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# *'Isolated Mass Hermits': Individualization and Communication in the Risk Society*

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## **Abstract**

This essay gives an insight into the effects of cosmopolitan individualization that Ulrich Beck investigates in chapter 5 of *Risk Society*, thus anticipating some of the sociological findings in some of his last books, e.g. *A God of One's Own* and *The Metamorphosis of the World*. To the fore is the relationship between the new 'communication landscapes' and the process of fragmentation of daily life fuelled by hyperconnectivity and mainstream narration. Accordingly, technological acceleration led to the construction of biographical paths inspired by a new relational solipsism, so common in the era of globalized risks and cultural obsolescence. The metaphor of 'isolated mass hermits' gives a better understanding of the tendency to personalize faith and spiritual practices, in line with some unexpected interactional techniques. According to Beck, scholars have the duty to analyse 'the subjectivization and individualization of risks and contradictions produced by institutions and society'. In this perspective, communicative risks interlace with value and cultural shortcomings, even though secularization and laicization find their foundation in the historical background of Western societies. This is why Beck's 'isolated mass hermits' are the prelude to the diffusion of an "isolated mass audience", whose social impact can be surveyed through the analysis of institutionalized biographical narrations.

Keywords: communication, individualization, risk society, religion, culture.

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## 1. Media and value individualization: a methodological note

Individualization is one of the most pressing issues inspiring Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society*, the first English language translation of which appeared in 1992, six years after the publication in German (1986). The rise of the so-called secondary modernization, along with the increase of functional and value uncertainty, sheds a light on Beck's sociology in the wider epistemological pattern developed by Niklas Luhmann (2002), Scott Lash (1999) and Anthony Giddens (1991), as he explicitly highlights in *World at Risk* (2009). The shift from modernity to post-modernity entails an unfathomable transition from social cohesion to experiential fragmentation (Bauman, 1997), whose psychic relevance is boosted by the media mindset. Risk society is both the result of our technological progress and the outcome of our excessive trust in reason and its precarious balance, frequently undermined by private and public disorientation (Lombardinio, 2018).

Individualization can be interpreted as one of the five intertwined challenges of our risk civilization: globalization, unemployment, class revolution, global warming and financial turmoil. This reflexive modernity is fuelled by a constant reflection on the great challenges coming about with the passing of the cold war and the rise of mainstream culture, inasmuch as symbolic hypertrophy can be related to the visual simulacra investigated by Jean Baudrillard (1970) in *The Consumer Society*. Some years earlier, Guy Debord (1967) had further investigated the drawbacks of *The Society of Spectacle*, whose symbolic relevance owes its sociological impact predominantly to Horkheimer and Adorno's (1947) heuristic works.

Some of the theoretical cornerstones of Beck's theory of risk society are firmly pivoted on sociological criticism purporting to denounce post-modernity shortcuts and shed light on the incumbent collective risks (also) related to communicative hypertrophy. While dwelling on Habermas's (1997) philosophic discourse on modernity, Beck's thinking revolves around the social evidence linked to post-industrial society ruled by reflexivity and political and economic innovations, since they may engender not only wealth, but also social conflicts. To the fore is the construction of a sociological discourse inspired both by value and functional inequalities, as Bauman (2000) insistently highlights in reference to the form of liquid society. In other words, Beck's sociology of risk gives an insight into the deep contradictions of our advanced modernity, in which social relationships seem to have lost their very nature, especially if referred to the social distancing imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which can be considered as only one of the global dangers afflicting our world 'at risk' (Boccia Artieri, Farci, 2021; Giaccardi, Magatti, 2020).

In this account, individualization has to be connected to institutionalization and standardization, as Beck assumes in *Risk Society* while observing those daily situations and biographical models permeating social existence. One of the most peculiar features of post-modern societies is the construction of individual paths produced by our digital and communicative universes. The 'spirals of silence' investigated by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1984), in reference to mainstream culture, convey the metaphorical background of our endemic dependence on remote connectivity. Hence follows the relationship between value decay and symbolic obsolescence afflicting several contexts of daily life, thus unavoidably feeding the process of self-isolation. Conversely, media narration has the power to shape those 'imagined communities' that Benedict Anderson (1991) analysed for the purpose of understanding how collective media 'narcosis' can lead to individual decentralization, concerning the most inner dimension of conscience (Boni, 2007: 19-20).

Religion is one of the most significant social aspects that have directly undergone the social shifts of individualization, closely related to laicization and secularization, as Beck (2010) highlighted in *A God of One's Own*. Meanwhile, Habermas (2008) investigated religious transformations in *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*. Their sociological efforts tend to interpret religious processes in line with-cultural and relational changes and the symbolic fluctuations of history, inasmuch as social systems are unavoidably shaped by cultural immanence. In this perspective, Peter Sloterdijk's (2009) metaphor of *God's Zeal* finds inspiration in the forced cohabitation of the three monotheisms (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) and sheds light on the correspondence between our individualized society (Bauman, 2001) and the individualization of faith so diffused in post-modern biographies (Abbruzzese, 2016: 259-286). Paradoxically, personal isolation and collective fragmentation seem to be the consequences not only of our continuous informative needs, but of mainstream inputs and media discourse, as Noelle-Neumann (1984: 63) argues: 'Fascinated by the ideal of the self-reliant, independent individual, scholars have hardly noticed the existence of the isolated individual fearful of the opinion of his peers. [...] Where opinions and forms of behavior have gained a firm hold, where they have become custom or tradition, we can no longer recognize an element of controversy in them'.

