

15 YEARS OF ‘RISK SOCIETY’– IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES FOR A GLOBALISING ECONOMY

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Only a few weeks before the disaster in Chernobyl, Ulrich Beck in 1986 published his book „Risikogesellschaft“ (Risk Society, published in English by Routledge in 1992), which had a major impact on the whole environmental debate. It has a specific relation to a number of issues which shape the agenda of the Greening of Industry Movement. Though the concept has met a quite ambiguous reception in the social sciences, it has had a major impact on the environmental politics.

The workshop attempts an over-all assessment of the concept 15 years after it entered the debate. It is designed as an interactive workshop, which tries to encourage a vivid scholarly discussion, based on two introductory papers.

The first paper will be given by Gavan McDonnell, who will give an outline of basic features of “Risk Society”, its reception in Social Sciences and Economics in general and the specific relevancy of the concept for the conference’s topic.

The second paper by Dirk Matten will tighten the focus specifically on the relevancy of “Risk Society” for industry in the age of globalisation. The societal orientation towards risk has changed the corporate environmental agenda significantly, bringing in both constraints and new business opportunities. The theme of the workshop pertains to the research agenda of the majority of environmental scholars. Therefore, we design the workshop as an interactive one, in order to open the floor for a vivid discussion and exchange of views and thus profiting from the specific occasion of having 300 scholars of the field together at one place at the GINET 2001 meeting.

Consequently, the two scene-setting papers will present and argue various theses, providing a basis and guidelines for discussion. Major aspects will cover the following:

- ↳ The concept of “Risk Society” highlights the element of uncertainty as a dominant aspect of environmental impacts of industry. Most of the current environmental issues, like GM food, nuclear power, food safety (BSE, CJD), ozone depletion etc. have in common that uncertainty is at the core of the undesired side-effects.
- ↳ The concept of “Risk Society” already by definition stresses the global scope of environmental damages. Risks discard national borders and are in effect one of the key issues of globalisation. While the triade-based countries enjoy most of the world’s wealth, the produced risks affect especially the poorer countries in the third world and developing countries. This reshapes the role of large multinational actors, both from the corporate and NGO level, and puts them in search of new ways of dealing with global corporate environmental responsibility.
- ↳ The concept of “Risk Society” is based on the empirical evidence that public perception of risk matters more than “scientific” evidence of certain environmental problems. This puts corporate actors in demand for new ways of legitimising their actions.

- ↳ The concept of “Risk Society” unveiled significant deficits of western democracies in adequately dealing with environmental risk. The institutions of traditional democracies are geared to wealth distribution which, face to coping with risks, results in what Beck called “the organised irresponsibility”.
- ↳ The concept of “Risk Society” opens a specific focus on emerging markets: The production and allocation of environmental risk is a crucial element in the creation of certain new markets (market of waste management) and in the development and shape of many emerging markets (green products, markets for recycled goods, eco-leasing etc.).