

# Twenty Observations on a World in Turmoil



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# Contents

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<i>Preface</i>	<i>page vii</i>
1 Mushrooms and Other Flowers of Capitalism	1
2 All Aboard the Nuclear Power Superjet – Just Don’t Ask about the Landing Strip	8
3 This Appalling Injustice!	13
4 Harm in Exchange for Money	20
5 Illegal World Citizens	28
6 The Cards of Power Are Being Reshuffled across the World	36
7 Felt Peace and Waged War	45
8 The Return of Social Darwinism or: Which University Do We Want?	53
9 A Kind of Berlin Wall Has Again Collapsed	60
10 German Euro-Nationalism	67

11	Beyond the Aeroplane	74
12	Global Domestic Politics from Below: How Global Families Are Becoming Normal	81
13	The Environmental Storm on the Bastille	89
14	Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian	96
15	The Caterpillar's Mistake: Fukushima and the End of Nuclear Power	105
16	It's Time to Get Angry, Europe. Create the Europe of Citizens Now!	111
17	Powerless but Legitimate: The Occupy Movement in the Financial Crisis	120
18	Cooperate or Bust! The Existential Crisis of the European Union	126
19	What Is Meant by Global Domestic Politics?	139
20	The Five Self-Delusions of a Supposedly Unpolitical Age	151

# Preface

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For many years it has been my business to sound out the present for potential futures (something one should do, however, only with a certain twinkle in the eye). Today the question is: which opportunities, which futures are implicit in the events convulsing the world – the nuclear worst-case scenario in Fukushima, the global financial crisis, the chaos in the euro zone, the uprisings of the Arab spring, as well as the protest movements in Athens, Barcelona, New York, Moscow, etc.? This much seems clear: nobody thought they were possible. They are exploding our horizon of expectation (including the conceptual framework of the social sciences!). They are striking at the heart of modernity. At the same time they are opening up new spaces of action, including space for alliances across all borders. All of them are by nature transnational and therefore cannot be understood and explained within the frame of reference of the national outlook. And, most of all, there are uprisings of ‘multiple global generations’ and revolutionary middle classes, even in the United States and Russia. The *citoyen* is making a comeback across the globe!

Two diametrically opposed futures are looming. One is a Hegel scenario in which the threats engendered by global risk capitalism represent a historical opportunity for the ‘cunning of reason’. This is the cosmopolitan imperative: cooperate or fail, succeed together or fail alone.

At the same time, however, the everyday experience that the world is becoming uncontrollable also triggers a Carl Schmitt scenario, a strategic power game which, as the planetary state of exception is becoming normalized, dismantles basic rights and democracy and opens the doors for a neonationalist politics. Remarkably, these mutually contradictory potential futures seem to be interconnected in a variety of ways; this used to be called ‘dialectics’.

One way or another, we have to find new ways to orient ourselves in a world that is in a state of turmoil. Of course, political leaders need to address local issues and to react to people’s specific demands; but without a cosmopolitan outlook, such a reaction is likely to be inadequate. My *Twenty Observations on a World in Turmoil* is a demonstration of cosmopolitan politics in practice. It is more than a mirror: it is a magnifying glass that brings into focus the processes which are transforming our world and highlights the formidable challenges we face today.

*Weltinnenpolitik*, ‘global domestic politics’, the concept I am introducing and developing, is much more than a political theory, a philosophical utopia (or dystopia), a governance programme or a state of mind: it is the reality of our times. I turn the argument that ‘global domestic politics’ is an unrealistic ideology on its head, arguing that at the beginning of the twenty-first century it is the proponents of the national who are the idealists. They view reality through the obsolete lenses of the nation state and thus cannot see the profound global changes which are transforming our reality. Global domestic politics is therefore a perspective, a



political reality and a normative idea. And it is *the* critical theory of our times since it challenges the most profound truths which we hold dear: the truths of the nation.\*

