



Ulrich Beck
Theorising World Risk
Society and
Cosmopolitanism

Klaus Rasborg

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Introduction

The first edition of Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* was published in German in 1986. In it, he introduced the concept of the 'risk society', which would go on to assume huge importance not only in sociology, but also in public debate. The central thesis is that the highly developed industrial society of the post-war era has turned into a hyper-complex and uncertain 'risk society'; one that Beck also sees as synonymous with the emergence of a *new* modernity (as per the title and subtitle). The concept of the 'risk society' takes the dark sides and many newfound uncertainties of the highly differentiated growth society and condenses them into a concise yet stark formula. *Risk Society* was Beck's contribution to the sociological tradition of diagnosing the 'X society': the welfare society, service society, leisure society, experience society, network society, multi-option society, insurance society, high-speed society, performance society, recognition society and so on.

Now considered a modern classic in its field, *Risk Society* has been translated into more than 25 languages, including English, Japanese, Chinese, Russian, French, Spanish, Italian and Polish.¹ Beck subsequently wrote a whole range of other books, articles, anthologies and collections of articles, many of which have been translated into English and several other languages. Key works include *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (1995),

¹ Cf. <https://webarchiv-ulrich-beck.soziologie.uni-muenchen.de/biography/>; accessed 10/08/21.

The Normal Chaos of Love (with Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order* (1997b), *Power in the Global Age* (2005), *Cosmopolitan Vision* (2006), *World at Risk* (2009b), *Distant Love* (with Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, 2014) and the posthumously published *The Metamorphosis of the World* (2016). In his later works, Beck sought to refine and flesh out his analysis in relation to a number of key fields and themes in contemporary society: the welfare state, individualisation, social inequality, family, gender and the ways in which people live together, working life, politics, globalisation and the economic and political power structures that came to dominate the new international world order after the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11.

In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has paralysed vital functions in virtually every country in the world since January 2020, and has cost millions of lives, Beck's diagnosis of the times seems more relevant than ever. The corona crisis, as well as the potentially far more extensive climate crisis, clearly demonstrates that we are, for better or worse, connected in a global interdependence that Beck describes as a 'world risk society'. In Beck's perspective, such worldwide crises can be seen as an expression of the fact that we live in a new uncertain modernity, where 'the state of emergency', as he says, 'threatens to become the normal state' (Beck, 1992 [1986]: 79).

Thus, the purpose of this book is to provide a comprehensive introduction to all of Beck's theoretical work—not just his original theory of the risk society and reflexive modernity, but also how he later refined his thinking and formulated theories about the 'world risk society' and 'cosmopolitanism'. This approach differentiates this book from the few previous introductions to Beck, which due to their publication dates were unable to encompass the whole of his career (Mythen, 2004; Sørensen & Christiansen, 2013). I seek to remedy this by presenting all of his theories, right up to the draft for his final critical work, *The Metamorphosis of the World* (Beck, 2016). The scale and complexity of Beck's body of work make it difficult to grasp in its entirety, and his often somewhat convoluted and abstract way of expressing himself can be challenging for uninitiated readers. I hope that a comprehensive presentation and interpretation of his theory will overcome both of these problems and prove useful to readers who would like to gain deeper insight into his critical diagnosis of the times.

When I first started writing this book, Beck was still alive, in the best of health and fully engaged in international research. This came to an abrupt

end on New Year's Day 2015, when he died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 70. While tragic, this event further suggested that the time had come to take stock of Beck's contribution to contemporary sociology. However, my aim is not merely to introduce his theories, concepts and points of view. I also wish to discuss them and put them into perspective in the light of other relevant sociological theory and empirical research. This thread runs through all of the chapters, culminating in a critical summary in Chap. 8.² In this sense, this book might be said to contain elements of a broader presentation of contemporary and critical sociological diagnoses of the times, albeit one consistently based and focused on Beck. As his theory has gained more and more traction, it has, quite naturally, attracted criticism from various quarters. The question is whether this criticism fundamentally undermines the theory, or merely identifies shortcomings and weaknesses that must be addressed if Beck's theory is to serve as a plausible critical diagnosis of contemporary society. I discuss this in detail in the concluding Chap. 8.

