

The Future(s) of the Mediterraneans Between Uncertainty and Resilience

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Abstract. In this introductory discussion, we argue that uncertainty can be seen as a common feature of Mediterranean countries beyond their varying histories and social realities. Such sense of uncertainty regarding the present and the future – strongly linked to economic instability and political turbulences – is analysed in this special issue through examples from the South and the North of the Mediterranean. A particular focus is laid on innovative forms of resilience, understood as actors’ capacities to adapt or deal successfully with change, or with challenging circumstances. However, we also discuss the limitations and potential misuses of the concept when applied uncritically. Equally important in the case studies presented here, in Greece as in Portugal, in Morocco and Tunisia as in the Italian case is the investigation of social actors’ perception of the future. Times of crisis and the capacity to aspire, anticipation and the individual or collective imagination: these are topics also investigated by the articles of this special issue, which are not only contributions to Mediterranean anthropology but also to the anthropology of the future. Altogether, the articles scrutinise how powerful imaginations of potential futures and orientations to the yet-to-come are in structuring individual and collective experience in times of political and economic uncertainty.

Keywords: Mediterranean, future, crisis, uncertainty, resilience.

1. *The Mediterraneans*

While planning this special issue on Mediterraneanist Anthropology, we could not have anticipated how the tragic Covid-19 pandemic would have given the themes we chose – uncertainty, resilience and the future – such urgency. As we write these lines, in the Mediterranean and beyond the future is bleak, uncertainty is the general mood, resilience the catchword of every government – generally because the pandemic worsened an already difficult social and economic situation, as the following articles widely demonstrate. We could not know it but, alas, we grasped the *Zeitgeist*.

In fact, this Edited Section investigates uncertainty, resilience, and futures in relation to the reprise of interest for the “Mediterraneans” through a primarily ethnographic approach, focused on local situations but also interested in a more theoretically oriented discussion. This discussion links the present contributions to a body of literature produced within the context of Mediterranean studies, which fully acknowledges the diversities and varying social realities within the region.

Observing our Blue Planet from above, one entity can be identified with geographic coordinates that are definitively unique: the Mediterranean Sea. Based on this observation, the environmental approach of Braudel [1972], Horden and Purcell [2000] and others developed an argument regarding the uniqueness of the Circum Mediterranean basin and the importance of geophysical and ecological factors in shaping forms of production, reproduction and connectivity across the Sea. This idea of a certain unity and shared social ethos in countries bordering «the great sea» has been initially discussed and then very critically debated and de-constructed [Lauth Bacas, Kavanagh 2011]. The cultural syndrome of honour and shame, for example, and its centrality as a unifying Mediterranean value, came heavily under attack as early as the 1980s; as highlighted by Michel Herzfeld - one of the protagonists of this critical approach – the thesis of the existence of common cultural traits among different countries surrounding the Sea is clearly an anthropological construction, reflecting the stereotyping of Western societies and thus a globally hierarchised set of values [Herzfeld 1980; 1984].

This debate among the «critical mainstream» of social anthropologists [Sacchi, Viazzo 2013] results in a common understanding of the Mediterranean as a region with multiple social realities that are interconnected in varying ways depending on processes of social, economic and cultural change [Pina-Cabral 1989; Albera 2006; Lauth Bacas 2013]. Recent anthropological approaches in studying these differentiated realities are ongoing and have rekindled a critical dialogue between the anthropological literature amassed in earlier Mediterranean studies and some of its “gate-keeping” concepts (family, honour, patronage – to name a few). In grasping

the ambiguity of the term “Mediterranean” used to identify a region with longstanding historical, social and economic interconnectedness, but without an encompassing sociocultural homogeneity, a new term was introduced to the academic discourse: the Mediterranean(s) [Greverus, Römhild, Welz 2001; Abulafia 2005; Clancy-Smith 2010]. The grammatical plural in the term “Mediterraneans” obviously points to the pluralisation of cultural practices and discourses in Mediterranean societies. Adopting this concept of the Mediterraneans, the present collection starts from the understanding that the Mediterranean is neither a clearly defined geographical unit nor a unified social-cultural area with uniform traits and characteristics.

An adequate approach to these pluralities could also be seen in the concept of a «mosaic of cultures and societies» [Giordano 2012], in which societies clearly differ from each other but nevertheless are interconnected throughout history by longstanding interactions, trade and exchange across borders and across the sea. The Mediterranean mosaic is also a post-colonial sea and region [Chambers 2008] whose history is encumbered with the burden of colonialism and unequal power relations that still haunt and shape the current dynamics of interaction and exchange between the Northern and Southern shores.

