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**Boundaries: Transience and
intercultural dynamics.**

Global Generations in World. Risk Society.
Ulrich Beck

Global Generations in World Risk Society

Ulrich Beck*

ABSTRACT

Does something called global generations exist? Do we need to adopt a cosmopolitan outlook to understand the generational dynamic? It was Karl Mannheim who first drew attention to the role of generations in historical change, and who highlighted the importance of traumatic historical events in the creation of a generational consciousness. A "cosmopolitan vision" means social sciences and humanities which get rid off "methodological nationalism" and take globality and human social life on planet Earth seriously. Cosmopolitan social science differs from universalist science in that it is not based on something supposedly general, but on global variability, global interconnection and global intercommunication. Cosmopolitan sociology doesn't mean treating global generations as a single, universal generation with common symbols and a single consciousness. Rather, it conceptualises and analyses a multiplicity of global generations which appear as a set of interwoven futures. The relationships between these futures are no longer to be seen in terms of a polar star radiation from the North Atlantic segment of the globe, but as something in a wide spectrum of possible interactions of modernities.

Key words: Cosmopolitanism, risk society, sociology, generations, migrations, tradition, modernity

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Is there such a thing as *global generations*? What does *global generation* mean? Is there a consciously active global generation? Can we, as we did so far, still understand the concept of generation in a national frame of reference? Or do we need a cosmopolitan outlook to understand the generational dynamics that exacerbate inter-generational tensions within nations and intra-generational affinities and conflicts between nations? This lecture¹ is a risk! Especially, of course, for myself. I have no data to present. There is no consistent theory either. There are only “suggestions and refutations” (to quote Karl Raimund Popper). But so things get started. My intention is to provoke a reflection which is obviously necessary (maybe it is going on already): You, students and researchers from different countries, are one of the principle examples of a cosmopolitan academy of the global generation. You have personal knowledge of different national and traditional contexts and are both experiencing and establishing new transnational life forms and networks. Is this true or is this fiction? Is this part of your self-identity and your future ambitions, privately and politically? Of course, not I, you have to answer those questions.

It was Karl Mannheim who first drew attention to the role of generations –as distinguished from social classes– in historical change. In answering the question, what makes a generation? He had a very important point for our discussion today: he stressed not only the role of communication but also the importance of traumatic historic events in creating a generational consciousness. Nowadays there is, of course, the *Internet generation*, which shares information and ideas across borders, making a global impact. And the traumatic historic event? There is the *9/11 Generation* (Edmunds & Turner, 2005). It will be conscious of the negative effects of terrorism on life-chances (with respect to travel, urban security, employment worldwide, civil liberties, religious and national identities and the marginalisation or empowerment of the post-colonial world). It is, therefore, distinct from the *1989 Generation* (the “Fall-of-the-Berlin-Wall Generation”), which experienced the world after the Cold War as an open space. But at the same time the concept and image of a *9/11 Generation* is a highly ambivalent one. This traumatic ‘cosmopolitan event’ - 9/11 - was celebrated by opponents of ‘Western Imperialism’. A distinction should evidently be made between generational *awareness* and generational *consciousness* - that is, we are all aware of 9/11, but the consciousness produced may be different –some becoming more cosmopolitan, others more anti-cosmopolitan.

Then we might distinguish the *Climate Change* or *Global Warming Generation*. This global generation fraction is not passive but active and political. It doesn’t need to be told, that in order to prevent London, New York or Tokyo from disappearing under the rising sea-level, there has to be an invention of global politics. There is no British way to save London, no American way to save New York, no Japanese way to save Tokyo. Only a new *cosmopolitan realism*, an awareness of the need for co-operation between states could become the resource for coping with the challenges produced by climate change.

Finally, as the creation of a global as opposed to a national generational consciousness, there is a *Princess Diana Generation*; the reference points here include, for example, the rise of global consumer brands (such as McDonalds, Nike or Madonna). Globalised ‘*Consumer Generations*’ comprise very different fractions; not only those, who buy and live with these brands and images, but also those who are unable to buy and live with these symbols, but risk their lives to become migrants to the consumer paradises of the Western World or Dubai.

