

Thoughts on Uncertainty¹

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Abstract:

There is growing agreement among scholars and citizens that our planet and its peoples are presently living through an era of great political uncertainty. Global pestilence, species destruction, shrinking US power and the birth of a new Chinese global empire are among the forces said to be responsible for the rising tides of uncertainty. Some observers even speak of a great leap backwards, a regression towards catastrophe, a rebirth of the disquiet and fear that marked the world of the 1920s and 1930s. They are sure that the future will bring only threats, rather than new opportunities to live well. This essay notes the seriousness of things, but it raises doubts about these pessimistic claims of a new age of uncertainty. Historical comparisons are needed. So is greater clarity about the role played by communicative abundance in inflating our collective sense of doom. And a paradox is noted: calamities do more than stir up questions about how best to classify and measure the experience of uncertainty. Definitions of uncertainty also become uncertain. This should be unsurprising. Only institutions and everyday experiences unaffected by the flow of time could be defined and lived with any certainty. The insight not only has rich implications for the way we think about politics and democracy and its vulnerability to morbid backlashes and yearnings for demagogues. Doubt can generate fresh ideas and positive practical breakthroughs. Disquiet and incertitude are fickle characters, but they are also challengers of all forms of human arrogance, including the dogmatic conviction that our world is now headed for hell.

Keywords: certainty; democracy; habit; knowledge; pessimism; uncertainty.

There seems to be growing agreement among scholars and citizens that our planet and its peoples are passing through an era of grave political uncertainty. Floods and fires, global pestilence, species destruction, shrinking US power, talk of the spiritual decadence of the West, disaffection with democracy, and the birth of a new Chinese global empire are among the forces said to be responsible for the rising tides of uncertainty. They are doomsayers' delights. Some pessimists speak of a great leap backwards, a regression towards catastrophe, a rebirth of the disquiet and fear and violent breakdowns that marked the world of the 1920s and 1930s. They are sure not only that we are gripped by VUCA – volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, to use the current managerial acronym – but also that the future will bring only threats, rather than new opportunities to live well. Conservative scholars not known for their optimism speak of the 'devastation we have made together'. They suggest that human foolishness and stupidity have joined forces to ensure the irreversibility of current trends. 'It may well be too late to avert a global catastrophe', it is said. 'Unlike the great extra-human threats of the past, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, asteroid strikes, we have brought this one on ourselves and show every sign of intending to go on doing so.'² This style of catastrophist thinking is growing in popularity. Schopenhauer is again fashionable. While there is no agreement about the root causes of the unfolding tragedy, pessimism is the new cool, given wings by the 'if it bleeds, it leads' mentality of breaking news journalism, and by the

information-spreading dynamics of networked, communicative abundance. The combined effect is to ensure that a collective sense of doom is enjoying an unprecedented boom. Or so it seems.

How are we to judge the plausibility or veracity of the new pessimism? Is the gloom really without precedent? Things are indeed serious, but dogmatically pessimistic claims about a new age of hyper-uncertainty come shrouded in doubts. When seen historically, for instance, it is unclear whether, and to what extent, the new uncertainty exceeds or even matches previous periods of calamity. Are the difficulties of our era and fears of an uninhabitable planet comparable in scale and depth to the disasters of the first half of the twentieth century, with its economic crises, a pestilence that killed 5 per cent of the world's population, failed empires, the destruction of parliamentary democracy, totalitarianism and catastrophic global wars that robbed more than 100 million soldiers and civilians of their lives? Or how do the uncertainties of our age compare with the great religious turmoil of the late medieval and early modern period, masterfully analysed by the French historian Jean Delumeau: the guilt and terror of damnation and death whipped up by the Church and compounded by episodes of military violence, famine, disease and widespread end-of-the-world fears of witchcraft and other sinister forces of magic? (Delumeau 1990).

We don't really know how to respond straightforwardly to these challenging, unsettling questions. When comparing whole epochs, and contrasting our own difficulties with their misfortunes, classifying and measuring the experience of uncertainty is done with difficulty. Even the definition of uncertainty remains uncertain. That should come as no surprise, for only life unaffected by flows of time can be defined with any certainty. We could even say that uncertainty is a fickle character, a capricious tormenter of human yearnings for certitude, an irritable doubter of certainty and – as several previous important studies of certainty and uncertainty have pointed out – a chronic feature of all human action.

