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ODDS AND ENDS: RISK, MORTALITY, AND THE POLITICS OF CONTINGENCY

ABSTRACT. Medical anthropology's cogent rethinking of conventional biomedical categories has largely overlooked the core problems of one key concept of both biomedical and social scientific analysis: risk. In particular, the use of the term in medical anthropology (and the social sciences more generally) frequently rests on two assumptions: (1) that contingency necessarily constitutes a threat to individual experience or social order; and (2) that a risk management paradigm that relies on a model of statistical probability is the ontologically preeminent way of engaging chance. Other approaches which do not take risk as the starting point for understanding contingency also have problems; they too assume that contingency is necessarily cause for crisis. These problematic root assumptions lead social analysts to miss how individual actors and local communities variously engage, rather than minimize, contingency. I suggest a new approach that instead aims to treat contingency as normatively neutral and as arising in four domains of experience. Conventional approaches also miss how attempts to account for unexpected events themselves involve struggles between competing paradigms (or tropes) of chance. This contest over accountability I call here *the politics of contingency*, and I seek thereby to signal the need to renovate our language of uncertainty in order to address its political dimensions. I trace the literature to identify some sources of these terminological problems, and through an examination of the life and death of a close contact in Chania, Crete, I explore his own approach to chance and the different, competing interpretations of his death. I thereby demonstrate the importance of revamping the conventional approach to understanding the contingent nature of human life.

KEY WORDS: contingency, Greece, mortality, risk

AN UNCERTAIN LESSON

"Tora!" *('Now!') exclaimed my friend Nikos, as the coffee began to froth and bubble, threatening to overflow the long-handled brass coffeepot. I stirred the coffee briskly as I removed it from the flame, trying to do everything just as I had seen Nikos do it many times. My next problem: the flame. It was produced by a small propane canister with a burner attached to the top; the heat from it struck my face as soon as I moved the pot away. Somehow Nikos always turned off the burner while simultaneously stirring the pot he held. How had he done this? All of this flashed through my mind as I finally began to look for a spot to set the spoon down before reaching under the flame to turn off the burner. But it was already off – Nikos had reached around from behind me and deftly extinguished it. Now the next part of the lesson, pouring the coffee into a small cup, hopefully without splashing any coffee on the saucer*. "Ohi etsi – apo psila" *('Not that way – from up high'), Nikos*

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chided. The coffee poured to the brim – not without some errant splashes – and gripping the saucer's edge in the fingers of my right hand, I began to carry it to our table. The cup trembled and rattled as I moved across the floor, the more so, it seemed, the more intently I watched it, and coffee began to overflow, staining the white exterior of the cup and running down to the saucer. "Here," said Nikos, as he took the cup and saucer away from me. And then, pointing forward by cutting the air in front of his face sharply with the edge of a vertically raised hand, he said, "You must look forward. Only. The cup is nothing. Nothing! Only then will it not spill."

And so went a brief lesson in the midst of a quiet afternoon on the island of Crete.[1] Nikos, along with his two brothers, owned a small hotel in the "old town" section of Chania, a city on the Western end of the island.[2] Later, after his death, I came to understand much better just what Nikos was teaching me that afternoon as the coffee cup shimmied in my hand. He was putting forward an approach to contingency, a way to face the unpredictable, whether it be the possibility of spillage or something more serious, such as the timing of his impending liver failure. I do not mean to imply that this approach was a fully verbalized, coherent, and systematic way of confronting the unexpected (nor do I suggest that this particular account does not demonstrate something well-known to anyone who has waited tables for a living), but through this example, and others from his life below, I piece together a portrait of how Nikos engaged the uncertainties of his life.[3] These examples demonstrate that this approach was more a technique, a learned disposition toward the world that revealed itself in actions as well as in reflections. It is encapsulated in the paradoxical injunction to ignore my concern (the coffee) in order to attain my goal (not spilling it), and it is a personal engagement of chance that I will try to make sense of throughout much of this paper. Nikos once said to me that the biggest risk in the world was friendship; opening oneself up to another, he said, was what made one most vulnerable. For him, risk and uncertainty were inextricably bound up in social relations, and this suggests that any view which begins from the assumption that risk is dangerous (and should be minimized/avoided) must be questioned. Instead, his views indicate that it is through the engagement of indeterminacies, rather than through their minimization or resolution (such as through statistical 'risk management'), that one may socially demonstrate one's place vis-à-vis chance, and, by extension, one's place in relation to others and the world.

Nikos died on a moped while heading home one evening in 1996 when, apparently, he fainted from liver failure and crashed into the back of a parked truck. I write "apparently" advisedly, because, as this paper will explore, there were multiple accountings for his death, and no one of them can claim precedence. In the end, his final moments were his alone. It was an event that happened after I had left the field, and of which I

was informed nearly immediately by mutual friends and Nikos' family. My coming to terms with this event involved attempting to reconcile this chanceful event into some meaningful account. In fact, this process mirrors how social actors in general engage the unpredictable. I seek to use this parallel constructively here in order to renovate our approach to understanding the role of contingency in social life. In particular, I explore the disjuncture between one person's disposition toward death and the various attempts by others to account for an unforeseen, and in this case horrible, event.

The fundamentally unpredictable quality of experience, its *contingency* (the term I most often use here), is a key universal of human experience, the dimensions of which have not fully been explored within the social sciences. Max Weber, of course, most famously investigated how successful Calvinist capitalists aligned morality and contingency in order to legitimize their good fortune in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930).[4] More recently, Michael Jackson, one of the first contemporary social analysts to recognize the importance of contingency at the heart of experience, suggests that contingency, "the precarious and perilous character of existence" (1989: 15), is at least one common aspect of experience for all people and thus can serve as a starting point for finding common ground (1989: 17).[5] I argue throughout this essay that conventional approaches to understanding contingency in experience are in deep need of fundamental reappraisal, and in particular I demonstrate that they preclude a clear understanding of engagements of chance both at the personal level (where an attitude toward chance, such as Nikos', is nonetheless embedded in local understandings of chance) and at the level of local struggles over accountability (where the legitimacy of institutions may rest on their ability to account for an unforeseen event according to a particular paradigm of chance). Instead, I suggest a model for examining contingency that avoids normative assumptions, helps us (heuristically) sort out the various kinds and sources of indeterminacy, and provides a groundwork for assessing the struggles over accountability that characterize a surprisingly large part of everyday life.

How human beings everywhere come to make sense of unexpected events has long been a central theme in anthropological literature. From Malinowski's observations on canoe building and yam gardening, through Evans-Pritchard's (1937) exploration of the witchcraft of the Azande, the field's interest in the seemingly exotic means by which outcomes are interpreted has never waned. These approaches, however, suffered from an overly schematic view which distinguished these practices through the lens of a problematic set of categories: magic, science, and religion

(Tambiah 1990). Anthropologists are beginning to recognize how these confrontations of the unpredictable are not solely to be made sense of according to a narrow system of practice or belief (such as witchcraft, or that associated with the evil eye), but instead belong to a more general case of how the indeterminate is negotiated amidst competing frameworks of meaning (Keane 1997; Whyte 1997; Becker 1997) and between representation and embodiment (Csordas 1993). This development suggests that anthropology is breaking free of its reliance on, on one hand, the underexamined opposition between risk and fate and, on the other, the too narrowly circumscribed chestnuts of our literature: witchcraft, the evil eye, magic, and so on. As Michael Jackson writes about these categories, "Many of these frames of reference suggest radical *discontinuities* between 'them' and 'us', and fail to clarify on what grounds we can reach an understanding of such 'alien' beliefs and practices" (Jackson 1989: 17, emphasis in original). He writes that an anthropology which seeks to "include participatory knowledge and subjective concerns ... places the knower within the world of the known and gives incompleteness and precariousness the same footing as the finished and fixed" (1989: 16). He states (1989: 15):

> But if knowledge is not so much a systematic revelation of the inner logic of antecedent events as a way of dealing with life in the here and now, then the anthropologist's preoccupation with regularity, pattern, system, and structure has to be seen as less an objective reflection of social reality than a comment on his personal and professional need for certitude and order.

