

# Theory Culture & Society

Explorations  
in Critical  
Social Science

Volume 13 Number 4  
November 1996



SAGE  
Publications

ISSN 0263-2764

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*Theory, Culture & Society* (ISSN 0263-2764) is published by SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, quarterly in February, May, August and November.

Annual subscriptions: full rate £120/\$192; reduced personal rate £35/\$56.

Complete set – Volumes 1–12, £1199/\$1918.

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Typeset by Type Study, Scarborough, UK.

Printed on acid-free paper by The Alden Press, Oxford.

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# Critical Reflections on 'Reflexive Modernization'

*Jeffrey C. Alexander*

*Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition, and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*

by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash  
Polity Press, 1994

**I**N THIS WORK, three of the most important theorists in contemporary European sociology contribute extended essays on the topic of 'reflexive modernization', a concept first introduced by Ulrich Beck in his 1980s writings on the risk society. The book concludes with a final, fourth chapter, in which each of the three contributors responds to the other.

This format focuses in a more precise way the often diffuse debates of contemporary social theory. What it starkly reveals, however, are fundamental weaknesses in the theories that form the substance of this book. Not only do Beck and Giddens recycle, in breezy and unsystematic fashion, positions for which they are already well known, but they do so in remarkably anachronistic ways, returning to simplistic modernization arguments and ignoring important developments in recent theoretical and empirical work. While Lash, by contrast, produces an original and extremely interesting essay, his work suffers from serious theoretical simplifications of its own.

In their joint Preface, the authors make the welcome suggestion that 'the protracted debate about modernity versus postmodernity has become wearisome'. They then advance the claim that 'the idea of reflexive modernization . . . breaks the stranglehold which these debates have tended to place upon conceptual innovation' (p. vi). Yet, in their discussion of reflexive modernization Beck and Giddens actually reproduce the tenets of early modernization theory itself, reinforcing in an unintended way the stereotyped critique and one-sided alternative offered by postmodern thought.

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■ *Theory, Culture & Society* 1996 (SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 13(4): 133–138

Only in the stage of late modernity, Beck suggests, does reflexive modernization come into play. In early modernity, economic production focused on energy-based technology and material goods; actors believed in the inevitability of progress; science was an object of blind faith; nature was perceived as inanimate matter to be mastered instrumentally. All this has changed with the onset of late modernity. Because technology-based production now produces terrifying ecological risks rather than reassuring certainties, faith in science and, indeed, in progress itself, has withered. In the 'risk society', security, not material wealth, is becoming the primary good that economic organizations aim to produce; yet the complexities of information-based industry make confident calculations of dangers impossible, for solid evidence of long-term consequences is, by definition, unobtainable. This contradiction pushes late modernity into what may be a terminal crisis. The only solution is to move toward more reflexivity, a tendency already manifest in three different domains: (1) science itself must be democratized, so that calculations of risk are taken out of the hands of an elite separated from the concrete experiences of everyday life; (2) the increasingly differentiated and self-directed social spheres of contemporary life should be reconnected through the creation of intermediate policy-making bodies on the model of the 'round-table' that evolved in the transitions from Communism; (3) as social movements concentrating on protection and security arise, a new kind of subpolitics is developing that increasingly shifts decision-making away from the formal democratic institutions of parliaments and executive bodies.

Since Beck's theory of reflexive modernization and risk society appeared in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster, it has exercised large influence not only in German social theory but among lay intellectuals and policy-makers. Certainly its pithy, down-to-earth propositions represent a welcome pragmatic turn away from the often obsessive abstraction and system-building that characterizes so much of Germany's *Geisteswissenschaft*. In focusing on subjective calculations of risk and the natural environment, Beck's theory also moves beyond the single-minded focus on material distribution and group equality that characterizes more empirical social science in Europe and the USA. Thematizing cross-sector mediation and the limits of social differentiation, finally, offer an alternative to Luhmann's exaggerated emphasis on fragmentation and self-referentiality, a conservative and technocratic vision that has exercised, at least until recently, such a great influence over continental general theory.