Before turning to theory, I will start at the beginning, with a brief biographical sketch of Beck's life and academic career, in order to provide insight into the background and qualifications of this pre-eminent sociologist.³

Ulrich Beck was born on 15 May 1944 in Stolp, then part of the German province of Pomerania, now part of Poland and called Slupsk. At the end of World War II, his family fled to Hanover, where he grew up. In 1966, aged 22, Beck started studying law at the University of Freiburg. After just one semester, he changed disciplines, obtaining a scholarship and throwing himself into sociology, philosophy, psychology and political science at the Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität in Munich (LMU). In 1972, after six years of study, Beck defended his final *Dissertation* (the equivalent of a PhD thesis in the Anglo-Saxon university system), 'Objectivity and Normativity: The Theory-Praxis Debate in Modern German and American Sociology', for which he achieved the highest honours (*summa cum laude*) (see Chap. 8 for a more in-depth discussion of

²This is another way in which this book differs from previous introductions to Beck, some of which shy away from a critical-discursive approach (Sørensen & Christiansen, 2013: xx).

³The biographical information is based on the following sources: Beck's own website, which has now been replaced by the in memoriam website *Ulrich Beck zum Gedenken* (cf. https://www.ls2.soziologie.uni-muenchen.de/ulrich_beck_zum_gedenken/index.html; accessed 10/08/21); Wikipedia (cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulrich_Beck; accessed 10/08/21); (Sørensen & Christiansen, 2013: 1–6).

the thesis, later published as a book, see Beck, 1974). Beck then worked as an assistant at the University of Munich, where he participated in a research project on the theoretical foundations of sociological research into labour and professions. This resulted in his *Habilitation* thesis (corresponding to postdoctoral research), which he defended at the University of Munich in 1979.⁴ That same year, Beck received a *Ruf* (call) to apply for the post of Professor of Sociology at the University of Münster. He worked there until 1981, when he moved on to pastures new as Professor of Sociology at the University of Bamberg. In 1992, Beck completed the circle, returning to Munich as Professor of Sociology and Director of the Department of Sociology at Ludwig-Maximilian University. The professorship served as the basis for all of his sociology work until 2009, when he was awarded the title of Professor Emeritus at the age of 65. However, this did not mean that Beck swapped active research for the quiet life of a pensioner. On the contrary, he was still going strong as a researcher, writer and lecturer, as a guest lecturer at numerous universities around the world, and as the head of a major five-year EU-funded research project on ‘Methodological Cosmopolitanism – In the Laboratory of Climate Change’ (for more on Beck’s concept of cosmopolitanism, see Chap. 7).⁵

In the course of his academic career, Beck also edited several journals, managed several major research projects, received honorary doctorates and was visiting professorships at a number of European and American universities. In 1980, he became co-editor of the German sociological journal *Soziale Welt*. From 1981 to 1988, he headed up a major social science research project (‘Uses of Social Science’) funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). From 1995 to 1997, Beck was a member of the Commission for Future Questions in the State of Bavaria and the State of Saxony. In 1996, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, and over the next few years he received similar honours from several other universities in Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Argentina and Bulgaria. In 1995–98, he was a Distinguished

⁴ Beck’s *Habilitation* thesis has never been published, but its themes are covered in Beck et al. (1980).

⁵ The original English title of this five-year research project (2013–18), which was funded by the European Research Council Advanced Grant (ERC) and interrupted after approximately 18 months by Beck’s death, was ‘Methodological Cosmopolitanism: In the Laboratory of Climate Change’ (the Cosmo-Climate Research Project) (cf. <https://webarchiv-ulrich-beck.soziolegie.uni-muenchen.de/en/ulrich-beck-erc-advanced-grant-methodological-cosmopolitanism-in-the-laboratory-of-climate-change/>; accessed 10/08/21).