Thus, before anthropology can focus productively on uncertainty, this quote suggests that it must ensure that it has explored the root assumptions of its own terminology. How can we find a relatively neutral language, one which strives to avoid presupposing the primacy of regularity and order, with which to begin?

In this paper, I consider approaches toward understanding chance in medical anthropological and other social scientific discourses, in particular those which have relied upon risk as an explanatory term. I suggest that despite many authors' well-intentioned efforts to provide a framework by which local and subjective understandings of chance can be heard and examined, their approaches nonetheless rest upon unexamined and problematic assumptions about risk as the primary means by which to make sense of chance. I argue that our current language is ill suited for exploring this aspect of experience. Moreover, our use of terms such as risk suffers from a deeply embedded assumption that that which is unexpected constitutes a threat, whether in terms of statistical normalcy or an imagined, bounded social order. It furthermore carries with it an

approach toward the unexpected which gives pride of place to the quantification of uncertainties.[6] I call for a more considered and precise language for exploring how social actors confront the uncertain in their lives, one inspired by theories of social performance, such as that of Fernandez (1986). Next, I describe and discuss Nikos' life to give a sense of this kind of personal attitude toward chance, one which is lost in applying the traditional academic discourse of risk to social experience, and which may more completely be grasped with a more nuanced approach. I finally briefly consider Nikos' death and the attempts by various locals to "explain" it, attempts which reveal how accounting for the contingent is a process embedded in local and national struggles over meaning and resources. I hope to communicate the central and contested position of contingency as a feature of social life, one which mediates and shapes the struggles over resources and identity that characterize everyday life from the local to the national level.

RETHINKING RISK

Risk as an analytical term has played a prominent role in medical anthropology, owing in large part to the prominence of the concept in biomedicine and other relevant fields. The key issue in much of this writing is the research subjects' ability to recognize and/or measure health risks, and how "cultural" influences play a role in this ability or lack thereof. By contrast, the narratological tradition within medical anthropology has focused on uncertainty and illness as they relate to the more general anthropological literature on misfortune. Both genres share a key concern: How do people cope with events that break the continuity of their lives? Yet in this question lies an attitude toward pattern and order as normatively preferable modes of experience. It is worthwhile to examine some representatives of each literature briefly to inquire further into this commonality.

Recently in medical anthropology risk has become the focus of critical writings, most often by those who seek to examine its deployment in the field of epidemiology (Gifford 1986; Frankenberg 1993; Kaufert and O'Neil 1993; Martinez, Chavez and Hubbell 1997). Gifford's article in particular neatly traces how correlation and causality are frequently conflated when statistics are used to identify risks. She also convincingly argues for the recognition of the fundamental uncertainty that persists for any patient in a clinical encounter despite the elaborate techniques of epidemiological and clinical measurement.[7] As Frankenberg observes: "The risk approach in epidemiology thus poses for its practitioners two

initial choices: which outcomes to focus upon and which risk factors ought to be given priority. Like all choices these are surrounded by culturally defined moral problems in which power relations play a central role" (1993: 236).

These writings constitute an important critical view, but in them certain unexamined assumptions about risk remain. First, while all of the authors are wary of the claims by epidemiologists or other professionals to define and measure risks, and in several cases seek to put forth a notion of "lay risk perception" to combat this power imbalance (Gifford, Kaufert and O'Neil), in general the ontological primacy of *risk itself* as the preeminent language for discussing uncertainty is not questioned. Thus, Frankenberg, while briefly recognizing the willful engagement of risk in such activities as rock climbing and motorcycle riding, nonetheless sees these activities as, at root, reflecting a misalignment between the measured (presumably quantifiable) risk of the social person (the 'body incarnate') and the risk of the physical body (the 'body corporeal') (Frankenberg 1993: 235). Second, Frankenberg's exceptional consideration of these intentional yet risky activities aside, the authors as a whole continue to ascribe to unexpected events a necessarily crisis-producing, normatively negative quality. The overall pattern is one where these local conceptions about contingency are always re-interpreted by these analysts through a language of risk. The status of the term itself as representing what "lies behind" these ideas is never questioned.

For example, Kaufert and O'Neil nicely explicate how Canadian obstetric policy among the Inuit relies upon the dominance of an epidemiological language of risk, as opposed to the local, subjective concept of it. In particular they note how in their research the Inuit asserted that confronting uncertainty was an essential aspect of living. As one of their informants put it: "Can you guarantee my life tomorrow? ... There's always risk. I mean, you wouldn't live if you didn't live with risks" (Kaufert and O'Neil 1993: 49). Yet contained in this quote is a key suggestion that Kaufert and O'Neil miss. By interpreting local conceptions of chance as a "language of risk," the normatively negative quality of uncertainty itself remains unquestioned by them. As they write in their conclusion (1993: 51), "For the [Inuit] woman, risk is the occasional threat of danger in childbirth accepted as part of a natural process." The previous quote, however, suggests something more fundamental. It suggests that, for the Inuit, the engagement of risk itself may be constitutive of lived experience. Thus, it is not how one manages to avoid or minimize risk which characterizes social practices and beliefs about contingency, but instead how life's contingent quality provides an arena wherein social

identities are explored and confirmed. Here, even the possibility of death is not normatively unambiguous. In a similar way, I suggest, Nikos' life and death illustrate this same idea of the engagement of indeterminacy as an arena where identity is constituted.

The narratological focus of much work in medical anthropology, by drawing so intimately on the constructions of meaning by individuals, holds promise for the development of an approach to uncertainty which would avoid the term risk and its attendant problems.[8] A prominent recent example of this is Gay Becker's book *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World* (1997). Becker recognizes that how people make sense out of the unexpected is an overlooked yet fundamental aspect of human life. She describes her approach as follows (1997: 4):

> In this book I examine the process by which people attempt to create continuity after an unexpected disruption to life . . . A sense of continuity is captured in ordinary routines of daily life, the mundane and comforting sameness of repetitive activities, such as drinking a cup of coffee with the morning newspaper. These activities give structure and logic to people's lives.
>
> In all societies, the course of life is structured by expectations about each phase of life, and meaning is assigned to specific life events and the roles that accompany them. When expectations about the course of life are not met, people experience inner chaos and disruption.

This passage presents several problems, however. While recognizing the need to address the place of the unexpected in experience, Becker misses Jackson's point that we must correspondingly reexamine our own preoccupations with regularity and order. Becker's finding of comfort in repetitive activities such as drinking coffee must not lead us to forget that routinization, stagnation, and inescapability are as much possible (and 'negative') effects of order and pattern as are such notions as stability, regularity, and continuity.[9] Correspondingly, innovation, opportunity, and windfall are as much ('positive') interpretations of the unexpected as are crisis, disruption, and chaos. While Becker does later recognize that a normative emphasis on continuity in U.S. life "amounts to a cultural ideology" (1997: 191), the critical impact of this observation is muted by multiple assertions that in all societies disruption constitutes a problem of meaning (see, for example, pp. 190, 203, 204–205). It is unclear, in the end, whether a cultural ideology of continuity is specific or universal (with perhaps specific cultural variations only in form or intensity). Ultimately it appears that both the narratological tradition and the epidemiological one share a preoccupation with order and pattern. Yet the roots of this preoccupation, as Jackson puts it, are deep and multiple. In order to begin to trace them, I now turn to some other examples within the discipline.