Nationalism is particularly toxic not only because of the overt justification it gives to national protectionism and global inequalities. It is dangerous on account of its cognitive status: nationalism defines and ossifies our political and social scientific frameworks and our most basic categories of thought and knowledge. Nationalism as an ideology thus limits not only what we can imagine and wish for, but, more importantly, what we know and how we conceive of reality. The most basic categories are indeed captive to the national order: family, gender, religion, class, democracy, politics, etc. – all are nationally defined. Our legal and administrative systems define them and these definitions are amplified by the social sciences. The demystification of our sciences requires us to part with nationalism and to see the world as it is, as already cosmopolitan. And indeed, climate change, financial crises, cities, migration, families, Europe, risk societies – if we open our eyes we can see that they all are already cosmopolitan. Especially world cities are examples of this reality: they are part of the world – being nodal points for the dissemination of people, goods, technologies, capital, risks and images – but are still part of their nations. They exemplify the logic of ‘both/and’ – of both globalism and localism, of

\* Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker used the concept ‘Weltinnenpolitik’ in a philosophical sense in a 1963 lecture in which he draws on Immanuel Kant. I lend this word a new sociological meaning. The question one needs to ask is ‘What *is* global domestic politics?’ rather than ‘What should global domestic politics be?’ The second turn I propose is a cognitive one: the national outlook misjudges reality (on this see the following and chs. 18 and 19).

the transnational that cohabits with the national – which is in fact the logic of global domestic politics (rather than ‘either/or’).

Critics argue that this story lacks the ‘agents’ which propel it. They ask: how has this global domestic politics come into being? Was it an unavoidable unfolding of an idea? Was it a side-effect of global capitalism? Who were the agents who advanced the reality of cosmopolitanism and the processes that I propose be uncovered? And isn’t the puzzling blindness of various people to this reality not, in fact, a blindness at all, but an antagonism in wilful opposition to this *involuntary* global domestic politics?

Modernity is threatening to fail specifically on account of its successes – that is my thesis. Precisely the staged threat of failure – not first the catastrophe but already the anticipation of the catastrophe – is undermining the key institutions of the nation state and making the latter receptive in a new way to cross-border political initiatives. The social and psychological volatility entailed by cultural relativism, on the one hand, and the recognition of global risk, on the other, are giving rise to enormous discontent, which in turn inspires various political and social movements for resistance and reform. Those movements address – to put it bluntly – the moral aspect of the events now unfolding. The protesters, who are ‘Occupying Wall Street’ in different countries, are calling for a return to the principles of equality, social justice and solidarity. People are questioning why the crisis for which they are not to blame should be solved at their expense.

This might be the birth of a new ‘*Weltbild*’, a new world view – namely, global domestic politics – because such protests and projects are typically justified in the name of ‘humanity’ and ‘the planet’. The universality of such claims, moreover, is not conjured up out of thin air or a merely utopian aspiration. Instead it presents itself in the form of globally available cultural models

of protest and resentment ('We are the ninety-nine per cent', 'occupying Wall Street'), which, when enacted by activists and social movements, inspire new circles of human agency and responsibility to change, save or otherwise repair the world in the name of 'another modernity'.

Global domestic politics includes the caveat that our orientation to the world is becoming continually more critically reflexive. At the same time – and this is crucial – it is becoming more universalistic, interventionistic, and prescriptive: the contradictions between the hegemonic universalism of the Western world picture ('the American way of life') and a new global domestic politics from below characterize open local-global conflicts over the 'good world' – and, of course, over who has the power to define it.

And there are other essential questions: will people in Europe live in a Post-Europe? What will a post-European Europe look like? Will there be new and old wars? Or will Europe be able to play a positive role if its current economic policies and its failure to cooperate condemn it to stagnation and long-term crises?

Too much is coming to an end, too little is beginning. This slim volume collects *Twenty Observations on a World in Turmoil*, published in leading European newspapers between 2009 and 2011. It represents a kind of monthly journal, miniature depictions of the future, on the question: where is the old merely being restored and where is the new being given a chance?

