decoded (Hall, 1980). In taking account of potentially ambiguous representations of risk in the media, the most likely beneficiaries of information about hazards will be those who already possess background knowledge of the subject in question (Anderson, 1997: 200).

Side-stepping these qualifications, Beck maintains that the media act to challenge the dominant relations of definition, generating public support for greater regulation of social risks. As lay actors gain expertise in relation to risk, a more intense form of public consciousness develops. However, the available empirical evidence questions the existence of uniform reflexive responses to risk amongst audiences. Beck's rather linear understanding of the media as a catalyst for public knowledge and reflexivity only partially explains how risk meanings are generated. Risk communications will produce variable affects, with individuals responding to risks in locally and culturally contingent ways (Cottle, 1998: 21; Tulloch, 1999: 34, Tulloch and Lupton, 2001). Of course, it has long been a given within cultural studies that the meaning-making process will be canalised by gender, ethnicity, class and age (Hall, 1980; Morley,

1980; Lodziak, 1986). Material, cultural and geographical features are of vital significance in determining the way in which media texts are decoded and reproduced. Beck's conception of the public as an amorphous mass, waiting to be schooled in reflexivity is decidedly out of kilter with contemporary media and cultural theory. In relation to the hermeneutic process, Beck paradoxically assumes passivity on behalf of the same audience which he later imbues with a critical and reflexive consciousness. It is almost as if the audience are attributed a critical consciousness in relation to the relations of definition, but not in relation to its opponents. In Beck's work, counter experts, political dissenters and protesters are embraced by the public as the keepers of absolute truth.

All of these criticisms suggest a lack of attention to the way in which risks are interpreted by social actors in embedded cultural contexts. At times, Beck simply equates media *reporting* with media *effects*, demonstrating no familiarity with empirical studies of risk perception (Beck, 1987: 155). This omission leads Beck to underplay the active role of the audience in decoding media representations (Lupton, 1999a: 7; Tulloch, 1999: 56). As Douglas notes, the moment of risk perception cannot possibly arrive prior to interpretation of information and images: 'information does not even become information at all unless it is somehow coded by the perceiver' (Douglas, 1985: 27).

3.8 Summary and Conclusions

In concluding, it has been argued that Beck's account of the relationship between the public and the media in the social construction of risk fails to scrape beneath the surface layer of representation. As a result, the underlying issue of public sense making goes unplumbed, leaving Beck with an outmoded hypodermic model of media effects. In the risk society thesis, satisfactory appreciation of the

interconnectivity between risk, the media and the public is lacking.

In addition, the risk society narrative reproduces an inconsistent understanding of the media. As Cottle points out, Beck oscillates between seemingly diametrical poles for illustrative purposes, leaving it unclear whether the media is to be understood as an emancipatory vehicle of the people, or as a tool of state propaganda (Cottle, 1998: 9). Unquestionably, Beck's political optimism draws him more closely to the former possibility. However, the weight of empirical evidence suggests that Beck's *general* claims about the role of the media as a reflexive facilitator are difficult to substantiate. The interpretative outcomes of mediated risks are multifaceted and detailed research is required to establish concrete patterns within a presently scattered field (Sjöberg and Wahlberg, 1997).

As far as the more expansive risk society argument is concerned, a cluster of important criticisms can be raised. Firstly, Beck's theoretical conception of the social construction of risk lacks empirical support and is reliant on anecdotal evidence. Secondly, Beck's representation of the relationship between the media and the public is contradictory and imprecise. Thirdly, Beck makes scant account of either the political economy of the mass media, or the routine features of the media production process. As has been demonstrated, the political, organisational and economic contexts in which media interests operate have vital implications for the reporting of risk. In contrast, Beck seems to conceive of the media in the manner of a Habermasian utopia, as a platform for undistorted information and public debate. However, the continued expansion of the media has taken place in private hands, *for* profit, and *without* social regulation (Thompson, 1997). *Inter alia*, this questions the ability of media organisations to provide free and undistorted information about risk. Fourthly, Beck's work is characterised by a lack of appreciation of the cultural hermeneutic involved in structuring everyday understandings of risk. This is particularly salient with regards to the grounded cultural context in which people

interface with the media and the issue of cross-cultural difference. Cultural factors such as location, age, class, gender and ethnicity will serve to filter media representations and to vitalise public perceptions of risk.

The wider social ramifications of this discussion are manifold. What is at stake here is not only the way in which risks are routinely represented in the media, but also the degree and quality of information about risk which is available to lay actors. Public knowledge and subsequent social action - be it preventative, combative or dismissive - depends upon a diverse and unrestricted range of information. In order to make informed lifestyle choices, the public require accurate media information about risk issues. Of course, allowing for the volatile and unknown quality of manufactured risks, objectivity is a somewhat impossible goal. Furthermore, the economic and organisational context out of which risk knowledge is disseminated, questions the likelihood of due impartiality being realised. The flow of information about risk is managed and controlled through implicit and explicit forms of censorship. The potential consequences of this for the formulation of public knowledge give rise to concern, particularly when set against the power of global economic forces which continue to transform the media from a space of rational discourse to one of figural entertainment and spectacle (Thompson, 1997: 35; Lash, 1990: 174). This underlying shift from discursive to figural regimes of signification has wide-ranging implications for meaning making in the public sphere. As Anderson (1997: 201) notes, it is only possible for audiences to be 'active' with the information which they are provided with. Taken collectively, these issues fundamentally question whether the mass media has the potential to stimulate public reflexivity to the point of the effective oppositional action envisaged by Beck.

4

Perceiving Risk

4.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter unpacked the central issues surrounding the social construction and mediation of risks in contemporary culture. Inevitably, this discussion occasionally diverted our attention towards the crucial process of risk perception. In chapter four, I intend to focus more intensely on the perceptual dimension of risk, applying the risk society thesis to existing empirical evidence. Complementing the knowledge developed through empirical research, several important theoretical shortcomings in Beck's work will be identified (see Alexander, 1996; Dickens, 1996, Lash, 1991, 1993; Lupton 1999, 1999a). It is anticipated that such a discussion will contribute towards filling the void between risk definition and risk perception in the risk society perspective. In considering the correspondence between the risk society thesis and empirical studies of risk perception, I intend to explicitly address three questions. Firstly, what can we confidently 'say' about cultural understandings of risk? Secondly, to what extent do existing empirical studies enable us to evaluate the cultural dimensions of risk? Thirdly, how far does Beck's work take us in unravelling the complexities and ambiguities of risk perception?

I begin by critically scrutinising Beck's dualist theoretical perspective on risk perception, drawing upon the critical observations of Lupton (1999; 1999a) and Culpitt (1999). From here, I will provide a brief synopsis of existing empirical research into public perceptions of risk. This discussion will invite a more rigorous

investigation of the fit between the risk society thesis and empirical risk research. In the final sections of the chapter I intend to move beyond the confines of the risk society thesis. Here, I will revisit the constituents of reflexivity, arguing in favour of a revamped understanding of the relationship between lay and expert actors.

4.2 Theorising Risk Perception: Natural Objectivism Versus Cultural Relativism

As discussed in chapter one, it is reasonable to argue that contemporary risks cannot be exclusively understood as private fears about unknown dangers. Cultural understandings of contemporary risks are widely acknowledged to go beyond individual rationalisation or simple attribution to fate (Culpitt, 1999: 4). Since the Enlightenment period, knowledge about risk has steadily permeated western culture. Consequently, increased scientific and social knowledge has led to various strategies of abstinence becoming customary within everyday life. Thus, in contemporary culture risk avoidance involves not only accounting for private dangers but also thinking through more public effects (Prior et al, 2000). But to what extent are the risks *themselves* universal? Indeed, are universal dangers universally *perceived?*

In response to these questions, Ulrich Beck describes two dominant approaches to risk perception which have been prevalent in the West. The first he refers to as, 'natural objectivism about hazards' and the second, 'cultural relativism about hazards' (Beck, 1995: 162). For Beck, natural objectivism about hazards is based upon scientific knowledge and calculation and informs the collective approach of the relations of definition. The natural objectivist model is utilised in risk assessment in areas such as health, law, statistics and engineering. Within these fields of inquiry, risks are widely perceived to be measurable and quantifiable phenomena. As a consequence, risk is predominantly approached in terms of identification, assessment and prediction. In conceiving of risk as an objective and measurable entity, natural objectivism is

broadly compatible with the realist position (Beck, 1999; Lupton, 1999: 33).

By contrast, cultural relativism about hazards implies that reality is constructed via the reproduction of shared meanings about risk. For cultural relativists, perceptions of risk are steered by subjectivities created by social interactions and situated within cultural settings. Relativists believe that risks are inseparable from cultural belief systems and cannot be objectivized (Dean, 1999). Thus, cultural relativism has been more closely associated with social constructionism than realism (Lupton, 1999: 60).[73] But which of these perspectives is most appropriate in disentangling public perceptions of risk?

In *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995) Beck suggests that both objectivism and relativism have distinct merits. Natural objectivism is assisted by the application of technology and monitoring procedures which aid the assessment and quantification of risks. As Beck points out, the objectivist method has enabled scientific researchers to identify global dangers, such as the hole in the ozone layer or acid rain (Beck, 1999: 23). For Beck, the appeal of realism is that it maintains a 'clear historical storyline', in which the development of western society can be divided into two distinct phases (Beck, 1999: 24). In the first phase, society is crucially bound up with questions of class. In the second phase, society focuses more centrally upon ecological issues. Of course, this kind of divide perfectly mirrors Beck's risk society narrative. However, as noted in chapter two, such an epochal divide is empirically indistinct and indeterminably contestable. Furthermore, I will go on to illustrate that pure objectivism fails to appreciate the subtlety of the cultural dimensions of risk perception. As Beck notes, scientists utilising the objectivist paradigm have failed to acknowledge that it is ultimately a value position rather than an immutable truth (Beck, 1995: 90).

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[73] For analytical purposes, the objectivism/realism and relativism/constructionism couplets can be used interchangeably (Lupton, 1999: 35). Indeed, in *World Risk Society* (1999: 23) Beck reverts from objectivism and relativism to the categories of realism and constructivism.

Beck believes that cultural relativism manages to avoid some of the pitfalls of objectivism by taking account of the culturally situated character of risk cognisance. Nevertheless, it is argued that rigid cultural relativism clouds the distinction between natural and anthropogenic risks (Beck, 1999: 23). Of course, the application of cultural relativism rather undoes Beck's historical narrative, blurring epochal boundaries. Beck contends that the relativist approach to risk tends to lose sight of 'objective' degrees of danger and the 'special features of large scale technological hazards' (Beck, 1995: 162). Dropping a glass on one's foot and dropping a nuclear bomb are both risky practices, but the consequences of the latter are far more catastrophic than the former.

Having considered the theoretical shortcomings of each perspective, Beck refuses to uniformly adopt either an objectivist or a relativist position (van Loon, 2000: 176). As Lupton notes:

> He maintains a 'natural-scientific objectivist' approach by subscribing to the idea that 'real' risks exist, but brings in 'cultural relativism' by arguing that the nature and causes of risks are conceptualized and dealt with differently in contemporary western societies compared with previous eras (Lupton, 1999: 61).

In theorising risk perception, Beck calls for an eclectic 'sociological perspective' which extracts the finer points of each approach (Beck, 1995: 76). In marrying realism to constructionism, Beck is able to explore the concrete and the abstract dimensions of risk, attributing risks with an objective reality whilst also differentiating between the effects of different risks:

> I consider realism and constructionism to be neither an either-or option, nor a mere matter of belief. We should not have to swear allegiance to any particular view or theoretical perspective. The decision whether to take a realist or a constructionist approach is for me a rather *pragmatic* one, a matter of choosing the appropriate means for a desired goal (Beck, 2000b: 211).

This divergent approach to risk perception is woven into the risk society thesis. For example, Beck's understanding of environmental risks largely follows the tradition of natural objectivism. As Goldblatt (1995: 174) points out, scientific reports suggestive of global warming are more or less unreservedly accepted by Beck. By contrast, a more relativist stance towards risk underpins Beck's analysis of personal relationships in contemporary culture (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 52). Here, Beck is sensitive to the heterogeneity of responses to the 'normal chaos' of contemporary relationships.

Despite affording theoretical manoeuvrability, Beck's mixed approach to risk perception throws open a bundle of concerns. In shifting between realism and relativism, Beck's theoretical angle on risk becomes somewhat abstruse (Alexander and Smith, 1996: 251). At times, he appears to be undecided about whether manufactured risks are real, unreal or hybridous: 'risks are a kind of virtual, yet real, reality' (Beck, 1998: 11). On certain occasions, Beck is adamant that manufactured risks are imperceptible to human faculties, arguing that the latency of manufactured risks means that 'our senses have become useless' (Beck, 1987: 155).[74] In this vein, Beck stresses that contemporary risks evade both identification and perception:

> In matters of risk we have been disenfranchised... we the citizens have lost sovereignty over our senses, and thus the residual sovereignty over our judgement (Beck, 1987: 156).

For Beck, the social consequence of risk imperceptibility is that lay publics become increasingly dependent upon the media and scientific and governmental experts, without whom objective risk identification is impossible. In such instances, Beck follows a 'top-down' model of risk perception, drawing heavily upon natural objectivism. Following natural-objectivism, the manifestation of a given risk is consequentially followed by identification of the risk and subsequent disclosure of

[74]For example, it is impossible to tell whether or not a prospective sexual partner is an HIV carrier, or whether a particular piece of beef is contaminated.

avoidance strategies to lay actors.

However, at other junctures Beck treads much closer to a relativist position, stressing the culturally situated nature of risk perceptions (Beck, 1996: 3; 1999: 22). In this mode, Beck is appreciative of the socially constructed and diverse nature of cultural understandings of risk: 'the same dangers appear to one person as dragons, and to another as earthworms' (Beck, 1999: 22). Here, the suggested model of risk perception is multi-linear, structured by social context rather than expert identification.

Beck's contradictory approach to risk perception defies classification, slipping between realist and social constructionist approaches (Lupton 1999; 1999a).[75] The anomalous position of the risk society thesis in relation to risk perception has driven theorists such as Dickens to contend that Beck's argument only serves to produce interpretative uncertainties:

> Beck seems to be assuming that all knowledge is no more than a social construction. He is not recognising any real causal mechanisms 'out there' independent of human discourse and social construction. Indeed, the supposed uncertainty over science to which he refers seems to confirm this stance. Beck seems quite confused. On the one hand he is, like Giddens, saying that all forms of knowledge are under constant interrogation and challenge. On the other hand, his notion of a risk society must assume that there actually *are* real mechanisms out there causing real and likely environmental disaster (Dickens, 1996: 41).

So, how can Beck's seemingly convoluted approach to risk perception be unravelled? In my opinion, we can begin by distinguishing between the relative accents on each perspective. Whilst Beck does draw upon both objectivism and relativism, the risk society thesis is far from equally weighted. The overwhelming body of Beck's work is informed by a realist rather than a relativist position on risk (Alexander and Smith,

[75] In recent work, Beck has advocated a 'reflexive realism', which accounts for the centrality of power relations in the production of evidence and the formation of public discourses of risk (Beck, 1999: 26). However, the specific trajectory of such an approach remains indistinct.

1996; Lash, 2000: 51). At best, Beck's work draws upon a 'weak' form of social constructionism, compared with the stronger versions present in anthropological and governmentality approaches (Lupton, 1999: 29). For followers of Foucault, risks are constituted by discursive practices which are unrecognisable outside constructed belief systems. By contrast, for Beck, manufactured risks are objective, hazardous and deleterious, regardless of cultural interpretations (Beck, 1999: 23). Despite occasionally nodding towards cultural interpretations of risk, Beck maintains that risks require objective identification. Several critics have argued that this assumption forces Beck to artificially separate out public and scientific knowledge about risks (Dickens, 1996; Wynne, 1996). For Beck, there are two sides to understanding hazards: 'the risk itself *and public perception of it*' (Beck, 1992: 55). Hence, a clear delineation is established between existing 'objective' facts and 'subjective' values. As Dickens (1996: 40) notes, this binarism pushes Beck's understanding of public risk perception perilously close to the expert bodies he criticises.[76] For example, in Britain, the Royal Society have traditionally distinguished between 'objective' and 'subjective' risks, portraying social risks as identifiable via scientific monitoring and quantification. Further, the Royal Society maintain that objective risks are subsequently interpreted by lay actors in a broadly 'subjective' fashion. Hence, a curious paradox can be detected in the risk society thesis. Having vigorously criticised expert bodies for their use of the objectivist paradigm, Beck proceeds to adhere to the model himself by insisting on the objective existence of risks.

Although reference to the relativist position is made by Beck, the risk society thesis is underpinned by the realist perspective (Lash, 2000: 54). Thus, in agreement with Lupton (1999: 35), Beck's work can only be tenuously aligned with cultural relativism. Beck does infrequently acknowledge the role of culture in structuring interpretations of risk, but this recognition is invariably secondary and subservient to the initial identification of objective risks. For example, in *Risk Society* (1992)

[76] See, The Royal Society Report (1992) *Risk, Analysis, Perception and Management* London: Amber p.94.

emphasis is placed on the cultural intangibility of contemporary risks 'which only come to consciousness in scientized thought and cannot be directly related to primary experience' (Beck, 1992: 52). This is again indicative of a 'top-down' model of risk perception, which flows *from* expert identification of risk *to* lay-cultural interpretations. By contrast, a strong relativist position might work from the 'bottom-up', approaching lay publics as active interpreters of risk, rather than subordinate reception points for risk information. By and large, Beck's version of subjectivity is post risk-identification and, by definition, reactive. As we shall see, this strong gravitation towards objectivism rather colours Beck's understanding of public perceptions of risk.

In support of Beck, it is evident that the risk society thesis is intended to be both political and speculative. In addition to being a serious intellectual inquiry, Beck's project is deliberately intended to provoke reaction and debate (Beck, 1997: Introduction). In this regard, Beck's polemical style has clearly had the desired effect (Marshall, 1999; McGuigan, 1999: 125). However, one of the dangers of polemical theory building is night blindness to the complexity of patterns of lived experience. Unfortunately, Beck's rather universal portrayal of risk perception is insensitive to cultural variations. As will be demonstrated, Beck is guilty of exaggerating the uniformity of risk perception and failing to fully account for the cultural dimensions of risk cognisance. Such shortcomings have led critical theorists such as Smith and Alexander (1996: 253) to remark that, in the risk society thesis, 'complex issues of interpretation and meaning are swept under the carpet by the objectivist fallacy'.

However, *pace* Beck, he does appear to recognise the variability of interpretations of risk. Indeed, in *World Risk Society* Beck notes that 'one person's risk is another person's hazard' (Beck, 1999: 23). Nevertheless, due appreciation of the scattered and diverse nature of cultural understandings of risk is rather 'smuggled in' to the argument and unsustained in the body of Beck's work (Lash, 1993; Wynne, 1996).

Of course, the central thrust of Beck's argument requires that he emphasise the convergence of risk perception. In the risk society, public cognisance of threats is universalised. With reference to nuclear spillages, Beck asserts that 'every event arouses memories of all the other ones, not only in Germany, but all over the world' (Beck, 1996a: 114). In such instances, Beck appears to be doing little more than universalising a subjective opinion. This is somewhat careless, given that Beck's own reflexive and risk-aware consciousness cannot possibly reflect the totality of cultural perceptions of risk.

A number of criticisms have been directed at Beck's transference of a particular understanding of risk to universal risk consciousness (Alexander, 1996; Scott, 2000; Smith et al, 1997). In particular, it has been argued that public perceptions of risk do not follow the uniform pattern assumed by Beck. As Alexander comments in a decidedly vitriolic article:

> His unproblematic understanding of the perception of risk is utilitarian and objectivist. By ignoring the cultural turn in social science that has gained increasing force over the last two decades, Beck cuts himself off from the more sophisticated and symbolically mediated discussions of risk (Alexander, 1996: 135).

Crucially, Beck's invariant understanding of risk perception prevents him from adequately tackling the differentiated nature of risk experiences (Strydom, 1999). As a consequence, the vitality and breadth of cultural understandings of risk are inadequately addressed. In direct opposition to Beck's realist approach, cultural relativists such as Douglas have insisted that risk perceptions are not so much translated by culture, but actively *formulated* there. Rather than assuming that an 'objective' risk is subjectively culturally decoded, relativists believe that the 'objective' risk itself is *culturally* as well as *rationally* constructed. The risk society thesis conceives of risk perception as a distinctly rational-cognitive process, which is

actioned at a conscious level. However, it seems reasonable to argue that responses to risk may be constructed by the *habitual,* as well as the cognitive-rational. Cultural understandings of risk are not always fashioned in the image of Beck's reflexive subject:

> Risk-related practices, therefore, may include both activities that may need high levels of problematization, the seeking out of advice or self-interrogation (should I do this or not?) but also those practices (perhaps better entitled 'habits') that do not involve such deliberation, but rather are experienced as 'second nature' to us (Lupton, 1999: 120).

Such a concession rather disables Beck's argument, indicating that the notion of a risk-aware reflexive subject is unappreciative of the habitual aspects of cultural experience. In particular, Beck fails to account for the structural power of the 'everyday' in the formation of public risk perception. I will go on to explain the wider significance of this omission shortly. However, at this stage, it is worth visiting a short example to illustrate the dangers of adopting an objectivist approach to risk perception.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) recently produced a documentary series following the day-to-day activities of an environmental health team. Fittingly enough, the series was entitled 'A Life of Grime'.[77] In one particular episode, the team were called to the dilapidated premises of an eccentric octogenarian. The resident, a Mr. Treavis, had all manner of effects stored in his large garden, ranging from motorbikes to kitchen sinks. Such was the extent of his collection, the entire surface area of the garden was covered. Since the breakdown of his indoor toilet system, Mr Treavis had been using the garden as an ad hoc lavatory, with the assistance of plastic carrier bags. The passageway leading into the property was also crammed with various items and Mr Treavis was in the habit of walking across a ladder over the top of the passage to access his house.

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[77] The episode referred to here was first shown on BBC2 on Tuesday 25th May 1999, between 9.30 and 10.15 pm.

Needless to say, during the course of the visit, the somewhat bewildered environmental officers uncovered all manner of health risks. A large oak tree had been steadily rotted by the contents of the garden and was promptly chopped down. The lack of access into and out of the property presented a fire hazard; hence the collection of curios was gradually removed. The bundles of tidily packaged faeces contravened health and safety laws and were excavated from the garden. The ladder across the passageway was deemed unsafe for use and also contravened planning regulations. Accordingly, the ladder was removed and the passageway cleared. All of this took place whilst an increasingly agitated Mr. Treavis looked on in dismay. Meanwhile, the team of environmental health workers were visibly appalled by the state of the property and Mr. Treavis' lifestyle. With much head shaking and rolling of eyeballs he was described as 'lucky to still be alive'. So, what sense can we make of this example in terms of risk perception? What does the case tell us about the problems of objectivizing risk?

The environmental experts present were clearly approaching the situation via an objective-scientific model of risk. Working within this rational framework, a plethora of objective health risks were identified and appropriate counter measures taken. Few would dispute the potentially hazardous state of the property or the possible risk to health. Through the lens of objectivism, the actions of the environmental health team were intended to counteract the possibilities of harm to the occupant and his neighbours.

However, counter to the objective expert identification of risk, it is hypothetically possible to read the example from the perspective of the layperson, Mr Treavis. In the first instance, the risks identified by the experts had not arisen overnight. Mr Treavis appeared to have been following an embedded routine for some time. This was true of his toiletry habits, his use of exit and egress routes and his apparent inability to part

with possessions. It is of course possible that the potential health risks he encountered on a daily basis were unbeknown to him. However, if we adopt the top-down position of the objective risk assessor we assume that the experts were indeed 'right'. The tree was about to fall down, the ladder likely to collapse and Mr Treavis due to fall victim to all manner of unwelcome ailments.

By contrast, drawing upon a bottom-up model, it might be argued that the lay actor's habitual experience informed his perception of risk. Mr Treavis's routines had been established over a number of years and none of the impending disasters had previously materialised. Indeed, it is quite possible that, in the light of accumulated experience, the potential health hazards were not perceived as risks by the lay actor himself. Alternatively, it is equally possible that Mr Treavis recognised the risks at hand, but chose to proceed with his lifestyle nonetheless. Whatever the case, he was visibly distraught at the dismantling of his everyday routine. Given his age and frailty, it is probable that Mr Treavis's perceptions of risk were informed by a fair degree of fatalism.

