Remapping social inequalities in an age of climate change: for a cosmopolitan renewal of sociology*

ULRICH BECK

Institut für Soziologie, Konradstrasse 6, D-80801 München, Germany
u.beck@lmu.de

Abstract Climate change globalizes and radicalizes social inequality; it exacerbates inequalities of rich and poor, core and periphery, and at the same time dissolves them in the face of a common threat to humanity. Climate change combines with the inequalities arising from globalization, decoupling the producers and subjects of risk. Remapping inequality in the age of climate change and globalization therefore requires taking account of the unbounding of both equality and inequality, and an awareness of the end of the opposition between society and nature, one of the founding principles of sociology. The article outlines four theses of inequality, climate change and globalization, and concludes with the question: what does a cosmopolitan renewal of the social sciences mean and how will it be possible?

Keywords INEQUALITY, CLIMATE CHANGE, GLOBALIZATION, (METHODOLOGICAL) COSMOPOLITANISM, RISK

Introduction: the conception of inequality as limited by the nation-state collapses

Ever more children in Europe are growing up in poverty. Millions of people risk their lives fleeing from the poverty of their native lands in order to share in the supposed wealth of Western countries. In Europe, as in the USA, but also in China, Brazil, Russia and India, the gap between rich and poor is widening. News reports like these are founded on a conception of inequality among the world’s inhabitants that arose in the transition to modern society. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the age of globalization and climate change, its foundations are being shaken. To understand this transformation of a world-view it is necessary to locate it historically at least in outline.

Aristotle tried to explain the origin of inequality by assuming a natural difference in worth between human beings. Rousseau objected sharp-wittedly: if the rulers are worth more than their subjects, ‘is then mental ability, wisdom and virtue always to

* Revised version of opening lecture given at the German Sociology Conference ‘Uncertain Times’, 6 October 2008 in Jena, Germany.
be found in the same individuals, and that in direct relation to their power and their wealth?" The premodern order of society stood or fell with the assumption, that human beings were by nature unequal in worth and the origin of social inequality was to be found in God’s Will. With the revolutionary Enlightenment claim of the natural equality of all men, this conception was shattered. Uncertain times began! If human beings are not unequal by nature, but equal, then social inequality is subject to change, then the privileged of today can be the outcasts of tomorrow. Politically that means that all inequalities are in principle changeable and require justification. However, in the reality of Europe and the USA since the eighteenth century this principle was, and is always, applied only within clear limits and with characteristic omissions. All are equal – but this equality does not extend to blacks, Jews and women, and, above all, it stops at the borders of the nation-state. Social inequalities may blossom and flourish on the other side of the national garden fence, that is, at best, cause for moral outrage, but politically irrelevant. Ultimately, there is a clear separation of society and nature and so of social and natural inequality. The former has to be politically justified; the latter does not.

All these boundary premises are becoming increasingly dubious today. The overlap, one might also say the collision, of growing global expectations of equality (human rights) and growing global and national inequalities on the one hand, with the radically unequal consequences of climate change and the consumption of resources on the other, could soon sweep away this whole set of premises of a nationally delimited inequality, just as Hurricane Katrina swept away the houses of the poor in New Orleans.

At the start of the twenty-first century we are once again subject to an epochal transformation, this time of the modern world and social order, although one that is only just beginning to enter public consciousness. That is because we are still trying to understand the discontinuous transformation of the coordinates of contemporary society in terms of the old conception of fenced-in nation-state equality or inequality and thereby underestimate the scale of the change.¹

What does the sociological remapping of inequality and power mean? First, it will be able to rely neither on the old institutions nor on the seemingly eternal distinctions – us and the rest, national and international, nature and society. Instead, the remapping of inequality in the age of globalization and climate change must take account of three kinds of ‘unbounding’ processes involving the loss of familiar limits: (1) the unbounding of social equality; (2) the unbounding of social inequality; (3) the end of the opposition between nature and society. Finally, I shall take up (4) the question: what does a cosmopolitan renewal of the social sciences mean and how will it be possible?

Social equality becomes a worldwide expectation

First thesis: Social inequalities become a problem, a cause of conflict, not because the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, but when, and only when, acknowledged norms and expectations of equality – human rights – spread. Anyone who wishes to
understand the political effect of social inequalities must look at the history of social equality.

A clear distinction must be made, therefore, between the reality of social inequality and the political problem of social inequality. In a historical perspective, social inequalities become a political scandal relatively late – and then at first in the form of a characteristic contradiction: all people are at once equal and not equal in relation to national boundaries. Frontiers act as watersheds of perception: they turn social inequalities into a political issue – internally – and simultaneously produce, stabilize and legitimate them – externally. Under what conditions does this view of the world begin to crumble?

