

Conversations with

Ulrich Beck

ULRICH BECK & JOHANNES WILLMS

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CONVERSATIONS

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*Conversations
with
Ulrich Beck*

Ulrich Beck and
Johannes Willms

Translated by Michael Pollak

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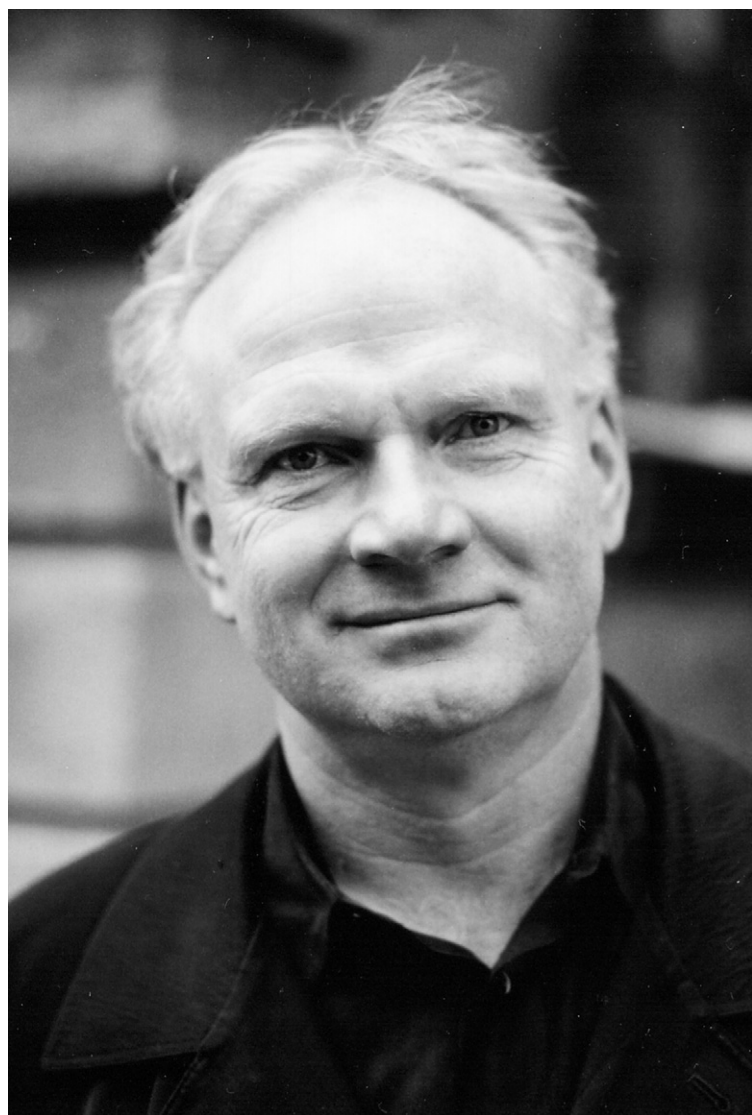
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Introduction: Thinking Society Anew

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Every now and then a new way of thinking about the social world appears. And once that happens it is difficult to imagine how sociology had managed without that new way of thinking. It simply seems so obvious. Further, it is often difficult to see why it had taken so long to get to that novel way of thinking; once “discovered” it is hard to imagine what all the fuss was about. The new theory or concept or method rapidly becomes part of the academic furniture, one prop that supports or holds up sociological thinking. The distinctiveness of the innovation may thus be hard to see even just a few years later. It is normalized, making possible some understanding of the extraordinarily opaque and hard to fathom social world.

Teaching students can be difficult since some of the time one is trying to explain just why a particular theory or concept or method was such an innovation although it has now become part of the furniture. The teacher has to recreate the disciplinary world before that new way of thinking and this is something that contemporary, cool students may find hard to see the point of. I was struck by this issue while reading obituaries of Robert K. Merton who recently died aged 92 and who was responsible for probably more enduring innovations than any other sociologist during the second half of the twentieth century. But explaining the nature of Merton’s contribution to those young people who at least as teenagers will soon only know the twenty-first century will not be easy.

