

Zombie Categories: Interview with Ulrich Beck

[This interview with Ulrich Beck was conducted in London by Jonathan Rutherford on 3 February 1999.]

JR Your concept of individualization provides a convincing explanation for what is happening in society – the transformation of work; the decline of public authority and increasing personal isolation; a greater emphasis on individuality and self-reliance; the changing balance of power between men and women; a redefinition of the relationship between men and women; a redefinition of the relationship between private life and the public sphere; the emergence of a culture of intimacy, informality and self-expression. You describe it as the ‘disembedding of the ways of life of industrial society’ (class, family, gender, nation) without re-embedding. Can you explain what you mean by individualization?

UB There is a lot of misunderstanding about this concept of individualization. It does not mean individualism. It does not mean individuation – a term used by depth psychologists to describe the process of becoming an autonomous individual. And it has nothing to do with the market egoism of Thatcherism. That is always a potential misunderstanding in Britain. Nor, lastly, does it mean emancipation as Jurgen Habermas describes it.

Individualization is a concept which describes a structural, sociological transformation of social institutions and the relationship of the individual to society. It is not simply a phenomenon of the second half of the twentieth century. Earlier historical phases of individualization occurred in the Renaissance, in the courtly culture of the Middle Ages, in the inward asceticism of Protestantism, in the emancipation of the peasants from feudal bondage and in the loosening of inter-generational family ties in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. European modernity has freed people from historically inscribed roles. It has undermined traditional securities such as religious faith, and simultaneously it has created new forms of social commitment. I use the concept of individualization to explore not just how people deal with these transformations in terms of their identity and consciousness, but also how their life situations and biographical patterns are changed.

Individualization liberates people from traditional roles and constraints in a number of ways. First, individuals are removed from status-based classes. Social classes have been detraditionalized. We can see this in the changes in family structures, housing conditions, leisure activities, geographical distribution of populations, trade union and club membership, voting patterns etc. Secondly, women are cut loose from their ‘status fate’ of compulsory housework and support by a husband. Industrial society has been dependent upon the

unequal positions of men and women, but modernity does not hesitate at the front door of family life. The entire structure of family ties has come under pressure from individualization and a new negotiated provisional family composed of multiple relationships – a ‘post-family’ – is emerging. Thirdly, the old forms of work routine and discipline are in decline with the emergence of flexible work hours, pluralized underemployment and the decentralization of work sites.

At the same time as this liberation or ‘disembedding’ occurs, new forms of reintegration and control are created (‘re-embedding’). With the decline of class and status groups the individual must become the agent of his or her own identity making and livelihood. The individual, not his or her class, becomes the unit for the reproduction of the social in his or her own lifeworld. Individuals have to develop their own biography and organize it in relation to others. If you take as an example family life under conditions of individualization, there is no given set of obligations and opportunities, no way of organizing everyday work, the relationship between men and women, and between parents and children, which can just be copied.

Alongside the freeing of individuals from traditional constraints, a new standardization occurs through the individual’s dependency upon the employment market. This simultaneous individualization and standardization of our lives is not simply a private experience. It is institutional and structural. The liberated individual becomes dependent upon the labour market and because of that, dependent on, for example, education, consumption, welfare state regulations and support; possibilities and fashions in medical, psychological and pedagogical care. Dependency upon the market extends into every area of life. As Simmel noted, money individualizes, standardizes and globalizes.

The individual is removed from traditional commitments and support relationships, but exchanges them for the constraints of existence in the labour market. In spite of these new forms of constraint, individualized cultures foster a belief in individual control – a desire for a ‘life of one’s own’. There is a paradox here. On the one hand epochal changes are occurring – especially in the area of sexuality, the law and education. On the other – except for sexuality – these changes exist more in people’s consciousness, and on paper, than in behaviour and social conditions. This historically created mixture of new consciousness and old conditions sharpens in people’s minds the continuing and intensifying inequalities between men and women, rich and poor.

JR What’s changing here, people or institutions?