A common theme of both of these literatures (epidemiological critique and narrative) is the presumption that human beings seek to minimize the chanceful, and therefore dangerous, nature of their lives. Furthermore, many of these works also assume that risk is the ontologically preferred means of engaging uncertainty; thus, a given group of people's management of uncertainty, shaped (or hampered?) by inherited cultural forms, may manifest itself in the form of what traditional social analysis would call 'lay perceptions,' but it is, in the end, to be made sense of in terms of risk. Finally, several of these works presume that "modernity" is more complicated and thus more "risky" than previous eras (see Gifford, for example, who writes of an "increasingly unpredictable world" [1986: 216]). Where do these assumptions come from? There are two primary sources of the preoccupation with certitude and order that I identify here. The first is the rise of statistical reasoning (as it has been charted by Ian Hacking [1975, 1990]) and the attendant control of this information by experts (as the work of Bruno Latour [1987] and Ulrich Beck [1992] suggests). The second is the concept of the bounded, normal society, most often associated with Emile Durkheim and realized for our purposes through the work of Mary Douglas (1992), where any contingency can be seen as a dangerous threat to social order.

The edited volume *Insecure Times: Living with Insecurity in Contemporary Society* (Vail, Wheelock and Hill, eds. 1999) points to these sources most clearly. By explicitly choosing to use the term insecurity as opposed to risk, the authors recognize how risk carries with it some of the connotations I have identified. As John Vail puts it in the introductory essay to the volume, "Risk has come to signify aspects of danger, or threats to people's livelihood, which are in theory accessible to some form of calculation. . . . Risk implies a level of objectivity and abstraction that distances us from a direct engagement with what we actually fear" (Vail et al. 1999: 6). Nonetheless, for these authors insecurity and its management have a similarly normative component. Vail writes, when illustrating the term, "Insecurity is thus associated with isolation. . . . Insecurity is a feeling of hopelessness. . . . [I]nsecurity is a feeling of uncertainty about the future" (1999: 7). Again, one might ask: For what reason are analysts starting from such a normative distinction? Why is uncertainty in experience a priori a bad thing? One part of the answer lies in a further assumption of much of the work cited herein: that modernity is more risk-filled than previous eras. As Vail puts it (1999: 10–11):

> Finally, social theorists have seen the insecurity dilemma as a paradigm for the modern condition. . . . What the insecurity dilemma may reflect, in other words, is the growing interdependence of social action in the modern world, the fact that in our increasingly complex societies, we are more vulnerable to the behaviour of others than ever before.

Because the outcomes of human intervention travel along chains of social interdependence, the more extensive these networks are, the greater is the likelihood of unintentional consequences.

This picture of a world growing too complex too quickly gives a compelling thrust to any prescriptive effort to define and minimize contingencies (quantifiable or not), and Vail cites the work of Beck (1992) and that of Giddens (1991) to support this idea that the world is becoming so complicated as to create an ominous systemic unpredictability. These authors pointedly argue that (a) one way of thinking about chance, risk assessment thinking, has come to dominate much of the people of the world's engagement with chance, and that (b) this requires that individuals ignore their own senses and rely more and more on scientific and professional expertise to manage the often hidden risks that pervade their lives. Talal Asad has also recently suggested that the deployment of power is intricately tied to control over the perception of probabilities and the exploitation of ambiguity (Asad 1993: 7, 17, 1994).[10]

The problem with accepting these assertions, powerful as they may be, is that one must thereby buy into assumptions which lay behind them. For example, a corollary assertion of Giddens (and Beck, though to a less clear degree) is that there is a clear cognitive break between "premodernity" and "modernity." For Giddens (1991), members of modern societies are characterized by a heightened awareness of the uncertainty of future outcomes, and this awareness is in turn shaped by the prevalence of such statistical techniques as risk assessment and the like. Conversely, in "non-modern" societies, Giddens argues, individuals lack this heightened sense (that is, reflexivity about the limits of cosmologies), and therefore their members are concerned with fate, destiny, and an individual's relation to an unquestionable cosmos (a stance which Giddens glosses with the term *fortuna*). Giddens equates "traditional" society with a preoccupation with the cosmological domain while at the same time denying its members the possibility of doubting their cosmology. Thinking in terms of risk assessment is therefore unavailable in these societies, Giddens suggests, because it is "intrinsic to institutionalized risk systems" that are "much more prominent in modern rather than pre-modern societies" (1991: 119, 117). The conditions of modern societies, on the other hand, require that their members think in terms of risk assessment, although notions of fate "refuse to disappear altogether" (1991: 130). This is a pernicious notion that lies at the root of the opposition between risk and fate in academic and policy discourses. Reflexivity becomes identified with a particular way of engaging contingency in a particular era (risk, modernity) and a residual category arises, that of fate (in a determinist sense). Thus, the

"prognosis" of the modern is contrasted with the "prophecy" of the non- or pre-modern. I do not dispute that the character of contingency in life has been vastly transformed over human history. The *scale* and *scope* of the effects of unintended outcomes are probably wider now than ever before. I also do not mean to suggest that unpredictability cannot be a source of anxiety or other suffering. From neither of these possibilities does it follow, however, that contingency is more a feature of individual experience now than it was in an imagined "pre-modern" age. Nor does either invalidate the more important fact that change, possibility, and opportunity are themselves forms of contingency which we not only confront and engage but even pursue and celebrate. To speak meaningfully, then, about the place of contingency in our lives, our language must strive for, though it may never truly reach, a normative neutrality.

But the second point concerning an increasing reliance upon experts for the interpretation of contingencies, most prominent in the work of Ulrich Beck, also has crucial implications. If, as Ian Hacking (1975, 1990) and Bruno Latour (1987) suggest, a particular style of reasoning about chance has, through the dissemination of expertise, come to dominate much thinking about indeterminacy, then how do we as social analysts ensure that our own terminology is not itself implicated in this project? What is more, even if our work avoids the term risk because of its unwelcome baggage, to what degree do notions of (statistical) normalcy and stability at the individual and societal level still reside in our language? Mary Douglas is a case in point. An enduring and valuable critic of the rational choice theory approach to risk and uncertainty, in her own work she nonetheless subscribes to a view that equates risk with danger. In Douglas's view, a culture's response to risk is a direct result of the social structure of that culture. Specifically, it is the amount of "solidarity" in the society that determines how it deals with risk and blame. In her words (1992: 6), "There are communities, barely earning the name, which are not organized at all: here blame goes in all directions, unpredictably. . . . In short, the stronger the solidarity of a community, the more readily will natural disasters be coded as signs of reprehensible behavior." While clearly a contrast to the egocentric social models that Douglas criticizes, this approach, with its strong Durkheimian tenor, nonetheless goes too far, as it erases the local interests of the actors involved and continues to view the contingent as threat.[11]

I therefore suggest the following revisions of our use of risk and of our approach toward indeterminacy more generally. First, I suggest that the term risk, narrowly defined, is a helpful way to denote the placing of something in a position to be lost or gained. Second, chance itself must

be viewed as normatively neutral from an analytic point of view – the *fact* of contingency is not itself dangerous. We can more profitably speak of *engaging* chance or risk, rather than "coping with," "dealing with," or "managing" it. Third, we can see more clearly the limitations of any particular means of interpreting chance when we consider that the contingency in social life which leads to unexpected outcomes may usefully be described as arising in at least four domains: what I term here the formal, performative, social, and cosmological.

