

Afterword

Vertiginous life and the Inconstancy of Becoming in the Mediterranean

Daniel M. Knight

Abstract. The socio-historical nexus that is topologically interwoven throughout the Mediterranean region provides the background for a comparative framework for capturing the dizzying affects of precarious life in the 21st century. The conceptual triad of uncertainty, resilience, and futures is key to presenting life on the vertiginous “edge” as people tackle crises in Greece, Italy, Morocco, Portugal and Tunisia. Standing on the brink of time and of history-making, people face a decision of whether to cling by their fingernails to former lives, former Selves, or to take the plunge into the vortex of uncertain becoming. Here I argue that such world-changing moments should be contextualised through an acknowledgement of academic and historical lineages to better package so-called “unprecedented” events. More potently, I further propose that times of uncertainty influence how people orient to the future where a sense of urgency penetrates the normalised social fabric triggering a form of affective vertigo. In the whirlpool of unforeseen social change, people experience confusion as to where and when they belong on timelines of previously unquestioned pasts and futures, manifested as disorientation and dizziness where pathways to becoming have altered dramatically.

Keywords: Crisis; Future; Solidarity; Temporality; Urgency.

The contributors to this collection bring three concepts to the fore that will prove crucial to an anthropological understanding of social life in the second quarter of the 21st century. Through the topological nexus of uncertainty, resilience, and the future, authors address the challenges of COVID-19, the global economic crash, migration crisis, the Arab Spring, and non-marital love. While not advocating models of cultural homogeneity, the Mediterranean region (or, Mediterraneans, as it is termed here) provides the reader with an arena of sociopolitical, economic and, importantly to my

mind, historical connectedness through which to draw comparative – and pedagogical – insights.

Uncertainty, resilience, and futures are mutually instructive. An era of uncertainty requires resilience while informing people's futural aspirations, hopes, and expectations. A future envisaged as uncertain from the position of the present provokes one to prepare resiliently or recognise the need for resilience to deflect or absorb the oncoming impact of change. At a governmental level, projections of futural uncertainty are formally enshrined through scenario planning for disasters and resilience testing of state institutions. This triad is, I would argue, thrown into sharp relief by the addition of a fourth condition: urgency. Urgency provides imminence and associated affective registers including panic, rupture, temporal distortion, or feelings of vertiginously balancing on the proverbial cliff-edge. The recognition of dramatic societal change marked by urgency infuses the historical moment with a sense of eventedness – history has been ruptured; the world will never be the same. Out with the old and in with the *something else*. Temporal horizons are suddenly very close, long-term planning goes out the window, there is hyperconsciousness of presence in the present, of standing "on the brink of time" [Runia 2010, 15], of being altogether ejected from anticipated historical continuity [de Martino 2012].

In Heideggerian terms, urgency makes the future *now*, inverting time's arrow to puncture the present and announcing the future as of immediate concern. The literal tomorrow takes priority over deep-future planning. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, across Europe supermarket shelves were bare as people scrambled to stock larders, not knowing whether food would be available on the next, usually routine, trip to the shops. In the UK, continuous news coverage replaced the customary thrice-daily bulletins – inverting the temporality of a lengthy pandemic to an event that required minute-by-minute updates. Only now, with a vaccine readily available, does the temporal horizon expand slightly to include imaginations of "when I am vaccinated, I will ... (go to Greece, return to the workplace, leave the house)". But still, a normally mundane expectation of attending a conference in August remains uncertain. August is not part of my imminent future. Under the condition of urgency, uncertainty becomes the only certainty.

In all articles in this collection, there is the sense that urgency brings structural uncertainty to the fore and provokes responses characterised by resilience. This is evident in the resistance against housing demolitions that render people homeless, leading to emergent acts of hospitality (Giacomo Pozzi); in the chaos of a migration crisis where calls for reconciliation between diverse Others are facilitated by a timeless Madonna who has "seen it all before" (Francesco Vietti); in how the violent rupture of the Arab Spring that promised transformed sociopolitical subjectivities lives

on in civil society (Giovanni Cordova); from crisis Greece where austerity has desolated an already vulnerable care system (Andreas Streinzer); and in Morocco, where pregnancy outside of marriage immediately collapses one avenue of becoming to a world of unexpected precariousness (Irene Capelli). The authors succeed where many have failed by not letting the crisis moment obfuscate the longer-term structural issues that lead to urgency. Indeed, all papers here address the sociopolitical long *durée* alongside the intellectual heritage of their chosen analytical concepts. Crisis brings underlying uncertainties to a pinnacle whereby they burst through the normative social fabric and require an urgent response.