Six years after the publication of Noelle-Neumann's work, inspired by the 'hypothesis of silence' in modern society, Beck's *Risk Society* cleverly emphasized the impact of media influence on social dynamics, with specific regard to the economic and cultural dimension. In other words, a more advanced technology rapidly weakens traditional values, including the aesthetic and sacred spheres. In the early Eighties, Beck realized that media flows can

exploit very refined rhetorical patterns moulding public opinion, thus nourishing the collective illusion of sharing experiences and contents. Media risks are a fundamental consequence of reflexive modernization, in which individualization is more than a theoretical hallmark (Beck, Giddens, Lash, 1994). In line with Altheide and Snow's concept of *Media Logic* (1974), Beck dwells on mainstream impact, while assuming that "television isolates and standardizes. On the one hand, it removes people from traditionally shaped and bounded contexts of conversation, experience and life. At the same time, however, everyone is in a similar position: they all consume institutionally produced television programs, from Honolulu to Moscow and Singapore" (Beck, 1992: 132).

Standardization is the result of an organic mediatization involving daily life and social relations, in which symbolic simulacra are strong enough to replace reality with artificial reflection. The 'metalanguage of an absent world' analysed by Baudrillard in reference to the perfect crime committed by television is but the product of the synesthetic transposition of daily life into mainstream discourse, in which uniformity and standardization seem to be two accurately planned semiotic processes (Lombardinio, 2017). However, McLuhan outlined that electric civilization accelerated the rise of a 'culture without literacy', long before the triumph of our digital addiction: 'We are now compelled to develop new techniques of perception and judgement, new ways of reading the languages of our environment with its multiplicity of cultures and disciplines. And these needs are not just desperate remedies but roads to unmitigated cultural enrichment' (McLuhan, 1953: 20).

The cultural shifts boosted by mainstream narration regard both the private and the collective environments, along with the value pauperization and perceptive improvements that shortly after the birth of the 'Gutenberg galaxy' assured decentralization of power and educational development, as supported by religious actors at large (Eisenstein, 1983: 148-186). Admittedly, linearity is the most relevant feature of the print age, whereas simultaneity is tethered to the rise of the electric age, whose functional impact implies both psychic and perceptive functions (Meyrowitz, 1985). In Beck's sociology, the investigation of media risks turns into an epistemological tenet and a theoretical endeavour, whose communicative background is essentially tied to relational individualization. The relationship of individual pulverization and media fallout is one of the most intriguing traits of our post-modernity, as Beck points out in the light of the social complexity of risk society: "The individualization - more precisely, the removal from traditional life contexts - is accompanied by a uniformity and standardization of forms of living. Everyone sits isolated even in the family and gapes at the set. Thus arises the social image of an isolated

mass audience - or, to put it more bluntly, the standardized collective existence of isolated mass hermits' (Beck, 1992: 132).

While considering individualization as the 'removal from traditional life contexts', Beck aims at explaining the symbolic shortcuts nurtured by standardizing media influences whose rhetorical stereotypes weave the ephemeral webs of the political debate. The oxymoron of 'isolated mass hermits' expresses the tendency to live spirituality in line with the experiential dynamics of media strategies, insofar as secularization entails the transformation of the sacred sphere into a variety of atomized spiritual efforts. Self-reference and media hypertrophy are likely to be considered the consequence of productive and technological acceleration, as Fischer (1998: 111) points out: 'The concept of the risk society refers to an epoch in which the dark sides of progress increasingly come to dominate social and political debate. It brings forth that which few want to see and no one wants: the self-endangering, devastating industrial destruction of nature'.

Accordingly, the loss of natural enchantment matches a fleeting spiritual awareness and the reinforcement of religious radicalism, whose social relevance is emphasized by media narration, in a time when social actors are intrinsically constrained by fear and violence (McIntyre, 2018). Fundamentally, the search for collective wealth seems to imply the individual satisfaction of body and soul, insofar as media consumption can feed the illusion of personal gratification, as Bauman deals with while dwelling on the relationship of faith and instant gratification: 'To have faith means to have trust in the meaning of life and to expect what one does or desists from doing to be of long-lasting importance. Faith comes easy when life experience confirms that trust is well founded. Only in a relatively stable world, in which things and acts retain their value over a long period of time, a period commensurate with the length of a human life, is such confirmation likely to be offered' (Bauman, 2001: 154).

When instability takes over and mistrust hovers over social actors who trusted their ancient but comfortable certainties, isolation can be perceived as the only exit strategy from symbolic mess and experiential confusion, while considering the endless flow of media discourse shaping the public sphere. In other words, the liquid society is imbued with a variety of solipsistic approaches to daily life, whose diffusion is connected to the loss of traditional functional habits. In this perspective, Beck's oxymoron of 'isolated mass hermits' reveals the inner contradiction of an unfolding risk society that appears as relentlessly projected towards collective atomization and spiritual nihilism, despite the incessant journalistic focus on multiculturalism and religious cohabitation (Elliott, 2002). The clash of civilizations described by Huntington (1996) heralds the clash of universalisms permeating the reflexive modernization that

Beck cleverly investigates in *A God of One's Own*, with the purpose of highlighting the unsolvable contradictions stemming from the convergence of individualization and cosmopolitization. The dialectics of peace and violence, along with the fluctuation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, are only two of the cornerstones of this sociological engagement founded in the analysis of the most particular biographic sketches and journalistic patterns. Beck wonders whether our post-modern crisis may require the 'cosmopolitan voice of religious representatives', accurately amplified by media devices: 'Faced with the global threats of terrorism and war, climate change and poverty, as well as the slighted dignity of religious others, is it not they above all who are in a position to set nations of different beliefs on the 'common' path of justice?' (Beck, 2010: 200).

