

Climate of Uncertainty

Geoff Mann, October 2024

Frank Knight was an irascible cynic. Founder of the free-marketeering Chicago School of economics, he had a well-earned reputation for criticizing everything and trusting nothing. His students include some of the most influential conservative thinkers of twentieth-century America, like Milton Friedman and James Buchanan, both of whom went on to beget their own reactionary legacies. But Knight is not remembered for his enormous influence on them or their students and peers—George Stigler, Aaron Director, Ronald Coase, Friedrich Hayek, and others—an influence rarely acknowledged, repressed even. What he is remembered for came long before the decades in Chicago: his 1916 doctoral dissertation from Cornell, published five years later as *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*.

There, Knight—who has been called “the most famous economist few have heard of”—proposed what has since become a common-sense distinction in economics between “risk” and “uncertainty”.* “Risk”, he said, is “measurable uncertainty”. “True uncertainty”, in contrast, is unmeasurable, because the future is unknowable:

The practical difference between the two categories, risk and uncertainty, is that in the former the distribution of the outcome in a group of instances is known . . . while in the case of uncertainty this is not true, the reason being in general that it is impossible to form a group of instances, because the situation dealt with is in a high degree unique. The best example of uncertainty is in connection with the exercise of judgment or the formation of those opinions as to the future course of events, in which opinions (and not scientific knowledge) actually guide most of our conduct.†

The most important feature of “risk” is that it is knowable and measurable. It is, if you will, an “objective” feature of the world: risk is what it is; it is the partial “knowledge” upon which we form judgments. If there is a 50% chance of rain tomorrow, there is a 50% chance of rain tomorrow. Should you bring a raincoat? Your answer will depend not on whether or not you believe 50% means 50%, but on what you choose to do with that information.

“Knightian” uncertainty is something different. It describes a situation in which the range of possibilities is neither knowable nor measurable; it concerns both “known” and “unknown” unknowns. We might have an intuition about what the future holds, but ultimately we can neither put limits on it, nor assign meaningful probabilities to this or that outcome. The only guide we have is our “opinions,” however well or ill informed.

This “Knightian” uncertainty is very often equated with more sociological notions of “radical uncertainty.” This is not at all accurate, we might even call it ironic. Knight himself never admitted to anything like “radical uncertainty”. He was as arrogantly sure of his thinking as a Chicago economist could be, and that is saying something. Knight’s uncertainty is not the kind of fundamental uncertainty many feel today. It is better described as uncertain undulations of a

* David Cowan, *Frank Knight: Prophet of Freedom*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2016, p. 27.

† Frank Knight (1921) *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 233.

well-knit institutional and political-economic fabric: the realm of rational action in a monetary production economy.

So it is only another ironic joke that among the most powerful influences his notion of uncertainty had was on John Maynard Keynes, someone Knight (like all mature “freshwater” economists) treated with outright disdain, and—to close out a trio of ironies—whose stick-figured ghost has since become the Chicago School’s *bête noire*. Keynes died almost eighty years ago, but they’re still looking over their shoulders, checking every closet.

Keynes took Knight’s thinking on uncertainty where Knight himself refused to go. Knight’s whole goal in making the distinction had simply been to justify “the peculiar income of the entrepreneur”. Knightian uncertainty explains why, in a system of “free enterprise”, profit emerges as the reward for the exercise of the “superior judgment” of a “special social class, the business men” who—unlike consumers and the “great mass of producers”—specialize in anticipating the future, “deciding what to do and how to do it”.*

Keynes made uncertainty central to modern economic thinking in a radically different, almost existential, manner, something much closer to what I think most of us imagine when we hear the phrase “radical uncertainty”. As he put it in 1937:

By ‘uncertain’ knowledge, let me explain, I do not mean merely to distinguish what is known from what is only probable. The game of roulette is not subject, in this sense, to uncertainty; nor is the prospect of a Victory bond being drawn. Or, again, the expectation of life is only slightly uncertain. Even the weather is only moderately uncertain. The sense in which I am using the term is that in which the prospect of a European war is uncertain, or the price of copper and the rate of interest twenty years hence, or the obsolescence of a new invention, or the position of private wealth-owners in the social system in 1970. About these matters there is no scientific basis on which to form any calculable probability whatever. We simply do not know.†

It is this kind of uncertainty, or something very close to it, that motivates the thoughts I’d like to share today. It is the experience of uncertainty à la Keynes entangled with the sense that we are living through a time of fracture in the continuity between past, present and future. I cannot speak for everyone (obviously), but for many, including myself, developments are underway that hardly seemed imaginable or even possible only a decade or two ago: hundreds of millions of people displaced and soon potentially a billion more, democratic electorates vote for the end of democracy, artificial intelligence systems even the inventors barely understand rapidly becoming adept at virtually everything, and the permafrost—the *permafrost*—is literally on fire. Birnam Wood, and much else besides, has come to Dunsinane, but unlike MacBeth we didn’t get—or maybe we just missed?—the warning from some crazy crowned ghost.

