Chapter 9

Uncertainty

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Introduction

Uncertainty seems to be the hallmark of the contemporary era. In current Western societies, it seems to be everywhere. Apparently, it is impossible to speak about health, economics, politics, environment, work, love, personal relationships, everyday life and the future without taking into consideration that we – Western subjects – are not able to predict with a certain degree of certainty the evolution of the situation and to control the outcomes of our choices. Public and political discourse, experts and media headlines seem to assert that things are uncertain, and increasingly so (Scoones, 2019). The question of uncertainty seems to have invaded the Western world, which – it is assumed – lived more stably and securely in the past.

From an existential point of view, we could say that uncertainty is part of how human beings experience existence (Nowotny, 2016). It constitutes features of human nature: the fact that human awareness is relational; and the need to interact with an 'external' world – made up of both living beings and material substances – which has its own consistency, logic and structure. This 'external' world is constitutive of self-perception and personal agency, and it has an unexpected and unpredictable ability to respond and react to our actions and will. Uncertainty is the correlate of the radically relational character of the experience of oneself and reality. It is part of the human mode of experiencing and expressing awareness of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962) and of always being in relationship with others and with the environment. In general terms, we may say that uncertainty is connected to the social character of human experience, to the fact that our ability to relate to experience is always relational: it is always a being-with-others within a material context. It is in this unavoidable and ineliminable experience of relationality (with other human beings and with the material context) that we can locate the existential and experiential dimension of uncertainty. Its relational nature means that the horizon of the possibilities of experience always remains inevitably open because the meaning that we attribute to experience is always the result of a relationship, of a dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981; Todorov, 1984). If we embrace the idea that 'any true understanding is dialogic in nature' and that

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'understanding is to utterance as one line of a dialogue is to the next' (Voloshinov, 1973: 102) then the ability to understand and make sense is always open to the future and uncertain. It depends on what comes next, on what others will say or do, on how the context will resist, react or change. If the understanding – of oneself and reality – is always 'dialogic', 'open', it is also necessarily uncertain. It contains a certain amount of unpredictability; it can never be fully controlled because it 'depends' on what is not under our full control; it is never in the here and now but comes into existence in the relation, in the time spent waiting for an answer, in what comes next.

However, the growing centrality assumed by the question of uncertainty cannot be fully understood from only an existential point of view. If it is plausible that uncertainty can be considered a constitutive aspect of human experience, it is probably equally plausible that the meaning that it assumes in experience is linked to historical and social conditions.

More than being a 'fact' of the world, uncertainty is an interpretation and an account of the person's experience of the world. As such, it assumes more or less significance according to the specific conditions of the society concerned and of the persons who use it to make sense of the world (Zinn, 2008). Given these premises, the purpose of this chapter is not to analyse the ontological consistency of uncertainty. It does not investigate what uncertainty really is; it does not explore its relations with knowledge and ignorance, danger and risk (for this reason, the terms 'uncertainty', 'risk', 'danger' and 'precariousness' are often used interchangeably throughout the chapter). Nor does it aim to suggest how to tackle or cope with uncertainty, how to reduce, harness, tame, control and exploit it. Instead, it considers how uncertainty is perceived and used, who uses it and for what purposes. It analyses how and to what extent uncertainty is part of the toolbox of contemporary social sciences and becomes part of the discourses people use to make sense of their social experience in their specific socio-historical contexts, how it is conceived, addressed, promoted or problematized for specific purposes by different actors.

Any sociological analysis of uncertainty should be rooted in specific socio-historical contexts, avoiding excessive generalizations. For this reason, this chapter mainly analyses how uncertainty has been, and still is, used to make sense of experience and reality in Western societies; societies in which discourses on uncertainty have become pervasive as ways to understand reality and as political means to manage, control and regulate individual and collective behaviours.

A modernity yearning

Developing a specific sociological perspective on uncertainty requires putting in the foreground how, in a specific historical and social context, it is defined, interpreted and endowed with meaning. This involves focusing attention on by whom, how, when and for what purposes reference is made to uncertainty in order to describe, interpret or judge the social situation and reality. We can say that each

era, each social group and each situation has its forms of uncertainty, its discourses on how to recognize and control it, and specialists and institutionalized systems for its management (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Lupton, 2013). The definition of security or insecurity is always deontic (it is never simply descriptive; it is not a matter of pure rationality). It implies a specific worldview: it is a declaration of how we would like our world to be.

Classical Western modernity was particularly obsessed with uncertainty. In several respects, it could be said that one of the central guidelines of classical modernity was the aspiration to eliminate uncertainty, take full control of the world, tame nature to serve human needs, plan and design to predict the future, and eliminate unwanted negative effects. In the logic of classical modernity, eliminating uncertainty was tantamount to taking control of the world and making human beings fully masters of their destiny (Bauman, 1990, 2000).

