

# Individualization and the Aporias of Modernity

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## Abstract

Ulrich Beck's musings on individualization have been described as a theory that provides a convincing explanation of what is happening in society, but has it seemed convincing because of its superior explanatory power or because it says what those who have been convinced wanted to hear anyway? This paper argues that, far from explaining more or better, the theory is haunted by intractable contradictions and paradoxes and that, at the root of these problems, is the sociological imagination itself, which insists on treating modernity as an empirical reality. This paper's contention, by contrast, is that there is no such thing as modernity in society and history. It is an empty signifier, a phantom or, to use Beck's own colourful terminology, a 'zombie category'.

**Keywords:** Aporias, autonomy, Beck, individualization, modernity, sociological imagination.

## Introduction

Beck's theory of individualization (Beck, 1989; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) has been described as a 'concept [that] provides a convincing explanation of what is happening in contemporary society'.<sup>1</sup> Has it been convincing, however, because of its superior explanatory power, as the claim implies, or because it says what those who have been convinced wanted to hear anyway, namely, that it is possible to do the impossible — for example, 'to have one's cake and eat it' (Atkinson 2007b: 709)?

I believe the latter to be the case and, unlike Atkinson, who raises the question but does not pursue it, I wish to explore what this explanation might be and why it is impossible. Although I cannot prove that this desire is the reason for the theory's popularity — for who would admit to it? — there is ample evidence to suggest that it has not been convincing for its explanatory power. I will not be concerned here with the empirically related problems that have been raised from various quarters: how to prove, for example, that the West is re-modernizing (Latour 2003) or whether Beck provides sufficient evidence to substantiate his claims.<sup>2</sup> The problem I wish to examine is more fundamental than these empirical shortcomings, insofar at least as it opens Beck's thesis to a wider critique that concerns the architectonics of the theory, the coherence of the argument that Beck is seeking to develop. It is a problem that, to my knowledge, has been completely overlooked, which is all the more surprising given that even a cursory reading of Beck's texts on individualization quickly reveals that they are marred by innumerable contradictions and paradoxes. Indeed, even Beck himself recognizes and names some of them — 'the paradox of "institutional individualism"' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 23), for example, or the 'paradox of "imposed freedom"' (2002: 163).

Atkinson (2007a, 2007b), who noted some contradictions in Beck — especially the latter's apparent inability to make up his mind whether individualization is dis-

embedding *with* subsequent re-embedding or *without* — did so selectively and strategically. In effect, his concern was to save the notion of class, which Beck dismisses as a ‘zombie category’. There is no mention in Atkinson’s critique of the paradoxes that Beck himself recognizes, despite the fact that they are as likely to undermine the individualization thesis. But perhaps there is more that unites critics like Atkinson with Beck than divides them; first and foremost, one presumes, the idea of modernity itself. At any rate, whatever the reasons for this highly selective critique, Atkinson’s discussion remains conceptually limited. Nowhere does it attempt to analyze the contradictions it highlights, nor does it ever ask why Beck ends up contradicting himself so often.

It is, of course, entirely possible to explain the contradictions by saying that Beck is careless with his statements, insufficiently attentive to what he says, unsystematic in his reasoning — in short, by portraying them as the outcome of personal shortcomings. And although this cannot be ruled out — certainly, Beck has a penchant for the dramatic and the hyperbolic — it could also be the case, as it so often is, that matters are far more complicated and convoluted. It could be that Beck cannot avoid contradicting himself at almost every turn because he is trying to do the impossible.

This is the argument that I will try to develop in this paper. Beck insists that modernity is an empirical reality, a way of life that developed in Western societies, initially at least, identifiable and distinguishable from other ways of life, first and foremost from modernity’s devalued other — the traditional. My argument is that this claim is the root of all of Beck’s problems, for there is no such thing as modernity in society and history. It is an empty signifier, a phantom, a figment of the sociological imagination, or, to use Beck’s own term for such ideas, a ‘zombie category’. To say this is not to claim that Western societies are the same as non-Western societies. It is to argue, rather, that whatever the differences between them, they cannot be understood in terms of the idea of modernity. The latter is not an object of possible experience, as Kant would say, or, to use Derridian terminology, it cannot appear and become (a) present.

This paper is written from an anthropological perspective insofar at least as it pleads ignorance concerning the fundamental question of what it means to be a human being. In the sociological tradition, the meaning of humanity is posited a priori: to be (human, a human society) is to be modern. Anthropology, by contrast, insists that this is an empirical question and treats different ways of life as so many experiments in human being.<sup>3</sup> It should go without saying, therefore — but I will emphasise it, in any case — that this paper is not meant as a critique of the Western way of life. What it does criticise is the pretension that this way of life is something other (and superior) than what it actually is.