It is also not easy to convey the sheer difficulties involved in generating really productive new ways of thinking. They are not simple to achieve. Indeed most innovations have a very short shelf life; they never survive more than a few outings within various books, articles, and papers. Like new start-up companies new ways of thinking die rather rapidly and the author's innovation remains at best a small footnote in the history of the discipline. Not that small footnotes are unimportant since building on the "small footnotes" of others is how all disciplines make even faltering progress. Merton incidentally emphasized the importance of developing intellectual work that builds "on the shoulders of giants."

Intermittently, however, something more than a small footnote does occur and the new way of thinking becomes part of the furniture. Indeed to become part of the furniture is the best measure of success and scholarly achievement. Within sociology there are relatively few such bits of furniture. This is in part because the social world is so opaque, social systems are incredibly open, and there are extraordinarily diverse processes affecting human practices moving through time and across space.

Ulrich Beck's concept of *risk society* is one such innovation that has become part of the furniture of modern sociology, an innovation nicely simple to grasp but which conveys a profoundly illuminating argument that deals with how the results of social activities powerfully and unpredictably move through time and space.

Beck argues that there is an epochal shift from industrial to risk societies. The former were based upon industry and social class, upon welfare states and upon the distribution of various *goods* organized and distributed through the state, especially of good health, extensive education, and equitable forms of social welfare. There were organized societies, there was a national community of fate, and there were large-scale political movements especially based upon industrial class divisions that fought over the distribution of these various "goods." In the post-war period in western Europe there was a welfare state settlement in such industrial societies based upon achieving a fairer distribution of such goods.

By contrast the concept of risk society is based on the importance of bads. Risk societies involve the distribution of bads that

flow within and across various territories and are not confined within the borders of a single society. Nuclear radiation is the key example of this, something few sociologists had ever examined. The risks of nuclear radiation are “deterritorialized.” They cannot be confined into any specific space nor into any current sector of time. Such risks thus cannot be insured against. They are uncontrolled and the consequences incalculable. The unpredictable consequences of radiation stemming from nuclear energy will last into the unimaginable future.

These risks have largely resulted from the actions of people – of state officials, scientists, technologists, and corporations – treating the world as a laboratory. These risks are thus not simply physical effects although they have profound physical consequences. Such risks are difficult to see or even more broadly to sense and yet they can enter and transform the body from within; they are not external to humans.

This concept of the risk society of Beck was a kind of revelation. It provided for sociology a way of speaking of the physical world and of its risks that brought in a striking array of new topics. In effect it enabled people to speak of things, indeed in a way to “see” things, that they had been trying to speak of and to see, but where the concepts had been chronically lacking.

First, then, the notion of risk society puts onto the sociological agenda the very nature of the physical world and of the need to create a sociology of-and-with the environment. No longer is it possible to believe that there is a pure sociology confined and limited to exploring the social in-and-of itself. The distinction of society and nature dissolves. The thesis of risk society brings out that most important phenomena within the world are social-and-physical, such as global warming, extreme weather events, global health risks such as AIDS, biological warfare, BSE, nuclear terrorism, worldwide automobility, nuclear accidents, and so on. None of these is purely social but nor are they simply physical either.

Risk society brings out how important aspects of people’s lives are structured not through social processes alone such as the distribution of goods in a welfare state society. Rather major aspects of human welfare stem from the movement and potential impact of these “person-made” risks. So people’s lives, we have come to understand, are affected by the global spread of AIDS, by global warming, by the ubiquitous spreading of the

motorcar, by acid rain, and so on. Welfare is a matter of bads as well as of goods.

