

Preface

The first essay in this volume was written in 2007 and is a critical analysis of the findings of social and cultural “pluralism” and “individualization” that have dominated the social sciences and commentary on contemporary society since the 1990s. Using the theories of Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman as prototypical examples (but also expanding beyond them), the essay demonstrates how fragile these general theses are. The author shows that—and how—the pluralization and individualization theses are part of a superordinate and rarely considered “*episteme*,” as Foucault would have called it, a set of grand narratives of pluralism that have a very definite ideological and social-reassurance function.

The second text dates from 2020 and was originally published in the journal *Sociologia Internationalis* (Bonn). It serves, so to speak, as the empirical supplement to the preceding essay. The focus here is on demonstrating the falsity of a scholarly discourse that is dominant in the German-speaking world, in particular, according to which cultural globalization (in the broadest sense) is “transnational” and “hypercultural” (i.e., without origin) and represents an uncontrollable “*métissage*.” Whatever the case, this grand narrative, both in the media and in academic circles, denies the presence of Americanization or Anglo-Americanization. Based on the empirical facts, I show in contrast that, despite the explosion of productive forces in the field of communications technology—which would, in principle, provide the potential for multiculturalism—cultural globalization has an extraordinarily strong Anglo-Saxon monocultural slant. Nor is this tendency offset by the much-vaunted phenomenon of glocalization, since glocalization is based on a return to a regional or national culture that always has the Anglo-Saxon pattern as its international complement.

A Farewell to the Thesis of the Most Plural of All Possible Worlds

The Myth of Pluralistic Individualization and the Grand Narrative of Pluralism

“If this is the most plural of all possible worlds, what can the rest be like?”¹ Voltaire’s *Candide* would have to ask himself today. For, within a quarter century, the theses of an inexorable proliferation of differences and pluralism and a constant increase in complexity and individualism—however much these theses may differ among themselves—have been built up in the media and academia into a veritable system of fortification. This discursive fortification is all the more expandable and immune to falsification because it describes itself as plurally constituted.

This essay aims to provide a counterweight. The general theses of pluralism must be countered with pressing empirical evidence. This evidence documents how necessary it is to hold the rhetoric of plurality up to judgment—or at least, where an increase in plurality is undeniably present, to point out the standardizations and formatizations that threaten (or have always already undermined) it.

This essay also takes some initial, tentative stabs at several questions that have long been of the highest importance, but that it has been difficult or impossible to raise under the hegemony of the pluralization discourse:

- In a civilization that describes itself as plurally constituted, how is the evaluation of people, works, and texts that contradict that constitution handled?
- What kind of tendencies toward involution exist in the socioeconomic, pop-culture, media, and linguistic spheres, and what effects result when these involutions are described by the media and scholars not as such, but instead as “complexity,” “play,” “the end of ideologies,” and so on?
- Under the hegemony of pluralization theses, what exactly does it mean to be “contemporary,” or, conversely, “archaic” or “outdated”?

The philosopher H. Lübbe, who is only rather vaguely characterized by the label “neoconservative,” coined the term “shrinking present” (*Gegenwartsschrumpfung*). It means—to give a “shrunken” definition—that, in a “dynamic” civilization, what appears to us to be the past is ever closer to us. There is a continual decrease in the total timespan for which “looking back beyond it means looking into a world that is outdated in essential aspects of life,” in which we no longer recognize “the structures of the world with which we

¹ Adapted from Voltaire, *Candide*, London 1947, p. 37.

are currently familiar.”² In a proportional reflection of today’s rapid obsolescence, the exponentially advancing dynamic of innovation shortens the period of future time for which we can make reliable forecasts by extrapolating from the present.

In Lübbe’s work, this finding of acceleration is always accompanied by the thesis of increasing differentiation, pluralization, and individualization—a thesis that, albeit with varying emphasis and nuance, has long been shared by the dominant strand of commentary on contemporary society (whether “academic,” “essayistic,” or “feuilletonistic”³) with sometimes frightening unanimity.

In contrast, I wish to show that the undeniable processes of acceleration observable since the First Industrial Revolution (currently most conspicuous in the headlong replacement of devices and software for the storage, transmission, and modification of images, text, and sound) have been permeated, overlaid, and conditioned by decelerations or even regressions precisely in the last quarter century. Minor differences are blown up into epochal “processes of differentiation,” while homogenizations are hardly recognized as such any longer. The individual’s individualization and dissociation from a social class, perhaps even the end of the talk of social class, is proclaimed, as if “advanced” societies were heading at breakneck speed toward an egalitarian and, at the same time, plural utopia—as if individuals, despite all of their regrettable complaints and indispositions, were becoming ever more complex, more emancipated from their origins, more open to the future, and more highly developed beings.

I seek to demonstrate the fragility of the pluralization and differentiation thesis primarily on the basis of two books by the sociologists U. Beck and Z. Bauman.⁴ This may appear a scanty selection. Readers must first be willing to accept my assurance of the eminently paradigmatic character of these two hugely influential publications. What is at issue is their agreement on essential points that constitute the grand thesis of increasing differences and pluralities—not the demonstration of a seamlessly uniform theory, which would be an absurd undertaking.