Munich, January 2012  
Ulrich Beck



# 1

## Mushrooms and Other Flowers of Capitalism

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July 2009

For many Japanese, matsutake, wild gourmet mushrooms, are the most Japanese thing that the Japanese cuisine has to offer. These mushrooms acquire their unique flavour precisely where the environmental crisis has left its traces, in barren forests on parched ground. During the 1970s, as the anthropologist Anna Tsing reports, two things came together in Japan: increasing wealth and increasing environmental destruction. Thus, the ‘wild’ gourmet mushrooms had to be ‘produced’ and their production ‘outsourced’ – to the forests of China, South Korea, Sweden, Turkey, Mexico, Canada and the United States. Who harvests the mushrooms? Refugees, migrants, ‘outsourced’ citizens of the world and ‘self-entrepreneurs’ living at the edge or precipice of society, for whom living and working in ruined forests is not too much to ask. Thus the outsourcing of risks and the outsourcing of people come together in the symbol of the matsutake mushrooms, the most expensive mushrooms in the world and an original Japanese delicacy with which the Japanese enjoy their success and celebrate it for all to see. The macrocosm of globalized outsourcing capitalism is reflected in the microcosm of the mushrooms.

Thus, the 'whether' is no longer the issue. Outsourcing as a feature of global domestic politics – offloading risks and responsibility onto the weak who do the dirty work for the rich for a pittance – has become a key global source of profit in which the domination of the rich, the exploitation of the poor and the destruction of nature are entering into new combinations and becoming radicalized across all borders. The 'national vision', national borders and laws, transform deliberate outsourcing into 'latent side effects' in the no-man's-land of organized irresponsibility.

This capitalism of disposal and supply chains (Anna Tsing) permeates all domains. The major corporations, which at one time were famous and celebrated for their comprehensive production machinery, have mutated into masters of outsourcing. Governments are imitating them by outsourcing everything – from social services, through war, even to torture – to subcontractors. Scientists arrange to have research projects which are regarded as ethically suspect or are forbidden in the EU conducted in 'low ethics countries'. Moreover, the 'emancipation compromise' on which the unstable balance between double income marriages and parenthood is based in the West, falls under the headings of 'outsourcing' or 'insourcing'. The labour which many women no longer want to do and which most men, in spite of lip service paid to open-mindedness, still do not want to perform – namely, the incessant, monotonous, dirty and yet joyful work involved in family and parenthood – is being delegated to immigrant women: 'substitute mothers'.

This is one point of global domestic politics: the outside suggested by the concept of '*outsourcing*' no longer exists. A particularly drastic illustration of this is provided by the so-called 'environmental' problems. Many people still believe that these 'latent side effects' of their industrial or political decisions can be 'outsourced' across national borders to 'others',

‘foreigners’, who do not have any public voice and cannot defend themselves. However, this *factual* global domestic politics raises questions of *normative* global domestic politics: how can the ‘outsourcing’ of transnational harms be exposed and placed on the global domestic political agenda? How can the boundaries of moral and political equality be redrawn? How can the ‘outsourced’ citizens of the world be included in decisions which affect their vital interests?

### **Are we living in a neo-neoliberal capitalist system to which there are no alternatives?**

One can literally hear it, the big sigh of relief on the markets. With the recent rise in the value of their stocks, the investors are already celebrating the end of the crisis. On the credit markets, too, there are muffled cries of joy – the message is that confidence has returned. Perhaps the clearest indicator is that those highly risky investments which started the whole slide are again in demand – in spite of a shrinking economy. How are banks which are still threatened by collapse able to make these megadeals? Quite simply by making the crisis itself into a business. Speculation has turned from junk assets to government bonds, in other words, to the money that the state must raise in order to rescue capitalism from itself. There are still gnawing doubts, for example that the Great Depression also only really set in in 1931 when people thought it was already over. When it comes to the present, it seemed for a brief historical moment as though the boundless, neoliberal capitalism would become reflexive and open to learning when faced with its self-endangerment.

Are the calls for regulation merely empty words? Has the window of opportunity for civilizing market fundamentalism already closed again? Could it even be that we are experiencing the shortest recession since the

Second World War, now that the players can no longer contain their jubilation? Before everything finally turns to the good, we should again recall what was actually involved and is still involved.