UB I’m talking about zombie categories.

JR Zombie categories? Sociology and horror?

UB Because of individualization we are living with a lot of zombie categories which are dead and still alive.

JR Can you name some?

UB Yes. Family, class, neighbourhood.

JR Zombies are the living dead. Do you mean that these institutions are simply husks that people have abandoned?

UB I think people are more aware of the new realities than the institutions are. But at the same time, if you look at the findings of empirical research, family

is still extremely valued in a very classical sense. Sure there are huge problems in family life, but each person thinks that he or she will solve all those problems that their parents didn't get right.

JR You write a lot about the family and relationships.

UB Yes. The family is a good example of a zombie category. Ask yourself what actually is a family nowadays? What does it mean? Of course there are your children, my children, our children. But even parenthood, the core of family life, is beginning to disintegrate under conditions of divorce. Families can be constellations of very different relationships. Take, for example, the way grandmothers and grandfathers are being multiplied by divorce and remarriage. They get included and excluded without any means of participating themselves in the decisions of their sons and daughters. From the point of view of the grandchildren the meaning of grandparents has to be determined by individual decisions and choices. Individuals must choose who is my main father, my main mother and who is my grandma and grandpa. We are getting into optional relationships inside families which are very difficult to identify in an objective, empirical way because they are a matter of subjective perspectives and decisions. And these can change between life phases.

If you ask what is a household, the answer seemed quite straightforward ten or 20 years ago. Today there is no simple answer. It can be defined as a geographical unit of one place, an economic unit in which individuals are economically supported and dependent upon one another, or a social unit of individuals who want to live together. And of course these definitions can contradict one another. There is also the dramatic increase in single households in the last 20 years. In cities like London and Munich, more than 50 per cent of all households are single households and it is a tendency which is increasing. But this category is not singular. There are old widows, men after divorce, maybe before remarrying and you have single households where people are living in quite close relations with others or not.

We are living with a rhetoric about the crisis in family life, but the family is not the cause of the historical conflict between men and women, it is the surface upon which this conflict becomes visible. Everything which strikes the family from outside – for example the contradiction between the demands of the labour market and the needs of relationships, the employment system, the law – is distorted into the personal sphere. The tension in family life today is the fact that equalization of men and women cannot be created in an institutional family structure which presupposed their inequality. In personal relationships conflicts are initiated by the opening up of possibilities to choose: in conflicting needs over careers, in the division of housework and child care. In making decisions people become aware of the contrasts in the conditions of men and women. With the lack of institutional solutions people are having to learn how to negotiate relationships on the basis of equality. This is transforming what we mean by the family.

JR I want to ask you what you think has determined these changes. I ask because you've tipped the conventional Marxist view that material conditions determine people's consciousness onto its head. You talk about how people's consciousness has changed but the institutions they live within, even their actual practices, haven't to the same extent.

UB Yes, that's true.

JR I accept that. I find it a paradox which is very interesting.

UB Let me pick up the question of this paradox. Marxist sociologists argue that capitalist societies, despite the changes I mention, are relatively stable structures of social inequality. They point out that the differences between the groups occupying the bottom, middle and top of society haven't really changed. They argue that this proves we are still living in a class society and that class remains the dynamic of modern capitalism. I argue that the dynamism of the labour market backed up by the welfare state has dissolved the social classes within capitalism.

JR You've called this transformation of society, capitalism without class.

UB It is true that in Germany, patterns of social inequality have remained relatively stable. Yet at the same time the living conditions of the population since 1960 have changed dramatically – which has set in motion the diversification and individualization of lifestyles and ways of life. This development is related to the expansion of education, the increase of social security and wealth, even the patterns of inequality. I want to think about these changes in terms of democratization. I would make a distinction between political democratization, social democratization related to the welfare state and what I would call cultural democratization. Individualization relates to this third description. If you look closely at the changes we are living through you find that principles of democracy are being picked up and at least believed in, as principles for the organization of everyday life and relationships. We are living under the preconditions of internalized democracy: the belief in equality in relationships, in dialogue not violence or the imposition of authority as the main element for reaching agreement. The capitalist market of instrumental relations under the conditions of the post-welfare state has produced something no one really imagined it would – an individualization which is infused with ideas of cultural democratization.