Of course, in re-working the example from the lay perspective I do not intend to imply that the actions of the environmental officers were necessarily 'wrong'. To be sure, the potential risks to health appeared tangible to the disinterested observer. However, the debate about 'real' as opposed to 'unreal' risks is not at issue here. Moreover, I am seeking to highlight the possibility of a cultural-habitual dimension to risk perception. To this end, the case study demonstrates that individual perceptions of risk are culturally grounded and can be firmly entrenched (Fox, 1999: 13). Lay actors are quite capable of forming understandings of risk that go 'against the grain' (Caplan, 2000: 23). The case study lucidly illustrates the variability of cultural understandings of risk, with the conflicting poles of risk perception being nicely demarcated. Drawing upon the objectivist model, the actions of the environmental experts can be rationalised. Similarly, the relativist perspective enables us to

hypothesise about Mr Treavis's motives and desires.

In approaching risk in an overly utilitarian fashion, the risk society thesis glosses over the various ways of seeing and perceiving risk (Szerszynski, Lash & Wynne, 1996: 7). As the example employed here suggests, risk situations can be perceived in radically divergent ways. Contra Beck, the case study highlights the heterogeneity of risk perception and hints at the explanatory potential of a polysemic approach to cultural understandings of risk.

The shortcomings in Beck's theory of risk perception can be partly attributed to a staunch refusal to engage with empirical evidence (Alexander and Smith, 1996: 254). Rather than seeking empirical support for the risk society thesis, Beck's argument remains steadfastly theoretical (Hajer and Kesselring, 1999; Smith et al, 1997). Remarkably, Beck makes no coherent attempt to apply his abstract model to existing research into risk perception. This is a notable oversight given that the sweeping claims Beck makes about public understandings of risk *do* require empirical substantiation. Unfortunately, the empirical dimensions of risk perception are simply circumnavigated, threatening the wider credibility of the risk society thesis:

> It is simply not acceptable to *assume*[78] that the empirical case has been made for the widespread existence of the increasing threat of risks and increasing risk perception, or that their combined impact on social behaviour and beliefs is so conclusive that we can properly herald the emergence of a new type of society (Goldblatt, 1995: 174).

[78] My emphasis.

4.3 Researching Risk Perception: Public Understandings of Danger

Having sketched out the theoretical framework of Beck's approach, in the following sections I wish to relate the risk society thesis to empirical studies of risk perception. Prior to directly applying theory to practice in section 4.4, I will first offer a capsule account of existing empirical risk research. In the course of this review, I will raise several methodological concerns which arise in relation to dominant practices of data-gathering within risk research. However, I do not profess to offer a detailed and systematic analysis of empirical studies of risk.[79] The prime objective in the following sections is to explore the intersection between research studies of risk perception and Beck's risk society thesis. In so doing, both commonalities and dissimilarities will be discussed.

So, what do we actually *know* about public perceptions of risk? What have been the most significant findings of empirical research into risk perception? The bulk of empirically based academic risk research has historically been conducted in the United States (see, Douglas, 1985: 8; Krimsky and Golding, 1992). Further, American research has traditionally followed a cognitive-scientific model, focusing upon the relationship between risk perception and the statistical probability of hazards. Thus, empirical risk research has sought to probe cognitive and behavioural responses to risk. The dominant research methodology utilised in such studies has been psychometric testing, through which researchers have attempted to identify cognitive strategies of risk assessment (Slovic, 1992; Slovic, 1987; Flynn, 1994).

Those conducting empirical studies of risk perception have found that individuals respond to certain heuristics and biases which structure mental models of risk events (Lupton, 1999a: 2). A number of psychometric studies into public risk perception have indicated that individuals feel an unjustified sense of subjective immunity with

[79] For a thorough review of the empirical research see Krimsky et al (1992) or Douglas (1985). A more contemporary but abridged version is provided by Lupton (1999: ch 2).

regards to risks that arise from familiar activities (Lee, 1981; Slovic, 1981, 1987). In a seminal study in the area of risk research, Slovic et al (1981) report that individuals overestimate the risk presented by rare but memorable events, whilst underestimating the threat posed by more mundane risks. Slovic et al (1981) also discovered that risk events which cluster together are perceived to be more serious than one-off events. Similarly, disasters that manifest themselves immediately are more likely to provoke anxiety than those which are temporally staggered (Slovic, 1992). As indicated in chapter three, from this we can infer that the greater the frequency with which an issue is reported, the more likely it is to be publicly perceived as a risk (Singer and Endreny, 1993; Douglas, 1985).

In Britain, Claire Marris and Ian Langford (1996) have extended the findings of American research, exploring public attitudes to risk incidents. Using a sample of 210 respondents, Marris and Langford sought to test the hypothesis that certain global dangers are universally feared, whilst local risks are more easily tolerated (Marris and Langford, 1996: 36). In order to investigate this proposition, the researchers identified 13 possible social risks - such as AIDS, sunbathing, genetic engineering and alcohol consumption - and invited respondents to rate the seriousness of each.[80] The particular selection of incidents was deliberate, with the researchers claiming that the risks were classifiable by two variables. The first variable was the extent to which the harmful effects of the risk might be delayed and catastrophic. The second, the extent to which the risk was imposed or voluntary (Marris and Langford, 1996: 36). In concurrence with extant American studies, Marris and Langford discovered that familiar voluntary hazards, such as microwave oven usage and alcohol consumption are perceived to be low-risk activities. Meanwhile, catastrophic global dangers such as genetic engineering, ozone depletion and nuclear power were rated as highly risky and treated with a general sense of 'dread' (Marris and Langford, 1996: 36). These findings are

[80]The full list of risks also included terrorism; food colouring; nuclear power; driving a car; mugging; home accidents; war; ozone depletion and microwave oven usage.

analogous with Slovic et al (1981) and support the idea that individuals tend to overestimate distant risks and underestimate proximate dangers.

Marris and Langford also attempted to apply the four personality types suggested by Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky to their research (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982). Douglas and Wildavsky contend that individuals can be grouped into four personality types: fatalists, individualists, hierarchists and egalitarians. Each personality type can be expected to perceive risk in a predictable fashion (Marris and Langford, 1996: 37; Tansey and O'Riordan, 1999). Marris and Langford claim to have identified 'a remarkable consistency of ideas expressed by people of the same cultural disposition and distinct differences between each of the four groups' (Marris and Langford, 1996: 37). Whilst certain methodological questions might justifiably be raised,[81] at the very least, Marris and Langford's research indicates that understandings of risk will be canalised by social and cultural characteristics. Indeed, the social stratification of risk perception is considered to be a robust assumption within risk research, being borne out by a series of empirical inquiries (Finucane et al, 2000; Flynn, 1994; Slovic et al, 1993).

Evidence that perceptions of risk are influenced by layers of social stratification is also provided by Graham and Clemente (1996), who report that white men with higher educational qualifications and higher incomes perceive risk to be less serious than other social groups. The apparent class dimension of risk cognisance also raises tricky ethical issues, which cast further doubt upon the validity of Beck's uniform approach to risk perception. As Douglas notes, a blue-collar worker whose job is at stake might understandably be in favour of nuclear power, whilst 'a middle class elite interested in preserving their mountain holidays' may be against the production of nuclear energy (Douglas, 1985: 21). Other research studies have indicated that gender

[81] For example, which data and which mechanisms were used to classify individuals? How generalizable are these studies given their limited sample size and small catchment area?

is an important influence on risk perception. Using psychometric testing Flynn discovered that white men were generally less concerned about risk than white women (Flynn, 1994). Others have argued that women can be expected to have a relatively developed sense of risk awareness (Douglas, 1985: 70; Rose, 1993: 143). It is probable that gender differences in risk perception are firmly rooted in differential socialisation. In western cultures, women are more rigorously schooled in risk awareness, whether it be in relation to personal safety, hygiene or contraception. By contrast, males are encouraged to be more fearless in relation to dangers and to actively 'take' risks (Douglas, 1985: 70).

Age has also been found to be an important influence on public attitudes towards risk (Barrett and Jackson, 1999; Hinchcliffe, 2000: 127). Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that elderly people tend to overestimate the possibilities of danger and are more likely to feel threatened than younger people (Maguire, 1997; Balkin, 1979). Furthermore, it has been convincingly argued that children's perceptions of risk will vary substantially from those constructed by their parents (Scott, Jackson and Backett-Milburn, 1998; Furedi, 1997: 117). Whilst the structuring influence of ethnicity on risk interpretation appears to be an under researched area, several theorists have noted that different ethnic groups will develop particular attitudes towards risk (Caplan, 2000; Flynn, 1994; Mackey, 2000).

So, how useful are these empirical studies of risk perception in informing the risk society debate? Before directly addressing this question, I would like to flag up several methodological shortcomings of traditional risk research. In the first instance, it might be noted that cognitive-scientific studies have tended to approach the subject through the eyes of the researcher. As Douglas points out, the idea of the rational, risk-perceiving agent is based upon the model of the rational investigator: 'both are driven to seek order in the world; both recognise inconsistency; both assess probability' (Douglas, 1985: 28). This 'mirror-imaging' of subject and researcher may

have had the effect of steering American research towards a one-dimensional rational choice model of risk perception. Such an unwavering focus upon the subject as a cognitive rational actor precludes the wider dimensions of risk perception identified earlier. In addition, cognitive-scientific studies have tended to conceive of risks as potential threats to the private individual, rather than collective dangers faced by society. This individualistic focus has been exacerbated by narrow research design and the use of a de-contextualised methodology. The use of psychometric tests and one-on-one interviews has encouraged cognitive-scientific studies to focus upon isolated individuals rather than cultural groups. As such, risk is modelled in a way which suggests that it is *individuals* rather than *populations* that carry social risks (Prior et al, 2000: 106). Indeed, it might even be argued that the research studies constitute part of a broader ideological process of risk privatisation.

As Beck argues, the mobile nature of manufactured risks means that hazards can no longer be adequately approached in purely private terms. Firstly, the globality and the unpredictability of manufactured risks questions the validity of individualizing risk perception. Secondly, perceptions of risk are constructed in relation to both significant others and social institutions which function within broader collective cultural networks (Caplan, 2000: 23). As such, risk perceptions cannot be adequately understood as isolated individual responses to particular hazards. As has been noted, attitudes towards risk are, by definition, socially and culturally constructed (Lupton, 1999a: 15). Nonetheless, cognitive-scientific studies remain constrained within the boundaries of the medical/scientific model and follow the theory of rational choice. The cognitive-scientific paradigm tends to conceive of human behaviour in an overly linear fashion.

These criticisms indicate that the paradigm which has dominated American research may not be universally appropriate in relation to the perception of global technological and environmental risks (Douglas, 1985: 49). It is important to

acknowledge that risks - and, by dint, *responses* to risk - are protean. In differentiating between both risks *and* social groups, we can begin to understand why it is that risks which are imposed by institutions will be handled in a different manner to risks which are considered to have a voluntary element (Bennett, 1998: 6; Pidgeon, 2000: 46, Wynne, 1996: 58).

Reading between the lines of empirical risk research, it is apparent that contradictory risk perceptions between 'objective experts' and 'subjective lay actors' are not necessarily indicative of the latter's inability to assess the probabilities of danger (Taig, 1999). Rather, a variable set of determining factors and cultural referents are being used by each party in the process of risk definition. Remaining sensitive to the crudity of binary distinctions, we should expect a divergent logic to emerge between 'expert' strategies of risk management and 'lay' approaches to risk. These cultural styles of sense making might well conflict, but this should not guarantee the superiority of one logic over another.

In reproducing the expert/objective and lay/subjective couplets, cognitive-scientific studies of risk perception have rather trampled over the more intricate dynamics involved in the formulation of cultural understandings of risk. This oversight might well be sourced from an implicit endorsement of a top-down objectivist model of risk. Many existing empirical studies have failed to account for the role of collective networks and symbolic meanings in the formulation of risk perceptions (Harris and O'Shaughnessy, 1997; Lash, 1993; Lupton, 1999a: 30). It must be recognised that individuals tend to encounter everyday risks with a pre-existent package of beliefs and assumptions (Douglas, 1992: 58). These beliefs will be culturally variable and will be formulated by the emotional and the habitual as well as the rational (Lupton, 1999a: 30). Everyday cultural responses to risk are likely to be structured by hatred, fear and anger as well as reflexive decision-making. However, under controlled conditions and outside of an everyday social context, respondents will understandably tend to

approach risk through the rational/analytical as opposed to the emotional/habitual. This suggests that the methodology used in the cognitive-scientific studies limits the horizon of responses to risk, even before lay voices are able to speak.

In defence of the existing research, it is worth pointing out that a completely objective tool for exploring risk perception is impossible to build. However, greater acknowledgement of the partiality and limitations of the existing research is required, particularly with regards to the ideological assumptions which underpin particular studies (Fischhoff, et al, 1980). As the social constructionists suggest, greater attention needs to be directed to the relative nature of social risks (Crook, 1999; Fox, 1999). It must be appreciated that risks only become social realities when they are constructed and interpreted through culture (Dean, 1999: 147).

Two notable British studies by Macgill (1989) and Reilly (1999) serve as useful correctives to cognitive-centred studies of risk perception. These socioculturally informed inquiries utilised qualitative methods to draw out the myriad of meanings which are attached to risk in everyday life. Both studies sought to access the situated context of understandings of risk, focusing upon the way in which social actors interpret risk within lived social and cultural realities. As described in chapter three, the purpose of Macgill's inquiry was to gauge lay responses to the risk of radioactive discharge from the Sellafield nuclear plant, in the light of abnormally high rates of childhood leukaemia in the area (Macgill, 1989). In the study, a cross-section of residents living in a village within close proximity of the nuclear power plant were interviewed. Through ethnographic research methods, a wide range of opinions about the nature and effects of the radioactive risk were identified. Macgill argues that these divergent perceptions of risk were contrary to both 'expert opinion' and national media coverage, which both gravitated towards homogenous positions on risk. At the time, dominant media representations were suggestive of a united culture of local public opposition to the plant. In practice, many interviewees flatly denied any

possible link between health risks and the nuclear power plant (Macgill, 1989; 58). In Macgill's project the inherent complexities of lay responses are brought to the surface, emphasising that risk perceptions are socially variable and culturally situated entities.[82]

In contrast to cognitive-scientific studies, Macgill's research works with a bottom-up model of risk perception. For her, lay understandings of risk are not simply rationalised responses to knowledge from above. Rather, lay actors accumulate, assess and disseminate risk knowledge over time. This means that perceptions of risk will always be culturally contingent. As the Seascale study demonstrates, cultural understandings of risk are moulded by a plethora of factors, such as social status, economic factors, collective networks and mass media coverage (Macgill, 1989: 55).

A decade after Macgill's work, Jacquie Reilly published her report into public understandings of the BSE crisis in Scotland (Reilly, 1999). Reilly's findings were drawn from two research projects based on the production and reception of media representations of risk. Reilly's study attempted to access the collective dynamic of perceptions of risk by using sets of interviewees who were socially connected. The situated dimension of the research was accentuated by utilising focus groups as opposed to one-on-one interviews. By staggering the two projects - the first took place in 1992, the second in 1996 - Reilly was able to tap into the dynamism of public perceptions of risk and to question how and why risk perceptions had evolved over time (Reilly, 1999: 129). In the initial interviews in 1992, the dominant mood of the focus groups towards the risk of *nv* CJD was one of scepticism, pragmatism and apathy: the BSE crisis was perceived to be 'just another food scare' (Reilly, 1999: 131). In the second set of interviews in 1996 - after the government's admission of a link between BSE and *nv* CJD - assessments of risk altered dramatically (Reilly,

[82]Macgill noted that those who refuted the radioactive risk at the plant were often directly related to people dependent upon the plant for their livelihood.

1999: 131). In employing a longitudinal method, Reilly is able to access the evolution of risk perceptions over time, in relation to social institutions and public knowledge. Contrary to the cognitive-scientific studies, this research appreciates that lay actors are *active* parties in risk definition. In the 1996 inquiry, rather than passively waiting for information about *nv* CJD to be filtered down from experts to the public, many interviewees had sought to gather a range of information and to decide for themselves:

> Respondents used media coverage as a starting point for information which led to them phoning doctors and health authorities for information, picking up leaflets in supermarkets and butchers, asking shopkeepers where their meat came from, avoiding establishments such as cafés and restaurants which did not have clear signs/information about BSE and, in some cases, phoning restaurants to find out the source of their meat before booking (Reilly, 1999: 134).

In sharp contrast to cognitive-scientific studies, Reilly's work highlights that the relationship between lay publics and experts is symbiotic rather than unilinear. In hindsight, critical public approaches to the risk of *nv* CJD proved to be justifiable and prudent.

Collectively, Reilly and Macgill's studies enable us to make inroads into the vital cultural dimensions of risk. Both researchers take hermeneutic approaches to particular risk situations, stressing the culturally embedded nature of understandings of risk. Such subtlety to social and environmental factors is essential in understanding public perceptions of risk. By contrast, the majority of cognitive-scientific studies have sought to dissect individual attitudes and have focused upon the categorisation of risks. But how do the two forms of empirical research relate to Beck's analysis of risk perception and the wider risk society thesis?

4.4 The Risk Society Thesis and Empirical Research: An Interface of Theory and Practice?

Both Reilly and Macgill's studies provide some support for Beck's theory of risk. Reilly's research in particular, suggests that lay publics are becoming less reliant on expert systems and increasingly reflexive in relation to social risks. In Reilly's inquiry, individuals became actively involved in the debate about *nv* CJD having recognising the contingency of 'official advice'. Despite offering reassurances of 'zero-risk' for a number of years, government and scientific expert opinion proved to be inaccurate. Reilly argues that the contradiction of a long-standing message in 1996 encouraged lay actors to re-evaluate their opinions and to examine fresh ideas about the risk (Reilly, 1999: 134).

At a superficial level, these findings lend weight to Beck's suggestion of a developing culture of reflexivity in relation to risk. However, few absolute conclusions can be drawn, given the limited scope of the study. To validate Beck's position, a raft of similar empirical material would need to be recovered, accounting for a diverse mix of social risks. This said, Macgill's work does suggest that lay publics are capable of reflexively monitoring social risks, and of rejecting official advice. Indeed, the Seascale study turns up a number of interesting issues about the changing relationship between lay actors and experts. Whilst I shall pick up this discussion later, suffice it to say that Macgill's research also casts doubt upon the credibility of the lay-expert binary constructed by Beck.

Despite being blighted by methodological shortcomings, the cognitive-scientific studies of risk perception also substantiate certain aspects of the risk society thesis. In vindication of Beck, Marris and Langford discovered that their sample group were most anxious about 'global social risks', such as environmental pollution and genetic engineering (Marris and Langford, 1996). At a wider level, the bulk of the empirical

research supports the notion of heightened risk awareness within culture. These findings do seem to tentatively point towards a nascent form of public risk consciousness. This said, within empirical studies the apparent equation of risk *severity* with risk *preoccupation* is questionable (Mythen et al, 2000: 10). Whilst genetic, environmental and nuclear catastrophes might well be the most feared risks - in Marris and Langford's terms, the risks which we 'dread' - it does not follow that these are necessarily the most *consuming* risks. Unsurprisingly, in Marris and Langford's studies, nuclear and genetic technologies were construed as the most serious risks to humanity. However, the most *feared* risks are not necessarily the most *focused upon* risks. If a person is asked whether a nuclear catastrophe is a 'more serious' risk than the threat of losing their job, they might reasonably be expected to answer in the affirmative. However, the same person is likely to dedicate more time and effort to mulling over the detrimental effects of the former rather than the latter. The point I am trying to make here is that whilst catastrophic risks might well be the most feared risks, they are not necessarily those which are reflected upon most frequently in the course of everyday life. It is probable that lay actors will distinguish between profane and catastrophic risks, responding to each in a qualitatively different fashion. As Anthony Giddens points out:

> Global risks have become such an acknowledged aspect of modern institutions that on the level of day-to-day behaviour, no one gives much thought to how potential global disasters can be avoided. Most people shut them out of their lives and concentrate their activities on privatised 'survival strategies' (Giddens, 1991: 171).

In a similar vein, Culpitt hints at the existence of 'two transparent and interlocking palimpsests (sic) of risk...which are flung over each other' (Culpitt, 1999: 136). According to Culpitt, the first of these is oriented to the personal and determined by private assessments of possible risks. The second is public oriented; reflecting concerns about more abstract and unmanageable social risks. Whilst the seriousness of public risks may be recognised by lay actors, in everyday practice individuals tend

to focus more readily upon personal uncertainties:

> The scale of the risks that have burst the 'lifeworld' are so apocalyptic they can only be defended against - not easily resolved. The result of this is to alter the politics of responsibility so that, increasingly, individuals cannot be held responsible for the moral management of risks outside the area of the personal palimpsest...faced with the massive encroachment of global risk we are forced to direct our resistance to 'abstractions' of the lifeworld...the public palimpsest is so overwhelming that we are forced to return, almost atavistically, to inscribing the personal (Culpitt, 1999: 137).

Thus, it seems reasonable to argue that the immediacy of risks within the everyday lifeworld will take cognitive precedence over potentially apocalyptic risks. To cede this is not to argue against a wider trend of enhanced risk consciousness. On the contrary, it is probable that individuals in western cultures are more informed about risks and hazards than at any other point in human history (Macionis and Plummer, 1998: 646). However, in many cases, global risks may be perceived as remote and beyond the sphere of personal influence. In addition, the seemingly ubiquitous nature of uncertainty in contemporary culture may encourage individuals to divert their attentions towards those risks which are most salient at any given time (Ravetz, Funtowicz and Brown, 1989: 135). In the chaotic realm of lived experience, social actors often choose to deal with risks on a 'first come first serve' basis. This suggests that any appreciation of global dangers is likely to be cut across and underscored by personal and local considerations (Bennett, 1998: 14).

As Beck avers, transformations in public risk consciousness have been facilitated by the dissemination of risk information by the mass media. Nevertheless, the evidence presented in chapter three demonstrates that the relationship between media representation and public consciousness is far from linear. Whilst news reports may draw upon expert knowledge to advise on public strategies of risk avoidance, media products are interpreted within culturally specific surroundings, such as the home, the pub or the workplace. In addition, the sense which is made from risk communications

will be informed by pre-existing knowledge and experience.[83] This again indicates that we should not lose sight of the fact that risk perceptions are socially constructed entities (Dean, 1999; Douglas, 1985; 1992; Hinchcliffe, 2000). Risks cannot possibly be interpreted outside of everyday social and cultural frameworks. Furthermore, the development of a public risk consciousness is connected to a parallel preoccupation with self-identity and personal decision-making. As the connections between the global and the local become more transparent, public risk perceptions continue to transmute (Boden, 2000: 193).

Despite indicating an overall rise in risk consciousness, the empirical evidence is difficult to codify, also suggesting that individuals *underestimate* the threat of proximate risks (Bennett, 1998: 9). In many respects, neglecting familiar hazards might be perceived to be a perfectly reasonable cognitive strategy. As Douglas notes, to attend equally to all the probabilities of disaster would lead to inertia and might produce a dangerous lack of focus (Douglas, 1985: 30). Hence, lay actors will tend to prioritise risks to avoid feelings of engulfment. Despite this qualification, the apparent underestimation of proximate risks has led certain theorists to suggest that the 'real' risks might not be the ones which we fear the most (Marris and Langford, 1996; Furedi, 1997: 6).

On reflection, such a proposition is rather difficult to substantiate. The fact that a particular risk may not ultimately be inflicted on the individual who fears it, does not necessarily invalidate its status as a risk. This is particularly pertinent in the case of 'unknown' public risks, such as global warming or nuclear technology. The deleterious effects of global risks are not manifested instantaneously and are unquantifiable. Therefore, it would seem rather fatuous to argue that an individual has 'more'- or indeed 'less'- chance of being affected by one risk than another. Nevertheless, a number of theorists have failed to recognise evident qualitative

[83] For example, accumulated values, conflicting ideas and collective debate.

variations in risk composition. For example, Furedi maintains that the threat of manufactured risks such as AIDS has been vastly exaggerated. Drawing upon statistical evidence, Furedi contends that mundane risks such as car crashes are more likely to present a risk to public health than AIDS (Furedi, 1997: 23). However, simply casting an eye over the global situation highlights the vacuousness of such a neo-liberal argument. Over 35 million people globally are currently infected with the human immunodeficiency virus, with 15 million people already deceased through AIDS.[84] Furthermore, the number of people dying of AIDS per annum is rising exponentially, currently touching 2.6 million. In Britain, a recent report on AIDS suggests that there are currently 10,000 people who are unaware that they are HIV positive, with 30,000 infected overall. If these statistics are accurate, roughly 1 in 2000 people in Britain are already HIV positive.[85] Given that manufactured risks such as AIDS are latent *and* highly mobile, the actual risk to the individual is simply impossible to predict. The greater the number of people that contract AIDS over time, the greater the percentage chance of becoming victim in the future. This recursive process is set to continue ad infinitum, unless a suitable cure for the disease is developed. With similar myopia, Furedi proceeds to dismiss the threat of *nv* CJD, arguing that the disease has only actually killed ten people. In the intervening four years since the publication of his book this number has already increased nine-fold.[86]

The formation of a collective risk consciousness must also be understood in relation to the potential influence of group dynamics. Empirical studies indicate that social groups will generally tend to make riskier decisions than individuals (Douglas, 1985: 58). In a group situation, the responsibility for risk is shared by the collective and the individual burden is lessened. If reflected in reality, these findings have serious ramifications for the manufacture of environmental hazards. Against the social trend suggested by Beck, widespread recognition of the collective damage inflicted on the

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[84]See 'Aids - Our Gift to Africa' by Giles Foden in *The Guardian Review* October 30th 1999 p.9.