The twentieth century was marked by two antagonistic and mutually exclusive systems: capitalism and socialism. We lived through two experiments on a planetary scale. One of them tried to impose the model of a centralized planned state economy, the other the capitalist economy free from any controls. The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked the failure of socialism. Now 'pure' capitalism is collapsing before our very eyes. There are good reasons for assuming that, although we are not witnessing the end of capitalism, we may be witnessing the end of that kind of neoliberal fundamentalist capitalism which held the world and its governments in thrall in the years since Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. State socialism went bankrupt also because the alternative of unregulated market capitalism existed. As a consequence, one elite could be replaced by another. The pure doctrine of market capitalism is now likewise bankrupt, but without a viable alternative – either in economics or in politics. Everywhere the neoliberal poachers were appointed gamekeepers. However, this raises the question: is it even possible for pure capitalism to go bankrupt if the old elites continue to govern disguised as state socialist turncoats? Are we living in a global system of neoliberal state capitalism that is simultaneously bankrupt and not bankrupt but to which there is no alternative?

### **The politics of climate change: squaring the circle**

If it is the case that each of us must save the world from the impending climate catastrophe every day, then the US government under George W. Bush was actually good for something: one could blame Bush for every-



thing that failed to occur or went wrong. Now many environmental activists hope that Barack Obama will bring about the environmental turn. In fact, the House of Representatives in Washington recently enacted a law to place limits on carbon dioxide emissions. What is envisaged may represent a giant step by comparison with the denial of climate change propagated by the Bush administration around the world. But the guidelines have actually turned out to be so moderate that they will probably have little effect. However, the Indians and Chinese, whose support has to be won for a worldwide agreement on climate change, are arming themselves with arguments that are not so easy to refute. By now, China has probably become the greatest global CO<sub>2</sub> transgressor; factored over the per capita income of its population, however, emissions in China are still far below levels in the West. How, the Indians and Chinese ask, can Americans and Europeans claim the right to consume energy on a scale that they want to deny to the poorer countries?

The proposal of the West boils down to the rich countries providing financial aid to the poorest states to enable them to reduce emissions by importing new, clean technologies from the West: this amounts to capitalist environmental altruism. China has made an interesting alternative proposal which is putting pressure on the Western governments: all developed countries should make one per cent of their gross national product available to enable poorer countries to combat global warming. What consequences would such an agreement have? The United States has a budget deficit of twelve per cent. The Chinese are holding US government bonds to the tune of at least \$800 billion. It is they who are 'rescuing' – that is, buying up – the large companies in Europe and the United States. Imagine the following scenario: Obama would have to explain to his fellow Americans that he is issuing a large cheque to the Chinese, among others, so that they can combat climate

change with clean technologies, while at the same time he must hope that the Chinese will generously buy American government bonds so that the American budget deficit can be financed!

The following squaring of the circle is in the offing: the more all sides proclaim their good will to solve the problem of climate change, and thus the weaker official objections become across the world, the more involved and contradictory the search for viable answers becomes. There is no one left to blame for the failure of climate policy. But for this very reason climate policy is at the mercy of the internal calamities of a radically unequal world. The debate on climate policy is dominated by what must and should be done – or by a green, all-party technocracy of market gullibility. If only good intentions – and their taboos – were enough!

### **Strange bed fellows**

The hardliners in Iran are at each other's throats. This could have advantages from the perspective of the sociology of power – that is, from the civil society perspective of the Iranian demonstrators and their sympathizers. When restrictions are placed on public liberties, it is the tendencies towards fragmentation within the more or less monolithic block of the governing clergy which – as the example of Gorbachev demonstrates – could bring the whole power structure tumbling down. Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, has called upon President Ahmadinejad to dismiss the recently appointed first vice president. This was reported by the acting Speaker of Parliament, a confidant of Khamenei's. Prior to this, leading representatives of the hardliners among the clergy and in the media were harshly criticized. This has opened up a further, perhaps decisive, line of conflict in the confrontations that began with the presidential election of 12 July 2009.