Developing my argument I have ten theses:

THESIS ONE

A cosmopolitan sociology is required in order to understand the situations, impacts, divisions, contradictions and desires of the global generations

A cosmopolitan sociology means a sociology which gets rid off *methodological nationalism* and takes globalism and (human) social life on planet Earth seriously. A cosmopolitan sociology differs from a universalistic one by starting, not from anything supposedly general but from global variability, global interconnectedness and global intercommunication. Cosmopolitan sociology means treating the global generations not as a single, universal generation with common symbols and a unique consciousness. Rather, it conceptualises and analyses a multiplicity of global generations which appear as a set of intertwined futures. The relations between these futures are no longer to be seen in terms of a polar star radiation from the North Atlantic segment of the globe, but as involving a wide range of possible interactions of modernities.

Cosmopolitan sociology entails a turn away from both the provincial self-centredness of the nation state and from the exotic gaze of the coloniser on the colonised (and the other way around). There is no longer any legitimate (central) point from which to look out on the rest of the world and communicate with it. In other words, a cosmopolitan sociology or social science is something far more demanding and has far greater consequences, than an interest in *globalisation*, mobile capital and challenges to the sovereignty of the nation state. It means a decisive break with the Eurocentric perspective of the sociological classics and of much of conventional sociology today. A cosmopolitan sociology amounts to a fundamental shift of imagination, as well as of investigation, from the nations in the North Atlantic frame of reference to a cosmopolitan social world with no privileged national observation post and no absolute time (or chronology). The potential implications of globality for sociological theory and research are as revolutionary as Einstein’s theory of relativity for Newtonian physics.

THESIS TWO

There are specific cultural codes which might generate global generations

If one inquires as to the cultural code of the global generations, then the following fact takes centre stage: For the first time in history the rising generations of all countries, nations, ethnic groups, religions are living in a *common present*. Every nation has become the immediate neighbour of every other, and crises on one side of the world are communicated to the whole population of the globe at extraordinary speed. But this actual common present is not based on a common past and does not in the least guarantee a common future. If this new generational experience of universal neighbourhood is to have consequences, that promise more than a tremendous growth in mutual hate and a more or less general getting on each other's nerves, then a process of mutual understanding and progressive self-explanation on a gigantic scale must begin.

Added to the condition of a *common present* is the "culture of immediacy" (John Tomlinson). But what is immediacy? It can be taken as referring to a sense of cultural *proximity*, to an increasing sense of *connectedness with others*, and, perhaps, to a sense of compulsion. What links all these features is a perception of the *general dissolution of mediation*, of an intervening element, a middle term. What in the past has separated –now from later, here from elsewhere, desire from its satisfaction– is melting away. Contemporary rhetoric in relation to terrorism is dramatic in its immediacy and blunt when it comes to contextualisation. It fights for attention in the political spaces that only the media provide. It fights for a response from the global audience. Terrorism itself depends on what has been called the "oxygen of immediate publicity" (Roger Silverstone).

You can apply the basic idea of Mannheim's sociology of generation in a modified form: it is the symbolic code of traumatic cosmopolitan events which constitute the new space of experience, of global generations in the world risk society. So, global generations are also *global risk generations*. What is global, in fact, is not necessarily the catastrophe, but the *anticipation* of catastrophe. This is what *risk* is about. Risks bring home to us a condition of the world, which does not (yet) exist. The key question which confronts the global generations is this: How is this anticipation, this presence of future catastrophes *produced* and thereby averted? In what ways does a global risk come by the prefix *actual*, that is, as anticipation how does it dominate people's minds, the institutions across the boundaries of nations, regions, religions, political parties, rich and poor? And why is it, that the anticipation of catastrophe is a stimulation to the re-invention of politics?

The creeping climate catastrophe –more precisely: the anticipation of it– has effectively become a constitutive experience of the global generation, even a post-utopian, but also politically activating generational experience.

Now, in the main part of my lecture, I will present three (interdependent) *transnational constellations* of the global generations: the transnational constellation of equality and migration, the 9/11-generation of terrorism and the Western insecure-generation.

THESIS THREE

Expectations of equality and migration dreams constitute an important fraction of global generations

Until now the perception of social inequality has often been curiously narrow, limited by the frame of reference of methodological nationalism. That is to say, social inequality has been only considered a problem internally, within the nation state and the national society. To the extent that poverty, hunger, oppression take place somewhere *outside*, beyond the borders of one's own country, they do not have become a public scandal. It's true, pictures of starving children in Africa appear in the media again and again, and in the short term they have produced an outcry –but this has been essentially a humanitarian reflex, containing next to no political legitimation pressure, hardly translated into sustained political action. And a similar basic attitude also prevails in academic sociology. There the topic of global inequalities has been hardly registered at all, still less closely investigated, because it has lain outside the limits of the nation state and so outside the professional angle of vision.