[85]See 'AIDS at Record Levels with 2.6 m Deaths This Year' in *The Daily Telegraph* 24th November 1999 p.3

[86]For an update on the current number of victims, plus detailed press coverage see, www.bsereview.org.uk

environment has not significantly altered patterns of production and consumption in the West.[87] The feeling that we are *all* to some degree guilty of environmental pollution, might well psychologically alleviate *individual* culpability for the manufacture of toxins and pollutants. As far as environmental risks are concerned, a disjuncture may exist between risk recognition and strategies of risk avoidance.

Against the risk society thesis, it would appear that individuals in western cultures might be more motivated to act upon personal risks rather than catastrophic global dangers.[88] With respect to the vista of risk, individual actions may have resulted in tangible securities, such as a stable relationship or greater job stability. By contrast, the public palimpsest might be perceived to be less mutable. In terms of public risk awareness, research studies do indicate that there has been a general rise in environmental risk consciousness (Dunlap, Gallup and Gallup, 1992; Macionis and Plummer, 1998: 648). However, as indicated earlier, risk awareness cannot simply be equated with risk avoidance. Instead, it is quite possible that the expansion of the local and personal dimensions of risk may be colonising the potential time and space available to deal with global/public risks. As Goldblatt (1995: 175) notes, enhanced public understanding of social risks has not significantly modified cultural and economic behaviour.

Contrary to Beck's uniform portrayal of risk experience, empirical studies illustrate that perceptions of risk are culturally canalised (Caplan, 2000; Flynn, 1994; Graham and Clemente, 1996; Maguire, 1997). A variety of influences, such as class, race, gender and age have been found to impact upon public understandings of risk (Hinchcliffe, 2000: 127; Jackson and Scott, 1999: 102). Which incidents are considered to be risky will differ according to the cultural grouping to which an

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[87]Certain modifications have been made in consumer behaviour in the West. For example, recycling and purchasing environmentally friendly products. However, the dominant system of capitalist production and consumption continues to expand.

[88]Of course, we must avoid artificially separating out 'local' actions from 'global' effects. However, it remains the case that ultimately local personal decisions will generally take precedence over global considerations.

individual belongs or identifies (Crook, 1999: 174; Lupton, 1999a: 15). Beck himself paints a uniform picture of risk perception, which glosses over the differentiated nature of risk perception (Alexander, 1996; Skinner, 2000: 161). As Scott notes:

> The universalising language used by Beck is not sufficiently context-sensitive...and the 'we are all in the same boat' rhetoric distracts attention from differences both to exposure and perception of risk (Scott, 2000: 42).

In relying upon an objective model of risk cognition, Beck overlooks the structuring force of power relations in the formulation of risk knowledge. As will be discussed in chapter five, forms of cultural stratification are indexed to the differential distribution of resources. Those with the least resources/power in society also tend to be most heavily encumbered by the burden of risk (Hinchcliffe, 2000: 127; Day, 2000: 51). As Douglas notes, society regularly 'exposes a large percentage of its population to much higher risks than the fortunate ten percent' (Douglas, 1985: 6). Hence, stratified risk experiences are melded to the unequal distribution of resources in society. By consequence, the degree of exposure to risk and access to resources for reflection are likely to be key factors in the development of 'subjective' perceptions of risk. These conditions suggest that Beck's marriage between risk exposure and personal reflexivity cannot be taken for granted. As implied in chapter two, both individual subjectivity and self-reflexivity are resource related entities:

> The self-reflexive individual as presented by Beck and Giddens, is a socially and economically privileged person who has the cultural and material resources to engage in self-inspection. Many people, however, simply lack the resources and techniques with which to engage in the project of self-reflexivity (Lupton, 1999: 114).

From this we can infer that education, social status and access to material resources will influence personal interpretations of risk. Thus, adequate appreciation of the cultural milieu of everyday life is essential in understanding public perceptions of risk. Social actors do not respond to risk as disparate reflexive agents, mechanically weighing up the costs and benefits of decisions. Rather, people act as 'situated agents'

within existing collective groups and networks. Whilst the risk society thesis depicts contemporary individuals as compulsively rational, we would do well to remember that individual subjectivities are also governed by the forces of affluence, fate and desire. In placing overriding emphasis on the rational dimensions of reflexivity, Beck rather disconnects social beings from embedded traditions and practices (Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 113; Lash, 1993).[89]

The weight of research strongly suggests that attitudes towards risk will be structured by wider social and cultural factors such as public morality, ideology, welfare and justice (Caplan, 2000; Thompson, 1983). Consequently, risk perceptions are best understood as mobile and multivarious entities which are interpreted in relation to geographical and temporal factors (Jackson and Scott, 1999: 102). It would seem reasonable to speculate that individuals are capable of alternating between perspectives on risk, depending upon cultural context and social situation (Vera-Sanso, 2000: 126).[90] Thus, Beck's suggestion of a reflexive and uniformly vigilant risk consciousness would appear to be well wide of the mark. The reality of risk perception is decidedly more contradictory and abstruse.

To recap, the fit between the risk society thesis and empirical research is a decidedly uncomfortable one. Taken collectively, the empirical studies do suggest a rise in risk awareness in western cultures (Marris and Langford, 1996; Slovic, 1992). Further, ethnographic studies highlight the development of public reflexivity in relation to risk (ESRC Report, 1999; Reilly, 1999; Macgill, 1989). On the other hand, research indicates that risk perceptions are more stratified and culturally variable than Beck admits. Of course, formal recognition that risk is canalised along the lines of class, gender, age, ethnicity and region would detract from Beck's universal narrative of

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[89] I shall return to this issue in more detail shortly.

[90] For example, when confronted by certain threats - such as the risk of cancer - an individual may think reflexively and take preventative action. One might stop smoking and increase consumption of fruit and vegetables. In another situation - such as the risk of sexual disease - the same individual may adopt a more fatalistic approach, rejecting the use of preventative aids.

risk. Nonetheless, it would seem that a more complex understanding of risk cognisance is required in order to acknowledge the culturally situated and stratified nature of risk perception.

4.5 Rethinking Risk Perception

So, where does this leave us in terms of our overall understanding of risk perception? At this stage, I would firstly like to excogiate the key issues which are elided in the risk society thesis. In the following sections, I will flesh out the critique of Beck's work by re-evaluating the significance of intensified perceptions, cultural fatalism and reflexivity for cultural understandings of risk. Finally, in section 4.6, I finish the chapter by considering the ramifications of this discussion for the broader lay-expert association in contemporary society.

In approaching the subject of risk perception, it is important to recognise that the general heightening of risk awareness in culture is indissociable from the broader development of social knowledge (Woodward and Watt, 2000). Up to a critical point, we collectively 'know' more about which activities are likely to be harmful and which may improve our health (Mythen et al, 2000: 6). This general rise in risk consciousness has led cultural relativists to challenge the idea that human perceptions of risks are actually 'real', in the objective sense (Ewald, 1991; Wildavsky, 1994). This issue becomes even more debatable in the light of the future-oriented trajectory gathering momentum within contemporary culture (Caplan, 2000: 22; Lupton, 1999: 3).

The cultural trend of planning and managing the future is particularly pronounced with regards to the prevention of health risks (Beck-Gernsheim, 2000: 124). If we refuse alcohol, we reduce the risk of liver failure in the future. If we opt not to smoke,

the risk of contracting cancer is smaller. If we exercise regularly we reduce the possibility of having a heart attack, and so on. Of course, such an overt emphasis on risk avoidance begs a rather crucial question: If we inhabit a culture which is bound up with futurity, are we not destined to 'see' and 'feel' more risks? Macro value shifts toward personal anticipation and management of risk might reasonably be expected to produce more acute forms of public risk perception. The self-perpetuating quality of intensified risk perception is recognised by Beck in a characteristically reflexive moment: 'is not the whole thing an *intellectual fantasy,* a canard from the desks of intellectual nervous nellies and risk promoters?' (Beck, 1992: 75). Thus, Beck is awake to the possibility that the uncertain nature of contemporary risks may fuel the multiplication of cultural anxieties. As illustrated in chapter three, the latent composition of manufactured risks means that manufactured risks are always potential 'dangers of the future'. In short, nobody really knows precisely where or when risks will impact (Beck, 1999: 12). This implies that cultural approaches to risk perception necessarily involve a 'projected variable' (Beck, 1992: 34). This projected variable has vital implications for the formulation of public understandings of risk, as evidenced in the controversy surrounding *nv* CJD and AIDS. For Beck, the 'random impact' component infuses such risks with an omnipotent quality.

Nevertheless, the issue of whether or not hazards themselves have increased, or whether our perceptions of risk have simply multiplied remains debatable. Beck himself rather sidesteps the argument, suggesting that the key issue is one of *quality* rather than *quantity* (Hinchcliffe, 2000: 136). For Beck, the crux of the matter is that manufactured risks are comparatively more volatile, mobile and catastrophic than their predecessors, regardless of quantification and probability (Beck, 1992a; 1999). However, Beck's contemporaries have questioned the extent to which risks are escalating (Giddens, 1998; 1999; Furedi, 1997; Luhmann, 1993). Giddens argues that heightened perceptions of risk are not necessarily indexed to probabilities of harm (Giddens, 1991: 115). Indeed, both Giddens (1994: 173) and Culpitt (1999: 99) go as

far as suggesting that the reverse is probably the case within western cultures. Certainly, suggestions of a simple proliferation of social risks must be treated with circumspection:

> The idea of 'risk society' might suggest a world which has become more hazardous, but this is not necessarily so. Rather, it is a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety) which generates the notion of risk (Giddens, 1998: 27).

On this point, Furedi concurs with Giddens, hinting at the expansion of a risk culture which is distanced from actual probabilities of danger: 'the healthier we are, the more obsessed we become with our health' (Furedi, 1997: 6). In a similar groove, Luhmann emphasises the symbiotic relationship between social knowledge about risk and public perceptions:

> It is no accident that the risk perspective has developed parallel to the growth in scientific specialisation. Modern risk oriented society is a product not only of the perception of the consequences of technological achievement. Its seed is contained in the expansion of research possibilities and of knowledge itself (Luhmann, 1993: 28).

For Luhmann, as our capacity for amassing knowledge about risk grows, our anxieties become amplified. It would seem that modern western societies are destined to face increased risk awareness due to a collective atmosphere of uncertainty, bred by the development of social and scientific knowledge (Douglas and Wildavsky: 1983). In this sense, risk consciousness is a distinctly social construct which meshes with dominant cultural ideologies as well as probabilities of risk manifestation. The development of knowledge about risk, allied to changes in the nature of contemporary risks, alter the complexion of public understandings of risk. These contextual issues must be taken into account in unravelling the warp and weft of lay responses to risk.

In opposition to the objectivism that infuses the risk society argument, cultural habits and dispositions form a vital backcloth to public risk perceptions. In everyday

practice, lay actors will draw upon fate as well as rationality in handling risk situations (Cohn, 2000: 216). Somewhat surprisingly, the role of fate in informing approaches towards risk has been somewhat overlooked. Beck's theory of risk and the empirically based studies assume an exclusively rational model of risk perception. Both approaches neglect and undervalue the influences of tradition and fate in structuring understandings of risk. Due to his epochal framework, Beck is forced to exclusively tie fatalistic attitudes to 'traditional societies' (Beck, 1992a; 1999: 50). Nevertheless, it ought to be noted that attitudes towards risk continue to be influenced by fatalism, both within and outside of contemporary western culture (Caplan, 2000; Vera-Sanso, 2000). Many cultures still rely upon fate as a mechanism for explaining risk. Certain tribes, such as the Azande in Africa, deny the possibility of chance happenings altogether, attributing the existence of risks to sorcery and black magic (Alexander and Smith, 1996: 251; Giddens, 1999: 2). By contrast, in the West, the secularisation process is said to have eroded the explanatory power of religion and tradition. It is argued that fate continues as a superstition in which people 'only half believe', with strategies of fate being mobilised to back-up risk taking of a more calculative nature (Giddens, 1999: 2).

Conversely, recent studies into public perceptions of risk indicate that fatalism acts as more than a simple reinforcement to rational choice (Eldridge, 1999; Reilly, 1999: 141).[91] As Douglas notes with reference to the threat of AIDS amongst high risk groups:

> A large number of the community at risk are impervious to information; either they know unshakeably that they themselves are immune, or recognizing that death is normal they draw the conclusion that to live trying to avoid it is abhorrent (Douglas, 1992: 111).

Referring back to the differentiation of risk, it is conceivable that the turn to fate is

[91] One only has to think of a few stock phrases within British culture to appreciate the pervasiveness of fatalism. 'Why worry?', 'That's life' and 'When your number is up' serve as pertinent examples.

most pronounced in relation to catastrophic risks. This supposition is supported by a BBC documentary featuring survivors of a tornado that struck Oklahoma in 1998.[92] A notable feature of the programme was the prevalence of a fatalistic attitude within the community at risk. A number of interviewees expressed reliance upon fate and religion in making sense of the disaster. When questioned about his response to the tornado, one interviewee responded: 'You didn't have time to do anything, to think anything, you just had time to pray'. Of course, this is merely selective anecdotal evidence, based around an extreme manifestation of risk. However, both examples imply that lay actors may place faith in religion and superstition in coming to terms with catastrophic risks. This point is nicely articulated by Brian Wynne:

> There is, in other words, a kind of defence mechanism for coping with the overwhelming difficulty of living with inexplicable and uncontrollable, yet emotionally important forces, which is to convert them into identifiable agents, even superhuman ones (Wynne, 1996: 54).

This is not to suggest a blind naiveté on behalf of lay actors in the face of risk. On the contrary, I am simply arguing that the fatalistic aspects of risk perception should not be discounted in understanding sense making practices. It would appear that we need to retain the idea of lay actors as rational subjects, whilst also factoring in the habitual and fatalistic dimensions of risk perception.

Whilst the secularisation process may have eroded Christian faith in the West (Turner, 1991), distinctive forms of ritual and spirituality are emerging out of the shadows of risk. This trend is particularly pronounced in relation to various forms of body fetishism. For example, dieting, vitamins, bodybuilding and self-help books can all be recast as modern rituals which are mobilised to ward-off ill health. Perhaps these coping strategies fulfil a similar emotional function to religion in providing

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[92] *Twister* was screened by BBC1 on Saturday 3rd July 1999, between 11.40-12.30 pm

psychological insurance against risk.[93] Lupton goes much further than this, contending that 'godliness' is being *replaced* by 'healthiness': 'focusing upon one's diet and other lifestyle choices has become an alternative to prayer and righteous living' (Lupton, 1995: 4).

Whilst Lupton's argument might well be overstated, the existence of ritualistic and fatalistic strategies of risk avoidance re-opens the cracks in the risk society thesis. In imagining reflexivity to be the dominant public response to risk, Beck overstates the unanimity of risk perception. Reflexivity may constitute one particular form of risk perception, but its expression will be context, situation and person dependent. Under various conditions, habit, desire and fate still inscribe social and cultural experience in western cultures. In overplaying the pervasiveness of reflexivity as a response to expert knowledge, the situated context in which individuals make decisions about risk is disregarded. Catastrophic dangers might well be consciously recognised by lay actors, but public attitudes will also be informed by pragmatism which is born out of lived experience. Borrowing from Marshall's work on social class, such a dualistic attitude towards risk might be described as 'informed fatalism' (Marshall, 1988: 143). Evidently, public strategies of risk avoidance are not mobilised at the first sign of possible danger (Reilly, 1999: 131). Under certain social circumstances lay actors can be remarkably tolerant to the threat of risk. An interesting - and largely untapped - area of research revolves around the attitude of respondents to manufactured risks as *set against* the potential benefits (Douglas, 1985: 59; Vera-Sanso, 2000: 126). To what extent do individuals accept the relationship between risk and progress as a Faustian pact?

Reilly contends that lay publics are resigned to accepting a certain degree of risk: 'respondents within our groups were quite aware and appreciated that decisions they

[93]For instance, people suffering ill health can often be heard bemoaning the fact that they have been taking their vitamins, eating well and/or exercising regularly.

made were rarely based on absolute certainties, but rather a balance of probabilities' (Reilly, 1999: 135). Further, it is likely that individuals will *trade-off* one risk against another (Hinchcliffe, 2000: 145; Wylie, 1998). Whilst chemical, nuclear and genetic technologies may harbour risk, they might simultaneously be perceived to improve the human condition.[94] Without risk-taking in science and medicine, a number of technological inventions and remedies would not have materialised (Goldblatt, 1995: 175). In addition, personal acceptance of risk can sometimes be a precursor to excitement and adventure: 'think of the pleasures some people get from the risks of gambling, driving fast, sexual adventurism, or the plunge of a fairground roller-coaster' (Giddens, 1999: 2). Lupton believes that the tacit relationship between risk and pleasure is highlighted by the increasing popularity of dangerous leisure pursuits, from bungee jumping to white-water rafting (Lupton 1999: 149). This trend towards voluntarily exposing oneself to danger has been referred to by Lyng as 'edgework' (Lyng, 1990). Whilst 'edgework' may relate to a distinctive form of risk (Lupton, 1999: 113), Beck's emphasis on risk aversity neglects cultures that actively seek risk. Thus, any appreciation of the complex relationship between risk, pleasure and desire is absent in the risk society thesis (Culpitt, 1999: 113; Irwin et al, 2000: 98). Despite evidence of risk-taking activities within culture, both Beck and the empirical studies replicate an understanding of risk as an exclusively negative phenomenon. Within psychometric research, a negative ideology is attached to risk by asking participants how 'serious' or 'severe' a given risk is. In the risk society thesis, the negativity of risk is reinforced by constant reference to the dangers and pathological features of modern life (Goldblatt, 1995: 175).

[94]To be fair to Beck, he does acknowledge that the development of such technologies would not have been possible without the production of certain social benefits (Beck, 1996b: 99).

4.6 Toward a Cultural Reflexivity

Application of the risk society thesis to the empirical studies of risk perception has bought to the fore a series of substantive issues which extend beyond the boundaries of this thesis. It would appear that in approaching lay understandings of risk, social theory must be acute to the cultural milieu in which everyday sense-making occurs. Furthermore, future empirical research would do well to appreciate that perceptions of risk are structured by the habitual and the fatalistic as well as the rational. In this section, I wish to offer a brief discussion which tentatively builds upon these principles. Firstly, I will argue in favour of a reconstituted understanding of the lay-expert relationship in relation to risk situations. Secondly, I propose that Beck's notion of reflexivity be reformulated to accommodate cultural and aesthetic influences on sense-making. In making these suggestions, I will lean heavily upon the work of Scott Lash and Brian Wynne, two theorists who have been instrumental in placing the everyday dimensions of risk on to the academic agenda. Prior to evaluating the contributions of these authors, it is worth briefly recounting Beck's understanding of the relationship between risk perception and public reflexivity.

As chronicled in earlier chapters, Beck believes that reflexive modernization essentially involves a de-traditionalization of cultural experience. Central to this process is the questioning of traditional social roles and an increased emphasis on individual choice. Without doubt, traditional ties of family, locale and religion have been substantially loosened in the second half of the twentieth century. One of the most conspicuous effects of individualization is that life biographies have become more reflexive (Beck, Giddens, Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1991). For Beck, this emphasis on reflexivity is accentuated in relation to risk situations. A combination of social experience of hazards and greater knowledge about risk is said to drive the process of reflexive monitoring. Of course, this leads lay publics into a peculiarly paradoxical relationship with social institutions. Expert systems such as science, politics and legal

systems have historically held a virtual monopoly on risk definition, meaning that lay actors have been forced to 'accept the dictation of centralized information' (Beck, 1987: 156). As risks multiply, lay actors become increasingly reliant upon expert systems for information and guidelines about risk. However, according to Beck, a converse trend is gathering momentum. In contemporary society, trust in social institutions is being stripped away as uncontrollable risks undermine the legitimacy of expert systems. As institutions such as science and medicine transmit contradictory messages about risk, the ideological power of expert knowledge is cast into doubt. Given the uncertain nature of contemporary risks and the diversification of risk knowledge, lay publics are said to have become increasingly sceptical and combative towards expert institutions (Beck, 1997: 158).

Beck maintains that reflexivity is 'built-in' to contemporary risks, with indeterminate manufactured risks effectively demanding critical assessment and invoking multiple responses (Beck, 1994). As a consequence, the validity gap between lay and expert knowledge closes (Beck, 1992: 165). In the risk society narrative, public reflexivity develops *in relation* to expert and counter-expert bodies, rather than at a personal/individual level. This means that Beck's conception of reflexivity is firmly rooted in the cognitive, being a product of rational thought and debate (Alexander, 1996). In this sense, the performance of reflexivity has a structural dimension which is inextricably tied to forms of institutional critique (Lash, 2000: 50).

Both Lash (1993; 1994) and Alexander (1996), suggest that Beck overplays lay public dependence upon expert systems in the development of reflexivity. For Lash, the risk society argument is anchored in an analysis of the power of macro institutional structures rather than micro forms of public agency. In describing the insurgence of public reflexivity, Beck does tend to centre on the role of experts and counter-experts within science, government and the legal system. Such predominant emphasis on the institutional/structural dimensions of reflexivity has been a source of criticism

(Alexander and Smith, 1996; Lash, 1993: 2; Lash, 2000)

It is argued that Beck's concern with structure and rationality causes him to neglect the cultural aspects of reflexivity (Lash, 1994: 201). In many respects, Beck's risk society model works along the lines of Weberian social action theory, with certain epochal changes being indexed to transitions in dominant forms of human behaviour. Beck believes that as society moves away from tradition and becomes institutionalised, rational and reflexive forms of thought and action emerge.

For Beck's critics, the rigidity of the risk society model forces him to reproduce a 'one-sided notion of contemporary subjectivity' (Lash, 1993: 2). Arguing against Beck, Lash maintains that reflexive actions must be understood in relation to a *range* of different forms of social action. For Lash, public perceptions of risks are both multi-layered and multi-dimensional (Lash, 1992; 1993; 1994). Lash avers that the risk society thesis fails to address the power of aesthetics in moulding cultural understandings of risk. Both Lash and Wynne (1992) are keen to uphold the influence of traditional and aesthetic features in shaping contemporary forms of reflexivity. Beck and Lash also seem to disagree about the nature and functions of social institutions in modernity, with Lash contending that social structures are transmuting rather than dissolving (Lash and Urry, 1994: 119). In Lash's version, social institutions are being restructured, as modern information and communication systems replace older influences such as religion.

As confirmed in chapter three, the mass media has played a significant role in structuring life biographies in the West in recent years. However, it might also be noted that the technological diversification of the media and the trend toward narrowcasting make the media a very particular 'structure'. With the introduction of new technologies such as the internet and virtual reality, styles of public interaction may be shifting from collective/mass engagement to more individualized forms.

Nevertheless, Lash's reference to the functions of the aesthetic in the development of self-reflexivity is well supported by audience reception studies. For example, Corner et al's analysis of the representation of environmental issues upholds the value of cultural and the aesthetic features in structuring symbolic understandings of risk (Corner et al, 1990). Further, Harris and O'Shaughnessy (1997) have convincingly argued that public understandings of the BSE crisis were organised around a cluster of mediated symbolic images, which came to represent the crisis in the eyes of the public.[95] More recently, photographs and film-footage of human sufferers of *nv* CJD have tapped into and re-kindled emotions and impulses, as well as rational forms of cognitive reasoning. At a wider level, it is possible that the BSE crisis *itself* has served as an articulation point for broader public concerns about risk (CSEC report, 1997: 19).

Along with Lash, I would agree that the nascent operation of the symbolic in structuring cultural perceptions of risk urges a more refined understanding of reflexivity. It would appear that Beck's normative version of reflexivity needs to be supplemented with appropriate appreciation of the aesthetic.[96] For Lash, the aesthetic aspects of reflexivity are rising exponentially, in comparison to normative and cognitive dimensions. In substantiating his argument, Lash cites the growing aestheticisation of culture through consumerism, travel and tourism:

> For example, the increasingly reflexive nature of economic growth is aesthetic, as products are increasingly associated with images; as symbolic intensity at work often takes the form of design rather than cognition (Lash, 1993: 19).

In fairness to Beck, it would be unjust to suggest that the risk society thesis is

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[95]In an outstanding article, the key symbolic moments analysed by Harris and O'Shaughnessy are: visions of mad cows, the incineration of cattle and the bungled John Gummer burger incident. Since the publication of the article, powerful film footage has emerged showing victims affected by the same lumbering gait as the original 'mad cows'.

