

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Ulrich Beck**, *Twenty Observations on a World in Turmoil*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012, 162 pp., \$14.95 paper (978-0-7456-5397-6)

**B**y title, *Twenty Observations* would seem like casual reflections on contemporary events by an influential academic-pundit. But Ulrich Beck is trying to do more. Most of these essays were published in various European newspapers and magazines. This is only an academic sociology book in that it is written by a well-known sociologist. Nevertheless, we can learn something about public engagement as sociologists. In these essays — especially as they are collected into a surprisingly cohesive body — Beck attempts to alert us to “global domestic politics” as an important process in late modernity. Many of the emerging trends in the world today are simultaneously domestic and global.

Beck is well known for proposing that the global community (especially the Western world) has entered a new period of modernity characterized by reflexivity and perceived risk. These formulations of “reflexive modernization” and “risk society” make multiple appearances in this short and eminently readable collection of essays. They are muted, however, in favour of a new focus on the simultaneity of the global and domestic. In Beck’s hands, global domestic politics is the cosmopolitan vector of globalism. It is also the avenue for making sociology compelling. Sociology, he thinks, must escape the container of the nation-state in its understandings of contemporary society. As he puts it, “One thing is clear: the national outlook not only misunderstands this reality but it obscures how breathtakingly exciting sociology could become once again” (p. 162).

In kaleidoscopic fashion, the collection traverses a wide range of topics: climate change, nuclear power, economics, the European Union, immigration and transnationalism, terrorism, multiculturalism, religion, the university system, the global industry in organ transplantation, and onwards. To illustrate: in one essay Beck transitions from illegal immigration to biomedicine, and it makes sense. The drawback is that readers require knowledge of recent European events. This makes the book hard to use in undergraduate courses; it is best used for personal professional reading.

Global domestic politics is the diffusion of “us” into “them,” in which “the geographical, cultural, social and political separation between ‘native’ and ‘foreigner’ is *de facto* falling to pieces” (p. 145) with immense consequences. Europe faces this every day, and not just with Algerians in France and Roma in Germany. The global and domestic merge with Greece in a united Eurozone. They merge in ash from Icelandic volcanoes, raising the question of mobility in everyday life and becoming early warnings of a carbon-constrained world. Global domestic politics identifies how the “risk prevention war” (p. 20) in Afghanistan is intimate with the killing of Afghanistan-serving soldiers on London streets. Together the essays illustrate that global domestic politics is becoming increasingly useful as a depiction of the era; it is a rampant, spreading “wild” (not domesticated) reality, Beck asserts, while leaving readers to ponder how this is so.

However, we should worry about a Eurocentric/Western conceit in this postulation. While “globalization” reaches further into human lives in farther-flung places than ever before, not everyone is becoming cosmopolitan. Beck may be aware of this. In the chapter “Without Buddha I could not be Christian” (the title is a quote from theologian Paul Knitter) he lists “religion” as a Western concept — primarily because it is presented exclusively in belief-based terms in the old-Christian world (historic Christendom), but also because elsewhere there is more fluidity and less segregation between the personal/private and the public as faith is practiced. Similarly, he insists current sociological theory is losing its relevance (p. 126) because there is so little attempt to escape the distortions of sociologists’ own lived experiences (typically Eurocentric, rationalistic, and thoroughly “modern”); the result, Beck argues, is that we miss what is going on in much of the rest of the world.

*Twenty Observations* is an example of an engaged sociologist, using his signal concepts to record reaction to events from 2009–2011. It’s unfortunate that the essays do not indicate where they were published (they do record month and year). He says, in the end, that it is up to readers to decide how to separate the transitory from the enduring in these twenty reflections. Perhaps the very engagement with the domestic implies that the everyday endures, albeit in ever-changing forms amidst the politics of the global.

Beck is one of the most influential sociological theorists alive today, and not just in the academic sphere. He was appointed to the German commission that eventually recommended closure of Germany’s nuclear power plants, in part based on his powerful thesis of contemporary conditions of risk. In contrast, no social scientist (excluding economists) has yet been on any of the many panels considering the Alberta oil sands.

England has its Giddens, Germany has Beck, France had Bourdieu. Who are Canadian sociologists in the public eye? In an era in which the Prime Minister of Canada insists we should not “commit sociology,” Beck shows that elsewhere they are visibly doing so. Sociology here should be so nimble.

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