

An Imaginary Dialogue on Modernity 2.2

Angelica Pofert and Natan Sznaier (sous la direction de) Ulrich Beck's kosmopolitisches Projekt Auf dem Weg in eine andere Soziologie (Festschrift in Honor of Ulrich Beck 60th birthday) Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden Baden, pp. 17-23 (2004).
Bruno Latour

He- I can't watch the news anymore, let's switch it off.

She- That reminds me of that guy, what's his name, the German sociologist, Becker.

He- You mean Howie Becker ? But he is American.

She- No, that famous sociologist, who writes best-sellers proving that we live in a more risky society than our ancestors the Cavemen. Quite mad.

He- Ah, you mean Beck not Becker, Ulrich Beck... but he is not saying that at all, this is stupid.

She- Oh yes he is, he has written *Risk Society*, now I remember. Risks everywhere, in our food, in our bed, in our car, in our office, in our factory... Creepy really. As if the sky were going to fall on our heads.

He- But it is falling on our heads...

She- See how you are ! You believe that crap about living dangerously ? Come on. Horror stories written by a German university professor ? A guy who must drive to work in Mercedes, in a country where they live forever with fat retirement pensions ? Would you say they live in a risk society ? Be serious.

He- But Beck is serious. He doesn't mean we run into more dangers, he means that we can't control them any more; that we no longer share the belief that we can fully control them.

She- But see, this is just another case of German irrationalism... we do control factories, nuclear plants, missiles, subways, long logistics chains and we do that very well, very consistently— apart from the little odd accident now and then...

He- Yaah, like Chernobyl.

She- Come on, you are not going to gloat endlessly over Chernobyl: those were Russian engineers, and Soviets at that. I am talking about really good engineers. Science, technology and management work, my dear, they work. Don't give me all that crap about an increase in risks. We have never lived under such accurately controlled organisations. To say the contrary is just plain old anti-science. I hate those German forest males, like your friend Heidegger, loathing modern technology while walking quietly in the Black Forest, eulogising jugs while spitting on steel Coca-Cola cans.

He- Beck is in Munich... Bavaria... and Heidegger is not a friend of mine at all... But you don't get it, it's not about risk as danger, its about control: there is no way to limit the extent to which one piece of technology implies all the others any longer. It's modernism which is finished, that's what he says, 'reflexive modernisation' he calls it.

She- Oulalah ! 'Modernism' no less, and it's 'finished' ?... That's grand theory indeed, very German, that's for sure. But you must be out of your mind ! While the whole world aspires to modernisation, to air-conditioning, education, democracy, market economics, health insurance, clean water? More modernism, more, my dear, not less.

He- I did not know you were really that much of an unrepentant, unreconstructed modernist. I would have thought women would be more sensitive to this tidal change...

She- Since when has the adjective 'modernist' become a stain? And what do 'women' have to do with this ? Do you imagine that I am going to veil myself ? To abandon the task of emancipation ? You men are so funny: now that we share rationalism with you, you want to suddenly withdraw it from us and go back to the time of the Cave, to the good old days of wife-beaters...

He- No, dearest, I just want to be a tad more sensitive to the limits of modernism, that's all. Beck is rightly feeling that something is amiss in modernity, and he is not alone.

She- Alas, no, that's true, he is not alone, there is this other irrationalist in France. What's his name? He is named after a wine company. Oh, this one is a real anti-science guy: Latour, a catastrophe, he thinks we have never been modern. Fancy that. He takes 'rationalist' and 'modernist' as insults! I have heard it once, in a lecture, and couldn't make heads or tails of what he said.

He- Oh, that one is really spaced out, I'll grant you that, but they both have one thing right: modernism cannot continue along the same course.

She- You seem to have a weak spot for these guys who claim to be postmoderns, don't you ?

He- They are not postmoderns, or at least they would both adamantly deny they are.

She- Denial, denial... if they say modernism is finished, then they are 'after' modernism, and thus they are post, post, post, and that's the end of it.