² H. Lübbe, “Gegenwartsschrumpfung,” in K. Backhaus and H. Bonus (eds.), *Die Beschleunigungsfalle oder der Triumph der Schildkröte*, Stuttgart 1997, p. 131. Cf. also Lübbe, *Im Zug der Zeit*, Berlin 1992.

³ Both Lübbe’s brusque contrast between journalism (or feuilletonism) and academia and P. Bourdieu’s recurrent attacks on “essayism” are to be understood from their respective contexts, but only savored with considerable skepticism. Countless factors can lead to a tendency for the experience and knowledge appropriate to an age to be expressed in an essayistic or journalistic way. Excessive specialization and adaptation to the particular terminology of proliferating “schools” or micro-disciplines produce in genuinely scholarly literature a myriad of abstract individual data points or repetitive statements, often bordering on tautology, that simply cannot be synthesized except in a way that may appear “essayistic.”

⁴ Z. Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, London 1992; U. Beck, *Risk Society*, London 1992.

That Beck does not see himself as a representative of a “sociology of postmodernism” (which Bauman differentiates from a mimic-like “postmodern sociology”) is only a question of taste and terminology.⁵ The decisive factor is that both authors describe the present (even using the same words) as a self-reflexive modernity in which technical and scientific rationality’s claims to explanatory power and society-forming competence are trimmed back, a pronounced awareness of modernization’s “rejects” and “ostracized parts” prevails, and at the same time, the results of past actions are subject to ongoing evaluation and once again taken into account. The two authors share this view with another highly influential sociologist, A. Giddens.

The core thesis of Beck’s book on the “risk society” is that the distribution problems and conflicts of “traditional” (Fordist) industrial society are fading into the background in favor of a comprehensive logic of the production and distribution of risk. What is decisive here is the ubiquity of these risks, which are only to a certain extent similar in distribution to social inequalities, being instead *grosso modo* “egalitarian”: “Even the rich and powerful are not safe from them.”⁶ It should be emphasized that risks are, for Beck, both ecological or “natural science” hazard scenarios and social ones.

The merging of socioeconomic and ecological risks reduces the analytical clarity of Beck’s approach but evidently serves his theoretical enterprise, the success of which depends on the implementation of a paradigm, perceived as far as possible as “new,” that must be built up to the point of hypertrophy and fitted out with all eventualities and options. In the case of ecological dangers, for example, it is not clear to what extent it is only in the last thirty or forty years that they have objectively posed global dangers as well. Beck alternates, as the mood strikes him, between objective scientific explanations of particular issues and descriptions of their subjective, media, and institutional treatment.

The hypertrophy of the concept of risk generates apparently counterfactual assertions. In the Western world, no increase in political, economic, sociocultural, or other types of risks can be identified for either the largest owners of capital or the largest oligopolies since the Second World War. As far as the “richest” are concerned, it is precisely the widening inequality of income and property in so-called “reflexive modernity” that stands in spectacular contradiction to Beck’s generalizations of risk. In the “post-Fordist” present, there is nothing in internal company hierarchies to indicate an equal distribution of risks for workers or employees and higher management. Overwhelming empirical evidence suggests

⁵ On this, see Beck, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

the opposite—it has even been observed that managers have been promoted in proportion to the financial damage and organizational confusion they have caused for their companies.⁷

Nevertheless, Beck does not allow either the “new poverty” (which he himself has studied extensively) or the developments in the United States (which had long been apparent at the time his book was published) to limit the extension of his concept of risk. On the contrary, “the division of working hours” goes along with “an *unfavorable* redistribution of income, social protection, career opportunities, and status in the organization, in the sense of a collective decline (across differentiations of specialty, occupation, and hierarchy).”⁸

Beck cements this extremely risky thesis with the proclamation of “*a risk-fraught system of flexible, pluralized, decentralized underemployment, which, however, will possibly no longer raise the problem of unemployment, in the sense of being completely without a paid job.*”⁹ Apparently, according to Beck, “in this system, unemployment in the guise of various forms of underemployment is ‘integrated.’”¹⁰

Is it only readers’ incompetence in economics that is to blame if they fail to understand the difference between unemployment and joblessness? To what extent is the “system” fraught with risk if it itself integrates unemployment? How is the risk distributed among suppliers and buyers of the commodity of labor power?

Conclusive answers to such questions cannot be found in Beck’s theses on “individualization” and the “risk society.” But there are at least one or two clues that can be used to explain how commentators on contemporary society have (successfully) drawn certain conclusions over the past three decades. Beck states, for example, “In the redistributions between production, services and consumption, which are made possible by technology and are socially desirable, there is a bit of *clever self-abrogation of the market.*”¹¹ He gives the example of the ATM, which allows customers to access their accounts without time restrictions; according to him, this is a hybrid of paid and unpaid work. For one thing, it is noteworthy how “idealistic” and “metaphysical” the language becomes as soon as sensitive areas are broached. Actually, one would like to be that plural, un-metaphysical, and un-German. But unemployment is still integrated into the system, and the market abrogates itself.

