

# T

Dean Komel

## The Nihilism of Risk Society

It should be observed<sup>1</sup> from the outset that the term “risk society,” which stems primarily from Ulrich Beck’s 1986 *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*<sup>2</sup>, can by no means be taken as an elaborated theoretical concept<sup>3</sup>, even though, decades after it first appeared, it continues to be profusely employed within the sociological and humanistic disciplines, and probably even more so within today’s perception of ‘social reality.’ At the same time, the term “risk society” – like the terms “knowledge society,” “global society,” “information society,” “society of spectacle,” etc. – is no mere slogan or buzzword. Perhaps it is best to say that “risk society” is a *preception* that dictates a particular thematised experience, alongside a dearth

<sup>1</sup> The text is published as part of the implementation of the research program *The Humanities and the Sense of Humanity from Historical and Contemporary Viewpoints* (P6-0341) and the research project *The Hermeneutic Problem of the Understanding of Human Existence and Coexistence in the Epoch of Nihilism* (J7-4631).

<sup>2</sup> U. Beck, *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1986; english: *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, transl. by M. Ritter, Sage Publications, London 1992.

<sup>3</sup> In this connection, Niklas Luhmann, who has himself done a great deal of work on risk society, also notes “The descriptions of modern society that are on offer today no longer strive for theoretical elaboration. They emphasise individual phenomena which they consider particularly noteworthy and leave it at that. Even the term ‘capitalist society’ was not covered by the relevant economic sciences and merely suggested a socio-historical description of an epoch, a narrative, so to speak. This lack of theoretical analysis is even more obvious in the case of “risk society” or “experience society”. The same applies to the ‘information society’” (Niklas Luhmann, “Entscheidungen in der ‘Informationsgesellschaft’”, lecture held at the conference *Soft society: eine internationale Konferenz über die kommende Informationsgesellschaft*, 28.10. - 3.11.1996 in Berlin, organised by the Arbeitskreis Informationsgesellschaft der Humboldt-Universität and the Japan Society for Future Research, Tokyo. [https://www.fen.ch/texte/gast\\_luhmann\\_informationsgesellschaft.htm](https://www.fen.ch/texte/gast_luhmann_informationsgesellschaft.htm)).

of effective socio-critical recipes and formulas.

The label “risk society” does not link the element of risk to some human action but to the *performance of society as a whole*. The first concern is this: how can what we generally understand and accept as “society” encompass risk, even mega-risk, which exceeds any other kind of “risk,” from “living” to “economic” risk? How can “society,” as a subject we trust in more than we trust in people, God, and the world, in the process of its subjectification, turn out to be a “risky investment”?

Today we are clearly facing a deluge of all kinds of social risks, and society itself is rushing forward boldly and blithely, risking everything because everything is at its disposal. Is not the formulation “risk society,” then, the “Trojan horse” of sociological science and the entire scientific apparatus, which leaves the self-totalising subjectivity of society intact or makes it a function of its own promotion? It is easy, of course, to theoretically dismiss these sorts of concerns, but at the same time, in practical terms, this could suppress critical awareness of how our general attitude about the state of the world has become suspiciously risky and is already beyond normal human comprehensivity. This abnormality, which also has a dramatic impact on the formation of social norms and political imperatives<sup>4</sup>, demands that we position the prevailing discourse of risk society in the context of today’s *erasure of the world-horizon*<sup>5</sup>,

<sup>4</sup> As a current example of this, consider the contemporary political and scientific glorification of nuclear energy as “green,” which is a complete reversal, given that since Chernobyl we have seen widespread political activity aimed at *closing* nuclear power plants, etc. Consider, too, how ecology has become a political issue that generates its own economy and requires a special reflection on the functionality and functioning of European and global political institutions and fora.

