

Risk society and Marxism: Beyond simple antagonism

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Abstract

Moving beyond Beck's explicit opposition to Marx's understanding of society, this paper proposes to explore some of the deeper commonalities between Marxism and Beck's theory of risk society. Rather than remaining at the level of propositional claims about society, at which Marx and Beck are opposed in several important ways, this paper proposes to analyse these theories in terms of their key commonalities in the problem situations they address. In particular, this paper identifies how both of these theories explore the implications of the development of productive forces and the resulting humanisation of nature in the context of widespread social estrangement. This paper then identifies key commonalities in the *structure* of the theoretical solutions that each theory employs to address their commonly held problem situation. In this way, this paper rethinks the relationship between Beck and Marx, as well as suggesting alternative ways of re-appropriating classical social theory.

Keywords: Karl Marx; Ulrich Beck; capitalism; risk society; risk; class; forces of production and destruction; humanisation of nature; *problématique*.

The relationship between Ulrich Beck's theory of risk society and Marxism ostensibly is one of antagonism. In quite definitive terms, Beck explicitly rejected the relevance of Marx's work to contemporary society. Highlighting how the theory of the risk society is opposed to Marxist analyses of contemporary society, Beck declares that: 'With the end of the

predominance of Marxian theory, the century long petrification among Europe's intellectuals has been lifted. The father figure is dead. In fact, only now can the critique of society get its breath back and see more clearly' (Beck, 1999: 79). Marxist approaches have returned the favour, ranging between critique (Brand and Görg, 2001; Lacy, 2002; Swyngedouw, 2007) to ignoring Beck's work and his 'political economy of risk'.

Reasons for such antagonism are understandable; behind Beck's headline rejection of Marx, and the reciprocal Marxian critique, there are several fundamental differences in their accounts of social life. Marx's central structuring force of social and material life, class, is rejected *en bloc* by Beck (1992a, 2009; Beck and Willms, 2004). Beck argues rather that it is risk that serves as the key site of social, political, and material change (Beck, 1992a, 1999, 2009, 2013b). As such, it might be concluded that in terms of their analysis of contemporary society, Marx and Beck's work are fundamentally opposed.

However, this paper proposes to move beyond this explicit opposition between Beck's and Marx's claims about the fundamental structuring forces in society to identify some important underlying similarities in their work.¹ Stated most boldly, it can be said that, in Beck's theory of risk society, risk occupies the same *structural position* that class occupies in Marx's historical materialism. Consequently, while Beck is unquestionably not a neo-Marxist in terms of his propositional claims about contemporary society or the master concepts he uses to analyse the fundamental sources of social structuration, he may, in fact, be considered a neo-Marxist at the level of the *structure* of the models that he employs to analyse society. This structural similarity of their approaches is moreover manifested in another fundamental similarity, their engagement with many of the same core *problématiques* (or problem situations) in analysing society. These common points of engagement include the problems arising from: the dynamics of the humanisation of nature; increasing instrumental control over social and material life; the revolutionary development of the forces

of production; the centrality of estrangement in contemporary society; the power of genuine democratic control over social life to resolve these contradictions, and the need for the development of a collective social agent that can overcome this estrangement through general democratic control. While each of these two theorists understands the implications of these social processes in quite different ways, focusing on the centrality of risk or class respectively, this paper argues that there are nevertheless, important similarities in terms of the structures of their theories and in terms of the key problem situations each of them addresses.

Identifying some of these key points of commonality between Marx and Beck provides several benefits for understanding Beck's theory of risk and Marx's work. As this paper will show, analysing Beck's work through his powerful debt to Marx highlights both strengths and weaknesses in Beck's work. Firstly, by looking at Beck's theory of risk society through the prism of Marx's historical materialism, and its core explanatory and emancipatory tasks, it is possible to better understand some of Beck's theoretical and empirical conclusions, which may seem to be less motivated without these theoretical aims in mind. Likewise, it provides a sharper appreciation of how Beck reproduces some of the key failings that have been attributed to Marx's work, including his totalisation of risk corresponding to Marx's totalisation of class (Jay, 1984; Sayer, 1995), and how, similarly to Marx, Beck's theory of risk society tends to lack an adequate account of the diverse bases of political conflict. Additionally, it may be possible to discern how both of these important thinkers provide different insights into various contemporary issues, particularly the implications of the contemporary humanisation of nature associated with the massive increase in the forces of production in the face of contemporary alienation, and of one-sided democratic control over social life. Lastly, in terms of what can be learned about how to pursue social theory, this paper suggests that we should think not just in terms of common

propositional claims or even similar concepts in identifying relations between theories; rather, thinking in terms of underlying problem situations and the structures of the models employed to address these questions can illuminate key relations between theories that are opaque if only analysed at the level of claims about how society works and ought to work.