### **On the Question of Modernity**

On the surface of things, what Beck is trying to do should be clear enough to anyone who cares to read his work. Atkinson (2007a: 351), for example, notes that Beck is ‘attempting to tread a theoretical path between the nihilistic tendencies of an over-zealous postmodernism and the myopia of a bankrupt faith in modernity’. This is not far off the mark, even though, when phrased in this way, the statement is biased and misleading. To begin with, the portrayal of postmodernism as over-zealous and nihilistic

is presented as a matter of fact, not as Beck's own understanding of it. Many would no doubt disagree with such an evaluation, but perhaps this is also Atkinson's own understanding and one of the things that unite him with Beck, whatever their differences when it comes to the question of class. Moreover, faith in modernity may be myopic but it certainly is not bankrupt. Had it been, Beck would not have spent so much time and effort to save it by positing a 'second modernity'; nor would he have gone to such lengths as to propose 'taboos' that would protect modernity from what Beck perceives as the danger of further erosion, even dissolution (Beck and Sznaider 2011: 423). Modernity — and the precise meaning of this term requires elaboration — is the stake in Beck's argument of individualization. It is what he must criticise if his idea of a second modernity as an alternative to postmodernity is to get off the ground. But it is also what he must preserve if the master distinction between the modern and the pre-modern is to be maintained — and with it, of course, the difference between the West and its others: the other without, to be sure, the non-West as the Rest, but also, what is often overlooked, the other within, the European that the category 'Western European' excludes.<sup>4</sup>

What I will keep from Atkinson's understanding of Beck's aim is the key image of a path in-between. Beck wants to tread the middle ground, to find the right measure, to strike the right balance. He does not want to be a 'pessimistic' postmodernist, but nor does he want to be a naïve proponent of modernity — neither the one nor the other. He wants to be a critic of 'first modernity' but within reason, not an 'over-zealous' critic, not to the extent that his critique would threaten the idea of modernity itself. And, reciprocally, he wants to be a modernist but not of the traditional kind, not to the extent that he becomes blind to the problems of first modernity. To put it in terms of the object of this desire, what Beck wants is neither a traditional modernity, non-reflexive and self-satisfied like first modernity, nor a postmodernity — in Beck's view, critical and self-absorbed to the extent that it becomes self-destructive. He wants a modernity that is somewhere in the middle, reflexive and self-critical so that it can be distinguishable from the traditional, but not so reflexive and self-critical as to endanger its own existence. In short, he wants the best of both worlds, which is to say, everything: a society that preserves and reproduces itself on the basis of certain fundamental beliefs and values, but a society which is nonetheless modern and not traditional, despite the fact that these beliefs and values are taboo and are taken for granted. Hence the otherwise amusing claim that the 'taboos' of second modernity are 'reflexive' and 'post-traditional' (Beck and Sznaider 2011).

Speaking of taboos, it may not be amiss to mention here one of sociology's academic taboos — anthropology — and what it has to say about the middle ground.<sup>5</sup> As is well known, this is the space 'betwixt and between', neither here nor there, hence nowhere in particular, a 'liminal position' occupied by those in rites of passage who are no longer what they were — boys, say — and not yet what they will become — men, in this example.<sup>6</sup> At this point in the ritual, they are neither the one nor the other, neither this nor that. They are nothing — nothing socially visible or recognisable for lack of categories that would make them visible in this way — and it is no accident that the images associated with these rites of transition are images of silence, invisibility, darkness,

and death. This, it seems, is where Beck places himself and locates the object of his desire — nowhere. Only, this is not a rite of passage and there is no way out of this liminal condition. For all his talk of ‘zombie categories’, it does not seem to have occurred to Beck that modernity itself may be such a category; indeed, may have always been one (e.g. Latour 1993). Or, if it has occurred to him, it must have appeared as a terrifying spectre to be exorcised at all costs. Beck is afraid to acknowledge that it is a phantom he is talking about, and he wants us to be afraid too. He fears ‘new, barbaric alternatives [to modernity]’ (Beck and Sznaider 2011: 418), horrors such as the Holocaust and eugenics, which he parades in his taboo article for us to take note, as though such things have not happened in societies that have called themselves modern. Beck must cling to the notion of modernity and treat it in precisely the same way in which he accuses others of treating ‘zombie categories’ — as a real, living being. This is the root of his problems and explains all the contradictions and paradoxes in his texts.