Research Professor at the University of Wales. In 1997, Beck was awarded the Culture Prize of the City of Munich, followed by several other similar accolades. The same year, he was appointed guest professor—*British Journal of Sociology* Visiting Centennial Professor—at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), which at that time was headed by the internationally renowned sociologist Anthony Giddens. In 1994, Beck—along with his sociologist colleague Scott Lash—started working with Giddens on the book *Reflexive Modernization* (Beck et al., 1994) (cf. Chap. 5). Reflexive modernisation was also the subject of a major interdisciplinary research project (SB 536), funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), for which Beck was project manager from 1999 to 2009. The project—which involved sociologists, political scientists, economists, lawyers, social psychologists, historians and philosophers—sought to further develop the theory of the risk society and reflexive modernity in relation to a range of different social spheres, and to strengthen its empirical foundation (Beck et al., 2003; cf. Beck, 2002) (cf. Chap. 5). In 2009, Beck was awarded a ‘Senior Loeb Fellowship’ at Harvard University in the US. In 2011, he was also a visiting professor at the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l’Homme in Paris. As yet more evidence of Beck’s international renown, in 2014 the International Sociological Association (ISA) gave him the ‘Lifetime Achievement Award – For Most Distinguished Contribution to Futures Research’ during the World Congress of Sociology in Yokohama, Japan.

Beck was married to Professor Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, a sociologist specialising in issues such as gender, ethnicity and family. They met as students in Munich and became lifelong academic sparring partners and co-authors of several books (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2014). After Beck’s death on 1 January 2015, newspapers in Germany and several other countries published obituaries.⁶ Many researchers who knew and worked with him also penned their own tributes, all of which stressed that he was not only an innovative and inspirational thinker, but also a very friendly and welcoming person with a good sense of humour and self-irony⁷—attributes to which I can testify based on my personal encounters with him. As Giddens so aptly puts it in his obituary in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*:

⁶Including *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *The Guardian*, *The Times Higher Education*, *Le Monde* and *The New York Times*.

⁷Cf. <https://webarchiv-ulrich-beck.soziologie.uni-muenchen.de/obituaries/>; <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/condolences/2015/01/05/ulrich-beck/>; accessed 10/08/21.

Ulrich Beck ... was the greatest sociologist of his generation. [He] was a dedicated and conscientious scholar, with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the social sciences. For such a distinguished figure he was refreshingly down to earth and approachable, highly popular with his students everywhere. I used to tease him quite often, since he never mastered the British sense of humour, with its mixture of selfdeprecation and smug superiority. More often than not though I was the one who ended up looking foolish. He had a good line in put-downs when he needed to.⁸

As this brief biography shows, by 1986, Beck had already published several weighty sociological works and research reports. However, the book on the risk society was his major breakthrough, not only by dint of its contribution to a critical diagnosis of the times, but also because it adopts a new perspective on post-war, highly developed industrial society. With regard to the seeming dichotomy between ‘the modern’ and ‘the postmodern’, which was on everybody’s lips at the time (cf. Habermas, 2007 [1980]), Beck posited a third possible interpretation—that we do not live in either modernity or postmodernity, but in a *new*, more reflexive and ‘self-critical’ form of modernity (for more on this, see Chaps. 5 and 7).

In an era characterised by rapid social change, Beck sought to reformulate social criticism in a non-dogmatic manner that acknowledged the legacy of German critical social theory. While he did not see himself as part of the Frankfurt School, he did adopt one of the underlying themes in its critique of modernity—science and rationality (cf. Chaps. 3 and 5) (Beck, 1994a: 9, 33; 1994b: 177; 2009a: 12–13). Nevertheless, social criticism had to be reformulated to make it relevant to modern society. The German sociologist Wolfgang Zapf provides a very apt characterisation of how Beck fits into German critical theory—a characterisation that Beck himself quotes and with which he seems to agree:

