

Cosmopolitanizing Catastrophism: Remembering the Future

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Abstract

Ulrich Beck's quest to unshackle the social sciences from their methodological nationalism has yielded numerous influential concepts. In his last work he theorized the transformation of a globally connected world through the notion of 'metamorphosis' understood as a form of radical (paradigmatic) change. This transfiguration is driven by different perceptions of catastrophism, carrying the potential to re-shape world risk society. In this essay I critically assess what Beck refers to as 'emancipatory catastrophism'. I suggest substituting emancipatory with cosmopolitan catastrophism. Cosmopolitan catastrophism seeks to adjoin an event-centered approach with a relational understanding of world risk society. By emphasizing cosmopolitan trajectories we avoid the linear fallacies plaguing earlier theories of modernity. Beck's iterative approach provides us with a heuristic tool, which addresses the ongoing interplay of universal scripts and local appropriations in the context of contingencies and uncertainties. Previously seen as residual, catastrophism becomes the center of our analytic efforts.

Keywords

Ulrich Beck, catastrophism, collective memory, cosmopolitanism

It is interesting to note that vision of this kind not only must precede historically the emergence of analytic effort in any field but also may re-enter the history of every established science each time somebody teaches us to *see* things in a light of which the source is not to be found in the facts, methods, and results of the preexisting state of science. (Schumpeter, 2006: 41)

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This epigraph may well serve as an epitaph exemplifying the work and legacy of Ulrich Beck. He was inventive and idiosyncratic, not least because he was thinking outside the box. Beck was not only a visionary thinker but also a ground-breaking tinker, an intellectual bricoleur enhancing ideas and concepts with which he surrounded himself. If anything, he was 'too original' in the sense that he was not playing by the rules of disciplinary totemic concept worship, instead supplying the profession (and the public) with generative neologisms. He was an itinerant 'tool sharpener', leaving us with a rich conceptual language for the growing field of cosmopolitan studies.

This special section is testimony to Beck's influential role in providing a theoretical viewpoint and conceptual language amenable for a variety of cosmopolitan experiences. Proliferating case studies from East Asia and other regions underscore Beck's theoretical openness, which itself is a distinctive feature of cosmopolitan theorizing. Rather than merely presupposing a transition from first to second modernity, which is essentially a sequence that mirrors the post-war experience of Western Europe, Beck encouraged his East Asian interlocutors to modify and recast reflexive modernization in light of their particular circumstances. However, East Asia here is neither peripheral nor a passive recipient of cosmopolitan imperatives. East Asian scholars were quick to heed Beck's call to locate the cosmopolitan turn vis-à-vis developmental trajectories in their respective countries (Han and Shim, 2010; Yan, 2010).¹ From Beck's perspective:

It is impossible to talk meaningfully about methodological cosmopolitanism without pulling down the walls of Euro-centrism. We need to open up perspectives onto the world beyond Europe, onto the entanglements of histories of colonization and domination as well as onto border-transcending dynamics, dependencies, interdependencies and intermingling. How? Through a new conceptual architecture distinguishing two types of social theory: the *singular* and the *plural*. A theory of *the* society in the *singular* means: society neither national nor global but society absolutely understood in universal terms; whereas a theory of *societies* in the *plural* refers to the very different paths and contexts of modernization processes. (Beck and Grande, 2010: 411)

The appeal of this and earlier programmatic efforts (see especially Beck and Sznaider, 2006) is evidenced in a burgeoning cosmopolitan literature. A major accomplishment of methodological cosmopolitanism then consists of directing our attention toward those conceptual interstices where global currents intersect with local currencies, be it via competing modes of development in East Asia, through the prism of post-colonial theories

or in terms of recursive flows of knowledge production (Han, 2015; Maharaj, 2010; Levy and Sznajder, 2010).

The objective of the following comments is to highlight the profitable avenues contained in Beck's most recent work. Specifically, I expand on Beck's latest contribution to our tool kit, namely the notion of 'Emancipatory Catastrophism' which he describes as follows:

The metamorphosis of the world is about the hidden emancipatory side effect of global risk. Talk about bads produces 'common goods'. As such, the argument goes beyond what has been at the heart of the world risk society theory so far: it is not about the negative side effects of goods but the positive side effects of bads. They are producing normative horizons of common goods. (Beck, 2015: 75)

On this view, catastrophism illuminates 'sense-making mechanisms' (Stallings, 1998). Emancipatory catastrophism highlights the potential goods threats can generate. Juxtaposed hereto is the conventional association of catastrophism with apocalyptic outcomes. Yet, what appears at first sight as opposites in fact bears heuristic affinities as both are predicated on event-centered narratives that have global implications representing serious (quasi-universal) violations. More than merely another binary of utopian versus dystopian interpretations, both views of catastrophism constitute a corrective to the prevalent uniformitarianism in the social sciences. Whereas the latter envisions change as a gradual process (with occasional interruptions, that are conceptually residual), catastrophism as a mode of change focuses on sudden and massive transformations.