Another example is the monitoring of risky war situations in various parts of the world, with the fear that they could spread and escalate into a conflict of greater proportions, perhaps even destruction. Such hypocritical fears are at the same time “complemented” by constant war-goading and by concrete aid in the forms of money, arms and manpower, which leads to the conclusion that establishing world peace would be riskiest of all for today’s military, economic, technological, cultural and political drive for world domination. Let us not be distracted here by all sorts of philanthropic events and sporting events such as, say, the Olympic Games, and above all not by ethical tribunals.

<sup>5</sup> “In a world, in which space dominates, then there is no room for any notion of time or of place other than as modifications of space – other than as amenable to the numerical, the measurable, and the quantifiable; in such a world, what lies outside the objectivity of space and number can only be subjective and so conventional – or, one might say, ‘onstructed’. The difficulty, however, is that this leaves almost everything that pertains to the human as belonging to the realm of conventionality, and so as having no intrinsic foundation or limit, at the same time being completely subject to the supposed objectivity of the spatial and the numerical. Contemporary capitalism, conjoined with modern information systems, and embodied in the ‘market’ (itself an informational as much as economic system), becomes the all-encompassing technologi-

which we can follow live on our screens<sup>6</sup> and which social theories generally have little regard for, let alone take it as a key premise of their own occupation with the sociability of contemporary society. Instead, *theory* itself, with the all-encompassing aid of various media houses and housings, is becoming *theatre*. The society of the spectacle<sup>7</sup>, where we do not seem to risk anything, but in fact – without realising it – actually risk everything, is the best company for risk society. The result of this can only be a *calculation* that defines every possibility of *communication*, including scientific or religious communication. The ubiquitous calculative-communicative *economy of risk*, to which the use of the word “risk”<sup>8</sup> is originally allied, is, in terms of supply and demand, in strategic league with the *ecology of risk*, which in recent decades has acquired not only catastrophic but even apocalyptic tones<sup>9</sup>. *Rationalisation, computerisation, capitalisation, globalisation* on the one side, and *the apocalyptic, the catastrophic, riskiness, panic* on the opposite side, offer themselves up as determining *para-characteristics* of the present age

cal ‘machine’ that allows spatialized human subjectivity to be worked out within the realm of the objectively quantifiable and numerical. Moreover, there can be no easy defense against the encompassing reach of technological modernity, including its instantiation in contemporary capitalism, since technological modernity refuses the very idea of boundary or limit on which such a defense must depend” (J. Malpas, *The Spatialization of the World. Technology, Modernity, and the Effacement of the Human*, “Phainomena” 27, 106/107 (2018), pp. 101-101).

<sup>6</sup> “With the real-time transmitting and receiving power of the various signals alienating the nature of time distances, the active optics of electromagnetic waves exploits the depth of field, the very reality of our own world to the point of reducing it to nothing, or next to nothing, thereby leading to a catastrophic sense of incarceration now that humanity is literally deprived of horizon” (P. Virilio, *Open Sky*, trans. by Julie Rose, Verso, London 1997, p. 40-41; orig.: *La Vitesse de Liberation*, Éditions Galilée, Paris 1995, p. 55).

<sup>7</sup> Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (1967), Les Éditions Gallimard, Paris 1992; english: *The Society of the Spectacle*, Zone Books, New York 1995. See further: R. Gruneau, J. Horne (eds.), *Mega-Events and Globalization: Capital and spectacle in a changing world order*, Routledge, Abingdon-Oxon. 2017.