This paper proceeds in five steps. Firstly, Marx and Beck's theories are briefly introduced and some of the key conflicts between them at the level of propositional claims about society are highlighted. Secondly, an analysis of Marx's work is developed that identifies a set of core problem situations of Marx's work. Thirdly, an analysis of Beck's work is elaborated that shows that his theory of risk society employs a similar set of core problem situations to Marx's work. The different ways in which these respective thinkers analyse these problem situations is then discussed in the fourth section. Lastly, despite their differing analyses of the problems situations, certain core structural similarities of their solutions to these problems are then identified, thus suggesting that Beck and Marx's work have substantive affinities, despite their important differences.

Opposing propositional claims about society

In seeking to explore the extent of the relationship between Beck's theory of risk society and Marxism, it is necessary to identify some of the key threads of Marxism so as to better evaluate the ways in which Beck is and is not a (neo-)Marxist. This in itself no easy task, as in addition to the richness of Marx's work, there are even considered to be many types of Marx and Marxisms. 'Early Marx' and 'Late Marx', 'humanist Marx' and 'structural Marx', 'classical Marxism' and 'Western Marxism' are common points of dispute (see Althusser and Balibar, 1970; Anderson, 1976), suggesting that no one definitive account of Marxism is possible. Simply put, the diversity of threads in Marxism appears in some sense ineradicable. Despite this, it is still possible to identify some key characteristics of Marxism which have

strong foundations in Marx's work. These characteristics include the theorisation of capitalism as a 'total society', which functions as society's defining feature,² the centrality of class relations and class conflict, and the defence of the ultimate goal as the social ownership of the means of production (see *inter alia* Bottomore, 1985).

These key elements clearly bring out the conflict with Beck's theory of risk society at the level of propositional claims of how contemporary society functions. Regarding the first discussed point – Marx's focus on capitalism as the defining feature of society – the conflict with Beck's work is particularly clear. The concept of 'capitalism' features little if at all in Beck's work (Rustin, 1994).³ Beck does provide a theory of the production of risks in contemporary society in his classic work, *Risk Society* (1992a [1986]); however, his core concepts in analysing the production of risks – science, technology, and industry – do not make direct reference to capitalism (Beck, 1989, 1992a, 1995[1988]). In the early twenty-first century it may seem incomprehensible to leave 'capitalism' out of an analysis of science, technology, and industry, but the year that *Risk Society* came out in German, 1986, was also the year that the Chernobyl disaster occurred, which became in turn, a key paradigm through which to analyse the risks associated with this new stage of modernity (Beck, 1987, 1992b, 1995[1988]). Though the nuclear threat generated by Chernobyl clearly involved advanced science, technology, and industry, it occurred in a communist, not a capitalist, state, and hence it was theorised in terms of advanced modernity rather than in terms of capitalism by Beck (Beck, 1987).

While Beck tends to ignore 'capitalism', his relation to another of Marx's core concepts, 'class', suggests even less of a fruitful relationship between the theory of risk society and Marx's work. Throughout his work, Beck has consistently rejected the importance of class to the processes associated with risk society (Beck, 1992a, 1995, 2006b, 2009; Beck and Willms, 2004). In *Risk Society* (1992a), Beck explicitly rejects the relevance

of class to risk society arguing that the growing catastrophic nature of these new risks tends to undermine the importance of previous class inequalities. As Beck quips, in the end, ‘poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic’ (Beck, 1992a: 36). In the shift from a political economy focused on goods to one focused on risks, class inequalities become displaced from their previous centrality in determining life-chances.

While Beck’s thesis of the ‘democratic’ nature of the distribution of risks has shifted over time (see Beck, 2010, 2013c) he has also employed other supporting arguments to reject class. His individualisation thesis centred on the rejection of previous collective forms of social groups, such as class (Beck, 1992a; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). The result of these individualisation processes is a ‘capitalism *without* classes’ in which social inequality is increasingly individualised (Beck, 1992a: 88). In this way, individualisation undermines the importance of classes to identity and cultural life, and saps its relevance to political life and collective conflict over how life should be organised. The continued fundamental explicit opposition between Marxism and Beck’s theory of risk society regarding the driving force of contemporary society is made clear in a paper published twenty years after *Risk Society*, where Beck definitively declares that ‘risk exposure is *replacing* class as the principal inequality of modern society’ (Beck, 2006b: 333, emphasis added).