The discussion so far has been operating with the assumption that reflexivity — understood as questioning and doubting, criticising, refusing to take things for granted (as a grant or gift) — is fundamental to modernity. This is consistent with everything that Beck has to say about the traditional, the shortcomings of first modernity as well as the process of change he calls ‘reflexive modernisation’ (see e.g. Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994). As we shall see, it is also consistent with the wider intellectual and cultural tradition that goes by the name of the Enlightenment and with its motto: ‘think for yourself. Elsewhere (Argyrou 2013), I have argued for the impossibility of this tenet — to think for yourself, you must not think for yourself; you must take this tenet for granted. This paradox aside, I have also tried to show that, sociologically speaking, to think for yourself would require the subject to purge itself of everything that it has ever taken for granted; that is, make the historical unconscious visible. If such a monumental socio-analysis were possible, it would destroy the subject. The latter would be free to do anything but would have a desire for nothing. As Manheim (1936), among others, has shown, with the historical unconscious uncovered, life would be meaningless. Here I wish to argue for the impossibility of modernity by following a different path, since reflexivity does not exhaust how modernity is perceived and begs the question: why doubt and question everything? Why reinvent the wheel when it has already been invented and is available to anyone who cares to use it? As this is clearly not a rational way of going about doing things, we must raise the question of modernity afresh, which is also what Beck himself does: ‘the question is: what is modernity?’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 157). Beck considers this a complicated question — which it is — and vouches ‘to give a simple, comprehensible answer’ — which he does not. Let us turn to this answer briefly:

The answer is: not just ‘instrumental rationality’ (Max Weber), ‘optimal use of capital’ (Marx) or ‘functional differentiation’ (Talcott Parsons, Niklas Luhmann), but supplementing and conflicting with these, it is *political freedom*, citizenship and civil society... Modernity accordingly means that a world of traditional certainty is perishing and being replaced, if we are fortunate, by legally sanctioned individualism for everyone (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 157).

This is hardly a simple and easily comprehensible answer. What is worse (for Beck), it does not sit very well with either the kind of individualism that he imagines in second modernity or the idea of reflexivity itself. Instrumental rationality comes across as cold and self-serving, while optimal use of capital cannot be easily divorced from ideas of profit-making and exploitation. By contrast, as we shall see below, Beck's individual in second modernity is not only co-operative but also altruistic. As for functional differentiation, this is a property of systems and is far removed from the reflexive individual that Beck places at the centre of second modernity. Be that as it may, and problematic though it is, Beck's answer to the question of modernity adds an indispensable element — freedom. In the quotation above, Beck specifies it as political, but as we will see shortly, what he has in mind is something far broader. Before we turn to this issue, however, it may be worthwhile to refer to some of the things that Beck does not include in his vision of second modernity — things that often have been, and probably still are, considered by some as fundamental modern characteristics. What I have in mind is science and technology and the related idea of progress. Such things are now associated by many with a 'myopic faith in modernity', with first or traditional modernity, and it is understandable that Beck wants to maintain his distance. Secularism receives no mention either, and this, too, is no accident. As we shall see shortly, Beck considers a certain kind of religion to be vital to second modernity.

Let us, then, return to the question of freedom. As we have noted, the principle of reflexivity considered on its own begs the question as to why anyone would want to reinvent the wheel. Freedom provides the missing link that makes this a reasonable proposition. It is for the sake of autonomy that the individual becomes reflexive. This is why this persona supposedly questions and doubts everything, why it refuses to take anything for granted. The autonomy of the individual is at the centre of any conceptualisation of modernity, Beck's conceptualisation of second modernity included. It is also what forces him to address questions he would rather not face, 'bitter' questions, he says, since answers to them reveal the fundamental contradictions at the heart of his project. 'Does acknowledgement of the freedom of others apply equally to despots as to democrats?' Beck asks. Apparently despots violate the freedom of others and it may be necessary to violate their freedom in turn. 'In some cases, [despots] can perhaps only be kept down by force.' This would be a contradiction — violating freedom for freedom's sake — but, as Beck will admit, 'it is necessary to confront the contradiction, and if necessary break with one's own principles... in order to preserve them'. To preserve freedom, Beck is saying here, one must break with it, negate or eliminate it. In other words, to preserve it, one must not preserve it. And this paradox applies everywhere, including the case of those who may not be despots but enjoy so much freedom as to threaten its existence — the 'over-zealous postmodernists' who are the target of the 'taboo' article. 'The radicalization of modernity can also turn into its creeping dissolution... This means that the excessive, taboo-free exploitation of possibilities and freedoms ends by abolishing freedom' (Beck and Sznaider 2011: 423). Too much freedom, freedom without limits, freedom itself, or in itself, destroys itself. To preserve it, Beck is suggesting, one must break with it, curtail it, in effect abolish it. Any

way one looks at it, then, there is no such thing as freedom in society and history. If one does not intervene, freedom destroys itself by itself; if one does, it is destroyed by the intervention.<sup>7</sup>