1. Genealogies

I like the editors' suggestion that uncertainty represents a confusion of the temporal line; an encounter with the unforeseen or unanticipated provokes what might be termed "vertigo" (nausea, dizziness, the sense of falling, and detachment from former Self) [Knight 2021]. It is productive to think of uncertainty as a crisis of aspirations brought about by an interruption in the usually unquestioned timeline of progression. I applaud the editors' endeavours to encourage us to think about how temporal disorientation necessitates adaptation and strategies to cope with social transformation. However, while at home in conversing on futures and uncertainty, resilience makes me take a cautious pause. Too often 'resilience' and its partner 'trauma' become hollow terms, employed as catchalls in fields as diverse as social work, psychoanalysis, political science, and medicine. Resilience – similar to what Streinzer argues for 'solidarity' – can become heroically romanticised or act as a cover that dismisses the circumstances of vulnerability. If we are to talk of resilience and trauma, I feel it necessary to acknowledge the pathological implications of diagnoses associated with very specific and outwardly identifiable symptoms. Top-down identification of resilient and traumatised peoples readily adopted by anthropologists disregards the genealogies of categories powerful enough to be bureaucratised by the state for means of population «sorting» [Tuckett 2018]. Such "morally unassailable" labels have become signifiers «of our age» [Fassin, Rechtman 2009, xi] not regularly subjected to rigorous counter-critique. Akin to how trauma stands in for cultural memory in the social sciences [e.g. Cappelletto 2003] rather than linked back to the characteristics of its medical routes, so anthropologists have embraced resilience from the disciplines of social work and psychology. Regrettably, the outcome has been the whitewashing of historical and ethnographic complexities in favour of sorting the vulnerable (particularly children) into sanitised categories, often emphasising individual responsibility (Capelli). The current collection is refreshing in critiquing

normative claims of resilience, hospitality, and solidarity that have become institutionalised and feel stagnant.

Genealogy is not only imperative in better defining conceptual tools but is equally important when approaching uncertainty and resilience through the regional literature. I passionately endorse the editors' word of caution against reinventing the wheel at a time of social change. Detaching ourselves from previous thematic and regional scholarship to accommodate an "unprecedented" situation is not fruitful but unfortunately seems to be a growing trend, particularly in studies of the Mediterranean. For instance, in the field I know best, Greece, resource-sharing and solidarity should be discussed in conversation with Juliet du Boulay and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, the bones of precarious economic activity can be traced back to John Campbell or further to the early 20th century work of Kostas Karavidas, problems caused by mass-migration are centre-stage in the fieldsites of Ernestine Friedl and Renée Hirschon, while Michael Herzfeld and James Faubion provide eloquent commentary on Greece's ambiguous place at the table of European modernity. Of course, the list is endless. Suffice to say that catchy terms and concepts can only benefit from thoughtful consideration within their intellectual lineage.

2. Situating Uncertainty

Contributors set astute ethnographic observation of contemporary events within the conceptual and scholarly traditions of Mediterranean anthropology. In the context of the Portuguese housing crisis, Pozzi demonstrates how homelessness is another layer added to historical and structural issues of housing provision in the country. The current precarious situation of informal accommodation arrangements is not a sublime entity born of the 2008 financial crash, but rather represents the tip of the iceberg in a dense topology of crises that have built-up in the sector over many decades. When considered alongside rich regional writing on hospitality, Pozzi successfully portrays how family pasts are engrained in the materiality of a house. Thus, for Pozzi, eviction from home equates to a cutting of ties to the otherwise inalienable past; or put another way, eviction creates a detachment from once expected futures [cf. Sabaté 2016; Wilde 2017; Knight 2018; Davey 2020]. Hospitality reorients people towards alternative versions of the future, once unimaginable, re-connecting home with hope.

Pozzi's critical bottom-up approach to hospitality is convincing, but as with all the articles in the collection I still wonder whether solidarity and hospitality would be the focus of 21st century ethnographic analysis if there was not a crisis of neoliberal economy or failing of normalised sociopolitical networks. Indeed, the interdependence of state, civil society,

and the family – and the overlapping of communitarist and neoliberal initiatives – is emphasised in Streinzer and Cordova’s papers. As Streinzer, following Susana Narotzky, argues, the market, state, kinship, and alternatives forms of provision are entangled in social reproduction. The reimagining of the future under different terms is, in part, a neoliberal product as much as one of communitarist solidarity; Pozzi’s informants have been dispossessed of ‘birthright’ futures, plunged through the whirlpool of dehistoricization, and face the prospect of rebuilding lives on very different material and affective terms. Futures constructed around the host-guest relationship must, by their very nature, be temporary and this poses questions about the embedded interdependence of market, society, and temporal orientations.

The prominence of the moral economy of care at a time of uncertainty is a theme running throughout the contributions, whether as solidarity, faith, hospitality, love, or civil society. Streinzer sees the problems with healthcare provision in Greece since the 2009/10 economic crisis not as a sudden rupture instigated solely by Troika austerity, but as the latest episode in structural faults stretching back to the 1980s. He is uneasy with the often-uncritical praise given in the social sciences to the resilience of solidarity movements without acknowledgement of the complex conditions underlying the creation of precarity and the market deprivation in which solidarity initiatives operate. In one of the most thought-provoking contributions to the solidarity literature I have read over the past decade, Streinzer calls for a reimagining of unproblematised «warm and progressivist notions of care and solidarity» [on outsourcing care to civil society, see Muehlebach 2012]. Our ethnographic gaze is refocused toward the mundane reasons why resilience is made necessary to reduce the combination of increasing precarity and unpredictability that produces uncertainty. The political-economic background to the disintegration of interrelated systems of care helps to de-romanticise solidarity and resilience.