For Marx, contradictions emerging from the capitalist mode of production – in which the relations of production are privately owned by the few – need to be resolved by social ownership of the means of production (Kolakowski, 2005[1978]: 1208). For Beck, however, given his general lack of discussion of capitalism in the core texts that have articulated the ‘risk society thesis’ (Beck, 1992a, 1995, 1999, 2009, 2013a) and his rejection of class, the solution to the problems of the contemporary risk society are not even addressed in economic terms, and the question of the private ownership of the means of production is not even broached. As with the key concepts of Marx’s discussed above, there is little to suggest that

Beck can be considered in any way a neo-Marxist. If only to further reinforce the point, it can be pointed out that while Kolakowski and Hampshire (1974) list a total of *twelve* key characteristics of Marxist socialism, not a single one of these would apply to Beck's 'risk society thesis' or the normative conclusions Beck generates from this theory.

However, this paper suggests that, once we move beyond an understanding of theory as a series of propositional claims, to the underlying level of the *problématique*, analysing the *structure* of the models employed to answer these questions (see Jameson, 1972), reveals important affinities between Beck's theory of risk society and Marx's thought. The next section will further develop this analysis of the relationship between Beck and Marx by aiming to identify a common set of key problem situations that Marx's thought addresses.

Marxism's core problem situations

As mentioned above there are many different threads in Marx's work; consequently, any list of the key *problématiques* of Marx's work will emphasise some elements and neglect others, especially as it is the case that most reconstructions of Marx's work focus on his key concepts and his theoretical claims about society rather than isolating his underlying *problématiques*. Moreover, as discussions in the philosophy of science have highlighted, proving the existence of something (such as a fundamental *problématique*) is much more straightforward and much less epistemologically problematic than establishing a negative existence statement (i.e. that there are not any black swans or, in this case, any other fundamental *problématiques*) (see Popper, 1959). Considering and attempting to reject the other candidates for possible fundamental *problématiques* would be a tiresome task, and could still not be considered definitive because the number of other possible candidates is infinite. Moreover, given the complexity of Marx's work, his critical engagement with three different fundamental areas of study: British political economy, French socialism, and German Idealism (Lichtheim, 1961),

and the evolution of thought and emphasis in Marx's work over time it is not clear that any one definitive problem situation for Marx's work could be identified, which could somehow nest or reduce all of his different concerns into one single problem. On the other hand, it should be added that while the richness of Marx's work defies a definitive account, its aspiration to totality does lend itself to systematic analysis of its key elements and *problématiques*. Exploring Marx's *problématiques* even in a fallible and provisional way can aid in advancing knowledge of the ramifications of Marxism throughout contemporary social theory in new and, perhaps, unexpected ways.

The development of the forces of production and the estranged humanisation of nature

One of the core elements of Marx's theorisation of his materialist approach to history is his understanding of historical development as the increasing humanisation of nature. In highlighting this theme, Marx declares that 'the bee, the beaver, the ant, etc....produces only themselves, while man reproduces the whole of nature' (Marx, 1975[1844]: 329). For Marx, this process of the humanisation of nature is a highly historical and dialectical process, in which there is both 'the creation of man through human labour, and the development of nature for man' (Marx, 1975[1844]: 357; see also Ollman, 1971: 101-103). The humanisation of nature ties into his conception of *species-being* and the special capacities for flourishing (and also for distortion of these capacities) that human beings have:

'It is therefore in his fashioning of the objective that man really proves himself to be a *species-being*. Such production is his active species-life. Through it nature appears as *his* work and his reality. The object of labour is therefore the *objectification of the species-life of man*: for man reproduces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created' (Marx, 1975[1844]: 329).

For Marx communism is the resolution of previous antinomies between humanism and naturalism through the development of a humanised nature in which even nature becomes 'a *social* object for him' (Marx, 1975[1844]: 352). In this way, Marx considered the 'entire

movement of history...the *actual* act of creation of communism' (Marx, 1975[1844]: 348) in which through the humanisation of nature 'man consciously creates himself in nature' (Ollman, 1971: 227).

For Marx the increasing humanisation of nature is developed by human labouring on the natural world, which proceeds in lock-step with the development of the forces of production. Through the development of both technical means of production and scientific knowledge as devoted to industry, the incredible opportunities, and possible damages of contemporary powers of production have been realised: 'natural science has intervened and transformed human life all the more *practically* through industry and has prepared the conditions for human emancipation, however much its immediate effect was to complete the process of dehumanization' (Marx, 1975[1844]: 355). As this quote suggests, while there is potential for the process of the humanisation of nature to realise the full unfolding of the capacities of human society in communism, the current stage of the humanisation of nature is far from benign. Within existing property relations, the humanisation of nature through the externalisation of human capacities and skills onto the external world, which in turn reshapes human capacities, is also a process of estrangement, in which human beings' own creations are alienated from their control:

The externalization of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien (Marx, 1975[1844]: 325).