Here there is something of a rule: when times are felt to be out of joint questions about how best to classify and measure the experience of uncertainty flourish. Think of John Dewey's *The Quest For Certainty*. First delivered as the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1928/29, it acknowledged the omnipresence of uncertainty in human affairs and the flawed efforts of previous ('primitive') attempts to 'escape from peril' and eliminate hazards by means of 'supplication, sacrifice, ceremonial rite and magical cult' (Dewey 1929: 3). Dewey went further. He implicated the whole Western philosophical tradition in the foolish quest for definite knowledge of an ultimate and immutable reality. The search presumed that 'certainty, security can be found only in the fixed and unchanging' and that 'knowledge is the only road to that which is intrinsically stable and certain' backed by the conviction that 'practical activity is an inferior sort of thing' (Dewey 1929: 51). The consequent split between the quest for contemplative knowledge of antecedent timeless essences and the mundane realm of everyday action is crippling, Dewey reasoned. It limits human progress, which now requires their pragmatic joining so that the search for knowledge supports efforts to live well and to act rightly. Dewey urged philosophy to rid itself of theology and to put its feet firmly on the ground by abandoning disembodied and 'passionless reason' and its 'isolation from contemporary life' (Dewey 1929: 35, 70). Experimental scientific methods should hereon be our trusted guide to intelligent living protected by a strong measure of certainty. Certain knowledge, he emphasised, isn't a 'photograph' of 'a reality beyond' (Dewey 1929: 137–139). It is rather tested in experience by experimental means that are measured against test outcomes and actual experience. Just as astronomers study stars from afar and must interpret their behaviour from generalisable observations, so philosophy and other human sciences can help dispel

uncertainties by using experimental scientific methods to garner testable reflective knowledge applied to human experience.

Dewey emphasised that the elimination of uncertainty from human affairs isn't possible, not only because nature is a fickle mixture of regularity and unknown surprises, but also because since 'uncertainty is primarily a practical matter' human action is always risky (Dewey 1929: 223). Referring to Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty, Dewey proposed that indeterminacy in human affairs is double-edged: it can bring good things, as well as bad, 'evil or... good fortune' (Dewey 1929: 223). Human action is 'fraught with future peril' (Dewey 1929: 223). There is no escaping the 'gnawing tooth of time' and 'vicissitude and uncertainty' (Dewey 1929: 292, 296). But it's the experimental method applied to socio-economic and political life that can help us tame the wild horses of uncertainty and bring a 'greater meed [share] of security' to citizens' lives (Dewey 1929: 307).

The Quest For Certainty's attack on Western metaphysics was formidable. The practical formulations were less so. They suffered vagueness, but elsewhere, during a long life well lived as America's most prominent public intellectual, Dewey made clear his attachments to such political principles as the independence of universities, the public regulation of markets and corporations, life-long education, opposition to bigotry and fanaticism, and affection for power-sharing democracy. But given these commitments, it's worth noting the strangely technocratic or managerialist bias within his political commitment in these lectures to what he variously called 'operational thinking', 'pragmatic instrumentalism' and 'intelligent methods of regulation', 'orderly social reconstruction' and 'adjusting things as means, as resources, to other things as ends'. Dewey was a firm believer in the Progressive vision of good government as policy formulation and implementation based on evidence gathered by expert bureaucracies and other agencies. The role of democratic politics in the book's vision remained unclear. Equally questionable for a similar reason was his early twentieth-century belief in the conquest of nature: 'science advances by adopting the instruments and doings of directed practice, and the knowledge thus gained becomes a means of the development of arts which bring nature still further into actual and potential service of human purposes and valuations' (Dewey 1929: 85). A century later, the whole human project of manipulating and conquering 'nature' conceived as external to humans is suffering a profound crisis. Growing numbers of scientists and citizens and their representatives have turned their backs on the vandalisation of our planetary biosphere. They are instead embracing principles and methods guided by precautionary sensibilities. Contrary to Dewey, many people are insisting, rightly in my view, that the 'operative intelligence' of scientific-technical reason is making things worse, compounding the uncertainties of our times. They are saying that humans aren't the measure of all things, and that our universe is not to be regarded as a stockpile of resources to be plundered by humans at will, for our self-aggrandisement and selfish pleasure. Humility in the face of the new uncertainties – humans as wise shepherds rather than arrogant masters of the biosphere – is now mandatory. So is the re-imagining of democracy as a project of protecting humans and their biomes against the ravages of power exercised arbitrarily.³

Everyday Life

A more philosophically radical approach to the subject of certainty and uncertainty is on display in the extraordinary set of 676 aphorisms known as *On Certainty (Über Gewissheit)*, a classic work penned and typed by Ludwig Wittgenstein during the final 18 months of his life,

on the move, from Ithaca to Vienna and Oxford, from mid-1949 to his death at the end of April 1951.⁴

On Certainty is an anthem against the human will to certitude and mastery of the world. To begin with, it reminds us that certainty and uncertainty are intimate, everyday matters. There is an embodied, personal dimension of the experience of not knowing exactly who we are, what our world is and where we and our world are heading. Big talk of global spikes and planetary uncertainty is one thing. Daily living with uncertainty is another. And it is a political matter.