It is a brutal irony that the inequality between poor and rich in world society takes the form of a champagne glass (Held 2007). The 900 million people privileged by the grace of birth in the west are responsible for 86 per cent of world consumption; they use 58 per cent of its energy supplies and have 79 per cent of world income at their disposal as well as 74 per cent of all telephone connections. The poorest 1.2 billion, one-fifth of the world’s population, are responsible for 1.3 per cent of world consumption, use 4 per cent of its energy supplies and have 1.5 per cent of all telephone connections. It is easy to understand why the rich bask in their affluence, but why do the subordinate poor put up with it? As is well known, Max Weber linked the stability of the order of inequality and power to the question of legitimation. What ‘belief in legitimacy’ guarantees the consent of the global poor and excluded to the inequality of world society, in which half the world’s population – the majority of its children – starves? That fifth of the world’s population that is doing worst (they have less money altogether than the richest man in the world) lack everything – food, clean drinking water and a roof over their heads. So what is it that makes this global order of inequality legitimate and stable? How is it possible that internally the affluent European societies organize costly financial transfer systems on the basis of national criteria of poverty and need, while a large part of the world’s population is daily threatened by starvation?

My answer is this: the performance principle legitimates national inequality, the nation-state principle legitimates global inequality (in another form) – how? First, national boundaries draw a sharp distinction between politically relevant and irrelevant inequality. Perceptions of inequalities within national societies are magnified enormously; at the same time, inequalities between national societies are faded out. The ‘legitimation’ of global inequalities is based on an institutionalized ‘looking the other way’. The national gaze is ‘freed’ from looking at the misery of the world. It operates by way of a double exclusion: it excludes the excluded. The sociology of inequality, which equates inequality with nation-state inequality, is unreflectively a party to that. It is indeed astonishing how firmly global inequalities are ‘legitimated’ by a tacit agreement between nation-state government and nation-state sociology – a sociology programmed to work on a nation-state basis and claiming to be value-free! Second, because there is no global state responsibility and instance of observation, global inequalities disintegrate into approximately 200 islands of nation-state inequalities.
This leads to the third principle, by which the inequalities between countries, regions and states are accounted politically incomparable. In a perspective bounded by nation-state, politically relevant comparisons are played out only within the nation-state, never between states. Such comparisons, which make inequality politically explosive, assume national norms of equality. That is why even massive differences in income between people with the same qualifications but different nationality only have political force if they are related to a horizon of perception of common equality. Such a common frame only emerges when the people belong to the same nation or European union of states, or are employed in the same company, even if in different national subsidiaries.

Yet that is precisely what the national gaze fades out: the more norms of equality spread worldwide, the more global inequality is stripped of the legitimation basis of institutionalized looking away. The wealthy democracies carry the banner of human rights to the furthest corners of the earth without noticing that the national border defences, with which they want to repel the streams of migrants, thereby lose their legitimation. Many migrants take seriously the proclaimed human right of equality of mobility and encounter countries and states that – not least under the impact of increasing internal inequalities – want the norm of equality to stop short at their fortified borders.

Critique of ‘methodological nationalism’: social inequality can no longer be understood in the nation-state frame

Second thesis: The perception of social inequality in everyday life, politics and scholarship is based on a world-view that equates territorial, political, economic, social and cultural borders. In fact, the world is becoming ever more networked and interconnected. Territorial, state, economic, social and cultural borders still exist, but they no longer coincide! The empirically undeniable growth in links and interactions across national boundaries compels the remapping of social inequality.

In the sociology of inequality everything has been questioned – classes, strata, lifestyles, milieux and individualization – but not the territorial reference, the ties to the soil, the nation-state framing of social inequality. Put in other words, this means that the conception of social inequality is based on principles of nationality and statehood, without this so far having been (adequately) addressed in sociology. Most theorists of class, including Bourdieu, who thought so extensively about globalization in his final years, identify class society with the nation-state. The same is true of Wallerstein, Goldthorpe and, in fact, almost all non-class theory sociologists of inequality (and incidentally also of my individualization theory of social inequality).

To illuminate the range of this background assumption, it is useful to distinguish between first order and second order questions. First order questions refer to the ‘What questions’ of social inequality, second order questions to ‘who questions’. First order questions take as their subject the material distribution of chances and duties, resources and risks, such things as income, education and property. They presume the answer to the unposed second order questions, that is: who is unequal? What unit of
Remapping social inequalities in an age of climate change

reference precedes the social inequalities? What is the appropriate frame within which first order questions can be raised – and answered – politically as well as sociologically? Even today, the congruence of political status (national membership, passport) and socio-economic status (position in the nation-state hierarchy of inequality) is a tacit assumption of inequality analysis. Social researchers understand and analyse their object from the standpoint of a national us-sociology. Inequality conflicts assume nation-state norms of equality as much as they do the exclusion of the non-national others. This paradigm, which unreflectingly equates political and socio-economic status, is what I call ‘methodological nationalism’. It is only the cosmopolitan outlook that reveals that the meta-principles of state, nationality and ethnicity constitute the frame of reference, within which the material distribution of resources is conflictually negotiated. The gaze of social science, under the spell of methodological nationalism, cannot even see that the linkage of nationality and territoriality primarily fixes the position of individuals and groups on the world scale – and that is the real dimension of inequality! Status within a national-territorial frame, which can be acquired, is secondary to an allocated status of rank and politics of the country of origin within the international system (for example in accordance with the distinction between centre and periphery).