We might use Keynes’ brief mention of the weather as a bridge to the kinds of questions I have been worrying over. He begins with an intuition, drawn from Knight, about calculability. On those terms, he says, weather goes in the “moderately uncertain” box, which for him means it is

* Knight, *RUP*, pp. 244, 268, 271, 311.

† JMK (1937) The General Theory of Employment, *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 51(2): 213-4.

much closer to “probable” than something “we simply do not know.” Here we have to think of “probable” as he meant it: it doesn’t mean “might happen,” it means something about which we can calculate probabilities, like a 50% chance of rain tomorrow. And it’s true that even with the much greater extremes today relative to 1937, the weather is very “probable” in this sense. In fact, modern meteorology makes it more than “moderately” certain.

If, that is, we are talking about tomorrow, or three days from now. But if we are talking about the weather a year from now, or ten years from now, it is nowhere near as “probable” as in 1937, and a lot more than “moderately” uncertain. That’s because the background conditions—in this case what we call climate—are no longer dependably similar to the past.

If, one February morning in 1937, you had said to Keynes, “Hey Maynard, it says here there’s a 0% chance of rain in the Arctic tomorrow,” he might have laughed at your absurd forecast. “Hahaha of course it doesn’t rain in the Arctic winter; that’s what makes it the Arctic, you fool!” But if you were transported in time to this past winter and you had mentioned to a friend that there was a 0% chance of rain in the Arctic—well, that is no longer funny. It would have seemed incredible to Keynes, but hard rains are now annual events where and when it has almost never rained for tens of thousands of years: in the Siberian winter, on top of the Greenland icesheet, late fall downpours across muskox habitat on Banks Island.* Sometime in the next fifty years, possibly quite a bit sooner, the Arctic will receive more precipitation as rain than snow.† Centuries of common sense is no longer sensible; things we have long taken as given are no longer given.

Which means that in anything other than the very short run, Keynes was wrong about the weather. It is no longer “moderately” uncertain. Even “warmer in general”, as unhelpful as it is, is only true at temporal and spatial scales beyond those of human experience. Climate change makes weather more volatile—research shows that even with the computing power of modern meteorology, forecasters’ window of predictability shrinks as temperatures rise.‡ If, as often said, climate is what you expect and weather is what you get, it is increasingly the case that we can only expect what we get.

A similar realization strikes when we look at a few of the other buttresses bracing the trusses of modern life. Take electoral democracy, for example, which I think it is fair to say that, while flawed, many of us have taken as a given feature of modern life, at least in a large part of the globe. But today, when you hear or read that if Donald Trump claims the US presidency in 2024, it could be the last presidential election in the richest country in the world for a long time (because once in office he and his party are unlikely or unwilling to cede power), it does not sound at all implausible. The same goes for the lack of armed civil conflict in most of the world’s richest countries. For decades we have not worried about it, basically assumed it was impossible, but when Trump himself declares there will be a “bloodbath” if he loses in

* e.g. Sujata Gupta (2023) Reindeer Herders and Scientists Collaborate to Understand Arctic Warming, *Science News*; National Snow and Ice Data Center (2021) Rain at the Summit of Greenland; Jaako Putkonen *et al.* (2011) Rain on Snow: Little Understood Killer in the North, *Eos* 90(26).

† Michelle McCrystall *et al.* (2021) New Climate Models Reveal Faster and Larger Increases in Arctic Precipitation Than Previously Projected, *Nature Communications* 12(6765).

‡ Aditi Sheshadri *et al.* (2021) Midlatitude Error Growth in Atmospheric GCMs: The Role of Eddy Growth Rate, *Geophysical Research Letters* 48(23).