Second, the risk society brings out the importance of human bodies within sociological analysis. In going about their lives humans sensuously encounter other people and physical realities. There are different senses – and indeed sensescapes – that organize how social arrangements are structured and persist. Moreover, some such realities can in effect get inside the body. In the case of nuclear radiation generated by the 1985 explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant (in what is now the Ukraine) people right across northern Europe had their lives transformed by something that could not be directly sensed (in the UK sheep farmers in Wales and Cumbria, for example).

Only experts with specialized recording equipment could monitor such direct exposure, while some effects of Chernobyl are still being generated decades later as children are being born with multiple deformities resulting from the explosion nearly twenty years ago. The naked senses are insufficient – so humans have to depend upon experts and systems of expertise to monitor whether they are subject to risks that may get “inside” their bodies. So bodies are subject to expert intrusions, as with the monitoring of HIV/AIDS, as risks pass in and through humans. And this in turn generates complex relationships between expert knowledge and lay forms of knowledge and especially with how the latter in a “risk-expert” society are often treated as inferior, subordinate, and replaceable by expertise.

Third, these risks know no boundaries. Rich and poor people, rich and poor countries are all subject to the nuclear radiation that emanated from Chernobyl. Such radiation does not stop at national borders nor at the homes of the rich, although there are big inequalities in the distribution of expert resources to remedy the unintended consequences of such risks.

This risk society results from the changing nature of science. Once upon a time science was confined to the laboratory – a spatially and temporally confined site of “science.” Although there are examples of science escaping – most famously in Mary Shelley’s story of the monster created by Frankenstein – generally this does not happen. But nuclear energy and weapons change this equation. Suddenly the whole earth is the laboratory – the monster has escaped and risks now flow in, through, over, and under national and indeed other borders. The mobil-

ity of GM (genetically modified) crops is a more recent example that shows the difficulties of trying to limit the location and impact of testing GM crops within a confined area (in so-called field trials). Modern science according to Beck increasingly treats the whole world as its laboratory and this spreads risks across the globe. In recent formulations Beck emphasizes the global nature of risks; that there is not so much a risk society as a global risk culture.

This argument about the “borderlessness” of the risk society has, together with the writings of many others, developed the analysis of “globalization” and of the implications of this for sociology. Beck has especially shown the nature and limitations of what he calls “methodological nationalism.” What does this mean and what is wrong with it?

He means that sociology has been historically concerned with the analysis of societies, with each society being based upon a distinct national state (or nation-state). So there is a system of nation-states and sociologists study their particular society defined in national state terms. The nation-state provides the container of society and hence the boundary of “sociology.”

Moreover sociologists tended to generalize from “their” particular society to describe how “society” in general is organized. Especially American sociology developed in this way, presuming that all societies were more or less like that of the USA, just poorer! It was perfectly possible to study that particular society and then to generalize as though all, or at least most, other societies (at least those that mattered!) were much the same. This led to debate as to the general nature of order or of conflict within “society” based upon the particularly distinct US pattern. Order and conflict theories were to be “tested” within the USA and it was presumed that these conclusions could then be generalized to all societies or at least to all rich industrial societies.

It is not hard now to see many problems in this although it took Beck and various others to expose its limitations. For decades it was simply how sociology worked; it was a taken-for-granted way of doing sociology.

First, though, we now know that societies do differ a lot. The US and Scandinavian societies both have high levels of economic wealth. But the former has never had a welfare state while the latter countries have continued with a substantial

welfare state (many “goods”). So generalizing from any particular society as though that tells one about all societies (or even all rich societies) is wrong.

Second, it is also clearly wrong to presume that all societies are on some kind of evolutionary scheme and that each will develop towards the “western model” (even if there were such a single western model). Beck and others have helped to subvert any sense of a single evolutionary scale of the development of society from the less to the more developed.

Third, global transformations represent a meta-change that makes us develop new concepts to displace what Beck rather provocatively calls *zombie* concepts. Zombie concepts are those that were appropriate to the period of methodological nationalism. They are not appropriate to the contemporary period.