He- Careful, dear, you are in danger of turning obnoxious... The question is how 'post' you are. Beck simply says that the 'second modernization' in which we have entered will be reflexive, that's all, in the sense that we can no longer ignore all what was left outside by the first modernisation, and which now comes back to us with a vengeance. We can no longer ignore, reject, externalize, leave behind.

She- Like what ?

He- You are so funny : like the environment, to begin with, like the after-effects of technology, like the third-world, like... all the ghosts left behind.

She- But all the modernists will agree with this, and they will all say as I do: we will take care of it, too, in due course, just give us time; if there is one thing not to do, that's to change track in mid course and abandon the calling of modernisation; if you do abruptly stop modernizing, then for sure, all that has been put aside by the 'first modernisation', as you say, will be abandoned for good. The 'second' modernisation is the first, simply amplified. More modern, not less, and certainly not 'post'. Modernism squared ! Modernism to the power of two ! If this is what Beck argues, then I am all for it.

He- I don't think that's what he says, no.

She- But you don't seem to be aware that if we, the educated, the wealthy, the rationalists, abandon the task of modernisation, you will play into the hands of all the reactionaries, the obscurantists, the archaics who

demand nothing other than to deliver us back to the hands of the Mullahs ! I don't want to be sent back home with a veil on my head in the name of 'reflexive modernisation' ! Rationalism and modernism is our only hope, especially now, especially with the religious fanatics at our door.

He- Heck, you speak like a Roman proconsul watching the Barbarians threatening to cross the Rhine!

She- But they are! And they do come from the other side of the Rhine... And you don't see the danger, occupied as you are with making pacts with the various tribes of 'pomos' out there. Without modernisation there is no future except the darkest past.

He- Is religion not a good case against you ? It was left aside as if it belonged to an archaic past and it's now very much in everyone's heart, it seems, even in yours, I would say. What do we do with it ? Keep denying its existence ?

She- I am not a religious person.

He- Oh yes you are ! There are many ways of being pious, my dearest, but anyway, that's not the point: you don't seem to realize that taking into account what modernism has forgotten requires a complete change of attitude. It's not modernism squared, it's modernism reanalyzed, cured of its hubris, rebuilt from top to bottom, defeated, burned to ashes. And maybe --yes, fine with me-- reborn like the Phoenix; that's what 'reflexive' means.

She- But this is much too dangerous, too risky ! It's really amusing, you always speak of risk but here is one that you and your Beck have overlooked : touch modernization and everything explodes... Apply your cherished 'principle of precaution', for God's sake, and don't tamper with our essential values.

He- Clever, even witty, but wrong : it's exactly the opposite : if you don't tamper with modernisation, risks increase exponentially. But you are right, touch modernisation and everything falls apart. Beck would agree, I think. And so would Latour : a certain idea of science, a certain idea of politics, a certain idea of God, a certain idea of time and progress, he calls that a Constitution, if I remember correctly, and there is one modernist Settlement, and certainly he would like to see it wrecked. Except that for him it has never been in effect, that's his twist. So it's easier to change course in the end : we simply have to recognize what

we have never stopped doing. Beck requires a complete conversion from unreflexive to reflexive; Latour requires simply the recognition of our anthropological roots.

She- 'Simply'? There is nothing simple in that. Anyway, Beck is enough for our plate. Please, leave this mad Frenchman aside.

He- I still think it's a plausible alternative. It all depends on how we stick to the metaphor of the Enlightenment.

She- Don't talk about the Enlightenment ! It sounds horrible in your mouth ; you wish to switch off the Lights. Back to the future. You are for the Dark Ages.

He- Don't be silly. For someone who claim to be a rationalist, you should be able to listen to an argument, no ? The question is not darkness versus light.

She- Is it not ? I think that's exactly what is at issue.

He- I disagree : we are all the children of the Enlightenment. So is Beck. So, I'd say, is Latour. It's the metaphor that differs. Sloterdijk calls it 'explicitation', bringing the implicit out.