We typically cope with uncertainty by setting it aside and hiding away from it, if we can. There are times and places where it is impossible to do so. Think of recent worst-case settings, for instance the many thousands of Afghan people abandoned at Kabul airport by an empire in retreat; or reflect for a moment on the lives of more than two million Beirutis ripped apart by one of the largest non-nuclear explosions ever recorded; or think of the people of Haiti, nearly all of whom are currently suffering the back-to-back lethal effects of earthquakes and aftershocks, battering by tropical depression Grace, landslides, the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, gang violence, cholera, severe food shortages and child malnutrition. In catastrophe zones of these kinds, uncertainty rules absolutely. People's everyday lives enjoy only one kind of certainty: disarray and death.

When people are luckier, and circumstance are kinder, Wittgenstein pointed out, they have the luxury of imagining that uncertainty has little or no grip on our daily lives. We hedge ourselves with certainties. We build nests of predictability. We do so by supposing things to be fixed, certain, settled. 'The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty', wrote Wittgenstein (115). Just as a child 'learns by believing the adult' and suspending doubt, which 'comes *after* belief' (160), so in our daily lives all of us arm ourselves with unshakeable beliefs and cocoon ourselves within language-shaped practices that we suppose to be indubitable, 'true' and morally 'right'. 'I act with complete certainty', remarks Wittgenstein. 'But this certainty is my own' (174).

We doze, pillow talk, spring from our beds the same side every morning. We sit on the toilet; wash our faces, peer in the mirror at our bodies while brushing our teeth. We boil kettles, make tea, drink coffee, kiss goodbye our loved ones, catch buses, walk, mount our bicycles, send text messages, scan breaking news, doom scroll, say good morning, daydream before wielding the word 'absolutely' in our first morning conversations. Certainty is our mantra against lost bearings. But it's not just a stop-gap remedy for confusion and disempowerment: contrived certainty is a condition of possibility of our being-in-the-world. It is otherwise known as habit: learned dispositions that function as stabilisers and enablers within everyday life. Habits – what Aristotle called *hexis* and Maurice Merleau-Ponty called *habitude* and Pierre Bourdieu called *habitus* – are not blind anchors that dull the pains of uncertainty by mechanically weighing down and constraining our daily actions. Friedrich Nietzsche mused that a life without habits would hellishly require constant 'improvisation', but he also worried that their nourishing effects could become so habitual – 'enduring' – that habits turn into 'tyrants'.⁵ He had a point. Habits come inside us. They become us. They may in consequence have harmful effects on our propensity to act in the world, as well as damage the lives of others. Bad diet, no exercise, racist talk, masculinist arrogance, domestic violence, and racist talk are disabling habits, and thoroughly political matters; in the fields of everyday life and beyond, they arbitrarily shape who gets how much, when, and how. But habits can be positively enabling. Far from reducing us to lazy slob or turning us into bigots, habits function as internalised experiences that strengthen our creative ability to navigate life's vicissitudes. They serve as regularities that augment our being: empower us (and other living species), render us

fit and such fitness, as Ghassan Hage has noted, enables us to handle the challenges thrown our way by the social milieu in which we dwell and evolve (Hage 2013).

The Uncertainties of Certainty

So much for habits. Wittgenstein's thoughts on the contingent and fabricated quality of what counts as certain knowledge are just as important. They have profound implications for the way we scholars of the political think about such matters as the role of universities, empirical research, truth, and the meaning and functional role of expertise in a democracy. Consider, for instance, the way in which Wittgenstein's reflections help us to see the need to abandon the orthodox view that experts are those blessed with incontrovertible truths, as if they are substitutes for priests and shamans, and instead to re-imagine experts as specialists who know from long experience some of the worst mistakes that can be made in their field. Genuine expertise implies incredulity towards meta-narratives of truth-as-knowledge. It implies opposition to grand illusions of certainty, big lies and bone-headed nonsense. Experts, seen in this new way, operate as contrarians. They are specialists in contrapuntal reasoning. The expert is someone who wisely sets out to avoid mistakes, humbly imploring others not to be foolish in their arrogant ignorance. When they live up to their own standards, experts fling counter-perspectives into the face of established authority. Their contrariness is often said to involve speaking 'truth' to power, but given the philosophical and political difficulties with that arrogant weasel word, wisdom counsels against its use. It is much better to see experts as people who know that they do not fully know. Experts have a strong sense of wonder about the world. They are aware that their judgments always teeter on the brink of error. Their expertise is an unending adventure into the lands of uncertainty. Experts are trained to expect the unexpected, and they are aware of the quantum weirdness of the world.⁶

Wittgenstein's emphasis on the contingent and fabricated quality of our thinking has more general implications. By arguing with and against G.E. Moore, the Cambridge Apostle defender of 'here is one hand, here is another' common sense, Wittgenstein pointed out in his aphorisms that the word certainty (*Gewissheit*) belongs to a family of terms linked to a set of meanings that include determined, reliable, sure (Latin: *certus*: settled, sure), not variable, not to be doubted, established as a 'fact', or (more strongly) as 'truth'. Consoling and comforting they all may be, he wanted to say, but all these words serve to obfuscate the thoroughly contextual and contingent quality of what we take for granted, or what we agree upon.

'Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement [*Anerkennung*]' (378), said Wittgenstein. The thought is more daring than Max Weber's earlier observation that 'all our "knowledge" is related to a categorially formed reality' and that even "'causality" is a category of "our" thought' (Weber 1949: 188). Wittgenstein's remark certainly has continuing relevance for what counts as political science: what we take to be true, factual, evidential, certain and incontrovertible is always and everywhere anchored, positioned and defined within rules-structured 'language games'. Though he used different words, Wittgenstein in effect revived a now-obsolete verb from the early sixteenth century with older roots: to certain, which means to make certain, or to certify something as beyond doubt.⁷ The point goes beyond Dewey's pragmatism, for according to Wittgenstein all truth claims are assertions made from within the confines of a given language game. What counts as evidence and 'the facts', and all testing, confirmation and disconfirmation of truth claims based on 'evidence' and 'the facts', takes place within the scaffolding (*Gerüst*) of a language game (105). 'The reason why the use

of the expression “true or false” has something misleading about it’, Wittgenstein noted, ‘is that it is like saying “it tallies with the facts or it doesn’t”, and the very thing that is in question here is what counts as “tallying” [*Übereinstimmung*] (199). In other words: certainty about ourselves and the world derives from our efforts to make things certain, to certify them. Evidence is adduced. Facts are artifacts. Truth is claimed. Certainty is fabricated, and it thus has a time-bounded quality. It follows that ‘what men and women consider reasonable alters’, said Wittgenstein. ‘At certain periods, they find reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable. And vice versa’ (336). He added: ‘When language-games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change’ (65; 256)

Over the years, I’ve tried in various ways to follow this rule, for instance by making a case for the revival and reconstruction of the language of civil society, developing the theory of monitory democracy and deploying the old term despotism to make new sense of the power dynamics, sources of resilience and weaknesses of phantom democratic regimes such as Russia, China, Hungary, Turkey, and Vietnam. My efforts to bring together history and democracy and to underscore the punk quality of democracy – its defiance of fixed ways of living and refusal of all forms of top-down power masquerading as ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ – are similarly wedded to Wittgenstein’s insight that things are never forever, and that uncertainty, the twin of certainty, can’t be banished from human affairs.⁸ Amidst the present-day doom and gloom, Wittgenstein’s wisdom exudes a fresh pertinence. For it turns out (pace Benjamin Franklin) that not even taxes and death are certain. Nothing is certain but the uncertainty of the unforeseen and the unexpected. This may be cold comfort. Uncertainty can be ruthlessly cruel; misfortunes greater than anybody expected regularly happen. Yet uncertainty is capable of kindness; and, as Chinese people like to say, bad outcomes can be blessings in disguise (*sài wēng shī mǎ yān zhī fēi fú*). In either case, or anywhere in between these extreme opposites, uncertainty keeps its cards close to its chest. There are even times, as José Saramago reminded us in his wonderfully satirical account of a dictator felled by a collapsing deckchair while relaxing at his summer house, when small moments produce great surprises of historic significance. Saramago’s allegory referred to the bizarre fate of Portugal’s António de Oliveira Salazar, who after suffering a cerebral haemorrhage caused by an accidental fall was removed from the office of prime minister by the president of Portugal, but then lived on for another twenty-three months, unexpectedly recovered his mental powers and, with the help of his obliging staff, carried on supposing that he was still at the helm of his country, until death (in July 1970) finally put an end to his illusion (Saramago 2013: 1–25). That’s why, in opposition to human snobbery and swagger, Wittgenstein appealed for greater humility about what we claim to know, or what we think we’re capable of knowing. He asked us to imagine language games in which an understanding of ‘knowledge’ and even the word ‘know’ are entirely absent (443; 562). And he urged believers in hard evidence, facts and truth to think twice, to acknowledge the contingency of their beliefs. ‘Suppose it were forbidden to say “I know”’, he wrote. Imagine we were ‘only allowed to say “I believe I know”?’ (366).