Commenting critically, I would like to say that Ulrich’s position is so fascinating because it adheres to the programme of modernization as well as to a fundamental critique of contemporary society, including the bulk of today’s sociology. Beck’s intent is to design a ‘new modernity’ and a more insightful, conscientious, reflected, in a word, a reflexive theory. It can gain the loyalty of adherents to the Frankfurt School of the 1930s and 1960s

⁸Giddens’ obituary appeared in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 05-6/1/2015 (for an English version, see: <https://www.scribd.com/document/372147109/Ulrich-Beck-Obituary-by-Anthony-Giddens>; accessed 10/08/21).

who believe in Adorno's statement that 'The totality is the untrue'. It is able to take in the disappointed Marxists, whose dreams of socialism may be broken, but who are now being shown that free-market democracies also must fail from their own contradictions. It is a modernized variant of the doctrine of late capitalism, with the ecological crisis now playing the part once taken by the legitimization crisis of late capitalism. It is another theory of the 'third way' transcending capitalism and socialism. (Beck, 1997b: 182, note 24; cf. Zapf, 1998: 294–95)

Although Beck maintains his intention to conduct critical social science research, he emphasises that it must be done differently now than in Marx's day, because society has changed significantly in the intervening period. According to Beck, productive forces have become destructive, and progress has become ambivalent and problematic. It is no longer possible to proclaim a particular class to be the vanguard of change for the better, since we are all affected by the destructive logics of the risk society (cf. Chaps. 3 and 6 in particular).

As will become apparent, this did not make Beck a pessimist or a prophet of doom. He very much stresses both the potential for action and the importance of finding political solutions to the multilateral problems of a global risk society (cf. Chaps. 6 and 7). In a globalised world with ever closer relationships between individual nations, Beck does not consider it sufficient to think of politics, democracy and the rule of law only at the national level. He calls for an 'active civil society' and a 'cosmopolitan democracy', in which we see ourselves as part of a European community that works together to solve shared problems (cf. Chaps. 6 and 7). Beck's social commitment and his ability to lay out new and thoughtful perspectives on contemporary society sparked debate around some of society's most pressing problems. It is not least because of this that he attained the status of an internationally renowned sociologist, mentioned in the same breath as Niklas Luhmann, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman and Richard Sennett.

However, Beck's constant desire to refine a critical theory of contemporary society raises a number of questions. What changes led Beck to talk of a 'risk society'? Have we not always faced myriad risks? Are risks social constructions in our heads or objective realities in the world? What does Beck envisage when he refers to contemporary and relevant social criticism? Does Beck see himself as part of the tradition of normative social theory? If so, what constitutes his standpoint—the normative

foundation—for his social criticism? How does Beck see the relationship between structure and agent? What political options for action are available to us in the global risk society, and who is the ‘subject’ of change? These and other questions are explored in the chapters to come.

The various chapters are based on key themes in Beck’s analysis of modern society. This will provide readers with insight into how Beck’s views on risk influence his thinking with regard to various aspects of contemporary society. My choice of themes corresponds with the main ones that Beck himself regularly addresses in his writing and which may be divided into four main phases: (1) the original theory of the ‘risk society’ (1986); (2) the theory of the ‘world risk society’ (1996); (3) the theory of ‘cosmopolitanism’ (1996); and (4) the theory of the ‘metamorphosis of the world’ (2016) (Curran, 2018: 30; cf. Rasborg, 2018). The chapters introduce all four phases in chronological order. In addition, I incorporate two themes that Beck himself does not address, but which I consider crucial in order to illustrate the subject adequately. In Chap. 2, I outline the history of the concept of risk in order to shed light on its meaning. In a critical discussion in the final chapter, Chap. 8, I summarise whether Beck’s theory can be said to be a plausible, critical diagnosis of the times in relation to the highly developed Western societies of the early twenty-first century.

