



The Roots of Human Insecurity

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Abstract

What follows are notes attempting to place into context the current discussion on Human (In)Security with special attention to the case of Brazil. In this article, we will observe that insecurity has been the norm since pre-historic times. We will also observe that the uncertainties associated with this insecurity have been the engine for the development of social institutions, of technologies, and of sets of beliefs of human societies. It will also explore how this creative process engendered new sources of uncertainty and insecurity in such a way that the world, as if playing a multistage game, never ceases to encounter new challenges, eventually reaching the current situation where we face a complex of crises, some of them threatening our very existence as a species. After this exposé of human security in general, we turn our attention to peripheral countries. Inequalities among nations have prevented peripheral countries from developing civilizational tools of the same quality as those of core countries. Peripheral countries are still confronting ancient challenges such as food insecurity and vulnerability to natural disasters. To the extent that their institutions and technologies are insufficient to meet them, they face the mistrust of populations in peripheral countries. The concluding remarks present the case of Brazil as an example of this situation.

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1. The Eternal Quest for Human Security

Human insecurity has been a constant feature of daily life throughout history. Primitive man lived in an environment that was basically hostile, facing permanent challenges from wild animals, disease, frequently inclement weather and, not least, other humans. Insecurity was, of course, associated with uncertainty about the surrounding environment. Being a social and intelligent species, humans have progressively developed material, intellectual and societal tools to overcome these challenges. Social structures and institutions were developed to pool and organize individual resources; ideas about the surrounding environment led to the creation of new knowledge and beliefs, and technologies were developed. All these advances reduced uncertainty, controlled risks, and provided an increasing sense of security.

As argued by Douglass North (2005), uncertainty “has been the underlying condition for the evolving structure of human organization throughout history and pre-history.” As history shows, advances in knowledge, beliefs and social structures would in turn create new challenges and uncertainties and produce a new cycle of social innovation and technological advances. The situation could be compared to a game where mankind fights a set of challenges successfully so as to progress to the next stage of the game, only to face new challenges. Thus, uncertainty and human insecurity have been, throughout history, not only the underlying condition but also the engine for what we call progress. This latter point was also made in a largely forgotten paper by Ronald Heiner (1983), where he criticized the common assumption of rationality of economic agents, arguing that, instead, agents’ behavior was driven by the uncertainty surrounding them.

2. From Primordial Insecurity to Modern Challenges

As societies became more complex, new uncertainties and sources of human insecurity appeared. Some of the ancient challenges were not entirely tamed, such as pandemics, natural catastrophes, and wars. In addition, an entirely new type of source of insecurity appeared, namely man-made crises such as the environmental crisis, the financial crisis and the demographic crisis (see IPCC, 2023 on the environmental crisis, Wolf, 2014 for the financial crisis, and United Nations, 2022 for the demographic crisis). All of these were provoked by technological advances, which led to critical developments. Technological progress translated into industrial development and medical advances, which made possible large increases in population stocks. Larger and more prosperous populations are pushing the limits of our environment. Given the increasing integration of human societies, another consequence of technological progress, these crises are of a global nature. As a result, the world shares new sources of human insecurity. Saavedra-Rivano (2016) further develops the preceding discussion to provide elements for a theory of global crises.

3. Existential Crises

The extent of human insecurity is well conveyed by the fact that some of these global crises are termed “existential crises”, that is, challenges that may eventually threaten the very existence of our species or of the planet we inhabit. The environmental crisis is, according to most scientists, such an example, and it finally begins to be taken seriously by world governments. Another emerging threat to mankind is the development of artificial intelligence (AI) which, if unchecked, could lead to AI entities taking control of our lives. Saavedra-Rivano (2020) develops in some detail this latest existential crisis.

The combination of these crises presents the world with a very complex and dangerous situation. Referring to the previous game analogy, would this be the endgame? Being more positive, we would argue that the current situation, when risks to our security are global, calls for the development of a new set of institutions of global governance. Elements for some of these institutions already exist, such as those created by the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC), although their authority is limited. Others are entirely lacking, as is the case for an international AI authority.

4. Peripheral Countries

Even in core countries, such as those in Europe, North America and Japan, public perception of the seriousness of the security situation is limited, although a feeling of insecurity is present. That perception is much more limited in peripheral countries, such as those in Latin America, Africa and most of Asia, and populations are basically oblivious to those risks. Human insecurity in those countries is dominated by more ancient risks, such as hunger, vulnerability to natural disasters, and economic insecurity.

We can say that the social and political institutions that were developed to cope with these risks have been largely unsuccessful in peripheral countries. Inequality within those countries is both a cause and effect of these failures. Another reason for this situation is that the knowledge and institutional developments that originated in core countries have not spread fully to peripheral countries. Inequality among countries is increasing, with negative effects both for core and peripheral countries.

5. Concluding Remarks

We will use this last section to apply the earlier discussion to the case of Brazil. Brazil is an interesting example, being a large peripheral country that deserves to play a more central role in the world. As with others, however, most of its population ignores the climate crisis or the risks posed by AI, to mention two of the most prominent global crises. However, there is a high degree of concern relating to more traditional sources of human insecurity. As in other peripheral countries, the root cause is inequality which, in the case of Brazil, is particularly severe. All classes of society experience deep feelings of insecurity. The poorest feel insecure because their basic needs are not met, with millions going hungry every day and even more living in substandard dwellings lacking drinking water and sanitation infrastructure. The middle class is heavily indebted and lives in economic insecurity. Even the well-off feel insecure, as they may become targets of crime.

In this situation, when nobody feels safe, people question the effectiveness of the institutions that were created to ensure a peaceful social environment. Parliament, the justice system and political parties are all perceived to work for their own sake rather than the public good. The democratic system itself is under question and even well-intentioned public figures are met with skepticism. Some disturbing developments arising from this situation are the rise in crime and fraudulent activities, the increase in drug dependence, the ascent of cults, and the return of populism.

Clearly, institutions need to be strengthened, but it is unclear how this could be achieved.

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