Pessimism

On Certainty may be read today as a timely assault on all forms of human intellectual vanity. It’s a warning against literal mindedness and cock-sure claims based on claimed ‘evidence’, ‘facts’ and ‘objective reality’. But here we encounter a corollary that was not spelled out by Wittgenstein: gloomy convictions that we are living in a doomed age headed for hell are the

conjoined twin of know-all certainty. Pessimism is optimism turned upside down. Part of the appeal of gloomy catastrophism is its cock-sure seductiveness. Its propositions and judgments appear to be in accordance with ‘the facts’. But as we’ve seen, to repeat Wittgenstein, what counts as ‘facts’ or ‘reality’ is always controversial. That’s why the form, content and genealogy of dogmatically pessimistic perspectives must be of interest to those who study the political.

Here we encounter a paradox. We can say that catastrophism is a type of certainty that sets out to crush and destroy uncertainty. It knows that everything is shit. It’s sure that unless everything somehow changes things are bound to become shittier. Albert Hirschman called it ‘fracasomania’, the manic obsession with failure and decline, and his objection to its grip on our thinking about the political was that it had no room for ingenuity, amelioration, problem solving and policy adaptation to evolving conditions. His rejection of catastrophism was pragmatic. ‘Possibilism’ was his mantra. He once said that the core aim of his work was to ‘broaden the limits of what is or is considered possible, even at the expense of reducing our ability, real or imagined, to discern the probable’ (Hirschman 1973: 36). For Hirschman, determinism of every kind must be challenged. The social sciences have to pay attention to the fluidity and open-endedness of the fields of power they investigate. Researchers must embrace methods that steel their sense of uncertainty. They must cast doubt on arrogant truth claims, question big-picture stories, probe the uniqueness of situations and concentrate on unexpected dynamics. Their brief is to look for countervailing trends, signs of improvement and unintended consequences. They must ask counterfactual questions about how things might have been and whether new ways of turning historical corners are possible. Social scientists ought never make the mistake of supposing that the growing pains of change are equivalent to the collapse of entire social systems.

Hirschman’s rejection of pessimism was a social science version of Oscar Wilde’s well-known remark that a pessimist is somebody who complains about the noise when opportunity knocks. He was right to say that our political imaginations are damaged when we are lured towards the sirens of either nothing-can-be-done fatalism or total change. But more needs to be said about the metaphysical ingredients of the catastrophism he rejected. Just as early modern geological theories of how our planet has been shaped periodically by sudden devastating events (mountain chain upheavals, vast floods, and the extinction of species) were sometimes inspired by Old Testament accounts of the great flood ordered by God, the mentality of today’s catastrophism usually comes tainted by metaphysics. The key point in need of further research is that catastrophe thinking enjoys no innocence or ‘objectivity’: not only is catastrophism typically attached to a form of dogmatic belief in certainty, but its dogmatism often draws on deeper, older, often-forgotten metaphysical presumptions. Eschatology is its guide. Think of the way Christian notions of baptism as purification were anchored in a catastrophe fable: a grand flood (40 days long according to Genesis 7:17, or 150 days according to Genesis 7:24) that ended when lucky Noah, raised to new life and salvation after waters had buried the old world, set free a raven which ‘went to and fro until the waters were dried up’. Now consider a contemporary version of this catastrophe fable evident in the writings and speeches of Rupert Read, a prominent spokesperson of Extinction Rebellion. ‘It is beyond reasonable doubt’, he says, ‘that we are at present driving ourselves toward a cliff, maybe one with a fatally larger drop below it than our best current science suggests.’ Our ‘industrial-growthist civilisation...is going down...one way or another, *this* civilisation is finished’ (Read and Alexander 2019: 4–5, 7–8). The apocalyptic formulations on the fate of capitalism peddled by German political sociologist Wolfgang Streeck are another recent

example of a style of dogmatic thinking with theological affinities. Certain that we have already passed through the gates of purgatory, sure that we are now living through times tottering on the edge of hell or paradise, Streeck urges us to admit that ‘capitalism is facing its *Götterdämmerung* [catastrophic collapse marked by disorder and violence]’ (Streeck 2014: 46). It’s not socialism or barbarism – Rosa Luxemburg’s famous formulation in her 1915 prison pamphlet *The Crisis in German Social Democracy* – but we’re now facing the unopposed self-destruction of capitalism, whose ‘master technicians have no clue today how to make the system whole again’ (Streeck 2014: 46). In our time, democracy doesn’t stand a chance. Declining growth rates and rising household and state indebtedness and widening income and wealth gaps are now pushing capitalism to the brink. Uncertainty and decadence are mushrooming. We’re in for a painful extended period of cumulative decay, quite probably on a scale comparable to the global breakdown of the 1920s and 1930s, or worse. Capitalism is on its way to hell, he says in *How Will Capitalism End?*, but ‘it will for the foreseeable future hang in limbo, dead or about to die from an overdose of itself but still very much around, as nobody will have the power to move its decaying body out of the way’ (Streeck 2016: 36).