<sup>8</sup> “*Risk* (n.): 1660s, *risque*, ‘hazard, danger, peril, exposure to mischance or harm’, from French *risque* (16c.), from Italian *risco*, *rischio* (modern *rischio*), from *risicare* ‘run into danger’, a word of uncertain origin. The English spelling is recorded by 1728. Spanish *riesgo* and German *Risiko* are Italian loan-words. The commercial sense of ‘hazard of the loss of a ship, goods, or other properties’ is by 1719; hence the extension to ‘chance taken in an economic enterprise’. Paired with *run* (v.) from 1660s. *Risk aversion* is recorded from 1942; *risk factor* from 1906; *risk management* from 1963; *risk-taker* from 1892” (<https://www.etymonline.com/word/risk>). See also the chapter “The Concept of Risk” in: N. Luhmann, *Risk: A Sociological Theory*, transl. by R. Barrett, de Gruyter, New York 1993, pp. 1-39; orig.: *Soziologie des Risikos*, de Gruyter Berlin-New York 1991, pp. 9-40.

<sup>9</sup> J.-P. Dupuy, *How to Think about Catastrophe: Toward a Theory of Enlightened Doomsaying*, trans. by M.B. DeBevoise and M.R. Anspach, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2022; orig.: *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé*, Le Seuil, Paris 2002.

and of the image of humanity, i.e. (post-? hyper-? meta-? contra-?) modernity as... *bidirectional? multidirectional? unidirectional? or directionless!* course.

The very title of Beck's 1986 pioneering *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne* shows that he structurally defines "risk society" as a consequence of modernity, and this structural defining is further reinforced by his correcting "modernity" into "new modernity." In this context, Anthony Giddens' 1990 study *The Consequences of Modernity*<sup>10</sup> is cited as a reference work. Related to Giddens' insights is Beck's further structural determination of the "new modernity" as a *reflexive modernisation*, involving both (reflexive) scientification and politicisation. The label 'reflexivity,' which has its own exclusive and defining place within the shaping of modern philosophy and the forming of modern subjectivity, is used here more in the sense of what is being (reflexively) *reacted to*, which is also true of the aspect of *risk-consciousness* that characterises the current process of modernisation in comparison to previous ones<sup>11</sup>. This "reflexive cut," like the "knowledge society," may be conceptually weak but it is indicative in the sense that the risk to be reflected upon, not only after the fact but also *in advance* of the fact, is not produced by any particular social subjects, but by the very self-reflexive social system of production and consumption. To "reflect in advance" thus means not only "to react" in the sense of "to look at something" and "to pay attention," but "to keep under the spotlight" – to *exercise control*. A society that is reflected as risky must take recourse to a *methodology of control* that serves as its *prevailing worldview*, or rather as a *camera and a screen* that can present anything and everything as risky – that is, the whole world *and most of all the world*. The world has been riskily diminished through this presentation. It is therefore superficial and unfitting to talk about how the world is being globalised; rather, society is globalising (itself) as a subjectivity which, "respecting the principles of the free market," establishes dominance over the entire world and, in its totalization,

<sup>10</sup> A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity, Cambridge 1990.

<sup>11</sup> "While simple modernization ultimately situates the motor of social change in categories of instrumental rationality (reflection), 'reflexive' modernization conceptualizes the motive power of social change in categories of the side-effect (reflexivity). Things at first unseen and unreflected, but externalized, add up to the structural rupture that separates industrial from 'new' modernities in the present and the future. 'Reflexive' thus also implies reflex-like and simultaneously historic modernization (which, of course, as the present enterprise evidences, can be conceptualized, that is, reflected)" (U. Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics. Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 45; orig.: *Die Erfindung des Politischen*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1993, p. 51).

exercises total control. On this basis, it establishes its own *ecosociology*, by which it no longer, and no longer only, means social theory and critical social reflection. In reflexive modernisation, ecosociology (where “eco” is to be understood strictly as a conflation of ecology, ecology and eco-technology) has become *a key medium for the self-(re)production* of society itself. As a system of self(re)production, society synthesises both the functions of subjectivity and objectivity – it is the *society of society*, as Niklas Luhmann suggested in the title of one of his most extensive works<sup>12</sup>.

