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bienal são paulo

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UNCERTAINTY BETWEEN FEAR AND HOPE

Boaventura de Sousa Santos

Spinoza (1632-1677) once said that the two basic emotions of human beings are fear and hope. Uncertainty is the experience of the possibilities that emerge from the multiple relations that can exist between fear and hope. When these relations are different, the kinds of uncertainty are different as well. Fear and hope are not equally distributed among all social groups or historical ages. There are social groups in which fear so overwhelms hope that the world happens to them without their being able to make the world happen. They live awaiting, but without hope. They are alive today, but they live in such conditions that they could be dead tomorrow. They feed their children today, but they don't know if they'll be able to do so tomorrow. The uncertainty in which they live is a downward uncertainty, because the world happens to them in ways that depend very little on them. When fear is such that hope has completely disappeared, downward uncertainty becomes abysmal and turns into its opposite: the certainty of fate, however unfair it may be. There are, on the other hand, social groups in which hope so overwhelms fear that the world is offered to them as a field of possibilities they may manage at their whim. The uncertainty in which they live is an upward uncertainty in that it takes place between options that bear generally desired, even if not always positive, results. When hope is so excessive that the notion of fear is lost, upward uncertainty becomes abysmal and turns into its opposite: the certainty of the mission of appropriating the world, no matter how arbitrary such a mission may be.

Most social groups live between these two extremes, more or

less afraid, more or less hopeful, going through periods in which downward uncertainties are dominant and others in which upward certainties are dominant. Ages are distinguished by the relative preponderance of fear and hope and of the uncertainties to which the relations between one and the other lead.

WHAT KIND OF AGE DO WE LIVE IN?

We live in an age in which the mutual ownership of fear and of hope seems to collapse in the face of the growing polarization between the world of hopeless fear and the world of fearless hope – in other words, a world in which uncertainties, be they downward or upward, increasingly become abysmal uncertainties by turning into fates unfair to the poor and powerless and into missions of appropriation of the world for the rich and powerful.

An ever greater percentage of the world population lives by facing imminent risks against which there is no insurance, or, if there is, it is financially inaccessible, such as the risk of death in armed conflicts in which they are not actively participating, the risk of illnesses caused by dangerous substances used legally or illegally on a massive scale, the risk of violence caused by racial, sexist, religious or other prejudices, the risk of the pillaging of their meager resources, be they wages or pensions, in the name of austerity policies over which they have no control, the risk of expulsion from their lands or homes as a result of the imperatives of development policies from which they will never benefit, the risk of precariousness in employment and the collapse of expectations that are stabilized enough for them to plan their personal and family lives in direct opposition to the reigning propaganda of autonomy and entrepreneurship.

In contrast, social groups making up ever smaller minorities in demographic terms accumulate ever greater economic, social and political power, a power based nearly always on the control of financial capital. The polarization has long existed, but is today more blatant and perhaps more virulent. Let us consider the following quote:

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 percent, or thereabouts, live in ceaseless physical labor and oppressive need, and the remaining one percent live 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, bad religion, science and art.”¹

1 Leo Tolstoy, *Last Diaries*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1960, p 66.

One would think this to be an excerpt from the manifestos of the Occupy Movement or the *Indignados* Movement from the beginning of the current decade. Nothing of the sort. It is actually an entry in Leo Tolstoy’s diary from March 17, 1910, shortly before he died.

WHAT UNCERTAINTIES ARE FACED?

As I have just explained, uncertainties are not equally distributed, whether with regards to their kind or with regards to their intensity, among the different social groups and classes that make up our societies. As such, the different fields in which such inequalities have the greatest impact on people’s and communities’ lives must be identified.

The uncertainty of knowledge. All people are subjects of knowledge, and the overwhelming majority define and exercise their practices with reference to knowledge other than scientific knowledge. We are experiencing, however, an age, the age of Eurocentric modernity, which attributes total priority to scientific knowledge and the practices directly derived therefrom: technologies. This means that the epistemological and existential distribution of fear and hope is defined by parameters that tend to benefit those social groups that have more access to scientific knowledge and technology. For these groups, uncertainty is always upward, inasmuch as the belief in scientific progress is a strong enough hope to neutralize any fear as to the limitations of current knowledge. For these groups, the principle of precaution is always something negative, because it stems the infinite progress of science. The cognitive injustice that this creates is

experienced by social groups with less access to scientific knowledge as an inferiority that generates uncertainty as to their place in a world defined and legislated based on simultaneously powerful and strange knowledge that affects them in ways over which they have little or no control. This knowledge is produced about them and in some cases against them and, in any case, never produced *with* them. Uncertainty has another dimension: uncertainty about the validity of their own ways of knowing, often ancestral ways of knowing, based on which they have guided their lives. Must they abandon and replace them by other kinds of knowledge? Is this new knowledge given to, sold to or imposed upon them, and, in all cases, at what price and at what cost? Will the benefits brought by this new knowledge be greater than the harm? Who will reap the benefits, and who will incur the losses? Will the abandonment of their own knowledge involve a wasting of experience? With what consequences? Will they be left more or less able to represent the world as their own and transform it according to their aspirations?

