

CONCEPTUALIZING INFORMATION SOCIETY AS RISK SOCIETY

Róbert PINTÉR

Department of Information and Knowledge Management
Budapest University of Technology and Economics
H–1521 Budapest, Hungary
Phone: (36 1) 463–1832, Fax: (36 1) 463–1225
e-mail: pinter.robert@itk.hu

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Abstract

The article try to find why does it seem that the recent human development will be fatal. It employ two, so called postmodern theories, the information society idea and the concept of risk society. The thesis is that the information society is itself the risk society, and risk society is itself the information society. On theoretical level, both of them describe the characteristics of the same society, the postmodern (late modern or postindustrial) society. This revelation raises important questions: Is the information society capable of surpassing the logics of industrial epoch? Creating a really sustainable development, which can redefine the directions of hazardous processes? Restructuring the methods of economy, policymaking, culture and giving us a new chance in living harmony with nature?

Keywords: risk, risk society, information society, globalization.

“Henry David Thoreau said most famously,
‘The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.’
So it is not one whit mysterious that we poison the
water and air and topsoil, and construct ever more
cunning doomsday devices both industrial and mil-
itary. Let us be perfectly frank for a change. For
practically everybody, the end of the world can’t
come soon enough.” ([?]).

1. Introductory Questions

Although Kurt Vonnegut, the pope of the black humor, was maybe too pessimistic, his comment well summarizes a common belief: our life recently is rather turning to be bad. But why do the people usually think that the development of Euro-American civilization will be fatal?

On the next pages I try to give a special answer to this question from a sociological point of view. I will employ two, so called postmodern theories, when I try to merge the information society idea in risk society idea and vice versa.¹

¹Later I give the definitions of ‘information society’, ‘risk’ and ‘risk society’. When I mention information(al) society I mainly refer the works of CASTELLS (for example the three volume book

The thesis in the center of my work is that the information society is itself the risk society, and risk society is itself the information society.² If we see them on theoretical level, both of them describe the characteristics of the same society, the postmodern (late modern or postindustrial) society.

But why is this statement so important? Well, it seems, that beyond the scientific delight – which I feel while searching the right answers – it raises more important questions: Is the information society capable of surpassing the logics of industrial epoch? Namely creating a really sustainable development, which can redefine the directions of hazardous processes? Restructuring the methods of economy, policymaking, culture and giving us a new chance in living harmony with nature?

First I will define the notion of risk, and then describe the risk society and information society ideas. After these definitions I give a pessimistic and an optimistic scenario of the possible future prospects of the information society.

2. The Notion of Risk

The word ‘risk’ is a widely used term in different areas of life. Hence, if we want to use it for our special purposes, first we must define the content of the notion; clarify that which senses will we take. As Lupton states, in modern societies risk has at least a dozen different meanings:

“In contemporary western societies, the noun ‘risk’ and the adjective ‘risky’ have become very commonly used in both popular and expert discourses. An apparatus of expert research, knowledge and advice has developed around the concept of risk: risk analysis, risk assessment, risk communication and risk management are all major fields of research and practice, used to measure and control risk in areas as far-ranging as medicine and public health, finance, the law, and business and industry.” (LUPTON, [?]).

But not only doctors, businessmen, lawyers and industry people have their own blurred ‘risks’ concepts, even sociologists have an independent risk definition. According to KAPITÁNY ([?]) after 1986, since BECK’s book *Risikogesellschaft* was first published by Suhrkamp, the risk society idea is in the central of sociologist’s debates. Beck, in another book, formulated risk as the following:

“But what does ‘risk’ mean? Risk is the modern approach to foresee and control the future consequences of human action, the various unintended consequences of radicalized modernization. It is an (institutionalized) attempt, a cognitive map,

of Information Age: [?][?][?][?]) and at the risk the works of Ulrich BECK ([?]-[?]).

²Beck himself has emphasized that theoretically, empirically and politically risk society is information society and (knowledge society) as well, but he didn’t make a clear explanation of his statement ([?] quoted by DESSEWFFY [?]). In fact, there are only several attempts to apply the risk society concept in information society researches (for example see [?], [?], [?] or [?]). One can calmly state that the researches of risk society and information society are not overlapping yet.

to colonize the future. [...] Risks presuppose decision. These decisions were previously undertaken with fixed norms of calculability, connecting means and ends or causes and effects. These norms are precisely what 'world risk society' has rendered invalid."

