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Multidimensional Risks in the XXI Century

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Introduction. Experiencing Risk in Uncertain Times

by *Fabio D'Andrea* and *Maria Grazia Galantino**

This book issues from the proceedings of a conference organised by the ISA/ESA network on Sociology of Risk and Uncertainty, with the partnership of the Italian Sociological Association (AIS), in 2021 on the theme of «Multidimensional Risks in the XXI Century». When we chose to devote the joint midterm conference to this subject, we had in mind to investigate this awkward, uncharted field with a special focus on the megacities, which were the typical environment of those who felt displaced and lost and seemed to be becoming a new kind of global actor in the foggy scenarios of the new era. Things, however, have a way of happening that rarely matches our plans: the conference was supposed to be held in 2020, but the first call had to be postponed and then cancelled as the COVID-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, making even less sense than whatever had happened before, which was however far from negligible. We succeeded in holding the conference online a year later, but the impact of the recent, tragic events showed in the number of contributions that dealt in different ways with their dynamics and consequences. It also urged young researchers to test their skills against the unknown and set in motion many middle- and long-term projects. The articles presented here are a selection of the papers discussed on that occasion and give an adequate feel of the shift in interest caused by the pandemic. They also show how – more often than not – things seem to unintentionally fit together in a wider, unexpected plan, allowing us to catch a glimpse of what Kauffman, citing Nagel, calls a «purposeless teleology» (2016, 197), according to which organization at times springs from apparent disorder.

In a way, we showed some sign of clairvoyance, the catalyst of it all, when we decided to address the multidimensionality of risk as it seemed to unfold since the beginning of the new century, even though we were far from imagining its sheer scale. No one – or very few, as it turned out – could have foreseen the COVID-19 pandemic, just as no one was able to predict the oncoming war in Ukraine or the vertiginous speed of climatic change. Now, this is exactly the issue we had in mind when we first thought of the conference title: the fact that a system which prides

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itself on its data-computing power, presented as a sure way to know things in advance, fails to do so on an awkwardly regular basis. Not only think-tanks, departments and institutions do not see what is coming, but they are almost never up to it, even if by all means they could and should have. It is hard to ponder these circumstances and not to be reminded of Beck's work, which sadly culminated in an unfinished book, *The Metamorphosis of the World* (2016); a book, however, whose insights are helpful to try and better understand the apparent paradox we just mentioned. Ever since *Risikogesellschaft* (1986), Beck felt that the modern world was at an end and had to find (more or less) acceptable ways to raise the awareness of this unheard-of fact among those who were – and are – still convinced of the inevitability and eternity of Modernity and of its successes. Successes, by the way, that Beck never denied; he rather pointed to them as the reason why the hallowed modern order was crumbling. Too great a power to wield can cause unforeseeable and unforeseen consequences, especially if it is wielded with blissful nonchalance and arrogance.

The first essay we present has to do with the scope of human power over the world. Emanuela Ferreri deals with *Sociology and Anthropocene. Uncertainty, Risk and Contingency in the Global Scenario*, coming to grips with the new era that the unimaginable and still not understood potency of techno-science seems to have disclosed. Beck saw clearly that the end of Modernity was due to the change in scale of its capacity for the manipulation of reality, which rendered obsolete the three pillars it rested on: accountability, compensation and precaution, all parts of what he called the «risk contract» and all by now inapplicable. «The category of *risk society* [...] thematizes the process of problematizing the assumption that it is possible to control and compensate for industrially generated insecurities and dangers» (Beck 2009, 7), thus forcing onto unaware modern people things they used to think of as defused, left behind. One of the most significant among them is surely the idea of *uncertainty*, which could be read as a side-effect of the growing complexity of teleological chains and fully blamed on human error or – and this is Beck's perspective, as well as Morin's, for instance – as a consequence of the partiality of knowledge, of the fact that there is a part of reality we know nothing about: «Ironically, our continually perfected scientific-technological society has granted us the fatal insight that we do not know what we do not know» (Beck 2009, 47). This is why Ferreri gives herself the uneasy task to work towards a socio-cultural redefinition of the concepts of *uncertainty*, *risk* and *contingency*, as a new form of knowledge is sorely needed to deal with the global challenges of the XXI century.