The modern desire to eliminate, or at least to control, uncertainty is rooted in its radical destruction of old certainties. One way to deal with the 'melting into the air' of what was solid – the traditional European feudal society – caused by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution was to develop forms of control and management. Advances in science, technological innovation, the bureaucratic and rational organization of work, the army and the state, control of the economy and the population through data collection, statistics and probabilistic calculus: these are all examples of both the constant production of uncertainty and the effort to reduce or control it. 'Progress' is the term that summarizes the modern aspiration to control the world and, in doing so, to constantly produce change. The widespread idea in classical modernity was that, through scientific knowledge, it would be possible to eliminate uncertainty and take full control of human destiny. The idea of progress implies a specific conception of time and history, and it defines a clear hierarchy among human beings. Time is conceived as an arrow, as a vector along which human beings move from a state of present knowledge towards a future state inevitably marked by more knowledge. It also represents a way to locate the different groups and individuals on the vector. Those who are lower on the arrow of progress have less knowledge – they are less modern and less civilized; they still live in the past – than do those who are higher. The degree of uncertainty experienced in the present is a sign that the modern project to eliminate uncertainty is not yet complete and requires harder work; however, there is the certainty that, under the guidance of those at the highest level of civilization, with further efforts, the goal will be achieved, that new knowledge will guarantee more control and more safety.

To fully understand the idea of progress, the tension towards the elimination of uncertainty and the simultaneous production of constant changes that undermine certainties, it is necessary to consider the close link between modernity and colonialism (Bhambra, 2007; Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018, 2021; Santos, 2018).

Uncertainty and precariousness have constituted the reality of the peripheries, guaranteeing greater stability and certainty at the centre of the colonial system. Colonialism was able to promote security for the colonizers by producing

uncertainty, terror and exploitation in the colonies. The hierarchical and unequal treatment of the colonies enabled Western countries to control the uncertainty at the centre. The appropriation of the colonies' resources allowed the development of science and technology. It generated prosperity and enabled the development of the welfare state in the centre by causing or allowing famine, natural and social destruction in the periphery (Davis, 2001). The exploitation of the colonies freed a substantial part of the colonizers from material needs, allowing for greater social activity which resulted, for example, in the institutionalization of the bourgeois family unit and coffee houses (around the middle of the seventeenth century, tea, chocolate and coffee, typical colonial products, had become the common beverages of at least the affluent inhabitants of European cities) as places to create public opinion necessary for the development of democracy (Habermas, 1991). Moreover, it encouraged artistic production and entertainment – the flourishing of music, theatre, literature and painting (Barker, 2017). Colonial control made it possible to test and put into practice techniques of political and police control, to develop the bureaucratic machine (Quijano, 2007). These skills were then re-imported to the centre and used both to increase the security of the middle class and to control and repress the 'dangerous classes'. The colonial system guaranteed internal security and well-being by exporting uncertainty to the colonies: criminals, poor people, redundant labourers were transformed into colonizers – making the 'miserable', the 'dangerous classes' of Europe, sovereigns and masters of others (the colonized) more miserable and dangerous than they were. At the same time, the techniques tested to produce control through terror and uncertainty were re-imported and applied to the management of internal marginality (Procacci, 1993; Castro-Gomez, 2002; Magubane, 2013). Racial classifications were reused to define internal hierarchies and criteria of citizenship (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991; Hall, 2017).

As Fanon argued with narrative and critical force in his works, the colonial relationship was not limited to material expropriation; it also aimed at the annihilation of the colonized by creating 'an atmosphere of certain uncertainty' (Fanon, 1986: 110–111): a situation that allowed full control thanks to the ability to constantly produce uncertainty for others. The imposition of the colonial economic and political model shattered forms of popular action and solidarity, introducing generalized insecurity with regard not only to the unpredictability of the situation and the action of the colonizers but also to the capacities and identities of the colonized themselves (Fanon, 2004).

Part of the security of the Western world is linked to this constant ability to produce some external uncertainty. The idea of progress, the myth of classical modernity of achieving, through knowledge, planning and measurement, the mastery of the future and the elimination of negative contingencies was rooted in colonial exploitation. It can be said that colonialism promoted the illusion of eliminating – or, at least, controlling – uncertainty by exporting it to the margins of the empire (Sowa, 2020).

Late modernity and risk society

The myth of classical Western modernity of full security and control (Castel, 2003) gradually lost its credibility. After World War II, it became increasingly evident that a series of transformations had radically changed social relations and the structure of society, and that 'the institutionally enforced program of modernity, its cultural promise of making the world controllable, not only does not "work" but in fact becomes distorted into its exact opposite' (Rosa, 2020: 19). A series of terms was introduced to signal this transformation: 'late' or 'second modernity', 'postmodern' or 'postindustrial society', 'risk society'. Beyond their specific differences, these terms converge to underline a profound change in the social meaning attributed to uncertainty and to the role it assumes in social experience.

