

## Questioning Ulrich Beck's "Second Modernity": An Instrumental Rationality Critique

*Cheng-kuang Hu*

### Abstract

Since the publication of *Risk Society*, Ulrich Beck has become one of Germany's leading sociologists. Now, many social scientists—including Beck, Giddens and Lash—in many different fields, are flocking together to conduct their research under the motto of "second modernity": a new sociological paradigm through which they seek to escape the controversies troubling "modern" and "post-modern" theories. This study concerns the other aspect of Beck's theory: the critique of instrumental rationality, which is also contained in the original thesis of the risk society.

In this way we discover a fundamental problem in Beck's work. At the beginning he ascribes modern risks to the failure of instrumental rationality, but since he cannot find any objective criterion to prove that modern life is riskier than the earlier ones, there is consequently no epoch of "second modernity." And when he identifies "risk" with "uncertainty," all societies in the human history must be considered "risk societies."

On the other hand, Beck could not tame instrumental rationality without components of the "post-modern" theories in his thesis, which is among the most progressive attempts to solve the problems of rationalization. Finally, Beck's normative strategy seems to be like that of Max Weber, who employs a "*Handlungsmaxime*" instead of a value system for which we should be searching. But it is also important that Beck holds a more optimistic standpoint in contrast to Weber.

**Key Words:** Ulrich Beck, risk society, second modernity, rationalization, subpolitics