As GIDDENS ([?]) states the notion of risk is rather a modern phenomenon in the history of humankind. The 'risk' is always connected to uncertainty and probability referring to a forthcoming event. That is why historically based, traditional societies rather used the notions of luck, fate, 'will of gods' and magic instead of risk. The life of people in such a traditional community was mainly defined by the past, the laws and customs derived from their ancestors and their religion.³ And at the same time in these old communities the changes in one's life weren't so hectic as later in the industrial age or in nowadays. Of course these words as luck, fate etc. didn't disappear from our ordinary vocabulary, but their meanings and the beliefs, which are attached to them were changed. The former ideas were partially substituted by future orientation of post-traditional communities and the feelings that one can rule his own life.

In the modern society risk had a very important influence on macro (societal) level. Risk became a driving force of human development. 'Risk presumes a society that actively tries to break away from its past – the prime characteristic indeed of modern industrial civilisation. [...] Moreover, a positive embrace of risk is the very source of that energy which creates wealth in a modern economy.' ([?]).

So, in a sociological sense, the notion of risk centralizes around:

- Calculation: probability of events and reducing uncertainty
- Decision-making: taking risk in decisions and human action (based on calculation)
- Future orientation: colonization and control of future (consequences of a set of decisions and actions)⁴

3. Risk Society

But what happened that the social scientists after a hundred years of indifference suddenly explored the concept of risk and recently suggest that it is one of the key concepts of our (post)modern society? The answer may be that the quantity and quality of risk completely changed as the theorists of risk society put it. For example Douglas argues that in contemporary societies 'bad risks, having moved from *chance* to *danger*. Risk as a cultural concept no longer carries the positive aspects of *gamble* or *probability*' (DOUGLAS 1990: 3, quoted by [?]). The judgement of risk has changed in the last thirty years, as its negative side became in the center.

³For a more detailed history of risk see [?]

⁴In this sense 'risk' can give an alternative explanation (beside Weber's protestant ethic) of why and how capitalism arose. Risk could be the driving force in the background of entrepreneurs' behavior (for details of this idea see [?] especially, pp. 60–66).

After the second World War (WWII) the risk is relocated from nature to society in consequence of intensifying industrial production. The former risk (natural) is called ‘external’ by GIDDENS ([?]) and the latter (social) is ‘manufactured’. The nature of risk was changing. Nowadays we face up the process, that manufactured risks increasingly influence our life while we don’t have enough historical experience to handle the new problems, which are caused by ourselves.⁵ But these aren’t our biggest problems.

The real difficulty is the imponderable probability. That is, we can’t calculate the probable consequences of our actions. It is the phenomenon called the ‘return of uncertainty to society’ (BON [?] , quoted by BECK [?]). It causes the end of experts regimes, the conflict, that ‘no one is an expert, or everyone is an expert, because the experts presume what they are supposed to make possible and produce: cultural acceptance.’ (BECK [?]). If we are not capable of measuring safely the probabilities of our actions’ final outcomes, how could we discuss the natural or social conflicts and try to find a solution, which is acceptable for everyone?

In this sense ‘risk society’ means a new way of living, a new kind of society in which the historically evolved political and social institutions’ rational control over the situations is dissolving day by day. The strict borders between technical and social questions are blurred (BON [?] pp. 248–249, quoted by SZÍJÁRTÓ [?]). Where thirty–forty years ago the rules were clear, nowadays everything is doubtful.

These changes in ‘risk society’ reach everybody in the process of individualization. As Beck writes ‘individualization is not based on the free decision of individuals. To use Sartre’s term, people are condemned to individualization.’ ([?]). If we call this individualization process the ‘micro level’, because it handles mostly the interpersonal contacts and forms of living, we must depict the changes at ‘macro level’ too.

‘Macro level’ means the socio-political and cultural institutions of a society. These institutions are facing with a challenge of changing risks and emerging of new kind of conflicts. The idea of ‘risk society’ means a completely new way of living in which the social institutions must change as much as the nature of conflicts have altered. We entered a new epoch, when the ability to completely control the industrial risks called into question. The rational, predictable world of the industrial era has turned unnoticed its torso, as it became irrational, unpredictable risk society, which unites contradictory trends. As Beck stated:

‘The concept of risk and the concept of world risk society are concepts of ambivalence, meaning that they destroy distinctions and reconnect antitheses. Accordingly [...] the concept of (world) risk (society) means:

1. neither destruction nor trust/security but real virtuality;
2. a threatening future, (still) contrary to fact, becomes the parameter of influence for current action;
3. both a factual and a value statement, it combines in mathematicized morality;

⁵Such problems are the global warming, the nuclear armament, but we have new social conflicts as well, for example the changing role of family and relation between genders.

4. control and lack of control as expressed in manufactured uncertainty;
5. knowledge or unawareness realized in conflicts of (re)cognition;
6. simultaneously the global and local are reconstituted as the 'glocality' of risks;
7. the distinction between knowledge, latent impact and symptomatic consequences;
8. a man-made hybrid world which lost its dualism between nature and culture.' ([?]).

