"New Political Institutions for a Risk Society"

Abstract

What kind of political institutions do we need in order to handle the problems of a "risk society"? In order to address this question, I will first describe the world transformations that are encouraging the arising of new and higher risks. Then I will define and describe the characteristics of new risks, their impact on civil society as well as on nation-state. Finally I will give a preliminary answer to the main question, a sketch of the types of institutions needed in a risk society.

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Introduction

When we analyze the transformations in our modern world, we usually do it according to the globalization perception. However, there is another way a little bit different to observe and analyze the actual world. This new perception is based on the concept of risk.

Ulrich Beck (1992), in his book "Risk Society, Towards a New Modernity", argues that we are living in a "second modernity", which he calls reflexive modernity. The second modernity's society has the tendency to become global through technological change.

The concept of risk is directly connected to the concept of reflexive modernization. Risk can be defined as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities caused by modernization itself. Our society is being threatened by risks, which arrive at an advanced level of complexity; ecological catastrophes, financial crisis, terrorism, preventive wars, migration, and radioactivity are just some of the global risks we face day by day. Risks have always threatened humanity, but now they do it globally and with a greater intensity.

At an individual level, increased risks also appear. According to Beck (1992), the family nucleus of current societies is tending to break up, leading towards universal individualization. In the following situations the uncertainty of the individual in our risk society is displayed: jobs have become temporary, marriages break down often, we have difficulties in identifying with values, and –as expressions of individual crisis we find skepticism, marginalization and uprooting.

The risk society is not exactly a class society, the social differences and limits are not important because new risks are universal. The risks of the second modernity sooner or later also reach those people who produce or profit from them.

Risk society provokes great problems, which require great solutions. The nation-state is no longer able to control them by itself. National security has been reconstructed as

"international security," concerning the security of the state-system as a whole rather than the security of the specific nation-state. We definitely need to rethink and reconstruct the institutions in charge of the managing of risk.

That's why the main question I will try to answer in this paper is: What kind of political institutions do we need in order to handle the problems of a "risk society"?

As I was saying, due to the magnitude and transcendence of risk society's threats, there is no doubt that it is necessary to set up those characteristics political institutions must have in order to be able to control, and, if possible, to solve the problems of the risk society.

In order to address that question, I will first describe the world transformations that are encouraging the arising of new and higher risks. Then I will define and describe the characteristics of new risks (3), their impact on civil society (3.a) as well as on nation-state (3.b). Finally I will give a preliminary answer to the main question, a sketch of the types of institutions needed in a risk society (4). This sketch could be taken as a base for further research.

World transformations

We are living dramatically transformations in the way we are running our world. There is a interesting approach used by Zygmunt Bauman (2002) to explain these transformations: "(…) the truth is that the world is full, the great dream of the West that there is always a new land to discover and colonize has dissolved; the great hope that a nation could wall itself off from the other is likewise over; the era of the Berlin Wall is at an end. There is no empty space, if there ever was one. There is no society that can subsist apart from the rest of us." (Bauman 1)

Globalization is the term used to refer to this experience of the "world filling up". It includes globalization of economic relations, clearly interconnectivity in the development of cultures, and global political transformations. All three transformations have accelerated in recent decades due to the communications and technology development.

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Globalization is the term used to refer to this experience of the "world filling up". It includes globalization of economic relations, clearly interconnectivity in the development of cultures, and global political transformations. All three transformations have accelerated in recent decades due to the communications and technology development.

We can observe that "the world is full" phenomenon, is not just a geographic one, but also social and psychological. "There is no place for oneself where one is free to follow one's own ways, pursue one's own goals and be oblivious to all the rest as irrelevant." (Bauman 1) We can feel that fullness in our daily life.

Tied to this idea is the concept of interdependence, which means that every action affects others. Globally interdependent systems, means greater vulnerability when problematic events occur that affect these systems as a whole.

A Risk Overview

Here is when the concept of risk appears, global problems represent global risks: powerful nuclear weapons, dirty air and water, financial crisis, terrorism, preventive wars, migration, radioactivity, etc. According to Beck (1992), modernism of science technology and its uses has created additional hazards already institutionalized[*], which are rationally incalculable, unlimited in time and in national boundaries, they affect future generations and they are beyond social classes.

