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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

KNIGHT, DANIEL, 2021, *Vertiginous Life: An Anthropology of Time and the Unforeseen*, New York: Berghahn Books, 163 pp., ISBN 978-1-80073-194-3

Daniel Knight's *Vertiginous Life* delves into the concept of crisis, drawing from personal experiences and extensive ethnographic data collected over years of fieldwork. This groundbreaking work explores the instability and uncertainties of existence through the lens of vertigo, portraying the impacts of crisis that people of all social statuses undergo. Knight creatively weaves film, literature, and vivid imagery into his exploration of the multifaceted nature of chronic crisis, captivating readers' imagination and academic interest. While utilizing various examples to elucidate the subject, Knight's core findings stem from a decade-long ethnographic study in Greece, spanning the onset and aftermath of the 2008/2009 global financial crisis. By strategically selecting diverse Greek locations as fieldwork sites, the book unveils how the financial upheaval threw lives into disarray, subjecting both rich and poor to experiences of vertigo in its myriad forms. Divided into chapters addressing existential, material, and temporal aspects, followed by discussions on life in suspension and the overarching theme of captivity, *Vertiginous Life* significantly enriches anthropological understanding of vertigo by tapping into knowledge of it.

Throughout the text, the author commences each chapter by presenting biographical snapshots of individuals confronting turbulent lives in various manifestations. In the initial chapter, Knight introduces the concept of vertigo-induced 'unknowingness.' Further, the narrative challenges the assumption that wealth and prosperity shield one from the impact of the Greek crisis, highlighting how even the affluent experience vertigo. Amidst the disaster, individuals lose their agency and security, plunged into the daily abyss of uncertainty that produces a sense of nausea. Knight diverges from Sartre's perspective, asserting that this 'nausea' stems not from 'knowing' but from a profound 'unknowing' of the self. Vertigo emerges as the phase between past and present, where individuals grapple with the transformation of their identities in the wake of such events, ultimately

succumbing to a pervasive sense of unknowingness, including about their own selves. Expelled from opulence and thrust into a struggle for mere 'survival,' vertigo reveals the abrupt and capricious cruelty that life can impose, even upon those perceived to be in stable circumstances.

Human experience, rooted in the physical realm, finds tangible expression through material objects. In the book's second chapter, Knight transports readers to Petrochori, an abandoned village nestled in the Greek mountains, where inhabitants embark on the reconstruction of old residences and lives, distancing themselves from the uncertainties of the bigger cities. The refurbished homes symbolize the crisis's tangible aspects, while the return to traditional lifestyles reflects a reassessment driven by it, challenging preconceived notions about village living. In this way, vertigo disrupts linear progress. The ruins, serving as foundations for new beginnings, infuse narratives with echoes of the past; the palpable presence of old structures and the surrounding landscape grounds these experiences. Vertiginous lives thus take a tangible turn. For those hugely impacted by the crisis, vertigo demands physical repositioning and temporal reorientation. Furthermore, with struggles faced when adhering to EU and Greek conservation laws that impede the literal reconstruction of the village, the crisis's material nature also exposes tensions between local and global dynamics.

In the book's third chapter, Knight delves into the temporal dimension of vertigo, focusing on technology, disorientation, and belongingness. Amid navigating the repercussions of the financial crisis, individuals grapple with the daily presence and interaction with technology, characterized by the author as the 'complex intermingling of past, present, and future.' This daily experiences prompt a reevaluation of society's position within the broader global context. Specifically in Greece, people confront a profound dilemma regarding the country's classification—whether it aligns with 'First World' nations or parallels developing countries outside Europe; whether it embodies the contemporary present or remains tethered to a primitive past. It is because, as the author contends, 'technology both enhances and disrupts temporal alignment, manipulating emotional rhythms that pull individuals across different temporal spaces.' Knight illustrates this disorientation experienced by Greeks, stemming from a challenge to their European identity which is often commonly linked to affluence. The introspection stirred by technology ultimately leads to broader inquiries about one's sense of belonging, prompting questions like 'where and when do I truly belong?' Life assumes a vertiginous quality, torn between the promise of modernity and the

practicality and respite that the ‘past’ offers, inducing a sensation of dizziness and nausea akin to the author's experiences with vertigo.

How does vertigo look for individuals escaping one crisis only to find themselves embroiled in another? This query serves as the focal point of Knight's exploration in the book's fourth chapter. Acknowledging that crises pervade both local and foreign landscapes, one reaches low points, overwhelmed by a sense of emptiness and left suspended in a state of limbo. Vertigo, triggered by political turmoil, manifests as a condition of being trapped amid successive crises, unable to actualize one's potential. For migrants, this situation epitomizes being ensnared in a web of divergent temporal realities. Emptiness not only reflects the despair one might experience but also emerges as an intrinsic facet of the crisis ordeal. To grapple with vertigo, the framework of navigation proves valuable. In the context of the individuals studied, shifts in politics banishes guiding stars, causing disorientation and an inability to anchor the Self within the greater scheme of things. When life's course becomes unclear, all that remains is a sense of suspension.

Finally, in the fifth and concluding chapter, Knight explores the underlying theme of vertigo: captivity. While experiences of vertigo vary, they all share a common thread—being unavoidably trapped within the crisis, held captive by its grip. Entrapped in the throes of enduring crisis, individuals adapt by learning to adeptly maneuver through it, often enduring hardship while mustering courage, skills, and strategies to confront the situation. Despite its disruptive nature, crisis becomes a period where individuals carve out a sphere of self-determination. Disruption, nonetheless, does not equate to complete destruction.

"Vertiginous Life: An Anthropology of Time and the Unforeseen" thoroughly and authentically examines its subject matter. It will strongly resonate with students and intellectuals seeking an anthropological perspective on Times of Crisis. Ultimately, it presents human suffering as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon. Although it boasts considerable theoretical depth, the book retains a readable and captivating style, ensuring its accessibility to a wider audience, including that outside academia who are intrigued by comprehending the intricate nature of crises.

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