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On Uncertainty

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It is has become one of the truisms of this extraordinary year that we are living in a period of chronic uncertainty. This is partly a matter of practical uncertainty – for example, the ever-changing and increasingly baffling rules and regulations being set down by governments. It is also an emotional and spiritual uncertainty. The props of everyday existence, so long taken for granted, are no longer there – work, travel, recreation, meetings with friends and family. And in addition we are all being worn down by the uncertainty of where this period is taking us, the alarming idea of a 'new normal'.

The future has always been uncertain, of course – I could fall under a bus tomorrow etc.; but we all learn strategies for managing that kind of uncertainty, generally by simply putting it out of our mind. The present, though, offers a uniquely intense and relentless uncertainty, of which we are reminded daily, hourly or even continually, depending on our news and social media habits; an uncertainty made far more problematic and emotionally challenging because it is framed by decision-making (that of politicians) in which we feel we should have a stake. If existential uncertainty (the bus) is static and an immovable given, then the uncertainty around the virus is painfully kinetic; arguments are being framed and decisions being made by politicians day-by-day in a restless and continually unfolding drama.

That the crisis has come at a time when faith in official narratives has been seriously undermined by populist politics and social media makes the uncertainty particularly difficult. Uncertainty paralyses action, and it is in action that we generally find solace for the pain we feel about the world. That inner paralysis has of course been exacerbated by the outer paralysis of lockdown – so many forms of action are suspended either because of regulations or because of peer pressure.

So how do we live with this particularly aggressive and exhausting uncertainty? How do we still the anxious voice that says, 'Give me answers, give me explanations, give me a story that I can understand, that I can fit into the *schemata* I use to make sense of the world'. We all have a need for a narrative that helps us feel we still have some control and power. But is there a way to resist its lure, and instead experiment with uncertainty? Uncertainty is, after all, not just a product of this year's events,

but of the human condition itself. Do we need to do more to explore it, rather than ignore it or belittle it, and is the virus offering us an opportunity to do so?

In conversations about uncertainty, I have introduced several friends to the words of the romantic poet, John Keats. In a phrase newly minted in 1817, familiar to literature students but otherwise little known, he stepped back from the proclamations and certainties of the older generation of romantic poets, and posited instead what he called 'Negative Capability', 'that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after Fact and reason – Coleridge, for instance [was] …incapable of remaining Content with half knowledge' (letter to George and Thomas Keats, 22 December 1817).

In the course of 2020 we have all become familiar, in ourselves and in others, with that 'irritable reaching after fact and reason' – desperate measures to find an explanation, a truth other than the official one. While the idea of a conspiracy theory has indeed been weaponised by the mainstream media to shut down counter-narratives, it is also true that many people have turned to such counter-narratives as a comfort, as a source of certainty in a maddeningly uncertain world. Such alternative interpretations frame what is happening in a way that is reassuring – there is a 'they' against whom our anxieties can solidify into anger or hatred.

In October last year, I was trying to strike up a conversation with one of the private security guards at Jones Hill Wood on the HS2 hit-list, trying to find some shared ground, and our talk turned inevitably to life in lockdown. He identified himself as 'a truther' and explained that he knew that the virus was a hoax, the beneficiaries being what he called, 'the 1 per cent, the elite', which he told me was made up of 'paedophile billionaires'. When I asked him whether he thought the doctors, nurses and careworkers who urge me to wear a mask are all systematically lying, he said that there is no proof that masks are of any benefit: show me one peer-reviewed paper on the effectiveness of masks, he said. His eyes shone with certainty. He is happy, he has the answers he needs, he has 'fact and reason' within his grasp.

We live in febrile times when suspicion that civic leadership is failing to protect us or treat us fairly is increasing and when, as a result, desperation for the comfort of certainty-narratives is also growing. That is entirely understandable: we seek a balm to the fear and anxiety which the last year has introduced. The problem is that such answers only channel fear into anger, not least because anger is more comfortable to live with than fear. Where fear is powerlessness, anger feels like ('taking back') control. I can see too how, whether deliberately or not, fear is being manipulated, as a way to undermine solidarity and community. We see it for example in the othering of people who wear or don't wear masks, which became so bitterly divisive in the USA during last year.[1]

That US discourse looks extreme, but there is clearly a way in which, while much government and mainstream media messaging has eulogised solidarity and community – indeed, tried to ritualise it with the 'clapping for carers' in the UK last spring – in practice, those virtues are also being undermined. Compassion and kindness become harder as fear and anger about others is subtly endorsed and reified, not just from the margins but also at the core of

mainstream narratives – a drip-drip of suspicion and paranoia.