As Marx points out in the *1844 Manuscripts*, in so far as the object of production is taken away from human beings, one's labour is estranged from oneself. It is a product that one creates, but then loses control of and which actually comes to dominate oneself (Marx, 1975[1844]: 329). As manifested in the capitalist mode of production, past labour (capital)

comes to dominate living labour, thus leading to exploitation and class domination (Marx, [1867]1976; see also Fine and Saad-Filho, 2010: 18, 27-34).

As the analysis above suggests, the humanisation of nature as enabled by the development of the forces of production and driven by estranged labour is a, if not the, fundamental social problem for Marx. It is both the cause of contemporary suffering and contradictions *and* the creation of immense opportunities to realise a truly human and free life. Consequently, a core *problématique* of Marx's work is to diagnose: *what historical problems are created by the increasing development of the forces of production and its associated humanisation of nature in the context of widespread estrangement?* Building upon this *problématique*, a second associated core problem situation is: *what potentialities exist within contemporary society to resolve these contradictions and to advance the conditions of human society?* Focusing on this pair of interrelated *problématiques* of Marx's work, the next section explores Beck's theory of risk society and the relation of Beck's core problem situation to Marx's.

Beck's risk society's core problem situation

Ulrich Beck's impetus in writing *Risk Society* (1992a) was to identify a new emerging epoch, which he calls 'risk society'. This risk society is a new phase of modernity in contrast to 'first modernity' which was based on 'nation-state societies' and characterised by 'collective patterns of life, progress and controllability, full employment and exploitation of nature' (Beck, 1999: 2). This greater rational control in the 'first modernity' (which Beck understands in terms of Weberian instrumental reason) over one's environment led to a society dominated by the distribution of goods (Beck, 1999: 8). However, the growing technological power of society through the success of rationalisation and control over nature comes to undermine the basis of Weberian rationalisation because, *'Along with the growing*

capacity of technical options [Zweckrationalität] grows the incalculability of their consequences' (Beck, 1992a: 22). In addition to using 'risk society' to refer to this period, Beck identifies the epoch as a shift to a 'reflexive' modernity that constitutes a self-confrontation with the latent side-effects of social action that manifest themselves as risks (Beck, 1999: 8, 73). As such, risk society is an age of increasing possibilities of disasters: it is '[l]iving in an age of side-effects', in which our basic economic, political, and social processes incessantly spawn new risks (Beck, 1999: 13). The types of risks that are produced from this process of 'reflexive modernisation' include: climate change, smog, nuclear radioactivity, toxicity of food, widespread genetic modification, and global financial crises (Beck, 1992a: 22; Beck, 1999: 111).

More recently, Beck has further developed his theorisation of risk society into an analysis of globalisation. Beck argues that, 'Risk society, fully thought through, means world risk society. For its axial principle, its challenges, are dangers produced by civilization *which cannot be socially delimited in either time or space*' (Beck, 1999: 19, emphasis added). From this analysis of risk society as a world risk society, in which it is impossible to solve the problems of socially produced risks in isolation from the rest of the world, Beck has increasingly shifted towards a cosmopolitan turn in his more recent work, arguing that we are currently occupying 'a world of global interdependence risks' (Beck, 2006a: 48). As such, Beck seeks to theorise contemporary processes of cosmopolitanisation as generally occurring as an 'unintended and coerced side effect' of the globalisation of the processes identified by the theory of risk society, which in turn generate a '*world risk society*' (Beck, 2006a: 33-4, emphasis added).

From this brief outline of Beck's theorisation of risk society, it is clear that the claims made about society, in particular the shift away from *goods*, and the centrality of risks are a major departure point from Marx's account of capitalist society. However, in looking at the

specific *problématique* that Beck addresses in coming to the risk society, there is a much deeper affinity with Marx's work. For Beck, the shift to a risk society is driven by a novel hybridisation of society and nature. Beck indicates that we are now experiencing 'a historically unparalleled and so far completely uncomprehended social and political dynamic' in which we are now experiencing '*the end of the antithesis between nature and society*' (Beck, 1992a: 80). This humanisation of nature (or as Giddens called it 'socialised nature' (Giddens, 1990: 127)⁴) means 'that nature can no longer be understood *outside* of society, or society *outside of nature*' (Beck, 1992a: 80). It is the terms of this humanisation of nature that create a fundamental problem for contemporary risk society. For Beck, this humanisation of nature is driven by contemporary 'productive forces', that is science and industry, which are the '*executors of the generalized social claim to the mastery of nature*' (Beck, 1992a: 81; see also Beck, 1989: 87).