This globalization of risks in the sense of intensity and quantity that affects everyone is named by Martin Shawn (2001) as "common risk society".

Talking about individual risk, a paradox is presented. Today people are in a more much secure position of physical security (increased life expectation, medicine development, cures from serious diseases) than in previous times. Meanwhile the internal security of people is more and more exposed to danger. Giddens (1991) uses the term "Abstract systems" to explain risk at an individual level. He argues that individuals don't face specific threats, but their daily lives are always reconstituted by the operation of "knowledge-based patterns of social behavior, coordinated through markets as well as bureaucracies, which govern the conditions of individual experience". (quoted by Shawn 3). The great threat individuals face is a security threat. "The challenge to individuals is to construct and reconstruct their own identity, which is no longer given for them by traditional institutions and cultures, but are constantly at risk." (Shawn 3).

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Civil Society's Reaction to Risk

Traditionally, it is suggested (Berry 2000) that general risk is handled in three broad ways: privately (via financial markets and contracts for insurance), publicly (common payments into forms of public insurance) and individually (charitable organizations).

But according to Beck´s point, none of these measures can handle properly the changes imposed in the new risk society.

So, now that those measures are not enough, how do people perceive or approach risk? Adams (1995) suggested four positions taken towards risk: 1) Individualists take risk as entrepreneurial leaders of popular capitalism, great men or heroes, which exert control over their environment and people in it. 2) Hierarchists manage risk by repression, by risk assessment, by insurance and by portfolios. 3) Egalitarians share risk, group decisions about risks are arrived at democratically. 4) Fatalists just ignore risk.

It has also being observed (Adams 1995) that with "increased safety", people will take higher risks under the principle of balancing behaviors. For example, people drive faster in safer cars in order to bring back the risk levels to their predisposition for taking risks.

On the contrary, other people overestimate risk, threatening their own long-term prosperity by being excessively risk-adverse to the involuntary dangers they are exposed. For example, when they leader a manifestation or mass protest for the removal of hazardous wastes already buried, under circumstances where this act is more likely to increase rather than decrease the general level of risk. The cause of this risk-aversion might be part of a defensive reaction to the bad assessment of risk by the dominant institutions taken along since first industrial revolution

Unfortunately, the civil society neither the business industries, take the responsibility about the risks there are producing, so they just shift the responsibility of potential looses to others´ shoulders. "Institutions and their hired experts denounce individuals for demanding unacceptable levels of protection against involuntary risks inherent in the technologies that

also bring impressive net benefits." (Leiss and Chociolko 4) By the other hand "individuals reply by denouncing those same institutions for failing even to try to asses most such risks with the abundant scientific experts at their disposal." (Leiss and Chociolko 4)

The point here is that both, individuals and institutions are right, but if this attitude of irresponsibility continues, society will continue letting the risks manage them, instead of learn how to manage risks.

As we can see, risk can't be seen only as a phenomenon, but as socially constructed by preferences and believes of each person. "It can't be viewed as a technocratic calculus separated from its social and cultural context." (Berry 4)

Risk's Impact on the State

In the last decades, some authors had been exposing the idea the weakness or decline of the nation-state. Among other things, Shawn (2001) argues that this is because the concepts of "nation" and "state" do not coincide anymore in the majority of the cases. So, he proposes that "a model of the world as consisting primarily of interacting ethnic-national-religious societies is little more adequate than the traditional equation of states with national societies." (Shawn 2)

As well concept of "state" has changed, also their functions in the aspect of security. In his work "Security Emancipation" (Review of International Studies), Booth (2000) points out the need of focusing on individuals and communities rather than the state as the primary referent of security. On his argument, he states that "states must not be assumed to be providers of security; on the contrary, each state must be critically examined to see whether it presents threats or provide security, or some combination of the two.

Even though, power must still be understood in terms of "state" as well as of "governance". Maybe the state in its "nation-state" form is almost over, but this is not the only form of state. We must realize about the importance of regional and global forms of state power. "Nation-state is in decline only relatively not so much in relation to the market and the global culture, but in relation to regional and global forms of state power." (Shaw 6)

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Since the state in its new forms is still important as a political institution, we need to find the adequate characteristics it should have in order to respond to the demands of a risk society.