We have noted that the autonomy and, as we shall see, dignity of the individual is at the core of Beck's second modernity and, in the 'taboo' article, he will raise the question of how these values can take root in everyday life: 'How do these values become the vantage point of the personal identity of human beings and thereby also politically significant? How do they acquire and renew their reality in rituals and strike root in post-national communities?' This is where Durkheim and his notion of the cult of the individual come in handy. 'At issue,' says Beck, 'are the boundaries between the profane and the holy as well as the sacred character of existence.' And in case anyone finds this kind of talk too metaphysical and religious for a disenchanted world, Beck will marshal the authority of Durkheim. 'This was also suggested by Emile Durkheim's sociological project. At the transition of the nineteenth to the twentieth century Emile Durkheim, for example, talked of the "religion of individualism".' If Durkheim talked of religion and did not think that such talk would damage the reputation of first modernity, why should we think that it would damage the reputation of the second?

Durkheim was... concerned... with the dignity of the individual... [and] wished to lend secular sociology transcendental features... He stressed the worldly sanctity, which the autonomy of the individual, as a fundamental principle of modern society, has meanwhile achieved. He was concerned with moral individualism, which is both transcendental and of this world. To him that was the true expression of modernity... Something similar can also be said today of the 'secular' religion of cosmopolitan morality (Beck and Sznaider 2011: 421-22).

For the modernist, then, the highest of all values — which is another way of saying, the sacred — is the autonomy and dignity of the individual. It is modernity's essence, what modernity would be if the autonomy of the individual (and the individual itself) were ever possible. For, as we have seen already and will discuss further in what follows, it is not possible: to be preserved, freedom must be abolished, to be, it must not be.<sup>8</sup> This fundamental value — the autonomy of the individual — is of course far older than Durkheim's positing of it as the core and, indeed, the only common value of modernity (Lukes 1969). One can trace it back to the 'dawn' of modernity — if this is the right term for something that has never appeared — to Locke, for example, or Kant, which, ironically, suggests that, in academia, if not anywhere else, we are not 'losing the traditional' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002); we are faithfully reproducing it! 'The maxim of thinking for oneself at all times is enlightenment,' says Kant (1991a [1786]: 249) in a well-known essay. And in another, even more famous piece, he spells out in no uncertain terms the consequences of having others doing one's thinking. It is not simply that such people 'remain immature for life' and are treated like children who need a 'guardian' to look after them and speak for them. The image is much darker than that and places the humanity of the 'immature' in question. Such people are 'domesticated

animals’, says Kant (1991b [1784]: 54), ‘docile creature’ on the leash — ‘the leading strings’. An image from a by-gone era, one might say. Perhaps, but the understanding that, without autonomy, a person has no dignity and is not quite a person remains a fundamental presupposition. It may even be behind the educational system’s aim of cultivating ‘independent thought’ — a contradiction in terms, apparently, since, if it is taught, thought is no longer independent.

### Autonomy and Difference

Beck imagines the West (some parts of it, as we have seen — the western parts — more than others) to be populated by individuals, which is to say, subjects that are both different from one another and autonomous. They must be different because this is, after all, what it means to be an individual: ‘the “essence of individuality” may therefore be understood as “radical non-identity”’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 27). And they must be autonomous because this, too, is what it means to be an individual — self-interested perhaps, certainly self-determining, a subject that thinks for itself, makes its own decisions, runs its own life. Individuals must be both different from one another and autonomous, but are they? Is there such a thing as the individual in society and history, or is this another figment of the modernist imagination? Beck is aware of the latter possibility at some level. He is certainly well aware that individualism and social solidarity do not go very well together, if at all. His problem, however, is that he needs both. The individual is an indispensable player in this drama, the defining characteristic of modern society. Social solidarity is equally indispensable — it is what every society needs to reproduce itself over time. If Beck is to save modernity, therefore, he must both insist on and deny the reality of the individual. He must contradict himself — and, of course, deny the contradictions: ‘New “we” orientations are creating something like a co-operative or altruistic individualism. Thinking of oneself and living for others, once considered a *contradiction in terms*, is revealed as an *internal connection*. In fact, living alone means living socially’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 28; my emphases). I will first consider the impossibility of this persona from an ontological point of view and then turn to how Beck deals with it at the sociological level.