Maybe real compassion lies not in certainty but in uncertainty, in active listening and engagement with other people's feelings, however different they may be from our own. Real courage perhaps lies in being willing not to reach for a certainty-narrative with all the anger against others that it entails. Instead of seeking out a dominant story, admitting no contradiction, perhaps we need to recognise, as Lucy Winkett, Rector of St James's Church Piccadilly, remarked recently, that paradox, creativity and mystery are the soul's native language. We carry multiple truths within ourselves, but Covid and government responses to Covid are eroding our capacity to remain open and receptive to that plurality of truths. Choosing to remain open to plurality, to uncertainty, is a form of resistance to the colonisation of our community by fear and anger.

This is what Charles Eisenstein has called 'the holy ground of uncertainty'[2] when he urges us to resist the 'war mentality' of a polarised society. In a similar way, Arundhati Roy, after a lifetime of active resistance to increasingly intolerant certainty-narratives in her native India, has written, 'I believe our liberation lies in the negotiation. Hope lies in texts that can accommodate and keep alive our intricacy, our complexity, and our density against the onslaught of the terrifying, sweeping simplifications of fascism.'[3]

Accepting that we do not know, that we cannot know, has been part of many spiritual and religious belief systems. The Tao te Ching, for example, is insistent on recognising that the further one goes, the less one knows; on having patience to wait for clarity; and on the wisdom of knowing what we do not know. But this kind of passivity is profoundly at odds with modernity, with neoliberal culture. Modern people are trained to expect answers at their fingertips, and more, we are encouraged to have opinions on every subject, however limited our knowledge. Ill-conceived plebiscites such as the Brexit vote demand conviction, despite the elusiveness of facts on which to base a decision; phone-ins, social media and online reporting demand instant reaction; information is packaged for ease of consumption; we are encouraged to binge on news, to hook up to a drip-feed of confirmatory stories. Reflection, ambivalence, doubt, do not sell; shades of grey do not fit in a world of polarised black and white.

An instinct for certainty is natural. But in his much-watched lecture 'The times are urgent: let us slow down', the Nigerian academic and activist Bayo Akomalafe speaks eloquently about what he calls 'post-activism' – that is, recognising how the way in which we respond to a crisis can itself become part of the crisis, or part of the architecture and structure which is the problem. We need to realise, Akomalafe says, that the problems we face are not exterior to us.[4] He suggests that where we are now, in the anthropocene, it is no longer possible to come up with 'solutions'; and in his re-telling of the 1973 Ursula le Guin story, 'The ones who walk away from Omelas', he posits not knowing the answer as a way forward.

Perhaps all our charts have failed us, and we should now consider the legitimacy and creativity of being lost, of accepting that we do not know, that we are uncertain. Rebecca Solnit has written a whole 'Field Guide' to getting lost. In response to the challenge of the pre-Socratic philosopher Meno, who asked, 'How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is

totally unknown to you?', she replies, 'Finding it is a matter of getting lost'. She traces the etymology of the word 'lost' to the Old Norse, *los*, meaning the disbanding of an army, and remarks that she worries that 'many people never disband their armies, never go beyond what they know'.[5]

So the question this past year prompts in me is – Does embracing and exploring uncertainty offer a way forward, not least in allowing us to foster the compassion and empathy we shall need more than ever, as we navigate this pandemic and the other existential threats which are now welling up around us?

References

1 See https://tinyurl.com/y2zfm8ym (accessed 14 January 2021).
2 Charles Eisenstein, 'The conspiracy myth', May 2020; available at https://tinyurl.com/yd64fcvf (accessed 14 January 2021).
3 See https://tinyurl.com/y5qlxrto (accessed 14 January 2021).
4 See https://tinyurl.com/y3fwc32y (accessed 14 January 2021).
5 Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Canongate, Edinburgh, 2006 (first published New York, 2005), pp. 4–7.

About the contributor

David Lambert is a historian and landscape consultant. In 2016 he helped set up Politics Kitchen in Stroud, inspired by the ideas of active listening and a new way of doing politics. In 2018 he discovered the seriousness of the climate emergency and became an active member of Extinction Rebellion. David is still coming to terms with the unfolding ecological catastrophe and societal breakdown, and he continues to seek ways to build resilience and understanding in his local community.