To be more specific about the structure of this book, this chapter is followed by Chap. 2 with a brief outline of the history of the concept of risk, which clarifies what it means and how Beck positions himself in relation to previous risk theories. In Chap. 3, I account for Beck’s original theory of the risk society and compare it with theories propounded by a number of other prominent sociologists who also emphasise the key role that risk plays in contemporary society: Niklas Luhmann, Anthony Giddens and Mitchell Dean. In Chap. 4, I take a closer look at individualisation, one of the most controversial aspects of Beck’s theory of the risk society. According to Beck, greater individualisation is an inseparable part of the risk society and reflexive modernity. After identifying what he considers to be the particular features of individualisation, the chapter discusses the differences and similarities in relation to a number of other sociologists who also stress the key role individualisation plays in society: Thomas Ziehe, Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman. In Chap. 5, I delve deeper into Beck’s central concept of reflexive modernity, and also into modernisation, which I put into perspective based on other sociological understandings of the nature of contemporary society, namely Bruno

Latour's concept of 'amodernity' and the concept of 'multiple modernities' devised by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt et al.

In Chap. 6, I present Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's views on changes to forms of family life/ways of living together, paid work and politics in the risk society, reflexive modernity and the differences and similarities with the analyses of change processes provided by Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, Richard Sennett and Guy Standing. In Chap. 7, I show how Beck, in the course of his writings, develops his original theory of the risk society and reflexive modernity into the theory of the world risk society and cosmopolitanism. The chapter explains why Beck's 'cosmopolitan turn' should be seen as part of a broader current in sociology/social theory, and how Beck is positioned in relation to this context. It also illustrates how, according to Beck, globalisation and 'cosmopolitanisation' make demands of contemporary sociology/social theory, by requiring that they keep up with the pace of change. In addition, it looks at Beck's analysis of 'cosmopolitan Europe', in which he underlines that the EU represents a crucial step in building an 'institutional cosmopolitanism', which he considers indispensable if solutions are to be found to problems that transcend national borders. The chapter ends by looking at the direction Beck's theory was taking up to his death, namely his theory of 'the metamorphosis of the world', which in several respects represents an exciting new departure from his 'classic' risk society argument. In Chap. 8, based on themes raised earlier in this book, I conclude by reviewing the main criticisms of Beck's theory in the now reasonably extensive (international) secondary literature. In this way, the chapter also acts as a—critical—summary of the whole book, through which it will hopefully be possible for the reader to consider and evaluate the sustainability of, and critical potential in, Beck's theories of the (world) risk society, reflexive modernity and cosmopolitanism.

In conclusion, a few words about how I came to write this book. In the years 1995–97, I translated Beck's *Risikogesellschaft* (1986) into Danish (Beck, 1997a [1986])—a long, arduous and sometimes painstaking task that required a high degree of empathy with Beck's conceptual universe. I found him to be extremely interesting, and I consider him an innovator in critical German social theory, which also accounts for much of my own theoretical grounding (see, e.g. Rasborg, 1988). Ever since, I have been interested in and conducted research based on Beck's theory and how it evolved. I have written about it in both Danish and international journals, textbooks and anthologies. For more than 20 years, therefore, Beck's

theory has been an important source of inspiration in my research and teaching, both at Roskilde University and in my previous teaching positions in the Departments of Sociology and Political Science at the University of Copenhagen. In addition, I have introduced Beck's theory of the risk society to a wider audience, via radio interviews, newspaper columns, feature articles, lectures at the People's University and many other contexts.

In other words, my intellectual baggage makes it impossible for me to 'reboot' or 'start from scratch'. It is unavoidable that the book is based on—and elaborates upon—some of my previous writings on the subject. It should be stressed, however, that this book is not merely a repetition of my previous writings on the subject but is based on highly extensive research into Beck's work, as well as other relevant sociological theories. In other words, this book is an independent work in its own right, in which I seek, to the best of my abilities, to convey the insights into the structures, relationships and lines of development in Beck's theory at which I arrived during the course of my research. Responsibility for the analyses presented here, of course, lies entirely with me.

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What Is Risk?