Although it may not be readily apparent, autonomy and difference, the two constituent elements of the individual, do not sit very well together. In fact, they do not sit together at all. They un-sit one another, and do so because there is only one seat and it cannot accommodate both. Autonomous individuals cannot be different from one another. This very quality — autonomy — makes them the same kind of people. Indeed, insofar as autonomy is said to be a fundamental characteristic of the individual, its essence — and as we have seen, this is precisely what is being said — it makes them *fundamentally* and *essentially* the same. If, therefore, individuals are radically different from one another, as Beck argues, they cannot be autonomous. And, reciprocally, if they are autonomous, as Beck also argues, they are not radically different. Something has to give, autonomy or difference, but neither does or can give without the individual disappearing from sight. An individual who is the same as everyone else is as inconceivable as an individual who is hopelessly dependent on another. If nothing gives, the individual is

impossible — it simply does not get off the ground. If something gives, it is also impossible — it collapses into a heap of rubble. Any way one looks at it, there can be no such thing as the individual. His uniqueness, says Arendt (1999[1958]: 181), what makes him different from everyone else, escapes us: ‘The moment we want to say *who* someone is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; ... the result [is] that his specific uniqueness escapes us.’

The second paradox has to do with autonomy itself. We have already noted that it, too, is nowhere to be found in society and history, that, to be present, it must not be present. The paradox we will consider here is rather different, and can be read as a confirmation or a different version of the argument, another way of looking at this impossibility. Autonomy, or ‘self-determined life’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 162), cannot be the outcome of an autonomous decision. Such a decision presupposes the existence of the individual who is, by definition, an autonomous being. If, therefore, one is to avoid the absurd proposition that the autonomous individual decides to become an autonomous individual, one must acknowledge that autonomy is the outcome of some other agency, God or nature, for example, or, as Beck argues, the outcome of structural conditions — division of labor, social differentiation, the state and so on. If such is the case, however, autonomy is no longer what it claims to be — self-determination. The individual is determined by something outside itself and is not a ‘self-contained’ existence, as Hegel says about freedom — even if the unintended consequence of this determination is (what appears to be) such existence. This is to say that the condition of possibility of autonomy is heteronomy; that, to be free, the individual must not be free; in short, as we shall see below, that freedom must be an imposition.

It may be said that what we have been discussing so far are logical or philosophical paradoxes which are not the concern of the sociologist. Yet this is not the case. These paradoxes reproduce themselves at the level of social reality and Beck cannot avoid them in his exposition of second modernity. Let us first turn to the question of autonomy. Reading the texts that went into the making of *Individualization*, it becomes clear quite quickly that Beck is not about to put forward a voluntaristic argument. Time and again, he will assert that individualization is not the outcome of individual decision but of structural conditions. Nor, Beck will point out, does individualization mean an ‘unfettered logic of action, juggling in a virtually empty space’ (2002: 2). Indeed, at times he seems to go over to the other side completely so that, if this were not a book meant to celebrate individuality, one could easily mistake it for a structuralist argument of the most monolithic kind. One example should suffice here to make the point:

A ‘life of one’s own’ is a highly socialized existence, *utterly dependent* on institutions... What we call a life of one’s own is thus neither the expression of a bubbling individualism and egoism that has reached epidemic proportions, nor a life in which individuals float free in determining themselves, but rather a life of *thorough conformity* (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 151, my emphases).



There is no individual in this portrayal of life in second modernity. Certainly, one of its constituent elements, autonomy, is nowhere to be found. What we see instead is utter dependence and thorough conformity. As we shall see below in another demonstration of Beck's over-zealous structuralism, difference goes by the board as well. How is one to explain this portrayal of second modernity? There is no doubt that Beck has a penchant for the dramatic and the hyperbolic. It is also the case that he is responding to critics who interpret him as making a voluntaristic argument. But, over and above these considerations, there are other more important factors involved, fundamental sociological constraints and imperatives that leave him with no choice but to make this sort of argument. Beck needs thoroughly socialised and conformist subjects because he is well aware that 'thinking of oneself and living for others *is* a contradiction in terms, *not* an internal connection'. As a good sociologist, he knows that individualism is a recipe for the kind of society that Durkheim imagined in his worst nightmares — an egoistic, anomic society with few or no bonds of solidarity. And he knows, too, that without bonds of solidarity no society can survive for long, second modernity included. He must, therefore, once again break with his principles in order to preserve them. And he does — in the quotation above, in the quotation below and elsewhere in his texts — but not for very long. As we have said, Beck needs the individual, and he needs it desperately, since without this persona there is no modernity, whether first or second. Hence, although he will eliminate the individual here and there, he will also reinstate it elsewhere, often, as we shall see, in the same text. He will contradict himself repeatedly, and if for whatever reason he must acknowledge the contradiction, he will name it but pretend that there is nothing more to be said about it.