In other words, methodological nationalism is based on a double assumption of congruence: on the one hand the congruence of territorial, political, economic, social and cultural boundaries; on the other, the congruence of actor perspective and social scientific observer perspective. The premise of the normative-political nationalism of actors becomes unreflectedly the premise of the social scientific observer perspective. These congruence assumptions are mutually reinforcing. The historical trend, however, is running in the opposite direction: territorial, state, economic, social boundaries continue to exist, but they are no longer coterminal! The necessary change in perspective can build on three insights:

- social classes are only one of the historical forms of inequality;
- the nation-state is only one of the historical frames of interpretation;
- ‘the end of the national class society’ does not mean ‘the end of social inequality’, on the contrary: inequality both in the national and the transnational sphere is exacerbated.

Today we are seeing a kind of repetition of the process Max Weber was observing when he analysed the origins of modern capitalism. Now, however, this process is taking place on a global scale. Weber said, we have to look at the separation of family household and capitalist enterprise – that is the emancipation of economic interests. At present, we are witnessing the emancipation of economic interests from national ties and control bodies, in other words the separation of power and politics. The emergent nation-state developed institutions of politics and power that were able to limit the injuries of modern industrial capitalism. This took place within the territorial borders of the nation-state and was a kind of marriage between power and politics, one that is now ending in divorce. Accordingly, power is becoming more diffuse,
partly transferred into cyberspace, to financial markets and mobile capital, partly shifted onto individuals who now have to cope with the attendant risks alone. And, at present, there is no equivalent of the sovereign nation-state in sight.

What determines position in the system of social inequality in a world in which national boundaries – at least for capital and information flows – have become porous? The interesting answer is that it is essentially determined through the response to exactly this loss of limits. Accordingly, it is necessary to distinguish between active and passive transnationalization of persons, population groups or whole countries. The possibilities of border-transcending interaction and mobility have become an important factor influencing the positioning in the hierarchy of inequality in the global age. That involves resources of all kinds – passports, educational qualifications, languages and money – that is, cultural, economic and social capital. Likewise, the specific national immigration policies – according to what criteria (of access or closure) do countries organize their migration policy in the international competition for human capital?

If one replaces the national viewpoint with a cosmopolitan one, a completely different picture of the border-transcending dynamic of inequality emerges. On the one hand, there are those going up in the world, the ‘active transnationalizers’. These include very different groups. There are the global elites who no longer think and act in terms only of national spheres, as well as large parts of the younger generations (across educational attainments) who consciously live transnationally, are correspondingly mobile, acquire international educational qualifications, form friendship networks and in this way increase the capital they can ‘draw on’. Finally, there are migrants, making use of the opportunities of globalization, for example by deploying the extended family as a social resource. Another aspect of this new division is the global middle, passively suffering transnationalization and afraid of coming down in the world. The extremely heterogeneous majority of those who define their material existence territorially and, in the face of the threat to their standards of living, support the strengthening of territorial boundaries and the accentuation of national identity, demanding the protection of the state. Here the uncertain times show their neonational face: the hatred of ‘others’, of foreigners, Jews and Muslims is growing. To be frank, words that are intended to soothe the declining middle sectors of society – the twin arguments, globalization is our fate, protectionism is counter-productive – comfort and save no one. The voter is not a masochist. He is not going to vote for a party promising him that he will go down in the world. Without the consent of the national middle worldwide, however, a politics that wants to maintain international integration, or even extend it, lacks a power base. Mau et al. (2008) show that this is not the whole picture. In 2006, using a German survey group, they empirically tested the hypothesis that active transnationalization (interaction across borders) is a source of cosmopolitan attitudes. The conclusion: persons with frontier-transcending experiences and possibilities of activity are much more likely to develop cosmopolitan attitudes to foreigners. In other words, the experience of global interdependencies and active interaction across borders favours the readiness and capacity to see through others’ eyes. The fixation on the nation-state is slackening.
Social and natural inequality fuses in the course of climate change

Third thesis: Climate change, held to be anthropogenic and catastrophic, occurs in the shape of a new kind of synthesis of nature and society. The inequality of life chances arises from the ability to dispose of income, educational qualifications and passports, and their social character is very evident. The radical inequality of the consequences of climate change takes material form in the increasing frequency or exacerbation of natural events – such as floods or tornadoes – which are in principle familiar natural occurrences and are not self evidently the product of societal decisions. The expression ‘force of nature’ takes on a new meaning: the natural law evidence of ‘natural’ catastrophes produces a naturalization of social relations of inequality and power. The political consequence is that the conception of the natural equality of human beings tips over into the conception of a natural inequality of human beings produced by natural catastrophes.

The facts are well known – global warming, melting polar ice caps, rising sea levels, desertification, increasing numbers of tornadoes and all of it usually treated as a natural catastrophe. But, nature is not in itself catastrophic. The catastrophic character is only revealed within the field of reference of the society affected. The catastrophic potentials cannot be deduced from nature or from scientific analyses, but reflect the social vulnerability of certain countries and population groups to the consequences of climate change.