This set of domains of contingency is not intended as a taxonomy or typology, but rather as an aid to apprehending the stakes of social action. *Formal indeterminacy* encompasses discrete chance events, often amenable to quantification in aggregation (such as rolls of the dice, distributions of cards, and series of these – but also more catastrophic events, such as illness or accident). *Performative indeterminacy* is that which is involved in the execution of a performative act (that it be done well, poorly, or fail completely). The risk of failed execution of expressive acts was perhaps first recognized by Austin (1962), and more recently has been discussed by Battaglia (1995) and Keane (1997). *Social indeterminacy* denotes the fundamentally elusive nature of others' points of view, nicely captured by the Greek expression "*Pou na kseri ton allon?*" ('How can one know another?'). (Alisdair MacIntyre calls this the "game-theoretic" form of unpredictability [1984: 97].) By *cosmological indeterminacy* I mean the ever-present potential for any explanatory system (any cosmology, or way of making sense of the world) to be called into doubt, such as in the question of theodicy, where a moral system collides with a particular chance event. Each individual encounters unpredictabilities that encompass one or more of these domains throughout quotidian experience. Differentiating these sources of contingency will, as in the example below, aid us in seeing more clearly what is at stake for Nikos and others, groups and individuals, in their engagements of chance. I also hope that the contours of these domains become clearer to the reader through their application to Nikos' story, below.

In making these distinctions, I continue in the same vein as Thomas Csordas and Alisdair MacIntyre, each of whom has (quite distinctly) explored how indeterminacy may more usefully be conceived as of differing kinds (Csordas 1993; MacIntyre 1984). Csordas' discussion is particularly relevant for this case given the place of his work within medical anthropology, and he begins from a similar standpoint when he states that "indeterminacy, it turns out, is an essential element of our existence" (1993: 148). Recognizing that indeterminacy resides both in representation of experience and in embodiment itself, Csordas contrasts

forms of indeterminacy recognized by Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu to illuminate what he sees as the dual quality of indeterminacy. Merleau-Ponty, according to Csordas, recognizes an "existential indeterminacy" (1993: 150), wherein the perception of an embodied situation carries with it a vast and ungraspable set of possibilities about the world; that is, in perceiving a situation we can never separate out an open-ended world from the existential meanings we may construct of it. In this sense, this kind of indeterminacy aligns with what I term cosmological indeterminacy, or the idea that the infinite possibilities of lived experience will always outrun accounts of it. Bourdieu's indeterminacy, Csordas notes, is of a different kind. Bourdieu is concerned with indeterminacy as it resides in practice: bringing symbols and referents into association in new and fundamentally unpredictable ways. As Csordas paraphrases helpfully, "Since no person has conscious mastery of the modus operandi that integrates symbolic schemes and practices, the unfolding of his works and actions 'always outruns his conscious intentions' " (Csordas 1993: 150–151; quoting Bourdieu 1977: 79). For Csordas this contrast serves to illustrate a perhaps irresolvable dispute between the two theorists, with Merleau-Ponty giving precedence to agency and embodiment, and Bourdieu to representation and convention. Csordas concludes by calling for "careful elaboration of [indeterminacy's] defining features ... [which] will allow it to become an awareness of our existential condition without becoming an excuse for analytical imprecision" (1993: 153). It is in the spirit of this recommendation that I offer the suggested scheme of indeterminate domains above.

Absent from this set, however, is a clear indication of how stances toward these indeterminacies are used in struggles over meaning and resources. The engagement of chance across these domains constitutes a usefully circumscribed class of phenomena in social life, what I call here the *politics of contingency*, and power is exercised through the dissemination of particular ways of accounting for chance, as Talal Asad has noted (Asad 1993: 7, 17, 1994). If a fundamental unpredictability is a given feature of social life, then it follows that any unexpected event may clash with established ways of looking at the world (the cosmological indeterminacy I have introduced above). Thus particular groups or institutions (as described by Latour [1987]) must mobilize resources to account for such events. Max Weber observed this in the context of death in war and its relationship to the legitimacy of the state. As he writes (1946: 335), the "location of death within a series of meaningful and consecrated events ultimately lies at the base of all endeavors to support the autonomous dignity of the polity resting on force." The politics of contingency are

thus about accountability: why might one account of a given chance event hold and another fail? I now return to the story of Nikos to explore further how these recommendations work in practice. It is in fact the ultimately personal and fundamentally irresolvable quality of his death that invites the attempts by other interests to account for it that I explore in the final section.[12]

"THE EAGLE DIES IN MID-FLIGHT"

I met Nikos in one of those chance meetings so common to fieldwork; I paused outside the hotel which he owned with his brothers to examine the picture of a room they had posted by the door. Within a few moments Nikos had engaged me in conversation and invited me inside their small café. He began to ply me with multiple toasts of *raki* (a strong, locally-made, unaged brandy) while we spoke about everything from backgammon to the status of the old town of Chania. I came to realize, however, that to describe this meeting as "by chance" is itself incomplete, as Nikos was quite adept at engaging passersby, particularly foreigners, in order both to get to know them and, of course, to get them to stay at his hotel. Nikos, furthermore, worked the afternoon shift at the hotel (from two until eight; his brothers taking the other two), a time when many shops close for a brief siesta and during which mostly tourists and other foreigners are out and about.

Nikos was in his early forties, and was the oldest of the three brothers. He had a thin build, a rakish smile, and dressed almost exclusively in black. One of the first things I learned from him was that a cousin of his who lived in the U.S. and owned a fast-food hamburger place in Virginia had recently been shot and killed in a robbery attempt, and it was for this reason, Nikos said, that he wore black. Yet he continued to wear this color throughout the two years that I knew him, and he later said that he favored darker colors because they "suited his character." Nikos' family was originally from a high mountain village southeast of Chania, located in the Sfakia region of the island, an area widely seen throughout western Crete as exemplifying the strength of character, cleverness, and capacity for violence (when called for) that typifies the imagined Cretan personality (see Herzfeld 1985). Thus Sfakiani in Chania are perceived as shrewd and well-connected in business, and as dangerous to cross. Nikos' father had long run a very successful *kafenio* (coffeehouse) in their neighborhood in Chania. He passed along the money he had saved to his sons, who bought a property in the old town – a picturesque, very active, and growing part of the city which is beginning not only to serve tourists but also to be the

area in which Chaniots themselves spend their spare money and time. The hotel they built on the site was a success, and they also rented a space on its first floor to a small restaurant that also enjoyed good business. Nikos, at the time I met him, was pleased to be able to provide for his own family (a wife and two daughters), yet his comments about his children, particularly about their future, were always tinged by an element of sadness. It was only after I came to know him better that I realized that it was his failing health that led him to expect not to see his daughters grow into adulthood.