The situation is different now in the late 1990s, but let us stick with the 1970s and 1980s. I don't think you can make sense of what has happened in all Western European countries in terms of social movements, changes in family life, sexuality and love, a growing interest in the politics of everyday life and more direct forms of democracy, if you do not accept at least a part of this interpretation of cultural democratization.

JR I agree with you broadly speaking. What seems to be crucial to your analysis is this notion of culture – something which is not, as the more conventional Marxism has argued, a determined activity but is rather a relatively autonomous and transformative experience and activity in which human beings act upon and create their material world. This Marxism would argue that against the power of capital, cultural practices are relatively incidental and incapable of producing the kind of ideological political blocs which could resist exploitation, the globalization of capital, the commodification of society.

UB I would agree to some extent. First of all it is right that these changes in the family are only one part of the picture of what is happening in modern society. It is not the whole picture but I wouldn't agree with the old mechanical Marxist picture of capitalism which provides a too singular description of

the way society is constructed and one which has to be understood as a natural law. There is something more significant going on which this old type of Marxist analysis cannot recognize. Over the last few hundred years we have been living in modernity, an experience of industrialization, democratization and modernization. We are now in a situation where this first modernity is being transformed into a second modernity. The first modernity is based upon a nation-state society, on given collective identities such as classes, families, ethnicities. Central to it was the principle, if not the practice, of full employment, and a mode of production based on the exploitation of nature. This modernity is being challenged by four developments. First of all by individualization. Second, by globalization as an economic, sociological and cultural phenomenon. Third, by underemployment or unemployment, not simply as the consequence of government policy or a downturn in the economy, but as a structural development which cannot be easily overcome. And fourth it is being challenged by ecological crisis. In this second modernity, we are heading for not only minor changes in, for example, personal relationships, but for a different form of capitalism, a new global order, a different type of everyday life. We have to begin again by asking very basic questions about how we live, how we can respond to these changes and how we can analyse them in sociological terms.

JR In your books you talk about the global conflict between societies like ours, which are entering a second modernity and those that are either in, or entering, their first modernity. Do you think there is a similar uneven development within societies?

UB Of course. We shouldn't simplify this process. There are very different speeds of development and individualization in different societies or subcultures and these are happening simultaneously. In the most developed countries you find undeveloped areas.

JR And these different formations in society must each give rise to different politics and values? I just wonder whether individualization is not describing the culture of a metropolitan-educated elite, perhaps the emergence of a new knowledge-based class?

UB No. I do think class is a zombie category. The discussion about individualization got started in the early 1980s in Germany too, after I published an article 'Beyond status and class'. Why did I do this? In the late 1970s and 1980s I had more and more trouble explaining class categories to my students. The conventional Marxist analysis of class bore no relation to their own experience and they could not make sense of it. I had to translate class to a more individualized culture which was concerned with quite different basic questions. The students did not think of themselves in an unconscious way as members of a class. Their cultural self-perception was somehow different from the picture presented by a class analysis of culture and society.

In Britain you still have a sociology which believes in the centrality of class as an explanatory category. You find this even in the writings of Anthony Giddens. Relativized yes, but still believing that we cannot say goodbye to the class category. Maybe this is related to experiences in Britain which I am not aware of. But if

you look at how a class-based sociology defines class categories, you find that it depends upon what is going on in families and households. Empirical definitions of class identity are founded on categories of household defined by either a male head of household, or at least the leading person of the household. This is a completely fictitious way of defining class. No one can really say what a household or a family is nowadays, not in economic or social terms.