Social vulnerability

Without the concept of social vulnerability it is impossible to understand the catastrophic content of climate change. The idea that natural catastrophe and social vulnerability are two sides of the same coin is familiar wisdom to a way of thinking that sees the consequences of climate change as a co-product. In recent years, however, social vulnerability has become a key dimension in the social structural analysis of world risk society: social processes and conditions produce an unequal exposure to hardly definable risks, and the resulting inequalities must largely be seen as an expression and product of power relations in the national and global context. Social vulnerability is a sum concept, encompassing means and possibilities, which individuals, communities or whole populations have at their disposal, in order to cope – or not – with the threats of climate change (or financial crises).

A sociological understanding of vulnerability certainly has a crucial relationship to the future, but also has historical depth. The ‘cultural wounds’ that, for example, result from the colonial past, constitute an important part of the background to understanding border-transcending climate conflicts. The more marginal the available economic and political options are, the more vulnerable a particular group or population. The question that allows the unit of investigation to be determined is this: what constitutes vulnerability in a particular context, and how did it become what it is?

In southern Mali, for example, the increasing vulnerability of villagers to catastrophic fires is a consequence of the implementation of state-prescribed fire
policies, which in turn were a response to international pressure to address deforestation and desertification; to this end links with various international organizations have to be officially established and, finally, the conditions for international indebtedness burdening the country in question. For many countries in this have-not situation, these relations, which are now being reoriented and expanded under conditions of ‘globalization’, can be traced back to colonialism (Kasperson and Kasperson 2005). Climate change can dramatically exacerbate regional vulnerability – or reduce it. Russia today already sees itself as benefiting from the future ecological crises, because it has large reserves of fossil fuels while warmer temperatures also permit an expansion of agriculture in Siberia. If the ecological imperative asserts itself then human beings will have to alter their behaviour radically in a wide variety of spheres – from health to politics, business and education to questions of justice. The ecological imperative is not about something that might be ‘out there’. Our whole way of life is attuned to industrial society modernity – with its extravagant use of resources and indifference to nature, which is disappearing thanks to the triumph of industrialism. The more we are driven out of the paradise of climate innocence, the more do the forms of thinking, living and acting we had previously taken for granted give rise to conflicts, or are even considered criminal.

The side-effects principle

I have argued that the nation-state principle is no longer in a position to describe the inequalities resulting from climate change. What can take its place? My suggestion is the side-effects principle. It states that persons, populations and regions constitute the basic unit of natural social inequality and that these are existentially affected across nation-state frontiers by the side effects of decisions of national others. Methodological nationalism can be defined once more from this perspective: within its horizon the nation-state principle coincides with the side-effects principle. This identity becomes increasingly false as environmental problems become worldwide world-internal problems. Often, however, it is also the case that climate threats are exported, either spatially to countries whose elites see a chance to make a profit, or temporally into the future of generations not yet born. National frontiers do not need to be removed for this flourishing export of dangers; on the contrary, their existence is a precondition of it. What is deliberately done remains ‘latent’ and a ‘side effect’ only because these walls (whether actual or discursive) continue to exist in people’s heads and in law. There is a remarkable similarity between the construction of climate and financial crisis: default financial risks can be externalized by powerful multinational banks. They do not suffer, someone else suffers. Deregulation means creating a global finance system that opens huge rooms for pushing away the default risks. The same is true of environmental risks. Externalizing environmental dangers is most frequently encountered where people have no possibility of escape. Accordingly, the risks are dumped in places where they are not perceived as such. The acceptance of dangers in these countries is not to be equated with the agreement of the people living there, rather with non-knowing, silence and speechlessness fed by need. The ignoring of
climate-related threats in countries in which poverty and the illiteracy rate are particularly high does not at all mean that these societies are not integrated in world risk society. Rather, the opposite is true: they offer as their ‘wealth’ the otherwise limited resource of silence and so are the worst affected. This is exactly what global environmental (and financial) dangers presume and set in motion. The production of risk and being subject to risk are spatially and temporally uncoupled. The catastrophe potential one powerful actor creates, affects ‘others’ – people in other societies and future generations. It is accordingly true that whoever takes a decision that exposes others to danger can no longer be held accountable. There arises – worldwide – an organized irresponsibility. The construction of climate change or financial crisis as ‘latent side effect’ is also made possible because the actions required for the management of transnational environmental problems collide with the national perspective and the national logic of political institutions. In this sense, global climate risks are both latent and a threat to humanity; and the nation-state institutions whose responsibility it is to deal with them are blind both to their global character and to their natural society character. It is climate researchers, in particular, ignoring scientific doubts out of a sense of responsibility and acting as cosmopolitan citizens, who have pointed this out.

There is no longer any question that climate change globalizes and radicalizes social inequalities. To research them more thoroughly it is necessary to break up the misleadingly narrow framework, restricted to ‘gross social product’ or ‘income per head’, into which the problem of inequality is usually forced. Accordingly, research must concentrate on the fatal conjunction of poverty, social vulnerability, corruption, accumulation of dangers and loss of dignity. The region worst affected by all of that – apart, that is, from island states, which are disappearing under the waves – is the Sahel zone south of the Sahara. It is already impoverished and torn apart by religious and ethnic tensions, and the decline in rainfall could lead to an explosion of violence and to wars. In the Sahel the poorest of the poor live on the edge of the abyss and climate change threatens to push them – those have done least to cause it – over the edge. By every existing standard that is a crying injustice. Yet, at the same time it appears as a ‘natural catastrophe’: no rain. What does it mean?