[96]Lash claims that his aesthetic version of reflexivity is 'more rooted, more foundational - more situated in a *sittlichkeit* of social nature' (Lash, 1993: 10).

oblivious to the aesthetic dimensions of reflexivity. On occasion, Beck does delve into the cultural and aesthetic fringes of risk perception (Beck, 1992: 24; 1995: 100). However, Lash is justified in arguing that inadequate account is taken of aesthetic and cultural dimensions of reflexivity at a *general* level. Beck is primarily seeking to examine the role of social structures in the objective definition of risks and in the development of reflexivity. Unfortunately, this tendency towards 'institutionalism' glosses over the influence of symbolic triggers in the formation of risk perception and reflexivity (Lash, 1994: 201; 2000: 50).

In accordance with Lash, Wynne also believes that Beck's conception of reflexivity overemphasises the role of social structures. The inherent problem with Beck's argument is that public reflexivity might be construed as little more than choosing between expert discourses. In *Risk, Environment and Modernity: Towards a New Ecology* (1996), Wynne extends Lash's criticisms, arguing that Beck's division between reflexivity in simple modernity and the risk society is untenable. More specifically, Wynne takes issue with Beck's notion of unconditional public trust in the relations of definition in simple modernity. In opposition, Wynne contends that lay actors have long been aware of their relation to expert institutions and of the differential degrees of power held by each party:

> The assumption of lay public trust in expert systems under conditions of so called simple modernity has to be replaced by a more complex notion of this relationship, in which ambivalence is central and trust is at least heavily qualified by the experience of dependency, possible alienation, and lack of agency (Wynne, 1996: 52).

Wynne suggests that public disenchantment with expert systems is a more historically ubiquitous phenomenon than Beck is willing to acknowledge. Conterminously, Culpitt suggests that opposition to expert discourses has been a prevalent feature of many historical epochs (Culpitt, 1999: 119). In the risk society - as in simple modernity - organised opposition to expert systems requires access to material

resources. Consequently, a lack of effective opposition to public institutions - in previous or contemporary times - does not necessarily indicate lay satisfaction with the functioning of expert systems. A more plausible explanation for public acquiescence is that lay actors have rarely been in possession of a potent slingshot (Culpitt, 1999: 120).

Reflecting Lash's critique, Wynne also objects to Beck's rationalistic construction of lay reflexivity, arguing that the risk society narrative implies an institutional and contractual model of social action (Wynne, 1996: 47). In reality, rather than responses to risk exclusively being the product of rational engagement with the relations of definition, social actors will tend to construct semi-autonomous, culturally independent understandings. Vitally, these understandings are formulated with, without, and sometimes *in spite of* the information provided by expert bodies (Lupton, 1999: 110).

Wynne believes that lay actors evaluate expert claims in conjunction with a broader process of personal monitoring and decision-making. On this point Beck and Wynne are pretty much agreed. However, contra Beck, Wynne posits that this process of reflexivity is not enacted within a purely cognitive-rational framework. Understandings of risk are not instrumentally produced with reference to institutions and self-biographies. Instead, risk events are culturally interpreted in conjunction with a range of embedded beliefs, values and practices. Thus, the 'sense' that is made of risks is both situated and collective.

Wynne's criticisms of the risk society thesis are fleshed out in the excellent case study of sheep farmers referred to in chapter one (Wynne, 1996). Wynne's ethnographic research sought to examine the relationship between lay actors and experts in the case of contamination of livestock in Cumbria. Initially, concerns were raised about the transferral of leaked radiocaesium from the Chernobyl nuclear leak to local land.

Government scientists dismissed these concerns, arguing that most of the radiocaesium falling from Chernobyl would be washed off vegetation into the soil where it would be chemically 'locked up'. Nevertheless, local farmers became increasingly concerned about the movement of pollution from vegetation to livestock via the food chain. Scientific experts conceded that this movement was hypothetically possible, but insisted that even if sheep became contaminated the infection would only endure for three weeks. The experts stated that there would be no future contamination of livestock after the initial flush, with the risk of contamination receding after the three-week quarantine period (Wynne, 1996: 53).

Shortly after this statement, the government stunned the local community by announcing that the ban on livestock trade would be extended indefinitely. It soon became apparent that the scientists had located abnormally high levels of contamination in the Cumbrian soils. The validity of this claim was widely disputed by local farmers, who believed that much of the contamination in the soils had not come from Chernobyl but from a more local source, namely the Sellafield nuclear plant. At the time, these claims were vehemently refuted by the government and their selected scientific experts. Needless to say, months later in a 'leaked memo' it was revealed that scientists had - rather diplomatically - traced half of the radiocaesium in the soil to Chernobyl and the remaining half to 'other sources'. This, of course, meant radiation from Sellafield and contamination from the testing of atmospheric weapons (Wynne, 1996: 65).

Wynne's case study clearly illustrates that sections of the public are not engaged in relationships of trust with expert systems in relation to risks. The local population in the Cumbrian study were consistently sceptical about governmental findings: 'outbursts of frustration at the experts' ignorance occurred often' (Wynne, 1996: 66). Local people were quick to identify the inconsistencies within expert arguments and to challenge what they perceived to be strategies of deflection. Wynne believes this

scepticism to be symptomatic of a broader suspicion of expert knowledge. In opting either for inertia, or alternative action, the public are all too often portrayed as having misinterpreted expert information about risk. However, so-called lay actors may simply be acting within a different but equally valid cultural framework. Experts themselves are likely to perceive lay intransigence to specialist advice as being attributable to either a paucity of knowledge or an aberrant reading of information about risk (Michael, 1996). In sharp contrast, the Cumbrian study indicates that lay intransigence can be driven by active rejection of expert advice. Indeed, 'ignoring' expert advice can make perfect sense, when understood within a situated cultural environment. Furthermore, in an uncertain climate, rigid adherence to expert information does not insure one's health and well-being:

> The reflexivity of lay people in relation to risk may develop from the observations of the ways in which everyday life operates and from conversations and interactions with other lay actors. For example, people often develop a fatalistic attitude towards risk because they have observed that life does not always 'play by the rules'. Someone who drinks heavily and smokes may live to a ripe old age, while an ascetic non-smoking jogging vegetarian may die young (Lupton, 1999: 111).

Wynne's inquiry serves as an excellent practical demonstration of the shortcomings in Beck's theory of risk perception and his wider understanding of the expert-lay relationship. Firstly, the Cumbrian case illustrates that lay reticence toward expert systems is a historically and culturally embedded characteristic. The Cumbrian farmers mistrusted external scientific knowledge, favouring local networked knowledge and collective sensibilities. In Wynne's study, the farmers were keen to uphold their own historical experience of cultivating the land as a firmer basis for informed decision-making than the 'one-off' isolated studies of scientists. This preference for sense making through cultural practices and networks is born out by other empirical studies (Caplan, 2000: 22; Marris and Langford, 1996: 37). In formulating knowledge about risk, lay actors are much more likely to trust the opinions of friends, colleagues and family than those of experts. Of course, this

denotes an interesting twist in terms of our understanding of the lay-expert relationship. In the Cumbrian case, the boundaries between 'the experts' and the 'lay actors' were decidedly blurred. Indeed, in the final analysis, the most accurate body of risk knowledge belonged to the local farmers rather than the government or their scientists.

Secondly, the risk society thesis suggests that discourses produced by experts are the medium through which risks are identified and evaluated. In addition, the issue of public trust in risk knowledge is predominantly raised through the mouthpiece of counter-expert contestation. However, Wynne's research questions the assumption that risks require objective scientific verification. The Cumbrian example illustrates that informed understandings of risk can be located in the lay-public domain *outside* of the parameters of organised dissenting groups. It would seem that lay actors are capable of accumulating substantial intellectual knowledge about risk through lived cultural practices and experiences.

Thirdly, Wynne's work demonstrates that the rational-cognitive approach to risk perception assumed by Beck conceals the complexity and diversity of public understandings of risk. The lay actors in the Cumbrian study possessed subtle, and in some cases, discordant perceptions of risk. Wynne emphasises these ambiguities by recognising paradoxical tensions within the lay position. Whilst the Cumbrian farmers questioned expert inconsistency, they were also aware of their ultimate dependency on expert decisions. For many of the farmers, this led to behaving 'as if' the experts were trusted (Wynne, 1996: 65). Such ambivalent and contingent behaviour has been referred to by Wynne as 'virtual trust' (CSEC Report, 1997). Rather than affecting one-dimensional rational choice responses to expert knowledge, public perceptions of risk will be influenced by traditional, economic and emotional features. Lay actors may 'follow logics that are obscure and apparently capricious, that can be encapsulated and 'naturalised' in fatalistic beliefs, identities and senses of (non)

agency' (Wynne, 1996: 53). Such insights lead Wynne to maintain that our understanding of the relationship between lay actors and experts need to be radically reconstructed:

> It is not a matter of lay public 'cultural' responses to 'meaning-neutral' objective scientific knowledge, but of cultural responses, to a *cultural* form of intervention - that is, one embodying particular normative models of human nature, purposes and relationships (Wynne, 1996: 68).

In defence of the risk society thesis, Beck is sporadically attuned to the subtlety of lay knowledge about risk (Beck, 1992: 168; 1992: 59). For example, in a striking passage in *Risk Society*, Beck almost reflects Wynne's position:

> The technical risk experts *are mistaken* in the empirical accuracy of their implicit value premises, specifically in their assumptions of what appears acceptable to the population. The talk of a 'false, irrational' perception of risk in the population, however, crowns this mistake; the scientists withdraw their *borrowed* notions of cultural acceptance from empirical criticism, elevate their views of other people's notions to a dogma and mount this shaky throne to serve as judges of the 'irrationality' of the population, whose ideas they ought to ascertain and make the foundation of their work (Beck, 1992: 58).

However, Beck allows himself to get mired in the universality of risk, meaning that this transient appreciation cannot be satisfactorily sustained. This problem is symptomatic of Beck's whole approach to reflexivity, which seems to be destabilised by two conflicting tendencies. On the one hand, Beck argues that risk assessments are party to social evaluation and public reflexivity. On the other, he insists that lay actors are dependent upon expert knowledge and 'scientific battles conducted in intellectual milieux' (Cottle, 1998: 13). As noted earlier, Beck invokes both arguments, depending upon his particular purpose. Nonetheless, this strategy has not immunised Beck against critics who have accused him of fudging the issues of risk perception and reflexivity (Alexander and Smith, 1996: 221; Smith et al, 1997).

So, where do these criticisms leave us in terms of reformulating our understanding of

the relationship between expert systems and lay public groups? Perhaps the key theoretical point of note is that the terms 'lay public' and 'expert' are very much idealtype categories. The lay-expert divide as constructed in the risk society thesis depicts two relatively homogenous and externally opposed entities. In practice this distinction is too broad and fails to accurately represent the diversity of opinion *within* and *between* each group. In this regard, it would seem that Macgill's (1989: 50) question, posed over a decade ago, remains fitting today: 'Who exactly are *the public?'* With reference to the Sellafield inquiry, Macgill notes media reference to at least eleven different publics, ranging from residents of Seascale to political activists:

> Simply identifying 'the public', is not to fix on a uniform mass of fossilised opinion. In Seascale, for example, a village virtually entirely dependent in one way or another on Sellafield, all inhabitants similarly stigmatised by recent publicity and all living in the village allegedly most directly 'at risk', there is not a simple homogenous pattern of opinion. On the contrary, there are striking differences. There are about as many people who speak of concern for radiation-induced health risks linked to Sellafield's operations as their are who reject any basis for concern (Macgill, 1989: 51).

The term 'lay public' houses a myriad of overlapping and distinct sub-populations and incorporates a diverse range of attitudes and ideas. Such demographic complexity is not adequately acknowledged in the risk society thesis, which represents - and is arguably representative of - a distinctly selective public. Whilst we may be able to identify a reflexive, ecologically concerned and politicised group in society, one public should be taken as representative of another: 'what we are just beginning to realise is that there are many 'publics' in society, and that any given individual may move in and out of a number of bonding groups' (CSEC Report, 1997: 19).

Similarly, expert systems can be expected to house a broader range of ideas and opinions about risk than the lay-expert binarism suggests (Cottle, 1998; Irwin, 1989: 30). These criticisms indicate that Beck is guilty of caricaturing the association between experts and lay actors. The lay-expert relationship encapsulates too broad a range of subject positions and identities than can be realised by binary division. It

must be recognised that the boundaries between expert and lay groups are indistinct and permeable.[97] This is not to suggest the emergence of an egalitarian relationship between the two parties. Clearly, the expert-lay relationship is still shot through with power differentials. However, we do at least need to recognise the room for manoeuvre within and between each position. This suggests that a degree of fluidity must be built into our understanding of risk perception. Hence, rigid lay-expert groupings may be better recast as 'liminal categories' whose boundaries interface (Crook, 1999: 174). To argue otherwise is to write off important cultural patterns as anomalies, for the sake of maintaining a tidy theory.

4.7 Summary and Conclusions

In conclusion, whilst several empirical studies provide support for Beck's approach to risk perception, the overall picture is more ambivalent. Evidence of a firm link between Beck's theory of risk and empirical research is difficult to establish. On the one hand, there does appear to have been a general heightening of risk awareness in western cultures. On the other, it is impossible to decipher whether this awareness is tied to real probabilities of harm or simply greater knowledge about risk.

The apparent lacuna between risk recognition and risk avoidance alerts us to the unplumbed dimensions of risk cognisance. Close scrutiny of a selection of relevant studies of risk perception has not afforded us the luxury of unqualified conclusions. Whilst empirical studies of risk may work within an objectivist paradigm, they cannot be equated with objectivity in the wider sense. In the process of interpreting individual responses to risk, empirical studies necessarily use a subjectivist method within an objectivist framework (Bradbury, 1989: 384).

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[97]For example, a member of the 'lay public' may be dependent upon a 'governmental expert' for advice about the possible risk involved in the consumption of genetically modified food. However, if a water pipe bursts in the 'experts' house, the 'layperson' is required to save the house from flooding and the roles are effectively reversed.

It would seem then that the domain of risk perception is dogged by the troublesome question of 'who speaks?'[98] In relation to perceptions of risk, does any particular party or individual have the right to speak for the experience of others? Indeed, is such objectivity possible, or even desirable? Given the contested nature of risk perception, such questions must presently remain open.

Perhaps a more manageable task is to suggest a way forward for future studies of risk perception which will enable us to reformulate and enrich the risk society thesis. Historically, the methodology utilised within risk research has been remarkably homogenous, with the overriding number of empirical studies working rigidly within the parameters of an objectivist-rational framework. As a result, the social and cultural underbelly of risk perception has remained untapped. Studies of risk perception *can* tell us that risks are categorised, they are less precise about exactly why these categorisations occur. Evidently, more detailed ethnographic research is needed to ascertain both *how* risk strategies materialise and *why* these strategies vary over time and place. The extent to which risk perceptions are structured by combined variables such as class, gender, ethnicity, age and interpersonal relationships would seem to be a potentially rich vein of inquiry. Forthcoming studies of risk perception might also attempt to explore how cultural variables key in with particular types of hazard (Douglas, 1985: 25). It is evident that detailed cross-cultural research is needed to explore variations in risk perception in relation to place and social organisation.[99]

In modelling the individual as rational and goal-oriented, both Beck and the empirical studies have missed the situated features of risk perception (Strydom, 1999: 46). In

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[98]The term is borrowed from John Tomlinson, who originally applied the term to the discourse of cultural imperialism (Tomlinson, 1991: 11).

[99]Such studies have recently emerged within sociocultural theory in the collections edited by Caplan (2000) and Adam et al (2000). See, in particular, Nugent (2000) and Mackey (2000).

Beck's work, individuals relate to their surroundings in an instrumental and utilitarian manner, rather than engaging in 'creative social action which is structured in terms of cultural forms' (Strydom, 1999: 48). This utilitarianism serves to effectively de-contextualize the everyday environment in which social agents make sense of risk. As has been illustrated, individuals tend to relate to abstract systems of risk definition in a manner that is structured and mediated with reference to local habitats and aesthetic features. The relationship between actors and their environment is crucially mediated through the normative structures of the community (Lash, 1993; Lash and Wynne, 1996). Responses to risk and strategies of avoidance are clearly culturally relative phenomena.

To maintain credibility, future research will also need to be sensitive to the group context in which individuals encounter risk. Simply isolating respondents and instructing them to respond to questions about risk does not seem to be a particularly profitable or thorough method of accessing cultural understandings. Both Beck's work and the existing studies fail to adequately account for the collective and symbolic aspects of risk perception (Lupton, 1999: 82; Alexander 1996). In reality, risks are not approached in objective isolation by lay actors, but in a situated social setting and with an accumulated set of cultural baggage. Thus, in addition to addressing the individual-rational dimension, forthcoming research initiatives must account for the mélange of social, economic and cultural factors which underpin public perceptions of risk. Undoubtedly, greater awareness is needed of the range of windows through which diverse individuals interpret risk. As Langford et al note, public understandings of risk are composed by a 'collage of outlooks, predispositions, relationships, and structures all relating to each other in complex ways, like stars in a rotating galaxy' (Langford et al, 1999: 33). Whilst this conclusion infers a much messier idea of social reality than the risk society model, it may nonetheless more accurately capture the intricate nature of public perceptions of risk.

5

The Politics of Risk

1. 1 Introduction

Having considered the general issue of risk perception, we are now in a suitable position to extend our analysis into the relationship between public understandings of risk and political engagement. Of course, the politics of risk is an issue which has already been broached in the thesis: most notably in chapter two in relation to the distributional logic, and also in chapter four with reference to the differentiated nature of public perceptions of risk. In the final chapter, the political dimensions of the risk society thesis will be explicitly addressed. In particular, the theory of reflexivity, the notion of a transition in distributional logics and the concept of subpolitics will be scrutinised with careful reference to relevant criticisms of Beck's approach (Lupton, 1999; Culpitt, 1999; Hinchcliffe, 2000). This discussion will also seek to develop and extend the understanding of expert-lay relations constructed in chapter four.

It will first be necessary to sketch out the explicitly political aspects of Beck's thesis, drawing upon the arguments outlined in *Risk Society* (1992), *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995), *Democracy Without Enemies* (1998) and *The Reinvention of Politics* (1997). This synopsis will form a solid basis for analysing the comprehensiveness and cohesiveness of Beck's understanding of the relationship between risk and politics in later sections. In order to form a complete evaluation of the risk society thesis, the theory of distributional logics will also be revisited. At this juncture, evidence for and against a marked shift in the content of political debate will

be assessed. Finally, the concept of subpolitics will be revisited as a means of engaging more rigorously with the political effects produced by manufactured risks. At this stage, Beck's theory of reflexivity will be practically applied to the current political controversy surrounding genetically modified (GM) foods. This generally positive discussion of Beck's work is counterbalanced in section 5.4 with reference to the Foucauldian critique of Beck's work. Drawing upon discourse theory, the restrictive effects of expert constructions of risk will be considered as a means of teasing out the politically repressive potential of manufactured risks. Finally, in section 5.5, the overall validity of Beck's contribution to the debate about the politics of risk will be addressed in the light of the theoretical and empirical criticisms raised throughout the chapter as a whole.

5.2 Transitional Politics and the 'Victory Crisis' of Modernization

As has been illustrated, within western cultures, risk has become an increasingly prevalent and highly-charged political issue (Adam, Beck and van Loon, 2000; Lupton, 1999: 68). It would appear that risk - or, at the least, *knowledge* about risk - is increasingly permeating social and cultural experience. This process has heightened public awareness of the risks embedded in everyday life and has contributed towards risk being understood in public as well as personal terms (Ewald, 1991; Culpitt, 1999: 131). It is from within this ambiguous cultural climate of knowledge and uncertainty that Beck situates his analysis of the changing relationship between risk and politics.

As discussed in chapter two, Beck believes that contemporary western nation states are in the throes of an ideological power play between the distributional logics of 'social goods' and 'social bads'. It is argued that within 'simple industrial society' political parties, trade unions and protest groups debated and conflicted over the distribution of social goods. These goods such as income, housing, employment and

healthcare have traditionally been high on the public agenda and have consequently been crucial in dictating the content of political manifestos.

However, Beck believes that, since the 1970s, the issue of goods distribution has been augmented by growing public concern about the production of bads (Beck, 1992: 20). In the process of distributing goods, industrial society has produced a rash of unmanageable risks - or bads - which have become pressing issues in the everyday lives of citizens around the globe (Beck, 1992: 42). Thus, as explained earlier, Beck diametrically opposes the features of 'class society' with those of the 'risk society':

> The driving force in the class society can be summarized in the phrase: *I am hungry!* The movement set in motion by the risk society, on the other hand, is expressed in the statement: *I am afraid!* The commonality of anxiety takes the place of the commonality of need (Beck, 1992: 49).

Accordingly, the balance of political emphasis begins to shift from a positive logic based on the acquisition of goods to a negative logic predicated upon the avoidance of bads. This assumed dichotomy leads Beck to contend that the principal social problems in contemporary western societies do not stem from a dearth of goods, but are instead borne out of a glut of bads (Beck, 1992: 20, Lupton, 1999: 59). Furthermore, social bads such as environmental pollution, AIDS and food contamination are boundless risks, which have the potential to harm rich and poor alike. The mobility of social bads implies that risks are becoming universalised, with the West taking on many of the uncertain and insecure features of poorer nations blighted by bads. This global spread of risks has recently been referred to as the 'Brazilianization' of society (Beck, 2000: 1).

Beck posits that the seismic shift in distributional logics has been ineptly dealt with by power-holders within the relations of definition. In particular, the universalization of bads has not been met with appropriate counter measures at the level of public policy. By and large, political parties have failed to develop coherent policies to cope

with the pervasiveness and mobility of social bads. For instance, each year the number of cases of AIDS continues to rise, the ozone layer becomes thinner and an increasing number of food-related illnesses are identified. Beck argues that national governments have responded to manufactured risks by continuing with strategies of denial, ignoring palpable evidence of the escalation of risks in contemporary culture. In a political theatre of the absurd, democratically elected governments continue to campaign along the tracks of the distribution of goods whilst simultaneously reacting to the ubiquitous crises of bads in an ad hoc fashion (Beck, 1998: 9).

Despite the evident movement away from industrial society and towards the risk society, Beck believes that the political system continues to function according to the principles of industrial modernity. Beck argues that state intransigence is born out of a combination of a lack of knowledge and a shortage of resources to cope with the generation of volatile risks. Consequently, the dominant political response to the burgeoning problem of bads has been various forms of organised irresponsibility, with the multiplication of social bads producing a concoction of denial and feigned reassurance on behalf of political power holders and policy makers (Beck, 1995: 65).

Beck emphasises that the unmanageability of bads is not solely a personal problem which can be dealt with in privatised terms. The diffusion of bads requires collective ideological recognition and action.[100] In addition to raising practical issues of manageability, the diffusion of manufactured risks throws up a host of moral issues. For Beck, the universality of mobile bads such as AIDS and environmental pollution essentially *demands* that the public confront moral questions about the future direction of society. In this sense, the risk society is a latent political society (Beck, 2000b: 220). But where do social bads emanate from and who is *politically* responsible for the management of bads?

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[100] I refer here to the neutral version of ideology as a general body of ideas, rather than the critical version of ideology as a mechanism for concealing forms of domination.

As noted in chapter one, Beck believes that social bads are cumulatively produced by an aggregation of social institutions in the West. In pursuit of the general goals of 'progress', science and technology, medicine and business have spawned a series of unmanageable 'side effects'. For instance, the dominant goods generating system of mass production and mass consumption has produced environmental despoliation via industrial pollution and consumer waste. More starkly, the harnessing of new forms of nuclear power has provided the tools for instant human annihilation on a global scale. For Beck, this essentially means that the current crisis is not so much *of* modernity, but *within* modernity (Dryzek, 1995). Indeed, the production of bads is perceived to be a consequence of the 'victories' rather than the 'failures' of industrial modernization. As hazards continue to explode in the public domain, the conflict generated brings forth:

> The possibility of a creative (self) destruction for an entire epoch: that of industrial society. The 'subject' of this creative destruction is not the revolution, not the crisis, but the victory of western modernisation (Beck, 1994: 2).

Hence, it is precisely the achievements of technological progress and wealth creation that have generated a concatenation of undesirable side effects. In the name of progress, the West has steadily exhausted its environmental, material and social foundations with institutions, 'foundering on their own success' in the 'victory crisis' of western modernization (Beck, 1997: 6). Such a paradoxical turn of phrase is reminiscent of Marx's reference to capitalism as its own gravedigger. However, for Beck, it is the threatening spectre of social bads rather than a shortage of social goods which steers individuals toward politically reflexivity. As such, risks function as the vehicle through which modernity confronts itself in political terms:

> The conjecture is that the second modernity into which we slid some time ago is a *political* modernity, a modernity, that is, which stimulates the *reinvention of politics* (Beck, 1997: 5).