The shock caused by the use of the atomic bomb, the horror and shame of the Shoah, the protests of young people and the postcolonial struggles, as well as recurrent economic crises, awareness of environmental damage, the hazards produced by scientific knowledge and industrial production, and the issue of climate change: all of these phenomena contributed to solidifying the belief that the promise of modernity had not come true. The development of knowledge did not install humanity in a universe of deterministic and omnipotent knowledge such that it was able to dominate nature and the future; on the contrary, the twentieth century marked the end of the positivist ideal by throwing human beings into uncertainty created by their anxious desire for control and progress. This did not mean the total collapse of rationality and the return of irrationality, but rather the development of multiple forms of new rationality in the search for new ways to cope with and use uncertainty. The intensification of globalization processes created a dense network of interconnections (Appadurai, 1996; Tomlinson, 1999) which made it more difficult to find an 'outside' in which to expel the uncertainty created without suffering its negative side effects. The 'horizontal' distribution system of insecurity that had enabled classical modernity to maintain an acceptable degree of security at the centre was no longer easily feasible. The demand for security required the development of new forms of 'vertical', scattered and internal distribution of protections and guarantees. The social sciences contributed to dismantling the certainties of classical modernity by emphasizing how any understanding of human experience should be situated and should take contingency and ambivalence into account (Lash and Urry, 1987; Harvey, 1989; Bauman, 1992). As a result of all these changes, the meanings attributed to uncertainty changed.

Over the past 40 years, the focus of discussion in Western societies has shifted from how to eliminate uncertainty to how to control and use it (Bammer and Smithson, 2009). An important contribution in this regard has been the work of Beck (1992), who suggests that, in the second half of the twentieth century,

Western societies witnessed a break with classical modernity, forging a new form: 'late modernity' or the 'risk society'. In late modernity,

> the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks. Accordingly, the problems and conflicts relating to distribution in a society of scarcity overlap with the problems and conflicts that arise from the production, definition and distribution of techno-scientifically produced risks.
>
> (*Ibid*. 19)

The risk society is one aspect of reflexive modernization (Beck et al., 1994). The main assumption of this thesis is that modernity has entered a second phase: *the modernization of modern society* (Beck et al., 2003: 1). While in classical modernity

> privileges of rank and religious world views were being demystified; today the same is happening to the understanding of science and technology in the classical industrial society, as well as to the modes of existence in work, leisure, the family and sexuality.
>
> (Beck, 1992: 10)

'Reflexive' does not mean that modern individuals and societies today lead a more conscious life. On the contrary, the constant questioning of the knowledge and forms of organization of society increases the awareness that full control of unwanted side effects, the elimination of uncertainty, and a perfect forecast of the future are impossible. As Giddens (1990: 39) contends,

> Modernity is constituted in and through reflexively applied knowledge, but the equation of knowledge with certitude has turned out to be misconceived. We are abroad in a world which is thoroughly constituted through reflexively applied knowledge, but where at the same time we can never be sure that any given element of that knowledge will not be revised.

The constant production of risks has, for Beck, two main sources. On the one hand, scientific, technological and industrial development multiplies the possible negative and unwanted outcomes. On the other hand, late modernity promotes a constant social drive towards individualization which, by freeing human beings from the social forms of industrial society (in particular, class, family and gender), makes them responsible for creating their own forms of life – but without the possibility to evaluate their effectiveness in advance.

The techno-scientific and industrial improvements of the means with which to reduce uncertainty have themselves become producers of uncertainty. New threats have been produced by advances that make it possible to use nuclear energy, manipulate stem cells, map the human chromosome, rapidly process a

huge amount of information, track human movements and behaviours, create genetically modified organisms, new molecules, new drugs and mRNA vaccines. The long-term negative effects on the environment and the survival itself of living beings on the planet are less and less predictable while they appear more and more certain. Late modernity adopts an ambivalent attitude towards technoscience: it combines the need to question the already given and the already known to improve human existence with the desire to prevent and reduce possible damage. It creates tension between the need to take risks and the desire to reduce risk (Zinn, 2020). The idea that the advent of a new era – which some have started to call the ‘Anthropocene’ – in which society endangers itself and its environment does not imply a generalized distrust of science or, even less, a generalized return of irrationalism. Rather, it promotes the awareness of having to live with uncertainty and the attempt to transform it into risk – that is, a situation in which it is possible to calculate a certain distribution of the probabilities of the outcomes, and therefore to foresee the measures to cope with them. Uncertainty becomes something to live with rather than something to be eradicated. It becomes a political issue: the question is what risks are worth taking and how to distribute the potential dangers. The widespread awareness of living in a situation of omnipresent risk makes uncertainty an element ever-present in social and political discourse. It generates a spiral in which ‘the higher the safety/security level and the safety/security requirements, the more uncertainties and the more “new” uncertainties are discovered, which require more effort during the production of safety, security and uncertainty’ (Bonß, 2013: 11). There are no decisive counter-measures against risks; rather, the solutions envisaged are always much less than optimal because they generate new uncertainties, whether they are real or only imagined.