⁷ Cf. for example J.-P. Le Goff, *La barbarie douce*, Paris 1999.

⁸ Beck, op. cit., p. 143; emphasis in the original.

⁹ Ibid.; emphasis in the original.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 219; emphasis in the original.

By the self-abrogation of the market, Beck does not mean the end of the market economy (this much is certain). But since the “sum” of gainful employment has increased since the Second World War, as Beck also notes, he also cannot mean the increase in unpaid work. Or can he? Does he want to insinuate that the difference between paid and unpaid work is blurred when unpaid consumer work takes over work formerly done by the company itself, so that a new, market-indifferent stage of capitalism is imminent?

From the perspective of the sociologies of pluralism and risk, which project the situation in tertiarized centers out across the globe, it may seem so. These sociologies overlook the fact that, strictly speaking, the provision of services only brings about the distribution of money that had to be “really” earned somewhere. In this respect, the tertiarized centers of “advanced” societies, in particular, are economically surreal snow globes, predominantly inhabited by the independently wealthy and service providers, allowing money generated elsewhere to circulate. (It is precisely this constellation that brings with it an undeniable homogenization of social structures—such that anyone who, despite all of this, seriously claims that a city like Paris is consistently more pluralist than it was fifty years ago is merely proving himself to be a ventriloquist of the dogma of pluralism.)

Every provision of services, however calculated, is ultimately dependent on the real creation of value, that is, on opportunities for market expansion and growth. If this is not guaranteed, the only option is to go into debt, which does undoubtedly allow the further expansion of services for a certain period of time. The boundaries of wage labor, contract work, “consumer work,” and off-the-books work can then become blurred—but this is not a sign of “self-abrogation.” It is rather a sign of the cruel truth of the market, which, under these circumstances, at best is in crisis and at worst has collapsed.

Things are different if an “interpretation, which has largely prevailed in recent years, in both scholarship and politics,” and which Beck wholeheartedly agrees with, is correct: “For this assessment of the development predicts a long dry spell well into the nineties, but after those ‘lean’ years, ‘fat’ years in the labor market can be expected once again.”¹² It would be nice if it were that easy . . .

After presenting his truly risky grand thesis of generalized and encompassing risks, Beck must postulate the demise of genuinely significant classes and social strata and of the legitimacy of every socio-structural model of classes and social strata on the way to the equally comprehensive assertion of individualization independent of origin.

¹² Ibid., p. 141.

According to Beck, the current (“second”) surge of modernization, which is what first “ends” modernity, began about forty years ago and is characterized by the dissolution of social and ethical milieus that guide action and set standards—a dissolution that massively shifts the pressure to solve problems onto the individual. From the perspective of the history of sociology, Beck essentially takes G. Simmel’s findings to the furthest extreme. The individual is set free from his social and value relations and becomes responsible for the conduct of his life.

The welfare state guarantees the individual social rights and benefits, although these are, to a large extent, closely linked to participation in the labor market. “Perhaps against its will, the welfare state is an experimental arrangement for conditioning ego-centered ways of life.”¹³ The organization of society around the labor market is also linked to processes of mobility that further promote the detachment of people from traditional life contexts. This is accompanied by a reduction in the division of labor according to gender and an increase in upward and downward social mobility within the same curriculum.

The educational expansion of the 1960s is another constituent element in the retreat of traditional patterns of standardization and socialization. The total amount of education received has increased more or less equally for all social strata (in absolute terms). However, school education has not automatically guaranteed a secure income for around thirty years. Education is not a sufficient prerequisite for advancement, but it is a necessary condition for preventing social decline. Beck gives the name of “escalator effect” to the finding that despite the persistence of social inequalities, it is still the case that a longer lifespan, less working time, and more financial leeway (sic!) have been recorded in absolute terms, leading to a “radical change in the relationship between work and life.”¹⁴ Consumption styles are taking the place of former class worlds.

Beck’s thesis of individualization coupled with a simultaneous erosion of status or of the existence of classes (or social strata) is given a sharper profile by his downplaying of K. Marx. Marx appears here as an early theorist who demonstrates and describes tendencies toward individualization and isolation (e.g., rural exodus due to primitive accumulation, detraditionalization, urbanization of living conditions, individual sale of the commodity of labor power), but does not pursue this line of development further. Instead, he holds out the

¹³ U. Beck, “The Debate on the ‘Individualization Theory’ in Today’s Sociology in Germany,” in B. Schäfers (ed.), “Sociology in Germany,” special issue, *Soziologie*, 1994, no. 3: 198.

¹⁴ U. Beck, *Risikogesellschaft*, Frankfurt a. M. 1986, p. 124. The English translation substitutes a different text for chapter 3 of the German edition; see Beck, *Risk Society*, p. 101, n. 1.