It is argued that through the journey of modernization the West is perpetually confronted by questions that undermine its ideological basis. Beck believes that existing social institutions are incapable of managing the continual generation of risks for two key reasons. Firstly, manufactured risks are themselves increasingly unpredictable, diverse and difficult to manage. As demonstrated by the BSE crisis, the absence of certainty about risks places the relations of definition in an unenviable position in terms of risk communication and risk management. Essentially, social institutions are responsible for making and taking public health decisions in a situation of imperfect knowledge. What is more, experts within institutions have to face the daunting prospect of being accountable to the public in the event of a crisis:

> The ultimate deadlock of risk society...resides in the gap between knowledge and decision: there is no one who really knows the global outcome - at the level of positive knowledge, the situation is radically 'undecidable' - but we none the less *have* to *decide* ...so risk society is provoking an obscene gamble, a kind of ironic reversal of predestination: I am accountable for decisions which I was forced to make without proper knowledge of the situation (Beck, 1999: 78).

Secondly, the antiquated nature of public institutions, such as legal and political systems mean that experts are not resourced to effectively manage risk. Beck argues that the social mandates of western institutions were developed in the nineteenth centuries and have become outmoded in relation to current public demands (Beck, 1995: 107). As elucidated in chapter three, this has resulted in insurance systems, economies and health systems that are poorly equipped to manage the diverse production of bads. In Beck's estimation, all of this means that the general public remain dependent on a small cluster of institutions which are incapable of eliminating risks and fulfilling their own promises of safety and welfare. In the light of economic globalization, employers and trade unions fail to provide security for potential employees. Given the pervasiveness of incurable diseases such as *nv* CJD and AIDS, health systems cannot guarantee the well-being of citizens. Meanwhile, inter-

governmental environmental treaties have been spectacularly ineffectual in combating rising pollution levels.

For Beck, this not only means that institutions are failing in their role as guarantors of public safety, in many instances the institutions themselves serve to *exacerbate* existing problems by generating 'knock-on' risks (Beck, 1995: 122). For instance, a politico-economic failure to combat rising pollution levels leads to a larger hole in the ozone layer, which leads to higher incidence of skin cancer. This in turn generates unmanageable burdens on national health systems, infinite waiting lists, perfunctory treatment and ultimately a poorer quality of public health. Thus, in effect, institutional intransigence ultimately produces a vicious circle of risk. At a political level, the inability of traditional structures to deal with social bads seriously undermines the credibility of national governments that are unable to honour the pledges they are duty bound to offer.

Thus, the spread of manufactured risks does not simply stimulate public reflection. At a more fundamental level, modernization becomes a 'problem for itself' (Beck, 1997: 5). As the public become more aware that the universal principles of equality, safety and security cannot possibly be guaranteed, political discord emerges. Given that the risks sparked by development evade the harnessing capacities of dominant institutions, western societies move inexorably toward a period of *self-confrontation* and political reflexivity, with the goals of modernity being a ubiquitous topic of public debate (Beck, 1994: 6; Goldblatt, 1995: 163). This in turn challenges the validity of institutions, with expert knowledge being perpetually scrutinised and disputed. As modernization dissolves the certainties of industrial society such as work, family and class identities - new questions emerge as issues of contestation (Goldblatt, 1995: 163). This notion of societal self-critique lies at the heart of Beck's understanding of reflexive modernization. In theoretical terms, reflexive modernization means internal confrontation with the effects of the risk society. In

practical terms reflexive modernization suggests a sustained period of uncertainty involving a range of macro transformations. Despite gathering little evidence of subterranean political shifts, Beck believes that fundamental changes in social structure have taken place without great emphasis being placed upon them in the political realm:

> The transition from industrial to risk society takes place unreflectingly, automatically, on the basis of industrial modernity's 'blindness to apocalypse', situations of danger establish themselves (Beck, 1999: 81).

Beck is keen to stress that these tangible ground shifts have occurred cumulatively without violence, fanfares or 'flags of revolutionary change' (Beck, 1994: 16). Whilst fundamental changes in the family, work, gender and the environment have taken place, they have done so inconspicuously, on 'cat's paws' (Beck, 1994: 17). Nevertheless, the mobility of manufactured risks and the inability of the capitalist system to manage social bads gradually serves to stimulate the wider problematization of expert knowledge (Beck, 1992; Wynne, 1996: 73). Thus, public cultures gradually recognise that contemporary institutions are impotent in the face of social bads, offering only 'empty formulas' and 'non-solutions' (Beck, 1994: 8). For Beck, this urges the development of a more suitable political model which is able to meet the changing everyday political concerns of individuals and society at large (Beck, 1994: 6).

5.3 The Death and Birth of Politics

In *Risk Society* (1992) and *The Reinvention of Politics* (1997), Beck delineates a rudimentary shift in the locus of political decision-making. In these works, Beck argues that the location of key societal decisions has been transferred from the political system into economic and scientific domains. For Beck, throughout the period of industrial modernity, the decision-making power of national governments

has steadily been siphoned off by business, science and technology. In such a climate, major social decisions are no longer made by politicians but by a small elite of scientists, business leaders and legal specialists. Beck believes that this has resulted in governments assuming a reactive rather than proactive position on social risks. For example, it is scientists, technologists and multinational companies who have driven 'advances' in nuclear and genetic technology whilst national governments have tended to take a back seat, trusting market forces to generate progress and wealth (Ho, 1997; Rustin, 1994: 398). With reference to genetic technology, national governments have only belatedly been stung into action by widespread public concerns. However, given the private locus of political decision-making the biotechnological revolution seems inexorable, with preventative measures having 'no more effect than a bicycle brake on an intercontinental aircraft' (Beck, 1995: 504). Underpinning this transference of political decision-making is the wider process of globalization which stimulates a restructuring of social infrastructure:[101]

> During the first age of modernity capital, labour and state played at making sand cakes in the sandpit (a sandpit limited and organised in terms of the nation-state) and during this game each side tried to knock the other's sand cake off the spade in accordance with the rules of institutionalized conflict. Now suddenly business has been given a present of a mechanical digger and is emptying the whole sandpit. The trade unions and the politicians on the other hand have been left out of the new game, have gone into a huff and are crying for mummy (Beck, 2000a: 89).

In industrial society, lay publics anticipate that crucial social decisions will be made by government through legislation – and on the basis of expert knowledge. However, in the risk society these crucial decisions have been hijacked by science and business and no longer lie within the jurisdiction of the state. What is important here is that the very institutions which the public turn to for guidance on major issues no longer have the capacity to make the decisions which can ensure public safety. Furthermore, amidst public confusion, the vital issue of accountability for risk is obscured:

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[101]Curiously, it is only in recent times that Beck has explicitly recognised the salience of globalization as a motor of risk distribution (see Beck, 1999; 2000; 2000a).

> Neurotechnologies and genetic engineering are reshaping the laws that govern the human mind and life. Who is doing this? Technological experts? Medical experts? Politicians? Industry? The Public? Ask any of them, and the reply will be the one Ulysses gave the cyclops: nobody' (Beck, 1995a: 505).

It is argued that the indeterminacy surrounding the responsibility for manufactured risks obfuscates important political issues and breeds a culture of unaccountability. Again, Beck is visiting well-trodden territory, sharing the concerns of critical social commentators about the absence of public involvement in vital political decisions (Hinchcliffe, 2000; Ho, 1997; Woollacott, 1998).

Beck contends that within the formal democratic system, public involvement is restricted to a superficial choice of political representatives, alongside hierarchically organised participation in the constitution of political programmes. This said, Beck is not seeking to engage in a systematic critique of the formal democratic process.[102] Rather, he concentrates his energies upon the inactivity of political agencies in relation to the distribution of social bads. For Beck, the essential problem is a lack of active democracy in large-scale decision-making about threatening technologies. In the first instance, a minute number of specialists are involved in taking scientific and technological decisions. Secondly, major decisions about risky technologies often by-pass the parliamentary process, being enacted 'in the twilight zone' where science and industry merge (Beck, 1995: 506). The most notable outcome for Beck is that national governments increasingly find themselves having to legitimise decisions they may not have made in the first place. This point is nicely articulated by Giddens: 'a good deal of political decision-making is now about managing risks - risks which do not originate in the political sphere, yet have to be politically managed (Giddens, 1998: 29).

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[102] A more detailed critique of the formal party process can be found in Claus Offe's *Contradictions of the Welfare State* (1984) or Conrad Lodziak's *Manipulating Needs: Capitalism and Culture* (1997).

It is becoming increasingly evident that a wide range of critical social decisions only partially filter through the formal democratic process. Future developments in genetic technology, micro-electronics and pharmaceuticals are decided upon by industry and science, with governments often undertaking a mere rubber-stamping exercise. Beck warns that this reactive approach to risk can lead to a collective *fait accompli* in which social bads are 'produced by industry, externalised by economics, individualized by the legal system, legitimised by the sciences and made to appear harmless by politics' (Beck, 1998: 16).

The autocratic nature of risk decision-making has serious ramifications for lay publics, with opportunities for active engagement in the decision-making process being restricted. Of course, these observations need to be fixed within a wider context of declining membership of formal democratic parties and fewer people exercising the right to vote (Beck, 2000: 151; Rustin, 1994). For Beck, such political acquiescence is partly attributable to the inability of political parties and trade unions to appeal to the diverse local and global concerns of social actors (Beck, 1998a: 7).

As discussed earlier, the loss of power of national governments can be traced back to the changing infrastructure which globalization facilitates, with political conflicts projecting risk from the local to the global scale. Borrowing from Roland Robertson (1992), Beck notes an increased concern with 'glocal' questions which have impacts both at the global and the local level (Beck, 1999: 15). For Beck the universalization of political issues is part of a broader process of globalization which has enabled individuals to live, love, work and shop internationally (2000a: 80).[103]

Along with Robertson, Beck believes that globalization has fostered a new blend of 'glocal' political questions that cannot be solved by top-down national politics (Beck,

[103]The connectivity between the local and the global has been more carefully documented elsewhere. See, for example, John Tomlinson's *Globalization and Culture* (1999) or David Held's *A Globalizing World?* (2000).

1999: 15). Important social issues such as the development of genetic cloning and the diffusion of new media technologies transgress national boundaries and escape the regulatory powers of national governments. Such overlap between global and local prompts Beck to argue that the formal political system is in need of systematic restructuring to cope with seismic social shifts:

> The nation state has lost any capacity to act on the problems that are moving the world, from environmental protection to global economic interconnections and migration to issues of regional and global peacekeeping (Beck, 1998a: 107).

Thus, Beck posits that politics can no longer be tied exclusively to local or even national locations (Beck, 1998a: 36, McGrew, 2000: 173). In contrast, key global issues can only be adequately broached within a trans-national framework. Certainly, several other key theorists have noted that globalization has left significant marks on the sovereignty of national governments and has re-drawn traditional political boundaries (Held, 2000; McGrew, 2000; Waters, 1995). However, Beck goes on to suggest that the globalization process is presently driving politics in two contradictory directions. On the one hand, there is evidence of an ongoing form of 'globalization from above' through international treaties and global political organisations. Conversely, the diversification of politics is stimulating 'globalization from below' through the collective action of groups acting outside of the formal democratic arena (Beck, 1998: 37). Beck refers to the top-down paradigm as 'simple globalization' and the bottom-up model as 'reflexive globalization' (Beck, 2000). It is argued that the epochal movement into the risk society places greater emphasis on institutional transition via reflexive actions:

> A new kind of capitalism, a new kind of global order, a new kind of politics and law, a new kind of society and personal life are in the making which both separately and in context are clearly distinct from earlier phases of social evolution. Consequently a paradigm shift in both the social sciences and in politics is required (Beck, 2000a: 81).

In *Risk Society*, Beck offers up three scenarios for the future (Beck, 1992: 224). In the first scenario, the relations of definition continue to embrace the goals of industrial society. Following this 'business as usual' approach, key institutions follow the principles of progress under the traditional model. Politicians continue to act in the 'democratic interest', business leaders strive to generate full employment and greater wealth, scientists foster technological development and health officials promote universal welfare. If these goals are attained the dissolution of structures such as the nuclear family, employment and democratic politics might be arrested and manufactured risks contained (Goldblatt, 1995: 167). For Beck, this kind of rationality remains dominant within institutions in western nation states (Beck, 1992: 227). As the globalization process stretches national political relations, the political model simply opens outwards in the form of international treaties, laws and global political organisations.

Nevertheless, Beck argues that the structures of national and international political systems are incapable of controlling or managing contemporary political issues. Trans-national power blocs such as G8, the World Trade Organisation and NATO have done little to limit the diffusion of manufactured risks created by science, technology and industry (Beck, 1998: 9). Further, such global interactions continue to produce a top-down political model which is bereft of active public involvement.

In a second scenario, Beck suggests that a cogent political movement may develop around the principle of techno-economic democracy. The democratisation of decision-making might be carried out under the auspices of an ecological state which would monitor society and prevent environmental despoliation. This monitoring might be achieved by enacting a variety of procedures such as checks on corporate technology, modernization parliaments and inviting citizens into the decision-making process. In essence, the democratisation of development would seek to put the techno-economic realm under the control of parliament (Beck, 1992: 229). For Beck, whilst this version

of the future is an improvement on the continuation of the industrial model it still shares similar drawbacks. Most notably, such a system would still function in a top-down fashion, require huge bureaucracies and be blighted by long-winded decision-making processes.

Finally, Beck suggests a favoured third alternative of a system of differential or 'subpolitics' in which politics becomes generalised and centreless (Beck, 1992: 227).[104] The exact dimensions of the model are unclear, but Beck believes that subpolitics involves self co-ordination and political autonomy in various aspects of life, rather than simply within the formal process. Working on the broad principles of a round table model, through subpolitics citizens could be active in making political decisions in the realms of science, business and education, (Beck, 1998a: 152). It is the nurturing of this subpolitical model that Beck believes to be increasingly vital to ensuring democracy and welfare in western cultures.

5.4 Subpolitics in the Risk Society

Given the mutuality of the relationship between risk, reflexivity and subpolitics, it is necessary to examine the contents of sub-political engagement in a more exhaustive fashion. Throughout the last decade, Beck has advocated subpolitics as a progressive form of politics, envisaging it as an integral feature of a second phase of modernity (Beck, 1992: 231; 1997: 142; 1998a: 152; 1999: 91; 2000a: 4), In certain pieces of work, Beck's approach to subpolitics has been largely theoretically oriented (Beck, 1992: 231; 1994: 16) at other junctures his discussion has been example led (Beck, 1998a; 1999). For example, in *World Risk Society* (1999), Beck describes the actions of a range of new social movements operating worldwide across cultures. These organisations such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International and Terre des Hommes

[104] In utilising the prefix 'sub', Beck is referring to a politics which is positioned outside the formal system. Subpolitics means 'bottom-up' politics, rather than a secondary or inferior form of politics.

constitute part of an estimated 50,000 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) globally. Beck argues that the methods of direct action taken by many NGOs demonstrate the impotence and inadequacies of national parliamentary politics. The emergence of sub-political movements in the public sphere is said to usher in the possibility of a more deliberative and inclusive form of democracy. For Beck, this more responsive and accountable political system may be capable of managing and limiting the production of global risks (Beck, 1995a: 505). But what is the actual nature of subpolitics and why is it perceived to be such an effective means of conflict resolution? In *World Risk Society* Beck explains his rationale at length:

> Subpolitics means *'direct'* politics - that is, *ad hoc* individual participation in political decisions, by-passing the institutions of representative opinion formation (political parties, parliaments) and often even lacking the protection of law. In other words, subpolitics means the shaping of society from below. Economy, science, career, everyday existence, private life, all become caught up in the storms of political debate. But these do not fit into the traditional spectrum of party-political differences. What is characteristic of the subpolitics of world society are precisely *ad hoc* 'coalitions of opposites' (of parties, nations, regions, religions, governments, rebels, classes). Crucially, however, subpolitics sets politics free by changing the rules and boundaries of the political so that it becomes more open and susceptible to new linkages - as well as capable of being negotiated and reshaped (Beck, 1999: 40).

Thus, subpolitics refers to a fundamental re-shaping of society from the bottom-up via the democratisation of social criticism and political decision-making (Beck, 1998a: 37). As the locus of political decision-making gradually changes, local actions can produce global impacts. For example, petition signing, local campaigning, protest marching and the boycotting of consumer products all serve as contemporary methods of 'direct balloting' (Beck, 1999: 42). Beck believes that as traditional political affiliations of class, gender and ethnicity become indistinct, politics shifts away from entrenched conflict between delineated groups. In the risk society, the personal *is* the political (Smith et al, 1997: 170). As Beck puts it: 'one can spare oneself the detour through membership meetings and enjoy the blessings of political action by heading straight to the disco' (Beck, 1998: 170).

However, Beck also recognises that subpolitics requires the development of a broader institutional framework to democratise decisions about new technologies, public health and the economy (Beck, 1998: 21). As Goldblatt notes, the pre-requisites for an active public politics include an independent legal system and a free and diverse mass media (Goldblatt, 1995: 171). Given appropriate conditions, Beck believes that considerable political momentum could be generated to ensure that politicians, scientists and multinational companies are properly regulated and that manufactured risks are kept in check. Of course, all of this indicates that the subpolitical is necessarily a *conflictual space*, an arena in which actors table competing value claims as a basis for active debate. By way of example, Beck refers to the political conflict which resulted out of the proposed dumping of the Brent Spar oil rig by Shell. In this case, under substantial pressure from non-governmental environmental organisations and facing a decline in sales through consumer boycotting, the powerful multinational company reneged on its decision to sink the oil rig in the North Sea. For Beck, this example illustrates the workings of two overlapping political modernities of industrial and reflexive modernity. Beck believes that the Shell oil case demonstrates the failings of the industrial society political model and the power of subpolitical activity. In this instance, methods of direct action by passed the formal system, highlighting the potential power of subpolitical campaigns (Beck, 1999: 40).

However, for Beck subpolitics is more complex than simply being a forum where David is permitted to slay Goliath. In certain cases, the two characters may end up lining up on the same side of the table, albeit for different ideological reasons. For example, in the GM food debate, Greenpeace has sided *with* certain companies such as Iceland and Unilever and against the British government. This indicates that subpolitics produces a range of fragmented alliances and identities as unlikely coalitions involve themselves in large and small-scale battles outside of the party political process (Beck, 1998a: 76). In championing subpolitics, Beck calls for the

development of democratic freedoms which are rooted in everyday culture and activities (Beck, 1998a: 70):

> To be sure, risk cannot be banned from modern life, but what we can and indeed should achieve is the development of new institutional arrangements that can better cope with the risks we are presently facing; not with the idea in mind that we might be able to regain full control, but much more with the idea in mind that we have to find ways to deal democratically with the ambivalences of modern life and decide democratically which risks we want to take (Beck, 1999: 108).

Prior to critically evaluating Beck's argument, it must be noted that proposals for a restructured political system are common within social theory, from the work of Karl Marx through to André Gorz. Despite mirroring several aspects of Marx's work - in particular the inexorability of capitalist crisis and the inevitability of political opposition - Beck differs substantially in terms of his understanding of the driving force of political change. Whilst traditional Marxists have maintained that a political revolt against the structures of capitalism will be led by the exploited working class (Hume, 1997), Beck believes that subpolitics is an inclusive form of political conflict which is not driven by a specific revolutionary class:

> Of course, everybody asks who is the *political subject* of risk society...my argument is as follows: nobody is the subject and everybody is the subject at the same time (Beck, 1998: 19).

For Beck, the universality of social bads means that actors from a plethora of backgrounds will come together in the subpolitical space 'to reinvent the co-ordinate system and to reset and realign the switches' (Beck, 1998a: 104). In concurrence, the neo-Marxist thinker André Gorz agrees that the subjects of a possible revolution are an indistinct 'non-class of non workers' (Gorz, 1982; 1998). However, whereas Gorz stresses the crisis of the system of full employment, Beck centres on manufactured risks as the motor for political action.

In the German context, Beck's work has drawn inevitable parallels with Habermas' work on the public sphere (Prior et al, 2000). Meanwhile, in Britain, the Giddensian concept of 'life politics' bears a striking resemblance to the notion of subpolitics. For Giddens, life politics is about small-scale local activities which take place outside of the formal political system, free from delineated hierarchies. As with subpolitics, engagement in life politics is characterised by debate about future oriented ethical issues (Giddens, 1994: 14).[105]

Sharing the goals of such theorists, Beck attempts to envisage a more deliberative and inclusive polity. In forwarding subpolitics as an alternative to formal politics, Beck is essentially painting the shape of a future politics using broad-brush strokes (Beck, 1997: Introduction). Of course, given Beck's fixation with risk, his general critique of the political process is less developed than other prominent political theorists (Offe, 1984; 1994; Habermas, 1989). In this sense, the concept of subpolitics is best approached as an 'idea in progress' rather than a fully fledged blueprint for a political future.

5.5 The Political Logic of Risk: From Good Times to Bad Times?

Perhaps the most contested feature of Beck's discussion of contemporary western politics is the alleged shift in distributional logic. As recounted in chapters one and two, in industrial society political debate is focused around the way in which the 'cake' is divided up. In the risk society, the cake itself becomes poisoned, producing a string of side effects which radically alter the nature and pattern of distribution. In discussing the transforming distributional logic, Beck is seeking to develop a model that captures macro shifts in the composition and effects of risks (Beck, 1995: 78). This model also describes sizeable modifications in political motivations which are

[105]Interestingly, Beck's original title for *The Reinvention of Politics* - first published in Germany in 1992 - was *Beyond Left and Right*. The same title was, of course, subsequently employed by Giddens (1994).

linked up with particular stages of modernity. To distinguish between different epochs, Beck refers to a triad of defining features. In simple industrial society, a *lack of social goods* is said to lead to feelings of *hunger*, which drive political concerns about *scarcity*. By contrast, in the risk society, the triad is constituted by an *excess of social bads*, leading to feelings of *anxiety* which fuel concerns about *safety* (Beck, 1992, 49).

Whilst the idea of a changing distributional logic is clearly intended as heuristic, this aspect of Beck's work has nonetheless attracted widespread criticism (Draper, 1993, McMylor, 1996; Scott, 2000). The most common point of dispute concerns the degree of change in political emphasis from social goods to social bads (Cottle, 1998; Draper, 1993; Goldblatt, 1995; Scott, 2000). As indicated in chapter two, the evidence in favour of a fundamental shift in political logic is somewhat speculative (Goldblatt, 2000: 149; Marshall, 1999). Whilst a strong case can be made for a *general* increase in public concern about manufactured risk, this is not commensurate with a decline in interest in traditional cleavages produced by the inadequate distribution of goods (Goldblatt, 1995: 183; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 106). As I shall go on to elucidate, the notion of a seismic shift in distributional logic is difficult to empirically validate and is ideologically and theoretically questionable.

In reviewing the literature, it would seem that Beck's political model has been challenged by three related sets of arguments. Firstly, several theorists have pointed out that Beck provides scant empirical evidence to demonstrate a shift in political motivations (McMylor, 1996: 53; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 107). A second group of critics have theoretically challenged the linear perceptual relationship between logics suggested by Beck (Scott, 2000; Goldblatt, 1995). Finally, a third group of theorists have questioned the desirability of transferring the focus of political attention from goods to bads (Rose, 2000; Hinchcliffe, 2000). Despite differences in critical trajectory, the questions posed by those challenging Beck on theoretical, empirical

and ethical grounds are analogous: What exactly distinguishes a 'good' from a 'bad'? To what extent are 'bads' connected to 'goods'?

The most obvious weakness surrounding the theory of transmuting political logics is a lack of concrete evidence. Whilst gathering data on such a subject would be an onerous task, any theory worth its salt needs to marshal more than anecdotal evidence. Any attempt to empirically ground what are, after all, fairly sweeping claims is patently absent in Beck's work (McMylor, 1996; Hajer and Kesselring, 1999: 3).

The second more abstract set of objections to the distributional logic revolve around Beck's assumption of experiential difference under each political logic. Scott (2000) has convincingly argued that the anxiety and insecurity which Beck ties to an excess of bads might equally be related to a lack of goods. In suggesting that insecurity relates exclusively to social bads, Beck rather overlooks the complexity of risk perception. As Scott notes, the crude perceptual associations outlined by Beck are unlikely to be borne out in social reality:

> 'I am afraid', for Beck the motto of the risk society, is no less appropriate to class societies even if the focal point of anxiety has shifted. Fear of hunger, like the risk of ecological catastrophe, is most of the time probabilistic (Scott, 2000: 36).