¶In 1991, within the framework of a more broadly developed theory of social systems, Luhmann published *Soziologie des Risikos*. Significantly, Luhmann explicitly redirects the debate on risk society towards a sociology of risk, and he builds on the reflexive modernisation perspective with the autopoiesis of society as a system in process:

Above all, this requires exact definition of the concept of risk, and analysis of the reasons why the concept and the facts it refers to have been gaining in importance in the more recent development of the societal system. We will reply to this question with the thesis that the dependence of society’s future on decision making has increased, and nowadays so dominates ideas about the future that all concept of ‘forms of being’, which – as Nature – intrinsically limit what can happen, has been abandoned. Technology and the concomitant awareness of capability has occupied nature’s territory, and both surmise and experience indicate that this can more easily prove destructive than constructive. The fear that things could go wrong is therefore growing rapidly and with it the risk apportioned to decision making. In this analysis the concepts of decision and technology (in a sense yet to be specified) play an important role. It is thus all the more necessary to point out from the start that no mental and no material (machine-like) phenomena are meant. Our analysis of society is exclusively concerned with communications. Communication, and nothing else, is the operation by which society as a system produces and reproduces itself by ‘autopoiesis’. This is naturally not to deny that the environment of the societal system contains realities that an observer can describe as consciousness or as machine<sup>13</sup>.

Through his attempt to transcend a subjectivist social theory on the basis of the concept of autopoiesis, Luhmann at the same time systematically fixe the understanding of the sociability of society as a self-reproducing subject-

<sup>12</sup> N. Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 2 Bd., Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1997; english translation: *Theory of Society*, by R. Barrett, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Vol. 1: 2012, Vol. 2: 2013.

<sup>13</sup> N. Luhmann, *Risk: A Sociological Theory*, trans. by R. Barrett, de Gruyter, New York 1993, p. XII; orig: *Soziologie des Risikos*, de Gruyter. Berlin-New York 1991, p. 6.

tivity in the process of reflexive modernisation. By turning away from the “society of risk” to the “sociology of risk”, he in no way compromises the view that the economic, technological, ecological, population, political, cultural and other processes that take place within society, or in conflict with it, rather than *society itself*, are to blame for the global instability. If we accept that the flexion of modernity dictates the procedure of reflexive modernisation, the problem arises of how and through which channels *communication* – which Luhmann counts as a systemic condition of society’s self-production – should take place, since otherwise society as a system loses control, which constitutes a particular kind of risk. The channels of communication must therefore be channelled through *informational systematisation*.

The information society, which has the power to render the world uniform, communicates in a manner that abolishes the form of *tradition*, as well as the formative entities of *communitas* and *civitas*. This has a direct impact on the institution of the *public sphere* and on the functioning of so-called *civil society*, which makes varied appeals for greater social responsibility, wise decisions, solidarity, human conversion, and revolutionary changes within the social order. But all ethics, politics and social activism of various origins and orientations are powerless to do anything in this respect. We have even come to the point where the militaristic option and the strictly controlled reorganisation of the social base, directed by the highest political instances, remains as the only solution. In Slavoj Žižek’s recent book *Too Late to Awaken: What Lies Ahead When There Is No Future?*, we can read:

The situation is similar across Europe, from Germany to my own Slovenia. To cope with our ongoing, escalating crises, from threats to our environment to unfolding wars, we will need elements of what, in this book, I provocatively call ‘war Communism’: mobilizations that will have to violate not only the usual market rules but also the established rules of democracy (enforcing measures and limiting freedoms without democratic approval).

A collection of Bertolt Brecht’s (largely ignored or forgotten) short interviews and encounters was recently published under the title *Our Hope Today Is the Crisis*. Let’s be courageous enough to fully endorse this insight: instead of just trying to escape, postpone, or minimize the threat posed by the four new riders of the apocalypse; instead of continuing to dwell in our melancholic apathy and frantically doing nothing, let’s mobilize ourselves to attack the roots of our crisis, with all the risks that this involves. Because the greatest risk today is doing nothing and allowing history to follow its course<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> S. Žižek, *Too Late to Awaken: What Lies Ahead When There is no Future?*, Allen Lane, London 2023, p. 148.