The culture of tolerance and respect implies the construction of a media mindset focused on transparency, truth and understanding, in a time marked by the diffusion of new forms of media individualization and value pulverization, in line with the end of great narrations peculiar to our mass isolation. The indirect consequence of our media hypertrophy is nothing but behavioural homogenization and value inurement, as Beck remarks while hinting at 'the standardized collective existence of isolated mass hermits' (Beck, 1992: 132), who are metaphorically depicted as the result of our communicative individualization.

## **2. Self-reflexive biographies and the risks of individualization**

Chapter 5 of *Risk Society* is focused on the convergence of individualization, institutionalization and standardization, as these processes tend to mould "life situations and biographical patterns" (Beck, 1992: 127). Individualization deals with the inclination of post-modern societies to fuel isolation and tolerate displacement, in a world ruled by media symbolism and global connectivity. While hinting at the legacy of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel, without neglecting Burckhardt and Elias's cultural insights, Beck explores the immanent evolution of individualism across the last century, thus emphasizing the narrative shifts linked to the evolution of urban spaces and the acceleration of economic processes (Lombardinilo, 2016a). Media innovation shapes our individualized mindset, whose social impact sheds a light on the new forms of socialization peculiar to the era of global risks. As a result, individualization can no longer be interpreted through the traditional heuristic paradigms of post-industrial modernity, especially in a time of functional advancement engendered by post-war reconstruction: "Instead (if I may be forgiven for the monstrous word) it must be conceived of as the beginning of a new mode of societalization,



a kind of 'metamorphosis' or 'categorical shift' in the relation between the individual and society" (Beck, 1992: 127).

In Beck's analysis, metamorphosis is a real keystone, whose semantic relevance gains further sociological evidence in his posthumous book, *The Metamorphosis of the World* (2016). As a consequence, metaphorization becomes a cognitive tool, especially when language cannot fully grasp social complexity, as for instance Ovid did while narrating the permanent evolution of human condition in the Augustan age (Zolowski, 2004). Metamorphosis implies 'a new mode of societalization', as Beck emphasizes while dwelling on the new forms of individualization produced by our technological frenzy. 'Individualization reconsidered' can be taken as an epistemological insight, apparently tied to the atomization and fragmentation of social experience when it is influenced by the evolution of the labour market, media permeability and urban reconfiguration, against the background of old and new conflicts within the public sphere (Sennett, 2003). Beck provides three theses in response to a crucial research question: 'which mode of reintegration and control is connected with these emerging individual situations?' (Beck, 1992: 130). Consequences, standardization and simultaneity are to be duly investigated in a time featuring the end of great narrations and the explosion of a variety of relational experiences that take place in a mediatized way (Gavrila, 2016; Boccia Artieri, 2016).

Without undermining Baudrillard's tenets of simulacra and hyperreality, it is important to point out that mediality implies the replacement of face-to-face interactions with digitalized interfaces. Consequently, Beck underlines the centrality of institutionalization within the individualized framework of media post-modernity involving some crucial aspects of daily life: 'This all points to the institution-dependent control structure of individual situations. Individualization becomes the most advanced form of societalization dependent on the market, law, education and so on' (Beck, 1992: 131). The transition from sociability to societalization implies a theoretical shift that enables social scholars to gain an insight into the new individual dynamics permeating the public sphere as it stems from the overlapping of digital and mainstream narration. As a result, facts, norms, and opinions interlace so as to feed a media flow whose function is to foster our dependence on informative background noises (Castells, 2009). The analysis of risk society concerns this epistemological attention, as Alexander and Smith (1996, 255-256) highlight: 'Beck wants to portray the risk society as an objective fact, both ontologically, in the sense that it exists as such, in a cold, hard, and material way, and epistemologically, in the sense that these objective facts are perceived directly and accurately in the minds of citizens themselves'.

The so-called objective facts are shaped by the symbolic and semantic sedimentation of the media-action that Roger Silverstone (2006: 1-24) highlights precisely in reference to Beck's analysis of post-modern 'cosmopolitan vision' (Beck, 2006). The rise of the 'mediapolis' leads to the permanent sharing of the images and contents, linked together by accurate discourse and rhetoric strategies influencing the process of the institutionalization of biographical patterns. Therefore, individualized actors are ineluctably shaped by their communicative needs that are rarely without external and subliminal influence. In other words, the intensity of media presence triggers more pervasive and individualized relations. The end of great narrations entails the dependence of individualized lives on iconic representations and rhetoric dynamics, along with the electric filtering of the public sphere (Luhmann, 2002). As Beck assumes, individualization implies dependence and isolation, despite the illusion of collective sharing nourished by the ubiquitous media: 'Individualization means market dependency in all dimensions of living. The forms of existence that arise are the isolated mass market, not conscious of itself, and mass consumption of generically designed housing, furnishings, articles of daily use, as well as opinions, habits, attitudes and lifestyles launched and adopted through the mass media. In other words, individualization delivers people over to an external control and standardization that was unknown in the enclaves of familial and feudal subcultures' (Beck, 1992: 132).