That at least is how it has been until now. With a generational change, however, a shift is taking place, the nation state legitimation of global inequality is beginning to crumble. This could be put down to the increasingly deep and acute division between haves and have-nots on a world scale. It is significant that a movement towards *more equality* is nevertheless making headway, at least in terms of norms. The stimuli for that are to be found at different levels. Their combined effect is that *principles* and *expectations* of equality are spreading worldwide.

- *Postcolonial discourse of equality*: In the era of colonial rule the inferiority of the Others/ the “natives”/ the “savages” seemed a more or less natural given. The postcolonial discourse has divested such assumptions of any legitimation.
- The *nation state dualism of human rights and civil rights* has broken down: A guarantee of human rights has been normatively prescribed at ever more levels

–e.g. in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in the EU Treaties and the constitutions of many nation states. Such guarantees make it increasingly difficult to distinguish between citizens and non-citizens, nationals and non-nationals and to grant certain rights only to some and not to others.

– *Spread of transnational ways of life*: As recent migration research has frequently pointed out, there are today more and more groups whose members do not live in one country or another, but in two, or perhaps even more, at the same time. Such people have a bridge function. By building up transnational networks, organisations, institutions, by regularly visiting relatives in the old country, they create numerous links between country of origin and receiving society –and simultaneously contribute to the export of Western ways of life, norms, demands.

The global generations are living in a global culture of comparison. The principle of uncomparability between the haves and the have-nots on a global scale is dissolving. This is true why norms and expectations of equality and justice have now increasingly spread world-wide, with far-reaching consequences. Inequality between First World and the majority is no longer accepted as fate, but emphatically called into question, even if only one-sidedly, by those *outside*. It is the others, the excluded, the inhabitants of distant lands and continents who are beginning to rebel against the legitimisation of social inequality which has been taken for granted until now –through hopes and dreams of migration, which they are translating into action.

Understood in this sense the active *global generation* is definitely not the Western, but the *non-Western* generation, rising up against inequality across nation state borders, putting down a claim on equality. “I want in” is the watchword of this worldwide generation standing at the gates of the Western societies and vigorously rattling the bars.

THESIS FOUR

Dealing with terrorism has become the experiential space of the 9/11 generation

What is historically new, what characterises the generational experience at the beginning of the 21st century, was already summed up by Friedrich Nietzsche 150 years ago in the phrase the “age of comparison”: All the regions of the world, just like all cultural creations and symbols –from the most *primitive* to the most *modern*– co-exist in one and

the same present and, detached from their temporal and spatial context, are for the most part generally available, maybe appropriated, by fundamentalists or by individuals.

A good example of that is the quantity of religious Internet sites. Here there is an immense bazaar of ways of making sense of the world, through which individuals roam, and where they pick up whatever they fancy. In addition to this explosion of virtual religion a growing flood of publications on religious topics, to say nothing of films and TV are contributing to a dramatic change in the landscape of the institutionalised religions - even if to many this all appears arbitrary and superficial. "Two out of three French teenagers from Catholic families have never attended mass or a children's service. On the other hand they have no doubt seen films like *Little Buddha*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, or *Witness*. Through these films they will have come into contact with the world of other religions, or with themes drawn from the New Age Movement and spiritual ecology. It is quite possible that they have been confronted with the Gospels for the first time through a popular musical. Hence they will have discovered, even if in a very anecdotal and unreliable way, the existence of various cultural, religious and spiritual worlds, which remained largely unknown to their grandparents". (Hervieu-Léjer, 2006: 6)

The loss of tradition and of geographical location is very ambivalent process for the old world religions. Globalisation represents not only a great opportunity for the world religions to free themselves from the territorial ties of ethnic cultures, national society and the nation state; an opportunity to rediscover and revive their transnational dimensions, networks and conceptions of *community* and *mutuality*. Because at the same time the exclusive claims of the religions to truth and authority are also challenged, and their dislocation dissolves the seemingly "natural" ties between lived and suffered pasts, peoples and territories, which in the past constituted the unity of civilisation and world religions (and which Samuel Huntington mistakenly sees in essentialist terms and supposes to hold good for all times to come).

At least two religious forms of appropriation of modernity may be distinguished: the *anti-modern* and the *post-modern*. Anti-modern fundamentalism is of modern origin. It renews itself thanks to the *overlapping of post-modernism and post-colonialism* and their reciprocal reinforcement and empowerment. The era of post-colonialism begins where the colonised cultures, societies and religions seek to free themselves from the influence of Western imperialism. But intellectually this self-liberation succeeds, because the former colonies appropriate the post-modern dismissal (of the grand narratives) of Western modernity. Post-modernism as self-criticism of Western modernity, makes possible and empowers, intellectually at least, post-colonialism. The door that opens here, however, can swing in opposite directions: towards a fundamentalist anti-modernity on the one side, post-modern religious variety on the other.