Nikos confronted the uncertainty which perhaps lies at the root of much of social life, that of his own mortality, through a long degenerative liver condition, the result of years of constant drinking. While his death was inevitable, it was, as for virtually everyone, the timing that could not be predicted. As Weber observed (1946: 335), "Since death is a fate that comes to everyone, nobody can ever say why it comes precisely to him and why it comes just when it does." How much of his daughters' childhood would Nikos be able to see? In thinking about mortality and risk, one might be tempted to see death as solely the most unambiguously undesirable of events, the arrival of which should be continually fought. Yet Kaufert and O'Neil's reference to Inuit ideas about mortality and risk mentioned above points in a more complex and fruitful direction. We must consider the possibility that even impending death may be an occasion for the constitution of selfhood; that is, facing this contingency may, as these Inuit suggest, be an essential part of living, and may therefore reflect how one faces, rather than avoids or minimizes, contingency elsewhere in life. Nikos' approach to these circumstances, I suggest, mirrored his general approach to uncertainties, and could be characterized as a kind of instrumental nonchalance, an approach that, like carrying a brimming cup, relied upon a resolute insistence that the outcome was, paradoxically, simultaneously unimportant and central. One sees here a claim on his part about facing mortality that relies, in this example, upon the bringing together of the performative domain of indeterminacy (carrying the cup) with the formal (death's timing) and cosmological domains (death's meaning). (Below I explore an example wherein Nikos also brought the social domain of indeterminacy into play.)

Nikos took minimal steps to alleviate his condition, did not follow his doctor's recommendations, and continued to present himself as unconcerned about what might befall him. This is an approach to contingency that Campbell (1964) cautioned strongly against reading as "fatalism." To do so would be to miss the centrality of the engagement of chance that this example presents, and that characterizes a heretofore underrecognized element of human experience everywhere. Indeed, charges

of fatalism are the inevitable result when an attitude toward chance that does not accord with a risk management approach finds public expression. Such interpretations by anthropologists themselves can appear in surprising places as well, such as in the work of James Faubion (1993), an anthropologist of Greece, who argues that only Greek elites who have crossed the "threshold of modernity" are capable of reflecting critically on the cosmologies available to them, whereas other Greeks reside in a fatalist, non-reflective, pre-modern state.[13] But rather than a bowing down to destiny, Nikos' "instrumental nonchalance" was the ultimate act against it, stating, as Nikos did to me, that he would not let an impending doom change who he was.[14] This statement strikes at the heart of social analysts' own preconceptions about the normative undesirability of contingency.

While space does not permit me to give a full account of Nikos' life, I hope that the pieces I describe here combined with the anecdote that begins this essay paint a full enough picture of him, in particular that they reveal something of the way in which he engaged chance in his life. I do not intend to give the impression that Nikos had a single, coherent, formalized paradigm for making sense of the indeterminate in his life; in fact, I am wary of any approach that oversystematizes action. Instead, I seek to portray both Nikos' actions and his reflections in order to convey how, in myriad domains of experience, and often through embodied techniques, such as in the example of the coffee cup, he faced his illness and, ultimately, his mortality. I seek to create a portrait that is more nuanced than that which a surface reading of his actions might suggest, one that would likely be labeled as fatalistic and thereby irrational.

The most obvious example of how Nikos rejected certain approaches to chance that might be termed statistical is provided by a contrast he drew between his style of playing backgammon and that of his brother. Pavlos, he said, played slowly, always taking time to check all the possibilities. Indeed, this difference in tempo was something I had noticed in Pavlos' playing of backgammon, along with the fact that the two did not often play together. Nikos played the game with a lively though not at all frenetic pace, one which I came to adopt and enjoy in our frequent games together. Nikos remarked (and later demonstrated, with the backgammon board) that in certain situations most players will stop the game and concede that the game is essentially over (usually with a double loss). Nikos took the board and laid out such a situation. He pointed out that an extremely unlikely streak of double twos (six in a row, a chance of roughly one in two billion) for the player playing the black would mean that the white player has a chance of winning. Pavlos, he said, would *always* play these situations out, on this miniscule chance that he might win.

In most of these situations, Nikos said, "Not even those in prison would play that out!" (*'Dhen to paizoune oute i filakismeni!'*), making forcefully the point that even if one had nothing else to do with one's time it would not be worthwhile to finish such a game.[15] This accusation of unreasonableness on the part of Pavlos by Nikos is particularly noteworthy here because it is Pavlos' strict reliance on a statistical possibility, so often equated with rationality in academic literature, that renders his conduct, in Nikos' eyes, impossible to comprehend, even irrational. I asked Nikos why he does not play this way and he said that he just does not like to do so. His brother plays well, Nikos emphasized, "but I do not like to play that way." "Why?" I pressed. "For me," he said, "to play quickly, and to have the other player play quickly, creates *parea* (a sense of good company)." "The experience is better?" I asked. "Yes," he answered, "It's better for the *kefi* (sociable enjoyment) of the game." So Nikos thus extended his criticism of his brother to social terms, where reliance on statistics for one's decisions about the play of the game runs counter to contributing to sociability and the creation of a good feeling/atmosphere (*kefi*). For Nikos, then, playing backgammon was as much about creating a common intimate space through a common approach to the game as it was about a contest between two individuals.

These statements echoed Nikos' comments on friendship and risk that I previously mentioned, and they are best illustrated by an account of an evening, late in my fieldwork, when, according to the Orthodox calendar, it was my nameday (the Sunday one week after Orthodox Easter). At that time I was staying with another Chaniot friend and contact, Alekos, a ceramicist who was distinguished from most other Chaniots by his utter lack of interest in gambling and the more illicit aspects of Chaniot life that I was examining at the time. Needless to say, the contrast between him and Nikos (from whom I had learned most of the gambling games played in Chania and met many useful contacts) was considerable. To mark my nameday Alekos had planned a very simple yet delicious dinner on the front patio of his house above Chania. Most Greeks would expect on their nameday to receive friends at their business or home all day long, and be ready to provide them with sweets or drinks. As I had no recognizable and known residence down in the city at that time (I had left a hotel there where I had stayed all year shortly before), nor a place of business where friends could find me, I had instead spent the day walking from one friend's place to another with a box of pastries for each one. Nikos, at the end of the afternoon, asked where I was going. "Home," I replied simply, expecting then to say goodbye and be on my way. "I'll drive you," Nikos said, an unusual offer from him, and before I knew it we were, at my direction,

heading up the hill east of the city to the high plateau known as Akrotiri, where Alekos lived.

Nikos stopped at a bakery and bought some cookies, and then went next door to buy some Greek brandy. "What are you doing?" I asked him. "One does not visit someone's house empty-handed," Nikos replied, looking at me as if wondering how I could have forgotten a custom I in fact knew as well as my own name. His evasive reply made me all the more nervous. Alekos was not the sort to have socialized with Nikos, and, in our conversations about my work, had long expressed puzzlement why I might want to spend so much time with these, in his words, unpredictable scoundrels. When he then heard that Nikos was from Sfakia originally, his wariness increased. Thus, as I was heading toward Alekos' house with someone he neither expected nor was likely to want to entertain, my apprehension grew. In this situation the presence of social indeterminacy was so intense as to be palpable. Yet Nikos charged forward. What prompts such an unexpected and, in terms of its outcome, unpredictable action? I can only point out that this engagement of indeterminacy, here of the social kind, reflected again Nikos' engagement of it elsewhere (such as in the Greek coffee lesson). It is also worthwhile to note that this attention to the contingent context and quality of social action also helps us to avoid seeing social performance as the rote execution of conventional social practices. As theorists of performance have long recognized (Bauman 1977; Herzfeld 1985; Keane 1997), it is the innovative application and combination of convention that creates new social forms and reflects true social virtuosity; as the evening continued, Nikos continued to demonstrate this fearless facility.