As we have seen, this kind of thinking goes against the grain of apparently unshakeable convictions. Western culture has been spinning the tale of certainty and control for centuries and has built a whole system – with its privileges, imbalances and inertias – on its basis, so that it is now hard to back off from those positions and very few would want to. As Beck put it, however, «the metamorphosis of the world is something that happens» (2016, 18) and mocks procedures and protocols and all those who are convinced that they are tools apt to tame its unruliness. At the start of

2020, the idea of global risk turned from paper and ink into something real and catastrophic, even though hard to detect and understand, especially for laymen. Its form itself defied classic understandability: a virus is a chimera, it exists somewhere between life and death as we think we know them and shares the same blurred status of subatomic particles; it is invisible, ubiquitous and menacing, so much so that Isabella Corvino thought of the figure of the «uncertainty virus» even before the pandemic, when she proposed her reflections about *Uncertainty Virus and Social Metamorphosis* for the original conference. Something about synchronicity might come to mind. Corvino meant to investigate the connection between the social construction of risk and danger and the governability perspective, trying to show how security and safety are closely linked to an idea of safe space and a whole range of relational issues which are usually neglected by high and low policies and supposedly neutral scientific perspectives. Moreover, this has much to do with what Beck called «the *staging of the reality* of global risk» (2009, 10), the fact that risk too partakes of a form of unreality, as it has to do with «the controversial reality of the possible, which must be demarcated from merely speculative possibility, on the one hand, and from the actual occurrence of the catastrophe, on the other» (2009, 9).

Thus, risk and its particular configuration as a virus open up to an intermediate realm that partly escapes the control of techno-scientific instruments, as Antonio Camorrino highlights in his contribution, *The COVID-19 Pandemic Catastrophe. An Analysis of some Cultural Transformations Starting from the Social Theory of Risk*. Here the imaginal power of representation that is implicit in the «staging of reality» comes to the fore, in the hypothesis that the specific features of the COVID-19 pandemic have strengthened an atmosphere of «nocturnal re-enchantment of the world» – a definition that balances Durand’s and Maffesoli’s visions and gets back to another seminal insight of Beck’s, the «emancipatory catastrophism» (2016, 115-125). As metamorphosis happens, one can either mourn what is no more or make the most of what is coming, however foggy and indistinct. The aftermath of a catastrophe can offer a chance to change old habits and break now meaningless chains, a chance more easily exploited within the already mentioned new framework of understanding of the world. Even though “back to normal” seems to be the driving motto of the post-pandemic, what happened in the past two years can scarcely be thought to leave no trace on consciences and visions of the world as it is and as it should be. Already new ways of interpreting the work-life balance are making themselves apparent in market and supply-chain dynamics, while the old slogans lost a good deal of their guiding power. It is a hard-to-read set of circumstances; while the possibility of an emancipation towards a more sustainable and shared future is at least thinkable, old habits die hard and the metamorphosis has no in-built positive outcome: it is a wider, unpredictable field of opportunity. Warped by conflicting forces, in Camorrino’s view it might inaugurate a cyclical temporal conception that prevents us from imagining a post-pandemic era, leaving us stuck in the here and now.

One of the oldest ways to cope with the unexpected is the ritualization of everyday life, again something that has to do with the imaginal sphere rather than

with factual rationality. Elena Savona, in *Risk and Pandemic: COVID-19 and the Social Risk Perception of a «Cultural Trauma». A Brief Sociological Analysis*, deals with the consequences of the pandemic trauma and the rituals it called into being. She keeps a sharp eye on the changes in experiencing urban, public spaces and the new relational obstacles the pandemic forced upon us: sacrifices and limitations in order to maintain a reassuring “social distance” and to strive for «pure», safe environments. Again, the connection between imagined and real space is highlighted, the fact that to inhabit a place is more than to merely occupy it: there is a constant shaping going on, a symbolic reorganization of meaning that might be a key factor in a renewed perception of our way of being part of the world, beyond Cartesian mechanism and determinism. A fresh perspective on social practices, beliefs and cultural representations is needed to go beyond the «epidemic architecture» which could turn into a maze leading us nowhere, replicating and reinforcing on a subliminal level the fears that we pretend to have mastered and left behind. All in all, a desirable outcome of the current crisis might be a renewed awareness of the complexity of the «becoming of the biosphere [which] is more mysterious than we have thought» (Kauffman 2016, XV), a becoming in which there is more to take into account than we thought until now. As Savona aptly shows, the all-encompassing *Wechselwirkung* (Simmel) that forms this complexity is not limited to distant heights of abstraction, but it surfaces in filigree in everyday activities and practices, in rituals as well as in technologies.