One zombie concept is that of the “household” that operated within the time of the first modernity. But now there are so many different kinds of household. Because of the “normal chaos of love” there are very many “loving” and “living” relationships so no single notion of “the” household can remain. Beck uses the notion of “who washes their clothes together” as an illustrative indicator of the huge variety of now who counts as a household member and who does not.

Overall Beck seeks to capture the sense that late twentieth-century societies underwent an epochal shift. But he rejects the idea that this is a move from the modern to the postmodern, as was characteristically argued by analysts a decade or so ago. For Beck these are all “modern” societies; there is not a moving beyond the modern to its opposite. So rather helpfully he suggests there is a *second* modernity.

The first modernity was “nation-state centered,” the second is “non-nation-state centered.” In the second the indissoluble link of society and nation-state is fundamentally broken with the emergence of a logic of *flows* including of course the flows of risks discussed above. In such a situation modernity is radicalized, subjecting itself to reflexive processes. Second or reflexive modernization disenchants and dissolves its own taken-for-granted foundations. The normal family, career, and life history have all to be reassessed and renegotiated. The notion in, for example, Talcott Parsons’s writings that each society is a closed and self-equilibrating system dissolves, albeit at uneven speed and impact.

This second modernity can be seen in many different aspects. Particularly what is emerging is a banal cosmopolitanism comparable with the banal nationalism characteristic of the first modernity (that is most shown in waving national flags). Banal cosmopolitanism is seen in the huge array of foodstuffs and cuisines routinely available in many towns and cities across the world. It is possible with enough money to "eat the world." What others have viewed as a "postmodern eclecticism" is seen by Beck as not against the modern but as rather a new reflexivity about that modernity, as cuisines (and most other cultural practices) are assembled, compared, juxtaposed, and reassembled out of diverse components from multiple countries around the world.

There is thus coming into being a new system in which everyday practices involve exceptional levels of cosmopolitan interdependence. This transforms people and places from within, especially with the proliferation of many new and extensive *transnational* forms of life. Probably the most extensive of these is that of the overseas Chinese, a transnational society with tens of millions of members around the world. In many ways this is a powerful society. It is simply that its members do not live within a single territory. We thus need ways of understanding the developments of transnational "societies" that have nothing to do with a single nation-state that acted as its container. This is the second modernity according to Beck.

And in this analysis Beck strongly emphasizes the distinction between globalism and globalization. These words may sound the same but there is a distinct difference of meaning.

Globalism involves the idea of the world market, of the virtues of neoliberal capitalist growth, and of the need to move capital, products, and people across a relatively borderless world. And this is what many business and other writers mean by globalization. They argue that globalism generated much economic growth over the past two decades, especially since Reagan and Thatcher inspired the general "deregulation" of markets in the 1980s. Many, of course, object to this neoliberal globalism but Beck emphasizes how opposition will not be able to resurrect the power of the nation-state since that institution and its powers stem from the first not the second modernity.

Globalization for Beck and indeed others is a much more multidimensional process of change that has irreversibly

changed the very nature of the social world and of the place of states within that world. Globalization thus includes the proliferation of multiple cultures (as with cuisines from around the world), the growth of many transnational forms of life, the emergence of various non-state political actors (from Amnesty International to the World Trade Organization), the paradoxical generation of global protest movements (such as the WTO), the hesitant formation of international states (like the EU), and the general processes of cosmopolitan interdependence (earlier referred to as banal cosmopolitanism).

Roughly speaking Beck argues that globalism is bad (or at least very problematic in its neoliberal face), globalization is good and is in fact the only vaguely progressive show in town. There is simply no way of turning the clock back to a world of sovereign nation-states. That world has been lost in the second modernity. We have to go with the grain of contemporary globalization.

In terms of contemporary politics one might pose this as a conflict between the USA and the UN: the USA represents globalism, the UN a hesitant and flawed globalization/cosmopolitanism. These two visions of the second modernity haunt contemporary life, each vying to control and regulate an increasingly turbulent new world.

