



Summary

Prof. John Keane discusses the term “certainty” in times of growing uncertainties such as floods and fires, global pestilence, species destruction, unending wars, shrinking US power, talk of the spiritual decadence of the West, disaffection with democracy, and the birth of a new Chinese global empire. While discussing the reasons for the growing popularity of pessimism among population, he interrogates this mood and this mentality of catastrophes by examining eight points analytically.

Do we live in an age of Uncertainty?

Prof. John Keane

Prof. Keane argues that there seems to be growing agreement among scholars, politicians and citizens that our planet and its peoples are passing through an era of grave political uncertainty. He states that developments such as floods and fires, global pestilence, species destruction, unending wars, shrinking US power, talk of the spiritual decadence of the West, disaffection with democracy, and the birth of a new Chinese global empire are among the forces said to be responsible for the rising tides of uncertainty.

He points out the growing popularity of pessimism among scholars and the general population and underlines the role of journalism and information-spreading dynamics based on the technology. He questions the methodology to judge the plausibility or veracity of the new pessimism, and states that dogmatically pessimistic claims about a new age of hyper-uncertainty come shrouded in doubts. He argues that we don't really know how to respond straightforwardly to these challenging questions when comparing whole epochs, and contrasting our own difficulties with their misfortunes, classifying and measuring the experience of uncertainty is difficult, as even the definition of uncertainty remains uncertain.

He interrogates the mood and the mentality of catastrophes by examining analytically eight interconnected points. First, he underlines the importance of history questioning how do we compare present difficulties we define as pessimism with past events, especially events of the first half of the 20th century, such as a major global economic crisis, Spanish Flu that killed 5% of the world's population during and immediately after World War I, the collapse of empires, the destruction of parliamentary democracy in that period, the rise of totalitarianism, and catastrophic global wars that robbed more than 100 million soldiers and civilians of their lives.

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Secondly, he discusses the problem of defining uncertainty, arguing that when times are felt to be out of joint, when they feel, so to say, Shakespearean, then those times typically give rise to reflections on matters of certainty and uncertainty. He thinks that this should come as no surprise, because only human life or non-human life that was not subject to the flow of time could be defined with any certainty. He reminds that this very insight, that certainty and uncertainty have a history, and that reflections on uncertainty flourish during times of disorientation can be confirmed by looking at some great texts.

Thirdly, he discusses the importance of the literature on certainty, especially referring to the Ludwig Wittgenstein's text, called "On Certainty". The reflections on everyday life in Wittgenstein's text reminds us that certainty and uncertainty are everyday matters. He especially underlines the important role of habits in coping with uncertainties, as habits enable us to become fit for everyday living and to handle the challenges thrown our way by the social media in which we dwell and evolve.

As the fourth point, he discusses the question of certain knowledge which raises the question of "truth". He again refers to Wittgenstein's point that certain knowledge of the world is always open to contestation and is, in the end, based on acknowledgement. Thus, Keane points to Wittgenstein's argument that knowledge which we consider as certain in any context, in any time and space, is knowledge that depends upon a background acknowledgment. Wittgenstein holds that all certainty, the certainties of knowledge that we have of ourselves, of our milieu, is always structured and produced from within what he called language games and "nothing is certain but the uncertainty of the unforeseen and the unexpected".

The fifth point is pessimism, which he calls "optimism turned upside down". Part of the appeal of catastrophism is that it's certain and has a kind of seductiveness about it. So,

the paradox here is that catastrophism - the belief that the world is coming to a miserable end - is a type of certainty that aims to crush uncertainty. There is an analogy with the pessimism of our times - an analogy with geological theories of how our planet in the past was shaped by sudden devastating events such as mountain chain upheavals, vast floods or the extinction of species.

Prof. Keane's sixth point concerns democracy and particularly the tricky relationship between certainty/uncertainty and democracy. He argues that every type of regime, including the new despotisms of our day, has tried to manage uncertainty by hiding it away; and yet, paradoxically, tyrants are themselves riddled with uncertainty, gripped by fears about plots and assassinations and popular rebellions. He argues that with the help of bodies such as anti-corruption agencies, investigative journalism, independent courts and periodic elections, democracy promotes indeterminacy, and it heightens people's awareness of certainty.