As discussed above, Marx's analysis focuses on how the estranged from social control humanisation of nature is driven by the increasing power of the 'means of production'. On a point of significant similarity, Beck highlights how risk society is driven by the estrangement of the means of production, particularly science, from social control. Beck argues that 'under the conditions of a societalized nature, the natural and engineering sciences *have become a branch office of politics, ethics, business and judicial practice in the garb of numbers*' (Beck, 1992a: 82). This situation has become untenable in the risk society because 'the space for scientific research is getting narrower and narrower because of the *threatening potential of the forces of production*' (Beck, 1989: 92, emphasis added). In this way science and industry develop the ability to legislate for society as a whole, despite not being democratically directed: 'The division of labour thus leaves the industries with the primary decision-making power but *without* responsibility for side effects, while politics is assigned the task of democratically legitimating decisions it has *not* taken and "cushioning" technology's side

effects' (Beck, 1992a: 213). As with Marx, it is the contradictions and the opportunities emerging out of these conditions that are core for Beck's thought. Hence, it may be concluded that, similarly to Marx, a fundamental *problématique* for Beck is: *what historical problems are created by the increasing development of estranged forces of production and its associated humanisation of nature?* Following upon this point, it is then asked: *what potentialities exist within contemporary society to resolve these contradictions and to advance the conditions of human society?*

Differing analyses of their common problem situation

There may be some artificiality in distinguishing the *problem situations* of a theorist from his or her theoretical *answers* and accounts of society, because, amongst other reasons, commonality of the types of questions asked and their centrality of importance will already presuppose some commonality of analysis.⁵ Nevertheless, in so far as we can differentiate the extent of the contribution to social thought of the formulation of a problem situation (such as the durable impact of Hobbes's delineation of the problem of authority, political obligation, and social order) from the impact of a thinker's solution to these problems (such as the much more limited impact of Hobbes's proposal for the necessity of a Leviathan),⁶ then exploring the relations between *problématiques* of different thinkers can be substantiated as a method of analysing social theories.

In looking at their respective analyses or answers to their *problématiques*, there are definite differences between Marx and Beck. For Marx, the contemporary estrangement of control over the means of production leads to the waste of human life and productive resources and through this process of estrangement, class domination and exploitation.⁷ Through control of the means of production, one group, who constitute the minority, are able to exert control over productive life, and through this power, they exercise control over

political and social life more generally. Moreover, this private appropriation of a social power, the productive power of the means of production as enabled by social knowledge and the co-operation associated with the social division of labour,⁸ is also extremely wasteful because the social relations of production associated with bourgeois ownership in capitalism are contrary to the productive potential of the forces of production. Private wealth and private demand created by the existing social relations of production can no longer respond to the immense productive capabilities of the forces of production; consequently, the result is constant economic crises, in which because of the narrowness of the relations of production, the productive power of capital and labour lay idle, wasting away (Marx, 1959[1894], 1978[1884]; see also Fine and Saad-Filho, 2010). Moreover, even when labour is deployed, the narrowness of control and of the goal of capitalist production in aiming at exchange-value entail that the true potentiality for contemporary productive forces to create freedom from want and to labour as creation is completely wasted. In this vein, the functioning of the capitalist mode of production is ‘supplemented by complete idleness of a stratum of society. A definite quantity of surplus-labour is required...by the necessary and progressive expansion of the process of reproduction...which is called accumulation from the viewpoint of the capitalist’ (Marx, 1959[1894]: 819).

Beck, on the other hand, develops a different analysis of the implications of the problem situation of the contemporary humanisation of nature driven by the development of the estranged productive forces of science and industry. For Beck, it is not class inequalities that emerge from the estrangement of the ‘productive forces’ in this new stage of modernity. In fact, as mentioned above, he has argued that the ‘democratic’ nature of these new risks, which are increasingly difficult to escape from, are reducing the importance of ‘social differences and barriers’ (Beck, 1989: 92). For Beck, a new fundamental relationship between nature and society emerges in which there is not a mutual dialectic of rational human

intervention by society and the beneficial reshaping of nature (as with Marx's discussion of the objectification of the human senses in nature (Marx, 1975[1844]: 353)), but rather an undermining of the ability to control nature. While Marx and Weber may have previously been correct that increased instrumental reason provided greater control over nature, Beck argues that we are now in the midst of shifting to a new period of reflexive modernisation, in which the side-effects of instrumental reason are undermining this control. As Beck highlights, the greater the power of our interventions on nature, the greater the uncontrollability of their consequences (Beck, 1992a: 22). Likewise, as Beck emphasised recently, given that these side-effects are the product of instrumental reason, they cannot be controlled in turn by the further application of instrumental reason (Beck, 2009: 18-19). This 'reflexive' stage is driven by self-confrontation with the side-effects of our own attempts to control nature, which manifest themselves in increasingly global and possibly catastrophic risks (Beck, 1992a, 1999).