Žižek, referring to his earlier observations on “risk society”<sup>15</sup>, appeals to the need to do something, to take action and mobilise masses of people, also in the style of a soft or hard revolutionary upheaval, instead of snugly giving in to the course of history, albeit with a bit of kvetching and bleating along the way. Actually, he is right. But what if the key discomfort lies precisely in the “*course of history*,” which is unrelentingly sweeping us away, sparing us nothing? It is easy to identify it as “modernity,” much more difficult to figure out what drives it, because it is as if there is nothing there, no subjective or substantive basis. But perhaps we must not lose sight of how it is precisely the fact that there is *nothing here* that characterises the *mode of modernity*, which nevertheless and with a faceless indifference takes its course and control, staging a total mobilisation. What is essentially absent in this “never ending story” after “the end of history” is the *world-horizon*. Instead of the world, there are its *mobiles*, which, constantly in circulation, are entirely fungible and even useful as a substitute for the historical world. The more we try to proclaim this circulation as modern, the less historical it is in its course, the more a *total social drive* is being processed; this is carrying out a *total mobilisation*, which, “with a little compromise,” of course can be called “reflexive modernisation.” This in no way abolishes the unrelenting *flexion of modernity*, but merely prepares the power to manage it that belongs to a self-managing society. *The flexion of modernity is systematically reflected in the totalization of social subjectivity.*

If we make use of Baumann’s formulation *liquid modernity* in this context, the question arises as to how modernity maintains its *liquidity* while at the same time falling into *delinquency*, even into *liquidations*. Baumann identifies “liquid modernity”, which moves with total speed<sup>16</sup> and at the same time never gets anywhere, as a global functioning power or power complex, although he avoids defining it as a *power that empowers society itself*:

The disintegration of the social network, the falling apart of effective agencies of collective action is often noted with a good deal of anxiety and bewailed as the unanticipated ‘side effect’ of the new lightness and fluidity of the increasingly mobile, slippery, shifty, evasive and fugitive power. But social disintegration is as much a condition as it is the outcome of the new technique of power, using disengagement and the art of escape as its major tools. For power to be free to flow, the world must be free of fences, barriers, fortified borders and checkpoints. Any

<sup>15</sup> See S. Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, Verso, New York-London 2011, pp. 408-409.

<sup>16</sup> P. Virilio, *Open Sky*, trans. by Julie Rose, Verso, London 1997; orig.: *La Vitesse de Libération*, Éditions Galilée, Paris 1995.

dense and tight network of social bonds, and particularly a territorially rooted tight network, is an obstacle to be cleared out of the way. Global powers are bent on dismantling such networks for the sake of their continuous and growing fluidity, that principal source of their strength and the warrant of their invincibility. And it is the falling apart, the friability, the brittleness, the transience, the until-further-noticeness of human bonds and networks which allow these powers to do their job in the first place<sup>17</sup>.

“Liquid modernity,” which trudges over all the borders of the world and yet gets nowhere, must be recognised as *nihilistic* in the sense that it *nihilises the world-horizon*. The nihilisation of the world *mobilises the subjectivation of society* such that it risks its own totalization in the function of total domination over a world in which everything – and at the same time nothing – *functions*. The world is totally at disposal, but it appears rotten and indigestible. With the ongoing nihilisation of the world, the subjectivity of society receives from *nothing* the power of over everything, with the risk of falling under everything and receding *back to nothing*. The *society-power* therefore does not tolerate unwillingness towards the world and cannot endure any will at all, let alone “rational action”. It is all about the fact that it functions, and goes on, even if it gets nowhere and is without purpose and meaning, which is no problem at all; in fact, by turning everything into a problem, everything that could be a serious problem disappears. All that remains is aimless spinning with the risk of dizziness.