Lurking inside these lines is a kind of sublimated Calvinism, a this-worldly faith in predestination: the disposition of an intellectual blessed with certain knowledge that our world is corrupted and condemned to downfall, and certain in this dark hour of the sure pathway to salvation – ridding the world of capitalism – even if for the moment we are forced to await the apocalypse. The point here is not that Read and Streeck are religious figures dressed in secular clothing. It is to note the homologues between their eschatological mode of political thinking and apocalyptic religiosity, their dogmatic conviction that in these turbulent times of mounting uncertainty what is needed is a great purification – total solutions that miraculously rescue humanity from its fatal ignorance and stupidity.

Democracy

Albert Hirschman liked to point out that pessimistic disregard of complexity and uncertainty are antithetical to the spirit and substance of democracy, and so I would like to round out this essay with some thoughts about the rather tricky relationship between certainty, uncertainty and democracy.

All regimes, including the new despotisms of our day, try to handle uncertainty by hiding it away. Tyrannies of the past imposed certainty through tough public order measures that had the unintended effect of triggering disquiet and fear among their subjects and, as Lucian’s famous tract on the Sicilian tyrant Phalaris reminds us (Lucian 1913), endless sleepless nights for their rulers gripped by fears of plots, assassinations and popular rebellions. Early modern European monarchies handled uncertainty quite differently. They were a form of government guided by God-given rules that explained why superior blood lineage entitled a few to rule, how crowns were to be passed on, and why loyal subjects were obliged to cope in peace with their daily uncertainties.

Measured in terms of certainty and uncertainty, democracy is a different, and unique form of political rule. Considered as a type of self-government of people who treat each other as equals, it is the only political form that publicly admits of uncertainty as well as enables people to deal constructively with its potentially damaging effects. We owe to the Polish-American political scientist Adam Przeworski the insight that democracies are systems of ‘ruled open-endedness, or organized uncertainty’ (Przeworski 1991: 13).⁹ But uncertainty is

not only or principally the effect of elections, as he thought. Under the post-1945 conditions of monitory democracy, uncertainty is the combined effect of periodic elections and the continuous public scrutiny of power by watchdog institutions and social media platforms that together breed unpredictability in matters of deciding who gets how much, when and how. Democracy is good at whipping up political uncertainties. It has a *sauvage* (wild) quality, as the French thinker Claude Lefort liked to say. It tears up certainties, transgresses boundaries and isn't easily tamed. Democracy denatures power. There's a French proverb that runs *rien n'est sûr que la chose incertaine* (Nothing's certain but uncertainty). This could easily be a motto for monitory democracy. The value placed by democracy on public openness, institutional pluralism and continuous public scrutiny of arbitrary power enables individuals, groups and whole organisations to question and overturn the supposedly 'natural' order of things. With the help of bodies such as anti-corruption agencies, investigative journalism, independent courts and periodic elections, monitory democracy promotes indeterminacy. It heightens people's awareness that the way things are now isn't necessarily how they will be in future. The spirit of monitory democracy challenges people to see that their worlds can be changed. Sometimes it sparks revolution.

But there's an emotionally deeper, less obvious connection between democracy and uncertainty. Inasmuch as democracy regularly demonstrates the fallibility of those who exercise power, it tutors citizens' everyday sense of the malleability of the world. When it works well, monitory democracy casts public doubts on what Wittgenstein called 'complete conviction, the total absence of doubt' (194). We could say that it helps trigger a long-term mood swing, a transformation of people's perceptions of the world. The metaphysical idea of an objective, out-there-at-a-distance 'reality' is weakened; so too is the presumption that stubborn 'factual truth' is superior to power. The fabled distinction between what people can see with their eyes and what they are told about the emperor's clothes breaks down. Especially under media-saturated conditions, when vibrant democracies are marked by dynamism, pluralism and a multiverse of competing stories told about how the world works, 'information' ceases to be a fixed category with incontrovertible content. What counts as information is less and less understood by citizens and their representatives as 'brute facts' (Searle 1997), or as chunks of unassailable 'reality'. Talk of 'truth' lingers, but the sense that it has variable and contestable meanings gets the upper hand. Zones of verification featuring different criteria of what counts as truth multiply. The quest for truth in courts of law isn't the same, say, as what is said about truth in mosques, churches and synagogues, or what counts as 'fact' and 'knowledge' in the field of quantum physics (Latour 2013). The upshot is that what is called 'reality', including the 'reality' peddled and promoted by the powerful, comes to be understood as always 'reported reality', as 'reality' produced by some for others, in other words, as mediated veracity claims that are shaped and re-shaped and re-shaped again in complex processes of production and transmission of truth claims. Reality is robbed of its reality, which is why political efforts by leaders to privilege their own certainties and to seduce and manipulate citizens using smoke and mirrors, lying and bombast, are deemed unwelcome, and dangerous. Democracy serves reminders that 'truth' rests upon acknowledgment, and that 'truth' has many faces. It nudges citizens into thinking for themselves; to see the same world in different ways, from different angles; and to sharpen their overall sense that prevailing power relationships are not 'natural', but contingent. Reality is multiple and mutable, a matter of re-description and interpretation – and of the power marshalled by wise citizens and their representatives to prevent one-sided interpretations of the world from being forced down others' throats.