Furthermore, although it is not a cultural area, it is undoubtedly a geopolitical area characterised by precise economic and political processes made up of competition between countries and governments, the extraction of resources and commodities, unequal exchanges, and transnational infrastructures [Ben-Yehoyada 2017]. These multi-scalar and transnational interconnections - in which past and present processes are profoundly interwoven - may have contributed to the formation of the Mediterranean as a «unique place» [Ben-Yehoyada *et al.* 2020]. In fact, the Mediterranean is contemporarily at the core and on the periphery of the late-capitalist world-system, the sea operating as a border between the two. These political-economic dimensions must be considered at all times in order to understand the Mediterranean mosaic and its contemporary issues. This critical perspective is shared by Pina-Cabral [2014], who stresses that the Mediterranean not only supports exchange, long-distance trade and communication between people, but has recently been transformed into one of the world’s highest walls preventing refugees and migrants to reach the Northern fringes of that sea.

The Mediterranean peoples, countries and societies do not merely share a collective history of crossings, different encounters and unequal power relations. Many of them also have recent, more catastrophic experiences in common, such as the financial crisis of 2008 and the European migration crisis that has developed since 2015. New dynamics and various forms of protest and resistance have emerged due to the Mediterranean people’s reactions and responses to these developments. The Mediterranean has become one of the main sites in which the effects of economic depression,

politics of austerity, and the precarity of employment have been more clearly observed and critically analysed [Knight, Stewart 2016; Narotzky 2020; Spyridakis 2013]. Similarly, the sea that both unites and divides Africa from Europe, the South from the North, has become the magnifying glass through which to observe transnational migratory flows and disciplinary policies, as well as the dynamics of exclusion, xenophobia and racial exploitation that so dramatically mark our times [Cabot 2019; Feldman 2011; Kirtsoglou, Tsimouris 2016]. Finally, Mediterranean scholars have been paying more and more ethnographic attention to the political movements, revolts and repressions so intense in the region, above all on the Southern shore of the sea [Theodossopoulos 2014; Lauth Bacas, Näser 2018]. With the above-mentioned crises having been widely shared by all Mediterranean societies (and beyond), the meaning of future(s) here is closely interrelated with a deep feeling of uncertainty in the eyes of social actors, as we will see in a moment.

2. Uncertainty. A theory from the South and the North of the Mediterranean

Any discussion of the future of the Mediterraneans may also lead us – inspired by Anand Pandian’s important suggestions [2019] – to wonder how to figure out a “possible anthropology of the Mediterranean”, one that takes a critical look at itself while opening up to the yet-to-come? In our search for disciplinary renovation, we are often tempted to discard all past themes and concepts, judging them as obsolete and limited in scope and depth. However, Pandian shows us that the best way towards a possible anthropology passes via «imagining what the field has been, with an eye to what it might offer now and ahead» [Pandian 2019, 120]. We should, in other words, brush the history of the Anthropology of the Mediterranean against the grain, letting all the still unfulfilled ethnographic and theoretical possibilities finally emerge and enter into a dialogue with the most promising approaches and topics of contemporary anthropological research.

One topic that may arise from a critical look back to our past may be the crucial issue of uncertainty. At first sight, uncertainty has never received the theoretical attention reserved to concepts like that of honour or hospitality within the anthropology of the Mediterranean. Yet uncertainty has been often a basic theme in the research conducted in this part of the world that has historically been affected by poverty, marginality and exploitation. In any case, it is undeniable that Mediterranean anthropology has been focussing heavily on this issue especially following the enormous impact of the 2008 global crisis on Mediterranean countries and the politics of austerity as well as the economic and productive problems that have arisen since [Narotzky 2020]. Even in this region, standing on the border between the

North and South of the world-system, the global recession has stimulated an ethnographical investigation of the dark sides of neo-liberal late capitalism as well as of the various forms of adaptation, resistance and resilience to the contradictory dynamics of radical transformation [Ortner 2016].