The processes of institutionalized individualism constitute a second main source of uncertainty. They create the conditions in which risk management is increasingly construed as a matter of private choice and responsibility. People face socially generated risks individually, making choices that cannot affect the choice options available. They are compelled by the mechanism driving current forms of modernization to make themselves the masters of their destinies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). They are forced to decide for themselves how to plan their existence, education, work, family, and every other aspect of their lives, choosing among the many options that late modernity makes available. However, they cannot rely on models used in the past, which are no longer viable. Late modernity has freed people from the institutions of classical modernity. This has increased individual autonomy, but it has destabilized many of the models used by people to orientate themselves in regard to the future. Routines are increasingly replaced by choices, while choices can no longer rely on unquestioned ideal models (Zinn, 2020: 55). What individuals will be able to do with their lives in concatenating their choices remains their sole responsibility. As Beck observed (1992: 137): ‘How one lives becomes the *biographical solution to systemic contradictions*’. But this remains a paradoxical possibility: systemic problems require

systemic solutions, and individual actions and choices are unable to significantly modify the conditions that create risk and uncertainty.

Beck's idea of the risk society has been criticized for taking a deterministic stance towards technoscientific progress (Dean, 1998; Blackman and Featherstone, 2015). For Beck, the risks are real, and they are genuine dangers created by advances in science and industrial production. However, he recognizes that how the risks are defined and who is made responsible for addressing them are social constructs (Best, 2008).

An excessively deterministic interpretation of technoscientific development risks underestimating the political and cultural meanings that the control of uncertainty and the correlated social distribution of risks possess in contemporary societies. The current concern of Western societies with risk and uncertainty, critics argue, stems from a different cultural awareness and sensitivity, rather than from the fear that technology is running out of control (Furedi, 2006, 2019). The excessive focus on the technological aspects of the late-modern transformation – so the criticism continues – leaves unexplored

> the possibility that today's far-reaching social transitions have occurred as a result of a broader crisis, one that involves not only the spiralling of risk, but also the shattering of modernist culture, the breakdown of enlightenment faith in progress, the collapse of European imperialism, the globalization of capital, and such like.
>
> (Elliott, 2002: 310)

A cultural interpretation of risk (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Douglas, 1992; Lupton, 2013) stresses the symbolic meanings that different societies attach to uncertainty. The recognition of risk and uncertainty does not end with the objective recognition of an external threat. Instead, it is a way to interpret reality, affirm values, denounce what is not in line with the established order or social desires, and blame those who are perceived as violators of rules. It is a widely used way to explain deviations from the norm, misfortunes, and frightening events. When referring to uncertainty, people emphasize human responsibility and assume that something can be done to prevent misfortune (Lupton, 2013). The symbolic bases of people's uncertainties are the anxiety created by disorder, the loss of control over their bodies, over relationships with others, the lack of confidence in the sufficient stability of their daily routines and the loss of their deepest beliefs.

Melucci (1996) argues that contemporary global society is increasingly characterized by complexity, which means differentiation, the high speed and frequency of change, and the broadening of opportunities for action. People find themselves living simultaneously in several contexts, where different rules and languages apply, where different interlocutors have different interpretations of the situation and different expectations. The ability to pass from one context to another without being excluded becomes, especially for the younger generations (Colombo and Rebughini, 2019), a fundamental skill. Unable to rely on patterns and routines

inherited from the past, people are constantly forced to choose. This constitutes both a constraint and a resource. It is a resource because people are freer to choose their own paths and the relationships that are most congenial to them; it is a constraint because every choice creates a specific kind of psychological pressure: it can turn out to be less satisfactory than expected, wrong or negative, and, inevitably, choosing one option among the many available implies not implementing the others, which could prove to be equally, if not more, useful or rewarding. As Melucci (1996: 44) notes,

> complexity provides opportunities that in their scope far exceed the effective capacity for action of individuals or groups. We are constantly reminded that the field of action laid out before us remains far wider than what can be conquered of it through the opportunities that we are actually able to seize. In terms of everyday experience, the outcome of these processes is that *uncertainty* has become a stable component of our behaviour.

Neoliberal appreciation of uncertainty

Positive aspects of uncertainty are emphasized by neo-liberal capitalism (O'Malley, 2015). Following Foucault (2008: 66), we can say that the motto of neoliberalism is: 'live dangerously'. Economic thought has always stressed that uncertainty can be a potential source of gains. The ability to take advantage of uncertainty has always been an important profit opportunity: capitalist entrepreneurs are those who expose themselves to risk, who step out of the established terrain to explore and discover new fields of business. Uncertainty may be creative, generating profit and wealth (Lehtonen and Van Hoyweghen, 2014). Exploration and innovation can lead to significant losses; but if they are positive, they ensure an advantage over competitors. The positive attitude towards uncertainty has become a constitutive part of the spirit of neoliberalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). For our present purposes, we can briefly define neoliberalism as political, economic and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, competition and constant technological change (Springer et al., 2016). Furthermore, the neoliberal perspective envisages a reduction of intervention by the state in economic matters, so that it is restricted to being the guarantor of internal and international security and respect for the laws on private property, protecting citizens from aggression, theft, breach of contract and fraud. It conceives civic society as an arena in which individual entities relate to one another as competitors pursuing their self-interest. Finally, the neoliberal perspective places particular emphasis on individual responsibility and advocates the extension of the logic that drives competitive markets to all sectors of society, including the economy, politics and daily life.