Drawing on his rhetorical arsenal, Beck's primary objective was to dissociate catastrophism from its negative and frequently essentialized connotations. He was eager to replace the dystopian attributes of apocalyptic catastrophism and foreground the constructive, sociological and normative potential of catastrophism. However, by drawing on the emancipatory he unintentionally reproduced a uniformitarianism marked with linear predilections. The problem is not (merely) that the notion of emancipation connotes a positive outcome but also that it is inferring a temporal index with developmental markers.

To avoid this linear fallacy, I suggest substituting emancipatory with cosmopolitan catastrophism. This is also driven by Beck's own theoretical objectives. And it is in tune with the distinctive features of global risk society viewing catastrophes as an integral part of cosmopolitan processes. Otherwise catastrophes remain sequestered in a specialized and rather marginal sociology of disasters focusing on the event and sudden intensity and scope of the damage, disorder and disruption catastrophes

tend to create. Beck's cosmopolitan intent, however, is much closer to an alternative view of catastrophes not as

sudden ruptures in the social order that originate with natural systems and that governments and institutions seek to ameliorate [...] but catastrophes [that] are part of a set of negative externalities that occur as a consequence of larger political-economic trends and that must be explained by reference to those forces. (Tierney, 2007: 510)

Cosmopolitan catastrophism thus seeks to adjoin an event-centered approach with a relational understanding of global risk society. By emphasizing structural and normative interdependencies and combining the historical and relational qualities of cosmopolitan catastrophism we capture distinctive manifestations of cosmopolitanization.

Cosmopolitan Catastrophism and the Future

According to Beck, catastrophism

can be seen, and analysed, by using three conceptual lenses: first, the anticipation of global catastrophe violates sacred (unwritten) norms of human existence and civilization; second, thereby it causes an anthropological shock, and, third, a social catharsis. This is how new normative horizons, as frames of perception and action, emerge. (Beck, 2015: 79)

Together with Natan Sznaider (a close collaborator of Beck), I have addressed how the global diffusion of Holocaust memories since the early 1980s crystallized into a Human Rights Regime during the 1990s (Levy and Sznaider, 2006). Cosmopolitan attention to the other has since been inscribed in institutions, legal arrangements and a dominant human rights discourse (Levy and Sznaider, 2010). The extent to which human rights violations are experienced as shocks, and whether and where they are transformative, remains a matter of empirical study. Yet the expectation of engaging self-critically with past catastrophes, or failure to do so, has become an integral part of a cosmopolitan world culture, with contested currents in East Asia (Saito and Wang, 2014; Kurasawa, 2004).

In order to strengthen the conceptual surplus of cosmopolitan catastrophism, I propose a fourth conceptual lens, namely changing temporal apprehensions of the future. In a historical analysis of times and temporalities, Reinhart Koselleck points out that the present is situated between past experience, which is 'present past, whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered', and a horizon of expectations which refers to 'the future made present, it points to the not-yet, to that which has not been experienced to that which can only be discovered'

(Koselleck, 1985: 272). What matters for our current discussion is that the preoccupation with the past and the (secularized) command to remember have become political (and ethical) principles. And they are perceived as central mechanisms for the transmission of values. Especially the significance of memory for our temporal existence and how the past-present-future relationship is subject to historical changes carries conceptual weight. Memory is a central faculty for how we engage with both time and history. Memory and its association with a particular past are not an impediment for the future but a prerequisite to enunciate a narrative (bridge) over the present. A shared sense of the past becomes a meaning-making repository, which helps define aspirations for the future. There are no doubt other factors at work, but political and cultural engagements with our temporal existence are a foundational aspect of cosmopolitan catastrophism. Through their increasing institutional embeddedness cosmopolitan values are (currently) reflected in a global horizon of expanding rights and diminishing tolerance for their violation. It is precisely the widely reported failure to protect human rights that, in the context of the cosmopolitan imperative, renders them politically and culturally consequential (Levy and Sznajder, 2010). Cosmopolitan catastrophism is thus driven by toxic (no pun intended) pasts that have lost their exemplary utility. And by an apprehension of the future which is replete with contingencies and unknowns.²

Conventional western perspectives on changing conceptions of the future address the ideological and institutional transformations of temporality along a series of three epochal strands: traditional, religious and political dominions over time (Gross, 1985). The last of the series culminates in the modern nation-state. Each of these formations has shaped respective temporal conceptions during a given period.

At the beginning of human history, the dimension of time itself was understood as something mythic. [...] The only way to make mundane existence meaningful was to suffuse it with sacred time through a festive or ritual re-enactment of the events that were presumed to have occurred in primordial time. (Gross, 1985: 55)

Here time was plotted socially. As Christianity was consolidating its power around the 4th century, time was charted religiously for almost one millennium, with the familiar teleology of redemption providing a horizon for future expectations. By the 16th century political temporality was emerging and challenged both religious and traditional conceptions of time. The nation-state has since become the dominant institution for the structuration of temporality (Gross, 1985).