Let me give you an example of how the individualization debate has been picked up in Germany. First of all there has been very important research on the individualization of the poor. This challenges the misunderstanding that individualization is a matter for the rich. Research has shown that there is a much greater degree of mobility in and out of poverty amongst a wide range of people and at different periods of people's lives. There is still, of course, an increasing number of people who are poor in the long term. But in the middle there is a coming and going. Because of individualization, there is a lack of political organization of the poor. Capitalism without classes does not mean less inequality in the future, it will mean more. The current idea of exclusion can only be properly understood against the background of individualization or to be more precise atomization. It creates institutional circumstances under which individuals are cut off from traditional securities, while at the same time losing access to the basic rights and resources of modernity.

JR Are you using the term poverty in the sense of material deprivation to describe something which is new? Perhaps it has to be redefined for this second modernity?

UB Yes, I agree. Even poverty to some extent is a zombie category because we don't know what hides behind this term. This does not mean that these people are not poor, but it does mean that we cannot predict by one indicator what kind of life they lead and what kind of consciousness is going to develop out of this condition.

It is very difficult to work in a rich empirical way with class categories. You can only develop them on an objective income basis or on structures of work and employment. You can't relate them to how people live and think, eat, how they dress, love, organize their lives and so on. If you are interested in what is going on in people's minds and the ways of life they are leading, you have to get away from the old categories. And if you want to know what this all means politically, again you have to get away from objective class categories. Then you can draw a picture of a differentiated society with different cultures of individualization and different reactions to it. It is possible to identify a variety of not classes, but what I will call collective life situations and each of these has a different political meaning.

Such an analysis differs from the old class analysis by concentrating on changes in everyday life. In the 1980s and early 1990s this analysis identified between 30 per cent and 40 per cent of the population in Germany who were interested in some form of experimental way of life and who were at the same time highly political in a new sense. No one could understand this for quite a while because they were not involved in any political party, not the liberals, the SPD, the conservatives or the Greens, nor were they part of union membership.

Nevertheless they were still active politically in a very direct way, both around their personal relationships and around wider issues. It is these individualized subpolitical cultures which helped to alter the political landscape of Germany. Nobody expected it. They want an experimental politics to happen. They want politics to adjust to the new realities they perceive.

JR You don't think that this 30 or 40 per cent is the formation of a new class category and consciousness?

UB No. If it is, you have to think of class in a different way.

JR I'm quite happy to. Your work reminds me of the humanist, cultural Marxism of E. P. Thompson, which describes how working people organized around the shared experience of exploitation and created their own class cultures and a class consciousness. It seems absolutely right that class cultures and consciousness under different conditions will change or disappear. What takes their place?

UB I think it relates to this tradition of cultural Marxism quite well – at least in terms of the importance of what people think and believe, and how they organize their lives. But there is one big difference which we probably have to debate about – the need to acknowledge the individual as the basic unit of democracy, the republic and political organization. All old class conceptions and politics presupposed that the individual and individualization were a basic illusion which had to be overcome in order to rebuild collective identities, to organize political life and to represent the individual in political democracy. I think this is a basic mistake. Just the opposite is necessary. Political parties nowadays have to recognize and acknowledge individualization, not as something to overcome, but as a new form of cultural democratization and self-consciousness of society. A new form of society in which politics is related to individual freedom, and the political freedoms and rights of groups in their everyday life. If political parties fail to understand this situation and always try to go back to a given collectivity or class, they will completely misunderstand the political forces and ideas of this society. The basic mistake of communitarianism is to react to individualization. It is 'reactionary' in its attempt to recuperate the old values of family, neighbourhood, religion and social identity, which are just not pictures of reality anymore.

JR There are residues of class identity and discrimination in British society which remain immensely powerful. I wonder whether this emergence of a second modernity could ever break away entirely from the institutions and categories of the first modernity. The psychological residues of class identity provide people with a personal history, a way of making sense of their own life experience or at least the experience of their parents. I'd extend this to the level of a society's perception of itself. Even if we now aspire to leave our class, it still remains as something which defines where we came from. It still appears to hold water in terms of defining the unequal distribution of educational opportunities and social and cultural capital.