She- Good Lord, are you going to wheel in all the irrationalists one after the other ? Now Sloterdijk, the arch-Heideggerian, a child of the Enlightenment ?!! You, as a man, don't seem to know too much about childbirth, do you ? You confuse the healthy children of the Enlightenment with their aborted runts...

He- Unfortunate metaphor, my dear, Sloterdijk knows a lot about giving birth and raising children, his entire philosophy is about those life-sustaining envelopes... don't play the macho there, it's not becoming on you... Wrong gender... After all, you might agree that there are many ways to play the Kantian metaphors of 'What is Aufklärung'. One is to oppose Light and Darkness, the Queen of Night way. The other is to say that the veils that we have unveiled, we wrap ourselves in them ever more deeply...

She- Veils ! I knew that's what was on your mind, you want me back shrouded into some Afghan burkhas... when we, the modernists as you call us, unveil something, it's to throw the appearances away, to destroy the false pretences, and to let the things, the objective things shine with their own light. That's what the Aufklärung is all about.

He- That's one reading, just one reading. Who are you to know what the Enlightenment was all about ? Sloterdijk is very precise on that...

She- Precise ? Sloterdijk ? A mere weaver of metaphors!

He- Weaving, that's his trade, yes, his true skill, exactly what is required for weaving veils and envelops... good metaphor ! Very Platonist too, if I may say. The Enlightenment is not simply a matter of bulbs and projectors and batteries, but also of layers, folds, plaits, explications, explication. But again, his point is that what has been made explicit, what was lying latent before, will remain with us forever and cannot be thrown aside and forgotten, that's what the Enlightenment is all about. The modernists have misunderstood their own achievements. Don't you see that we are more and more folded, wrapped, entangled in what we have unfolded ? Don't you see that the more explication we have produced, the more implicated we are ? Don't you see that the more things emerge from latency the more opaque and veiled and obscure they become ? Veil upon veil, fold upon fold ? Have you not noticed that modernism has become baroque again ?

She- I would have sworn that Deleuze would be next ! 'Le Pli'. *C'est tellement chic*. All of the obscurantists, one after the other, all aligned... how many have you left in store to dim the lights of Reason, capital R ?

He- I don't like the tone you give to the conversation... modernists are on the defensive, it seems ; they might become silly...

She- Or might become mean; yes, we will fight back, don't count on our graceful withdrawal.

He- There is a trend to be sure in the people I 'wheel in' as you say, but you are the one who doesn't seem to notice it : it's not obscurantism, it's just that it does not provide the same stark light that you had expected. For instance, science...

She- Don't speak of science, for God's sake, this is our territory, not yours !

He- I beg your pardon, Queen of Light, the sciences offer the best example of this new way we all have to wrap ourselves into their unfolding. The sciences are my territory too, everyone's territory nowadays, exactly what Beck, and Latour, and Sloterdijk, and Deleuze said : they add more and more folds, they generate more and more entities to be taken into account, they make entanglements even more intricate, even more interesting... Sciences have become baroque of late.

She- Wrong, completely wrong, they go straight.

He- Through very curved lines, though.

She- They explicate...

He- They implicate...

She- They unveil...

He- And add veil upon veil...

She- They unfold...

He- Yes, yes, and we fold ourselves in their unfolding, that's what I am saying.

She- You play with words.

He- And you forget which metaphors your dreams of clarity and control are woven from.

She- That's literature ! I have facts on my side.

He- Facts have betrayed you, dearest, quite a long time ago, the modernist facts, in case you have not noticed, those who were supposed to simplify matters, look at them now, they are everywhere complicating states of affairs. Read the newspapers, simply read.

She- You are so exasperating : I am not talking about newspapers and journalism, I am talking about scientifically proven matters of fact.

He- But those two are entangled now, as much as the 'public proofs' of Mr Hussein's 'weapon of mass destruction'.

She- That's politics, that's not science.

He- No, its a perfect model for the new difficulty of proving, at the scale of the planet, for billions of people, phenomena which are politico-scientific.

