

UNCERTAINTY

Five essays to understand our times

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We do not know what is happening to us, and this is precisely what is happening to us, not knowing what is happening to us: the man of today begins to be disoriented with respect to himself, [...]

he is out of his country, thrown into a new circumstance that is like a terra incognita. Such is always the vital sensation

that seizes man in historical crises.

JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET

BEGINNING

Ortega y Gasset's quote is a fitting way to begin this book. Uncertainty is a sign of our times. What is wrong with us? We have all asked this question at one time or another. The pages that follow aim at sharing some hints I have found over the years. They are an attempt to probe where we have come from, get a sense of where we are, and imagine where we might be going.

I am aware of the limitations imposed on us by uncertainty. Donald Rumsfeld, former Secretary of Defense of the United States of America, described them well with a tongue twister: «There are things we know we know. There are things we know we don't know. But there are also things we don't know that we don't know». As we move from what we know we know to what we don't know we don't know, we need to draw on imagination and experience, tempered with discipline and rigor.

Uncertainty affects us all in different ways. Senior citizens are bewildered at the speed of change in all fields of human activity. Medical advances have extended life expectancy, but we are worried whether we will have financial security in old age, whether we will be independent when our faculties diminish, whether it will be possible to maintain satisfactory social relations as we lose friends and try to bond with younger generations.

The middle-aged are affected by the technological innovations that are changing the nature of work and threaten their employment and incomes. They experience difficulties in adapting to an increasingly digitalized world. The expectation that they would have better standards of living than their parents and grandparents is vanishing, and their children are taking longer to achieve economic independence.

Those who were born at the end of the twentieth century face a problematic world. Jonathan Rowson, British philosopher and chess grandmaster, describes their situation as follows:

... people born and raised in capitalist democracies after about 1990 have been brought up as digital natives in an ecologically compromised world with economies that are not serving the common good, where exponential

technological change is capable of radically altering society at the whims of a billionaire class, and gerontocratic leaders keep getting elected by telling implausible stories.

He adds they face a huge challenge:

It is in that kind of world, which is figuratively and often literally on fire, that the young have to conceive a future for themselves — even though the society they are supposed to adapt to appears delusional and necrotic.

Even without fully accepting his gloomy stance, we must recognize that the coming generations will face numerous dangers and threats.

Uncertainty affects more acutely those who do not have the resources, opportunities and capacities to decide about their own future. Inequities in the access to the means of subsistence and possibilities of advance exacerbate the bewilderment and frustration of those left behind. Gender violence, racism and discrimination shuts options for sizable portions of humanity and generate frustration and resentment.

Logic, with its premises and linearly derived conclusions, is not enough to cope with uncertainty and understand our times. Neither is a mechanical use of dialectics, with its thesis and antithesis that lead to a synthesis. To make sense of what is going on we should resort to paradox, in which opposites do not admit resolution, at least at first sight. Paradoxes require, as Francis Scott Fitzgerald suggested, «a first-rate intelligence [with] the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function».

A paradoxical approach can help to deal with uncertainty. It allows us, at the same time, to work with parts and wholes, to examine the short and the long term, to link thought and action, and to process inconsistencies and contradictions. It can help to estimate risks when we can assign probabilities to future events, to prepare when we can identify them but not assess their likelihood, and to make sensible guesses when the veil of ignorance hides the future from us.

Over the years, I have been fortunate to have teachers and mentors who guided me in the effort to understand what happens to us. The five chapters that follow are a

brief summary of what they taught me and what I subsequently learned on my own. I have tried to offer a synthesis of different ways of appreciating what is happening to us as we move deeper into the 21st century. In doing so, I have attempted to provide a global perspective from a Latin American viewpoint. Our diverse but common history, and the variety of situations our region has recently faced, can help to assess current and future events with a paradoxical stance.