November, it's not a "figure of speech", as he has made very clear: he's threatening a real, non-metaphorical bloodbath, and it's entirely plausible.*

Maybe it was naïve, but for many people these are things that seemed virtually unimaginable only a few years ago. It is easy to sympathize with those caught unprepared by the pace with which foundational, supposedly reliable aspects of modern society seem to be unraveling. Democracy and climate, but also: the global food system billions depend upon is no longer a sure thing; another European or even world war is readily imaginable; the hard-fought struggles of oppressed and marginalized peoples and communities are being rolled back, and more.

What will the world be like in ten, twenty or thirty years' time? Nobody knows. If pretty much the only thing we can say with any confidence is "warmer", that's not much to go on. Of course, there is much that could go well, trends we might turn around, technologies and movements and people who will bring us together. But even optimism cannot reduce the uncertainty or provide any clearer view of the future. Like much else in our lives, the background conditions constructed by past patterns are either definitely shifting, or sure feel like they are—which, from a human perspective, has close to the same meaning: a future untethered and unrefusable. When you hold it up against the past, it doesn't always make sense.

All this and more underwrites a profound and insurmountable uncertainty saturating the present moment, a sense that we can neither know what happens next nor trust history as our guide. I have been warned of "catastrophizing" by my friend Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo, of risking (among other sins) announcing the coming calamity, the urgency of which justifies setting the rest of a troubled world aside.†

I am also sensitive also to the tendency to believe (as I must admit I do) that "this time is different", when perhaps every age believes it is at the edge of the familiar, facing an unprecedented storm. It is also easy to forget that the experience of living with this sensibility, which is founded more on intuition than analysis, might be shared only by those who have always assumed the world was made for them, or that it is in no way unprecedented; as I have been reminded a hundred times since I have been bouncing these ideas off friends and colleagues, this is not the first time the world has seemed to teeter on a precipice. The philosopher Hannah Arendt, writing in the shadow of Cold War nuclear buildup more than half a century ago, assessed her own time in a phrase that resonates today: "to the question how shall we ever be able to extricate ourselves from the obvious insanity of this position, there is no answer".‡ Then, as now, we knew very little about how the menacing future might unfold, and how much time we might have had to avert it, if that were possible. Then, as now, apocalyptic thinking was not confined to Chicken Littles or street-corner preachers; indeed, it had become, paradoxically, quite normal.

* e.g. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/nov/06/how-close-is-the-us-to-civil-war-barbara-f-walter-stephen-march-christopher-parker>

† see e.g. Vázquez-Arroyo (2012) *The Antinomies of Violence and Catastrophe: Structures, Orders, and Agents*, *New Political Science* 34(2): 211-21.

‡ Arendt, *On Violence*, New York, 1970, p. 4.

And fifty years later, here we are. As bad as it seemed, the world did not end when Arendt was writing in 1970, or on any of the other ends-of-days foretold before and since. Perhaps there is some solace in that? Perhaps today's doom-and-gloom is an overreaction? Maybe this time isn't any different than all the other times "civilization" was supposed to fall apart but didn't. We might have no idea what is coming next, but they didn't either. Any moment, we might hope, can hear rumours it might be the last, and find itself stumbling about in a fog, the only sure thing the "obvious insanity" of the immediate situation. In the long run, though, don't we usually figure it out?

And yet, while numbers have their limits, by every measure currently in use, global uncertainty has increased significantly in the last decade, and the future is more uncertain, for more people, than at any time since we began measuring it just after World War II.* For a whole host of reasons—economic insecurity, climate change, political instability and more—there is a sense, shared by many living otherwise very different lives, that we have reached a point where we can neither know what happens next nor trust history as our guide. The past and the future have become untethered, and our ideas of "normal" seem outdated, relics of a different time. All we can expect is to get what we get.

It seems to me impossible not to confront a widespread, even common-sense, trepidation of a dark age to come, almost indistinguishable from expectation, that clouds the view of the horizon. Because it is impossible not to confront what is most common to the ways we think about the future today: a fear of a dark age to come, almost indistinguishable from expectation.† Earth scientists, theologians, insurance salesmen—everyone is scrambling to make sense of what is going on, to give themselves and us some way of conceiving what our common sense renders almost inconceivable: that the past and the future have become unmoored. We cannot pretend this is not bubbling beneath the surface of a "normal" that is now the privilege of a narrowing band of humanity.