And one reason for this turbulence is that both globalism and globalization are associated with increased *individualization*. In the first modernity there was a clear sense of social structure, with many overlapping and intersecting institutions that formed or structured people's lives. People's experiences were contained, ordered, and regulated. Family life, work life, school life, and so on took place within the boundaries of each society that possessed a clear and constraining social structure. Such a social structure was based on distinct and regulated social roles. Sociology for most of the last century sought to describe and analyze such social structures that mostly held people in place. Sociology investigated social roles and how they fitted together to form social structures.

But, say Beck and other analysts, in the second modernity (at least in the rich countries of the "north") these structures have partially dissolved especially because of the very development of global processes. This forces or coerces everyone to live in more individualized ways. Lives are disembedded from family,

households, careers, and so on. Social roles are less clear-cut and determined by an overarching social structure. There is a radicalization of individuals who are forced by social and cultural change to live more varied, flexible, and fluid lives. Beck shows how globalization coerces people to live less role-centered lives, lives that involve extensive negotiation and dialogue and where people have themselves to accept responsibility for their actions as they try to work them out with others in their network.

This shift might be characterized as the shift from social role in the first modernity to social network in the second. It also means that the key concepts for sociology change. So although we still study social inequality – and indeed across the globe inequalities seem to have increased – it is less clear that social class is the principal unit of analysis and investigation. Beck rather provocatively has helped to develop the argument that individualization is the social structure of the second modernity and this produces non-linear, open-ended, and ambivalent consequences. This is again a very different vision from most sociology focused around the zombie concepts of the first modernity, especially the idea that social class based on occupational division is the key element within social structures and that the object of class struggle is to transform the state.

Beck has helped to develop three strong points here. First, poverty is no longer a characteristic of those within the working class. It is something that many people will now experience, including especially young middle-class people undergoing higher education! Second, the world of a second modernity is a world of unbelievable contradictions and contrasts. There are “supermodern castles” or citadels constructed next to scenes from *Apocalypse Now* (as with the now destroyed World Trade Center in New York with thousands of beggars living in the subway below). Class hardly captures such shimmering inequality. Third, the major movements of change have little to do with class, even that responsible for the most stunning transformation of the past two decades, such as the dramatic and unpredicted bringing down of the Soviet empire by various rights-based social networks.

And the collapse of that empire is an interesting case of where changes took place almost overnight although the Soviet system had seemed so resolutely in place. Everything appeared unchanging. There was an apparently fixed social structure

found throughout most societies of eastern Europe, including the German Democratic Republic (GDR, now part of a unified Germany). And yet that social structure crumbled away, like sand running through one's fingers. There was an avalanche, an explosive change, a dynamic that went out of control, to use some of Beck's terms.

Indeed in many processes in the second modernity there is a regressive uncertainty so that the more we know, the more uncertainty grows. In some ways this is an example of complexity thinking that is partially present within Beck's analyses. In the case of BSE in Britain in the 1980s, the attempts to limit uncertainty by providing new information had the very opposite effect. The information designed to re-establish equilibrium resulted in movement away from equilibrium. And this sad story of British beef unpredictably spread across much of Europe in ways that beef producers elsewhere were unable to control. There was a contagion that could not be resisted.

What this analysis is dealing with is how in the second modernity there are many out-of-control processes, systemic unintended side effects. Beck, for example, describes boomerang effects, that corporations or western science can generate consequences that return to haunt them. With the mobile nature of risks across the world, the generators of schemes can also suffer the consequences. Within complex systems everyone is inside and suffers the effects.

Beck's exemplary investigations of global risks and global cosmopolitanism have highlighted the implausibility of sociology of the first modernity based on the triad of nation-state/social structure/role. What his analyses are now doing is pointing beyond these zombie concepts to initiate new terms appropriate for the second modernity where there are complex mobile systems, not simply anarchic but on the edge of chaos. Beck has provided some analyses by which to begin to capture the unpredictable, dynamic, global complexity of the second modernity.