These modes of temporal structuration, traditional, religious and national, were premised on the ability to provide a cultural response to the future and render it intelligible. What both national and religious

authority shared was an attempt to monopolize the temporal registers of existence. Both Christianity and nation-states were eager to provide linear notions of deliverance, the former anchored in distinctive forms of Salvationism. Theories of progress became the chief prism through which nation-states sought to control the political and cultural interpretations of the future. The classics of sociology essentially acquiesced to this view by relegating the past and memory practices to tradition(al) societies and vesting the future with progress (Abbott, 2001), be it in the structural-functionalist fantasies of modernization theories, the dialectical Marxist fashion of historical materialism or Weberian variants of rationalization.

With the weakening of a politically feasible and culturally salient narrative of progress, catastrophes are challenging the ontological security once provided by nation-state narratives about the future. The prevalence of catastrophism, we argue, has given rise to a fourth, cosmopolitan temporal epoch, alongside the mythical, religious, and national. The cosmopolitan epoch is characterized by fragmented times and the absence of a dominant hegemonic conception of temporality and attendant views of futurity (Beck and Levy, 2013). The previous (attempted) monopoly by the nation-state to shape collective futures has given way to a pluralization of private, individual, scientific, ethnic and religious agents. To be sure, the nation-state continues to exercise an important role, but it is now sharing the field of meaning production with a host of other players.

This cosmopolitanization obviously does not take place in the same fashion everywhere, and itself is likely to produce rejection and renationalization. As temporal practices are mediated by idiosyncratic group features of temporal experiences and distinctive cultural dispositions towards pasts, pastness, and the future, attentiveness to the kind of cultural validations specific groups attribute to temporal phenomenon – such as progress, change, innovation and memory itself – is therefore indispensable. We can address the balance of particular experiences and the universal dimensions of world cultural cosmopolitanism demands in terms of mnemonic path-dependencies, pointing to the formative impact of earlier commemorations for the mitigation of subsequent memories (Olick, 2007). At the same time, ‘path-dependence is never path-determination’ (Olick, 2007: 58). The empirical challenge then is to capture the co-extensive constraints of cultural memories and globally salient memory imperatives that are triggered by the political-cultural labor catastrophes evoke.

The de-coupling of state and progress narratives in developed countries and elsewhere is dissolving in the context of central epistemic junctures questioning the temporal modalities of national resilience in the past and redemptive narratives of future progress. We have moved from homogenous national time to fragmented cosmopolitan times.

Underlying these temporal dimensions are competing visions of the future. National futures consisted of teleological and/or rationalized heuristics. Cosmopolitan futures involve contingencies and unintended outcomes. Catastrophes no longer constitute a breach but are now a permanent feature of global audiences. They are feeding cosmopolitan orientations (and their resistances), commanding attention to inter-dependent features of world risk society and the inability to narrate a knowable future.

Concluding Outlook

As the current age of uncertainty is deprived of modular pasts and aspirational futures, risk perceptions are situated in new forms of insecurity (Beck, 2009). Modern collectivities are increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks. Unlike earlier manifestations of risk characterized by daring actions or predictability models, global risks cannot be calculated or predicted anymore (Beck, 2006). As a result, more influence accrues to the perception of risk, largely constructed by media representations of disasters, which are media(ti)zed through the recasting of temporal registers, especially the future (Beck and Levy, 2013). In the absence of a dominant statist narrative about the future, global risk frames structure how national experiences are informed by cosmopolitan expectations. Global risks are the anticipation of (localized) disasters. Specifically, contemporary mediat(iz)ation and global images of disasters reflect and contribute to manufactured insecurities and new horizons of future expectations. Unlike previous traditional, religious and statist attempts to provide secure images of the future, the cosmopolitanization of catastrophes engages with insecurities through the promulgation of risk iconographies in a global media environment. Whereas homogenous national time essentially was a secularized teleology, cosmopolitan times are fragmented with futures replete with contingencies. National heuristics have treated catastrophes as temporary, pathological and residual. Cosmopolitan heuristics approach catastrophes as central and constitutive and they do so by weighing universal human rights imperatives with particular political and cultural experiences and expediencies.

Contingencies and uncertainties were Beck's business. Let me conclude with a quote from an essay I wrote for his Festschrift five years ago.

Beck is like a navigator through a stormy sea, dropping us off on islands we thought we knew. As we go from one to the other, we come to understand that they are not only discrete places, but that our understanding of their common features is a function of the road we travel. We realize that it is not so much the destination that matters but the journey itself. (Levy, 2004)

I am grateful that I had the good fortune to be in Beck's intellectual and personal orbit, very much a constellation of a star whose light will go on shining.

Notes

1. Some of these intellectual energies are reflected in the formalization of research ties in the Europe-Asia Network (EARN) which involves the collaboration of numerous research institutes across East Asia. For more information on this project see: <http://www.earn-global.org>
2. I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing my attention to Bruno Latour's view on contingency. Latour – with whom Beck for many years enjoyed productive disagreements – underscores that contingencies and uncertainties for that matter are not socially and culturally detached unknowns. Competing views of the Anthropocene notwithstanding, Beck and Latour implicitly agreed that the 'principle of hope' was too important to be left to utopians. On this view, contingencies are coupled with time-sensitive opportunity structures, and as such are becoming an integral part of our conceptual vocabulary.

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