This leads to one of the fundamental contrasts for Beck, between the earlier phases of industrial modernity, in which the distribution of goods were the dominant social, political, and economic questions to be decided, and the risk society in which the distribution of *bads* are fundamental (Beck, 1999: 8). For Beck conflict over the distribution of the 'poisoned cake' creates a fundamental new dynamic (Beck, 1995: 129), and his argument that there is a fundamental competition of the logics of distribution of *goods* and the logic of distribution of *risks* (Beck, 1992a: 154), generates a fundamentally different analysis than Marx of their commonly held *problématique*. Moreover, Beck's analysis of the dynamic of globalisation focuses on how *risks* are creating a world risk society and how the interdependencies of these risks create the need for global co-operation (Beck, 2006a; Beck, 2012: 42-44). For Beck, private science and industry 'legislate' for society as a whole not by generating class

inequality and domination à la Marx, but rather by contributing to the creation of systemic risks that threaten our place in the world.

Differing analyses, yet similar structural models

As highlighted above, while utilizing a similar problem situation to the one that Marx outlined in the context of nineteenth century capitalism, Beck provides a very different interpretation of the implications of this *problématique*; nevertheless, their similarities do not simply rest at the level of common *problématiques*. They also exhibit several structural similarities in their theoretical claims made about social life and in their normative claims. In particular, while they each have different ‘master concepts’ (Beck, 2013b), the *structural position* in their theory for these placeholders are very similar. For Marx, *class* is the fundamental structuring factor in society; it is both the problem and the solution to contemporary contradictions. For Beck, it is *risk* that is the fundamental structuring factor in society; likewise, it is both the problem and the solution to contemporary contradictions.⁹ It is the inequalities and destructiveness emerging from capitalist class relations that need to be addressed for Marx. Likewise, for Beck, it is the destructiveness from contemporary risk that needs to be addressed. Both Marx (Jay, 1984; Sayer, 1995) and Beck (Dean, 1999: 181-2; Rasborg, 2012: 10) tend to totalise their master concept, conceiving of class or, alternatively, of risk as *the* fundamental structuring social fact, thus tending to neglect other aspects of life that are not based on class or risk respectively. Beck himself has made the analogous position of risk more explicit in his recent treatment of risk declaring that: ‘What “relations of production” in capitalist society represented for Karl Marx, “relations of definition” represent for risk society’ (Beck, 2009a: 31-2).

In addition to the similarity of the structural position of their key master concepts, they also exhibit significant similarities in their solutions to the problems arising from the

humanisation of nature driven by estranged productive forces. While for Marx, the problem is one of the means of production and for Beck the 'means of destruction',¹⁰ their respective solutions are extremely similar: the reappropriation of social control over these 'productive forces'. For Marx this involves social ownership and control of the productive decisions made with the means of production while for Beck this involves a reappropriation of public control over how science and industry creates risks through 'technical details': 'As poisoned eggs, wine, steaks, mushrooms or furniture, as well as explosions in nuclear or chemical plants demonstrate' recognition of these risks leads to a new social order in which 'The limits of specialized responsibility fall....The public gets a say in technical details' (Beck, 1992a: 76). For Beck techno-economic action must not be any longer allowed the 'accumulated privileges to create *faits accomplis*' (Beck, 1992a: 234). Alternatively, what needs to be realised is democratic control of science, through what he calls *reflexive scientisation*, and of industry through the ending of the shielding of techno-economic action from democratic control (Beck, 1992a: 158-65, 222-224).

In addition to similarities in their totalisation of one key factor in social life and their analysis of how the reversal of the estrangement relations within this specific domain ends the problems of estrangement more generally, they also have significant similarities in the structural position of the group they identify as the driver of this social change. This similarity is particularly notable given that the concrete groups that each identify for this task are very different. Looking at the structural location of these groups, both Marx and Beck aim to identify social groups with a universal social interest in overcoming the ills of this estrangement. For Marx, this universal group, the proletariat, is based on a *class* position (Lukács, 1968[1923]). Despite having a *specific* class position, they are also able to reach a position of realizing the universal interest. To achieve this theoretical goal of a universal class, they are considered a class that is not a class, a class whose sufferings are so great that

they both: i) have nothing to lose but their chains and hence are motivated to effect this change (Marx and Engels, 1996[1848]: 30), and ii) because their deprivation is so total, ‘in their emancipation is contained universal human emancipation’ (Marx, 1975[1844]: 333). They are able to realise this universal human emancipation because ‘the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production’ (Marx, 1975[1844]: 333).