She- Wait a bit more, even in that mixed up case, we will know for sure, soon.

He- Maybe, but what we will eventually know will not simplify the state of affairs any longer, that's my point, it won't stop the discussion, it won't reduce the complexity of the entanglement.

She- This is your line, I got it, mine is different : more and more facts will do the trick.

He- Tricks ? Who spoke of tricks ? We are not dealing in magic here, it's our future that is at stake.

She- Be decent, don't talk of our future, you have abandoned the task of the future : without modernisation, there is no future anymore, no collective future, at any rate.

He- Gosh, I didn't realize before this discussion how much we disagreed. I believe exactly the opposite : there is a common future only if we stop behaving as we did during the first modernization.

She- But don't you realize that becoming truly modern is the only hope that could unify the Earth from East to West, North to South, what makes us able to talk to Americans, what makes us Europeans.

- He- I'm not sure I want to be able to talk to Americans for a while... As for being European, well, I am not sure.
- She- What ? That's where the Enlightenment was invented, you won't deny that, would you ?
- He- No, but maybe that's where it should be disinvented... or, more exactly, recalled ?
- She- Recalling the Enlightenment ! Great idea. Is this a new lunacy of yours ?
"Sorry folks, we invaded you, we invented imperialism, and capitalism, and democracy, we unified the planet under one geography, one geology, one history, one economics... oops, we made a few mistakes, forget about us, we recall our inventions, wrong solution, a thousand apologies, here is our new great idea !" What's it called, by the way, your great new idea ? 'Reflexive modernisation', 'modernity 2.3', incompatible with everything before OS-Mod or OS-Pomo. What are you concocting, mister wise guy, a brand new Operating System ?
- He- You are making fun of me now, this was a serious discussion.
- She- But that's because you are ridiculous. How would one 'disinvent' modernity ? We are all in the same boat now ; it might have been a mistake, but now we have to carry it forward, all the way to the bitter end. Too late for recall, I am afraid.
- He- I don't feel we are all in the same boat anymore. Is Mr. bin Laden in the same boat as Mr. Rumsfeld ? Are Americans in the same boat as Europeans ? I see a whole fleet of various ships going in all sort of directions, many sinking.
- She- Yeah, and the bodies of those unfortunate migrants desperate to reach our coasts, those who are washed up on our beaches every night by the tide, have they drowned for the wrong cause, the mirage of modernity ?
- He- Modernity is not a mirage.
- She- See ? That's just what I'm saying.
- He- Its's an invention that is in great need of complete rethinking. It's the responsibility of Europeans to do that overhaul. The US might never do it, but it's their problem, no longer ours. All of the neocons and cultural warriors are saying the same thing : our geopolitical interests no longer converge. Good. How happy I am that there is no longer any West : what a relief... We don't go West any more.
- She- There is no pilot, none in the crew has the slightest clue of where we are going, the captain has thrown the only compass overboard, and he

- thinks it's a great achievement ! That the ship will trace her course better... I was right, abandoning the task of modernisation is pure folly.
- He- But I am not abandoning anything, nor does Beck, this is what you don't want to hear, those guys that you seem to dislike so much have nothing to do with postmodernists : redoing something is not the same as discarding it.
- She- The sad truth is that men have abandoned rationalism just when women had finally gained access to it.
- He- No, really ? Have you become a feminist of late ?
- She- By the way, do you know that I was offered a job in the States ?
- He- Good for you. Where ?
- She- Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. Isn't this a great place to continue my research ?
- He- In the middle of the cornfields, yes, for sure.
- She- At least I won't be pestered by your band of obscurantists.
- He- Don't be so sure. In Champaign-Urbana there resides the best, most productive, most witty, most positive demodernizer/remodernizer, he is writing down a completely new Operating System.
- She- How so? Who is he ?
- He- Richard Powers, the novelist, the immortal author of 'Gain' and 'Galatea 2.2' and 'Plowing the Dark'.
- She- Bah, a novelist, he can't be that dangerous.
- He- Lots of luck, darling. Hope you run into him, though.