Of the disappearance of the societal causes and consequences of climate change in the evidence of ‘natural catastrophe’ as natural law

Here Max Weber’s legitimation problem arises once again and likewise in a new form. To what extent has climate change effectively introduced a regression of social inequality requiring legitimation to natural inequality requiring none? To what extent, therefore, in the age of climate change must Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourse on inequality* (in which he demonstrates the consequences of man’s external relationship to nature for relations between men) be read backwards? Climate change, sociologically examined, is Janus-faced. Humanity’s threat to itself can be used, in a paradoxical modernization of modernity, to push even further the right to dominate nature, in order to overcome that same threat. At another extreme, taking leave of
modernity could, in the face of the ‘natural’ catastrophe, be accomplished by converting social inequality back into a natural phenomenon. It is quite possible that both the exacerbation and the defusing of the legitimation problem will exist conflictually side by side, or indeed, that the interpretative patterns of different regions will polarize accordingly. Be that as it may, there is no choice but to open people’s eyes to the possibility of barbarization.

The naturalness of inequality first of all finds expression in the insurmountable difference between climate and weather. The natural law evidence of the violence of storms, floods, drought is inherent in the everyday experience of weather. By contrast, awareness of climate change is the exact opposite of a ‘natural’ experience, but rather a highly professionalized view of the world, in which, for example, the abstract models of climate researchers determine everyday behaviour. Even if it should become normal for New Yorkers to walk around at Christmas wearing bikinis and the Mediterranean weather ruin the Austrians’ ski resorts, climate research always comes up with the same statement: individual examples of extreme weather conditions are no proof of climate change, at best an indicator. For people living in those regions most radically affected by climate change, the natural force of the weather is so overwhelming that the social inequalities between cause regions and affected regions are rendered invisible. In the escalating struggle for survival abstract climate models are no longer important. An almost ‘natural inequality law of climate change’ à la Malthus suggests itself: since those worst affected are thrown back on themselves by the ‘naturalness’ of their catastrophic situation, they accept it. The struggle for survival isolates people from one another. The principle ‘life is what you make it’ is replaced by the opposing principle ‘it’s nobody’s fault but yours’. Consequently, guilt increases with the degree of misfortune and the most unfortunate of all is also the guiltiest. Misfortune and guilt go so tremendously well together in the ‘natural fate’ of climate catastrophe, that it would be downright outrageous, as an outsider (moved by a concern for ecology and justice), to intervene in this harmony.

If the basis of legitimation of global inequality was shattered by the worldwide spread of the norm of equality, then now it is being re-established: under the impression of the ‘natural’ catastrophe, its societal source disappears and nature itself becomes the legitimation.

What does cosmopolitan renewal of the sociology mean and how will it become possible?

The remapping of inequality has to take account of three coordinates: (1) The sociology of social inequality can no longer detach itself from the globalization of social equality. Even if inequalities are not growing, the expectations of equality are increasing – and delegitimizing, destabilizing the system of national-global inequalities. ‘Developing nations’ are becoming more Westernized and reflect the West back at itself, so that the ‘equality’ of environmental destruction leads to the self-destruction of civilization.

(2) The sociology of social inequality can no longer rely on the premise of the
Remapping social inequalities in an age of climate change

distinction between national and international. The equation of social and national inequality that methodological nationalism adopts has become a source of error *par excellence*.

(3) The founding premise of sociology, the distinction between social and natural inequality has become untenable. Life situations and life chances, previously assessed within the horizon of an inequality confined within the nation-state are transformed into *survival situations or survival chances* in world risk society. In particular, there is no natural equality when it comes to ‘natural’ risks but, instead, social inequality in intensified form, the privileged and the non-privileged. Whereas some countries or groups are able to some degree to absorb the consequences of tornadoes or floods, others, the non-privileged on the scale of social vulnerability, experience the collapse of societal order and the escalation of violence. Anyone who thinks of these three components together encounters a paradox: the more norms of equality are acknowledged globally, the more insoluble the climate problem becomes and the more devastating the social-ecological inequalities of the side effects. This is not a cheerful prospect, but it is precisely this incorruptible realism, open to the world, that is designated by the concept of the ‘cosmopolitan outlook’. It is not a matter of any official rhetoric of world fraternity, but of sharpening perceptions in everyday life, in politics and scholarship for the unbounded explosive force of social inequality in the twenty-first century. This cosmopolitan realism certainly encompasses the possibility that nation-state governments will assert themselves militarily or even run amok because of the loss of autonomy they have experienced.

Yet all of that is only half the truth. Climate change is pure ambivalence: it also releases a ‘cosmopolitan momentum’.

