

Uncertainty, between Fear and Hope

Author(s): Boaventura de Sousa Santos

Source: *The CLR James Journal*, FALL 2017, Vol. 23, No. 1/2 (FALL 2017), pp. 5-12

Published by: Philosophy Documentation Center

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26752144>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Philosophy Documentation Center is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The CLR James Journal*

JSTOR



© 2017 Janet Lofgren

THE VINE OF CARIBBEAN PHILOSOPHY 1

Uncertainty, between Fear and Hope¹

Boaventura de Sousa Santos

ABSTRACT: We are living in a period where the balanced interdependence of fear and hope seems to have collapsed as a result of the growing polarization between the world of hopeless fear (great majority of the population) and the world of fearless hope (a strictly small but all powerful minority). It is a world where uncertainties tend to become abysmal ones which, for the poor and powerless, ultimately translate into unjust fate and, for the rich and powerful, a reckless mission to appropriate the world.

Under the present circumstances, the revolt and the struggle against the injustice must be waged in such a way as to bring about a new social redistribution of fear and hope to put an end to the hopelessness of the oppressed and the fearlessness of the oppressors. The struggle will be more successful if people come to realize that the hopeless fate of the powerless majorities stems from the fearless hope of the powerful minorities.

KEY WORDS: uncertainty, democracy, cognitive justice, nature, rights, dignity

ACCORDING TO SPINOZA, the two basic emotions of human beings are fear and hope. Uncertainty is how you experience the possibilities arising from the multiple relationships obtaining between fear and hope. Thus different kinds of relationships account for different types of uncertainty. Fear and hope are not evenly distributed among all social groups or historical periods. There are social groups in which fear outweighs hope in such a way that the world happens to them without their being able to make the world happen. They live in expectancy, but with no expectations. They are alive today, but their conditions are such that they could be dead tomorrow. Today they feed their children, but they do not know whether they will be able to feed them tomorrow. Theirs is a downward uncertainty, because the world happens to them in ways that depend little on them. When fear

is such that hope has been completely lost, downward uncertainty becomes abysmal and turns into its opposite that is, the certainty of fate, no matter how unjust. There are social groups in which, on the other hand, hope outweighs fear in such a way that the world is offered to them as a field of possibilities for them to manage at will. Theirs is an upward uncertainty in that it is faced with options mostly leading to outcomes that are desired, even if not entirely positive. When hope is extreme to the point of losing all sense of fear, upward uncertainty becomes abysmal and turns into its opposite: the certainty of the mission—no matter how arbitrary—to appropriate the world.

Most social groups live between these two extremes. Their lives are marked by more or less fear, more or less hope, and they go through periods dominated by downward uncertainties and periods dominated by upward uncertainties. Those epochs differ according to the relative preponderance of either fear or hope and the uncertainties that result from the relationships between the two.

Which Type of Period is Ours?

We are living in a period where the balanced interdependence of fear and hope seems to have collapsed as a result of the growing polarization between the world of hopeless fear and the world of fearless hope. It is a world where uncertainties, both downward and upward, tend to become abysmal ones which, for the poor and powerless, ultimately translate into unjust fate and, for the rich and powerful, a mission to appropriate the world. A growing percentage of the world population is faced with imminent risks for which there are no insurance programs, and if there are, they are financially unaffordable. Examples of such risks would include: death in armed conflicts in which the victims are not active participants; disease caused by the massive use—whether legal or illegal—of hazardous substances; violence caused by racial, sexist, religious or other forms of prejudice; the plundering of one's meager resources, be they salaries or pensions (in the name of austerity policies over which people have no control whatsoever); the expulsion from one's land and home by the dictates of development policies from which no benefits will ever come; the precariousness of employment and the collapse of any expectation of reaching the stability required for personal and economic autonomy, such as that which could be found through entrepreneurship.

In contrast, social groups that are becoming more and more minoritarian in demographic terms accumulate more and more economic, social and political power, a power that is almost always based on the dominance of finance capital. There is a long history to this polarization, which however is now more transparent and perhaps more virulent as well. Consider the following quotation:

If a man knew nothing about the lives of people in our Christian world and he were told "There is a certain people who have set up such a way of life, that the greater part of them, ninety-nine per cent, or thereabouts, live in ceaseless physical labor and oppressive need, and the rest one percent lives in idleness and luxury now, if that one-hundredth has its own religion, science and art, what would that religion, science and art be like?" I think that there can only be one answer: "A perverted, a bad religion, science and art."

One might think this is a passage in the Occupy or *Indignados* movement manifestos from earlier in the decade. Not so. This is a diary entry by Leo Tolstoy on March 17, 1910, shortly before he died.²

What Are the Uncertainties?

As mentioned above, the uncertainties are not evenly distributed, in terms neither of type nor of intensity, among the various groups and social classes that make up our societies. It is therefore imperative to identify the various fields in which those inequalities have a stronger impact on the lives of people and communities.