In the countries located on the Northern shore, research has shown how the global crises intensified pre-existing contradictory and problematic dynamics, linked to the post-Fordist and neo-liberal transmutation of the current economic landscape [D'Aloisio, Ghezzi 2016; Goddard, Narotzky 2017; Spyridakis 2013]. These contradictions are incarnated in the growing flexibility and precariousness of work as well as in the inefficiencies of the local systems of public welfare, which endanger social reproduction itself generating social, generational and personal frictions [De Pina-Cabral 2018; Narotzky, Pusceddu 2020; Viazzo, Zanotelli 2010].

Looking southwards to the opposite shore of the Mediterranean, other problems further aggravate a predicament of established economic insecurity due in large part to neo-colonial logics of exchange and neo-liberal policies [Bayat 2015; Pontiggia 2017]. Political turbulence in these regions – in the shape of revolutions and revolts, regime changes and civil war –, from Syria to Tunisia [Copertino 2017; Kilani 2014] – has heightened the shared sense of uncertainty that was one of the main causes of the Arab Springs [Singerman 2013; Winegar 2016], and which has for a long time now been fuelling the migratory movements from these coasts to the North [Capello 2008; Menin 2014].

Uncertainty regarding the present and the future - due mainly to economic instability and political turbulences - can thus be considered the most significant of those «shared problems» that actually unify the Mediterranean region beyond its cultural heterogeneity [Knight, Stewart 2016]. Uncertainty, as a collective «structure of feelings» [Williams 1977], appears as a shadow cast over the Sea and its shores, a few sunbeams of hope breaking through here and there. A shadow that the pandemic – and the inevitable economic recession – can only deepen and widen.

How can we describe this general feeling of existential, economic and social uncertainty? We can think of uncertainty first of all as a confusion of the temporal line [Bryant, Knight 2019], which makes it difficult to resort to the past to navigate the present and, above all, to anticipate the future. In the state of uncertainty shared by so many Mediterranean countries, time seems suspended, giving way to an «uncanny present» [Bryant 2016] or, in other case, to a sense of immobility and «stuckedness» [Hage 2009]. We merely need to think of the «waithood», characterising in particular young people in North Africa [Singerman 2013; Elliott 2016; Vacchiano 2014] or even, of the general condition of liminality of those countries that have abandoned the

Fordist-Keynesian regimes of the past to find themselves stuck in a never-ending crisis [Capello 2020; Spyridakis 2013].

Uncertainty, seen as a crisis of aspirations and hope as well as a sense of temporal disorientation, is thus an essential object of enquiry in understanding the present of the Mediterranean and - undoubtedly, due to the recession caused by the pandemic - its future too. However, as Sherry Ortner [2016] rightly stressed, besides a “dark anthropology” of the troubles and distress of the contemporary condition, we also really need to investigate what emerges beyond the darkness of the present, such as the various forms of adaptation and opposition as well the possibility for change and transformation: we need an anthropology of hope and of the yet-to-come, too [Pandian 2019]. This is one of the reasons why we decided to dedicate our edited collection not only to uncertainty, but also to the ever more important themes of resilience and the future.

3. Resilience: A concept that is full of contradiction yet embedded in our lives

Resilience has become a “buzzword”, used by the media, laypeople, scholars and policymakers. Every actor imbues the term with many different meanings, interpretations and applications, but it can still be a powerful term to describe everyday life; especially if we discern between normative claims that assume resilience is always desirable, and descriptive approaches where resilience is neither inherently good nor bad.

Anthropology has not followed the trend of other fields, which have proven to be greatly invested in the study of resilience. The contemporary concept of resilience emerged in anthropology in the 1970s [Vayda, McCay 1975], but only recently have anthropologists been paying more attention to the matter. The majority of anthropological works on resilience are related to disaster studies [Barrios 2016], and to a lesser extent to the anthropology of food [Reuter 2019], or the broader field of human-nature relationships (particularly regarding climate change) [Oliver-Smith 2016]. Some other studies come from psychological anthropologists [Zraly, Rubin, Mukamana 2013] while newer attempts to study resilience arrive from economic anthropologists [Tucker, Nelson 2017] or research on the relationship between cultural heritage and resilience [Karampampas forthcoming]. The scarcity of resilience studies is not only identified in the subfields of anthropology but also regionally, making this special issue a first attempt to discuss resilience in the Mediterraneans.