The nihilism of the modern circulation, or, for that matter, of the “post-modern condition”<sup>18</sup>, was first recognised by Nietzsche, who writes in an 1887 passage:

It is clear, what I combat is *economic* optimism: as if increasing expenditure of *everybody* must necessarily involve the increasing welfare of everybody. The opposite seems to me to be the case: *expenditure of everybody amounts to a collective*

<sup>17</sup> Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity, Cambridge 2000, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by G. Bennington and B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984; orig. *La Condition post-moderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Minuit, Paris 1979. “Everything is now organized and planned; nature has been triumphantly blotted out, along with peasants, petit-bourgeois commerce, handicraft, feudal aristocracies and imperial bureaucracies. Ours is a more homogeneously modernized condition; we no longer are encumbered with the embarrassment of non-simultaneities and non-synchronicities. Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development or rationalization (at least from the perspective of the ‘West’). This is the sense in which we can affirm, either that modernism is characterized by a situation of incomplete modernization, or that Postmodernism is more modern than modernism itself” (F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 1991, p. 383).

*loss*: man is *diminished* – so one no longer knows *what aim* this tremendous process has served. An aim? a *new aim*? – that is what humanity needs<sup>19</sup>.

This is pursued in the following fragment<sup>20</sup>:

“‘*Modernity*’ through the metaphor of nourishment and digestion.”

The circulation of modernity, which Nietzsche defines by comparing it to eating and digestion, lacks a goal but that lack is no obstacle to “economic optimism.” By combating it, Nietzsche does not especially take into focus the empowerment of society’s subjectivity throughout the entire food chain. Even the sporadic malfunctions of its powerful organism and occasional indigestion in its big belly do not stop the immense appetite of society – as long as it maintains constant control, so that, as Nietzsche’s diagnosis of nihilism already suggests, everything *falls below the level*. The self-totalising society’s power of *subjectivation*, *subjectivisation* and *subjection* (“reflexive modernisation”, “autopoietic system” and “total mobilisation”), in the function of establishing control over everything, degrades the world and all existing, with a man at the head<sup>21</sup>. This *society in power* is not Nietzsche’s will to power, since Nietzsche conceives it as immanent to the world itself, not as its nihilisation. The nihilism that characterises the totalization of *society-power* is not primary destructive, but *nihilising*. The main risk of “risk society” is the *nihilisation of the world-horizon*. This is not to unburden it of its complicity in the various phenomena of destructive violence and the threat of global annihilation,

<sup>19</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed., with commentary, W. Kaufmann with Facsimiles of the Original Manuscript Vintage, New York 1968, p. 464. orig.: F. Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, KSA 12, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari, DTV-de Gruyter, München-Berlin-New York 1988, p. 463.

<sup>20</sup> After the German edition: *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885-1887*, KSA 12, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari, DTV-de Gruyter, München-Berlin-New York 1988, p. 464 (“Die ‘*Modernität*’ unter dem Gleichniß von Ernährung und Verdauung”); english trans. *The Will to Power*, Vintage, New York 1968 p. 47. *Unpublished Fragments, (Summer 1886 - Fall 1887)* as the 17th volume of the *Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (english translation of the full contents of the *Kritische Studienausgabe*) will not be released until next year.

<sup>21</sup> “The disposition of nihilism is a *liminal* one in that we cannot interpret it in either a psychological or a social perspective as an effect of a negative ‘subjective experience’, since as such it expresses *the crisis of the dominant self-perception of the humanness* of the human being as *subjectivity*. It manifests itself primarily in the fact that, despite our being ‘chained’ to all possible information means – which are omnipresent and available to everyone – we fundamentally do not know *what we are witnessing in the world and what is being witnessed as our own existential meaning*” (M. Eržetič, *Vulnerability and Testimony within the Nihilistic Experience and Existential Attestation*, in “Teoria”, Rivista di filosofia fondata da Vittorio Sainati XLIII, 1, 2023 (Terza serie XVIII/1), pp. 71-72.

quite the contrary. However, the precondition for these destructive effects is the nihilisation of the world horizon, which is constantly and permanently under ultimate control, so that it can disappear into infinity.