The problem with Beck's risk society thesis is that, while it challenges Marx and Luhmann in substantive terms, it maintains much of the formal structure of their work. Broad tendential speculations are advanced about infrastructural and organizational processes that have little grounding in the actual processes of institutional and everyday life. For example, when has subparliamentary politics *not* played a primary role in the social life of industrial societies? Were consciousness and social action really focused only on distributive and material issues before the environmental crises of

the 1960s? Certainly fundamentalist religion, ethnic and racial movements, and nationalism were signal phenomena in the 19th and early 20th centuries! Most importantly, a persistent materialism and atomism underlies Beck's entire approach. His independent variables are located in the material infrastructure, and 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 undertaken by thinkers like Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky.<sup>1</sup> As a result, his theory reproduces the simplistic presuppositions about individualistic action and abstract collective order that inform the caricature of modernity and modernization theory of postmodern lore.

It is upon this deeply flawed concept of 'reflexive modernization' that Giddens has based his macrosociological theory during the 1990s. In the 1970s and 1980s, this highly influential British sociologist produced a series of dense and challenging writings that thematized reflexivity ontologically, theorizing a creative and resourceful social actor enmeshed in power structures that were simultaneously constraining and enabling. In the 1990s, Giddens's writing changed dramatically, both in form and substance. In contrast with his earlier writings, these recent works on late modern politics, family life, self and the intimate sphere present, despite the great intrinsic interest of their subject matter, a kind of 'Giddens lite', replete with apodictic assertions, loose propositions and ad hoc, often vague argumentation.

In substantive terms, these writings have historicized Giddens's concept of reflexivity in a radical and unfortunate way. Taking over Beck's emphasis on the abstract systems of late modernity, Giddens broadens 'technique' to include science-based interventions into the lifeworld such as psychotherapy and health manuals. Inspired by Beck's conviction that the current crisis can lead to a more responsive and democratic way of life, Giddens turns Foucault on his head, suggesting that contemporary actors have gained enormous control (reflexivity) over their selves and their environments by making wide use of various therapeutic techniques, including science, in the process often becoming experts themselves.

There is something very Parsonian about Giddens lite. The pathologies and alienations of modernity are converted into positive reaffirmations about the powers of the modern self and the emancipating contributions that apolitical scientific experts make to the reconstruction of society. In this new writing, the verities of 1950s and 1960s modernization theory are confirmed in a post-structuralist, Beckian, self-psychological and thoroughly anti-culturalist way.

The anachronistic quality of Giddens's new approach is exemplified in the way he counterposes late modern reflexivity with tradition. Taking off from a fundamental misreading of Edward Shils's theory of tradition, Giddens recapitulates early modernization theory's simplistic account of

tradition as dogmatic, repetitive, ritualistic, irrational and elitist. Under the influence of Beck, moreover, Giddens extends traditional domination well into the industrial period itself. Only in the contemporary, late modern period, Giddens suggests, has there been a radical departure from such submersion of the self. Actors and institutions have now become detraditionalized, liberated because they have become 'disembedded' and 'evacuated' from tradition. Today, Giddens asserts, tradition exercises influence only in a non-cultural way, through the repetition compulsions of addictions.

In historicizing reflexivity in this way, Giddens ignores the dense rethinking of the relation between symbolic patterning and contingent, creative social action that, in my view (Alexander, 1995), has made the tradition/modernity dichotomy obsolete. This revision began with the writings of Geertz and Burke on symbolic action, continued with Douglas's and Turner's work on secular pollution and ritual process, and has been further elaborated in the pragmatic, practice-oriented culture explorations of a wide variety of contemporary thinkers, among them Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot, William Sewell Jr, Viviana Zelizer, David Apter, Michele Lamont and Robin Wagner-Pacifici. The thrust of this line of thinking suggests that reflexivity, whether modern, late modern or postmodern, can be understood only within the context of cultural tradition, not outside of it. Typification, invention and strategization are simultaneous moments of every social action; they cannot be separated and compartmentalized in an historicist way.

This brings us to the contribution of Lash, by far the most original and interesting of the three. Lash criticizes Beck and Giddens for their utilitarian understanding of the relation between actor and environment. In contrast with the self–other dichotomy posited in their writings, he insists that actors relate to the abstract systems of late modernity in a manner that is decisively mediated by their relation to communities.

