

## Ulrich Beck

Person: Ulrich Beck

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Description Ulrich Beck is a sociologist and creative thinker, who has been highly influential in reflecting upon and theorizing about globalization. Beck began his university studies in the field of law at the University of Freiburg in Germany, switching relatively quickly to study Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy, and Political Science at the University of Munich. He completed his doctorate in 1972 and then his Habilitation (a second postdoctoral dissertation normally required for a professorship in Germany) in 1979, when he took up the post of Professor at the University of Münster in northwest Germany. In 1981, he returned to southern Germany as a Professor of Sociology in the beautiful Bavarian city of Bamberg. He remained there until 1992, when he took up the position of Professor and Director of the Institute of Sociology at the University of Munich. Since 1997, he has also held the position of British Journal of Sociology Visiting Centennial Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He has been editor of the influential German sociological journal, *Soziale Welt*, since 1980.



Ulrich Beck

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Beck has always been willing to push critically on accepted theoretical understandings of modernity in Sociology. This willingness is evident first

of all in his highly provocative and controversial book, *Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, published in 1986 and translated into English in 1992 under the title, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. This book is an early exploration of globalization. It argues that a fundamental break has taken place in modernity, one described as a shift from industrial society to a risk society. In his later works, he theorized this break as a *Zweite Moderne*, or "second modernity." By this term, Beck is suggesting that social and economic life in wealthier countries has changed in fundamental ways. Although important institutions like the school system, universities, scientific research, and government bureaucracies are still important, they are also more fragile. This fragility comes from the presence of new sorts of risks that cross territorial boundaries and reach to global dimensions. These risks cannot be contained by individual countries and their governments. Nor are they easily reduced by bringing in new technologies or scientific studies. Beck illustrates such risks using the example of radioactive fallout from a failure of a nuclear power plant, such as the accident at Chernobyl in the Ukraine in 1986. The risks from climate change are another example.

He began to make the linkages between "risk society" and globalization more explicitly in a series of works published in the 1990s: *Reflexive Modernisierung - Eine Debatte* (1996), together with Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash and published as *Reflexive Modernization* in English; *Was ist Globalisierung?* (1997), published in English as *What is Globalization?* (2000); *World Risk Society* (1999); and *Macht und Gegenmacht im globalen Zeitalter: Neue weltpolitische Ökonomie* (2002). In 1999, he received a highly prestigious grant from the German Research Council to set up a Special Research Area on Reflexive Modernization at the University of Munich.