In such social complexity, mass media nurture collective persuasion, in line with the need of social actors to satisfy the ineluctable fever of consumption that Veblen (1899) investigated ahead of the electric and digital fallout. Veblen's theory of the leisure class and Galbraith's metaphor of 'conventional wisdom' can shed light not only on the mass consumption of goods and products, but also on the symbolic hypertrophy feeding our instability. Henceforth, communication interlaces with standardization and representation, inasmuch as the perception of communicative risks tends to be instinctively underestimated: 'Those generally familiar with contemporary risk management and communication may be able to recognise both Beck's concerns and his influence in the clear shift away from 'top down' approaches based upon an idea of public views of risk as an irrational misperception to be corrected through increasing volumes of information' (Burgess, Wardman, Mythen, 2018: 2).

Technological reproducibility is the fundamental requisite supporting a society increasingly dependent on connective reliability and network interactions, in a world functionally eroded by new forms of influence, censorship and control (Lombardinio, 2016b). The public view of risk is embedded in the informative framework of liquid society, whose value and

experiential flair implies the explosion of the private sphere and the institutionalization of biographic paths founded on individual publicization. The illusion of collective participation collides with the individual atomization resulting from media hypnosis. Beck's point of view is inspired not only by Adorno and Horkheimer's critical approach, but also by Luhmann's (2002) sociology of risk, with the purpose of investigating the consequences of modernity (Giddens, 1990). In other words, media mesmerism can be considered one of the most effective factors of symbolic instability and biographical evanescence, as Beck attentively stresses: 'This occurs simultaneously *transculturally* and *transnationally*. We could say people meet every evening around the world at the *village green of television* and consume the news. In this sense, individual situations can no longer even be determined to be institutionally dependent on nation states. They are part of a globally standardized media network. More than that: institutional and national boundaries are in a certain sense no longer valid' (Beck, 1992: 132-133).

Undoubtedly, to the fore are the relational shifts engendered by the 'network society' described by Van Dijk (2012). Furthermore, Beck dwells on McLuhan's tenet of the 'global village of information', thus confronting the unsolvable complexity of post-modern individualism, whose social impact is closely related to the variety of relational opportunities provided by the media (De Kerckhove, 1997). Accordingly, McLuhan's technological determinism becomes a heuristic framework that can shed light on biographical massification, despite the apparent personalizing impact of digital and mainstream informative shafts. Seemingly, the dialectics of national and institutional boundaries change in line with the globalization of broadcasting, whose symbolic consequences are exalted by the media representation of violence, poverty, unemployment, environmental risks, religious and cultural discrimination. Bauman's 'individualized society' has an epistemological premise in Beck's analysis of media individualism and institutional influence, as well as the communicative point of view.

Hence follows the central role played by education in a scenario so multicultural and transnational, inasmuch as traditional educational patterns are about to be swept away by new digital devices (Tyner, 2010). Post-modern individualization is, indeed, the result of a shortage of values, whose semiotic instability is nourished by the hypertrophic connected inputs of our global communities. In this perspective, Beck cleverly emphasizes the impact of this relational dynamism on the biographic background of social actors, increasingly subjected to the cognitive shifts imposed by standardized discourses: 'Individualization in this sense means that each person's biography is removed from given determinations and placed in his or her own hands, open and

dependent on decisions. The proportion of life opportunities which are fundamentally closed to decision-making is decreasing and the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally is increasing. Individualization of life situations and processes thus means that biographies become self-reflexive; socially prescribed biography is transformed into biography that is self-produced and continues to be produced' (Beck, 1992: 135).

The personal construction of self-reflexive biographies has become a trademark of the connected society in which individuals comply with the consumptive paradigms ruling the public sphere. Nonetheless, the concept of production referred to private life experiences hints at the process of standardization triggered by the labour market and technological speedup. The symbolic exchange that Baudrillard dealt with has its roots in the rise of a consumer civilization that has apparently increased the decision-making power of social actors, whose illusory perceptions intermingle with the permanent glare of advertising (Codeluppi, 2020; Latouche, 2019). Accordingly, the religion of consumption imposes the cult of new material and symbolic idols, in line with the ephemeral dimension of post-modern civilization. Hence follows the tendency to build self-reflexive biographies that appear both momentary and approximate. Nevertheless, biographic paths are intrinsically embedded in the cross-media dimension of daily relations, as Possamai-Inesedy argues: 'It seems that since humans have secularly taken control of nature (through the example of industrialisation) and themselves (by the example of the French Revolution) so that risk, which at one time was the responsibility of an omnipotent God, would now be the responsibility of humankind. Furthermore, the dangers and hazards of contemporary societies, principally environmental problems, differ significantly from previous eras' (Possamai-Inesedy, 2002: 29).

