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978-1-108-42185-0 — The Anthropology of the Future
Rebecca Bryant, Daniel M. Knight
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THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE FUTURE

Study of the future is an important new field in anthropology. Building on a philosophical tradition running from Aristotle through Heidegger to Schatzki, this book presents the concept of “orientations” as a way to study everyday life. It analyzes six main orientations – anticipation, expectation, speculation, potentiality, hope, and destiny – which represent different ways in which the future may affect our present. While orientations entail planning towards and imagining the future, they also often involve the collapse or exhaustion of those efforts; moments where hope may turn to apathy, frustrated planning to disillusion, and imagination to fatigue. By examining these orientations at different points, the authors argue for an anthropology that takes a fuller account of the teleologies of action.

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The Anthropology of the Future



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RB: For Mete, as ever.

DK: For Bella Eugenia. The Future.

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Preface

This book has its origins in Rebecca's childhood in the American South, when she developed an early interest in time. Or rather, she saw in the racial divides and material deprivations all around her the way that the past was chained to the present and had to be dragged along into the future. All the Southern writers that she admired also had a tormented relationship to the temporal. When she went to university, she wrote in her college application that she wanted to study philosophies of time and history. Although US philosophy departments at that time insisted on teaching logical formulas instead, she still managed to write a thesis on amnesia as a recurring theme in one of her favorite Southern writers. Wiping out the past; making room for the future. She wasn't satisfied with her conclusions and sensed then that there was much more to be said about the temporal and its affects, but it took a couple more decades of thinking and reading and studying other people's temporalities even for the questions that she wanted to ask to become clear.

The theoretical framework of this book is the result of those several decades of thinking. That thinking took place in relation to her ongoing ethnographic research on long-term displacement and conflict and post-conflict temporalities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Although she began thinking about these questions – as many researchers have – from the perspective of memory and the past, she slowly began to understand that she needed to turn her perspective around and that the phenomena she was studying, such as conflict materialities and crisis, needed to be viewed through the lens of the future.

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The future has been of growing interest in the discipline, as anthropologists have acknowledged the ways that studies of temporality had been for so long primarily focused on the past–present relationship. The anthropology of the future, however, has developed primarily in relation to emerging studies of energy futures, biomedicine and biotechnology, and risk and finance, less so in relation to Rebecca’s subjects of displacement, conflict, and transitional justice. When she began to write this book, then, it seemed appropriate to bring on board someone whose body of work has made important contributions to the study of energy, austerity, and financial crisis. Moreover, Daniel’s work in Greece intersected in thought-provoking ways with Rebecca’s research in Cyprus and Turkey. A collaboration was born that enriched Rebecca’s several decades of thinking about temporality with the new ethnographic contexts and subjects that Daniel contributed.

Daniel’s interest in temporality has its roots in his pre-university studies of archaeology, with its focus on reconstructing the past, and the philosophy of religion, more interested in pondering the beginnings and ends of the universe. He fondly remembers lunchtimes spent aptly integrating soccer with theorizing the trajectories of life beyond the limits of our planet. Whereas Rebecca’s childhood in the American South shaped her passion for better understanding pasts and futures, for Daniel it was the trappings of the British class system that seemed to direct those around him toward preordained ends.

His doctoral studies produced a thesis on the everyday experience of nonlinear time in austerity Greece, introducing a theory of disparate “culturally proximate” pasts that provide direction to people in the clutches of severe socioeconomic crisis. Like Rebecca, Daniel’s initial focus was on history and memory, and it was only after high-tech photovoltaic panels started appearing on land previously belonging to large Ottoman estates that he realized that his research participants’ future lay with the future. Needless to say, Daniel is immensely grateful to Rebecca for the opportunity to collaborate on this book and share in her long-term intellectual project.

Because this work builds on numerous projects over many years, it would be impossible to thank all the many persons who contributed to Rebecca’s thinking – and often entirely rethinking – on the subject. Both

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Charles Stewart and Nicolas Argenti contributed through their own work and through stimulating conversations. Two persons who are no longer with us had significant influence: Peter Loizos, who always encouraged historical thinking that was firmly rooted in a future-oriented present; and Paul Friedrich, who always challenged his students to think “otherwise.” Rebecca also wishes to express her gratitude to Mete Hatay, not only for putting up with an intense period of writing and many irritable outbursts, but also for allowing this project to take precedence over their own joint work.

While so many people have helped Daniel think through the orientations presented in this book – and a list of acknowledgements would be extensive – here he would simply like to express special gratitude to three friends and major influencers: Debbora Battaglia, Charles Stewart, and David Valentine. In March 2018 Daniel organized an international conference hosted at the University of St Andrews on the theme “Orientations: The Anthropology of the Future.” Funded by the Ladislav Holy Memorial Trust and Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies, the event was designed to take further conversations on time, temporality, and futural orientations. Thanks go to all the contributors for three days of stimulating debate. Above all, and as always, Daniel is grateful for the support and encouragement of Stavroula Pipyrou, his inspiration for life.

In the chapters that follow, Rebecca is the sole author of Chapters 1 (“Anticipation”), 2 (“Expectation”), and 6 (“Destiny”). The Introduction and Chapters 3 (“Speculation”) and 4 (“Potentiality”) are coauthored, while Daniel is the sole author of Chapter 5 (“Hope”) and the Conclusion.

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