This brings me to the contradiction that Atkinson notes in his critique but does not explain, namely, that Beck does not seem able to make up his mind whether individualization is disembedding with subsequent re-embedding or without, as sometimes he says the former and sometimes the latter. It should now be clear why. Re-embedded individuals are absolutely necessary, since what is at stake is the viability of second modernity. If they are re-embedded, however, if they are 'utterly' dependent on institutions and 'thoroughly' conform to the dominant culture, as Beck says in the quotation above, there is nothing much left to distinguish second modernity from traditional society — whether modern traditional society (first modernity) or traditional-traditional society. Hence, if it needs to be said in some texts that individuals are re-embedded, it also needs to be stressed in other texts that they remain disembedded.

### **'The Paradox of Institutional Individualism'**

We have noted above that, in some texts, Beck goes overboard and removes any semblance of autonomy from second modernity. In what follows, he does the same with the other constituent element of the individual — difference. It is here, too, that we encounter the first paradox that he names as such: 'the paradox of institutional individualism':

The life of one's own is *not* a life *peculiar* to oneself. In fact the opposite is true; a *standardized* life is produced that combines both *achievement* and *justice* and in which the interest of the individual and rationalized society are merged. The expansion of the nation-state produced and affirmed individualization, with doctrines of socialization and institutions of education to match. This is what I call the *paradox* of 'institutional individualism'. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 23; my emphases).

It should be clear that if a life of one's own is not peculiar to oneself, it is not a life of one's own. If it is standardised, it is homogeneous, a common kind of life shared with others. Indeed, it seems that, in this case, it is shared not with just a few others, say, the members of one's own social class, but with everyone. And this is not only because, for Beck, there is no class in second modernity, hence no class culture either. It is also because, as he points out above, the interests of the individual merge with the interest of society as a whole. We will shortly turn to how this is supposed to happen. For the moment, let us note that although difference disappears in this version of a life of one's own — since this is also the life of everyone else — it does not disappear for long. A few pages later in the same essay, Beck will conjure another trick and make it appear again as if from nowhere. And this time it will be 'radical'. Having noted that a life of one's own enjoys 'high esteem' in 'late' modernity, and having defined the 'essence of individuality' as 'radical non-identity', he will add the following as if nothing to the contrary has been said a few pages earlier:

The life of one's own, seen in this way, is a *radically non-identical* life. While culture was previously defined by traditions, today it must be defined as an area of *freedom* which protects each group of individuals and has the capacity to produce and defend its own individualization. To be more specific, culture is the field in which we assert that we can live together, equal yet *different* (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 27; my emphases).

There is nothing here to remind us that a life of one's own is not peculiar to oneself but standardised and common to all. It is now said with as much conviction and certainty to be a radically non-identical life. In this version of second modernity, people may be equal but this does not mean that they are also the same. They are radically different despite the equality — which is not possible for the same reason that they cannot be both autonomous and different: if individuals are equal, in whatever sense equality is to be understood, they are not different, since this quality — equality — makes them the same; and, reciprocally, if they are different, they cannot be equal. There is nothing here, either, to remind us of the 'utter dependence' on institutions or the 'thorough conformity'. On the contrary, here culture is a domain of freedom where presumably 'individuals float free in determining themselves'.

Yet this is not quite Beck's last word. Individuals are free in making themselves and defending their individualization but, on second thought, they should not be free. As we have seen, freedom destroys itself and endangers the stability and viability of society

— second modernity included. Beck will therefore make a U-turn and reiterate the structural argument:

Individualization does not by any means imply that the increased freedom of choice is the same thing as a breakdown of order. Rather, what we see here, as elsewhere, is what Talcott Parsons has called ‘institutional individualism’... This means that in modern life the individual is confronted on many levels with the following challenge: You may and you must lead your independent life, outside the old bonds of family, tribe, religion, origin and class; and you must do this within the new guidelines and rules which the state, the job market, the bureaucracy etc. lay down (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 11).