Lash documents this contention empirically and theoretically. Drawing upon comparative studies of economic institutions conducted with John Urry (Lash and Urry, 1993), he shows that what has distinguished the recent successes of Japanese and German development from English and American is precisely the ability to embed high-technology processes in the guild-like networks of apprentice training (Germany) and interpersonal relationships of paternalistic trust (Japan). Rather than reflexivity being understood in terms of scientific, rational mastery of spatially separated environments, social self-control can successfully emerge only when modernist actors and institutions are embedded in relations of non-reflexive trust and commitments of a decidedly traditional kind.

In his theoretical attack on the utilitarianism approach to reflexive modernization, Lash suggests that the cognitive realism and moral proceduralism implicit in Beck and Giddens must be displaced, or at least counterbalanced, by a more 'aesthetic' approach. Following an important line of recent philosophical thinking, he connects Kant's emphasis on the particularity of aesthetic understanding in the ambivalent *Critique of*

*Judgement* to the emphasis on community-based ethical judgment which can be found in the Aristotelian and Hegelian traditions and in Heidegger as well. It is from this communitarian, particularist and aesthetic tradition, Lash argues, that the sociological effort to conceptualize late modernity must draw.

While this criticism is well-taken, where does it leave reflexivity? While aware of this conundrum, in the end Lash is unable to escape it. He claims that the notion of aesthetic subjectivity implies pattern-replication and relativistic deconstruction, and that it should be replaced by a conception of hermeneutical subjectivity, which, he suggests, implies active interpretation and truth-based reconstruction. As illustrations of such an approach, he points to British studies of class and ethnic subcultures of resistance, to Charles Taylor's work on the socially situated self, and to Bourdieu's ideas about strategic action rooted in the pre-reflective cultural schemas of *habitus*.

These theoretical moves obfuscate the problem rather than resolve it. Hermeneutical interpretation is, in fact, precisely the method implied by aesthetic, culturally bounded action. If the former suggests an active and creative thrust, then, *ipso facto*, so does the latter. Neither, however, gets at the kind of universalizing and critical reflexivity that differentiates contemporary democratic, multicultural and civil societies from earlier, more authoritarian, homogeneous and anti-individualistic regimes. For this differentiation to be made, Aristotelian and Hegelian ideas about community-situated ethics must be reconnected to the Kantian contention that critical thinking depends on the existence of more abstract, universalistic systems of reference (see Honneth, 1995; Alexander and Lara, 1996). This is precisely what subcultural studies, and thinkers like Taylor and Bourdieu, do not insist upon. To the contrary, they embed meaning-making in historically delimited institutional fields and geographically particular communities.

Lash is right to criticize Habermas's neo-Kantian synthesis for its inability to embrace culture in its idiographic particularity. However, he fails to recognize that the later Habermas has made precisely the relationship between proceduralist and substantive views a major focus of his interest from his 1988 Howison Lecture in Berkeley (Habermas, 1988) right up to his most recent work on identity and recognition. More importantly, perhaps, Lash fails to recognize, much less explore, other energetic and important efforts to bring together the formal and substantive traditions, implicitly, for example, in the work of Michael Walzer, and explicitly in the essays that Albrecht Wellmer, Habermas's wayward disciple, has devoted to the interpenetration between ethical and aesthetic validity spheres, relativizing both abstract truth claims and particularizing interpretations alike (see Lara, 1995).

Despite his brilliant critique of utilitarian approaches to reflexive modernization, then, Lash reaches a theoretical dead-end that brings us back to Beck and Giddens. They, at least, are aware that there is something in the contemporary condition, and in modernity itself, that is, indeed,

different and new, and that this newness has something to do with an increased capacity for reflexivity and rationality. What each of the three authors misses, each in his own way, is that this newly gained reflexivity is deeply connected to meaning-making, and that critical action depends on a continued relation to relatively non-contingent, supra-individual cultural forms. In contemporary societies, these cultural forms are more separated from ascriptive positions, whether institutional, moral or geographic, than ever before. It is this separation that makes the structures of cultural logics and emotional affects more accessible, the construction of syncretic meanings more possible, and the options for different kinds of social actions more widely available. Reflexive modernization means this, or it means nothing at all.

*Note*

1. For an extensive criticism of Beck from a more culturalist perspective, and an alternative approach to contemporary environmentalism, see Alexander and Smith (1996).

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