It needs to be recognised that feelings of anxiety are also associated with scarcity and are not solely attributable to risk. Scott's criticisms imply that a clear distinction between the two political logics is impossible to sustain. For instance, the uncertainty surrounding employment in the West is used by Beck as evidence of the move towards the bads-distributing logic of the risk society (Beck 1992: 144; 2000: 69). However, given the link between unemployment and scarcity - *as well as* insecurity - the uneven distribution of work serves equally well as an illustration of the logic of the class society. Of course, these interpretive issues are eminently debatable. However, they do raise wider concerns about the theoretical foundations which

underpin Beck's work.

As discussed in chapter two, the sources of goods distribution in class societies include paid employment, the nuclear family, welfare systems and formal democracy (Beck, 1992: 13). In *Risk Society* (1992), Beck does make some attempt to scrutinise the processes and features of the goods distributing class society. Furthermore, it would appear that the institutions indicated do appear to be apposite examples of everyday structures within class societies. However, the markers of the bads distributing risk society are more theoretically suspect. Beck's key examples of bads distribution are nuclear accidents, genetic technology and environmental disequilibrium (Beck, 1992; 1994). In the first instance, Beck rather takes for granted the *threat* of such risks, failing to engage with literature which supports the use of genetic technology or nuclear power. As highlighted in chapter four, the *prevalence* of social bads in everyday consciousness is simply assumed. Could it be that the most consuming issues for politicians and the public are the 'goods' which are closer to home and more easily manipulated? Whilst few people would argue that the risk of nuclear warfare is unimportant, Beck tends to use the most catastrophic of possibilities as a basis for constructing a general argument. This means that the qualitative distinction between scarcity and risk is based on the assumption of worst imaginable accidents as the paradigmatic form of contemporary risk. As such, various degrees of risk distribution are simply subsumed 'under the umbrella of total catastrophe, under the nuclear mushroom as it were' (Scott, 2000: 36). Thus, we can identify a distinct slippage in Beck's theoretical understanding of social bads between existent and hypothetical risk. As Bromley (2000: 83) notes, whilst certain 'bads' such as unemployment are quantifiable, others such as nuclear energy and biotechnology are less easily calibrated.

Beck's conceptual slippage itself produces a further set of questions about the *extent* of the movement from a political logic of class to one of risk. The worst imaginable

accident paradigm indicates that risks are potentially universal, enveloping rich and poor alike. However, by and large, material resources still govern lifestyle choices and the subsequent range of risk reduction strategies available to the individual (Smith and Goldblatt, 2000: 69). Consequently, the overall distribution of risks in society remains tightly fastened to wealth and poverty (Culpitt, 1999: 21; Dryzek, 1995, Draper, 1993). It must be remembered that affluent and powerful groups are still able to buy their way out of certain risk situations, whilst the poor have no such option (Bromley, 2000: 97; Day, 2000). Whilst class as a form of social identity may be waning, in many countries material class inequalities have worsened. This rather questions Beck's oft quoted maxim: 'poverty is hierarchic, whilst smog is democratic' (Beck, 1992: 36). Further, in both class *and* risk societies the wealthy can only be *relatively* rather than *absolutely* secure:

> The wealthy were protected from scarcity and remain protected from risk; 'protection' here being understood as 'relative protection'. Smog is just as hierarchical as poverty so long as some places are less smoggy than others (Scott, 2000: 36).

In reality, patterns of global risk distribution indicate that risks have uneven geographical impacts, with certain regions being more vulnerable to exposure. Whilst globalization has undoubtedly freed up the movement of risks, social bads are universal only in the hypothetical sense. The mobility of hazards might well lead to all areas being theoretically equally at risk, but, as always, some areas are more equal than others (Dean, 1999: 140). Whilst Beck's notion of 'boomerang effects' appeals to egalitarian principles, we must not lose sight of the fact that risks are often experienced by cultures distant from the point of generation (Bromley, 2000; Smith and Goldblatt, 2000: 101). For example, toxic waste is still transported away from western producing countries to burden the peoples of less affluent nations (Cochrane and Pain, 2000: 19). Thus, other than in worst-case scenarios, it would seem reasonable to argue that boomerang effects are the *exception*, rather than the rule in matters of risk distribution (Goldblatt, 1995: 178). In everyday practice, the

boomerang is rarely thrown out in such a way that it is likely to return to its owner.

The weight of evidence seems to indicate that exposure to risk overlaps with exposure to scarcity. This is illustrated by Chernobyl and Bhopal, the two examples most frequently used by Beck (Beck, 1992: 7; 1992: 43). Both disasters are described by Beck as 'galloping risks' that demonstrate the mobility of manufactured risks. However, by far the most immediate and catastrophic effects were felt locally by plant workers and those inhabiting the area nearby. To be fair to Beck, he does acknowledge that the logics of goods and bads can merge, with risks augmenting existing class cleavages (Beck, 1992: 44). This is particularly the case in the transitional phase between industrial society and the risk society. However, this acknowledgement is often obscured by a stronger desire to emphasise the universality of risk.

The alleged universality of risk has brought to the fore a final set of ethical objections to Beck's work. Both Rose (2000) and Dickens (1997) question whether risks should supersede issues of poverty on the political agenda. Certainly, more traditional political issues still seem to be high priorities for the general public and politicians (Goldblatt, 1995: 177). As Rose notes:

> Getting the whole of Europe back to work, reducing the high levels of male violence and xenophobia, responding more effectively to the re-emergence of genocide are arguably as big problems as managing risk to the environment, and, so far as the new genetics are concerned, to 'us' (Rose, 2000: 64).

Whilst Rose provides little evidence to support such assumptions, her sentiments do remind us that a shift in public concern from class to risk should not be simply assumed. As elucidated in chapter three, dreadful risks and one-off catastrophes are eminently more reportable than the continuing problems of poverty and malnutrition that beset people in many areas of the globe. This means that fundamental political issues of goods distribution such as malnutrition, sanitation, disease and inequality

receive inadequate attention in the pages of newspapers and in TV broadcasts. Meanwhile, risks which contain 'fright factors' such as uncertainty, dread, and irreversibility are more readily reported (Bennett, 1998). Indeed, it might well be that the weight of media coverage of risks has skewed the appearance of political concerns amongst the public in the West. As elucidated in chapter three, the prevalence of risk as a political issue cannot simply be read-off with reference to media representations.

Certainly, media reporting of AIDS, BSE and GMOs has catapulted risk forward as a politically 'hot' and volatile issue. However, as Rose notes, such an acute focus on risk might well have served to cloud the continuance of traditional inequalities (Rose, 2000: 65). Whilst problems of scarcity have not disappeared, political interest in them has been somewhat shoulder-charged by matters of risk. All of this suggests that public concerns about the universal distribution of bads have not displaced concerns about the sectoral distribution of goods. Without the benefit of empirical evidence, it would seem more reasonable to argue that traditional political issues of class, health and crime have been *augmented* by issues of risk, rather than *replaced* by them (Bronner, 1995: 85; Goldblatt, 1995: 179; McMylor, 1996: 53). Consequently, it is tempting to conclude that traditional determinants of goods stratification - of class, gender, ethnicity, age and geography - are still the key indicators of life chances in western society and will remain so into the foreseeable future (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 96). Meanwhile, the global political failure of society to meet fundamental human needs serves as a sharp reminder to those absorbed with the possibilities of a risky future:

> 1.3 billion persons, that is 22 percent of the world's population, live below the poverty line. As a consequence of such severe poverty, 841 million persons are today malnourished; 880 million are without access to health services, one billion are without adequate shelter, 1.3 billion are without access to safe drinking water; two billion are without electricity; and 2.6 billion are without access to sanitation (Pogge, 1999: 27).

For many, dangers to health are more basic and more imminent than the spectre of

manufactured risks (Bujra, 2000). Indeed, perhaps there is something of a perverse quality about the post-scarcity politics of risk when cast against the backdrop of such marked global inequalities. For the poor in continents such as Africa, Asia and South America, political prioritisation of technological risks might smack of decadence (Scott, 2000: 39). So, once more we come up against the thorny question of 'who speaks' about risk. In many countries the disenfranchised have little option but to further exhaust natural resources and to generate environmental risks (Bromley, 2000: 90). Whilst many in the West might well perceive genetic and nuclear risk to be *the* most important political issues, those dwelling in favellas in Rio or shanty-towns in Lesotho will speak of different priorities. It would appear that the 'global politics' of the risk society emanate out from the West and rather trample over differences between cultures around the globe (Bujra, 2000: 63). Given that Beck envisages western countries to be the forerunners in the development of a global cosmopolitan democracy, the danger of cultural imperialism looms large. Should the West be able to set the agenda on global politics? Is this not perverse, given that the bulk of manufactured risks are produced by western countries? Moreover, does Beck's appeal for subpolitical organisation run the risk of simply extending western political dominance?

The present state of global debate about risks suggests that the discourse of risk is largely being framed in the West. Like risk distribution itself, the distribution of subpolitical activity is unevenly spread around the globe. As McGrew notes, there are notably few subpolitical non-governmental organisations in the African continent (McGrew, 2000: 148).

In summarising, Beck's proposed shift from a politics of goods to a politics of bads has produced a lively and socially progressive debate. This discussion has pointed towards significant empirical, theoretical and ethical and objections to Beck's argument. Firstly, on an empirical level, further research is needed to quantify the

extent of the changing emphasis in political form and content. Secondly, at an ethical level the uncomfortable political choice between dealing with present inequalities or avoiding future hazards comes to the fore. It must be remembered that in *global* terms, the inadequate distribution of goods currently impacts upon - and indeed terminates - more lives on a daily basis than the excessive production of bads. This said, the optimal channel for political energies might well be through a dual strategy which attempts to tackle global poverty and regulates the future manufacture of risk. This would seem to be an occasion when a 'third way' is truly the most viable and desirable alternative. Thirdly, the theoretical objections to Beck's political model suggest that the distinction between 'goods' and 'bads' cannot be theoretically sustained, due to the indeterminate character of risks and the apparent mutuality between the two logics. In reality, it would appear that social bads tend to dovetail with social goods, both in terms of risk distribution and political concerns.

The combined evidence from these three branches of criticism suggest that Beck's demarcation of distributional logics is ethically debatable, crudely constructed and impossible to sustain at an empirical level. In global terms, the relative degree of political concern about the distribution of poverty and of risk is difficult to quantify, given the various political priorities of individuals in diverse continents, countries and regions.

5.6 Risk as Subpolitics

Having identified the theoretical inadequacy of the notion of distributional logics, a more extensive analysis of Beck's understanding of the relationship between risk and subpolitical action is required. In the following discussion, evidence which both supports and refutes Beck's argument will be evaluated. The prime rationale will be to assess both the extent and the power of subpolitical engagement. To this end, the

controversy which has arisen in response to the development of genetically modified organisms will be mobilised as a touchstone for debate. This discussion of risk as an enabling political force will then be counterpoised with reference to the discursive approach to risk. Finally, in synthesis, the relative value of each approach in making sense of contemporary political trends will be considered.

As has been noted, Beck maintains that the scale and extent of manufactured threats effectively forces citizens to consider risk in political terms. However, according to Beck, this public reflexivity cannot be satisfactorily expressed via the traditional routes of the formal political system. The spread of risk in modernity undermines traditional power bases, making society susceptible to political restructuring. For Beck, the deleterious effects of short-term economic goals and blind technological development paradoxically present the opportunity to construct a new global political order (Smith, 1997: 170). As public unease about risk shades into wider distrust in institutions, opposition emerges outside of the system in various forms of subpolitical activity (Beck, 2000b: 222). It is argued that this activity has the potential to radically restructure social institutions and to stimulate the development of a 'cosmopolitan democracy' (Abbinnett, 2000: 115).

In concordance with Beck, a cursory glance over the terrain of European politics does indicate low levels of public involvement in the formal democratic process (Offe, 1996; Rustin, 1994). If voting statistics are reliable indicators of public interest, significant numbers appear to be sceptical about the ability of political system to employ change and to empower its citizens (Beck, 2000: 115). Of course, a decline in interest in the formal process must be set within the wider context of the burgeoning global scope of multi-national corporations and the diminishing power of nation states as political power blocs (Held, 2000).

As Beck notes, a mood of general dissatisfaction with formal politics is particularly

prevalent amongst young people (Beck, 1998; Brynner and Ashford, 1994; Park, 1996). However, recent global political demonstrations demonstrated that young people are nevertheless still motivated by political concerns (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). This suggests that - for young people at least - the conflictual space of politics has shifted away from party politics and towards more direct political actions. These subterranean shifts in political activity are highlighted by the rising profile of Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) which have extended the boundaries of the political arena. As David Held notes, in the twentieth century the number of NGOs has risen from around 200 in 1909 to over 50,000 in the year 2000 (Held, 1999: 151). The single issue campaigns waged by various NGOs do appear to have impacted upon political structures. Undoubtedly, subpolitical pressure has contributed towards the development of novel ways of enhancing public involvement, such as citizens' juries, deliberative polls and consensus conferencing (Coote and Mattinson, 1997). Furthermore, in response to public discontent a number of quasi-autonomous government bodies have been set up to bridge the gap between citizens and the state. For example, in Britain the Food Standards Agency was founded after fierce lobbying by consumer groups and public disquiet about the mismanagement of food-related issues such as BSE and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Indeed, GM foods remains a politically hot issue which is frequently referred to by Beck as an exemplar of the ability of manufactured risks to stimulate subpolitical activity. Given the political controversy that continues to surround GM foods, it may be fruitful to pursue the issue as a touchstone for a broader analysis of subpolitics.

In theory, genetically modified foods bear all the classic hallmarks of manufactured risk.[106] In the first instance, the potential risk itself is created by human endeavours within science and industry. Secondly, given the dominant production of base GM foodstuffs for use in other products, the diffusion of GM foods is almost impossible

[106]It must be noted that many of the risks to public health which have been attached to genetically modified foods are yet to materialize, and, indeed, may never do so.

to delimit. Thirdly, the potential effects of modified foods on the human body and the environment are indeterminate and contested. Fourthly, the risk presented by GM foods is effectively boundless and potentially catastrophic. As Beck writes:

> Genetically modified food is a global business and anxiety about the unknown consequences and for the planet are a worldwide concern. Moreover, it is the *globality* of the phenomenon which explains why it is so hard to deal with (Beck, 1999: 107).

Genetically modified food crops were first commercially grown in the United States in 1995 and have more recently been developed in other countries such as Britain, Mexico and Brazil. In 1996 the first GM food products of soya and maize were sold by Monsanto. It has since emerged that the company also strategically mixed GM and non-GM crops in the food chain making it impossible to differentiate between genetically modified and GM-free products (ESRC Report, 1999: 9). Currently a wide variety of genetically manufactured foodstuffs are available, ranging from oilseed rape to fruit and vegetables. Those in favour of geno-technology argue that GM foods are more flavoursome, more resistant to damage and can be stored for longer periods. As Adam notes:

> Like previous technological innovations, it holds out the promise of cornucopia: the end of food shortages and world hunger, poverty and disease, weather and season dependence (Adam, 1998: 11).

However, the release of GM foods into the human food chain has provoked widespread public concern in several European countries. A number of NGOs such as Greenpeace and Genewatch have challenged food manufacturers and governments, arguing that GM foods may be dangerous to eat and could cause long-term damage to the environment.

The genetic modification of foods involves the isolation of a gene from one organism for cross-fertilisation with another species. Thus, the use of genetic technology signals

a shift from common methods of inter-species breeding, to genetic cross-species breeding. Opponents of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) have argued that genetically altered crops may be transferred to other crops via insects, causing cross-pollination and producing incalculable effects. Indeed, a series of problems with GM crops are beginning to emerge. In Britain GM maize has already damaged butterflies and modified oilseed rape has contaminated non-GM foods produced miles away from test sites. More concerningly, oppositional groups point out that the long-term physiological effects of consuming genetically modified foods are unknown.

In Britain, the anti-GM movement has gathered momentum, driven forward by lobbying groups such as Greenpeace. Despite significant public concern, the government have rejected the precautionary principle and elected to support the manufacture of GM foods. Despite conceding that genetically modified oilseed has already contaminated 1% of the oil seed population, the British government have refused to limit the production of GMOs to laboratories and have recently announced plans for twenty more outdoor sites.

5.7 The GM Food Debate: Subpolitics in Practice?

Research studies have indicated that one of the most dominant contemporary public health concerns surrounds the possible risk to health posed by the diffusion of GM foods (Cragg Ross Dawson Report, 2000; Mintel Report, 1999). The debate around GM foods bubbled under the surface in the 1990s and has now become a major public issue (ESRC Report, 1999). Currently, major biotechnology companies, ecological campaigners, politicians and supermarkets are all vying to communicate particular 'stories' about GM foods to the public (Mintel Report, 1999: 3). However, the manufacture of GMOs has provoked a surprisingly hostile reaction from the public. In this respect it would appear that public debate about GM foods is acting as a conduit

for the expression of wider moral and ethical concerns (Caygill, 2000: 155; CSEC Report, 1997: 3).

On the surface, the general disquiet about GM foods does lend weight to the development of public reflexivity around risk. In Europe a myriad of environmental, consumer and religious groups are campaigning vociferously against the use of GM technology. In Austria, a referendum involving about a sixth of the population voted in favour of keeping Austria a GM-free zone (Adam, 2000: 128). Meanwhile, the idea of a five-year 'thawing-out' period without further experimentation is supported by over 56 different non-governmental organisations in Britain. Furthermore, GM food protesters have made use of direct political action, sabotaging GM testing sites in organised cells. As Adam writes:

> Europeans...have responded with unusual strength of feeling to GM promoters' pronouncements that GM food is here to stay, that it is the future and that we had better get used to it. They are making their voices heard through opinion polls and demonstrations, by creating and joining anti-GM organizations, and by switching in large numbers to organically produced food (Adam 2000: 129).

For Beck, the pressure exerted on dominant institutions around GM foods is indicative of the collapse of expert power and credibility and the wider 'subpoliticization' of society (Beck, 1998: 16). Certainly the conflict surrounding GMOs demonstrates that public opinion and micro-political actions can influence the behaviour of powerful companies (Williams, 1998). Public pressure has had a marked impact on business strategy, as has been illustrated by the rejection of GM foods by high profile companies such as Unilever. Moreover, there has been a steep general decline in the number of genetically modified products stocked by supermarkets.[107]

Recent research into public attitudes towards GM foods demonstrates that many

[107] A recent BBC documentary entitled *Is GM safe?* suggested that in 1996 British supermarkets were stocking an average of 2000 genetically modified products as compared to a current average of less than 100.

'ordinary' people possess a sophisticated grasp of the possible risks presented by genetic modification. Furthermore, studies suggest that - in addition to the perceived risk to public health - GM foods are also perceived as a political and an ethical issue. A recent Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) report and a forerunning Centre for Environmental and Social Change (CSEC) document have sought to gauge political attitudes towards GM foods (ESRC Report, 1999; CSEC Report, 1997). Using focus group research, Robin Grove-White and his colleagues found the public to be highly sceptical towards the introduction of GM foods. For a significant number, the political motives behind the genetic modification of food were commonly seen to be money, power and profit (CSEC Report, 1997: 11). In a similar vein, the ESRC research suggests that many people believe that the British government has already made its mind up on genetic technology and has chosen to adopt a staunchly pro-industry position (ESRC Report, 1999: 8). A sizeable number of respondents in the CSEC studies chose to draw no real distinction between the government itself and the 'autonomous' regulatory bodies overseeing the development of GMOs:

> The responses suggested that people have a general sense that they are not fully informed about food risks; that they tend to mistrust scientific claims of safety; that they question the motives of corporations involved in its development; and that they identify most with the voice of NGOs (CSEC Report, 1997: 14).

These research findings do provide grist for Beck's mill, suggesting that - in the case of GM foods - critical reflexive thought about risk has led to a tangible distrust in expert knowledge. Many respondents perceived the introduction of GM foods to be 'the thin edge of the wedge', paving the way for human genetic modification (CSEC Report, 1997: 11). This said, public attitudes toward GM foods in Britain need to be understood historically, in the context of a series of food scares such as salmonella, listeria, e-coli and BSE (Pidgeon, 2000: 47). Evidently, individuals do not approach risk issues as *tabula rasa.* The strength of public feeling about GM foods in Britain must be set against institutional mishandling of preceding food scares (Cragg Ross

Dawson Report, 2000).

5.8 Risk as Discourse

Whilst evidence of direct political actions by various NGOs in Europe does provide support for the idea of subpolitics, this activity must be set against the gamut of responses to risk. Clearly, not all potentially risky issues will generate the subpolitical engagement suggested by Beck. As made explicit in chapter four, the dissemination of risk - both as an idea and as a material entity - will produce complex and differentiated responses amongst public groups (Wynne, 1996). To elaborate on this issue, the work of several authors of a Foucauldian bent will now be considered. This evaluation will also serve to counterbalance Beck's purported link between manufactured risk and political activity. In particular, the possible disciplinary effects produced by discourses of risk will be considered, drawing upon the work of Lupton (1999), Culpitt (2000) and Castel (1991).

As discussed earlier, the rise in political activity of a myriad of subpolitical groups is central to the risk society thesis. For Beck, the direct actions of NGOs against the development of genetically modified organisms provide ample evidence of subpolitical activity. Indeed, the recursive global anti-capitalist demonstrations and the road blocks recently used by European hauliers against rising petrol prices serve as ready-made examples of subpolitics in practice. However, such anecdotal evidence must be yoked to wider issues of ideological influence and the relative distribution of power. Whilst political factions outside of the formal process might well be more visible, it must be remembered that the overwhelming majority of political decisions are still made by experts in power-bound spaces within institutions. This suggests that a greater range of voices might indeed be allowed to *speak* about risk, but these voices do not carry equal weight at the level of social policy and material effects.

Arguing along with Beck, it is reasonable to suggest that the actions of experts are increasingly questioned and regulated (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998:254; Prior, 2000: 111). However, it remains debatable as to whether these advances represent a distinct movement towards a subpolitical culture. Contra such a scenario, several social constructionists have identified a counter trend towards the individualisation of risk via the employment of risk as a discourse. Whereas Beck believes that manufactured threats generate public knowledge about risk and act as a catalyst for political reflexivity, Foucauldians have it that risk can function in a disciplinary fashion, policing and restricting social behaviour.

Like risk, discourse itself is a generic term that has been used in a variety of ways within different disciplines. Here, we shall work within the boundaries of the definition provided within the social sciences. Although discourse has traditionally been linked to language, a broader understanding of discourse has been developed within social theory. This understanding of discourse refers to a set of ideas, beliefs and practices that provide a means of representing knowledge. As such, discourse enables the presentation of certain forms of knowledge and restricts the dissemination of others (Woodward and Watt, 2000: 22). As Lupton notes, information about risks has historically been collected by a range of experts such as 'medical researchers, statisticians, sociologists, demographers, environmental scientists, legal practitioners, bankers and accountants to name but a few' (Lupton, 1999: 87). Hence, institutional and social practices produce knowledge through language which forms broader bodies of ideas, or discourses. Thus, as strong social constructionists point out, in contemporary culture medical, scientific and economic discourses tend to dictate what can and cannot be said about risk. Throughout western history discourses have been employed as a tool of mystification and as a means of social closure, with medical and scientific language excluding women and the working classes (Woodward and Watt, 2000: 24; Douglas, 1985: 13). But how does discourse specifically relate to risk? How

is it that discourse makes risk 'thinkable'?

Foucauldians contend that it is only through the workings of discourses that we come to recognise and understand risk. Discourses of risk are said to flow through the networks of social institutions which structure and govern everyday practice, making risk 'thinkable'. It is only through our experiences in the domains of education, employment and the welfare state that we 'know' about the existence and the consequences of risks. Through the operation of discourse - as an idea *and* a material practice - what counts as knowledge about risk is determined. Hence, for Foucauldians the key issue is not so much the nature or the effects of risks, but the way in which risks are constructed and lived through discourse (Dean, 1999). As Culpitt notes, 'risk cannot be construed just as a potential threat to the self. Risk perception also involves the ways in which the self is able to perceive the self' (Culpitt, 1999: 23).

For those favouring a social constructionist approach, expert institutions employ discourses to obscure, filter and distort risks: 'institutions use the risk issue to control uncertainty about human behaviour, to reinforce norms, and to facilitate co-ordination' (Douglas, 1985: 92). By way of example, the mystification of risk via discourse was evidenced in the early stages of the BSE crisis by the scientific language used by politicians (Harris and O'Shaughnessy, 1997).

Discourses are said to modify and regulate behaviour by generating 'truths' about society which are interiorized by individuals (Foucault, 1978; 1980). It is argued that the interiorization of discourse enables people to make sense of the world and situates individuals in subject positions (Mackey, 1999: 127). For Foucauldians, this means that power relations are no longer exclusively reproduced by force or violence, but by discourses which facilitate self regulation (Lupton, 1999a: 4). Taken as a whole, the discursive approach raises several unsettling questions about the effects of risk. How

does the concept of risk relate to knowledge production procedures? *Does* risk flow through the capillaries of dominant institutions? More importantly, do discourses of risk serve to dissipate political opposition?