The complex and multifaceted interactions at play in the social construction of risk are at the core of all other contributions in this collection. Today’s public controversies over risk engage experts, politicians, business and non-governmental organizations, and their loads of ideologies, strategies and vested interests. Often, though, they fail to count in peoples’ perceptions and practices. The decoupling of expert knowledge and laypeople perceptions on contentious issues is well illustrated in Dario Pizzul’s contribution on *Privacy Violation Risk in COVID-19 Digital Contact Tracing: Italian App Users’ Perception versus App Designers’ Conceptualization*. The discussion over contact tracing tools and their implementation – at a later stage, also over vaccination campaigns – involved scholars and commentators of different disciplines and ideological orientations, focusing particularly on risks posed to privacy and democracy. Many have rightly warned that techno-solutions implemented for pandemic purposes might come to be seen as “normal” or “necessary” in the long term, infringing data protection rights and challenging democratic life (Agamben 2021; Lyon 2021). Nevertheless, research shows that the public seemed to be less concerned than experts about risks associated with tracking and surveillance measures during the pandemic. Neither low awareness of privacy disclosure risks, nor people’s fear of other risks, such as nuclear energy (Sjoberg, 1999) or biotechnology (Savadori et al. 2004), can be simply explained on the basis of misinformation or ignorance and dismissed as over-simplistic, non-scientific, and ultimately non-sense. Rather, how today’s subjects make sense of, and respond to possible violations of their right to privacy and data protection confirms the persistency of a gap between experts and laypeople which is

not simply rooted in a different quality of knowledge about risks, but in a different value attributed to objects at risk. If «risk refers to uncertainty about and severity of the events and consequences (or outcomes) of an activity with respect to something that humans value» (Aven, Renn 2009, 6), both uncertainty and what is at stake (something that human value) are a matter of evaluation as they need to be assessed by somebody. The Covid crisis is a perfect case where trade-offs between different risks (health vs. privacy, health vs. economy, etc.) have been differently judged according to the different actors who assessed them. Once again, we are reminded that in a world of manufactured uncertainty, «it is not a matter of choosing between safe and risky alternatives, but of choosing between different risky alternatives, often also between different alternatives whose risks concern qualitatively different dimensions and are therefore hardly commensurable» (Beck 2009a, 297-298).

In the contentious process of establishing a legitimate definition of risk and devising measures to manage it, the Covid-19 crisis is only but one example. As argued by Bianca Rumore in *Robot Density and Techno-inequality: The Perception of Risk for Italian Contemporary Workers in the Digital Society*, a mismatch of perceptions and evaluations emerges also about robotics and digital technologies in the workplace. Not surprisingly, in this context epistemic inequality rules and those with lower levels of high-tech skills and expertise are the most concerned about the developments of robotics, which they see as a risk for their professional and biographical continuity. A risk which on the contrary appears downsized or considered “acceptable” by those experts who foresee a future of liberation from human labour. Who decides what is (acceptable) risk and what is not (acceptable), and for whom, remain thus crucial questions, which cannot be answered once and for all, out of the specific situations, social structures, and cultural contexts where risk occurs. Studies using a phenomenological approach have highlighted how the meaning of risk objects, their perceived relevance and harmfulness are constructed through social interaction and personal experiences and can vary according to social circumstances and to the role of those who make claims about risk, promoting specific interpretations of the issues at stake. As it happens in other domains analysed in this collection, the social staging of risks in the workplace establishes *relations of definition* that are also *relations of domination* which revolve around issues of power, interests, gains and losses (Beck 2009).