The evolution of religious practices concerns the immanent shifts of our risk society, in which the presence of God has been progressively waning, insofar as secularization is perceived as an unavoidable social endeavour. Consequently, material gods are the essence of a symbolic hypertrophy stemming from the myth of daily experiential consumption, in line with the tenets of instantaneity and immediacy of self-gratification, as Bauman (2001: 153-160) emphasizes in *The Individualized Society*. His liquid society also features the declining force of institutionalized influences, as Beck had already stressed in *Risk Society*: 'Under these conditions, how one lives becomes the *biographical solution* of systemic *contradictions* (as for instance between education and employment, or the legally presumed and the actual standard biography). Against Luhmann: biography is the *sum of subsystem rationalities*, and by no means

their environment' (Beck, 1992: 137). The reference to Luhmann's tenet of the 'autopoiesis' of social life legitimates the reference to the role that subjectivity plays in such inextricable complexity, in which communication, education and economics converge and tend to shape the social environment of every single actor (Rubin, 2016).

The twilight of traditional patterns engenders the reconfiguration of value paradigms and experiential ambitions, even though the search for wealth and health often hampers collective risks. Accordingly, globalization can be considered as an epistemological metaphor of the indescribable drawbacks of our immanent craving for self-satisfaction: 'It is not only that buying coffee in the shop on the corner may perhaps become complicit in the exploitation of the plantation workers in South America. And not only that given the omnipresence of pesticides a basic course in (alternative) chemistry is becoming a prerequisite for survival. Nor only that pedagogy and medicine, social law and traffic planning presume active 'thinking individuals', as they put it so nicely, who are supposed to find their way in this jungle of transitory finalities with the help of their own clear vision' (Beck, 1992: 137).

Presumably consumption turns into the touchstone of a relational dimension increasingly ruled by symbolic exchanges to the detriment of interpersonal relations. This is what Beck points out while dwelling on the 'active thinking individuals', along with the collective risks hovering over postmodern actors whose reflexive opinions are to be seen as the result of a variety of communicative webs (Jenkins, 2006). In this perspective, Habermas can be considered one of the most insightful interpreters of our communicative rarefaction, as McCormick (2021: 232) underlines: 'Integration raises momentous questions concerning the institutional and legal means by which democratic principles and practices may be preserved and perhaps even advanced at a potentially novel supranational historical moment'. The dialectics of the national and supranational dimension interlaces with the discourse on individualistic consumption developed by media in reference to the loss of traditional value paradigms and the empowerment of new forms of self-referential narcissism. In the background is the biographical complexity ruling the ongoing digitalized metamorphosis of the world, in line with the infinite representative opportunities provided by our personalized media.

What kind of risks lurk behind such a dynamic relational framework? Standardization and assimilation appear to be the main drawbacks of a risk society closely embedded in the biographical inputs of mainstream discourses, as Thompson (1995) emphasized. The downfall of tradition coincides with the rise of post-industrial civilization, in so far as consumption turns into a communicative system. Henceforth, symbolic permeability involves the

biographical and narrative paths provided by ‘global media networks’, as Beck (1992: 137) insightfully pinpoints: ‘With detraditionalization and the creation of global media networks, the biography is increasingly removed from its direct spheres of contact and opened up across the boundaries of countries and experts for a long-distance morality which puts the individual in the position of potentially having to take a continual stand. At the same moment as he or she sinks into insignificance, he or she is elevated to the apparent throne of a world-shaper’.

The explosion of existential boundaries and the construction of global communicative narration entail the diffusion of a more versatile biographic flair whose publicity depends on the new connective prerogatives of the so-called hyperconnected society. The rise of a consumption mindset led not only to economic growth but also to existential atomization, thanks to the communicative exploitation of news, contents, images and reflections (Clarke, 2003). The risks of such collective individualization can be found not only in representative standardization, but also in biographical uniformity, despite the multiform variety of media influence (Gleick, 2012). Silence and incommunicability are likely to be perceived as unfathomable products of our frantic globalization. New forms of faith seem to benefit from the biographic evanescence of risk society, in line with the ‘ontological insecurity’ that Giddens (1991) deals with while referring to the laicization and secularization of our globalized world (Taylor, 2007).

### **3. Indifferent society: reflexive modernization and individualized faith**

The metaphor of ‘Isolated mass hermits’, inspiring chapter 5 of *Risk Society*, implicitly hints at the post-modern tendency to isolation and self-reference, in a world constantly encumbered by uncertainty and precariousness (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Biographical narration is one of the most meaningful traits of our reflexive modernization, as Beck shrewdly underlines: ‘While governments (still) operate within the structure of nation states, biography is already being opened to the world society. Furthermore, world society becomes a part of biography, although this continual excessive demand can only be tolerated through the opposite reaction of not listening, simplifying, and apathy’ (Beck, 1992: 137). Accordingly, communicative hypertrophy can be considered as the collateral effect of such a globalized relational world in which the lack of in-presence encounters might strengthen the distancing imposed by physical barriers. The birth of secular religiosity that Beck describes in *A God of One’s Own* is a pivotal cultural event, inasmuch as secularization is indissolubly linked to the values and social shifts engendered by modernity (Speck, 2012).

Technological advancement entails those forms of ontological creed that the civilization & clashes of our times has ineludibly fuelled (Bruce, 2006). Hence, collective and individual biographies are increasingly influenced by the existential complexity that during the Twentieth century was devastated by a number of unmatched collective tragedies. The Holocaust is one of them, as Beck recalls about Etty Hillesum's confessional writing: 'For all its simplicity, Etty Hillesum's diary is a document which expresses a cry of despair and a monstrous accusation – not least because, as far as we can judge from the external facts, her life ended in utter desolation' (Beck, 2010: 9).