We are, then, back to asserting and denying the same thing at the same time or, at any rate, in the pages of the same book. As we have seen, even Beck recognises that the notion of institutionalised individualism is paradoxical, but before we turn to this recognition, it may be pertinent to look briefly at Parsons, who coined the term. In the quotation above, Beck refers to an essay published in 1978, but there is an earlier discussion of this notion in another essay on American youth that Parsons published in 1962. It should not come as a surprise that the problem Parsons is dealing with in this essay is the same as Beck’s problem: to explain how an individualistic society can hold itself together, function properly, and reproduce itself over time. Parsons’s article was meant to reassure those concerned about the rebelliousness of the American youth of his time. His message, in a nutshell, was that this rebelliousness did not mean rejection of basic American values. On the contrary, Parsons says, and paradoxically, we may add, ‘a generous measure of dissatisfaction with the state of American society may be a sign of the healthy commitment to the activist component of the value system. However good the current society may be from various points of view, *it is not good enough to meet their standards?*’ (Parsons 1962: 121). There is no space here to discuss the paradox implicit in this quotation, so let us at least highlight and sharpen it. It is because young people *conform* (to the value system of American society) that they *rebel* against it, Parsons is saying here — which, whether he meant it or not, makes rebellion the same as conformity and the other way round.<sup>9</sup>

Parsons (1962: 101) singles out ‘instrumental activism’ as the dominant American value and describes its moral aspect as fundamentally individualistic. Yet, he goes on to add in the next sentence, this is not just any kind of individualism, unfettered and uncontrolled, running wild. It is domesticated, tamed, and thoroughly socialised. It is ‘an institutionalized individualism, in that it is normatively controlled at the moral level in two ways’. It is controlled firstly because it is premised on the idea that ‘the building of the “good life” [is] not [meant] only for the particular individual but also for all mankind’, and secondly because ‘the *achievements* of the individual... [are] regulated by... a moral law that defines the relations of various contributions and the patterns of distributed *justice*’ (1962: 101; my emphases). Parsons goes on to say:

The society, then, has a dual meaning, from this moral point of view. On the one hand, it is perhaps the primary field in which valued achievement is possible for the individual. In so far as it facilitates such achievements, the society is a good one. On the other hand, the building of the good society... is the primary goal of valued action... To the individual, therefore, the most important goal to which he can orient himself is a contribution to the good society (1962: 101-02).

There is, then, a moral law in place that regulates individual behaviour and ensures that the achievements of the individual are not attained at the expense of others. Although individuals ought to be committed to the idea of a good society, the implementation of this idea requires a normative order that regulates and, if necessary, limits what individuals can do in pursuing their interests. 'Ideally,' says Parsons (1962: 102), the achievements of the individual must be 'in accord with the rules, above all, with those that guarantee opportunity to all.' But if, for whatever reason, they happen to be in discord, 'the "moralism" of the system—the fact that the individualism is *bound* [my emphasis] within a strongly emphasized framework of normative order' — ensures that they fall into line.

Parsons does not see a paradox in the concept of 'institutionalized individualism'. As far as he is concerned, the subject that conforms to the normative order is still an individual, *different* from other subjects — even though they all conform to the same order — and *autonomous* despite the conformity. Beck does see the paradox, but it is one to be named, not discussed in its consequences. In the quotation above, he relates this paradox specifically to the state — 'the expansion of the nation-state produced and affirmed individualization, with doctrines of socialization and institutions of education to match'. To understand this, we need to refer briefly to his musings on Kant — for Beck one of the 'Freedom's Fathers' who paved the way for the 'Freedom's Children' of second modernity.<sup>10</sup> In the essay by the same title, Beck notes one of the 'antinomies' that Kant himself noted in his discussion of the constitutional freedom of the individual. Beck says: 'Fundamental rights are never guaranteed by the individual, but always by the law-based state and its institutions of power, which in turn threaten those rights.' For Beck, this is the paradox of 'institutional individualism'. The power of the state is 'both in one: a source of security *and* danger to individual rights and freedoms' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 182). We need to sharpen this paradox. Read in the way that Beck phrases it, it could be said that the state may or may not impinge on the individual rights and freedoms it also guarantees. But this is an illusion. The state has always already impinged on these rights and freedoms. It is because of the state that there are individuals with rights and freedoms. As Beck himself says, 'state power and the individual are born as twins. Without the state there is no individualization' (2002: 182). The condition of possibility of freedom, then, is power, which is to say, as we have said several times already, that to be free, the individual must not be free. It must be utterly dependent on another. This brings us to the question of how this freedom (if that is what it is) is experienced in everyday life and the other paradox that Beck names as a paradox — that of 'imposed freedom'.

## ‘Imposed Freedom’

The discussion is on how rapid social change and consequent feelings of insecurity affect freedom and Beck chooses to quote Bauman in this respect:

‘The more freedom we have, the more troublesome and threatening it seems’, writes Zygmunt Bauman. ‘I believe that people today are not so much concerned with the need to belong to a community as with *liberation* from the compulsion of constantly having to choose and decide’. Where freedom becomes a *cage*, many choose the freedom of the cage (new or old religious movements, fundamentalisms, drugs or violence). How is one to understand this *paradox* of ‘imposed freedom’, which so *many* are seeking to escape (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 163; my emphases)?