Urban security is a further field of policy where relations of domination are particularly manifest. The “safe city” is one of the most common refrains of the neoliberal frame that informs today’s urban planning. The proliferation of individual and collective behaviours which are considered as risks for safe cities reveals a model of public policy based on punitive control and reduction of social protection, leading to discriminatory policies and to the segregation of the most disadvantaged. Neoliberal policies of social services and crime control are rooted in a cultural terrain where neoconservative visions, characterized by a strong moral connotation, yearning for a society more centered on traditional values, more orderly, more disciplined and controlled (Garland 2001), are becoming increasingly popular among the elites and the

public. These visions inform the field of urban policies and contribute to define which risks are incumbent and which deserve to be urgently addressed. Given the variety of actors and agencies which concur in managing risks in the cities, alternative visions can also emerge and compete for dominance in the public debate. The good news is that, as Beck contends, the heightened consciousness of risk may open up to alternative reasoning and new critical ways to address problems (Beck 2016). However, the vision that eventually comes to dominate the debate and manage to legitimize its solutions will very much depend on power, strategies and interests of all actors involved. The case studies on the cities of Milan and Budapest presented by Tatiana Lysova and Laura Schmidt in *The Construction of Urban (In)Security: The Policies and NGOs' Discourses in Budapest and Milan*, add more insights in this direction. They unveil different interpretations of what security is and what risks are considered the most relevant and urgent. Beside contextual and historical differences between the two cities, they also show that the role and the position of the actors in the process of constructing risk and security remain crucial. Just as crucial remains the instrumental use of risk and security by political leaders and institutions in satisfying secondary functions (or dysfunctions), such as creating social alarm, protest and resentment that can be directed at specific social subjects (Luhmann 1993).

The relevance of public institutions in understanding and constructing risk objects (or not) is also taken up by Raul Singh in *Substances as Risk: A Comparative Study of Strontium-90 and SARS-CoV-2 Virus*, an essay proposing quite a daring comparison between the Chernobyl disaster and Covid-19. The author moves from the analytical distinction between technological and biological hazards, or danger and risk (Luhmann 1993; Battistelli and Galantino 2009), maintaining that we need to look beyond such scientific categorizations, in order to understand the unequal distribution of vulnerabilities and to disentangle the interplay of politics, media, science and economy. Notwithstanding their dissimilarities, in fact, both catastrophes are indicative of how political and public institutions construct the cultural meaning of potential sources of harm (substances) as risks, in the attempt to deflect criticism and produce an understanding of the situation which suits available solutions. The process leads to a widening cleavage between those who create risks (their materiality and/or their cultural meaning) and those who are affected by them and bear their consequences. Ultimately, it (re)produces vulnerabilities through stigmatization and marginalization of those who already suffer of structural and cultural disadvantages. The emphasis on the cultural context in which risks impact returns also in the contribution *Risks and Threats of Recent Years in Cultural Experience of Ukrainians* by Natalia Kostenko and Liudmyla Skokova. Their empirical analysis looks at the relation between reactions to Covid-19 measures and individual values associated not only to safety, trust or freedom but also to deep-rooted attitudes and emotions regarding the future and its opportunities.

The way in which the pandemic altered our being in the world and our seeing the world needs new lenses able to focus on emergent new beginnings (Beck, 2016). As Morin (1976) maintained, a crisis is something of an effector: «Because of its

uncertainties and randomness, because of the mobility of the forces and forms within it, because of the multiplication of the alternatives, [a crisis] creates favourable situations for the development of audacious and innovative strategies». In the same line Arundhati Roy (2020) wrote early in the Covid crisis: «And in the midst of this terrible despair, [the pandemic] offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next».

Today, the direction of change is ambivalent and fluctuating between progression and regression. As after any disaster, emancipatory instances move in parallel with processes of restoration and reorganization of economic and power structures (Klein 2007). The disappointing outcomes of climate change summits and, much more tragically, the return of the war in Europe, are but two striking examples. On the opposite side, the anthropological shock caused by Covid-19 pushes forward new ways of looking at ourselves and the world, different imaginaries of the present and the future, capable of opening up to new solutions and different forms of social interaction. Once again we can refer to Beck's «emancipatory catastrophism»: the awareness of living in a world at risk makes possible to glimpse glimmers of hope and, eventually, it may become a call to action.

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Part I

Global Perspectives