Whether and to what extent Nietzsche himself was already able to recognise the *nihilistic machination in the totalization of society-power* is not overly important here. However, the matter was certainly confronted by those who, “with a hammer” or some other tool, were able to relate to his philosophy, which conceals within itself the riddle of the future<sup>22</sup>. Let us cite in particular Michel Foucault and his consideration of *biopolitics*, which defines the new power of the control society<sup>23</sup>. The biopolitical management of life have been critically examined by Giorgio Agamben in the context of the measures taken to curb the COVID pandemic:

We can use the term ‘biosecurity’ to describe the government apparatus that consists of this new religion of health, conjoined with the state power and its state of exception – an apparatus that is probably the most efficient of its kind that Western history has ever known. Experience has in fact shown that, once a threat to health is in place, people are willing to accept limitations on their freedom that they would never theretofore have considered enduring – not even during the two world wars, nor under totalitarian dictatorships<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> See M. Heidegger, *Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?*, in “Review of Metaphysics” 20, 3 (1967) (pp. 411-431), p. 430; orig.: *Wer ist Nietzsches Zarathustra?*, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, GA 7, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, p. 123.

<sup>23</sup> M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979*, trans. by G. Burche, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2008; orig.: *Naissance de la biopolitique, Cours au Collège de France (1978-1979)*, Gallimard, Seuil-Paris 2004. In connection with this, Gilles Deleuze, another Nietzsche acolyte and a contemporary of Foucault, writes: “These are the societies of control, which are in the process of replacing the disciplinary societies. ‘Control’ is the name Burroughs proposes as a term for the new monster, one that Foucault recognizes as our immediate future. Paul Virilio also is continually analyzing the ultra-rapid forms of free-floating control that replaced the old disciplines operating in the time frame of a closed system. There is no need here to invoke the extraordinary pharmaceutical productions, the molecular engineering, the genetic manipulations, although these are slated to enter into the new process. There is no need to ask which is the toughest or most tolerable regime, for it's within each of them that liberating and enslaving forces confront one another. For example, in the crisis of the hospital as environment of enclosure, neighborhood clinics, hospices, and day care could at first express new freedom, but they could participate as well in mechanisms of control that are equal to the harshest of confinements. There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons” (G. Deleuze, *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, in “October” 59, 1992, pp. 3-7, p. 4). See further: G., Burchell, C. Gordon, P. Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect, Studies in Governmentality, with Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991.

<sup>24</sup> G. Agamben, *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*, trans. by V.D. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, etc. (MA) 2021, p. 9; orig.: *A che punto siamo? L'epidemia come politica*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2020.

Here it is not so important whether and to which extent we agree or disagree with Agamben's critique of the social measures taken during the COVID pandemic<sup>25</sup>. Of course, other arguments can be tabled<sup>26</sup>, but we should primarily ask ourselves what is being offered here as an alternative? And is there any alternative at all? Or must we cede and acknowledge that the *cooperative power of technology and the technology of power* in the process of the totalization of social subjectivity is without an alternative? Today, this cooperative power is guaranteed in operational terms by *artificial intelligence*, which has immediately proved itself to be an extremely risky tool, if not a weapon, one which no one will forgo because of the profitability it provides, but rather will try to normatively formulate the conditions of its use, almost as if it were a *secret intelligence service*. But until when?