Following the Foucauldian critique, Beck underplays the operation of discourses of risk and overlooks the possibility that risks may regulate political behaviour and stifle oppositional actions.[108] As Lupton (1999: 8) notes, the rationality of risk appears to be expanding within culture, tumbling into numerous social fields. Social workers provide estimations of harm to children, probation officers speculate about re-offending rates, food agencies impart information about food scares and so on. Whilst a strong case can be made for the existence of an institutional language of risk, the more crucial issue is the extent to which expert knowledge *conditions* individual attitudes and behaviour towards risk. For Foucault, expert discourses of risk provide the parameters of appropriate action, serving as tools of regulation and surveillance (Caplan, 2000: 23). Thus, expert discourses of risk are central to the construction of subjectivity, reproducing 'docile bodies' which do not threaten the political status quo.

In agreement with the strong social constructionist argument, social institutions have historically used fears about risk to shape ideological discourses and to enhance governance. Because the construction of the self is informed by expert knowledge and the circulation of expert discourses of risk, as discourses become more developed a greater degree of self monitoring and self regulation is required of the populace (Lupton, 1999: 88). As such, Foucauldians argue that the discourse of risk induces patterns of social conformity that are difficult to resist (Segal, 1997). As Schilling notes, the threat of health risks has encouraged people to 'keep' their bodies fit, healthy and active (Schilling, 1997: 65). As mentioned in chapter four, in

[108]Given the abstract nature of discourse, this is an extremely difficult proposition to verify or falsify at an empirical level.

contemporary culture greater emphasis is placed on self-planning to avoid risks, particularly given the strain placed on welfare systems by an ageing population. Furthermore, the gradual removal of state 'benefits' has further shifted responsibility for risk away from the state. Ironically, at the very time when the discourse of risk is most developed, governments appear to be strategically removing insurance systems and placing the burden of risk on the individual.

Beck does recognise the ideological power of institutions in governing information about risk, but contends that the discourse of risk is increasingly opened up and challenged by subpolitical actions. Of course, Foucauldians disagree, maintaining that power is 'provocative', closing down rather than opening-up political possibilities (Allen, 2000: 39):

> Discourses about risk are socially constructed narratives. Neo-liberalism constructed the discourses about welfare risk for its own hegemonic purposes...in that sense neo-liberalism has *used* the anxiety about risk society for its own political ends (Culpitt, 1999: 113).

A particularly prominent strategy of neo-liberalism has been the use of risk as a tool of political blame (Rose, 2000: 67). The anthropologist Mary Douglas has traced the long history of risk and blame, arguing that all cultures desire accountability for risk in order to achieve mental closure (Douglas, 1992). For Douglas, risk is inextricably tied to blame and enables cultures to create and maintain social order in the light of flux and uncertainty (Culpitt, 1999: 93). Contra Beck, for Douglas the process of blame does not 'begin' from the risk and search for the group to blame, it begins with the group to blame and attaches the risk. As Dean (1999: 131) argues, 'the significance of risk does not lie with the risk *itself*, but what risk gets attached to'. Of course, this brings to the surface the relationship between risk and ideological stigmatisation. The pervasive use of cultural stereotypes indicates that a distrust of 'otherness' can easily escalate into the attribution of blame, whether this be warranted or not (Lash, 2000: 51, Woodward, 1997: 15).

It would appear that the kernel of the disagreement between the risk society perspective and the governmentality approach resides in their conflicting conceptions of power. Beck implies that political power over risk has been exercised by institutions in a top-down fashion and needs to be replaced by a bottom-up model via the furtherance of subpolitics. In contrast, followers of Foucault understand the relationship between risk and power to be more scattered. Theorists such as Culpitt have criticised Beck's objectivist construction of power, contending that power has never simply 'belonged' to dominant institutions, but flows through society as a whole. The governmentality approach suggests that discourses of risk invoke techniques of self-governance and compliance rather than political opposition (Mackey, 1999: 127). More specifically, Culpitt argues that political power cannot simply be wrested back from institutions by individuals in the direct manner suggested by Beck:

> It is not satisfactory to assume that discussions about risk can be tied solely to a revalorization of the pre-eminent power of individuals. In all of this it is the 'knowledge' *of*, and *about,* power that Foucault is attacking. Effective critique depends not so much on who has or does not have knowledge. It does not depend upon the sovereign/servant matrix. It is not about the power of *inside* knowledge *vis-a-vis outside knowledge*. It is rather about the *structures and patterns of knowledge itself* (Culpitt, 1999: 42).

What is at issue here is a fundamental disagreement about the nature of power in relation to risk. Foucauldians favour a circular and networked notion of power, contending that discourses of risk are interiorized by individuals. Conversely, Beck works with a more linear model of power which assumes that institutional discourses of risk are collapsing under the pressure of subpolitical activity. Whilst both theories perceive the individual to be self-monitoring, the concept of reflexivity allows Beck to attribute political agency to individuals. In the Foucauldian version, the techniques of self-surveillance produced by discourse are politically oppressive. As Lash explains:

> What appears as the freedom of agency for the theory of reflexivity is just another means of control for Foucault, as the direct operation of power on the body has been displaced by its mediated operation on the body (Lash, 1993: 20).

5.9 Reconfiguring the Politics of Risk: Discourse Revisited

Having critically reviewed competing perspectives on the political consequences of risk, it is now necessary to delve deeper into the governmentality and risk society perspectives, as a means of evaluating the relationship between risk and politics. In this section I will gauge the applicability of discourse theory to the politics of risk. In section 5.10, the cohesiveness of Beck's theory of subpolitics will be assessed.

As noted in chapter four, the discourse of risk has become increasingly prevalent within western cultures. This is evidenced by the culture of futurity that has emerged in relation to health, wealth and security. It is indisputable that greater cultural emphasis is being placed on developing personal strategies of risk avoidance through careful planning and lifestyle choices (Lupton, 1999; Giddens, 1994). In addition, social pressure to conform to the commands of expert knowledge is routinely placed upon those identified as 'high-risk' groups (Eldridge, 1998). Such general observations suggest that we can indeed identify the operation of a social discourse which constructs selective knowledge about risks and promotes strategies of self management. Whilst Beck's risk society thesis does alert us to the uncertain nature of life in modernity, it fails to adequately account for the way in which discourses of risk can produce compliance, steering individuals into increasingly controlled social spaces (Dean, 1999). Rather ironically, it has been argued that Beck's dystopic risk society vision has contributed towards a fear of the future, which may condition and restrict human actions (Culpitt, 1999: 54). However, the germ of truth contained in such a claim is surely outweighed by the positive contribution Beck's work has made

to dialogue and debate about the environment, health, technology and politics.

In comparison with Beck's view of the individual as reflexive actor it would appear then that the Foucauldian perspective takes a rather dim view of human agency. Indeed, parallels might reasonably be drawn between Foucault's theory of interiorization and Marx's false consciousness. Whilst Foucauldians have argued that discourse theory is more complex and experiential than theories of ideological effects, the former still harbours a residue of determinism. The problem with a pure Foucauldian approach is that it can cast individuals as docile bodies, routinely complying with disciplinary discourses (Schilling, 1997). However, as has been demonstrated in relation to genetically modified organisms, the polythemic concept of risk also stimulates oppositional political actions. The production of manufactured risks produces diverse rather than uniform social effects. Risks will, in certain circumstances, facilitate political opposition. In other situations, risk perceptions may reproduce the patterns of self-surveillance suggested by the governmentality approach. As has been illustrated, public attitudes towards GM foods indicate a complex mix of anxiety, compliance and opposition (ESRC Report, 1999).

Whilst greater research is required to qualify the link between particular contexts and political agency, recognition of the diversity of political responses to risk deals a further blow to the risk society thesis. Beck *does* acknowledge that individuals have become increasingly preoccupied with preventing and managing risk (Beck, 1998: 12), However, he does not adequately elaborate on the disciplinary potential of risk and negates the possibility that discourses of risk can constrain as well as enable political engagement. In contemporary society, risks promote individual as well as collective responses and solutions:

> A feeling of separation from the collectivity represents part of a long-term historical process which is closely associated with subjective perceptions of risk and uncertainty. Individuals are forced to negotiate a set of risks which impinge on all aspects of their daily lives, yet the intensification of individualism means that crises are perceived as individual shortcomings rather than the outcome of processes which are largely outside the control of individuals (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 114).

In the past and the present, risk has been utilised as a tool of regulatory power that has enabled governments to contain and deflect political opposition (Lupton, 1998: 88). Furthermore, in relation to certain health risks, such as AIDS, cancer and heart disease, governmental discourses have individualized risk, placing greater material responsibility on individuals rather than social structures. For example, clear attempts have been made to individualize structurally produced environmental risks. The general public are frequently invited to 'make the difference' by recycling, buying green products and conserving energy. Meanwhile, multi-nationals and national governments continue to gloss over the systemic reproduction of environmental dangers inherent in capitalist patterns of production and consumption.

This suggests that the individualization of blame can be utilised as a governmental strategy to conceal the institutional reproduction of risk. As Scott points out, issues of risk are inextricably linked to the attribution of blame and can invoke the ascription of danger to repressed groups (Scott, 2000: 40). British social history demonstrates that governmental discourses of risk have consistently identified marginalized groups as the producers of social risks. In recent times immigrants, gay people and single 'parents' have all been labelled as problem groups:

> For a person to be identified as posing a risk no longer means that she or he has to be individually observed for signs of dangerousness. It is enough that she or he is identified as a member of a 'risky population' (Lupton, 1999: 93).

As elucidated in chapter three, governmental discourses of risk are often seized upon and amplified by the mass media reproducing unwarranted stereotypes. Whilst Beck

perceives the mass media to act as a check on the institutional production of risk, it must be recognised that the media can also serve to mobilise public anxiety and encourage the political misdirection and individualization of blame. This connotes a degree of connectivity between risk and blame which is not adequately explored in the risk society thesis. The construction of risk as discourse by politicians and the media may steer some individuals toward the attachment of individual blame rather than critical reflection on the structural reproduction of risk.[109] Beck is justified in highlighting that subpolitical groups have attempted to counter dominant discourses of risk by collectivizing blame and focusing upon the systemic production of risk. However, major political parties continue to individualize blame by exclusively pinning responsibility on social groups, rather than social institutions. Hall's now classic study aptly demonstrates how the construction of a discourse of risk around crime was used to produce public acquiescence to governmental policy in Britain (Hall et al, 1982). Hall's work illustrates that the moral panic generated by labelling marginalised groups as 'other' can be used as a tactic to foster compliance for the political enforcement of restrictive law and order legislation.

Obviously, both public and governmental attitudes towards risk and blame will vary according to the nature and context of risk. For example, the risk of crime or disease may be more closely indexed to individualization than say, nuclear or chemical pollution. The extent to which conflicts about risk are individualized or collectivized in the public consciousness will in turn influence the degree of political opposition or acquiescence. Again, these political outcomes will vary over time, space and place, and will be formulated in relation to the nature and effects of particular risks. Beck's risk society model inhibits him from recognising that certain risks may promote institutional critique, whereas others may mask institutional culpability. Arguing against Beck, in contemporary society the discourse of risk has enabled governments

[109]For example, in Britain the systemic problem of how to manage and monitor paedophiles in the community led to *The News of the World* publishing the names and photos of convicted paedophiles. This practice effectively individualized the risk and led to aggressive vigilante campaigns around the country. Notably, a number of innocent people were mistakenly identified and became the subjects of violence and abuse.

to pass through policies of risk regulation which uphold the dominant social order. It would seem reasonable to argue that discourses of risk can reinforce power structures and power relations by reasserting social norms (Lupton, 1993: 431). Risks can, and do, stimulate conservative responses which may restrain freedom and creativity (Caplan, 2000: 23; Furedi, 1997). In this vein - echoing the sentiments of Foucault and Weber - Castel believes that discourses of risk promote zealous avoidance strategies, which are constitutive of a wider project of rationalisation and control:

> A vast hygienist utopia plays on the alternate registers of fear and security, inducing a delirium of rationality, an absolute reign of calculative reason and a no less absolute prerogative of its agents, planners and technocrats, administrators of happiness for a life to which nothing happens (Castel, 1991: 289).

Whilst Castel's case is characteristically overstated, there does appear to be a tangible relationship between discourses of risk and the ordering of human behaviour. Beck identifies such a pattern as integral to industrial society, but in remission in contemporary society. However, contra Beck's social explosiveness of hazard, it would seem that risks are not always ignited in the public sphere. Furthermore, even the social explosiveness of hazards does not guarantee rational argumentation between expert systems and subpolitical groups. Risk is not exclusively dealt with in a political and reflexive fashion by the public. The production of risk situates individuals and groups in *defensive* as well as *offensive* positions. As Giddens notes, the profile of risk can exacerbate ontological insecurity, stimulating political acquiescence rather than reflexive political activity (Giddens, 1990: 135). In the risk society thesis, the enervating capacity of discourses of risk is not given appropriate credence (Smith et al, 1997: 171).

In concordance with Beck, there is little doubt that expert institutions have traditionally held something of a monopoly on discourses of risk. When confronted by risks, social actors have habitually turned to institutions, both as knowledge referents

and as regulators. Although there has been a marked decrease in the trust placed in experts, individuals still ultimately expect institutions to provide information and guidance on risk (CSEC Report, 1997; ESRC Report, 1999). It cannot be assumed that risk discourses will force the general public to either mobilise politically or to attribute liability to expert systems. The social construction of risk as a discourse can also serve to invoke the public apportionment of blame. This in turn may serve to mask the multi-causal and structural reproduction of manufactured risks.

Whilst the Foucauldian critique has enriched the general debate about risk, governmentality approaches have been rightly criticised for presenting a passive and disembodied version of the individual. As Connell argues, discourse theory tends to depict individuals as ahistoric, 'blank slates on which disciplinary power is written' (Connell, 1995: 56). Whilst Foucault's subject is uniform and undifferentiated, in reality, individuals are culturally and socially specific creations. Along with Beck, Foucault also fails to adequately acknowledge that both levels of stratification and cultural identities will influence individual understandings of risk (Mythen et al, 2000: 15).

5. 10 Limitations of the Theory of Subpolitics

The criticisms of Beck's work suggested by the Foucauldian school have fuelled academic debate about the prevalence and efficacy of subpolitical actions. Consequently, many theorists remain circumspect about the emancipatory possibilities of a consensual politics of risk (Rustin, 1994; Nugent, 2000; Abbinnett: 2000). Other critical thinkers have been more sympathetic towards Beck's general approach. As Goldblatt (1995) points out, it would indeed appear that the locus of political conflict has become globalized. This said, even the staunchest followers of Beck would probably be forced to acknowledge that the precedence of subpolitics in

contemporary society is overstated in the risk society thesis. Whilst Beck is justified in identifying a trend of widening public interest in political activity outside of the system, the *extent* of public involvement in subpolitical activities remains debatable (Tomlinson, 1999: 205). Moreover, it is questionable that public involvement in subpolitical activities is definitively or even predominantly generated by risk. For example, high profile subpolitical struggles in Spain, Canada and Ireland are historically rooted in matters of cultural identity rather than risk. In other circumstances, subpolitical activity is likely to be a reflection of public disenchantment with existing political parties:

> The rise of protest parties, extremist right-wing parties and regional and secessionist parties in many western countries suggests that mainstream politics has become less capable of commanding allegiance. However, whether this decline can be accounted for in terms of the state's decreasing capacity to meet safety and security pledges in the face of new risks and hazards is less certain. One could probably make a more convincing case for attributing the decline in legitimacy to the failure of governments in the West to arrest the rise in structural unemployment, and to the accompanying process of social and geographical polarization (Goldblatt, 1995: 187).

It must also be noted that subpolitical activities rarely remain completely autonomous from the formal process. Whilst Beck sees subpolitics as a radical transformative process, it is clear that subpolitical activity runs the risk of being subsumed by the formal process. In recent times, national governments have attempted to suck non-governmental organisations into the existing political system via consultation and round table discussion. This is particularly prevalent in risk-related areas such as crime, drugs and food safety. In this respect, the capacity of national governments to reconfigure political structures must not be discounted. Unfortunately, Beck's globalist approach to politics rather underplays the reflexivity of national state institutions (Beck, 1999; 2000a).[110]

[110]For example, in France and Britain public concerns about food safety have led to the appearance of a state-funded agencies to monitor and regulate the production of food related risks.

As Held (2000) notes, the wider globalization of politics referred to by Beck has been driven by formal political institutions as well as subpolitical groups. There is strong evidence of an internationalisation of formal politics in response to the emergence of global issues (Held, 2000: 137).[111] Mirroring the rise in non-governmental organisations, there has also been a dramatic rise in the number of intergovernmental agencies. As such, it is probable that Beck overlooks important continuities in the spread of global political power. The ability of national governments to dissipate subpolitical power by incorporating NGOs into the system and generating global political structures is not acknowledged by Beck.

Relatedly, Beck fails to appreciate the coercive capabilities of nation states in policing and dissipating subpolitical protests. The British state has a long tradition of aggressively dealing with oppositional activity. This has recently been evidenced in the policing of the anti-capitalist demonstrations organised by a coalition of subpolitical groups. Organised protests against the politics of the World Trade Organisation in America, Norway and Czechoslovakia also met with similarly repressive measures. As has long been noted within social theory, the coercive actions of the state can serve to dissuade individuals from involvement in oppositional politics (Hillyard and Percy-Smith, 1988; Lodziak, 1997).[112] These fleeting observations appear to question the likelihood of the wide-scale development of a subpolitical culture.

The subpolitical structures and processes outlined by Beck have also been subject to criticism. The theory of subpolitics foresees a reformation of politics with new structures, institutions and debating mechanisms flowing from below. In particular, Beck calls for the development of an 'upper house of technology' to regulate large-

[111] McGrew claims that the number of intergovernmental national organisations has risen from 37 in 1909 to 300 in 1999 (McGrew, 1999: 138).

[112] Furthermore, the ideological labelling of protestors by national governments has been eagerly supported by sections of the national media. For example, press and TV news coverage of the May Day protests in London selectively represented the actions of a minority of anarchists as indicative of the motivations of all oppositional groups on a largely peaceful march.

scale political decisions (Beck, 1995a: 506). In Beck's utopia, subpolitical groups debate key political decisions using deliberative democratic formats. This scenario invites us to steal Bauman's waspish depiction of the Habermasian ideal: 'society shaped after the pattern of a sociology seminar, that is, there are only participants and the one thing that matters is the power of argument' (Bauman, 1992: 217)

At a time when postmodern theorists have been critical of general theories and grand narratives, Beck remains unashamedly committed to the goal of rational consensus (Beck, 1998: 21; Rustin, 1994: 394). Of course, the desirability of a democratic model worthy of the name can only be established by the public themselves. Certainly it should not be *assumed* by academics that the general public are inherently inclined towards a radical reformation of democratic procedures. Neither should it be taken as a given that more vigorous public political contributions would be universally welcomed. A significant movement toward the kind of risk-sensitive politics suggested by Beck would require a sizeable swing in public values and a determined desire to sacrifice short-term for long-term gains. In this respect, there might well be substantial difference between *ideological* consent to the elimination of risk and the *practical* consequences risk reduction policies would have in lived reality. Whilst it is probable that many would agree in *principle* to policies which reduce pollution levels or redistribute global wealth the knock on effects of these policies might be less welcome. As Stephen Nugent reflects:

> Those espousing a/the 'Third Way' which actually takes on an accurate global view should be preparing their constituents to accept rather grim costs: no winter shoes for the kids this year, or next (Nugent, 2000: 232).

For Beck, public appreciation of the deleterious effects of manufactured risks will nevertheless stimulate the call for improved democratic procedures (Beck, 1997; 1998). Underpinning the theory of subpolitics is the idea that enhanced forms of democracy are capable of eliminating the production of risks. Using the example of

transport policy in Munich, Hajer and Kesselring take issue with such an assumption, demonstrating that the development and diffusion of democratic principles does not ensure either the development of subaltern discourses, or the elimination of environmental risks.

In the Munich case, a variety of democratic methods such as referendums, round table discussions and deliberative democracy were used to improve the quality of the decision-making process. However, the assimilation of democratic methods ultimately failed to produce a reduction in the production of environmental risks. This leads the authors to conclude that round tables can bear a striking resemblance to the 'two-sided tables of corporatist practices which allowed industry privileged access to government' (Hajer and Kesselring, 1999: 14).

On a wider note, this suggests that the democratic alternatives envisaged by Beck have already been appropriated and bastardised by political and economic power brokers. The sensitivity of multinational companies to bad public relations has led forward-thinking multinationals to hold 'consultations' and to develop 'participatory processes'. As Purdue warns:

> By themselves, however, 'consultations' and 'participation' do not necessarily solve the problems which motivated people to protest in the first place. Who is consulted? Who participates? Who decides who is consulted and who participates? Who decides what the issues are that people shall be consulted on? What counts as relevant knowledge and expertise? Is anyone obligated to pay attention to the consultation, or is the simple process of staging a consultation considered sufficient? Unless these questions are discussed, 'consultation' and 'participation' are likely to prove merely new ways of containing - or even silencing - popular environmental concerns (Purdue, 1995: 170).

Up to press, attempts to involve subpolitical groups and lay actors in the political decision-making process have often involved superficial forms of participation which have promoted unequal expert-lay power relations. Along with Hajer and Kesselring,

Purdue concurs that the appropriation of supposedly democratic methods can afford risk producers 'public consent' via the gloss of partial forms of consultation (Purdue, 1995: 171). Hence, the parallels with Foucauldian discourse theory again arise, with the possibility that consultations about risk form part of a wider culture of governance:

> Indeed, the motive for the introduction of new participatory practices is just as likely to be about enhancing the effectiveness or *institutional capacity* of government as it is about a democratisation of policy making. When it comes to the assessment of what the role and function of participatory practices in a risk society actually requires, we need to carefully consider the way in which the new practices of governance relate to one another (Hajer and Kesselring, 1999: 19).

As Hajer and Kesselring point out, deliberative democratic practices may in principle offer a way forward for more interactive forms of political decision-making. However, as the Munich case demonstrates, democratic practices are just as easily tagged on to existing political procedures, attenuating rather than enhancing institutional accountability for risk.

To do justice to Beck, he does concede that subpolitical activity alone will not act as a panacea in terms of the elimination of risks (Beck, 1999: 131). Certainly given the diversity of non- governmental groups, it cannot be assumed that subpolitical activity will necessarily be of a socially progressive and emancipatory nature (McGrew, 2000: 146). The briefest of trawls around the internet demonstrates that vitriolic racist groups and Machiavellian business organisations are equally capable of forming subpolitical organisations. In *The Reinvention of Politics* Beck does acknowledge alternative political routes into 'counter-modernization', such as a rise in nationalism, political violence and the scapegoating of 'enemy stereotypes' (Beck, 1997: 5). However, the negative dimensions of subpolitics are treated as an addendum and sufficient emphasis is not afforded to such developments, particularly in the light of ongoing conflicts in Palestine, the Balkans, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. In this respect,

Beck's vision of politics is hampered by an overriding desire to portray politics as a corollary of risk.

Beck's insistence on viewing the political realm through the lens of risk does tend to impede the balance of his argument. This can be fleshed out by revisiting the debate about genetically modified foods. As discussed, public attitudes towards GM foods do appear to provide evidence of political reflexivity and increased public scepticism towards expert systems. However, we must also be alert to the contradictions and complexities that arise in the relationship between risk and politics. Several recent reports on public attitudes indicate that political responses to GM foods are far from uniform (Cragg Ross Dawson Report, 2000; Mintel Report, 1999; ESRC Report, 1999; CSEC Report, 1997). Rather than outright rejection of genetically modified foods, public attitudes appear to be scattered at various points along a continuum, ranging from wholehearted acceptance to flat rejection. As Grove-White et al note (CSEC Report, 1997: 7), a significant minority are supportive of genetic modification. Even amongst those who rejected the technology, attitudes about GM foods were found to be ambiguous and speculative. This is perhaps unsurprising given the indeterminate nature of the risk and the volatility of the issue in question. The evident contradiction within the risk society thesis is that risk often throws up public confusion rather than automatically stimulating oppositional political responses. As Grove White et al's inquiry into GM foods demonstrates: 'there was little evidence of any reflex hostility to the technology' (CSEC Report, 1997). Of course, the extent of subpolitical engagement in GM food issues will vary across the globe. For instance, whilst public debate is relatively advanced in Scandinavia and Germany, in the United States and Mexico GMOs are not considered to be a burning social issue (Adam, 2000).