This is the point I want to get to: *Modern* arguments for a religious anti-modernity can be constructed from the combination of post-colonialism and post-modernism; that

is, for a return to the “pure”, precolonial, premodern foundations and fundamentalisms of religious truths and practices. This reaction is then simultaneously modern and anti-modern to the extent that Western modernity is rejected with the help of Western post-modernism. It is accompanied by an insistence, that there is only *one true* religious narrative, only the one true religious path of personal conduct as of the arrangement of society and politics (whoever defines and sanctions it as mandatory in what way and for whom). Here a specific segment of the global generation is appearing, a fundamentalist segment: a hybrid of modern-anti-modern, post-colonial and individualised fundamental religiosity, giving rise to religiously motivated terrorism. This by no means derives from a revival of tradition. Rather, its preconditions are both transnationalisation and individualisation and it emerges, therefore, from a fusion of extremes –pre-modernism and anti-modernism.

Although this fundamentalism appeals to tradition, it is in a certain sense *anti-traditional*. It is more or less defined by the rejection of established tradition, since it propagates a return to a pure first beginning, one not “soiled” by history. It is precisely because it reduces the world to a simple dichotomy between faith and lack of it, of forbidden and permitted, that it may have provided the basis of an Islamic International of terror: a “BigMac of Islam”, which extinguishes lived traditions, levels all differences and ambivalences, denies all local character, including its own, which it proclaims as universally valid. Anyone who looks for the origins of 11th September in the Koran or in the Middle Ages is trivialising the issues, is looking in the wrong direction. Islamic terrorism, too, is shaped by the cultural codes of the global generations: the common ground of the present and the divergence of past and futures, the “culture of immediacy” as well as the “culture of comparison”.

THESIS FIVE

United through decline: Flexible capitalism constitutes insecure generations in the context of the Western welfare state

Flexibility is one of the code words of global capitalism and therefore of the global generations as well. “Flexible man” (Richard Sennett) means flexible generations. Change regimes of capitalism are, as Sennett shows, inimical to this. And so the rhetoric of labour flexibility and adaptability can actually be read as a set of instructions –now increasingly issued by modern governments– to abandon hard-won rights not just of economic life but of culture. It is puzzling that resistance to this trend towards employment insecurity is so weak.

This structural transformation of the world of work with its drastic consequences for individual biographies is confirmed by many studies. It is especially pronounced, according to Angela McRobbie, in the various branches of the culture industry (McRobbie, 2005). Permanent posts having been eliminated, a strange world has taken shape here, where ambitious dreams are translated into poorly paid work contracts. In the graphic arts and in design, in museums, in the media, in these and similar areas young men and women congregate, who –after they have completed long and demanding training courses– now want to apply their skills and imagination. For the privilege of being allowed to work in their chosen field they don't ask questions about hours never mind about pensions. A world of creative one-person businesses has grown up, which entails highly motivated self-exploitation.

The whole world of work is affected by the transformation, but it hits young workers particularly hard. “British children: poorer, at greater risk and more insecure” –runs the headline of today's Guardian. In France *précarité* has become the current term, likewise referring to the new insecurity; and last spring, protesting against *précarité*, thousands of young people took to the streets, called for strikes, put the government under pressure.

The geographical reach of this structural transformation is confirmed by a large comparative study with the symptomatic title “Globalization, Uncertainty and Youth in Society” (Blossfeld et al., 2005). Included are young men and women in 12 OECD countries, from Hungary to Canada, from Germany to Mexico, broken down by age cohort, education and/or training background and qualifications. The empirical findings presented in detailed calculations and numerous tables confirm the general trend, insecurity is increasing everywhere. Beyond that three more precise differentiations are discernible:

- First, it really is the younger generation which is most affected. “Youth, who have less labour market experience and who are not yet shielded by internal labour markets, are more greatly exposed to the forces of globalization, which makes them the *losers* of globalization” (Blossfeld et al., 2005: 423).
- Second, all young people are affected, but not all young people equally. It is those at the lower end of the social and employment hierarchy who are exposed to the greatest risks: “It was the manual, un- and semi-skilled workers that were the most impacted by the recent changes... Youth in lower occupational classes showed a higher risk of being employed on temporary contracts, becoming or remaining unemployed, remaining entrapped in insecure positions, or having no pension benefits” (Blossfeld et al. 2005: 426).
- Third and finally, varying country profiles were also evident, the result of different welfare state regulations and socio-cultural norms. “In Italy and Spain, youth with lower levels of education were actually more likely to find a first job. In these

employment systems highly educated youth need to get a high-quality job match when entering the labour market. If they obtain a job below their qualification level, it is much more difficult to get back on track. This is in stark contrast from the ‘stop-gap’ circuit that youth from open employment systems undergo, where lower-level jobs have comparatively less of a ‘scarring’ effect on their long-term careers” (Blossfeld et al. 2005: 426).

Two conclusions may be drawn from these and similar findings: First, that the increasing insecurity, which is becoming the basic experience of the younger generations, is not a local, regional or national phenomenon. Rather, this insecurity is turning into a key, common experience, transcending borders, one we can sum up in the words: *united in decline*. Beyond that there is a paradoxical, explosive simultaneity to be discovered here. In the First World, and especially for younger people there, the risks, the insecurities of life are growing. Meanwhile, however, the countries that constitute it remain the dream destination for many of the young in the poor regions of the globe. Consequently the existential fears of the former are going to encounter the hopes for the future of the latter. On one side a generation *less* (which, measured by previous decades, has to accept material losses); on the other a generation *more* (which, motivated by images of an affluent West, wants a share of that wealth); and both, and this is the crucial point, part of “the global generations”. What is already becoming visible in outline today, will perhaps emerge even more dramatically in future: a new global redistribution struggle. One side on the defensive, trying to hold on to the remnants of affluence with laws and frontier barriers; the other setting out to charge against these same frontiers with all its strength, driven by the hope of a better life. The result is a conflict-laden interaction: one fraction of the global generations against the other.

THESIS SIX

Is the emergence of *global generations* really a new phenomenon? Anyone with knowledge of history will regard the emphasis on the new with a degree of scepticism, perhaps even suggest historical continuities

Was the political dynamic at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th centuries –one may ask– not already essentially characterised by a *new internationalism* of political generations? There was the Socialist International and a variety of peace movements

which made the worldwide achievement of universalist principles their central demand? Was it not already the resistance to German Fascism which, more than anything else, contributed to the formation of a political *generation Europe*? And is not, of course, the generation of 1968 the key example of a global generation, because its political activities ignored national boundaries and gave a significant impetus to cosmopolitan thinking? So, isn't it true that globalization cannot fully understood without this impact of this first active global generation?

Such questions are, of course, justified. Yet against that a number of features can also be mentioned, which clearly distinguish the movement of '68 from *global generations* at the beginning of the 21st century. The 1968 generation was essentially *politically* constituted, adherence to it was defined by participation in protests. At the start of the 21st century, in contrast, it is traumatic *cosmopolitan experiences and events*, which have become the key to the space of expectation of the rising generations. To sum up: Then there was collective action, today there is individualist reaction. Then there were critics of consumer society and the culture industry –today's generations are in a sense the children of the latter. They no longer relate the promises of global consumer society solely to the possibilities their own country offers –but derive from them the impetus to tear down the barriers separating the West from the rest. These *global generations* are at heart *unpolitical*, because they break down into different fractions in a conflictual relationship with each other.

I have sketched out three generational constellations: the transnational generation of equality and migration, the 9/11 generation of global terrorism and the Western insecure generation, *united in decline*. Each of those reflects specific sections of world risk society and correspondingly contradictory experiences and positions. They have a methodological point in common: They all no longer understand generation solely within the frame of the nation state and its conditions. They initiate –to put it at its most ambitious– a cosmopolitan turn and perspective in generational sociology. In order to carry this approach further, at least three steps are necessary.

THESIS SEVEN

What is needed is a critique of methodological nationalism

Whatever does not have its causes in the internal space of a nation state and is not limited to it can also not be described and explained solely by looking at this nation state. That means, for example, that youth and generation sociology research which explains the situation

of the up and coming generation in Germany primarily by reference to German prewar and post-war history, the German school system etc., is becoming, given social reality, increasingly anachronistic. Whereas First Modernity was constructed on the fundamental conditions of the nation state, of the national society as a separate unit, today Germany or any other country, or indeed Europe, no longer exist as closed, walled-off societies. Anyone who doesn't see the multitude of interconnections produced by production and consumption, Internet and TV, tourism and advertising, lacks an all-important key to grasping the hopes and dreams, the fears and disappointments, the actions and reactions of the *global generations*. It's as if one were to consult only a map of Bavaria to find out how to get to Singapore.