Neoliberalism conceives uncertainty as a resource that should be cultivated and exploited. It contends that too much social security encourages irresponsible behaviour and generates 'perverse effects' among its beneficiaries. The real

antidote to uncertainty, it maintains, is personal initiative and the assumption of the risks and responsibilities that derive from one's actions. Neoliberal thinking recognizes the existence of a trade-off between security and freedom, between security and autonomy, and it values the latter more than the former (Börner et al., 2020). People should pursue their ambitions and live their lives according to their ideas, taking their distance from social constraints, even if this means being constantly exposed to uncertainty. Being a free and autonomous subject implies knowing how to live with uncertainty, knowing how to rationally calculate risks and knowing how to seize the opportunities created by change and complexity (Bargetz, 2021). A society freed from the bonds of tradition and the pastoral control of the state favours individual freedom. It enables people to independently pursue their propensities, to develop their abilities. Acquired freedom and autonomy imply the ability/need to make choices, expose oneself to inevitable risks and take responsibility for one's successes and failures. The neoliberal antidote to the inevitable anxiety that accompanies greater freedom is keeping oneself busy, being active, seizing the moment and not waiting for help from others.

Uncertainty is also an incentive to seek greater knowledge and a stimulus of critical thinking. The awareness of not knowing, or that what we know is partial, incomplete, destined to be superseded by new knowledge, and awareness of not being able to plan the future without margins of error, stimulate a critical distancing from the taken-for-granted. Uncertainty induces people to give importance to agency and to recognize that social reality is not given in a definitive, universal and immutable way by some transcendental force, but instead depends on human actions and choices. It helps people to recognize that the reality in which they live could be otherwise. It promotes new forms of relationship, political participation and cooperation.

> To respond to complex uncertainties, citizens cannot just be customers of standardised insurance products, nor passive citizens of supposedly benevolent technological states – they must take on new roles, as part of collectivities that are based on the principle of solidarity, where care and collaboration are central.
>
> (Scoones and Stirling, 2020: 19)

Furthermore, uncertainty stimulates the sense of identity, the idea that there is continuity and stability beyond constant change and the multiplicity of alternative options that are always possible. 'It is in the productive, ever-changing tension between the two poles of a dynamic spectrum, of being in control and exposed to uncertainty, that personal and collective identities are formed by seeking continuity in defiance of what might happen next' (Nowotny, 2016: 1).

The positive assessment of uncertainty promoted by neoliberal ideology transforms uncertainty itself into a value and stimulates a new opportunity-directed form of individuality (Shilling and Mellor, 2021). Knowing how to expose oneself to risk, avoiding negative effects, becomes a test of maturity, a necessary skill.

As Lyng's (1990) analysis of 'edgework' illustrates, engaging in high-risk leisure activities can be a way to assert and strengthen a sense of personal identity. Voluntary involvement in risky recreational activities (e.g., bungee-jumping, off-piste skiing, skydiving, wild water rafting and kite surfing) highlights that uncertainty is not always synonymous with anxiety and that people may be willing to voluntarily risk their health and well-being because they believe that embracing risk is a positive virtue. Voluntary exposure to risk – without suffering negative consequences – becomes a source of gratification and excitement, even though the people who engage in these activities devote significant effort to risk management to reducing the likelihood of dangerous outcomes. As Lyng (2008: 130) maintains,

> in the risk society, indeterminacy and uncertainty are the overriding qualities of the dominant social reality and successfully negotiating the uncertainties of daily life becomes the key challenge for many social actors. Doing edgework in this context is not focused on transcending the dominant reality, when the reality of everyday life bears a fundamental resemblance to the reality found at the edge. Rather than representing a form of 'counter-agency' in late modernity, edgework must be seen as the purest expression of the agentic qualities demanded by the risk society.

Demonstrating that one is not afraid of risk – or, rather, exposing oneself to a controlled risk and emerging unscathed – strengthens the sense of self. It makes one feel 'fit', invincible and omnipotent, a person of worth. Exposing oneself voluntarily and playfully to controlled risk is an apotropaic rite; it removes the fear of uncertainty as well as constituting a sort of training for the tasks required by the neoliberal society.

From governing uncertainty to governing through uncertainty

Beck (1992) maintained that being exposed to risk is an unavoidable feature of contemporary experience. He argued that in the risk society, social classes and other classic forms of social stratification no longer obtain. Risks can affect different people in different ways, but no one is safe from them.