There is, I like to think, something about this experience that might provide some ground for less expected solidarities. Searching for it, or merely reminding us that it might be there, much as poetry can do, seems to me an essential element of what social theory can contribute to the effort to come to grips with the current conjuncture and make it less daunting, less atomizing and intimidating, if no less uncertain. If it is not necessarily possible to diminish many of the most tectonic uncertainties, then perhaps their common-ness might be grounds for a sense of at-present disavowed or unrecognized solidarity.

It is true, of course, that if the parts of life in which we can describe ourselves as meaningfully uncertain are exploding, there is much about which we are pretty confident. All the science on the climate front, for example, indicates that we should not feel at all uncertain about climate change and its debilitating effects on the planetary system on which we and all other species depend. In fact, in the realm of climate change's broad trajectory, one might even say that some

* IMF, World Uncertainty Index 2023; IMF, "60 Years of Uncertainty," 2020; Fed Uncertainty Index.

† For example, in a 2024 World Economic Forum survey of 1,500 "experts" asked to look ten years into the future, almost two-thirds (63%) "predict a turbulent or stormy outlook, with upheavals and an elevated risk of global catastrophes *at best*." World Economic Forum, *Global Risks Report 2024*, p. 37 (emphasis added).

of the search for “uncertainty” represents a desperate hope that everything might yet turn out all right, or at least less badly.

But this is a very thin form of “certainty”. Our knowledge, for example, that “science is real” and climate change is a “fact” is really just the last bit of stable footing on a scree slope of vast instability and uncertainty that has, in very short order, come to seem normal, even taken for granted. It feels like we are the end of something, but we have arrived without a sense of what happens now. The dark vagueness ahead often, and it seems to me quite sensibly, suggests unsettling possibilities. Take the following, for example: “There is growing agreement between economists and scientists that the tail risks are material and the risk of catastrophic and irreversible disaster is rising, implying potentially infinite costs of unmitigated climate change, including, in the extreme, human extinction”.*

Irreversible disaster, infinite costs, human extinction: these are not the words of an activist trying to urge us into action, or a soap-box prophet of apocalypse. This is a 2019 working paper from the International Monetary Fund, an institution that is not only usually quite measured in its assessments, but is among the most aggressive and inflexible defenders of the global *status quo* and its supposedly stabilizing influence. It is no exaggeration to say that the IMF has for more than fifty years insisted that it knows the answer to every single question you can ask about politics or economics, even before you ask it: there are ways things must be done in the modern global economy, it has always said; there is no alternative. Now it’s contemplating irreversible disaster and human extinction.

The collection of troubling challenges gathered on the immediate horizon cannot help but intimidate even the most fortunate among us. Economic polarization, a growing politics of hate, climate and more general ecological degradation; all mean that neither everyday life nor the environment on which it depends have an obvious normal or equilibrium toward which they will tend to return. Keynes famously warned that the faith in long run equilibrium that many of his colleagues espoused during the Great Depression—in other words, that if left to themselves things would stabilize in the end—“is a misleading guide to current affairs”: “In the long run”, he said, “we are all dead”.†

Keynes was writing in Europe in the tumultuous years following the First World War, a time of social unrest, fascist violence, economic volatility, and hyperinflation. In the midst of such upheaval, he said, it is useless to tell us “that when the storm is long past the ocean is flat again”—useless, because if we leave it to long-run tendencies, the short-run will swallow us before we get there.

Today, even this stern warning seems like a terrible understatement, because for many the hope that the ocean might ever flatten again has dissipated almost entirely. Our natural and social systems are increasingly subject to the undisciplined regulation of volatility, previously unimaginable extremes, and tipping points—thresholds beyond which political-economic and ecological systems lose key stabilizing anchors, and “normal” patterns of the past no longer hold.

* Signe Krogstrup & William Oman (2019) Macroeconomic and Financial Policies for Climate Change Mitigation: A Review of the Literature, IMF Working Paper WP/19/185, p. 11.

† JMK, *Collected Writings* IV, p. 65.

When we pass tipping points, things can unravel. Think, for example, of key earth system dynamics like the ways that oceanic circulation redistributes energy and heat around the planet, shaping regional climate conditions we all take for granted, even if we know they are getting hotter. The Atlantic Meridional Overturning circulation, for instance, which moves cold water south and warm water north in the Atlantic Ocean, is at its weakest point in a millennium because of climate change, and some predict it will collapse altogether before the middle of this century. The impacts would be incomprehensibly vast, and could include—we do not know for certain—drought across southern Africa, inundation on the US east coast, and much colder temperatures in western Europe, leading to devastating agricultural losses. Perhaps the US election will prove a political tipping point.