THESIS EIGHT

In the global generations various transnational fractions are interlinked, forming globalised *patchwork generations*, the mosaic pieces of which simply cannot be fitted together to make a unified picture

More pointedly, it is just this *non*-unity which permits the unity in diversity of the generational constellations to emerge –at the centre, on the periphery and through the opposition and interaction between them. It is the mono-national, mono-cultural gaze, which fails to recognise, that the activism of the global generations arises less at the centre than in the peripheral zones, in the regions of the world risk society has condemned to hopelessness. The protest of the *migration generation* is directed not so much at the established authorities of their own society of origin - but at the international order of inequality and its guardians. The *attack on fortress Europe* is able to adopt as its own the human right to mobility, which the West likes to proclaim. Then, of course, it collides with the fears of the European *insecure generation*, which is beginning to protest against short-term work contracts and falling incomes. They are mobilizing themselves on the basis of their own material interests against the state.

THESIS NINE

A youth and generational sociology which does justice even only approximately to the lived reality of the global generations requires a methodological cosmopolitanism

It must at least be able to answer the key question: What is going to replace the nation state unit of investigation known as “generation”? In this lecture, in order to make a start, I have substituted the image of various *transnational generational constellations* for the nation state-defined concept of a “generation”. In doing so I merely sketched their reciprocal but tense relationship; the question, how global generations emerge, has hardly been touched on. But this much should by now have become clear: The critique of methodological nationalism involves much more than just a problem of empirical data, which are largely collected and analysed on a nation state basis. More profoundly it’s about how the core sociological concept of generation (like the concepts of social inequality, the state, the family, the household, justice, neighbourhood etc.) can be liberated from the mental horizon of methodological nationalism and opened up to the fundamental transformation of globalised Second Modernity.

THESIS TEN (IT IS RATHER A QUESTION)

As a member of the global generations, what would my greatest hope and my greatest concern be? Let me start with the hope and then come to the concern

My greatest hope is that in global risk society there is hidden a new cosmopolitan moment which can be activated by the global generations. This cosmopolitan moment is different from that of the old Greek “*stoa*”, the *ius cosmopolitica* of the enlightenment (Kant) or the “crime against humanity” (Hannah Arendt) from which the human rights charta evolved. The big difference is: it is an *enforced* cosmopolitanism. Global risk tears down national boundaries and mixes us with them. The distant other is becoming the inclusive other. Everyday life is becoming cosmopolitan: people have to make sense of their own life in exchange with others from all parts of the globe. This cosmopolitan moment is becoming a key element of the generational experience. And from this can be drawn and built a cosmopolitan system based on the acknowledgement of cultural diversity and the dignity of the other. So far in history cosmopolitanism has been stigmatized as idealism and nationalism, has been praised as realism. But now it is exactly the other way around: cosmopolitanism is realism, because it provides the most positive way to deal with global problems which are insoluble at the level of individual state, but manageable through cooperation. With my understanding of cosmopolitanism people are having wings and roots at the same time.

My greatest concern looking at the world from your point of view is no longer the metaphysical homelessness of a Beckett, or the vision of surveillance of a Foucault, nor the despotism of rationality, which alarmed Max Weber. As with good old Communism, there is no longer anything spectral about good old post-modernism. What scares me, and maybe some of you, seems to be that the fundamental principles of modernity –like liberty, rationality, democracy are becoming optional, are being challenged, have to be renegotiated in the 21st century.

So everything is turned upside down: What for Weber, Adorno and Foucault was a vision of horror –the perfected surveillance rationality of the administered world– is, to the global risk generations, more like a promise. It would be nice, if the surveillance rationality did keep things under surveillance, it would be nice if only consumption and humanism did go on terrorising us, it would be nice if the freedom from breakdown of our systems could be restored by reforms within nation states and “offensives of technological innovation”. It would be nice if the repeated formulas of more market, more technology, more growth, more flexibility could raise up the unquiet hearts. But much more is at stake. It is the temptation and the horror of anti-modernism; the fear, that the tissue of our material dependencies and moral obligations could tear, and that the sensitive operating system of world risk society could collapse.

Of course, these are only my impressions. As Mahatma Gandhi said: “Be the change you want to happen.”

Note

1. Editor's note: The author wrote this article following a talk he gave at the London School of Economics.

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