In the managing of our risk society, the state is not the only important actor; the "common risk society" is the global society, which is coming into existence. So individuals, civil society institutions, the business sector, as well as states are responsible of creating a global community in which establishing a security community in the process.

Conclusion: What does this all means?

Through this paper I have exposed several reasons to justify the need of new political institutions: the diverse and contrasting reactions and attitudes civil society has towards risk, the lack or responsibility from civil society and the business sector about the risk they are producing, and the incapacity of the state to provide security.

"Thinking in terms of risk is also a means of seeking to stabilize outcomes, a mode of colonizing the future."(Shaw 9) It's clear that the reconstruction or transformation of legitimate political authorities and institutions, capable of managing risks and enforcing legitimate political will, is one of the most important outcomes we can get of this "risk society" analysis. But how do these institutions should be? Here I present some preliminary ideas or proposes from expert authors:

According to Bauman (2002), there are conditions society should have in order to transform the political sphere and the political institutions. The only one he mentions is to realize about our interdependence. "In this globalized world of ours, we all live closer to each other than ever before. We share more aspects of our daily life than ever before." (Bauman 3)

Beck (1992), also gives a condition: he argues that to get the political sphere transformed, fist we have to understand it through the elaboration of a sociological theory of the origin and diffusion of knowledge about risks. The risk society has a big political potential of catastrophes that has to be well used. This can be achieved by the re-organization of power and authority.

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I am sure that these are not the only conditions we most consider; there is still a hard work to do to identify the rest of them.

To get a real transformation of the political institutions, the entire political sphere was to change its spirit. Beck exposes the idea of a new "political sphere similar in tone to that of the organizational ecosystem theorists, with the need to create trans-institutional and transnational sub-politics, much as the green movement has done. These referent groups may act as links in the complex networks of individuals, groups and institutions" (Berry 8), and connect the rationalities of the different civil society's groups exposed before: individualists, the egalitarians and the hierarchists.

Beck also recognize the need to "moralize production", this means that the political sphere and the institutions inside it, need "(…) to be rooted in justice, love and compassion for all humanity and might be seen in relation to concepts of stewardship of God's creation and of man's creativity." (Berry 8)

Bauman (2002) give us another strong reason to re-construct political institutions. He argues that the current institutions are territorially limited and tied to the ground, so they no more match with the increasingly extraterritorial and free-flowing forces of finance, capital, and trade. He thinks that we have the responsibility to create institutions of effective political action that could "(…) match the size and the power of the global economic forces and bring them under political scrutiny and ethical supervision." (Bauman 4) If we don't get to match political institutions with the global reality, risks will just continue to grow.

Mueller (2005) in his article about global governance exposes the need to build institutions through combined efforts by private and the public sector. Also he thinks we most have in mind the participation of "actors besides governments that influence in international life: sub-state groups or regions, supra-national organizations, intergovernmental groups, transnational corporations (TNCs) and their associations, and individual non-governmental organizations (NGOs)." (Mueller 5)

If we can re-construct and truly transform actual political institutions considering the theorists' proposes presented above, we can achieve global governance, in which "all the structures and processes necessary to maintaining a modicum of public order and movement toward the realization of collective goals at every level of community around the world" will exist. (Mueller 4)

Here we have just an outline as a base of further investigation about the specific characteristics of the new political institutions and the way to crate them.

Even though, the ideas presented seem to have a lineal and chronological order, I mean, first the sociological theory, then the chance of tone in the political sphere and finally the creation of political institutions. The process wouldn't be like that.

All these steps will be interconnecting and developing at the same time; the new atmosphere in the politic sphere will encourage the creation of new institutions, and vise versa. By the same way, we can't stop this complex process to work on a sociological theory, this theory tries to explain our reality so it will be in constant change as well as the real world.

The transformation or creation of political institutions is not an isolated phenomenon, a great number of factors and actors intervene on this complex process. The consolidation of new political institution for a risk society represents a real challenge for everyone interested in improving the functioning of the world.

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