When we arrived, Alekos gave us a strained but polite enough smile as Nikos produced the pastries and brandy and presented them to Alekos. Alekos then asked, somewhat forcedly, whether Nikos would stay for dinner, whereupon Nikos replied, "Of course! It is Thomas' nameday, didn't you expect company?" The evening continued, with much wine and food, and included Nikos' delighted discovery of a radio station playing *zeibekiko* music, distinguished by the solo male dance which accompanies it, the performance of which is often put forth as the hallmark of manhood and Greekness (see Cowan 1990). Of course, it was not long before Nikos was entreating me to give the difficult improvisational dance a try, and as I was dancing (and presumably getting it at least a little right), I suddenly heard the crash of dishware as Nikos hurled a small plate near my feet. Alekos' reaction was immediate: he grabbed the more precious items of dishware from the table (those that he had made himself) and retreated a bit from the area. Nikos, however, forcefully glossed over any discomfort, just as he had when he arrived. "*Bravo, Thoma* [Thomas]!" he cried, and

engaged Alekos in agreeing with him that I had indeed learned at least a little during my time on Crete. By the end of the evening even Alekos had come to enjoy himself, standing up for a dance as well. Such was Nikos' approach to social relations, even those that might be fraught with the unexpected. Knowing that I would have evaded any direct attempt to have him join me with Alekos, he proceeded directly and forcefully, as if holding a brimming cup, one could say, full of either my anxiety or the possible social consequences. He charged forward and, in the end, instigated an evening I will never forget. It was as the three of us chatted late into the night that Nikos first told me that the greatest risk in life was friendship, and I only later appreciated how that evening was its perfect demonstration.

Shortly before leaving the field, I went out with Nikos one evening to a dance club owned by a friend of his, instead of our usual patronage of yet another gambling den. It was a crowded, popular place for Chaniots in the middle of the city, and its clientele was varied in age, from early twenties to early fifties. The music was a mixture of Greek popular music and international dance music (much of it from the U.S.), and it was not long before a song came on that Nikos proclaimed his favorite. He interrupted my conversation with another friend, and told me to listen to the words carefully. It was a song by a Greek pop music group entitled "*O Aetos petheni ston aera*" ('The Eagle Dies in Mid-Flight [lit., in the air]'). He then proceeded to dance a *zeibekiko* to the song, a highly unusual action, which initially brought critical stares from those around us. Nikos danced beautifully however, and it was not long before those around us were watching intently and applauding at the artful near-stumbles which the dance requires and which Nikos performed with flair. *Zeibekiko* calls for a convincing presentation of oneself as always on the brink of disaster (about to fall) yet at the last minute able to snatch success (regaining balance) out of the jaws of capricious fate. Through success in this performative domain of indeterminacy (indeed, one that foregrounds the indeterminacy to a remarkable degree) I suggest Nikos was able both to comment upon and to constitute his own approach toward his mortality. I thought about the song's lyrics as I watched him. While I did not bring up the subject to him explicitly, to me the idea of facing one's mortality while being true to who one is–what the song's title suggested–combined with the dance's similar injunction to dance on the brink of failure elegantly portrayed how Nikos' engaged his impending mortality. It also testified that to have done otherwise (by attempting to reduce his risk through complying with doctors' recommendations, for example) would have compromised his sense of self.

MORTALITY PLAYS

Nikos' death was a puzzle for me and his friends and family. In my later visits to Chania I joined his daughters, wife, and mother in remembering him, and I talked to others who knew him. I also examined the account of his death that arose in local media. Just as Nikos' personal attitude toward chance illustrates how the contingent may be constitutive of self, a possibility missed by analytic approaches based on risk, I contend that an examination of these other accounts of his death which were at play in Chania can begin to open our eyes to a broader case: the politics of contingency, an arena where the legitimacy of institutions, groups, and individuals is at stake.

It is notable that while traffic accidents as an issue have appeared only sporadically in anthropological literature (Moore 1987; Frankenberg 1993; Palmer 1999), in each of these cases the authors have presented them as particularly useful "diagnostic events" (in Moore's terms). As Moore writes, "the kind of event that should be privileged is one that reveals ongoing contests and conflicts and competitions and the efforts to prevent, suppress, or repress these" (1987: 730). Traffic accidents can pose a challenge for both official and unofficial perspectives. At the official level (and by this I do not mean simply that of the nation-state, but any formal vehicle for the dissemination of information, such as newspapers and other media outlets, for example), they suggest the failure of institutional systems of authority to ensure continuity. Again, as Weber noted, this is perhaps more a priority for institutions, which must guarantee their legitimacy over time, than a result of the desires of the individuals that insititutions seek to protect. At the unofficial level, they raise questions of responsibility that can never be fully resolved.

One form of responsibility in the case of Nikos is discernible from a public health perspective, from which standpoint his death appears as a failure of various systems of health prevention and maintenance. Certainly Nikos' actions could be interpreted in response to this view in a number of ways; they could be interpreted as, for example, representative of collective resistance to public health work more generally, or as simply irrational. While I hope that this portrait renders both of those avenues unappealing, it is not my intention to champion his actions without reservation. Nikos' story at least demonstrates how cultural imperatives may, in certain instances that are perhaps unique to certain individuals, shape and even overrun what might be assumed to be inarguable collective health objectives. This then shifts at least some of the burden of responsibility to the health care institutions themselves, calling for greater attention to and understanding of the role of such imperatives. Another question of

responsibility that Nikos' story raises is more difficult to address, and that is my own position with him throughout much of the time leading to his death. In my initial contact with him his illness was unknown to me, and this rendered our regular drinking together seemingly innocent from my point of view. After a couple of months I came to meet and know Nikos' family, who finally told me of his liver condition and asked me to join them in trying to discourage his drinking, which I did. At times Nikos could be persuaded to have white wine watered down with much club soda with his meals, and even to avoid any *raki* drinking for days at a time, but both Nikos' family and I found that seeking to reduce Nikos' drinking with any consistency was as challenging as trying to get water to flow uphill. It was particularly difficult at times to be with him alone at the hotel in the afternoon and attempt to refuse an offer to toast and drink a shot of *raki* together. Such acts of commensal solidarity are not only deeply ingrained in local convention, but my own position as an outsider did not add to the effectiveness of my entreaties to skip it "just this once" or otherwise to seek to put him off, although I was successful from time to time. When I could get Nikos talking about or playing games instead, particularly backgammon, this seemed to turn his attention away from drinking. Could I have stopped him from drinking? No. Could I have done more? Yes, if I knew Greek and Cretan culture as well when I first met him as I do now. Nikos' death demanded an accounting not just for his friends and family, but for me as well, and this essay itself is part of that process of coming to terms, although, like the other accountings here, it is ultimately not a resolution.

Beyond this issue, my primary goal in this essay has been to demonstrate how much is lost in conventional approaches to understanding contingency, and Nikos' story testifies to this particularly well on the level of personal attitudes toward chance. But Nikos' death was, in fact, a small one in the context of the events which occupy the residents of Chania on a day-to-day basis, and it certainly did not touch the broader level of national discourse, such as that represented by the Greek national daily newspapers. It was, nonetheless, front-page news locally in Chania the day after it happened. On that day, the largest local newspaper (in terms of circulation), *Chaniotika Nea*, ran a short story on the front page with the headline, "41-year old killed on the road [lit., in traffic]." It included a small picture of Nikos (from his official Greek identity card) with the caption "The unfortunate (*atikhos*) Nikos B." and a larger picture of a moped with the caption "A motorcycle such as this led to the tragic death of a 41-year old Chaniot." The story itself recounts the circumstances of Nikos' death from a particular point of view. He died when the moped

he was driving collided with a parked truck, the article says, and it notes that the moped and the truck had the appropriate licenses. The picture of the moped dominates the article, and its prominence is consistent with the newspaper's regular articles and editorials on traffic problems and dangers in Chania and Crete more generally. There was no follow-up article to mention that Nikos's autopsy revealed that liver failure played a role in the collision, rather than, as the article implies, poor traffic conditions. (His family at first suspected that he had been drinking that evening, and had lost control of the moped while drunk, but the autopsy revealed that he had a minimal amount of alcohol in his system.)