The Uncertainty of Knowledge. Every person is a subject of knowledge, and the practices of the overwhelming majority of people are defined and exercised with reference to knowledge other than the scientific. But we live in a time of Eurocentric modernity, that assigns full priority to scientific knowledge and to the practices which emanate directly from it, i.e., to technologies. This means that the epistemological and experiential distribution of fear and hope is defined by parameters that tend to benefit those social groups with greater access to scientific knowledge and technology. For these groups, uncertainty is always of the upward type, because their belief in scientific progress amounts to a hope that is strong enough to neutralize any fear regarding the limitations of existing knowledge. For these groups there is always something negative about the precautionary principle, because it blocks science's infinite progress. The social groups with limited access to scientific knowledge view the resulting cognitive injustice as an inferiority which generates uncertainty as to their place in a world defined and legislated according to knowledge that is at once powerful and strange and which affects them in ways they have little or no power to control. This is a knowledge that is produced about them and occasionally against them, but never with them.

Uncertainty has still another dimension: the uncertainty over the validity of their own—sometimes ancient—knowledge, by which their lives have always been guided. Will they have to shed it and replace it with fresh knowledge? Will this new knowledge be given to them? sold to them? imposed upon them? And then, at what price and at what cost? Will the gains

brought about by the new knowledge outweigh the losses? Who will reap the gains, who the losses? Will the shedding of one's knowledge entail a wasting of experience? With what consequences? Will they end up feeling less or more capable of representing the world as their own and transforming it according to their aspirations?

The Uncertainty of Democracy. Liberal democracy was first conceived of as a system of government based on outcome uncertainty and process certainty. Process certainty ensured that outcome uncertainty was evenly distributed among all citizens. The right processes made it possible for the various interests at play in society to compete on an equal footing and accept the outcomes as fair. That was the basic principle of democratic coexistence. That was the theory, anyway, because in practice things have always been very different, and nowadays the discrepancy between theory and practice has reached disturbing proportions.

To begin with, for a long time only a small part of the population was allowed to vote. As a result of that, no matter how adequate and correct, the processes could never be enlisted on the side of the interests of the majority. Only rarely could outcome uncertainty benefit the majority: to wit, in those cases where the outcome was the side effect of rivalries between political elites and the various interests of the ruling classes represented by them. No wonder, then, that for a long time the majorities have viewed democracy as standing on its head: a system of uncertain processes whose outcomes were certain, and always at the service of the interests of the ruling classes and groups. That is why for a long time the majorities were divided between, on the one hand, those groups who wanted to assert their interests by means other than those of liberal democracy (e.g., the revolution), and on the other those who fought to be formally included in the democratic system, in the hope that outcome uncertainty might favor their interests in the future. Since then, the ruling classes and groups (i.e., those groups whose social and economic power has not been democratically sanctioned) began resorting to another strategy to make democracy work in their favor. On the one hand, they fought to eliminate every alternative to the liberal democratic system, which they ultimately and symbolically succeeded in doing in 1989, on the day the Berlin Wall fell.

On the other hand, they started using process certainty to manipulate the processes, so as to be systematically favored by the outcomes. However, by eliminating outcome uncertainty they ended up destroying process certainty. Because they were subject to manipulation by whoever possessed the social and economic power to do it, the supposedly certain democratic processes became uncertain. Worse than that, they became exposed to one sole certainty: the possibility of being freely manipulated by whoever had the power to do it.

For these reasons, the uncertainty of the large majorities is of the downward type and runs the risk of becoming abysmal. Having lost the capacity for, and even the memory of, an alternative to liberal democracy, what hope can they have in the liberal democratic system? Can fear be so overwhelming that all there is left to them is resignation in the face of fate? Or could it be, on the contrary, that there is in democracy a seed of authenticity that can still be used against those who have made a cruel mockery of it?

The Uncertainty of Nature. Ever since the European expansion of the late-fifteenth century in particular, nature has come to be viewed by Europeans as a natural resource devoid of intrinsic value and therefore unconditionally and limitlessly available to exploitation by humans. This mindset, which was then new to Europe and not to be found in any other culture in the world, became gradually dominant as capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy (the latter reconfigured by the former two) gained sway throughout the so-called modern world. That dominance was so pervasive that it became the basis of all the certainties of the modern and contemporary era: progress. Whenever nature seemed to offer any resistance to exploitation that was seen as upward uncertainty at best, with hope outweighing fear. That's how Camoens's Adamastor was bravely overpowered, and victory over it came to be named the Cape of Good Hope.

There were peoples who never accepted this view of nature, because to accept it would be the same as committing suicide. Indigenous peoples, for example, used to live so close to nature that nature was not even external to them; on the contrary, it was mother-earth, a living being that along with them encompassed all living creatures, present, past and future. Therefore the land did not belong to them; it was they who belonged to the land. This mindset was so much more plausible than the Eurocentric one, and so dangerously adverse to the interests of European colonialists, that the most effective way to combat it was to annihilate the peoples who advocated it, turning them into just another natural obstacle to the exploitation of nature. Certainty about this mission was such that indigenous land was viewed as no man's land, free and unoccupied, regardless of the fact that flesh-and-blood people had been living there since time immemorial.