Resilience is commonly understood as a characteristic of individuals to cope with and recover from trauma. In a broader sense, resilience is the ability of individuals, groups, institutions, systems (such as ecosystems) and

materials to deal successfully with change [Brown 2015]. Resilience can also be «the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances» [Masten, Best, Garmezy 1990, 425]. Similarly to what Ghassan Hage has argued about «stuckedness», resilience «asserts some agency over the very fact that one has no agency by not succumbing and becoming a mere victim and an object in circumstances that are conspiring to make a total agent-less victim and object out of you» [2009, 100]. In this way, resilience can be seen as a proactive adaptation and anticipatory action; not as a response to an event, but «as a strategy for building the capacity to deal with and to shape change» [Brown 2015, 6].

However, using the concept of resilience could be problematic, particularly when resilience is understood as a society's ability to return to a state that existed prior to a stressful event or intervention. The assumption that a society - at a specific point of time - may be considered stable and a state of reference that can be returned to, is a fundamentally inadequate model for understanding societies which also diminishes their dynamics and above all does not consider how a major event may trigger new forms of sociality [Barrios 2016, 28-30]. Resilience could also obscure social inequalities with regard to vulnerable and disenfranchised populations since they have no other option than to adapt, find ways to carry on, improvise, and survive despite overwhelming challenges that the more privileged ones do not have to deal with. Finally, in the study of resilience, we should not overlook the phenomenon that has caused people to become resilient - an aspect which is often ignored in most studies. This attitude is indirectly presenting resilience as the response to traumatic and overpowering events, normalising the social production of vulnerability rather than vulnerability reduction [Barrios, 32]. Having acknowledged these issues and limitation of the concept of resilience, in this issue we consciously employ the term in a critical way, to emphasise the dialectics of continuity and change emerging from ethnographic research.

4. Future: a salvage anthropology?

A common thread of all our contributions is an attention to economic and political uncertainty, to which the topic of resilience is strictly connected, in Greece as in Portugal, in Morocco and Tunisia as in the Italian case. Equally important however – and perhaps still more distinctive - is the theme of the future, to which many of the following pages are devoted. After all, as Arjun Appadurai [2013, 6] claimed: «the anthropology of the future and the future of anthropology may well provide the best critical energies for one another». A claim we also deem true for the anthropology of the Mediterranean - as the title we chose for this edited collection indicates.

Since Appadurai wrote those lines in his manifesto for an anthropology of the future, things have been changing. Although Bryant and Knight [2019] still resent a tendency in the discipline to look above all to the past and the present, Appadurai's call received a wide response, so much so that nowadays the anthropology of the future is one of the most exciting and expanding fields within our discipline. What is the reason behind this growing anthropological concern for the yet-to-come? In a way, we can again see at work the "salvage paradigm" that characterised anthropology in the first half of the XX century: faced with the «slow cancellation of the future» [Fisher 2013], anthropologists are trying to rescue its traces in the collective imagination, aiming for the survival of hope and aspiration, even at the level of political engagement.

It is no coincidence that this trend began after 2000, with the growing collective concerns in our societies for global terrorism and the global civil war, and still more after the global economic depression, which started in 2008. It was the beginning of a time of crisis, when it became difficult to contrast uncertainty and anxiety through a personal and collective anticipation of the future. In a more profound way, those events marked the symbolic end of the grand narratives about the future, whether stated in terms of progress, infinite economic growth or simply social stability. The resulting confusion about temporality explains the emergence of a salvage anthropology of the future. Yet, just as anthropologists discovered that "tribes" were not always just "vanishing" but in a certain way changing [Clifford 1988], the transformation and multiplication of the collective images of the yet-to-come deriving from the crisis of grand narratives is the main substance of this line of inquiry.

A line opened, as we have seen, by Appadurai's theoretical and methodological reflections [2013] and further expanded, more recently, by the research of Bryant and Knight [2019] that lead to their book on the *Anthropology of the Future*. Particularly interesting for our discourse, the latter demonstrate that the Mediterranean – so often associated with the study of tradition and persistence – is actually the perfect field for the ethnographic investigation of hope, anticipation and aspiration.

Notwithstanding their common topic and shared aim to stimulate the debate, the differences between these authors should not be ignored. Appadurai proposes an approach to the future as cultural fact through the conceptual prism of the collective imagination and the capacity to aspire, focusing on the way both of them are moulded by the past and the present. On the other hand, referring to the field of the anthropology of temporality, Bryant and Knight propose to investigate more on how the future influences the present rather than how the past influences our view of the future. To this aim, the two scholars developed the concept of "futural orientations", linked to a phenomenological and action-centred approach.