Her grieving confessional flair is inspired by a deep sense of isolation, stemming from the incumbent tragedy that Bauman (1991) described in *Modernity and Holocaust* and which Hannah Arendt (1951) analysed in her *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in line with the philosophical issues already disseminated by Adorno and Horkheimer. In such a theoretical framework, Beck dwells on the diffusion of 'a life of one's own, a room of one's own, a God of one's own' produced by secondary modernization, also in reference to new forms of individualization residing in the public sphere. Therefore, reflexivity and spirituality interlace with narration and representation, inasmuch as communicative acceleration may lead to individual pulverization: 'This kind of multiplicity and alterity in one's own life arises with the fragmentation of modernity. This is also the source of this compulsion to give an account of oneself and others in all sorts of situations, plausible and implausible. The reflexive ego is the *detective in oneself*; more precisely, the eternal detective, who cannot resist investigating and reporting on himself. He opens files and prepares answers' (Beck, 2010: 15).

In other words, hypervisibility is the effect of such symbolic fragmentation, in which social actors can hardly debunk the deceitful images and content shaping unstable truths. In this perspective, truths of one's own turn into discourse issues often superficially dismissed. Communicative online habits cannot offset the variety of relational fragmented experiences that accrue in a more and more dilatated public sphere, in which McIntyre's 'post-truth' seems to play a growing representative role (McIntyre, 2018). Cultural alterity and religious diversity are two fundamental aspects of our post-modern individualization, especially when they concern the relationship of individualization and cosmopolitization and the analysis of 'religion in the framework of reflexive modernization' (Beck, 2010: 63).

This heuristic approach gives an insight into the birth of individualization and its development across the centuries. Conversely, Beck recalls Émile Durkheim who 'showed over a century ago how the sacredness of religion was transferred to the sacredness of the individual' (Beck, 2010: 94), in line with the

need to emphasize the tendency of advanced social organizations to replace moral individualism with 'an institutionalized individualization' (Beck, 2010: 95). Accordingly, both Durkheim and Habermas realized that inner individualized pulses are engendered by the atavistic need to share reflexivity through collective rituals. Our fragmented communicative habits are unavoidably weakening this identity legacy. Nevertheless, individualization is not a brand new social phenomenon, especially when referred to the spiritual sphere: 'Individualization is, as we have noted, an original Christian invention' (Beck, 2010: 98).

The inheritance of our Western civilization is inextricably intertwined with the tendency to endow daily life with narrative and symbolic habits that are characterized by the sharing of confessional and private soliloquies. In this account, individualization of faith stems from the global expansion of the public sphere as well: 'It is important to note at this stage that the early theorists of risk society, Beck and Giddens, saw religion as withdrawing from the front stage of western societies [...] Religion is no longer part of the public sphere the way it used to be yesteryear. In Western societies especially, it no longer provides a close-knitted system of beliefs united with, for example, a nation. Religion is now part of consumer culture' (Possamai, Possamai-Inesedy, 2009: 2). Paradoxically, the consumer society leads not only to communicative disintegration, but also to symbolic decay, as Baudrillard realized while dwelling on the perfect crime of mainstream media (Viviani, 2017).

Nonetheless, the rise of cosmopolitization calls for an attentive analysis of our post-modern cultural tardiness and its social impact that deals with the spiritual impoverishment of our identity background (Pendenza, 2016). The universalization of cultures does not perforce imply convergence and inclusion, especially when it focuses on the evolution of secularization across the centuries and the fluctuations of heresy and orthodoxy. Therefore, the distinction of 'individualization One' and 'individualization Two' enables Beck to remark on the intrinsic complexity of historical processes related to societal innovation: 'Individualization One reconstructs the struggles to achieve individualization arising *within* Christianity from the re-orientation of specific medieval potentials embedded in the conflicts between individualization and collectivization (during the Reformation). Individualization Two reconstructs the genesis of a God of one's own *outside* Christianity, in particular in the context of *welfare-state* individualization after the Second World War in Europe ('post-religious' individualization)' (Beck, 2010: 101).

The epistemological path stretching from Augustine to Augé can be observed through the lens of urbanization and civilization, without neglecting the religious influence on the way of living, as Sennett did in *Flesh and Stone*. In



Beck's perspective, the transition from 'Individualization One' to 'Individualization Two' sheds light on the effect of progress on the way social actors elaborate their symbolic asset, insofar as technology entails both informative and logistic innovation. This is an aspect highlighted by Mythen in reference to Beck's *A God of One's Own*: 'The decisions and choices propelled by individualization are reinforced by the mobility of people, information and ideas which, in turn, fosters cosmopolitanization as individuals are forced to confront preconceptions of others and develop global sensibilities' (Mythen, 2010: 119).

In the foreground are the risks lurking behind media civilization, in which the dialectics of false and true, morality and immorality permeate every single aspect of daily relationships (Camorrino, 2016). Biographical changes are indeed nourished by communicative practices, in a time ruled by synchronic and instantaneous exchanges. Accordingly, the myth of institutionalized individualism ceases to be a mere suggestion, gaining therefore a solid heuristic meaning: 'As the systemic production of risks and uncertainties intensifies, social institutions are rocked by media critique and public questioning. In this way, individualization strips bare a contradiction between the intractable absolutes of world religions and the infinite and open-ended possibilities of individual faith' (Mythen, 2010: 119).