Fourth thesis: *Climate change exacerbates existing inequalities of poor and rich, centre and periphery – but simultaneously dissolves them. The greater the planetary threat, the less the possibility that even the wealthiest and most powerful will avoid it. Climate change is both hierarchical and democratic.*

That implies a new programme of enlightenment. To the extent that a world audience becomes aware of the discontinuous transformation of the coordinates of social inequality – when, therefore, there is recognition of the fact that the nation-state system of social inequality is besieged by global risks (climate change, world economic crises, terrorism), which bind underdeveloped and developed nations to one another – then something historically new can emerge. This is a cosmopolitan outlook in which people see themselves both as part of an endangered world and of their local histories and survival situations.

Accordingly, climate change – like ancient cosmopolitanism (Stoa), the *ius cosmopolitica* of the Enlightenment (Kant) or crimes against humanity (Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers) – releases a ‘cosmopolitan momentum’. Global risks entail being confronted with the seemingly distant other. They tear down national borders and mix the local with the foreign – not as a consequence of migration, but rather as a consequence of global risks. Everyday life becomes cosmopolitan: people have to conduct and understand their lives in exchange with others and no longer in interaction only with their own kind. The current, easily adopted naïve catastrophe
realism is mistaken. Climate risks are not identical with climate catastrophes. Climate risks are the anticipation of future catastrophes in the present. This ‘present future’ of climate risks is real, the ‘future future’ of climate catastrophes on the other hand (still) unreal. Yet even the anticipation of climate change sets a fundamental transformation in motion in the here and now. Ever since it has ceased to be disputed, that the ongoing climate change is man-made and has catastrophic consequences for nature and society, the cards in society and politics have been dealt anew – worldwide. That is why climate change by no means leads straight and inevitably to apocalypse – it also presents the opportunity of overcoming the nation-state narrowness of politics and developing a cosmopolitan realism in the national interest. Climate change is both things at once. It is pure ambivalence.

Only a sociological gaze sharpened by the art and schooling of methodical doubt can uncover this and publicly turn it against the dominance of cynicism and helplessness. That is why the sociology of climate change may be considered exemplary for the creative effect of uncertain times (Beck 2010). How can this signature of Second Modernity be located in sociology?

The main problem of sociology today is that it is asking the wrong questions

Fifth thesis: The guiding questions of social theories are usually oriented to stability and the reproduction of order and not to what we are experiencing and hence must grasp – an epochal, discontinuous social change in modernity.\textsuperscript{5} It was not always so.

‘The old natural self-sufficiency and isolation is replaced by a general commerce, a dependence of the nations upon one another. … National particularity and narrowness are increasingly made impossible, and a single world trade union is forming out of the many national and local trade unions.’ Karl Marx wrote that of course. Only with one small difference. In the quotation I have replaced the word literature with the words trade union. This forgery reveals something that appears to have been forgotten. Marx placed class above nation. His social theory demonstrated that the biggest problem facing national societies in the nineteenth century was that their very existence was called into question by class conflicts that transcended borders. Marx’s ideas sent the nation-states into a panic. Their response was to frame the class problem, which emerged from the overwhelming transformation of industrialization, as one internal to the nation-state. Thus, the cosmopolitan class dynamic was turned into many separate, national ‘social problems’, and from now on the integration of the proletariat was at the forefront of politics in the nation-state societies. This task had such high priority that approaches to problems as diverse as socialism, the welfare state and even the academic sociology of class and inequality all participated. In the end, this was so successful that national integration and solidarity as a condition of the class order and class conflicts became simultaneously real and unrecognizable.

‘Until the last hundredweight of fossil fuel has burnt up’ – Max Weber’s famous quotation is more than a metaphor. He saw or predicted that unleashed industrial capitalism has an unquenchable appetite for natural resources and thereby consumes
its own material conditions. In Max Weber’s writings there is an ‘ecological subtext’ waiting to be discovered, a Max Weber for the twenty-first century and the age of climate change. Or, in other words, an early theory of reflexive modernization, namely that modernity is a victim, in a sense, of its own success. Because modern industrial capitalism produces and inaugurates, unseen and unwanted, the global crisis of climate change, that combination of natural-social catastrophic inequality potentials threatens life on the planet.

This early piece of ecological education teaches us two things. First, in the writings of the first generation of classic sociological authors (not only in Max Weber, but also in John Dewey, Herbert Mead, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel and many others) there are indeed inspiring insights and concepts for a sociology of climate change. Dewey, like Weber, talked about American capitalism intensifying the ‘waste’, ‘devastation’ and possible ‘extinction’ of natural resources (Dewey 1988). This makes it clear that the founders of sociology have a conception of the discontinuous transformation of modernity.

Second, after the Second World War the horizon of a modernization process revolutionizing the foundations of modernization was lost in the second generation of classic sociology (from Daniel Bell to Talcott Parsons to Niklas Luhmann). Decisive here was the historical paradox, the counter-experience of the stability of societal modernization in the course of the catastrophic twentieth century. Through all the crises and predictions of crises, two world wars, the Holocaust, governments overthrown, resistances, Kulturkritik and anti-modern movements the automatism of Western modernization seemed to have taken on a life of its own and to assert itself. In short, the leading question of social theory then was as follows. How is one to understand the paradoxical stabilization and reproduction of order into the incremental, almost crisis-free climactic phase of first, industrial society modernity in the context of the bloody disastrous turbulences of the twentieth century (this is still reflected in the soft ‘crisis theories’ of late capitalism of Jürgen Habermas and Claus Offe in the 1970s)?

