

World Risk Society

Concept: World Risk Society

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Description The concept of "world risk society" was put forward by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck in the book *World Risk Society*, published in 1999. The concept represents the building of a global perspective on to his original theory of "risk society" as described in his 1986 book, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Anthony Giddens developed a similar theory in *Consequences of Modernity* in 1990. Both Beck and Giddens discuss the idea of risk and its unintended consequences in response to a long-standing tradition of Weberian theory of rationalization and bureaucratization. The notion of a "world risk society" can be applied in relation to a number of different circumstances in the world today, notably the war on terrorism, oil spills, BSE (mad cow disease), and the Chernobyl disaster. According to Beck, "risk may be defined as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself" (1992, 21). Risks no longer take traditional or natural forms; instead, they derive from decisions deliberately made by humans, often for the sake of technology and advancement (Leiss n.d.).

Beck argues that "threats create society, and global threats create global society" (2000, 38). According to Beck's concept of world risk society, chemical, radioactive, and biological risks are commonly distributed and organized by political means (Dryzek 1996). These risks know no political or geographical boundaries. Political mobilization by those affected by these "risks" is possible and likely (Leiss n.d.). The mobilization can also be global in nature. It has been argued that such mobilization can threaten political and economic stability in the world (ibid). Yet, participation in the process of risk assessment is essential and could actually increase democratization through active participation (Odden Reksnes 2003). Beck (2000) illustrates this in his book *What is Globalization?*. He argues that there is now an involuntary politicization of risks which is emphasized by the justification of government decisions through public debates. Citizens no longer accept decisions at face-value, creating a more active and vibrant global community.

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