> Sooner or later the risks also catch up with those who produce or profit from them. Risks display a social *boomerang effect* in their diffusion: even the rich and powerful are not safe from them. The formerly 'latent side effects' strike back even at the centers of their production. The agents of modernization themselves are emphatically caught in the maelstrom of hazards that they unleash and profit from.
>
> (Ibid.: 37)

This perspective ends up supporting the idea that the distribution of modern hazard is blind to inequalities, that risk and uncertainty are democratic, and that we are all at risk notwithstanding our social position, wealth, education, gender, ableness, ethnicity and power. However, we are not all at risk and certainty not to the same extent (Furedi, 2006: 65). Dangers, hazards and uncertainties do not constitute the same burden; nor do they have the same effects on all people. Being able to handle uncertainty requires resources and skills. Knowing how to deal with uncertainty often means having the possibility and material resources to wait for the best opportunity, not being pressured by the need to make an immediate choice. It also involves having the information necessary to weigh the pros and cons of the uncertain situation and be able to make the best use of it.

Uncertainty not only has different effects on people in different social positions; it also manifests itself as inequality (Atkinson, 2007). Uncertainty is not democratic; it creates the condition in which the privileged experience enormous opportunities for enrichment, self-fulfilment and gratification, while the least advantaged are exposed to the negative side effects of uncertainty and risk, so that their impoverishment, their precariousness and the consequent damage increase (Curran, 2016). In many respects, we can say that one of the main cleavages in current Western societies is the different exposure to uncertainty and (negative) risks. The intersection among the categories that define the social distribution of privileges and oppression – class, gender, education, ethnicity, 'race', ability, age, etc. – defines specific social positions that make uncertainty and the ability to cope with it a significant source of differentiation (Giritli Nygren et al., 2020).

The intersectional perspective seems 'particularly helpful in detailing how conceptualizations of risk are shaped simultaneously by race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and other social divisions, and how risk-based policies and the governance of risk have varied and unequally affected, diverse populations' (Olofsson et al., 2014: 419).

Reflecting on uncertainty as a form of unequal distribution of social burdens and privileges makes it possible to place the question of power at the centre of the analysis. It enables one to question who uses uncertainty, how, on what occasions and with what results. It highlights that the question of uncertainty in contemporary societies is not to be found (only) in the risk that technology and scientific knowledge will spin out of control, or in the impossibility of calculating risks and predicting their consequences. Rather, it resides in the use of the concepts of uncertainty, risk, crisis and emergency to legitimize control and disciplinary practices functional to the social order.

The entwining of uncertainty and power is the analytical focus of scholars who, assuming a poststructuralist stance and mainly influenced by Michel Foucault's work, consider uncertainty to be a central aspect of current governmentality. The critique of neoliberal thought highlights how, in late modernity and in the new spirit of capitalism that characterizes it, uncertainty is positively evaluated as a potential resource if it is adequately controlled and managed. Neoliberal thinking and practices no longer aspire – as was the case in classical

modernity – to eliminate uncertainty. What they want and pursue is constant control over uncertainty, the possibility of distilling its advantageous and positive aspects without having to pay for the undesirable and negative consequences. They aspire to turn uncertainty into something that can be controlled and managed (Power, 2007; Samimian-Darash and Rabinow, 2015). In late modernity, characterized by the hegemony of neoliberal thought, uncertainty is organized (Power, 2007), made calculable. Commitment to the government of uncertainty becomes one of the sources of political action and its legitimacy. Governance of uncertainty becomes a necessary and positively assessed skill on both an individual and collective levels.

Specific governmentality is established which aims to manage uncertainty by regulating conduct. Following Foucault (2007: 389), governmentality is understood here as the 'conduct of conduct', that is, the ways in which the techniques of government are deployed to produce social order through the production of governable subjects (Dean, 1998, 2010). It focuses on the dispositives, discourses, techniques and power relations through which government is achieved; that is, how problems and subjects are conceived, what solutions to problems are invented, what ends are imagined as ideal outcomes, how reality is experienced and understood (O'Malley, 2008: 56).

The control of uncertainty becomes the 'logic' of the intervention on individuals and society that legitimizes and justifies government action and helps fabricate particular forms of identity, agency and expertise (Ewald, 1991: 201–202). As Foucault (2008: 65–70) observes, uncertainty, instability and ephemerality define the neoliberal world, and they represent the other side of free human existence. This tension is constitutive and cannot be completely overcome. It follows, however, that liberalism requires a security that it can never ensure: the search for security and the incitement to 'live dangerously' are the building blocks of liberal governmentality. Taking actions to control uncertainty becomes the main task of the state and the commitment of every single citizen. It is the claim that government action is endeavouring to control uncertainty that makes it justified, legitimate and widely accepted. Any agency that admits that it is unable to keep crucial uncertainties in check would lose legitimacy and authority (Scoones and Stirling, 2020). As an effective formula for controlling uncertainty, the neoliberal model promotes the extension of market logic to every aspect of public and private life. Competition, entrepreneurial spirit, individual initiative, self-directed action, cost and benefit calculation are presented as vital and constructive capacities of an autonomous and fully realized self.