UB Of course there are different situations in different countries. I am aware of Britain being a more everyday class-bound society than for example Germany. Again it is different in France. In the second modernity there are new powerful, transnational actors changing the social and political landscapes. There will

be winners and losers, so maybe we will need redefined class categories to understand the relationships and dynamics of a cosmopolitan society. But a society and politics which only reacts to globalization and individualization and which tries to reactivate old values, is failing to understand the process of 'reflexive modernization' and the historical changes we are living through.

JR Do you think it's simply about political parties not understanding? Surely they can't do anything. They are first-modernity institutions trying to grapple with a landscape beyond their language.

UB Yes. Take the example of full employment, which is a zombie category. We are living with two models of employment. One is the welfare, post-war model of full employment, characterized by very low unemployment, a male family wage-earner, normal, usually secure work contracts, the idea of a career for the middle classes, a job for life. The other model is what we could call fragile or flexible employment – which means flexitime, part-time work, short-term contracts, people juggling different types of work at the same time. This second category of fragile employment is increasing rapidly in developed countries worldwide. We don't have the categories to describe it. Politics, and governments in Britain, Germany and France, are reacting to this pluralization and flexibilization of work – even in relation to the most advanced areas of the information economy – by trying to enforce the full employment principle. It is one example of an outmoded politics trying to engage with the new conditions of individualization.

JR You describe an emerging society in which family and personal life has become individualized, employment has become less secure and more fragmented and the political system appears to be incapable of engaging with these processes. Is representative liberal democracy one of your zombie categories?

UB This is a very difficult question to answer. I think we need to democratize democracy. For Germany our admission ticket to the democratic age lies with Immanuel Kant, who took it upon himself to label parliamentary democracy 'despotic'. Representative democracy contradicts the self-determination of the individual. It is founded upon the rule of the common will against the individual which, as Kant says, is a contradiction of the general will with itself. The alternative to national majority democracy is what I call a cosmopolitan republicanism. By this I mean the revaluation of the local and the self-responsibility of civil society – an active society where political processes are not simply organized in parliament and in the government but at a local and everyday level of the citizen. Civil society is in poor repute amongst politicians because it does not meet their standards of efficiency. The technocratic plastic speech of so many politicians is a cancer on democratic culture. Politics cannot be simply rational. Efficient solutions to problems are important, but so is passion. Politics has to be about emotional life. It is about the ability to listen, justice, interests, trust, identities and conflict when necessary; these involve more than a belief in some optimal path. We need a society which is not simply centred on work but is willing to finance, by for example a citizen's income and work, those forms of self-organization and experimental life forms which are already going on. Such a democratization of democracy also needs to happen on a transnational level. We need a European civil rights movement which, with regard to foreigners, brings Europe's political

identity into focus and helps develop it further. The more successful the Euro becomes, the more urgent is the question of Europe's soul and the need to democratize the Union.

JR Who are the enemies of this process of democratization?

UB Individualization doesn't automatically mean that people want to live as individuals and relate to one another as individuals. It could mean a new form of reflexive fundamentalism as well, which attempts to redefine collective identities – nationalism for example – and use them to resist or attack this process of individualization.

JR Do you see where this might be happening?

UB If you look back at history, Hannah Arendt explained German fascism as a reaction to an earlier phase of individualization (or again, more accurately, the atomization of society). A picture book example of creating a collective identity by politics. I am not saying this is being repeated today, but there is a fundamentalist reaction to individualization in all parties and social groups which may become a more open conflict in the future. There will be resistance in the second modernity to individualization and to the way globalization deterritorializes national cultures. It will come in particular from religious movements, the revival of ethnicity and counter-modern movements, paradoxically using the information technology of the second modernity to organize themselves globally.

JR You say in your writing that we are living in a crisis of freedom and choice.

UB Yes.