A well-established body of research into risk already existed when *Risk Society* was published in 1986 (cf. Breck, 2001; Rasborg, 2020). In an interview, Beck himself drew attention to the fact that he had not fully acquainted himself with this literature at the time. Only later, he says, did he realise the extent to which he broke with the ‘conventional’ understanding of risk on several key points (Beck, 2002: 125–26). In order to understand the nature of this break, it is therefore essential to understand the ‘conventional’ view. With this in mind, I will start by outlining some of the main features of the centuries-long history of risk in order to clarify how the concept ‘emerged’ historically and how it was dealt with prior to Beck’s theory of the risk society. This will help to illustrate what was so special about Beck’s understanding of risk (cf. Rasborg, 2020).

The word ‘risk’ comes from *risicare*—Italian for ‘to dare’ (Bernstein, 1996: 8). It is about having the courage to throw yourself into the new and unknown. In other words, risk is not a matter of fate, but choice. As the American economist and financial historian Peter L. Bernstein (1919–2009) says in his history of risk from ancient Greece until today, it is about ‘the actions we dare to take, which depend on how free we are to make choices’. According to this view, risk is a fundamental characteristic of our actions, and as such, ‘helps define what it means to be a human being’ (Bernstein, 1996: 8).

In the mathematical sense, risk is linked to the probability of a given event (Bernstein, 1996: 3–4). Probabilities are neither ‘positive’ nor

‘negative’ per se, but simply a measure of how sure we are that something will happen (Bernstein, 1996: 43). Mathematically, a given probability is always greater than 0 and less than 1. A probability of 0 is synonymous with the incident not occurring. A probability of 1 is synonymous with it definitely happening—at which point, it makes no sense to talk about risk (Giddens, 1999: 21–22). Probability is therefore a method of making rational assumptions about uncertainty (Arnoldi, 2009: 21). However, we usually associate the word risk with ‘unwanted’ events (Sennett, 1998: 82–83), for example, the probability of contracting cancer, of redundancy, of dying in a road traffic accident or plane crash. In other words, the modern understanding of the term refers to the calculated probability of an unwanted event occurring (Adams, 2001: 8; Arnoldi, 2009: 21). However, in a range of cases, risk also refers to something ‘desirable’, for example, thrill-seekers who actively seek excitement via gambling, fast cars, drugs, extreme sports and so on. In macroeconomic terms, the willingness to take risks can also be seen as positive, because it is a prerequisite for entrepreneurship, innovation and economic growth (Arnoldi, 2009: 138–57; Giddens, 1999: 21–22). As the outcomes of events associated with risk necessarily unfold over time, there is an inextricable link between risk and time. Risks are by definition future-oriented—they refer to outcomes that may or may not come to pass in an uncertain future: ‘Risk and time are opposite sides of the same coin, for if there were no tomorrow there would be no risk. Time transforms risk, and the nature of risk is shaped by the time horizon: the future is the playing field’ (Bernstein, 1996: 15).

Only with modernity did the desire to master or control risk truly prevail. It is a specifically modern attitude, one that represents a marked departure from the belief that our lives are ruled by fate or Providence, the outcomes of which are unavoidable:

The revolutionary idea that defines the boundary between modern times and the past is the mastery of risk: the notion that the future is more than a whim of the gods and that men and women are not passive before nature. Until human beings discovered a way across that boundary, the future was a mirror of the past or the murky domain of oracles and soothsayers who held a monopoly over knowledge of anticipated events. (Bernstein, 1996: 1, 11–12)

Accordingly, risk may be considered a fundamental dynamic in a future-oriented society, one in which the future is seen as territory to be

conquered or colonised. This is precisely the perspective that characterises modernity (Arnoldi, 2009: 22–23, 35; Giddens, 1999: 21–23; Hacking, 2006 [1975]: 18–20).