The reference to media critique gives an insight into the invisible contradictions of our incessant globalization where social and economic origins interlace with the implementation of emotional uncertainty often triggered by media narration. Hence follows the tenet of globalism, which Beck associates with the economic and value dimensions of social life in line with the expansion of the communicative boundaries once characterizing traditional social acts. This is an aspect attentively investigated in Beck's *What is Globalization?*: 'By globalism I mean the view that the world market eliminates or supplants political action – that is, the ideology of rule by the world market, the ideology of neoliberalism. It proceeds monocausally and economically, reducing the multidimensionality of globalization to a single, economic dimension that is itself conceived in a linear fashion' (Beck, 1999: 9). The dialectics of globalism and globalization permeates Beck's last works, from *World at Risk* (2009) to *The Metamorphosis of the World* (2016).

Globalization implies a deep change within the collective and individual perception of symbolic paradigms engendered by new forms of biographic construction. For instance, *A God of One's Own* provides a close relationship between individualization and risk society from a spiritual point of view, thus stressing the metaphor of "isolated mass hermits" that Beck deals with in *Risk Society*. Therefore, individualization interlaces with confession and self-

thoughtfulness, along with collective narration: ‘Why do I want what I want? Why do I not want what I ought to want? Such reflections assume not just the form of silent monologue but also that of the verbalized ‘confession’ in the eyes of God, a social narrative of one’s own wishes and actions. Is the individual an invention of the confession?’ (Beck, 2010: 108).

The answer may be found in the analysis of the historical evolution of narrative practices, along with the diffusion of those confessional paradigms engendered by the private sphere in the era of publicly shared information (Boccia Artieri, 2016). Paradoxically, interior monologuing has turned into an outstanding form of loud conversation with nobody, consequently emphasizing the craving for psychological expression and experiential convergence. In this perspective, social risks seem to be nourished by approximative and uncertain informative webs, whose symbolic targets revolve around the construction of individual forms of consumption leading to collective hypnosis. As a result, individualization and secularization are two of the most significant trademarks of our fragile condition, despite its complex historical origin (Sloterdijk, 2009). The evanescence of the presence of God, that Paolo Sorrentino depicted in his successful TV series, *The Young Pope* and *The New Pope*, can also be considered as the consequence of a media narration pivoted on the exaltation of inter-religious dialogue and multicultural integration (Allen, Van den Berg, 2014). The birth of reflexive modernization is inextricably embedded in our communicative cosmopolitization, that Beck further investigates in *Risk Society* while observing ‘the subjectivization and individualization of risks and contradictions produced by institutions and society’ (Beck, 1992: 136).

The fall of the public man surveyed by Richard Sennett (2003) entails the rise of traditional paradigms concerning the sacred sphere and its public representation, insofar as the diffusion of institutionalized biographies seems to collide with the yearning for private and solitary lives. Therefore, disorientation becomes the counter-effect of such fragmented complexity, in which secularization and individualization tend to feed the sense of uncertainty of post-modern actors (Berger, 1967; Luckmann, 1967). This is what Beck thoughtfully stresses in *Risk Society*: ‘The institutional conditions that determine individuals are no longer just events and conditions that happen to them, but also consequences of the decisions they themselves have made, which they must view and treat as such. This is also favored by the fact that there is a surreptitious change in the character of the typical actions that throw individuals off the track. What assails them was formerly considered a ‘blow of fate’ sent by God or nature, e.g. war, natural catastrophes, death of a spouse, in short an event for which they bore no responsibility’ (Beck, 1992: 136). The surreptitious changes that Beck dwells on impose an attentive reflection on the perception of risks

amplified by media narration, thus emphasizing the collective drawbacks stemming from the underestimation of the post-modern symbolic fallout (Latour, 2006).

In Beck's perspective, the perception of risks and media strategies also concerns our emotional and relational flaws, as Cottle (1998: 8) underlines: 'The tension between ontological statements about what is, that is, the unprecedented nature of contemporary risks, and epistemological statements about how we can come to know these, that is, how they are 'visualized' in processes and fora of social definition is discussed below. Here it is apparent that Beck's conceptualization of risk inevitably leads to the identification of the mass media as a prime site of social definition' (Cottle, 8). In other words, communication gives an insight into the constant fluctuation of ontological and epistemological patterns, as long as science can shed light on the rooted contradictions of risk society. The ancient 'blows of fate' delivered by God or nature can nowadays be interpreted as the unforeseeable shortcomings of a hyper-technologized world, in which narration and representation gain a real sociological impact. Institutionalized biographies stem from this unconditioned secularization with a cultural background that lays its foundation in the process of secularization that Power (2007) has extensively analysed.

Hence follows the tenet of 'post-secular modernity' that Beck probes while exploiting Habermas's model of 'religiously neutral constitutional fate' (Beck, 2010: 154) which is closely connected to the forced cohabitation of science and faith. Conversely, the distinction of universalism and cosmopolitization implies a thorough reflection on the evolution of modernity across the centuries, so as to unfold the inextricable drawbacks of our ephemeral relational mindset: 'In contrast to secular modernity, the post-secular variety is already en route to the cosmopolitan society. In it the norms governing a tolerant and hence necessarily indifferent society guaranteed by universal laws must cease to be accepted only with reluctance; instead, they must be internalized and defended as guarantors of one's own religious traditions and communities' (Beck, 2010: 155).