Also approaching uncertainty as part of a long-term series of events, Vietti considers hospitality alongside the substantial intellectual lineage of the Mediterranean as a network of shared sacred spaces and religious coexistence [cf. Albera, Couroucli 2012; Bowman 2012, Henig 2014; 2016]. Navigation, cartography, and mapping inform the Madonna’s roots and routes through space and time. With Lampedusa the island of fluid reception, the Madonna who travels the Mediterranean connects lands, histories, and religions in a narrative of hospitality, impartial care, and acceptance [on the personalities and agency of Madonnas, see Pipyrou 2016]. An interreligious entity, the Madonna bears witness to historical coexistence, providing a lesson of cooperation and hospitality for today. The social cartography of the Mediterranean, in all its diversity, is embodied by the Madonna as she navigates the waves of uncertainty in a nexus of connectivity transcending time, space, and faith. At a time of crisis, she is the reconciliatory figure and

the omniscient protector; the island and the Madonna welcome all humanity and generate – in the words of the Bishop of Cefalù – “new children” offering new futures.

In Cordova’s article we see Mediterranean networks by way of expats returning to Tunisia to participate in civil society initiatives in attempts to harness the spirit of the Arab Spring. While the Arab Spring may have fizzled out in the eyes of the casual observer, its legacy lives on in disenfranchised Tunisian youth who experienced the uprisings during their formative years. The elongated transitional timespace between the revolutionary promises of 2011 and the actualisation of radically different futures has led to an epochal “Time of Chronic Uncertainty”, marked by waiting and life being held in suspension. The empty timespace («like a vacuum», in Streinzer’s words) that followed the uprisings has become a chronic condition – something I identify in crisis Greece when people report being trapped in a cyclical temporality of defeated expectations and young people feel robbed of their futures [Knight 2019; 2021]. In Tunisia, it is collective action which provides some direction to lives in suspension, with people pursuing the potentiality for *otherwise* futures glimpsed during the Arab Spring. Engagement with civil society associations fuels a futural orientation of hope that grasps at futures beyond the horizon of a Time of Chronic Uncertainty, pulling the revolutionary spirit kicking and screaming from the past into the disenchanting present. To paraphrase my muse, Michel Serres [1995], Cordova’s informants are dragging the proverbial “cartload of bricks” from the past, through the present, to build their home in the future. Through solidarity movements, Cordova’s Time of Chronic Uncertainty is thus laced with potentiality and hope, even in an era of darkness.

Staying in North Africa, Capelli brings together the themes of care, morality, and social change brought by Westernisation. Imaginations of the future are reassessed when young women give birth outside of marriage. Falling pregnant suspends life and former expectations. The futural uncertainty experienced by unmarried women is dependent on social class and frameworks of familial morality. Here, I like the term “inconstancy” to characterise both loving relationships and social ambiguities. The dual meaning of inconstancy as transgression from expected path and fickleness or infidelity captures personal and societal concerns with not staying true to moral norms. Capelli situates inconstancy as a “symptom of modernity”, referencing a before and after on an epochalised timeline. The emergence of love – and youth – as a category is, Capelli argues, historically and socially structured parallel to the uneven changes in the morality of care imported from outside traditional Moroccan cultural systems [on love as civil practice and public virtue, see Rapport 2018]. The critique of uncertainty that Capelli provides highlights a theme running throughout all the papers and speaks nicely to one of my conceptual doubts – resilience is not merely an individual

adaptation to unforeseen moments of precariousness but is rather situated in complex non-linear sociohistorical processes. Vertiginous life cannot be ethnographically captured through catchall terms such as “resilience” or “solidarity”; instead, we must attempt to understand the situated nature of how precariousness develops, and the complicated and sometimes paradoxical affects of uncertainty experienced by our interlocutors. This means engaging in fine-grained sociohistorical analysis and having the will to embrace messy ethnography that may at times go against our better judgements.

3. Pathways to Becoming

Undoubtedly, times of uncertainty influence how people orient to the future. Preparing for or even predicting the yet-to-come is usually based on internalised reflections on individual and societal expectations. Moments of urgency where deeply engrained sociohistorical processes rupture or penetrate the normalised fabric of life provoke in people a form of vertigo; disorientation and dizziness where pathways to becoming have shifted dramatically. In the whirlpool of unforeseen social change, people experience confusion as to where and when they belong on timelines of previously unquestioned pasts and futures.

The papers in this collection all deal with how uncertainty is a timespace that fosters speculation on the yet-to-come. Within this timespace we witness how moral economies of care rise to the fore – be it housing provision, the pastoral care of a religious entity, civil associationism, or the inconstancies of love. Authors do well to move beyond restrictive categories of resilience and solidarity to provide cultural and intellectual genealogies to their analysis. In doing so, they demonstrate how people throw themselves from the vertiginous cliff-edge of “known” time into the tumultuous vortex of uncertain becoming while providing comparative apparatus for thinking through life in the Mediterranean as we enter the turbulent second quarter of the 21st century.

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