Conversation 1

Postmodernity or the Second Modernity?

JOHANNES WILLMS *Let's begin with what sociology means, and why it's useful. What is the task of sociology?*

ULRICH BECK The simplest answer is that sociology is the study of society. But that just regresses the question, because what is society? You can't see it, you can't smell it, you can't taste it, and you can't hold it in your hands.

What do you mean? Are you saying that society isn't sensuous? If I walk down a crowded sidewalk, or into a bar or football stadium, society seems to fill my senses, sometimes almost to the point of overwhelming me.

Yes, but that's not what sociology means by society. Society is certainly there where you sense it, but it goes beyond your senses. It is present where you find a lot of bodies, but it can't be reduced to them. It's something that manifests itself through them. The individual who reads a book quietly all alone in her room is still doing it within the force field of society. It is there in her origins and her education. It could be that she's writing a review. But whether she's making a living or fulfilling a duty or experiencing a pleasure, society is enabling and constraining her. Society is realizing itself through her actions.

Society's ethereality is only the first in a series of problems. We have then to deal with the fact that society is always disguising itself. It is covered over with a thick shell of its own

interpretations. Society is composed of conscious agents, be they parties or unions, or less formally defined groups like the rich or the educated, and every one of them is constantly producing its own interpretations in order to explain and defend its position. This is the decisive difference between the social and the natural sciences. You can't just stick society in a test tube and analyze it scientifically. Unfortunately, these interpretations are not just nonsense that can be dismissed and swept away. They are important. They contain essential and indispensable knowledge that can only be gained by studying them in detail and analyzing out their truths.

What sociology does is to develop its idea of society out of these partial views and in contrast to them. For this reason, the sociological understanding of society necessarily entails at least a partial withdrawal from immediate perception. Society in the sociological sense is only graspable by means of a conceptual framework, one which has to seem abstract by comparison with the partial views that frame our everyday experience.

Then there is the question of power. By means of this process of abstraction and development, sociology necessarily undercuts the self-interpretations of society's actors. This necessarily brings it into collision with the lay sociologists who represent them. Some of these views have a great deal of power behind them. Others have less power but have the authority of expertise because they are propounded by social critics or cultural theorists.

What we get in the end is such a tangle that sociology often seems cursed. But this is also its attraction for an ambitious thinker: the challenge of making sense of it all, and beyond it of society.

Let's take up the question of power for a moment. What would you say to the view, to put it a bit polemically, that sociology is just the handmaiden of power? That it supplies the information that political decision makers need to do their job?

Many sociologists would deny that. But the fact is, there is a deep connection between the ideas of sociology and the reality of the nation-state that manifests itself even in denial.

To start with, it's worth pointing out that sociology doesn't usually analyze society. It analyzes *societies*. We talk, every day,

without giving it a second thought, about German society, French society, American society, Iranian society, Japanese society, etc. But what this way of speaking implies is that there are as many societies as there are nation-states. In the common sense of sociology, societies are assumed to be organized in nation-state terms. The state is assumed to be the regulator and guarantor of society. The nation-state is conceived of as something that contains society within its borders. The state is conceived of as something that fixes society, that secures and stabilizes it.

This idea that fully realized societies are nation-state societies is sociology's fundamental postulate, and it has molded every one of its central concepts. This is what I mean when I say that sociology is dominated by *methodological nationalism*. Its key assumption is that humankind is split up into a large but finite number of nations, each of which supposedly develops its own unified culture, secure behind the dike of its state-container.

How does this affect sociological practice?

It structures our entire way of seeing. Methodological nationalism is the unquestioned framework which determines the limits of relevance. The social space that is bordered and administered by the nation-state is assumed to contain all the essential elements and dynamics necessary for a characterization of society. The nation-state has become the background against which society is perceived. And when the sociological gaze is attuned like this, it has enormous difficulty in perceiving society when it appears outside this framework. The result is that non-nation-state forms of society are overlooked, minimized, or distorted. They are literally difficult for sociologists to conceive of.