The uncertainty of democracy. Liberal democracy was conceived as a system of government grounded in the uncertainty of results and the certainty of processes. The certainty of processes ensured that the uncertainty of results would be equally distributed among all citizens. The right processes allowed different reigning interests in society to be confronted on equal footing and the results arising from this confrontation to be accepted as fair. Such was the basic principle of democratic coexistence. Such was the theory, but in practice things have always been very different, and today the discrepancy between theory and practice has attained disturbing proportions.

For a long time, only a small part of the population could vote, and as such, no matter how certain and correct the processes were, they could never be mobilized so as to take the interests of the majorities into account. Only in very rare cases could the uncertainty of the results benefit the majorities: in the cases in which the results were the side effect of rivalries between the political elites and the different interests of the dominant classes they represented. No wonder, then, that for a long time the majorities saw democracy the other way around: as a system of uncertain processes whose results were

certain, ever at the service of the interests of the dominant classes and groups. This is why the majorities were divided for so long: between the groups that wished to assert their interests through means other than those of liberal democracy (for example, revolution), and the groups that struggled to be formally included in the democratic system and thus hoped that the uncertainty of results would eventually favor their interests.

From that point forward, the dominant classes and groups (that is, those with social and economic power that was not supported by democratic means) began to use another strategy to make democracy work in their favor. On one front, they fought to see any alternative to the liberal democratic system eliminated, which they symbolically achieved in 1989 on the day the Berlin Wall fell. On another front, they began to use the certainty of processes to manipulate them so that the results would systematically favor them. However, in eliminating the uncertainty of results, they ended up destroying the certainty of processes. In being able to be manipulated by whoever had the social and economic power to do so, the democratic processes, supposedly certain, became uncertain. Worse yet, they became subject to a single certainty: the possibility of being freely manipulated by whoever had the power.

For these reasons, the uncertainty of the great majorities is downward and runs the risk of becoming abysmal. Having lost the capacity and even the memory of an alternative to liberal democracy, what hope can they have in the liberal democratic system? Could their fear be so intense that they are left only to resign themselves to their fate? Or, on the contrary, is there an embryo of genuineness in democracy that can still be used against those who have transformed it into a cruel farce?

The uncertainty of nature. Particularly since the European expansion beginning in the late 15th Century, nature has been considered by Europeans as a natural resource devoid of intrinsic value and, as such, unconditionally and limitlessly available to be exploited by humans. This conception, which was new in Europe and had no validity in any other culture in the world, gradually became dominant as capitalism, colonialism and the patriarchy (the last of which was reconfigured

by the other two) imposed throughout what was considered to be the modern world. This domination was so deep and far-reaching that it was converted into the basis of all the certainties of the modern and contemporary age: progress. Whenever nature seemed to offer resistance to exploitation, this was seen, at most, as an upward uncertainty in which hope overwhelmed fear. It was how Luís de Camões' Adamastor was courageously defeated, and the victory over him was called the Cape of Good Hope.

There were peoples that never accepted this idea of nature, because doing so would be tantamount to suicide. Indigenous peoples, for example, lived in such an intimate relationship with nature that it was not even considered to be something outside of them; it was, rather, mother Earth, a living being that encompassed them and all living beings past, present and future. As such, the Earth did not belong to them; they belonged to the Earth. This conception was so much more credible than the Eurocentric one and so dangerously hostile to the colonial interests of the Europeans that the most effective way to combat it was to eliminate the peoples who held it, turning them into one among many other natural obstacles to the exploitation of nature. The certainty of this mission was such that indigenous peoples' lands were considered free and unsettled no-man's land, even though flesh-and-blood people had been living on them since time immemorial.

Such was this conception of nature inscribed in the modern capitalist, colonialist and patriarchal project that *naturalizing* became the most effective way of attributing an incontrovertible character to certainty. If something is *natural*, it is so because it could not be any other way, whether as a consequence of the laziness and lasciviousness of the populations that live between the tropics, of women's incapacity for certain functions or of the existence of races and the "natural" inferiority of darker populations.