Let us note, to begin with, that insofar as Bauman is correct in his observation, it lends empirical support to what we have been saying all along — that there is no such thing as freedom. Imposed freedom, the only kind possible, is no freedom at all. This is why people are striving to liberate themselves from the compulsion of having to constantly make their own decisions. Beck appears to be in agreement with Bauman’s observation, but he is not prepared to give up on freedom. It is ‘when’ or ‘where’ freedom becomes a cage, he says, that people choose other cages, the implication being that there may be a ‘when’ or a ‘where’ in which this does not happen. But there is no time or place where freedom is self-generated rather than imposed. Even if we were to believe that ‘man’ was born free, his freedom would still be an imposition — by nature, let us say, or God — not a free choice. As we have noted, to claim that autonomy is the outcome of individual decision is to posit autonomous individuals, beings who decide to become what they already are — which is absurd. Let us also note in this respect that although Beck professes to explain this paradox of imposed freedom, he will not explain it *as paradox*; that is, he will not ask whether one can talk of freedom at all under such circumstances. He will simply reiterate the structural conditions that produce this state of affairs and pretend that there is nothing more to be said about it:

How is one to understand this paradox of ‘imposed freedom’, which so many are seeking to escape? A *self-determined* life is *not a self-chosen* form of existence, but rather a structural principle based on the entire society and it can be influenced only to a limited extent. ‘*Programmed individualism*’ is the slogan, which becomes more comprehensible if one connects Kafka’s worldview to that of Sartre. The age of the self-determined life is produced by a dense fabric of institutions (law, education, the labour market and so on) which ‘condemn’ everyone ‘to freedom’ (Sartre) on pain of (economic) disadvantage (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 163; my emphases).

There is, then, nothing more to be said about this paradox of imposed freedom, nothing to suggest that freedom may not be what it appears to be. Although life in second

modernity is not self-chosen but imposed, it is none the less a self-determined life. Although the individualism of second modernity is ‘programmed’, which I take to mean mechanical and unthinking, it nonetheless still refers to subjects that think for themselves. Although people are condemned to it, this fate is not fate but freedom. Despite everything, people in the West are ‘freedom’s children’ with fathers to match — ‘freedom’s fathers’. The fathers, we are told, spoke of freedom, the children live at a time when ‘words of freedom are beginning to become deeds’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 157). Beck wants to save modernity and will stop at nothing. He will not let anything get in his way, least of all ontological and sociological contradictions.

In his discussion of Beck’s cosmopolitan sociology, Paul Gilroy (2010: 221-22) noted, in a diplomatic language and rather too briefly, the author’s ‘interpretive generosity towards modernity which allows the struggle for sociology’s soul to be continued and the master category of modernity to be retained in an amended form’. In this paper, I have argued something similar but in detail and more forcefully, using Beck’s own blunt terminology. In addition, I have sought to highlight the consequences of Beck’s strategy. I have argued that this master category, whether amended or not, is a ‘zombie category’, an idea with no empirical content, a figment of the sociological imagination. I have also argued, using Beck’s texts on individualization as an example, that this is the reason why Beck’s discourse is marred by intractable contradictions and paradoxes. Beck’s interpretive generosity may have allowed the struggle for sociology’s soul to continue, but this is a struggle always already lost. Put in another way, there is a heavy price to pay in keeping up this struggle. By asserting and denying the same thing at the same time, Beck runs the risk of becoming completely inarticulate.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Ulrich Beck by Jonathan Rutherford in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 202).

<sup>2</sup> For a review that includes also the work of Bauman and Giddens, see Dawson (2012).

<sup>3</sup> This is already implicit in Malinowski (1984 [1922]) and clearly articulated subsequently by Geertz (1973).

<sup>4</sup> ‘We Western Europeans are not living in a crisis of culture and certainly not in a decline of values... We are... “suffering” from freedom and not from a crisis’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 157).

<sup>5</sup> Despite the occasional calls for dialogue (e.g. Thomassen 2013).

<sup>6</sup> On the concept of liminality, see the special issue of *International Political Anthropology*, vol. 2 (1) and articles by, among others, Thomassen (2009), Horvath (2009), Wydra (2009), and Szakolczai (2009). On the question of liminality and modernity more broadly, see Szakolczai (2000), Horvath (2013), and Thomassen (2014).

<sup>7</sup> For a related discussion on the question of freedom, see Derrida (2005).

<sup>8</sup> I have argued this point elsewhere more extensively and along different lines (Argyrou 2013).

<sup>9</sup> I have dealt with these issues in detail elsewhere (Argyrou 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Both essay titles in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002).

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