The two approaches, however, are complementary in many ways, as can be seen in a number of the pages to come. Times of crisis and the capacity to aspire, anticipation and the collective imagination: these are some of the topics investigated by the papers that are in this sense also a contribution to the anthropology of the future (and to future anthropology). An anthropology whose task is to rescue and keep alive the «spark of hope» that – as Walter Benjamin taught us – the present inherits from yesterday to illuminate a possible different tomorrow.

5. Contributions to this Special Issue

Earlier, the editors argued that the Mediterranean is actually the perfect field for the ethnographic investigations of hope, anticipation and aspiration. Drawing on extensive ethnography, our collection of articles studies how social actors look to the future in their everyday lives, and how their collective imaginations and actions are «awakened» [Bryant, Knight 2019] by the anticipation of another future.

In the first article entitled *Hosting Futures: Dispossession and hospitality in contemporary Portugal*, Giacomo Pozzi investigates protests against eviction as acts of resilience in an informal neighborhood in Lisbon. Starting with the observation that nearly every family in the *bairro* was providing a roof to someone who had lost his or her home, the author sees hospitality in this context as neighborhood-based resistance, promoting a new, community-oriented approach to the future. Such reorientation was possible because dispossessed and homeless persons became the valued guests of neighbors offering their hospitality – a transformation that allowed the evicted to view their future in a different way.

The second contribution by Francesco Vietti, *In Search of a safe port: The Marian cult on Lampedusa amid mass tourism and the migrant crisis*, investigates the re-shaping of the local Marian cult after Lampedusa island was heavily affected by the Mediterranean refugee crisis and transformed into a hotspot of refugee landings. As Vietti argues, today's devotion to the Madonna of Porto Salvo reflects ambivalences initiated by these developments: for some, the Sanctuary of Saint Mary turned to a place of worship and devotion related to migration travel. On the other hand, frictions and forms of opposition on the part of members of the local population have emerged, indicating how local inhabitants have changed how they are looking towards the future.

Irene Capelli's article, *Undutiful daughters claiming their futures and the uncertainties of non-marital love in Casablanca*, presents a shift from community action to the coping strategies of unmarried young women giving birth in contemporary Morocco. As the author observed, childbirth occurs

outside socially prescribed frameworks in a sort of exile, notably hidden from one's family and sometimes in shelters for unmarried mothers. Nevertheless, case studies presented by Capelli prove how young women from different social backgrounds mobilise resources to actively adjust to their challenging situation. Capelli understands this shift not as a merely individual adaptation of "resilience", rather as a complex and non-linear socially informed process.

Giovanni Cordova, the author of the next article, *Shaping the future(s). Young Tunisians, civil society and itineraries of personal commitment*, is interested in the biographies of a young generation of social actors, who actively participate in citizens' associations or conservative political parties in Tunis. Cordova argues that their «political subjectivation» was inspired by shared ideas and views of the future in the aftermath of the Arab Spring on one hand while on the other, political commitment was born against the background of family and religious identification codes. To understand this complexity, the author coins the concept of «contradictory coexistences» to better understand how young volunteers and Islamic-conservative student activists enter the Tunisian public sphere.

The final contribution, entitled *Uncanny companions: kinship, activism, and public health as interdependent modalities of care provision under Greek austerity* by Andreas Streinzer, adds a critical note to our discussion by investigating the entanglement of acts of resilience with the neoliberal state system. The article discusses not only the impact of austerity measures by reconstructing the care structure established by family, kin and friends in providing care for an old-aged pensioner treated in a public hospital in Greece: Streinzer's critical analysis of the difficulties in solidaristic forms of private care within a state institution also stresses how entangled market, state, kinship, and alternative forms of care provision are. Streinzer's article makes the fundamental point that it is important not to overlook this «companionship» between engaged local actors and the neo-liberal policies of a capitalistic state system.

Altogether, the contributions to this Special Issue examine and analyse how powerful imaginations of another future and orientations to the yet-to-come are in structuring both individual and collective, solidaristic acts of resilience in times of political turbulences and economic instability. The «principle of hope», which the philosopher Ernst Bloch has seen as central to human thought, appears to be equally central to activities of «people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming» [Bloch 1986, 3]. «It is a question of learning hope» [Bloch 1986, 3], a journey on which our interlocutors as well as the authors and editors of this Special Issue have embarked.

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