The Doomsday Clock, the model for which was created in 1947 by the artist Martyl Langsdorf through her famous picture, and which was subsequently adopted by scientists working on the atomic bomb within the Manhattan Project to symbolically measure how long humanity has left before total annihilation, stopped at 90 seconds before midnight in 2024. A statement from the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, which maintains the clock's measurement capabilities, pointed out, *inter alia*:

One of the most significant technological developments in the last year involved the dramatic advance of generative artificial intelligence. The apparent sophistication of chatbots based on large language models, such as ChatGPT, led some respected experts to express concern about existential risks arising from further rapid advancements in the field. But others argue that claims about existential risk distract from the real and immediate threats that AI poses today [...]. Regardless, AI is a paradigmatic disruptive technology; recent efforts at global governance of AI should be expanded.

AI has great potential to magnify disinformation and corrupt the information environment on which democracy depends. AI-enabled disinformation efforts could be a factor that prevents the world from dealing effectively with nuclear risks, pandemics, and climate change<sup>27</sup>.

The following questions arise: to what extent does the Doomsday Clock

<sup>25</sup> See S. Sabeva, *Life with the virus. A Phenomenology of Infectious Sociality*, in "Phainomena" 30, 116/117 (2021), pp. 41-60.

<sup>26</sup> J.-L. Nancy, *Eccezione virale*, in "Antinomie. Scritture e immagini", 27/02/2020, <https://antinomie.it/index.php/2020/02/27/eccezione-virale/>

<sup>27</sup> A *moment of historic danger: It is still 90 seconds to midnight. 2024 Doomsday Clock Statement*, in "Science and Security Board, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists", <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/current-time/>

measure time? and which time? and, in particular, does it measure historical time? and in what way does the effort to raise awareness of the urgent global condition of humanity, which can in fact be healed, intervene in social space – to the degree, of course, that we take into account that the subjectivity of society extends its power over everything, without which AI would not have the chance to elevate. The rupture that looms as the locus of humanity’s failure is foresaged in the very process of the AI development; according to the *theory of the technological singularity*, sooner or later there will surely come a moment when AI will outdo human intellect and take over all control functions.

Which we could understand as: no longer will the totalization of subjectivity of the society involve any risk, since the final risk concerning man’s position in the world will have been annulated. Well, let us allow ourselves a little remark: given the fact that artificial intelligence can infinitely outdo the natural human intellect,<sup>28</sup> perhaps it would be advisable to *slow down time*, to *give time time*, to *find a place for time*, to *free up time*, just as, long, long ago, for the sake of philosophy, for the sake of wondering at what is and what has its time, it was freed up in the *schole*.

## Abstract

*In recent decades, discussion about “risk society” has been allotted considerable attention both in studies and among the critically minded public. This article examines risk society in terms of a totalizing society-power of a social subjectivity that erases the world horizon and proves to be nihilistic in its empowerment. Society, as self-establishing, not only follows the course of modernity, which in its unrelenting drifting gets nowhere but also, within its own totalization, risks anticipation of the same. In this connection, the notions of “reflexive modernisation” in Ulrich Beck, of “liquid modernity” in Zygmunt Bauman, and of the “self-production of social systems” in Niklas Luhmann*

<sup>28</sup> “A key capability in the 2030s will be to connect the upper ranges of our neocortices to the cloud, which will directly extend our thinking. In this way, rather than AI being a competitor, it will become an extension of ourselves. By the time this happens, the nonbiological portions of our minds will provide thousands of times more cognitive capacity than the biological parts.

As this progresses exponentially, we will extend our minds many millions-fold by 2045. It is this incomprehensible speed and magnitude of transformation that will enable us to borrow the singularity metaphor from physics to describe our future” (Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer: When We Merge with AI*, Viking, New York 2024, p. 18).

*have been particularly adopted for critical discussion. “Risk society” as an “operational concept” presupposes the apparatus of ecosociology, which links eco-nomics, eco-logy and eco-technology and has taken over the executive function of control, so that everything has the power to function.*

Keywords: risk society; control society; modernity; nihilism; totalisation.

Dean Komel  
University of Ljubljana  
*dean.komel@guest.arnes.si*