JR The second modernity seems to be founded upon freedom, choice, the individual, an existential uncertainty – and it is this last one that people draw back from and seek those old collective identities and certainties.

UB Yes, of course, you have to see this in the institutional context of the welfare state, the nation-state and a work-oriented society. There is not a simple choice between the new and the old. For example, in Germany the politicization of the ecological crisis is part of individualization and the second modernity. And yet out of this there is the possibility of a reflexive ecological fundamentalism as a reaction to this new culture of freedom.

JR What comes to mind in the relationship of the first modernity to the emerging second modernity is an antagonism between a large majority of the world's poor who might adopt a fundamentalist view of the world and a liberal minority of the rich societies. An antagonism which would also exist within the rich societies. I'm thinking about Islam both in Europe and in Britain where there are certain strands which mobilize fundamentalist interpretations of Islam to articulate an anti-imperialist politics and the grievances of Moslems against racism and injustice. The Islamic tradition of religion as central to everyday life and as a source of political expression poses a challenge to the secular pluralism of the second modernity.

UB Yes, indeed, this is one of the plausible future scenarios.

JR Second modernity against the first modernity. Privileged against the poor?

UB No, I wouldn't agree to just opposing first modernity to second modernity. It isn't that easy. The experimental cultures I speak about are not universal,

but a part of European culture. There are what I will call 'divergent modernities' and 'contextual universalisms' in Asia, Africa, South America to be recognized as well. This means we cannot think about societies as we did before, as existing within the container of the nation-state with clear boundaries and relationships to others. We have to think globally. People are no longer living even simply local cultures any more. The poor population, even in a worldwide perspective, is changing. The meaning of being poor is changing. In the first modernity, poverty as Marx said, was determined by class or group access to the labour market. The situation today is dramatically different because nobody needs the poor anymore. Capitalism is creating joblessness and excluding swathes of populations. The second modernity is not simply a positive development. We in Western Europe are highly individualized but at the same time we are confronted – in a world which doesn't have the same borders any more – with people who are excluded and yet still living inside our lives. They are excluded but a part of our life. We have to relate to them. There are really dramatic challenges coming up. We have to rethink society in a cosmopolitan order, redefining the essential notions of justice and solidarity. At the moment, most of the philosophical debate is preoccupied by the assumption of the national container model of society and its self-definitions of community, justice and democracy.

JR Going back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when society was radically changing with the emergence of capitalism and the first modernity, there existed a similar preoccupation with the self and with individual values and ethics. What do you think will be the values and ethics which emerge in this second modernity and which will lay the foundations for a different kind of politics?

UB They will not be the ethics from those periods of early individualization. The late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries witnessed the emergence of subjectivity and romanticism in everyday life. It was a dramatization of romantic love which created not only an individual biography, but also a moral and emotional complex that helped to create the couple and their history, as opposed to society. If you look at the cultural artifacts of the time – love letters and diaries – you are persuaded how people invented themselves and their relationships through love. The secular religion of love was invented at this time. You will also discover in these same love letters the invention of divorce as well. Today both romantic love and divorce have become ordinary and democratized.

The first impression one might have of individualized subcultures today is that they are similarly centred on the dramatization of their own egos. But research by Robert Wuthnow, a US sociologist of religion, has challenged the idea that we are living in a 'selfish society'. His study showed that for 75 per cent of the American population, solidarity, helpfulness and concern for the general welfare are as important as self-actualization, professional success and expansion of personal freedom. Individualized cultures do develop their own altruistic ethics. Being an individual does not exclude caring about others. In fact, living in a highly individualized culture means you have to be socially sensible and be able to relate to others and to obligate yourself, in order to manage and to organize your everyday life. In the old value system the ego always had to be subordinated to patterns of the collective.

A new ethics will establish a sense of 'we' that is like a co-operative or altruistic individualism. Thinking of oneself and living for others at the same time, once considered a contradiction in terms, is revealed as an internal, substantive connection.

JR And are you willing to give up for others?