Historically speaking, what sociologists have done in practice is that they've analyzed one nation, the one they've lived in, and then drawn inferences about society in general. In the best of cases they dallied a bit in a middle stage where they compared their chosen society with a couple of others before leaping to universal conclusions. This is true of Marx, who built his picture of capitalism out of the experience of nineteenth-century Britain. It holds for Durkheim, who was thinking of France when he asked his question "What holds modern societies together?" (He famously answered of course by arguing that the

new division of labor that divides society also produces a new kind of organic solidarity to hold it together.) And it's true of Weber. When Weber was constructing his theory of bureaucracy and instrumental rationality, the main picture before his eyes was turn-of-the-century Prussian administration. To make a mea culpa, it was originally also true of me. My first book, *Risk Society*, articulated a vision of how global risk consciousness would soon affect society. But society was assumed to be a welfare state much like Germany of the 1970s and 1980s.

But isn't this methodology a little questionable? To distill concepts out of the experience of your own society, and then make those the standards against which to measure all societies of the same period, no matter how different their historical formations?

It's extraordinarily questionable. And, as many people have pointed out, it also represents a kind of western conceptual imperialism.

Yet none of that should blind us to the paradoxical fact that this approach was extremely fruitful for a long time. No matter what school of social thought you subscribe to today, sociology had a major role in shaping it. And every sociological concept, whether developed by Marx or Durkheim or Comte or Simmel or Weber, grew out of this generalization of the European experience of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its genius and its limitations are inseparable.

This is also the mixture that allowed western thought to misrepresent imperialism as the process of "western rationalization." Sociology was contemporaneous with, and was one of the expressions of, the formative upsurge of European national consciousness. Within that framework of thought, colonial exploitation was firmly identified with progress. As an explicit assertion, this idea has now long been abandoned. But it still survives tenaciously in our assumptions. You can see it in the conceptual blindness that ascribes all improvement in developing countries to westernization, and ascribes all deterioration in their situation to not westernizing or not modernizing enough.

These conceptual blinders impose serious limitations on our ability to produce valid theories about the present world situation. They are also a political barrier, since, as a narrative of the history of the relations between the so-called center and the

so-called periphery, this one is so opposed to the historical experience of the periphery's inhabitants that it poisons the attempts of the two sides to communicate. This is one of the main reasons why, for many non-Europeans, "globalization" looks like just a new euphemism for the same old imperialism and exploitation, only this time by a "world market" that flies no flag. For both the sake of a social science worth its salt, and a politics that is just and effective, it is urgent that both sides communicate. For that to happen, we need a historical and conceptual framework that makes sense of both sides' experience.

What you say of sociology's conceptual imperialism is clearly true in retrospect. But as you say, it was true of all nineteenth-century European thinking. It doesn't seem like something we can really condemn sociology's founding fathers for not transcending.

That's true. But the retrospective view highlights deficiencies that we still need to fix. What we today consider conceptualized description, most of their contemporaries regarded as prescription and prediction. We don't because we can easily see that the world they predicted didn't come to pass. But this means something was fundamentally wrong with their system of statements that we need to fix in order to understand the world as it actually exists.

The achievement of classical sociology was to grasp the internal dynamics of the industrial market society that was then just coming into existence. Sociologists distilled its basic principles out of their own contemporary experience. The concepts they developed spread out and conquered the intellectual world. They were extremely fruitful for empirical research and they had huge political effects. But the irony is that the power of these ideas, and their consequent success, was all founded on this questionable inference from each theorist's society to society in general. We could call it the universalist inference. It's false. Yet the perspective it made possible had an enormous amount of explanatory power.

Our job now is to rethink sociology so that it no longer presumes this inference in each and every one of its concepts. We have to change our perspective. This necessarily also means changing our sociological practice. No one knows better than sociologists that every perspective rests on a social foundation.