Consequently, indifference turns into a sociological tenet involving cultural, communicative, existential and religious aspects of daily life (Habermas, Ratzinger, 2007). The neutral constitutional state depicted by Habermas evokes a utopian social environment in which solidarity and inclusion interlace and inspire the communicative strategy of multiculturalism and globalization. Accordingly, the 'indifferent society' that Beck deals with might collide with this sociological vision, in which solidarity and cohesion can be perceived as universal ethical hallmarks, despite the apparently unsolvable clash between national and supra-national dimensions (Fischer, 1998). The construction of media narration is often inspired by the fear of alterity and it is

frequently focused on the risks stemming from an unconditioned multi-religiosity, in line with the emotional and iconic hypertrophy fuelled by terrorism, violence and fundamentalist recrudescence.

Nonetheless, 'religion is globalization from the outset', whereas 'multiple modernity' risks engendering 'multiple forms of secularization': 'Globalization, then, is not the product of powerful economic, political and mass-media developments at the start of the twenty-first century; it is no belated, external, optional characteristic. Globalization, more accurately the question of the *multiple, contradictory frontier-regime* of religion, has been part of the essence, or, less pompously, of the definition of religion from the very beginning' (Beck, 2010: 51). The indifferent society of our time has the duty to retrieve its cultural foundations and identity patterns, with the aim to better pinpoint the central role played nowadays by individualization and cosmopolitization within the biographical discourse involving those 'isolated mass hermits' who support the metamorphosis of risk society.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In his last book, *The Metamorphosis of the World*, Beck brings us up to date with some of the epistemological insights inspiring his *Risk Society*, published at a time when digitalization and cosmopolitization had not yet produced the countereffects of reflexive modernity. The prophecy of globalized risks has thus become a reliable sociological tenet in the era marked by 'the failure of functioning institutions' (Beck, 2016: 141). As a result, the metamorphosis of the world has to be framed within the economic and communicative patterns stemming from our frenetic globalization. Thus, the ancient Ovidian metaphor can still express the unfathomable transformative processes which inspire new forms of individualization and secularization, as Beck seems to underline: 'Change brings a characteristic future of modernity into focus, namely permanent transformation, while basic concepts and the certainties that support them remain constant. Metamorphosis, by contrast, destabilizes these certainties of modern society' (Beck, 2016: xi).

The dialectics of metamorphosis, change and transformation endows Beck's inquiry with an argumentative flair focused on the relationship of 'public bads' and communicative acceleration, in line with the new 'politics of visibility' nurtured by digitalized interactions. Seemingly, the expansion of the public sphere implies the transformation of the traditional concept of audience, which both Lippman and Lasswell investigated ahead of the rise of connected interactions. 'The digital construction of the world' (Beck, 2016: 134-139) deals with the diffusion of new informative strategies, whose semantic obsolescence

tends to offset the symbolic effervescence of our synesthetic hyper-connected exchanges: 'At the same time, the rapidly evolving, new technological variants of digital communication are transforming the concept of the public. Consumers of news are becoming producers of news. National borders and topics are becoming less important. New communication landscapes are emerging – fragmented, individualized and simultaneously spreading out into networks in which the power of the communication media is broken' (Beck, 1992:133-134). While dwelling on the new communication landscapes of our world at risk, Beck emphasizes the role played by digitalization in the diffusion of new forms of individualization inspiring journalistic narration and media amplification of fear and insecurity.

As a result, our communicative landscapes influence both the collective and the individual spheres, in line with the need to feed one's own spiritual and solipsistic sphere. In this perspective, Chapter 5 of *Risk Society* ('Individualization of social inequality') seems to be closely related to Chapter 9 of *The Metamorphosis of the World* ('Public bads: politics of visibility'), in which Beck provides an insightful definition of individualization: "The world becomes individualized and fragmented. The individual – the 'undividable' – becomes the point of reference and, at the same time, no longer matters. It sinks in the unimaginable amount of data. Individualization is the process by which the primary unit of social and political action is no longer an aggregate of collective identity but becomes restricted to individual persons – the paradigm shift from 'we' to 'I'. As such, it is not to be misunderstood as the neoliberal ideology of individualism' (Beck, 2016: 137-138).

In the era of globalized risks, individualization can no longer be interpreted as ideological evidence. Conversely, it complies with the sociological dynamic fed by the fragmented connectivity of our post-modernity. The informative rhetoric concerning the environment, the economy, health and social inequalities fosters the versatile communication landscapes that overshadow the perception of liquid risks hanging over the globalized public sphere. Hence follows the disruption of ancient institutional certainties that nowadays appear as the romantic legacy of a world of which national identities once had a strong social and cultural grasp. Thus, Beck insistently deals with the five challenges of the second modernity revolving around multidimensional globalization, radicalized/intensified individualization, global environmental crises, the gender equality revolution and the third industrial revolution: 'According to Beck the social transition from a society of industry to one of risk coincides with a larger and more encompassing shift of modernity in general: a shift from first modernity to second modernity' (Sørensen, Christiansen, 2014: 7).

In conclusion, our digitalized modernity seems to have accelerated that process of globalized individualization in which both communicative and cultural shifts interlace, in line with the unavoidable exchange of old and new biographical paradigms. In the background is the public acknowledgment of the 'isolated mass hermits' still searching for a suitable place of their own in the digitalized public sphere, in conjunction with the value fluctuations featured in the 'isolated mass audience' (Beck, 1992: 132).

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