These findings would appear to bring us full circle to the issue of differentiated risk perception discussed in chapter four. In the first instance, forms of stratification and

cultural identity will affect the formulation of political meanings of risk. Individuals tend to possess a range of cognitive perspectives on risk which vary according to social roles and positions (Mythen et al, 2000: 16). As such, political attitudes towards risk will evolve and mutate in time, space and place, with uniform political opposition to risk being uncommon. Remembering the criticisms raised by Nugent, it would be prudent to be alert to possible inconsistencies in the relationship between expressed opinion, attitudes and actual behaviour towards risk.

Secondly, political perceptions of risk appear to be fluid and ambiguous rather than absolute. In the midst of a general rejection of GM foods, Grove-White et al also detected a fatalistic attitude towards GM foods, with many viewing the continued diffusion of genetically altered foods as inevitable (CSEC Report, 1997: 1). Not only does this have echoes of discourse theory, it also alerts us to a distinct gap between risk consciousness and political action. Whilst studies demonstrate that the public are generally capable of considering risk critically and reflexively, it is less clear that this reflexivity has stimulated the political activity described in the risk society narrative. In order for subpolitics to flourish, the apparent discontinuity between critical risk consciousness and political activity needs to be bridged. Although research into public attitudes towards risk infers little active compliance in the Foucauldian sense, it simultaneously implies that feelings of political powerlessness are widespread:

> The development of genetically modified foods appeared to be seen as lying outside people's control, with little sphere for public choice or intervention...these feelings of inevitability seemed to reflect a felt absence of choice and a sense that, realistically speaking, the technology was unstoppable. Such inevitability appeared to lie behind feelings of passive resignation in the majority of the groups (CSEC Report, 1997: 13).

These are significant findings in relation to the broader issue of political mobilisation. Whilst Beck believes that risks such as GM foods will generate political activity, the evidence seems to suggest that political reflexivity will be just one response amongst many. Interestingly, despite an attitude of widespread distrust of expert systems,

empirical research suggests little rejection of institutional structures *per se*. Rather than recognition of the inability of regulatory structures to cope with manufactured risk, what emerges instead is a less refractory opinion that existing structures are simply functioning ineffectively. This is backed up by the expectation that existing regulatory bodies will continue to monitor risk in the future (CSEC Report, 1997). It would seem that there is a strong residual expectation that expert institutions are structurally capable of responding to the challenge of risk (ESRC Report, 1999; CSEC Report, 1997). Of course, this is indicative of a distinct ambivalence in terms of public attitudes towards the politics of risk and sits rather uncomfortably with Beck's assertions of radical political change:

> Thus, increasingly...people may now be exhibiting a form of 'virtual' trust in relation to regulators, acting *faute de mieux* 'as if' they feel trust, because of a realistic sense of a lack of alternatives in circumstances of all-embracing and non-transparent dependency on expert judgements (CSEC Report, 1997: 20).

So, where do these findings leave us in relation to our two overarching approaches towards the politics of risk?[113] Somewhat ironically, the criticisms directed at Foucault's understanding of the individual can also be levelled at Beck's theory of reflexivity. Unfortunately, Beck's individual is also something of a blank slate; albeit one which is waiting to be reflexively activated by risk, rather than written on by discourses of risk (Lash and Urry, 1993: 32). This lack of cultural differentiation has led some theorists to question the uniform social characteristics of the human subject in the risk society thesis (Scott, 2000: 34). Thus, the central problem with both approaches arises out of the desire to uniformly predict the political effects of risk. Both the governmentality and the risk society perspective suggest predictable - if contrary - political outcomes to risk situations. Whilst discourse theory tends to overplay the totality of social structure and fails to adequately recognise individual agency, Beck underplays social structures and overplays the power of individual

[113]For a stimulating - if undeveloped - comparison of governmentality and risk society perspectives, see Dean (1999).

agency. As such, whilst we can use discourse theory to criticise Beck's theory of political reflexivity, Beck's very emphasis on human autonomy flags up the shortcomings of the Foucauldian approach. Unfortunately, both the risk society thesis and the governmentality perspective operate at the lofty level of grand theory and tend to assume a universal 'risk subject' (Lupton, 1999a: 6).

These criticisms indicate that abstract theorising about the politics of risk has led social theory into something of an impasse. With the Foucauldians maintaining a position as relativist as the risk society perspective is realist, the two sides have simply talked past one another (Lupton, 1999a: 6). To regain academic momentum, greater recognition of the diversity of risk - and political responses to risk - is required. It is clear that Beck and Foucault have made valuable contributions to the debate. However, neither theorist has adequately captured the inherent untidiness and contingency of the dense relationship between risk and politics.

5.11 Summary and Conclusions

In conclusion, it has become evident that the relationship between risk and politics is manifestly complex and contradictory. As far as Beck's theory of subpolitics is concerned, the evidence is largely mixed and inconclusive. In support of Beck, there does appear to be general disenchantment with the current political system and a broader trend of scepticism toward risk information imparted by experts. In addition, public attitudes towards the introduction of genetically modified foods are suggestive of embryonic forms of political reflexivity.

Contra Beck, it is clear that there is a discontinuity between reflexive engagement with information about risk and political mobilisation. Public criticisms of expert systems must not simply be read-off as desire or motivation to radically transform

political structures. Furthermore, the focus of expert and lay politics currently extends well beyond risk, suggesting that the balance between social goods and social bads is, at the very least, even. There is scant empirical evidence to support Beck's claim of a radical transformation in political logics in western cultures. Instead, it would seem more reasonable to suggest that traditional political issues of poverty, income, employment and health have been augmented by, rather than displaced by debates about risk.

Taking on board the criticisms raised by Foucauldians, we must also be sensitive to the possibility that expert discourses can serve to individualize public concerns about risk. As has been illustrated, discourses of risk may promote the unwarranted attachment of political blame and can intensify strategies of surveillance. Unfortunately, Beck's desire to attribute political reflexivity to the individual glosses over the possibility of the language of risk reinforcing as well as questioning social control.

On balance, the evidence suggests that political responses to risk are protean, reinforcing the idea of risk as a polymorphous concept. As in chapter four, we again arrive at the conclusion that risks are differentiated entities which generate multi-dimensional social effects. In terms of political motivations, risks can lead *inter alia* to anxiety, inertia, acquiescence, fatalism and oppositional action. The weight of theoretical and empirical evidence suggests that there is no direct relationship between the emergence of manufactured risk and active political reflexivity (Goldblatt, 1995; Tomlinson, 1999: 205). Robust empirical research suggests that an assorted set of variables intersect the route from risk to political engagement. Risks will inevitably be approached with different political strategies according to social habits and cultural circumstances (Wynne, 1996; Macgill, 1989). Hence, the risk society model of a politics which cements risk to political engagement is overly optimistic and uncorroborated by empirical evidence. The pressing weight of

environmental risks does make global political connectivity a social priority. However, we cannot assume that the production of manufactured risks will mechanically produce such political reorganisation. Whilst there is evidence to indicate that the rising profile of manufactured risks has generated a rise in subpolitical activity, the present scale of this activity is not indicative of a radical transformation in the locus of politics.

In general terms, political power holders have become more aware of the need for greater public participation in the political decision-making process (Hajer and Kesselring, 1999). Nevertheless, it is less clear whether new forms of democratic engagement can ensure a more egalitarian society. As has been noted, in certain circumstances subpolitical energies can be subsumed into the existing political system, dissipating conflict and affording decision makers the appearance of public support. Thus, the present state of contemporary politics is perhaps most aptly positioned somewhere between the two modernities described by Beck. This blend of continuity and political change is epitomised by the dual politics which emerged around the World Trade Organisation meetings in Washington in 1999:

> As more than 100 trade ministers and heads of state burn the midnight oil at World Trade Organisation negotiating in Seattle next week, outside, behind barricades, hundreds of environmentalist groups, aid agencies and consumer groups will take part in a huge lobbying exercise, taking on multinational corporations and their lawyers (Bunting and Elliott, 1999: 19)

The vastly powerful intergovernmental organisation held its conference in the tradition of top-down, economically driven politics. Meanwhile, protesters outside the building took to the streets to campaign for a bottom-up, socially and ecologically aware model. The political outcome of the current discord between the formal and the subpolitical remains to be seen. The conflicting parties may choose to engage in dialogue, coalitions may be formed, or one 'side' may manipulate and divest the other. Whatever the outcome, it will be much more than the emergence of risk which

drives political opposition and ultimately determines whether emancipatory politics remains behind the barricades.

Conclusion

The original objective of this project was to fuse together an investigation of the risk society thesis with an exploration of the social impacts of risk in contemporary culture. In subjecting Beck's argument to scrutiny, I have analysed the key domains of everyday experience over which the penumbra of risk is cast. In addition, critical examination of the institutionalised practices of science, the legal system and government has verified both the pervasiveness and the interconnectivity of discourses of risk.[114]

In terms of the validity of the risk society thesis, I have discused a series of significant flaws which originate from Beck's attempt to collapse variant forms of risk into a singular paradigm. The risk society perspective fails to adequately distinguish between different types of danger and instead amalgamates potentially disparate forms of risk (Anderson, 1997: 188). In this study, substantial differences in the composition and the effects of environmental, technological, economic and cultural risks have been identified. Contra Beck, it has been demonstrated that the nature, distribution, perception and experience of risk will vary considerably over time and place.

Beck's unwieldy attempt to universalise risk is particularly apparent in relation to the social distribution of risk. In chapters two and five of the thesis, I established that patterns of risk distribution follow existing grooves of class, gender and ethnicity. Despite anomalous instances of boomerang effects, at a general level, the distribution of risk reinforces rather than transforms existing patterns of social reproduction.

[114] I refer here to discourse in the general, rather than the Foucauldian sense.

Beck's failure to properly acknowledge such cultural continuities can be traced back to his dependence on WIAs as a paradigmatic form of risk in contemporary society (Scott, 2000). Beck extrapolates too readily from worst-case risk scenarios and overemphasises the universal distribution of irremediable risks. As a consequence of this theoretical slippage, the uneven diffusion of risks across the globe is skimmed over (Hinchcliffe, 2000).

As indicated in chapters three and four, the distribution of risk is inextricably connected to public perceptions of danger. The asymmetrical distribution of risk suggests that we should also expect to find variations in cultural understandings of risk. By dint of the fact that we do not all share the same life experiences, we cannot possibly share the same interpretations of risk. In opposition to the risk society perspective, cultural understandings of risk cannot be accurately generalised and will be diverse and organic entities. Public perceptions of risk are culturally developed with reference to social structures such as education, employment and the media. Throughout this study I hope to have illuminated the heterogeneous nature of interactions between institutional structures and individual agents in the formation of cultural interpretations of risk. Attitudes towards risk are multi-faceted and will be proselytised through the social networks of families, friends and work colleagues (Plough and Krimsky, 1987; Reilly, 1999). Public reliance upon this mix of cultural referents enables us to appreciate that perceptions of risk are constituted by a complex blend of rationality, emotion, desire and fate. As such, risk should be understood as a polyseme rather than an essential and immutable category (Caplan, 2000: 18). Given that social experiences are intricate and diverse, the public should not be portrayed as universally risk averse. Ultimately, the meaning of risk is fixed in the eye of the beholder (Fox, 1999: 13).

Of course, the heterogeneity of social meanings of risk infers that one person's risk may constitute another person's pleasure. In stark contrast, the risk society perspective

assumes that human beings are innately risk averse. In reading *Risk Society* (1992) one gets the impression that nothing short of a life free from risk will suffice. However, if we take account of the global situation, it is apparent that many cultures actively seek risk-taking (Douglas, 1985: 26). While Beck paints a dystopic picture of risk, we must not forget that risk-taking can also be socially progressive (Giddens, 1999: 2). The risk society thesis is purblind to risks that are 'autonomously' taken by individuals and ignores the salutary role of risk-taking in social development (Culpitt, 1999: 113). Beck's quest for an unconditionally safe existence obscures the fact that a 'zero-risk' society is an unobtainable goal (Furedi, 1997). In the first instance, in attempting to develop antidotes to risk, subsequent dangers can be manufactured (Prior et al, 2000: 117).[115] Secondly, it must be recognised that risk seeking and 'edgework' are often mobilised by subcultures as a tool for flouting convention and rationality (Lupton, 1999: 167; Lyng, 1990). As Ewald (1991) implies, we perhaps need to strike a balance between Beck's catastrophic culture of risk and a life in which very little happens. Whilst the risk society thesis is theoretically bound to index risk to harm, in reality the concept of risk 'is as long as a piece of string and as elastic as bungee rope' (Eldridge, 1999: 106).

The inherent elasticity of risk highlights the infeasibillty of Beck's juxtaposition between natural hazards and manufactured risks. Whilst the nature of risk inexorably alters over time, the difference between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' risks is far from absolute (Alexander and Smith, 1996; Strydom, 1999: 53).[116] In overdrawing the margins between epochal risks, Beck reproduces a reductionist notion of risk.

The combined weight of these shortcomings in theorising risk composition, distribution and perception suggest that the base of the risk society model is

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[115]For example, the combined measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine has recently been speculatively linked with the development of autism amongst children.

[116]For instance, in 1952 the infamous 'pea-souper' smog which killed 4,500 Londoners bore all the hallmarks of a manufactured risk (Macionis and Plummer, 1999: 650). Half a century later, flood, famine and earthquakes continue to blight existence in parts of Africa, Asia and South America.

somewhat unstable. Beck's argument relies heavily on catastrophic icons of risk and his historical narrative of the phases of modernity is too monolithic to bear resemblance to the breadth of cultural experiences:

> It is clear that the genealogy of risk is much more complex than the theory of risk society allows. Risk and its techniques are plural and heterogeneous and its significance cannot be exhausted by a narrative shift from quantitative calculation of risk to the globalization of incalculable risks (Dean, 1999: 145).

Dean's criticisms are well made, but we must nevertheless strive to understand the historical context out of which the risk society thesis was born. To be properly appreciated, Beck's argument needs to be situated in the context of the antecedent theories of Marx, Weber and Adorno (Lash and Wynne, 1992: 2). Undoubtedly, Beck's meta-theoretical approach is firmly rooted in the tradition of German social theory.[117] Whilst Beck should not be castigated for this, his cultural heritage does overshadow the risk society thesis. Often Beck is guilty of treating the German experience as synonymous with advanced contemporary society (Marshall, 1999: 267; Scott, 2000: 34). Beyond this, anthropologists have argued that Beck's totalising approach to risk has a distinctly Eurocentric bias (Bujra, 2000: 63; Nugent, 2000: 236). Further, it is probable that Beck's meta-narrative of modernization may unwittingly reproduce an evolutionist and westernised model of social development. At the very least, the risk society model has little room to accommodate uneven development between different cultures (Caplan, 2000: 21).

Beck's endeavour to provide a universal model of risk perhaps explains his unwillingness to engage in the process of empirical validation. This decision to preserve the theoretical sanctity of the risk society thesis has been a source of much ire and consternation (Alexander and Smith, 1996; Dryzek, 1996; Marshall, 1999). There can be little doubt that the risk society thesis *is* a 'theoretical endeavour that

[117] In its underlying modernism, the risk society thesis has also attracted comparison with Habermas's investigation into the public sphere (Culpitt, 1999: 137; Lash and Wynne, 1992: 8; McGuigan, 1999: 130).

lacks empirical input' (Hajer and Kesselring, 1999: 3). Moreover, on occasion, Beck substitutes grounded empirical investigation with ambiguity and paradox. In this sense, Beck does not always take ownership of his argument, preferring instead to present a series of possible scenarios.[118] For some, Beck's 'sociological spoon-bending' has been perceived as an attempt to conceal the contradictions inherent within the risk society thesis (Smith et al, 1997: 170). Nevertheless, in applying the risk society thesis to empirical research, this inquiry has also registered support for vital dimensions of Beck's argument. For example, empirical evidence appears to substantiate Beck's assertions about the unmanageable quality of manufactured risks, the increasingly individualized nature of cultural experience and the continued development of public risk consciousness. It would seem that the rush to categorically dismiss the risk society model has led several theorists to throw out the proverbial baby with the bath water.

Notable overreactions to the risk society thesis (North, 1997; Smith et al, 1997) appear to be born out of a failure to comprehend the broader aims and objectives of Beck's odyssey. Although Beck would not expect to be exempt from criticism, in many respects his project does not compute with academic tradition. Furthermore, it is likely that Beck's popularity has not been aided by his trenchant criticisms of the rigidity of the sociological tradition (Beck, 1997: 17). The empirical precision much esteemed within the social sciences does not fit comfortably with Beck's method or style of communication. The trajectory of the risk society thesis departs from sociological tradition in a number of ways. Firstly, the dark wit and humour present in Beck's writing has more in common with works of popular fiction than academic textbooks (Goldblatt, 1995: 154). In Germany Beck is considered to be a storyteller[119] as much as a serious social scientist (Lash and Wynne, 1992: 1). Secondly, the risk

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[118]Peculiarly, Beck is partial to constructing a polemical position, only to subsequently undermine it with counter examples. This is exemplified in Beck's distinction between the distributional logic of 'goods' and 'bads'. See, Beck (1992: 35-50).

[119]The German term is *Schriftsteller*. As Lash and Wynne (1992) note, this term has no real equivalent in the English language, being rather unsatisfactorily translated as an 'essayist' or non-fiction writer.

society thesis is assembled in the spirit of exploration, rather than assiduous empiricism:

> To put it bluntly, I am perhaps the least certain participant in the uncertain stance in which I deal. The lack of ifs and buts in the formulations is a question of style. Let this fact be taken out of parentheses and writ large once and for all (Beck, 1995: 13).

As Beck explains, his work is future-oriented and attempts to map out the changing shape of the world in broad-brush strokes. The theory of risk society is 'not only a visionary excursion into our present condition, but also a prophetic perspective on the future' (Adam and van Loon, 2000: 1). In defence of Beck, Giddens (1998: 24) maintains that a projective inflection is a pre-requisite for those seeking to properly understand the impacts and effects of risk. By definition, risks possess a 'nobody knows' quality (Beck, 1998a: 12).

Thirdly, in seeking to tease out general patterns of experience Beck presents the risk society as heuristic (Beck, 1992: 15). In order to relate broad dimensions, overarching models are liable to be crudely drawn. Beck does not purport to offer an exhaustive and watertight macro sociological theory. Instead, the aim of Beck's project is to provide a rudimentary and thought-provoking set of observations about the peculiarities and dangers of modern life. In so doing, Beck has presented us with a new sociological paradigm and a unique way of conceptualising society. Of course, the risk society model has evident faults, but these faults have generated the very questions and answers through which social knowledge has advanced.[120]

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, the risk society thesis is as much a *political project* as a form of academic inquiry (Beck, 1995: 12; 1997: 5). In many ways, Beck's work can be perceived as a clarion call for the radicalisation of democratic structures in modernity (Abbinnett, 2000: 115). *Risk Society* (1992) is an entreaty for

[120]For example, the Euro-centrism implicit in Beck's risk society thesis has opened up the space for more subtle cross-cultural approaches to blossom (see Bujra, 2000; Skinner, 2000).

the reformation of politics, the economy and science. These majestic demands are not always consonant with the rigorous requirements of academic theory building.To his credit, Beck appears to recognise the unrefined quality of the risk society narrative (Beck, 1992a; 2000b). It is almost as if Beck is wedded to the Frankenstein he has created, despite acknowledging its artificiality. In this sense, empirical and theoretical accuracy may be the price Beck chooses to pay for optimising political effect:

> Believed risks are the whip used to keep the present day moving along at a gallop. The more threatening the shadows that fall on the present day from a terrible future looming in the distance, the more compelling the shock that can be provoked by dramatizing risk today (Beck, 2000c: 214).

The risk society thesis is deliberately designed to unsettle the reader and to force society to confront a host of crucial issues. Living in Beck's risk society means facing up to the porosity of boundaries between nature and culture, local and global and public and private (Adam and van Loon, 2000: 5). Thus, Beck has welcomed the controversy and argumentation which has feasted off *Risk Society* (Beck, 1992: 15; 1994; 1998a). The prescient and speculative nature of the risk society thesis has served to catalyse political debate, inside and outside of academic circles.[121]

Within academia, Beck's *oeuvre* has provided a bridge between previously detached disciplines. Intellectual engagement in dialogue about risk has testified to the multi-disciplinarity of the subject and elucidated the common and conflictual ground between subject areas previously incommunicado. Outside of academia, deliberation about the risk society has served to stimulate media and public discourse (McGuigan, 1999: 125; North, 1997). As suggested in chapter five, political discussion about risk may serve as a vent for the expression of ethical and moral concerns. It is quite conceivable that the mythic quality of risk has provided society with a peg on which to hang its collective political and emotional anxieties (Alexander and Smith, 1996; Nugent, 2000: 247). At the level of public policy, the risk society thesis has been

[121]For an instance of the former see Adam et al, (2000), for the latter, see Franklin, (1998).

identified as a beacon in a number of high profile reports that are looped into structures of social decision-making.[122]

Venturing beyond the risk society thesis, there is evidence to suggest that a more reflective and socially aware understanding of risk is being developed within expert systems.[123] Risk assessors are gradually beginning to realise that they must do more than simply 'get the numbers right' (Fischhoff, 1995), and that 'absence of evidence is not the same thing as evidence of absence' (ESRC Report, 1999: 7). As a catalogue of risk management disasters reverberate around society, state institutions have acknowledged the need to be sensitive to public opinion. In the aftermath of the BSE crisis, most practitioners within the field of risk assessment appreciate that greater attention must be directed to the interests and aspirations of diverse stakeholder groups (Dean, 1999: 144; Handmer, 2000: 91). Whether these developments are indicative of a delicately fashioned veneer or a franker commitment to openness and accountability remains to be seen.

Outside the routine spin and fudge of party politics, nascent counter-expert voices have emerged, promoting more intense scrutiny of the risk assessment practices utilised by social institutions. These dissenting voices have contributed towards a progressive transformation in the relationship between so-called lay and expert actors:

> The potentialities for new forms of political, moral and epistemic order-one's enjoying greater public identification, and invigorated democratic grounding - are significantly broadened by introducing the problematization of 'expert knowledge' (Wynne, 1996: 73).

As Beck maintains (1992: 43; 1987; 1998a), well-publicised cases of institutional incompetence have undermined public trust in expert institutions. Furthermore, the

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[122]See, Hargreaves' *Who's Misunderstanding Whom? An Inquiry into the Relationship Between Science and the Media* (2000); the ESRC's *Politics of GM Food* Report (1999) or the CSEC's *Uncertain World* (1997).

[123]For example, the Food Standards Agency's *Policy on Openness* states that the agency will act on the precautionary principle in matters of food health and safety. For further details, visit www.foodstandardsagency.gov.uk.

inability of expert systems to deal with manufactured risks appears to have acted as a stimulus for political contestation. However, the emergence of irremediable risks does not guarantee a one-way journey towards political emancipation (Tomlinson, 1999: 206). While Beck has been cast as a 'prophet of hyper-enlightenment' (Szerszynski, Lash and Wynne, 1996), we would do well to remember that in matters of risk, truth is not always 'out there'. A meaningful political dialogue about risk must be sensitive to issues of contingency and cultural difference. There is no 'right' definition of risk, and understandings of risk will be fashioned in the course of social and political debate (Mythen et al, 2000: 28). Furthermore, we must recognise that disputation and decision-making must take place in conditions of profound and open-ended uncertainty. In this respect, we can expect future political dialogue about risk to involve the negotiation of difference in an attempt to reach consensus out of a plurality of perspectives, interests and concerns. The meaning of risk will be infinitely contested, and reasonably so.

In conclusion, the substantial impact of Beck's thesis within academia, social policy, politics and public life should not be understated. Significant environmental and cultural landmarks such as the escalation of BSE, AIDS and global warming warn against blithely plodding on with outmoded strategies of risk management. As manufactured risks continue to evade institutional regulation the resonance of the risk society thesis is reaffirmed. Of course, this does not detract from the need to probe and disassemble the risk society model. On the contrary, it is clear that Beck's macro-structural perspective must be complemented by a more grounded micro level approach to retain explanatory potential. In interrogating and remodelling Beck's work we are processually formulating questions about the world we live in, and, moreover, the one we are destined to inhabit in the future.

It would appear that the most propitious way forward is to continue to develop a social dialogue about the new types of risk and uncertainty which have become part

and parcel of the modern age. However, the eradication of menacing risks should constitute only one dimension of an inclusive emancipatory crusade. As the fault lines of risk expand, we must not lose sight of society's oldest burden, the crushing weight of poverty. The question of how a politics of risk can be incorporated into a broader political project is yet to be determined. Whatever the outcome, it is clear that the cultural differences which become manifest in the course of political activity must not simply be squashed by grand narratives.

At present, a lack of access to power-bound spaces has left new social movements with the pressing concern of how to convert subpolitical activity into a vibrant and functional democratic system. In the public sphere, genuine political participation is a pre-requisite for the effective management of existent hazards and the prevention of further deleterious risks. Whilst the 'appetite for democracy comes with the eating' (Beck, 2000: 139) it is paramount that everyone first sits down to dine.

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