The governmental logic oriented to the management of uncertainty has significant impacts on the social structure and social relations of contemporary societies. It acts both at the level of control of conduct and at the level of political management of the society.

In the former case, neoliberal governmentality emphasizes the need to learn to live with uncertainty and to exploit the possibilities that it makes available. This happens not by forcibly imposing models of behaviour, but by educating,

convincing, seducing people to acquire soft skills that help them to live with uncertainty without being subject to anxiety and frustration. By instructing individuals to live in uncertainty, drawing the maximum possible benefits from it, neoliberal governmentality constitutes a form of subjectification: it constructs a form of identification and a form of discipline at the same time. It disciplines people to exercise a well-regulated autonomy (Kelly, 2013).

The forms of institutionalized individualism promoted by neoliberal logic have the entrepreneurial self as their model. The entrepreneurial self is constantly required to demonstrate creativity, innovation and the willingness to take risks. 'The call to act as an entrepreneur of one's own life produces a model for people to understand what they are and what they ought to be, and it tells them how to work on the self in order to become what they ought to be' (Bröckling, 2016: xiii).

The logic of the entrepreneurial self induces individuals to constantly feel themselves 'on the edge of change', trying to adapt to, but also coping with, the feeling that there is about to be a breakthrough, an advancement, a new opening of possibilities (Christiaens, 2019). It invites people to live in the present, to get busy, ready to seize opportunities. The experience of living in a rapidly changing world, where nothing can be considered certain, stable and secure, defines a specific form of agency: reflective, entrepreneurial, quick, tactical, creative, self-centred, malleable and adaptable to contexts. The neoliberal person, disciplined in dealing with uncertainty, is significantly different from the self-confident, rational and calculating subject of classical modernity and rational choice. S/he is a subject capable of acting with speed and elasticity in a situation of constant uncertainty, a subject who takes risks, who acts before s/he has all the useful information for a rational choice (now impracticable); a subject who calculates not the best, the perfect outcome, but the least bad one.

The tendency to develop an entrepreneurial self is constantly balanced by concerns about control over uncertainty. A constant tension emerges between the injunction to be, on the one hand, active, creative, open to change and moderately risk-taking, and on the other hand, to prevent, anticipate and not to expose oneself to unnecessary risks (smoking, eating fat, gambling, being sedentary, engaging in behaviour that increases the risk of catching an infectious disease, etc.). O'Malley (2000: 461) observes that uncertainty constitutes a

> characteristic modality of liberal governance that relies both on a creative constitution of the future with respect to positive and enterprising dispositions of risk-taking and on a corresponding stance of reasonable foresight of everyday prudence (distinct from both statistical and expert-based calculation) with respect to potential harms.

Uncertainty, the logic of the entrepreneurial self suggests, should not be managed through perfect rational calculation. Instead, it requires specific forms of control and invites liberal subjects to exercise the most contextual and common-sensical skills of reasonable foresight and prudence (Best, 2008).

Being an entrepreneur of oneself means taking responsibility for one's actions and choices. Those who fall victim to the negative effects of uncertainty can only blame themselves: they have not been sufficiently skilled, provident, prepared and cunning. The negative effects of uncertainty are not attributed to the social structure; nor do they lead to a commitment to social change.

> Instead, desires for change are directed away from the socio-political sphere and turned inwards. Social critique is transformed into self-critique, resulting in a prevalence of self-doubt and anxiety. Competition too seems to be self-directed, suggesting that entrepreneurial subjects compete with the self, and not just with others.
>
> (Scharff, 2016: 108)

At the level of political management of society, neoliberal governmentality is manifest mainly in the constant construction of situations of crisis and exception (Agamben, 2005) in which the threat of uncertainty is amplified in order to implement and legitimize political actions aimed at its elimination or its control. Producing normality through the constant production of exceptions, of intrinsically unstable, precarious and uncertain situations, constitutes one of the most effective aspects of contemporary power. Political élites are interested in creating security and protection from uncertainty as a problem. By means of the so-called 'grammar of security' (Buzan et al., 1998) any social issue can be addressed as a 'problem' that requires exceptional measures (such as immigration or terrorism). 'This then allows for exceptional measures through a centralized authority (usually the government). Securitization, here, means calling something a security problem, and, through this, triggering the political measures to deal with it' (Banai and Kreide, 2017: 906).