Beck, on the other hand, identifies ‘subpolitics’ as the means of realizing the social re-appropriation of the productive (and destructive) forces in contemporary society. Subpolitics is a type of participatory politics that is outside of existing representative institutions (Beck, 1999). As with the proletariat, democratic citizens who are not a part of prevailing political institutions engage in subpolitics as a ‘direct politics’ (Beck, 1997: 6-7; see also Beck, 2013a: 16). In this way, as with Marx’s proletariat, those who engage in transformative action are not a part of political life, but because of this external characteristic have the ability to stand outside of the existing political divisions. In examples such as the massive ‘symbolic mass boycott’ of Shell after their decision to dispose of an old rig in the North Sea, Beck conceives of a ‘global subpolitics’ that can re-effect social control over science and industry without mediation of existing political institutions that reproduce existing social conflicts and divergent interests (Beck, 1996: 18-24). One might say in this vein that a key task of Beck’s theory of risk society, which is importantly similar to Marx’s, is the identification of the formation of a revolutionary subject that will manifest a general interest in overcoming existing estrangement without in turn imposing their own particular interest and ensuing estrangement of others from social power. As Marx declares, his revolutionary subject is ‘a class in civil society, which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society which has a universal character...and which does not claim a *particular redress*’ (Marx, 1983[1844]: 123). Beck’s highly individualised agent, who moves beyond existing class and status divisions (Beck, 1992a: 91-102), solves the problem of

finding a revolutionary subject that can overcome contemporary estrangement of the productive forces without likewise reintroducing their own power and partialities.

By finding a common interest in overcoming the catastrophes of world risk society and envisioning this subject outside of existing political institutions, Beck develops a subject of history that can address the problems arising from his core analytical concern, risk, without in turn creating other significant problems. Likewise, Marx is able to theoretically solve the problems arising from class relations emerging from productive relations without creating other fundamental problems by linking together the interest of one group (the proletariat) to the universal interest. Despite the richness of both of these bodies of thought, both of their specific programs for the transformation of social life are remarkably simple. Marx and Engels argued that ‘communists can sum up their theory in a single phrase: the transformation of private property’ (Marx and Engels, 1996[1848]: 13), while Beck’s body of works on risk society are primarily devoted to a single goal: the redressing of contemporary catastrophic socially created risks through more adequate democratic control of risk production (Beck, 1992a, 1995, 1999, 2009, 2013a). Whether their great theoretical focus and discipline in this regard is a great strength or a flaw (or most likely both), their theories are not oriented to the diversity of sources of social problems, but rather to one single fundamental problem. Moreover, for each of them, solving this single problem, in turn, ultimately solves a series of other fundamental social problems as well; this single transformation becomes in some sense ‘the solution of the riddle of history’ (see Marx, 1975[1844]: 348). For Marx changing control over the means of production ends domination, inequality, and alienation, thus leading to ‘the realm of freedom’ (Marx, 1959[1894]: 819-20; see also Marx, 1975[1844]: 352-8). Likewise, for Beck, solving the fundamental problem of risk solves the problems of society as a whole (which the term ‘risk society’ may suggest): ‘The other side of the uncertainty that the risk society brings upon

tormented humanity is the *opportunity* to find and activate the increase of equality, freedom and self-expression promised by modernity, *against* the limitations, the functional imperatives and fatalism of progress in industrial society' (Beck, 1992a: 232). Consequently, despite their differing analyses of contemporary society, and the minimal overlap in terms of thinkers who are sympathetic to both theoretical traditions, there are powerful similarities between Beck and Marx's work in terms of both the problem situations they have identified and the structures of their solutions to these problem situations.

Conclusions: Epistemological advantages of identifying these commonalities

Having analysed Marx and Beck's work to identify important similarities at the level of their *problématiques* and the *structure* of their theoretical solutions to these problems – despite their antagonism in terms of propositional claims made about how society functions – it might be briefly asked what are the advantages of identifying these similarities? Firstly, in itself there may be epistemological gains by identifying certain points of commonality between thinkers, both in understanding both of the respective theories (such that knowledge of Beck's risk society or Marx's historical materialism may aid in understanding the other's theories) and also from understanding certain key points of influence (which in this case, can only move from Marx to Beck). Given these key points of similarity, it is possible to interpret Beck as a neo-Marxist – though given his continuing fundamental differences with Marx regarding his 'master concepts' and his propositional claims regarding how society functions, Beck may be understood rather as a highly creative and unconventional neo-Marxist. Identifying these areas of structural similarity may be a significant advance in understanding contemporary social theory and the diverse nature of its roots and relations to classical social theory.