The quintessence of risk society is a paradox, that more technology in present means more problems in future: more good (or apparently good) is equal with more bad ([?]). The common beliefs, that all kinds of human problems can be solved by technology and using of knowledge seem to be false – the unintended consequences (or side effects) of our actions cause bigger problems than the original ones.

4. Information Society and Risk Society: Overlapping Concepts?

Speaking about the same, but in completely different manners – as one could summarize the relationship of information society and risk society theories. If someone tries to find contacts between the 'information society' idea and the 'risk society' idea he would fast recognize that there are not too many direct relations. Let us open the three volume book (Information Age, 1996, 1997a, 1998a) of Manuel CASTELLS, [?][?][?] who is the living guru of the information society theory and we will realize, that the notion of risk doesn't appear in the index of his books and that there isn't even a word about risk in the whole 1500 pages, which fits the risk society idea.

But both of these theories, information and risk society, are centralized around late-modern society, thus their topics are surely the same:

'At a deeper level of meaning, it may be argued that the contemporary obsession with the concept of risk has its roots in the changes inherent in the transformation of societies from premodern to modern and then to late modern (or postmodern, as some theorists prefer to describe the contemporary era). Late or postmodernity generally refers to broader socioeconomic and political changes that have taken place in western societies since World War Two, producing the sense for many people that we are 'living in new times' (SMART [?]). These changes include the end of the Cold War, the breakdown of the socialist and communist states, the spread of communications technology and changes in familial relationships and the workplace wrought by the feminist movement, economic decline and growing secularism.' (LUPTON [?]pp. 10–11).

These are the same trends, which are examined by Castells: end of statism, information technology revolution, end of patriarchy, feminist movement, transformation of work and employment (networkers and fleximers), fourth world etc.⁶

⁶I use Castells' terms instead of Lupton's.

But what is information society at all? WEBSTER (1995: 6-29) distinguished five different types of definitions:

1. technological: changing of tools (to information and communication technology)
2. economic: changing of economic system (emerging of knowledge industry and the information sectors)
3. occupational: changing of occupational structure (to information workers)
4. spatial: changing of the spatial logic of society (information networks, space of flows)
5. and cultural: changing of cultural reproduction (new mediated cultural environment, virtual reality).

Since the middle of the 1990s – when the above-mentioned typology was made – the information society theory became much stronger in the academic sector. After the publication of the widely cited trilogy of Castells, the information society idea arrived in the center of sociological debates. Castells offers more than only a spatial definition of the term (as previously Webster has categorized his works). His terms cover a much wider research area: the Net and the Self, revolution of technology, informational economy and globalization, network enterprise, proactive and reactive movements, culture of real virtuality, space of flows, timeless time, criminal economy etc.⁷

If we take a closer look at Castells' works, not only the Information Age trilogy, but some other articles or interviews (see e.g. CASTELLS 1997b, 1998b), we can realize that Castells' ideas on information society are full of comments on risk, potential risks of the informational development and despite the fact that he didn't use the term, there are a lot of contacting points. Information society can be risk society, especially for those, who are excluded from the increasing wealth:

'For the prophets of technology, for the true believers in the magic of the market, everything will be just fine, as long as ingenuity and competition are set free. All we need are a few regulatory fixes, to prevent corruption and to remove bureaucratic impediments in the path of our flight to hyper-modernity. For those around the world who are not ecstatic about surfing on the Internet, but who are affected by layoffs, lack of basic social services, crime, poverty and disruption of their lives, globalization is nothing more than a warmed up version of traditional capitalist ideology. In their view, information technology is a tool for renewed exploitation, destruction of jobs, environmental degradation and the invasion of privacy. Techno-elites versus neo-luddites.' ([?]).

The main social risks in the information society are: exploitation of workers (especially children, women, minority and elderly employees), destruction of jobs (high unemployment rates), environmental pollution, threatening of privacy and freedom, increasing xenophobia and intolerance, dividing the society, end of solidarity, increasing poverty and inequality.

⁷I don't mention here all the relevant terms and the notions of the previous list (see them above, after the citation of Lupton).

5. Scenarios: Dead-End or Restructuring of Old Institutions and Logics?

But there is, I think, a more important question, than the social risks, in the information society, which I stressed in the introduction of this article: is the information society capable of surpassing the industrial era? In other words we must examine whether the information society is a completely new social phenomenon, different from the previous epoch, namely the industrial one. Or, is it closer to the industrial logic of life, and in a structural sense barely anything has changed because of the so called 'information revolution'. As usually, this answer is twofold: there are an optimistic, and a pessimistic scenario.