In general, however, risk was closely associated with various forms of gambling—simple bets, dice, roulette and so on—hence the need to consider probability. Significantly, it was thinking about gambling that led to the crucial breakthrough in probability theory. Prior to this, people placed bets and played games without any knowledge of the odds or any way to estimate the probability of winning and losing—they just took risks without any concept of risk management (Arnoldi, 2009: 28–30; Bernstein, 1996: 11). Shipping also played a key role in the history of risk. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the idea of risk gained increasing traction among European explorers and traders, who would refer to ‘entering uncharted waters’ (Arnoldi, 2009: 25; Giddens, 1999: 21–22).

Describing the advent of the modern perception of risk, Bernstein distinguishes between four crucial periods: (1) up to the thirteenth century; (2) the thirteenth to the eighteenth century; (3) the eighteenth to the early twentieth century; and (4) the start of the twentieth century to the present (Bernstein, 1996: vii–viii).

Until 1200, it was generally believed that life was governed by Providence. In other words, people took decisions without any real concept of risk:

In the medieval and ancient worlds, even in preliterate and peasant societies, people managed to make decisions, advance their interests, and carry on trade, but with no real understanding of risk or *the nature of decision-making*. Today, we rely less on superstition and tradition than people did in the past, not because we are more rational, but because our understanding of risk enables us to make decisions in a rational mode. (Bernstein, 1996: 3–4; cf. Giddens, 1999: 21–22)

A rational approach to risk based on probability theory is therefore a relatively recent innovation. According to the philosopher Ian Hacking, the modern concept of probability only emerged in the seventeenth century (Hacking, 2006 [1975]: 18–20). Despite being familiar with the concept of probability, the ancient Greeks did not venture far into the world of probability theory (Arnoldi, 2009: 25). According to Bernstein, this is partly explained by the fact that the ancient Greeks—like the Romans—depended on a number system based on the Greek alphabet, which made

it difficult to multiply, divide, add and subtract (Bernstein, 1996: 15–16, XXXI; Hacking, 2006 [1975]: 6). This obstacle was removed when the Hindu-Arabic numeral system we know today came to the West during the period 1000–1200. However, this alone was not enough to pave the way for a modern understanding of risk, in which chance was replaced with probability and a belief that the future can be predictable—and even, to some extent, controllable. Such an understanding was unthinkable without the realisation that we do not live our lives passively, as playthings in the hands of fate or God (Arnoldi, 2009: 25; Bernstein, 1996: 3, 20, XXX–XXXI).

One of the precursors to the modern understanding of risk is the work of the Italian mathematician Leonardo Pisano (1175–1250), better known as Fibonacci. In his book *Liber Abaci* from 1202, he demonstrates the Hindu-Arabic numerical system's superiority over the Hebrew, Greek and Roman systems (Bernstein, 1996: XXIII–XXIV).¹ While Fibonacci considered measurement the decisive factor in risk management, the book itself did not herald a real breakthrough for the modern understanding of probability and risk, because most people still believed that risk was a matter of the whims of nature (Bernstein, 1996: XXVIII). It was not until approximately 1300, the start of the Renaissance and later the Reformation, that the path was paved for the modern understanding—and mastery—of risk, which did away with notions of predestination and Providence. Mysticism gave way to science and logic, and the Catholic Church's dominance began to diminish, providing fertile soil for the emerging awareness that we have the power to determine our own future (Arnoldi, 2009: 26–28; Bernstein, 1996: 20–21). These factors, along with the introduction of the new number system, were essential prerequisites for the new mathematics of calculating risk. They prepared the ground for the concepts of computability and calculability, which were fundamental aspects of the 'Protestant work ethic'—which, according to the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), was a key driver in the emergence of modern capitalism (Weber, 1992 [1904/05]; cf. Bernstein, 1996: 20–21; Hacking, 2006 [1975]: 18–20).

The renunciation of medieval superstition during the Renaissance therefore led to a breakthrough in probability theory and made it possible to calculate risk. This was the period in which Columbus (1451–1506)

¹'Liber Abaci' means 'book of the abacus', which was the instrument used for calculations in those days (Bernstein, 1996: 20, XXIII–XXX).