Moving beyond this initial point, there may also be advantages that not only aid in bringing to light aspects of a theory that were not clear before, but also in terms of making more explicable the motivations behind a particular theoretical position or strategy of a thinker. While speculating about the intentions of a theorist's intentions or reasons behind a specific theoretical position is a task fraught with difficulties, there still can be significant advantages to these types of rational reconstructions.¹¹ In this case, it may be helpful to highlight the ways in which Beck's work is indebted to Marx's, which can make more intelligible Beck's positions such as his use of a global subpolitics to solve environmental problems or his constant refusal to consider the importance of class to risk society.¹² For Beck, allowing for the centrality of both risk *and* class would undermine the possibility of a general solution to the problems of society through a single solution. The diversity of problems would likewise undermine the solution of a historical subject with a universal interest. This one-sidedness in Beck's work in some sense mirrors Marx's totalisation of class based in productive relations and the difficulty of integrating other social structuring factors into Marx's theory of historical materialism. In both cases allowing for the diversity of fundamental problems would threaten the structure of their solution to their identified social-material problems.

In addition to providing a better understanding of these respective theories and explicating some of their theoretical decisions, there is also the possibility of moving to a more developed critical position regarding these two theorists. Given the commonality of their problem situations and the structure of their solution to these problems, it is possible to deliver a more incisive critical relation between Marx and Beck. In particular, it might be argued that insofar as they both suffer from similar weaknesses, in particular their totalisation of one central factor in society, whether that be class or risk, and that they each provide important insight into different fundamental features of contemporary life, then there may be

some way of critically reworking each of these theories.¹³ In this way, it may be possible to identify how bringing together their respective insights into their common problem situations may better address contemporary society and nature relations, the estrangement and inequalities emerging from these relations, and how society may envision a way beyond these contradictions. While, this task can only be suggested, but not pursued, in the conclusion to this paper, the possibility of developing certain key points of mutual learning, without sacrificing the internal consistency and vibrancy of each of these theoretical frameworks may provide one fruitful departure point for moving beyond the existing mutual neglect between Marx's historical materialism and Beck's risk society. In this way, by exploring a plane of social theory beyond the level of agreement or disagreement on propositions about society, the study of the history of social theory may both open up new possibilities for re-appropriating classical social theory as well as suggesting novel paths for developing contemporary social theory.

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Notes

¹ Some of the key relationships between Beck's theories of individualisation and cosmopolitanisation and classical social theory have been recently discussed by one of

Beck's previous co-authors, Sznaider (2015). However, the relationship between Beck's theory of risk society and Marx's work is still unexplored in the existing literature.

² This is true despite the fact that while Marx commonly used the term 'capitalist mode of production', he did not use the term 'capitalism' before the late 1870s (see Bottomore, 1985: 3).

³ Though for an interesting exception, see Beck (1989: 89).

⁴ Giddens refers here to the original German version of *Risk Society*, *Risikogesellschaft*, which was published in 1986 (Giddens, 1990: 185).

⁵ Hacking (1982: 60) makes an interesting point about the amount of previous conceptual work that is required for something to be either 'true-or-false'. In this vein, addressing a similar *problématique* implies certain key similarities, whether they may be described as 'conceptual schemes', 'styles of reasoning' or 'worldviews'.

⁶ On this point, see Gardiner (2011).

⁷ '[I]n the society where the capitalist mode of production prevails, anarchy in the division of labour and despotism in the manufacturing division of labour mutually condition each other' (Marx, 1976[1867]: 477).

⁸ In capitalism, 'The productive power developed by the worker socially is the productive power of capital. The socially productive power of labour develops as a free gift to capital... Because this power costs capital nothing, while on the other hand it is not developed by the worker until his labour itself belongs to capital, it appears as a power with which capital possesses by its nature – a productive power that is inherent in capital' (Marx, 1976[1867]: 451).

⁹ As the discussion below shows, this equivalence of structural positions of class and risk includes both risk and class as a structural position – class position or risk position,

respectively – and the collective, political response to this structuring position – the proletariat or the subpolitical collective actor.

¹⁰ For an interesting discussion of the relation of Beck's work to Deleuze and Guaterri's conception of 'antiproduction' see Lazzarato (2012: 151-58)

¹¹ While Skinner's point about avoiding ascribing our own interests to a historical theory is an important regulative ideal in pursuing the history of thought (see Skinner 1969), the purposes of theory are many and there is no reason why the benefit to social understanding of a theory must be limited to the thinker's actual intentions in the specific context in which the theory was written.

¹² For critiques, see Scott (2000), Mythen (2005), Curran (2013).

¹³ Some possible connections between Marx and Beck, and ways of reworking their existing relationship, could also be explored through their respective relationship to Habermas, though to pursue this adequately would require a separate treatment.

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