Insecurity allows politicians to present themselves as necessary, as useful saviours of the community. It fosters 'rallying around the flag', strengthening people's feeling that they share a common destiny threatened by uncertainty. This, in turn, fosters a culture of blame: the objectification of insecurity in the form of otherness, of an external entity that would be the cause of the threatening and negative aspects of uncertainty. The process of 'othering' is favoured by the constant production of situations of crisis and exception: it is a way to create an (ephemeral) safety zone for some by producing others as threats, differentiating between individuals 'at risk', who should be protected, and individuals who are 'a risk' and should be controlled, expelled or eliminated. As Agamben (2005) observes, the state of exception is a political way to introduce uncertainty. It consists in the suspension of the normal, the usual, the expected, the taken-for-granted, what people are normally endowed with, and the introduction of the aleatory, of new rules and laws.

> In a context of uncertainty, all manner of interventions, which at other times or in other circumstances might be considered intrusive, oppressive,

> discriminatory or paternalistic, can be justified as being for the protection of the 'at risk' individual and ultimately of benefit to 'society' as a whole.
>
> (Petersen, 1996: 56)

The state of exception is a way to produce 'worthless Others', who can be treated unequally, who do not have the same rights as Us. It is a way to produce a legally (justifiable), unnameable and unclassifiable – that is, uncertain, unknowable – being. Identifying an Other responsible for uncertainty, on the one hand, reduces anxiety by unloading frustrations onto an external enemy, and on the other, allows those who hold political power to present themselves as those who, by fighting the threat of the Other, are champions of the defence of the community. In new forms, but according to the classical modern and colonial logic, neoliberal governmentality tries to create the feeling of being able to control the negative aspects of insecurity by increasing insecurity for others (Agamben, 1998).

The constant endeavour to control the negative effects of uncertainty leads to the constant development of prevention and control techniques. Measurement, observation, surveillance, profiling, registration, data and information collection are some of the main governmental technologies of 'normalization' and control of conduct. As Castel (1991: 288) observes, the technologies implemented for the control of uncertainty and the prevention of the resulting risks promote a new mode of surveillance: that of systematic pre-detection. These preventive policies dissolve the notion of a subject or a concrete individual and replace it with a combination of factors assembled in a form deemed significant through the application of complex and anonymous algorithms. Through the construction of categories derived from algorithms – from a huge series of data produced in the most diverse contexts – surveillance can be practiced without any contact with, or even any immediate representation of, the subject under scrutiny. What the new preventive policies primarily address is no longer individuals but factors, statistical correlations of heterogeneous elements.

Conclusion

Western modernity has among its constitutive features the continuous questioning of what is constituted, the continuous change and the increase of scientific and technological knowledge. As a side effect, it produces uncertainty. The myth of the possibility of controlling uncertainty, if not of completely eliminating it, was possible in the period of classical modernity thanks to the possibility, through violence and force, to export it 'outside' and impose it on 'Others'.

In the middle of the last century, a series of changes – the intensification of globalization processes, the crisis of the Fordist model of production, the evidence of the risks inherent in scientific progress and industrial production, anti-colonial struggles and new protests by social movements, awareness of environmental damage and the negative imprint of human activity on the fate of the planet – challenged this myth, and uncertainty became one of the main stakes of political

action. The distribution of risks became as central as the distribution of material resources, information and knowledge. The management of uncertainty – also through its constant production – became one of the tools of political power, of the production of order, of the formation of subjectivities.

In this way, uncertainty has become a constitutive and structural feature of Western neoliberal societies.

As an important theoretical notion with which to understand current social dynamics, it is important to conceive uncertainty as closely connected with complexity and power.

Recognizing the links with complexity means considering uncertainty as an aspect of the ineluctable contingency that constitutes the framework for human action; not as something to 'eliminate' or 'keep under control', but rather as an aspect of the relationship that human beings have with their experience and their contexts of action. Recognizing uncertainty means recognizing the complexity and irreducibility of reality and social experience to linear models. From this perspective – and differently from the classical modern ideal – uncertainty should not be understood as a problematic situation that must be resolved, a lack of certainty, order or understanding. Rather, it constitutes the horizon within which human action takes place, the inevitable immanent, situated, indicative character of action and social existence.

Recognizing the links with power means recognizing the socially constructed nature of uncertainty. It means recognizing that, in contemporary Western society, uncertainty has become a political tool that legitimizes specific forms of order, governmentality and control and produces specific identities – the entrepreneurial self and the threatening Other. The efficacy of this political tool makes its proliferation ubiquitous. The necessity to constantly produce discourse on emergency and uncertainty produces a reality of emergency and uncertainty. This creates a context in which regardless of what one does, regardless of one's actions, abilities and intentions, one is not sure of the result, one is not sure of the outcome of one's choices, one has the feeling of always being on the brink of a worse future, exposed to possible disillusionment. Furthermore, uncertainty becomes a way to produce new hierarchies, to transform social uncertainty into individual uncertainty, especially for those who are constructed as marginal, alien, precarious and risky.

Today, not uncertainty *of* (something), but uncertainty *per se* has become *the* problem. Uncertainty is not connected with clear, stable, objective issues; it migrates from one issue to another and becomes a general (abstract) condition, a form of experience, the context in which we (make sense of the situation in which we) live.

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