It is thresholds like these, the edges of what were thought steady states, that threaten to undo the functioning of many of the systems upon which we depend, and when we cross them, it is very difficult or impossible to reverse direction. These are processes that gain their own unpredictable momentum, and make it naïve to anticipate calm seas in the years ahead. All of which only intensifies the sense that the stability of the long run is not just a misleading guide to current affairs, it is a misleading guide to the long run as well. If in “the long run we are all dead”, it is not just because the real worries are immediate. Now the long-run’s jaws are open too. Even the deferred promise of an eventual return to normal is untenable. Maybe the whole idea of “normal” will soon be behind us, tied irrevocably to a world we no longer inhabit.

One might say that this is actually a kind of uncertainty born of certainty itself: what is uncertain is not our trajectory into a new, non-normal world, but how “we” as an Earth-bound species called “humanity”, and as members of our own communities, will deal with it. In other words, what is uncertain is not conflict, heat, and volatility, but how we will adapt to it, who we will become. Perhaps. But this does little if anything to diminish the vastness of the inescapable horizon, and the limits and possibilities for the present that we might discover when looking at it.

As tomorrows become less bound to yesterdays, resources for managing or subduing uncertainty can seem inadequate to the questions we face: we have no forecasting technologies that can tell how the planet will work at 4°C hotter; our children cannot assume they will live in democracies; we have no institutions prepared for a world in which 1 billion have to make a new home or in which “human extinction” is considered a realistic possibility; we don’t even have words to name these conditions.* I am sure Antonio would warn me again about catastrophizing. But then there’s the part of me that thinks, “what if it *is* a catastrophe”? Either way, it’s a conceptual forest fire, and we’ve got a squirt gun.

This increasingly diluted concept of “crisis” is our principal tool for grasping the daunting features of horizons near and far—especially the large-scale forces that threaten to overwhelm them, like the storms of economic inequality, war, biodiversity loss, climate change, artificial intelligence, pandemic and the decay of democratic institutions. Like catastrophizing, in a moment that seems to define itself as an age of crises, naming the crisis does a lot of political

* International Organization for Migration (2024) A Complex Nexus, <https://www.iom.int/complex-nexus>; Marin Weitzman (2009) On Modeling and Interpreting the Economics of Catastrophic Climate Change, *Review of Economics and Statistics* 91(1).

work, as Janet Roitman among others has pointed out.* It also tends to frame the present in light of the past, which often tacitly stands as the state to which we should or will return: it is a crisis precisely because it is a moment different enough from the past that its difference cannot be ignored.

Crisis is one of a family of terms—which also includes emergency, exception, shock, etc.—that have become indispensable to contemporary life: each carries within it an unspoken but irreducible opposition to a presumed *status quo* characterized by business-as-usual, the normal. This pairing of crisis and stability, exception and norm, is central to many, and certainly to the most dominant, reality management systems, the everyday categories into which we try to slot the hustle and bustle of history as it rumbles toward us and rolls on through.

According to that system, “normal” names what we can reasonably expect to understand and anticipate, while the crisis is, by definition, unexpected, or at least unintended: the financial crisis, the crisis of democracy, a crisis of faith. This normal/crisis dichotomy has been and remains inseparable from the ways that everyday life is organized, especially in the wealthiest parts of the world, where, for the last several decades, relative material abundance and domestic security have buffered the daily life of many, though of course not all.

In North America and western Europe at least, much of our quotidian expectations and public institutions, everything from pensions to school systems or elections to supply chains, are predicated on some general sense of predictability, of an equilibrium or more or less normal way of things. We organize these fundamental parts of life as much as possible to weather storms or manage crises that are assumed to be temporary by definition. In other words, in the part of the globe we call “the West”, the idea of permanent emergency can seem like an oxymoron.

Until recently, that is. In the last decade, the phrase “permanent emergency” or something similar (permanent crisis, forever emergency, etc.) has come up more and more often, especially in light of climate change (but not only: since 9/11, terrorism is often framed this way, but the usage is different, with the focus on the “emergency powers” through which the state can suspend the rule of law).† These phrases grab our attention precisely because common sense tells us they are oxymorons.