The discourse of traffic safety in Greece has often focused on the profusion of mopeds and motorcycles on the roads, and in particular the lack – or lack of enforcement – of laws requiring helmets. Motorcycle accidents in particular are an ever-present issue in the country, and very few people do not have a relative who was at least seriously injured while riding a motorcycle or moped. For *Chaniotika Nea*, Nikos' death was an opportunity to present yet another example of the dangers of *papaki* (moped) use, underscored by the placing of a large photograph of a similar moped in the middle of the article's text, with only Nikos' smaller Greek identity card photograph off to one side. The issue in this account, then, was not Nikos' personal qualities as a moped operator, or even as someone who might have been drinking. The idea that an error in performance on his part might have been the root cause of his death is not present. Instead, the contingencies of the traffic system itself (with its congestion and its attendant laws and their [lack of] enforcement), an indeterminacy which we might describe as belonging to the formal domain, is the thrust of the coverage. A case such as Nikos thus becomes fuel to a fire of criticism of governmental management of traffic conditions.

The accounts of Nikos' death from other sources differed considerably from that of *Chaniotika Nea*. A friend of Nikos, a jewelry store owner, mentioned that Nikos was "born into the wrong era" ('*yenithike lathos epokhi*'), a sentiment echoed by a few of his other acquaintances. "What do you mean?" I asked. "He never belonged in the city," he replied. "In the village, he would have been a powerful man; he was clever, and knew how to talk to people. But no one lives in the villages now; that way of life is gone." This characterization points to a further tension in Nikos' life that I have not yet touched upon here. As the oldest of three brothers, Nikos would normally have been expected to take the leadership role in their common endeavors, yet he was continually told what to do by his brothers, particularly Pavlos. Nikos, they claimed, was unaware of and untrained in the necessary business skills which the complex situation in

Chania's old town required. The difference in their backgammon styles, then, reflected for Pavlos (and others who shared his view about Nikos) Nikos' inability to navigate the complex and frequently shifting tourist business in the city. This business is marked by deep uncertainties from year to year due to regional crises that may vastly reduce the number of tourists in the country each summer. In addition, frequent changes in the tax laws during the period I spent in Chania (1994 until early 1996) led one business owner to argue that the greatest risk owners faced was these changes, not the possibility of few tourists. Further complications, such as managing one's affairs with the local historical conservation office, added to the task (cf. Herzfeld 1991). Nikos was marginalized in the decision-making by his two brothers, and frequently had little to do during the long afternoons at the hotel, and this lack of responsibility lent further weight to the comments by others which characterized him as from the wrong era.

This accounting for Nikos' death by reference to his allochronicity, his "other time-ness," is importantly similar to what Fabian calls the "denial of coevalness." Fabian defines it as (1983: 31), "a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other that the present of the producer of anthropological discourse." Obviously the case of Nikos and his allochronicity is not a systematic or persistent one, however; it is instead an ad hoc way of accounting for his death by placing him out of time. What is more, this case is not about the denial of coevalness as practiced by a discipline (or the 'West' generally) against the people who are the subject of study. Instead, and crucially, this example opens our eyes to the possibility of the deployment of ideas about time, contingency, and stances toward the future *within* a particular context. In this vein, a Chaniot might characterize Pavlos' style of playing backgammon as contemporary, of this time, and as therefore reflective of a current and rational approach to chance. That of Nikos, by contrast, an approach guided more by his interest in social performance than a narrow pursuit of victory, lies, according to this view, in a fatalist past. Such strategic representations are a key element of the politics of contingency. In this respect, inability or unwillingness to perform the normatively recommended means to approach chance (statistical probability) reflects a shortcoming in the cosmological domain as well. If one does not deploy the expected trope of chance – risk – then one must, the logic goes, be fatalistic.

Those who did not know Nikos were even less charitable, perhaps, than his acquaintances. While the placing of Nikos in another time at least portrayed his way of confronting the unexpected as valid in its own context yet simply out of place (time), others with whom I spoke saw Nikos'

actions as those of a self-absorbed would-be *mangas* (pl., *manges*). The image of the *mangas* is a frequently deployed one in Greece. It refers to the dramatic, self-sufficient, anti-establishment figure associated with the musical subculture of *rebetiko* in 1920s urban Greece (see Cowan [1990: 173–175] for a concise account of this figure). *Manges* danced *zeibekiko* well, walked with a characteristic swagger, wore their fedoras low on the brows, smoked marijuana, and gambled with flair. To connect Nikos to this image in a disparaging way is another way to put him out of time, yet it links him to a figure that was always largely marginal to Greek society, and while the image has its positive connotations, particularly amongst the gamblers of Chania, it is on the whole an idea of Greek manhood that many Chaniots find embarrassingly "un-European." In this account, then, Nikos first failed to perform convincingly the role of the *mangas* (perhaps because of both inappropriate context and inability), and is further suspect because he aspired to be an "un-European" Greek. As in the previous discussion, the attitude toward chance is a key element in the distancing of Nikos' actions from those of other Chaniots and thus, by extension, accounting for his death.

This issue reminds us, however, that Nikos' own approach to the contingent was not so idiosyncratic as to be nonsensical to other Chaniots. The instances of his successful social performance (both on my name day, and while dancing at the club) testify that his approach to chance was itself embedded in a larger set of ways to confront chance. Thus, to some other Chaniots, he was not inscrutable, but rather was putting forth an approach to contingency that failed on more specific grounds (out of place, out of time). And other Chaniots did not speak in any way so dismissively of Nikos and his way of life. One close friend said simply that he will miss Nikos yet always respect him. I was unable to press this contact further on this sensitive point, yet it suggests that for this friend Nikos' integrity to his own way of being was worthy of lasting admiration.

Nikos' family varied somewhat in their attempts to account for Nikos' death. In fact, his brothers and his widow were marked by a silence on the matter, even amongst themselves, a stance that reminds us of the ultimately personal, affective, and ineffable features of such engagements of chance. Nikos' mother, however, explicitly rejected this silence on the issue. During the evening that I joined her, Nikos' widow, and their two daughters for dinner, Nikos' mother repeatedly and somewhat uncomfortably asked her daughter-in-law and grandchildren, "Why? Why do we not talk about him? We must remember him and enjoy his memory." While his widow and the older daughter would only nod silently, the younger daughter fled the room, crying, upon the second or third such statement.

Yet Nikos' mother did not relent: "He was a good son, a good man." Indeed, the parallel between her willingness to charge forward into potentially distressing social situations and Nikos' similar quality struck me quite strongly in the midst of the evening, and brought my own sense of loss quite close to the surface. As I said my goodbye at the end of a long evening, Nikos' mother joined me as I left. Giving me a traditional and colorful hand-woven bag made by a relative who still lived in their village in Sfakia, she told me that I was a good friend to Nikos, and not to forget her son. She turned away abruptly, and strode purposefully back to her home.