Daniel Bell, for example, in his book The coming of post-industrial society, dismisses ‘limits to growth’ and denounces the ‘apocalyptic hysteria of the ecological movement’ (Bell 1973: 487). He and Talcott Parsons are agreed that modern society ‘increasingly develops outside nature’; that is, our environments are technologically and scientifically mediated, so that resource problems can be managed through technological innovations and economic upturns.

In his social or systems theory, Niklas Luhmann, in a quite different yet comparable way, made a brilliant attempt to defuse the class problem once and for all. The context of a lecture means I can only simplistically summarize his extremely complex argument and briefly refer to his evolutionary-epochal distinction between segmentary differentiation, stratificatory differentiation and functional differentiation. According to Luhmann, contemporary Western societies are distinguished from earlier forms primarily by functional differentiation. Segmented differentiation was typical of very early archaic societies; there were then only few distinctions, for example between warriors and priests. The succeeding societies were differentiated
by strata, that is, they were structured in the form of superordination and subordination on the pattern of social classes or levels. With increasing functional differentiation, argues Luhmann, such categorizations become socially and politically less significant. In other words, functional differentiation dissolves and replaces class society. Functional differentiation, the argument continues, certainly produces external effects, for example, the economic system produces new inequalities. On the other hand, there were welfare state compensations – with this consequence: class society mutates into industrial society. The latter’s inequalities by no means burst the frame, but should instead be regarded (as Parsons already saw it) as functionally beneficial and to be welcomed. This constellation of stability, which made the question of societal order compelling, breaks down at the point in time at which these authors leave the stage. They cannot see how individualization, globalization, environmental, climate and finance risks systemically create new border-transcending realities, volcanic landscapes of inequality. Sociology, understood as a science of order, suffers from the paradox of diagnosing, very professionally, in the greatest detail down to five decimal places, a transformation of society without transformation. The various sociologists are helpless in the face of the observable process of a societal mutation of modernity – if I may use the biological term – which, given the self-destructive consequences of radicalized modernization, revolutionizes the structure of society from the inside out. Sociology has at its disposal no theory of society, no empirical frame of reference, no research routines, no appropriately transnational organizational form of research and teaching appropriate to this process of ‘creative destruction’, as Joseph A. Schumpeter put it, which nevertheless, as the sociological classics tell us, is part of the essence of capitalist modernity.

It is probable that society and sociology are paralyzed with fear at the onslaught of the new, a paralysis that leads to a desire forcibly to commit both to the seemingly still effective pattern of unchanging change of the industrial society nation-state and, as tends to be the case in states of fear, displays considerable brutality. In such ‘uncertain times’ even calm and composed sociologists are sometimes transformed into reactionaries – and do not even notice it. However, there are other signals. The remapping of inequality I have sketched out permits a methodological conclusion, that is, as I have said, the cosmopolitan imperative: border-transcending life and survival situations can only be interpretatively understood and causally explained in a cosmopolitan perspective – that means border-transcending foci, which have to be discovered and defined, and which encompass the nationally excluded others. In fact, in the last ten years social scientists of various disciplines have tested the adoption of the cosmopolitan perspective of globality and practised it.

Prospect: of the caterpillar’s error

But what does the key concept ‘cosmopoliticization’ mean? Not globalization, but sociologically highly relevant side effects of globalization: the creation of a common world, a world that, for better or worse, we all share, a world that has no outside, no other. The global other is here in our midst. The flows of labour, capital and risks
create transnational networks of culture and people and simultaneously a new kind of strangerness, because the interconnectivity of the world is perceived as throwing open the doors to the world and leaving us unprotected from threats that come from previously secure borders. Thus ‘cosmopoliticization’ is the sociological face of globalization and means the involuntary confrontation with the stranger other resulting from the erosion of national boundaries worldwide (Beck 2006). The borders have certainly not disappeared, but they have become blurred and permeable by information flows, movements of capital and ecological threats as well as by migrants and tourists. Cosmopoliticization certainly does not mean that now all people will automatically be cosmopolitans. In fact, the opposite can be observed – a worldwide wave of renationalization. But the key sociological insight is this. In everyday life as in the social sciences there is an ever greater demand for a hermeneutics of the stranger, because we live and research in a world in which violent tensions and divisions and unpredictable interdependencies are becoming normal just as new kinds of dangers are indissolubly interwoven with possibilities of new beginnings.