The idea of permanent emergency does have a longer lineage—maybe we could trace it to Benjamin’s Thesis VIII, i.e. that “the tradition of the oppressed classes” teaches us that the “state of emergency” is the rule, not the exception.‡ Benjamin was not thinking about something like climate change, of course. The martial order fighting the “forever war” against terrorism is closer to what he had in mind: the state of emergency declared to suppress or control the “oppressed classes”. This has proven a powerful lens through which to examine the experiences of many marginalized peoples, those whose entire lives and ways of life are policed, criminalized, even

* Janet Roitman (2013) *Anti-Crisis*, Duke University Press.

† *New York Magazine*’s David Wallace-Wells, author of *The Uninhabitable Earth*, uses the phrase often in his influential climate journalism (e.g. “How to Live in a Climate ‘Permanent Emergency’”, 1 July 2021). See also <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jul/22/economic-models-environmental-crises-fantasy-stable-growth-global-heating>; <https://www.yesmagazine.org/environment/2020/09/04/climate-crisis-forever-emergency>

‡ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Thesis VIII.

eliminated: Jews, Roma, peasants, Indigenous nations and the colonized around the world. Since 9/11, a critique of the “permanent state of emergency”, substantially but not only inspired by Benjamin, has exploded across the humanities and social sciences, much of it also a discussion of the so-called “state of exception” many of these people live in, and the “spaces of exception” into which they are corralled, like Gaza, refugee camps, Guantánamo, or Indigenous reservations.

Benjamin too was leaning on the apparent contradiction in the pairing of permanence and emergency—they seem to rule each other out, insofar as it is implicit in the way we talk about emergencies that they have a beginning and an end, even if we don’t know when. One might even say that in its everyday meaning, an emergency can’t last very long. At some point it tends to transition to “crisis”, and joins the expanding concatenation of phenomena for which we seem to have no other word. There are few terms that have to do as much work today as “crisis”.

We could take up Adam Tooze’s recent attempt to capture the moment with “polycrisis”, which loses the rhetorical shock of contradiction in “permanent emergency”, but has the merit of making sense in everyday speech. Tooze brought the term into use during the covid-19 pandemic to describe the sense of multiplying and intersecting crises—war, mass migration, disease, recession, climate change, disease, biodiversity collapse, threats to democracy and so on—which not only to coincide, but exacerbate each other, making it hard to figure out what is going on, what is causing what, and even harder to know what to do.

Judging by how fast it was picked up by his enormous social media following, “polycrisis” met what some clearly felt was a desperate terminological need. But it misses something essential about the current conjuncture, because “crisis” is so ubiquitous today it is difficult to know what it means anymore. If everything, or virtually everything, is caught up in polycrisis, how useful is the idea of crisis? If you live in the midst of “polycrisis”, what do you call a drastic change in that regime? A meta-crisis? It is hard to avoid the thought that “polycrisis” is really just a last-ditch attempt to keep the idea of some non-crisis, stable normality alive. But what if that is not in the cards? That is indeed where we are according to Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director of the IMF, who warned in Fall 2022 of the “darkening global outlook”, “a dangerous ‘new normal’” of “shock after shock after shock”.*

My sense—and I don’t think it’s unrelated to the conceptual firefall—is that in this non-normal new normal, there is a broad expectation of generalized violence if current trends in politics and the global environment continue: that at some point, “crises” will cross thresholds beyond which fundamental features of the social order will break down. That expectation alone is cause for grave concern because it can generate a self-fulfilling momentum. Whether it is “correct” is in many ways meaningless, because expectations’ effects do not depend on their “truth”, whatever that might mean. Expected violence makes “real” violence all the more likely. Shooting starts when people think they need a gun.

If it feels increasingly like we are waiting to see not if, but *how* an inevitably destructive instability unfolds, the need to help change that expectation is urgent, and this, I think, is a project to which contemporary social theory can contribute. In the face of perceived threats of

* Kristalina Georgieva, Navigating a More Fragile World, IMF Annual Meetings, 6 October 2022.

social upheaval, any secure certainty can appear better than the alternative—regardless of the form it takes, however forcefully it must be imposed, and however and whoever must be sacrificed or eliminated to achieve it. Violence’s supposed inevitability becomes its own justification, or its alibi.