UB Yes, willing to give up and having a lot of dilemmas and paradoxes about it. Let's think about it on the level of personal relationships. On the one hand, you want someone who will always support you in your own development. On the other, you have to support their own development if they are to support yours. More than this, you have to acknowledge the other's freedom and also his or her need to be loved. This is the dilemma: you must allow your beloved to be free, but in wanting them to love you, you restrict their freedom. Each partner wants his or her freedom and at the same time to be chained in the hands of the beloved. Out of the struggle with this dilemma between love and freedom a new ethics will emerge about the importance of individuation and obligation to others. No one has the answer as to how this will work.

JR This is the business of growing up as children, learning the give and take of life, learning to be with others, reconciling our desire for autonomy with our need for dependence on others. Always that negotiation. Is this the ethical experience out of which a new politics will emerge?

UB Yes. We have to understand that individualization presupposes a conscience and a reflexive process of socialization and intersubjectivity. You have to construct and invent your intersubjectivity in order to be an individual. But it is not a Robinson Crusoe society where everyone is for himself. It's the opposite. It is in the everyday experiments in living that we will find out about a new ethics that combines personal freedom with engagement with others and even engagement on a transnational basis. I think we are living in a highly moral world despite what the cultural pessimists try to tell us. But it is not a world of fixed obligations and values. Rather, it is one which is trying to find out how to combine individualization with obligations to others, even on a global scale.

JR Does this ethical impulse have a political expression?

UB It does.

JR Where?

UB First of all, on a subpolitical level where changes in attitudes do not amount to an inflation of material demands for more income, more consumption, more career. At the centre of the new ethics is the idea of the quality of life. What does this imply? For one thing, control over a person's 'own time' is valued more highly than more income or more career success. So, for example, providing there are basic securities, a lack of waged work means time affluence. Time is the key which opens the door to the treasures promised by the age of self-determined life: dialogue, friendship, being on one's own, compassion, fun, subpolitical commitment. In some ways this marks a shift away from the struggle for the distribution of material goods which still dominates public politics, toward a demand for the distribution of scarce immaterial resources which cannot be expressed in the exchange of money. I'm thinking of rest, leisure, self-determined commitments and forms of working, relationships, family life. Of course, these are the values of a self-oriented culture which is sensitive to ecological concerns.

An ethics of everyday life is developing its own subpolitics, which is often very local and concrete and which politicians don't recognize because they don't know the cultural nerve systems of these individualized cultures. It is an 'antipolitics'. We are witnessing today an actively unpolitical younger generation which has taken the life out of the political institutions and is turning them into zombie categories. This Western variant of antipolitics opens up the opportunity to enjoy one's own life and supplements this with a self-organized concern for others that has broken free from large institutions. It is organized around food, the body, sexuality, identity and in defence of the political freedom of these cultures against intervention from outside. If you look at these cultures closely, what seems to be unpolitical becomes politicized.

JR Your vision of a positive outcome to an individualized society relies upon there being a moral impulse. I can see an alternative to this optimism here in Britain as we have moved away from the European model of social democracy toward the American model of a flexible, deregulated market economy. A more libertarian culture certainly, but one in which the poor and excluded and those needing support and help (and that means all of us at some time in our lives) are left to flounder alone. If the market is left to distribute freedoms in the way it distributes wealth then we're in deep trouble. There will be none of the social democratic institutions created in the first modernity left to defend people.

UB This is very true. Arguing for the centrality of risk to understand the dynamics of our time, I am aware of the dark sides of individualization and globalization as well. But I can't help feeling bored by the habit of concentrating on the catastrophes ahead. It doesn't challenge us to think. How do we know that everything is getting worse? Neither the pessimist nor the optimist can foresee the future. It is very difficult and therefore intellectually challenging to open up a mode of thinking and acting for realistic utopian opportunities. Maybe I underestimate the threats of the second modernity, because I am still very much connected to the continental political movements of the 1970s and 1980s.

JR I like that. It gives your work an optimism and hope for the future.

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