This view of nature became so deeply engraved in the modern, capitalist, colonial and patriarchal modern project, that *naturalizing* became the most effective way of conferring an incontrovertible quality to certainty. If something is *natural*, the implication is that it can be no other way, be it because of the laziness and lust of the inhabitants of the tropics, women's unfitness for certain activities, or the existence of races and the "natural" inferiority of darker-skinned people.

These so-called natural certainties were never absolute, but they always found effective ways to be seen as such. However, over the last hundred years they began to reveal uncertainty areas, and in more recent times those

uncertainties have become more believable than the certainties or have even led to new, opposite certainties. Many factors have contributed to this. I will dwell on two of the most important. On the one hand, those social groups that have been declared naturally inferior never let themselves be completely beaten, and since the second half of the last century in particular, they managed to make their full humanity heard with such vigor and efficacy that it was turned into a set of claims that finally found their way into the social, political and cultural agenda (social movements by women, indigenous peoples, afro-descendant peoples in racist countries, etc.). All that was natural melted into air, and this in turn created new and startling uncertainties for the social groups that were seen as naturally superior, notably the uncertainty of not knowing how to maintain their privileges except when uncontested by their victims. This is where one of the most dogged uncertainties of our times arises: is it possible to recognize the right to equality and the right to the acknowledgment of difference at one and the same time? Why does it remain so difficult to accept the meta-right that seems to underlie all other rights, and which can be formulated as follows: we have the right to be equal whenever difference diminishes us and we have the right to be different whenever equality decharacterizes us?

The second factor is nature's growing revolt against such an intense and prolonged onslaught, and it comes in the form of climate changes that pose a threat to the existence of various forms of life on earth, including human life. Some human groups have already been indelibly affected, either because their habitats have been submerged by the rising sea waters, or because they have been forced to leave their irreversibly desertified land. Mother earth seems to be raising her voice above the ruins of the house which was once hers so that it could belong to everyone and which modern humans ended up destroying with their greed, voraciousness, irresponsibility, and boundless ingratitude. Will humans ever learn to share what is left of the house which they once thought was theirs alone, but which they inhabited thanks only to the generosity of mother earth? Or would they rather live in the golden exile of neo-feudal fortresses even as the majorities prowls around their walls and keep them awake at night, and legions of dogs, stockpiles of surveillance cameras, countless miles of barbed-wire fence and bullet-proof glass are brought in to shield them from reality, but never from the phantoms of reality? Such are the increasingly abysmal uncertainties of our times.

The Uncertainty of Dignity. Every human being (and, who knows, every living being) aspires to be treated with dignity, i.e., to get due recognition for his or her intrinsic value, regardless of the value attributed to them by others on the basis of external instrumental ends. The aspiration toward dignity can be found in every culture and can be articulated in languages and narratives so different among themselves that sometimes they just sound

incomprehensible to those who do not share the culture from which they spring. In recent decades, human rights have been turned into a hegemonic language and narrative for naming the dignity of human beings. Governments and international organizations the world over declare the demand for human rights and vow to support them. But like Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass*, as she goes through the mirror posited by Lewis Carroll's consensus narrative, or like the heroine in José Saramago's *Baltasar and Blimunda*, whose eyes could see in the dark, we come across a few disturbing findings: a large majority of human beings are not subjects of human rights, but rather the objects of state and non-state discourses on human rights. There is much unjust human suffering that is not viewed as a violation of human rights. The defense of human rights has often been invoked to invade countries, plunder their wealth, and cause the death of innocent victims. In the past, many liberation struggles against oppression and colonialism were waged on behalf of other emancipatory languages and narratives, with no mention of human rights. Now these disturbing findings, when placed in front of the mirror of the uncertainties which I have been describing, breed a new uncertainty that is also a founding factor of our times. Is the primacy of the language of human rights the product of a historic victory or a historic defeat? Is the invoking of human rights an effective tool in the struggle against the indignity to which social groups are so severely subject, or is it an obstacle that deradicalizes and trivializes the oppression caused by the indignity and makes palatable the oppressors' bad conscience?

Today's uncertainties are so many and of such a downward sort for so many people, that fear appears to be triumphing over hope. Should such a situation lead us to Albert Camus's pessimism, who in 1951 wrote these bitter words: "After twenty centuries, the sum total of evil has not abated in the world. There has been no parousia, whether divine or revolutionary?" I don't think so. It should just make us think that, under the present circumstances, the revolt and the struggle against the injustice—whereby downward uncertainty, and abysmal uncertainty in particular, are produced, disseminated and deepened—must be waged with a complex mixture of much fear and much hope, against the self-inflicted fate of the oppressed and the arbitrary mission of the oppressors. The struggle will be all the more successful, and revolt all the more likely to attract followers, if more and more people come to the realization that the hopeless fate of the powerless majorities stems from the fearless hope of the powerful minorities.

NOTES

1. This essay was originally written for the Catalogue of the 32nd Bienal de São Paulo (2016), which was devoted to the theme "Live Uncertainty."
2. Leo Tolstoy, *Last Diaries* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1960), 66.