The first chapter deals with the twilight of Sir Francis Bacon's epoch, which began five hundred years ago and is ending presently. I started the research on which the first chapter is based at the end of the 1970s. Since then, I have had the support of several generations of research assistants, as well as the encouragement, comments and suggestions of numerous colleagues and friends. Several articles and working papers have punctuated this learning process, which uses as its main instrument a retrospective reinterpretation of what the German philosopher Hans Jonas called «the Baconian program».

The second chapter describes the paradoxical fractured global order that characterizes international relations today. The initial ideas on the fractured global order emerged from my studies on international development cooperation. I began to formulate them in the late 1980s during my time as head of Strategic Planning at the World Bank. They took shape a decade later in several papers on the prospects for collaboration between high- and low-income countries and continued during my chairmanship of the United Nations Advisory Committee on Science and Technology. A decade later they took shape in several studies on international development cooperation that led me to elaborate a conceptual framework to describe the new context for international relations.

The third chapter contains several ideas on development strategies. At times of uncertainty and ambiguity, defining a sequence of anticipated decisions pointing toward a desired future state is not enough. It is necessary to identify a tangle of possible routes to a better destiny, preparing to follow one or the other, adjusting to the vagaries of the forces shaping the fractured global order at the twilight of Bacon's epoch, making incremental decisions, advancing step by step, —but without losing sight of the destination, of the desired future.

The fourth and fifth chapters summarize the lessons learned during the time I spent supporting the creation of political parties in Peru, which eventually led me to the Presidency of the Republic during a short but intense and critical period during the COVID 19 pandemic. The reflections on governance in these chapters come largely from my experience as a Congressman and President. The fourth chapter describes the principles we adopted and guided the way in which the Transition and Emergency Government exercised political power and authority, as we sought to restore citizens confidence in government and instill hope for a better future.

The last chapter adopts a more personal tone. It emphasizes trust in institutions, in others and, most important, in our own self. The possibility of governing ourselves well in the uncertainty and gloom in which we live, of adequately managing the challenges and paradoxes we face, depends not only on those who exercise leadership in government, business and civil society, but on each and every one of us. A prerequisite for moving towards a better future is to know ourselves, to know what we want, and to coolly assess the prospects for achieving our aims. This may make it possible to remain calm and composed in the uncertain times we are living now and will live in the coming years.

This book attempts to distill and share lessons learned from numerous readings and life experiences. It offers some ideas that could help us to dispel, at least partially, the anguish of not knowing what is happening to us. As visual arts researcher Xavier Nueno put it clearly:

A book is always an attempt to reduce a library, to make unnecessary all the books one has read in order to carry it out. So we arrive at the paradox that the only legitimate reason we write is because there are too many books.

The text you hold in your hands or watch on your screen, dear reader, is my attempt to make it unnecessary for you to read many other books and, paradoxically, motivate you do so.

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CLOSING

The uncertainty and ambiguity of our times demand a renewal of the ways of apprehending the world around us. The ideas I have shared with you in these essays emerged from repeated acts of appreciation, integrating mindset, evidence and character to decide what to include, what to leave out and how to present it. They are unfinished "pre-texts" and, at the same, time "pretexts" to engage you, dear reader, in the task of unraveling the conundrum of not knowing what is happening to us.

These pre-texts/pretexts are also a way to pass the baton; of motivating the coming generations to explore the future, to rethink the ideas of progress and development, to create and adopt new values to guide our species in the twilight of Bacon's epoch and the fractured global order. They are, in addition, an attempt to stimulate the design of new strategies to improve the human condition; to put in place more just, equitable and effective governance schemes; and to build trust in others, in institutions and in ourselves.

. . .

I close this book on my eightieth birthday. I have learned and forgotten many things, but the idea that life is a terminal disease has remained in my mind: all of us who catch life end up dying. Let's enjoy the symptoms —joy, happiness, sadness, enthusiasm, chagrin, love, friendship, among many others— that we experience while this wonderful disease lasts.