Beck emphasizes, that his theory of risk society has a distinctive feature, which distinguishes it from the other modern social theories. It is in spite of all appearances not a pessimistic, but rather an optimistic coherent theory of the present processes:

"After all, one of the most important characteristics of the theory of risk society, so far scarcely understood in science or politics, is to unfreeze – at least intellectually – the seemingly rigid circumstances and to set them in motion. Unlike most theories of modern societies, the theory of risk society develops an image that makes the circumstances of modernity contingent, ambivalent and (involuntarily) susceptible to political rearrangement.

Due to this often unseen and undesired self-discreditation ('reflexive modernization') which is provoked everywhere by the discourse of risk, something ultimately happens which sociologists loyal to Weber would consider impossible: *institutions begin to change*. As we know, Weber's diagnosis is that modernity transforms into an iron cage in which people must sacrifice to the altar of rationality like the fellaheen of ancient Egypt. [...] Anyone who is simply focused on the risk potential of industrial society fails to understand that risks are not only a matter of unintended consequences – the 'toxin of the week' – but also of the unintended consequences of unintended consequences *in the institutions*." ([?]).

Hence, both of the scenarios suppose that the institutions of our society will change, only the directions of changes are not sure. If nothing is anymore as safe as it was one or two decades ago, then the managing of social order must change – but how? This question is also (partly) answered by Beck, as it was in the core of his research in his essay *The Reinvention of Politics: Towards a Theory of Reflexive Modernization* (1994). He offers the following theoretic solutions (positive scenario):

'[...] the model of unambiguous instrumental rationality must be abolished.

First, people must say farewell to the notion that administrations and experts always know exactly, or at least better, what is right and good for everyone: demopolitization of expertise.

Second, the circle of groups to be allowed to participate can no longer be closed according to considerations internal to specialists, but must instead be opened up according to social standards of relevance: informalization of jurisdiction.

Third, all participants must be aware that the decisions have not already been

made and now need only be ‘sold’ or implemented externally: opening the structure of decision making.

Fourth, negotiating between experts and decision-makers behind closed doors must be transferred to and transformed into a public dialogue between the broadest variety of agents, with the result of additional uncontrollability: creation of a partial publicity.

Fifth: norms for this process – modes of discussion, protocols, debates, evaluations of interviews, forms of voting and approving – must be agreed on and sanctioned: self-legislation and self obligation.’ ([?] pp. 29–30).

One can summarize Beck’s program in two words: citizen involvement. It meets the utopian concepts of information society theorists who highlighted the democratic potential of information technologies. These new technologies can restructure the old institutions and make them function better.

On the other side – from Castells’ viewpoints – information society is very close to the old system, as it works as capitalism, only it became global and functions on a planetary scale. So it can’t and really doesn’t differ so much from industrial world in its work: it maintains the profit-oriented, efficiency-centered economy, the less and less significant nation-state based politics (democracy) and the more and more multifaceted and virtual culture. Of course it doesn’t mean, that this world is static, moreover it changes very fast and the processes are able to turn be worse than ever (negative scenario):

‘Productivity gains, after all have to be realized by sale of output to someone with money to spend. Either Europe and Japan will join the expansion, or the US machine will stall and start spiraling downwards. Devaluation of stocks will erode the wealth accumulated on paper by both firms and households, and technology-led productivity potential will mutate into over-capacity, spilling into the morass of bad deflation on a global scale. Do not worry. Yet. It could still be worse.’ ([?]).

Are we at the beginning of a new economic crisis?

6. Conclusions

The information society is in radical changes. But it is still not clear what kind of processes opens it up. However, the whole frame of our life is in constant transformation. The main areas are the following:

- economy: it works as a global unit, all along the twenty-four hours. This economic system is inter-dependent, asymmetric, increasingly diversified and excluding certain areas and social groups. It increasingly tears from its foundation (creation of flying markets).⁸
- nation state: the states loose step by step their influence, the global networks and local communities are more suitable to handle the political challenges.

⁸ For the relation between flying markets and risk society see ALMÁSI [?] (especially pp. 157–170)

- democratic politics: the political institutes of democracy are in crisis, because there are not only good or only bad decisions, but every decision has side effects. At the same time increasing proportion of the decisions are made by non-elected corporations.
- culture: the collective norms and values are called into question. The people must choose their identity and community and find answers in uncertain situations. They must try to live with their 'risky freedom', where every decision may have bad consequences.

We are at the beginning of a new era, which is an information risk society: our world is in constant radical changes – our institutions will undoubtedly change. And hopefully they can create a new development era.

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