Precautions

It is customary to say that resilient democracies provide citizens with secure lifeboats in seas of uncertainty: protective mechanisms such as written constitutions and rule of law procedures; fixed-term elections and election monitoring; integrity watchdogs; bridge doctors (a South Korean invention) and other health and safety bodies; future generations commissions; and public enquiries. By means of these and other institutions, it is said, democracy affords citizens and their representatives a measure of reassurance that power will not be exercised arbitrarily, in ways abusive and offensive to citizens. They feel safer, more secure. But here there's a less obvious and more pressing sense in which democracies engage and reduce uncertainty. When reimagined in terms of precaution, monitory democracy, the most power-sensitive form of self-government in the history of democracy, is the best weapon so far invented for guarding against the illusions of certainty by breaking up monopolies of unaccountable and dangerous power, wherever and however they operate. Democracy protects people against those who deny their own ignorance. Amidst the 'noise' of public life, as Daniel Kahneman and his co-authors have noted, decisionmakers

who believe themselves capable of an impossibly high level of predictive accuracy are not just overconfident. They don't merely deny the risk of noise and bias in their judgments. Nor do they simply deem themselves superior to other mortals. They also believe in the predictability of events that are in fact unpredictable, implicitly denying the reality of uncertainty. (Kahneman et al 2021: 145)

Gripped by a strong sense of reality as fluid and alterable, democracy is thus a fair-minded defender of caution, a prudent friend of perplexity when in the company of those who exercise power with cocksure certainty. Nothing about human behaviour comes as a surprise: it sees that humans are capable of the best, and perpetrators of the worst. For that reason, democracy stands against every form of hubris. It considers concentrated power blindly hazardous; it reckons that humans are not to be entrusted with unchecked rule over their fellows, or the biomes in which they dwell. It upends the old complaint that democracy resembles a ship of fools, or a rollicking circus run by monkeys. A great threat to democracy is rulers who are blind fools.

When it works well, democracy stands against stupidity and dissembling; it is opposed to silent arrogance and has no truck with bossing, bullying and violence. Its role as an early warning system – spotting and countering the sources of destructive uncertainty, like reckless submarine purchases and military adventures, wanton destruction of species, market failures, including risky and fool-headed efforts to monetise uncertainty using such financial instruments as derivative securities, indemnities and catastrophe bonds – makes it attuned to conundrums and alive to difficulties. When democratic mechanisms function properly, they warn citizens and their representatives about the possible dangers of unknown consequences of consequences of consequences. In this way, by getting serious about the calamities of our times, and by tracking the possible calamities to come, democracy is the harbinger of certainty. It offers reassurance and comfort to the afflicted lives of citizens.

Pathologies

Speaking of calamities: the general proposition that democracy is a form of government that handles uncertainty with aplomb needs to be handled with care. The key reason is to be found buried within the aphorisms of *On Certainty*, where Wittgenstein remarks that the

‘groundlessness [*Grundlosigkeit*] of our believing’ (166) poses a great difficulty for our era, especially for anybody clinging dogmatically to rigid habits or simple-minded, commonsense beliefs in fact-based Truth. Rephrased in more nuanced terms that go well beyond his limited political horizons, we could say that one of the special challenges faced by democracy when it works well is the way it forces citizens to cope with a double challenge: to live their lives with a tolerable measure of certainty while at the same time admitting that their different beliefs and various ways of being-in-the-world have no absolute foundations – that they are ‘groundless’ and, hence, susceptible to change and haunted by grinding uncertainty.

Wittgenstein seemed to think that once a sense of doubt and contingency grip people’s lives, uncertainty would irreversibly trump certainty. Perhaps *On Certainty* was right: it may be that all the king’s horses and all the king’s men are unlikely to reverse the fallibilist trend, the long goodbye to absolute certainty. Present-day dynamics suggest we should be less certain.

Democracy can live without dogmatic Truths and other absolute certainties, but it requires *wise citizens* and *wise representatives*: experienced and humble people who know they don’t know everything, and who therefore are suspicious of those who think they do, especially when they try to use alibis to camouflage or enforce their arrogant will to power on others. But historians of democracy teach us that there have been many times in the past when the political form known as democracy destroys wisdom in this sense. When things go well, democracy provides spaces and mechanisms for people to articulate with some certainty their own insecurities. When things go badly, democracy does the opposite: it produces feelings of uncertainty that grip millions of people, sometimes with pathological effects.