This is the logical terminus of certainty for certainty’s sake. Which is to say that in the face of an inevitably and seemingly increasingly uncertain future, one of the most urgent tasks is to reconsider how we think about, manage and live with uncertainty. Because we do not need a world without uncertainty, or as little uncertainty as possible; we need a world in which we are honest and modest and generous enough to acknowledge the limits of our own grasp, what we cannot know. We need uncertainty, because it is not just the basis of anxiety, fear or indecisiveness; it is also the basis of modesty, generosity, and hope. It is an enemy of arrogance and dogma. It is, in other words, an absolutely essential experience as our presents—some shared, some much less so—tumble forward into the future.

For which we should be grateful. Uncertainty is the ground upon which the possibility for something different, new or better depends. It is the source of the very idea that any of us can do something in the world that will change it, that will make it better. Certainty can feel like safety, but at the same time it can only paint a picture of a world that will come to pass if we play no part in shaping it. No one ever took up a cause knowing the end of the story. The fact that the story is yet to be told is the whole damn point. That is unsettling, of course. But it might also wonderful.

What happens when what was previously unimaginable appears in our viewfinder? Ten years ago, “human extinction” was not on the IMF’s list of potential futures; now it has crept into the realm of the possible, but nobody knows how far or what that looks like. How does that (hopefully) unlikely eventuality change how we manage uncertainties? How does it change how folks see the world when they wake up in the morning, or when they put their children on the school bus? Even if “human extinction” were where we are headed, we are hardly less at a loss. The only thing we know is how it ends. Between here and there—almost nothing.

It seems to me that this points to some of the more pressing questions for contemporary social theory in the project of structural transformation. How do we describe the experience of seemingly unceasing, unlimited tumult, the deadlines that loom, the thresholds we cross, the constant shocks that are no longer surprises? How do we talk about the vague but very, very real sense of no-idea-ness so many of us feel right now about what the world will be like even ten years into the future? These questions lead directly to others, like what sensibilities, what commitments, what kinds of knowledge, and what sorts of communities and political and economic institutions might be helpful in current conditions? Are there forms of organization that can better handle the changing experience of uncertainty? What ways of life can make hope seem like a reasonable thing to have? The inadequacies of many of our vocabularies are starting to show.

Perhaps it might help to knit together a narrative that shows how these questions are shared—sometimes intimately, sometimes reluctantly—with a “we” that includes people we don’t necessarily think of as “us” (or includes not just people). Joyful and secure lives and livelihoods

are not impossible futures, but they will not come to us unbidden. We will need to build upon what is common among us in the years ahead, which, at least initially, is likely to be on pretty shaky foundations, but might include a shared sense of unsettling bewilderment with regard to what the future will be like.

I am aware—or perhaps it is more honest to say that I fear—that these thoughts might come across as the product of a politics that is wishy-washy, uncommitted, timid. But I do not think I am the only who lives with a sense of being at the edge of a chasm of uncertainty, and to look into it unflinchingly seems to me to require, perhaps before anything else, modesty. But it also seems to me that modesty is not something commonly associated with “radical” politics, or with calls for radical transformation. Indeed, the history of radical politics is awash with claims to certainty, with comprehensive programs that claim to have answers for all the questions before they’ve even been asked. I put no faith in anyone who already thinks they have the answers, or a fool-proof system for discovering them. Is a modest radicalism possible? A radical modesty? I do not know. It is what I am aiming for, but I worry a lot that it is just a way of asking too little of the world, and of myself. Perhaps it is only someone so undeservedly fortunate as me who can even contemplate it.

On the other hand, even beyond radically uncertain futures, I think that uncertainty, vagueness and imprecision are themselves essential to the social-theoretic project at this moment. When Adorno refused “the vague and brutal command clarity”, he was not just defending himself against critics of his theoretical work, he was making what we might call a meta-methodological point: “clarity can be demanded of all knowledge only when it has been determined that the objects under investigation are free of all dynamic qualities that would cause them to elude the gaze that tries to capture and hole them unambiguously”.*

And although Adorno is hardly well-known for either, this refusal also seems to me to demand both modesty (because it acknowledges that even what we “know” contains much that is unknown) and generosity (because we cannot claim to “capture and hole” anything unambiguously, and other gazes will find different qualities in “the objects under investigation”). If this doesn’t hold in the realm of what we cannot know, of an uncertain future, in politics, I don’t know where it does. Neither modesty nor generosity can be limitless, I suppose. But perhaps they could be much less limited than they are, both in the way that those involved in projects of transformational ideas and politics work with each other, and in the ways they work with those not (yet?) amenable to their projects.

* Adorno (1993) *Hegel: Three Studies*, MIT Press, pp. 98-106.