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His seventh point is certainty. He stresses that resilient democracies provide citizens with secure lifeboats of certainty and that a written Constitution is a set of rules for reducing uncertainty in the way that power is exercised; institutions such as fixed-term elections, election monitoring, integrity watchdogs, future generations commissions and public inquiries are methods of bringing citizens and their representatives a measure of certainty about how power is exercised. He argues that democracy is a way of preventing foolish certitude describing democracy, in the phrase of Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel winning economist, as "a weapon



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against the illusions of certainty”. He argues that democracy protects people against rulers who deny their own ignorance about the world, and it stands against every form of hubris. In this way, the great threat to democracy is rulers who are blind fools; for him democracy, when it works well, serves as an early warning detector system warning of the possible dangers of unknown consequences.

Keane’s final point is “ demagoguery”, which Wittgenstein in “On Certainty” describes as the groundlessness of our modern being”. Wittgenstein argues that our entire existence in the world is infused with time, with uncertainty, with flux, with transformation and there is no secure ground, no certain soil on which to stand. In parallel with Wittgenstein, Keane argues that democracies, when they do not function well, stir up great uncertainties and a sense that our existence is groundless.

About the Author

Professor John Keane, Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney, completed his undergraduate studies at the University of Adelaide, his MA and his Ph.D. at Toronto University. He has a particular interest in theories of democracy and political representation, and he is renowned globally for his contributions to democratic thought. He is the author of many books including “Whatever Happened to Democracy (2002)”, “Global Civil Society (2003)”, “Violence and Democracy (2004)”, “The Life and Death of Democracy (2009)”, “Democracy and Media Decadence (2013)”, “Refiguring Democracy: The Spanish Political Laboratory (2017)” and “The New Despotism (2020)”. Many of his books have been translated into Turkish, including “Civil Society and the State” (Ayrıntı Yayınları), “The Media and Democracy” (Ayrıntı Yayınları), “Violence and Democracy” (İmge Yayınevi) and “The New Despotism” (İletişim Yayınları). He has contributed to *The New York Times*, *Al Jazeera*, *the Times Literary Supplement*, *The Guardian*, *Harper’s*, *the South China Morning Post* and *The Huffington Post*. He was recently nominated for the 2021 Balzan Prize and the Holberg Prize for outstanding global contributions to the human sciences.



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ABOUT THE PROJECT

Imagining A Common Horizon for Humanity and the Planet

The world is passing through an extremely troubled period in its history, with a seemingly new challenge encountered at every turn. Serious economic, social, cultural, environmental and political crises at a global level are exacerbated by those being felt in individual countries. The challenges we are facing take a variety of forms, from financial collapses to climate change, from international terrorism to regional conflicts, and from the refugee problem to xenophobia.

All of these crises are being aggravated by the impact of the pandemic, revealing the inability of humanity to tackle them collectively, and invalidating the romantic discourse of globalization. As history continues its march, we are reminded that the answer to the common problems of humanity cannot be found by becoming more introverted, polarized or prejudiced. No matter how severe our problems, our destiny should not be seen as unchangeable. The problems we experience are primarily a result of human activity, and can be overcome only through human effort, but we should remain aware that there are many different hurdles to be passed if we are to rid ourselves of the crises being experienced in many parts of the world.

Only through conscious, patient and collective effort can we overcome the problems of humanity. Now is the time for dignified people from the different cultures and geographies of the world to come together in solidarity. It is time to speak with full respect of human dignity, setting aside the importance we place in our individual identities. An alliance of people who see truth and justice as the major pillars of our kind, will be able to open the door to a new era of solidarity for humanity. A dignified future is possible. We believe that Turkey holds a special, if not privileged, position, based on its geographical, historical and cultural characteristics, and can serve as a host to this joint effort of humanity.

Our goal within the scope of this project is to bring together the leading thinkers of the world, to create an international intellectual platform that draws its strength from human dignity, and that aims to build for the future of humanity and the planet with a holistic synergy with a view to offering humanity a common horizon. As Cappadocia University, our vision in this regard is to provide an academic platform from where esteemed intellectuals from around the world can share their visions for a common future of humanity and our planet, and to comment on the challenges and opportunities they envisage.

You can find detailed information about the Project at <https://commonhorizon.kapadokya.edu.tr/en/>

Cappadocia University (<https://kapadokya.edu.tr/en/>) is a young foundation (private) university in central Turkey, Cappadocia. The main goal of the university is to raise generations of opinion leaders who can read the 21st century realistically, and whose views therefore carry weight and significance – go-to men and women who are highly knowledgeable in their fields, who are happy to share their knowledge, and who will thus be respected and trusted by others. Cappadocia University is home to a highly successful dual-pronged system of academic and vocational programs that act in support of each other.

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