Pressured by outside forces and internal dynamics, democracies can stumble, paralyse their own workings, drown in surpluses of uncertainty. They can nurture feelings that there’s too much confusion, too little relief, too much talk and too little being done by leaders and governments. All regimes can suffer that fate, of course but, as Max Scheler long ago pointed out, democracy is peculiarly vulnerable to violations of its professed commitment to the principles of equality (Scheler 1972: 143–144). Whether measured by actual social conditions or considered as an ethical postulate, the ethos of equality is the carrier of *ressentiment*. Easily disappointed, perceived violations of equality breed fears of being marginalised, feelings of anger, indignation and envy, sour grapes yearnings for revenge against those who are more fortunate and more privileged.

The case of contemporary India shows that if *ressentiment* takes root in a democracy, demagoguery comes into season (Roy Chowdury and Keane 2021). When famished children cry themselves to sleep at night, when millions of women feel unsafe and multitudes of migrant workers living on slave wages are forced to flee for their lives in a medical emergency, the victims are unlikely to believe themselves worthy of rights, or capable as citizens of fighting for their own entitlements, or for the rights of others. Large-scale social suffering renders the democratic principle utterly utopian. Or it turns into a grotesque farce. No doubt, citizens’ ability to strike back, to deliver millions of mutinies against the rich and powerful, is in principle never to be underestimated in a democracy. But the brute fact is that social indignity undermines citizens’ capacity to take an active interest in public affairs, and to check and humble and wallop the powerful.

But the scandal doesn’t end there. For when millions of citizens are daily victimised by social indignities, the powerful are granted a licence to rule arbitrarily. Millions of humiliated people become sitting targets. Some at the bottom and many in the middle and upper classes turn their backs on public affairs. They bellyache in unison against politicians and politics. But the disaffected may do nothing. Complacency and cynical indifference breed voluntary

servitude. But there is another possibility: amidst the deepening uncertainties, the disgruntled begin to yearn for political redeemers and steel-fisted government. Fantasists sure of their ground and power mongers armed with their Big Truth grow bold. The powerless and the privileged join hands to wish for messiahs – Yogi Adityanath, Mamata Banerjee, K. Chandrashekhara Rao (KCR), Narendra Modi – who promise to defend the poor, protect the rich, drive out the demons of corruption and disorder, and purify the soul of ‘the people’. These loud-mouthed leaders who ‘talk rather more about certain things than the rest of us’ (the words of Wittgenstein [338]) boast of their power to put an end to uncertainty. Citizens brimming with resentment begin to pay attention. The old seventeenth-century proverb then applies: ‘He that leaves *certainty* and sticks to chance, When fools pipe he may dance’ (Ray 1678). That is the moment when despots make their appearance and offer their poisonous gifts to the confused, the perplexed sufferers of unbearable uncertainty.

In these times of global pestilence and mounting anxieties about cascading disasters, might the moment of popular submission to big-mouthed demagogues and strong-armed despots promising redemption to ‘the people’ once again be heading our way?

Notes

1. This essay is a revised version of keynote remarks originally prepared for the *Australian Political Studies Association (APSA) Annual Conference*, Faculty of Arts, Macquarie University, 21 September 2021.
2. Remarks made by John Dunn in his review of Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy*, (Dunn 2021). Niall Ferguson’s *Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe* (Ferguson 2021) provides many examples of past and present tragedies while adding his own hawkish prediction of a coming cold war with China.
3. See Keane 2018 and the concluding sections of Keane 2022.
4. The following quotations are numbered aphorisms from Wittgenstein 1972.
5. See Nietzsche 2001, Book IV, Section 295 ‘Brief Habits’.
6. See my remarks on the changing meaning of expertise, and why experts are best considered as experienced practitioners who admit the limits of their own knowledge and warn the powerful to exercise caution, in Keane 2021.
7. The verb is traceable back through Middle English *certeyn*, *certayne*, borrowed from Anglo-French *certein*, *certain*, going back to the Latin *certānus*, from *certus* ‘indisputable, settled, fixed’, which was originally the past participle of *cernere* ‘to discern, decide, determine, sift’, with roots back to the Greek *krinein* ‘to separate, choose, decide’.
8. John Keane, *The New Despotism* (London and Cambridge MA, 2020); and ‘Why History Matters for Democracy’, *Democratic Theory*, volume 6: 2 (December 2019), pp. 96–110.
9. Compare his ‘Some Problems in the Study of the Transition to Democracy’: ‘The process of establishing a democracy is a process of institutionalizing uncertainty, of subjecting all interests to uncertainty’ (Przeworski 1979: 14). The theme of democracy and uncertainty is applied in Jan-Werner Müller, *Democracy Rules* (Müller 2021).

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