These so-called natural certainties were never absolute, but always found effective means of making people believe they were. However, in the last hundred years, they have begun to reveal zones of uncertainty and, in more recent times, the uncertainties have begun to be more credible than the certainties, when they have not led to new certainties in the opposite direction. Many factors have contributed to this.

I will select two of the most important ones. On one hand, the social groups declared to be naturally inferior never allowed themselves to be completely defeated. From the second half of the last century onwards, they managed to make their full humanity heard loud and effectively enough to the point of transforming it into a series of demands that became part of the social, political and cultural agenda. Everything that was natural unraveled into thin air, which created uncertainties that were new and surprising to the social groups considered to be naturally superior, especially the uncertainty of not knowing how to maintain their privileges other than as long as they are not contested by their victims. Out of this arises one of the most tenacious uncertainties of our time: is it possible to acknowledge the right to equality and, simultaneously, the right to the acknowledgement of difference? Why is it still so hard to accept the meta-right that seems to be the foundation of all others and that may be formulated as follows? We have the right to be equal when difference makes us inferior, and we have the right to be different when equality de-characterizes us.

The second factor is the growing revolt of nature in the face of such intense and prolonged aggression in the form of climate changes that put at risk the existence of various different forms of life on Earth, including that of humans. Some human groups have already been definitively affected, be it by seeing their habitats submerged by rising sea levels, be it by being forced to leave their lands turned irreversibly into a desert. Mother Earth appears to be raising her voice above the ruins of the house that was hers in order to be everyone's and that modern humans have destroyed out of greed, voraciousness, irresponsibility and, finally, a limitless ingratitude. Will humans be able to learn to share what's left of the home they judged to be theirs alone and which mother Earth actually granted them the generous privilege of inhabiting? Or will they prefer the golden exile of neo-feudal fortresses while the majorities surround their walls and disturb their sleep, no matter how many legions of dogs, arsenals of video cameras, kilometers of barbed wire and bullet-proof glass protect them from reality, but never from the ghosts of reality? These are the ever more abysmal uncertainties of our time.

The uncertainty of dignity. All human beings (and, perhaps, all

livings beings) aspire to be treated with dignity, which they understand as acknowledgement of their intrinsic value, regardless of the worth that others attribute to them as a function of instrumental ends foreign to them. Aspiration to dignity exists in all cultures and is expressed according to very distinct idioms and narratives – so distinct that they are often incomprehensible to those who do not share the culture from which they emerge. In recent decades, human rights have turned into a hegemonic language and narrative to give name to the dignity of human beings. All States and international organizations proclaim the necessity of human rights and purport to defend them. Nevertheless, like Lewis Carroll's (1832-1898) Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, if we dive through the mirror proposed by this consensual narrative, or if we look at the world through the eyes of Blimunda, which were able to see in the dark in José Saramago's (1922-2010) novel *Memorial do Convento*, we are faced with some disquieting conclusions: the vast majority of human beings are not subjects of human rights, but are, rather, objects of state and non-state human rights discourses; there is much unjust human suffering that is not considered a violation of human rights; the defense of human rights has often been invoked in order to invade countries, pillage their resources, and spread death among innocent victims; in the past, many struggles for liberation against oppression and colonialism were fought in the name of other emancipatory languages and narratives, and without ever making reference to human rights. These disquieting conclusions, once put in front of the looking glass of the uncertainties I have been mentioning, open the way to a new uncertainty that is itself also one of the founding uncertainties of our times. Is the primacy of the language of human rights the product of an historic victory or an historic defeat? Is the invocation of human rights an effective tool in the fight against the indignity to which so many human groups are subjected, or rather an obstacle that de-radicalizes and trivializes the oppression into which indignity is translated and soothes the bad conscience of the oppressors?

So many are the uncertainties of our time, and for so many people do they take on a downward character, that fear seems to be triumphing over hope. Must this situation lead us to the pessimism of

Albert Camus (1913-1960), who in 1951 bitterly wrote: “for twenty centuries, the sum total of evil has not diminished in the world. Has there been no Parousia, whether divine or revolutionary”?² I think not. It must only lead us to think that, under current conditions, revolt and struggle against the injustice that produces, disseminates and deepens downward uncertainty, especially abysmal uncertainty, have to be waged with a complex mixture of a great deal of fear and a great deal of hope, against the self-inflicted fate of the oppressed and the arbitrary mission of the oppressors. The struggle will be more successful, and the revolt gain more adepts, inasmuch as more and more people gradually realize that the hopeless fate of the powerless majorities is caused by the fearless hope of the powerful minorities.

2 Albert Camus,
L'Homme révolté. Paris:
Gallimard, 1951, p. 379.

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