We are under the spell of a sociology whose foundations were laid in the past hundred years. The first century of sociology is now over. On the way into the second we must redevelop and redefine the space of sociological imagination and research – and so also of sociological enlightenment – and open it to the cosmopolitan constellation. There are historical precedents for that, not least in Germany, where the debate on cosmopolitanism and patriotism roused the intellectual audience of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Heinrich Heine even said that cosmopolitanism is the real contribution of the Germans to world culture. A cosmopolitan sociology, however, means something different, a sociology that questions the ontologized premises and dualisms of nation-state sociology – such as national and international, us and the others, society and nature. It thereby gains a new sociological view, a new sociological grammar for the descriptive theory of the phenomena of social inequality (linking poverty, wealth and ecological destruction, diminution of resources). A cosmopolitan sociology is distinguished from a universalist one in that it does not start out from an abstraction usually derived from one’s own – European – context (for example ‘world society’ or ‘world system’ or the ‘autonomous individual’).

It is, however necessary to be frank and self-critical: the research programme of cosmopolitan sociology is only in its initial stages (Beck and Szaider 2006). How can new transnational research units be defined? What is the basis of comparisons? If it is the case that the production of data is oriented to and organized by the nation-state, how can a transnational quantitative basis be established? How will it be possible to integrate the omnipresence of the cultural and political others into sociological perspectives and methods? What does the hermeneutics of the stranger and other mean? Can we even understand, let alone research the period of transformation while it is in a state of becoming? We know our old errors and mistakes, but how can we recognize, and thus avoid our new errors and mistakes in our research into the new reality? Humanity could succumb to the error of the
Ulrich Beck
caterpillar. This caterpillar of mankind is in the process of emerging from its cocoon, but lamenting the latter’s disappearance because it does not yet suspect the existence of the butterfly it will yet become. On the other hand, it could also happen that we trust too much in the often-quoted hope, expressed by the poet Hölderlin that what saves us grows with the dangers we face. Then, the impetus to make the effort necessary to become a butterfly would be lost. The question of whether sociology itself is at the point of emerging from its cocoon, is a caterpillar on its way to becoming a butterfly, is not one I dare answer.

Notes
1. Within the horizon of risk sociology uncertain times refer to times of manufactured uncertainties, that is, to a new type of civilization risk, to events like Chernobyl, BSE, 11 September, climate change or the catastrophic potential of global financial risks. They all have a number of features in common: they cannot be traced back to the lack of, but to the victories of, industrial modernization. Their causes and effects are not restricted to a geographical location or space, they are in principle omnipresent. Their consequences are incalculable. Basically these are ‘hypothetical’ risks, based on a science-produced non-knowing and on normative disagreement. But above all they lie beyond any capacity for compensation: the dream of security of first, industrial society modernity did not exclude damages (even ones of greater size), nevertheless these were considered capable of compensation, their harmful effects could be undone (through money for example). If the climate changes irreversibly, if human genetics permits irreversible interventions in human existence, if terrorist groups already dispose of weapons of mass destruction, then it is too late. In the face of this new quality of the ‘threat to humanity’ – in François Ewald’s words – the logic of compensation ceases to be valid and is replaced by the principle of precaution through prevention (Ewald 2002). The principle of precaution enforces a method of doubt, such as Descartes presented in exemplary form in his Meditationes, but with the crucial difference that here in the cases of greatest possible danger there is no certainty in sight. Now prevention depends not only on investigating knowing, but also non-knowing; I must – as a precaution! – imagine the very worst; and there is no experience I can rely on because that could itself trigger the worst possible eventualities, which has to be prevented at all costs. Through this ‘reflexivity of manufactured uncertainties’ the indeterminate character of risk in the present for the first time becomes fundamental to the whole society. This reflexivity of manufactured uncertainty points to that discontinuous transformation of fundamental coordinates of contemporary societies that I am here trying to understand. It penetrates and alters the basic structures of coexistence and action in every sphere, local, national and global. New forms of dealing with open questions can be read from the manufactured uncertainties, the ways in which the future is being integrated in the present (see Beck 2009).
2. See the studies of Held et al. (1999) as well as M. Beisheim et al. (1999).
3. Admittedly, Wallerstein and the world inequality researchers who work with world system theory stressed that there are remarkably few substantial theoretical reflections on convergence and polarization in the world economy; they also criticize the practice of taking the nation-state as the only unit of investigation. But, they do not question the distinction national/international, but see them as complementary levels (cf. Korzeniewicz and Moran 2007)
4. In this context Amartya Sen (1998) has proposed and elaborated mortality as a key indicator: ‘The epidemiological atmosphere in which someone lives can have a substantial influence on morbidity and mortality.’
Remapping social inequalities in an age of climate change

5. See on this the studies of the Münchner Sonderforschungsbereich ‘Reflexive Modernisierung’ (Munich Special Research Area ‘Reflexive Modernization’), for example, Beck and Lau (2005).

6. See Weber (1988: 203). In a lecture given in German during his American trip on 21 September 1904 at the St Louis World Fair, which took place from 30 April to 1 December of that year: ‘We will not forget that the modern boiling heat of capitalist culture is connected with heedless consumption of natural material for which there is no substitute … Then the dissolving effects of capitalism are increased’ (Weber 1988: 75, 77); ‘The relations of the rural community to other branches of social science’ (Weber 1988: 171; a German-language manuscript has not been traced).


References

Müller, Burkhard (2008) ‘Sein Schrei verhallte in der Masse des Weltgeräusches’, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1 August

© 2010 The Author(s) 181