UNSETTLING ACCOUNTS

Rethinking the heretofore unexamined roots of conventional approaches to understanding contingency, and in particular the dominant one of risk, enables us to capture much more of individual and social experiences of chance. Examining Nikos' personal attitude toward risk provides the startling realization that even the confrontation of our own ultimate ends, our mortality, may be an arena for the constitution of selfhood, and that this process may often take precedence over a narrow evaluation of risk – "the odds" – in a utilitarian sense. As Gifford reminds us, such statistical reasoning about chance provides very little in the way of meaning or even prediction in discrete instances (Gifford 1986). What is more, Nikos' story testifies to the usefulness of an approach which sees how someone may bring into juxtaposition different domains of indeterminacy as a part of this constitution of self. In this case, a person's demonstrated ability to confront chance in one arena testifies to that individual's ability in other domains.

Nikos' story is also useful in its striking reversal of what would appear to be the conventional narrative of impending mortality, given that, before his death, the future cause – liver failure – appeared predicted and explained, yet after the event the accounts were so irresolvably open-ended.[16] At the broader social level, events such as Nikos' death can become, due to their very lack of ultimate resolution, fodder for either individuals' or institutions' attempts to establish legitimacy. Admittedly, Nikos' death, which due to my close relationship with him provides a wealth of material on the side of individual engagements of chance, did not become a prominent focus of such struggles. In fact, it is the very taken-for-granted quality of the event itself that illuminates the social processes at work here. One of countless such events that in official discourse are interpreted and left behind, Nikos' death pointedly did *not* come to provide

grounds for any doubt about the discourse of traffic safety, for example, in Greece.

Much remains to be done in such a renovation of our ideas about the politics of contingency. How do struggles over accountability involve the state, for example? The stated aim of ten recently-approved casinos and additional state-sponsored games was to recover much of the tax revenue lost both to tax evasion and to the illegal gambling business throughout Greece, but in providing the opportunity to control more and more the arenas of gambling, the initiative provides the government the opportunity to exert an increasing amount of influence over how risk and chance are talked about. One can see these influences as much in the marketing of the games as anywhere else – as one poster for Lotto, the largest Greek lottery, proclaimed, "It puts your fate (*mira*) in your hands!" The poster for Lotto neatly invokes a powerful and inevitable destiny while simultaneously making it paradoxically dependent upon one's action to take part in the lottery. The state is thus colonizing an approach toward the future, saying, chillingly, that to have a chance at your destiny you must play the state's game.

Social life is rife with such examples, and yet it is the other social sciences that largely have dictated our own approaches toward understanding contingency. Economics in particular has long been concerned with how actors make decisions in the context of an uncertain future, but such rational choice theory approaches are of course founded on the same assumptions discussed above. Anthropology in general, and medical anthropology in particular, are in a unique position to explore personal and public engagements of chance, and furthermore to approach these events without a strongly normative scheme. In this way these fields can usefully expand on insights it has already gained by exploring the uses of the past, and come to understand how this contested past may be linked to an unfolding present and claims to legitimacy in the future.

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NOTES

1. The research upon which this work is based was carried out in two visits – one of ten months duration, the other of five – over a period of eighteen months, from September of 1994 through February of 1996.
2. The name Nikos is a pseudonym, as are those of other people and places within Chania (itself a true name, pronounced han-YAH) mentioned in this paper.
3. In seeking to avoid overformalizing Nikos' attitude toward chance I follow Kleinman's insights in *Writing at the Margin* (1995: 96–97), where he observes that both biomedical and anthropological renditions of distress can lose "the complexity, uncertainty, and ordinariness of some man or woman's world of experience." He continues, noting that if anthropology "occasionally resists such transformation [it] seems to have more to do with the constraints imposed by participant observation as an empirical practice – by its very nature a way of knowing difficult to isolate from the messiness and hurly-burly of daily living."
4. This example is a particularly useful one, as it reminds us that "positive" unexpected events ('windfalls') are both possible and can demand an accounting, an attempt to make meaning out of them.
5. Other authors who have made substantial contributions to thought in this area include Alisdair MacIntyre (1984), Thomas J. Csordas (1993), and Webb Keane (1997). See the next section for a brief discussion of some of their ideas as they relate to the approach outlined in this paper.
6. Given the importance I put on terminology in this paper, it is appropriate that I signal here some terminological challenges I face in attempting to communicate this issue. I choose throughout this paper to use a set of terms to indicate the fundamentally precarious yet morally neutral quality of experience, including contingency, indeterminacy, chance, and uncertainty. Each of these terms has its own problems and limitations, and indeed that is what I seek to demonstrate here: our analytic language in this arena is rife with unexamined biases and presuppositions.
7. Gifford briefly and usefully also discusses the etymology of the word "risk" (from the Latin 'resecare,' to cut back, or cut short) and notes that, "while the concept of risk has always embodied ideas of danger, it has not always embodied ideas about chance" (Gifford 1986: 216). It is this deeply embedded normative aspect of the term, combined with its widespread use, that provides the greatest obstacle to the development of a useful language for examining contingency.
8. This work has been greatly influenced by the phenomenologists (and by the pragmatists), as their objective of finding a way to talk intimately about experience led them to recognize uncertainty's ever-present quality. A partial list of classic works from these genres that have been influential in this regard would include the following: Alfred Schutz (1968), Merleau-Ponty (1962), John Dewey (1957), Pierre Bourdieu (1977), and Max Scheler (1971).

9. Arthur Kleinman recognizes something similar when he distinguishes between contingent, routinized, and extreme suffering, where both order and lack of order can be sources of distress (1995: 101).
10. Here is one example of the discourse of risk which permeates the media of much of the world, and how it is presented as the purview of experts, an article by Daniel Kopans that appeared in *The Boston Globe* on October 4, 1998, on the front page of the "Focus" section of the newspaper. The article was accompanied by an image (the text and image took up more than half the page) which showed a woman performing a breast self-examination yet, strangely, the image appeared to be that of an x-ray. The article's title was "An Unacceptable Degree of Risk," yet this was actually the conclusion of two sentences (which began in smaller type). The complete sentences stated, "Every woman over 40 should have an annual mammogram. Those who advise otherwise make women take AN UNACCEPTABLE DEGREE OF RISK." A close reading of these two sentences alone reveals a number of features: for example, they address a medical community more than a general readership, they suggest that medical advice is unquestionable, and they assert that the determination of "acceptability" lies solely with experts. The closing large-type phrase emphasizes this point: what constitutes unacceptable risk is the purview of experts alone.
11. This preoccupation with social order and coherence of course can be found elsewhere in the literature, as in such prominent examples as Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), and in A. I. Hallowell's *Culture and Experience* (1955).
12. This is a similar project, then, to that of Paul Rabinow in *Making PCR*, where he explores the variant accounts of the invention of the polymerase chain reaction. His work demonstrates convincingly that even in the highly formalized context of scientific research it may be ultimately impossible to create a complete "explanation" of an event characterized by the play of chance (Rabinow 1996). See especially the discussion of "*mouvement incident*" and bricolage, pp. 168–169, with reference to the work of Lévi-Strauss (1966).
13. See Malaby (in press) for an extended discussion of Faubion and this issue as it relates to class distinctions and the uses of temporality.
14. Bound up in this action on Nikos' part, and in that of other men in Chania who adopt a style of instrumental nonchalance, are issues of manhood similar to those Herzfeld has examined (1985), but he has also described a similar kind of action, a defiance of destiny, in the context of a Cretan funeral, where again the stakes were mortal, but where, interestingly, the actor was a woman (Herzfeld 1993).
15. This quote may also be a reference to those leaders of the *junta*, the military group which held power in Greece from 1967-1974, who are currently in jail, a group several gamblers in Chania that I knew referred to as *i filakismeni* ('the imprisoned').
16. My thanks to one of the anonymous readers of *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* for bringing this reversal of convention more clearly to my attention.

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