

**Zeitschrift:** Tsantsa : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Ethnologischen Gesellschaft  
= revue de la Société suisse d'ethnologie = rivista della Società svizzera  
d'etnologia

**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft

**Band:** 22 (2017)

**Artikel:** Uncertain future(s) : perceptions on time between the immediate and  
the imagined

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007183>

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# UNCERTAIN FUTURE(S)

## Perceptions on Time between the Immediate and the Imagined

**Text:** *Valerie Hänsch, Lena Kroeker, Silke Oldenburg*<sup>1</sup>

In the last decade, the notion of uncertainty has gained prominence in anthropological debates. So has the debate on future. Yet, the conceptualisation of uncertainty has barely been linked to the future(s) and its temporal relations. This lack of linkage seems astonishing in so far as uncertainty relates closely to the unpredictability of the future. Uncertain situations engender ambivalent experiences and affects towards an unknown future embracing hope, desire and opportunity as well as fear, despair and suffering. Theoretically, the future is always unknown and unpredictable, but usually people are able to anticipate the future as it is more conversant than in uncertain situations, which challenge future outlooks and knowledge practices. Anthropologists have dedicated attention to uncertain situations ranging from everyday uncertainties under precarious conditions to crises and critical events

of individual or collective existential uncertainty. Various ethnographies have described, for instance, responses to (natural) disasters (Hastrup 2011, Luig 2012), displacement/migration (Colson 1971, Hänsch 2012, Jackson 2013), famine (Spittler 1989), diseases, especially HIV/AIDS (Haram & Yamba 2009, Jenkins et al. 2005, Kroeker 2015), as well as being young and becoming an adult during times of war, violent conflict and decline (Vigh 2006, Christiansen et al. 2006, Oldenburg 2016).

Most of the recent as well as older ethnographies present various ways of dealing with uncertainty. They have shown that actors try to reflexively engage, interpret, tame, reduce, control and manage uncertainty by, for instance, institutional framings and norms, consulting oracles and horoscopes, navi-

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<sup>1</sup> We thank the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies and Prof. Dr. Kurt Beck (both Bayreuth University), Prof. Dr. Till Förster (University of Basel) and Mark Semmler (Mark Semmler GmbH) for making this special issue possible.

gating demands, juggling activities or positions or the strategic usage of social resources and family networks. These processes are typically characterised by doubts, involving balancing and negotiating possibilities in relation to structural constraints (Jenkins et al. 2005).

However, ethnographic studies of uncertainty have to a lesser extent conceptualised the role of the future in people's actions (for exceptions see Wallman 1992, Johnson-Hanks 2005, Wladarsch 2005, Cooper & Pratten 2015). In these works, the future is either perceived as exciting, open and as a manifestation of what once was a daydream, or plagued by deterioration, worries and fear and the realisation of haunting nightmares.

In this special issue, we explore the pivotal role that the future as a social perception of time and temporality plays in dealings with uncertainty. There are four linkages between uncertainty and future, as the chapters in this special issue show: Firstly, visions of the future result from current and past interpretations of culturally embedded everyday lives. Secondly, a multitude of co-existing models of time is possible. Thirdly, actors adjust their visions of the future when present conditions change. Fourthly, present actions are directed towards a vision of the future which merely serves as a guideline rather than a potential reality. Thus, the temporality of people's actions and imagination in uncertain times is at the fore of this special issue exploring the unfolding tension between the immediate and the imagined, the actual and the perceived (Vigh 2009).

We argue that uncertainty has to be approached as an inherently temporal phenomenon and agree with Benda-Beckmann and colleagues (2000: 7) who note: «Uncertainty and insecurity are notions that link the present with the past and the future. Looking at ways in which individuals or social institutions deal with indeterminacy, uncertainty and insecurity also means looking at how they deal with the future, how the future is conceptualized, and the extent to which the future is problematized».

The six ethnographic papers gathered in this special issue take diverse uncertain conditions in Uganda (Witte), Gabon (Fricke), Liberia (Kaufmann), Germany (Rehsmann; Feith & Marquardt), and Switzerland (Marti) into focus. Our empirical examples concern descriptions in the medical realm, with regard to natural resources, a lack of personal freedom and dire economic resources. The authors not only analyse these diverse situations but moreover provide an entry point on how to conceptualise future(s). Temporal modes bridge repercussions of the past through the present to one or many poten-

tial futures that lie ahead and introduce us to the model(s) of time as a philosophical basis of present acting. Geographically, the contributions shed light on dealings with uncertainty in Europe and Africa and diffuse the idea that industrial and non-industrialised societies differ in their exposition to uncertainty, rationality, institutionalisation, and planning.

This introduction scrutinises the current state of the discussion on uncertainty and we seek to inspire further thinking about matters of time. To this end, we present the contributions of this special issue in the introductory text wherever they link to the debate. After first highlighting the key points of the concept of uncertainty, the introduction discusses in the second part the abovementioned four theses about future(s) that seem relevant to us for the study of uncertainty. Finally, we conclude by presenting our ideas on the interaction of uncertainty and future(s).

## Approaching Uncertainty

Uncertainty was and is always an imminent part of everyday life but became one of the circulating topoi in a neoliberal world order. Uncertainty seems to be synonymous with crisis, an omnipresent narrative (Roitman 2014). It appears obvious that uncertainties have something to do with the forces of globalisation – flows of migrants, neoliberal paradigms, global inequalities, weakened states – which shape social life and leave traces on the subjective experience as well. Under processes of globalisation the world has been described as «high-speed modernity» leading to «accelerated changes» that tend to produce crises and unforeseen consequences (Eriksen 2016: 469–470). The fast circulation of people, goods, finance, ideas and information contributes to a «social velocity» (Mbembe & Nuttall 2004: 329), which seems to deprive people of the «known» and the «trusted». However, as a matter of fact, uncertainty also dominates personal situations that cannot be solely explained by such acceleration. It hits people no matter what their social status, living conditions, race, age, gender or life expectations are. Uncertainty, per definition, is a subjective perception of the present and the future and, thus, concerns everybody to a certain extent. It is about nightmares, the dearly needed improvement of conditions and, as we argue, produces visions of the wanted and the desired. One such example is romantic love where one never knows if the other feels the same and hopes may merge with blindness for the facts. And yet, romantic love as eternal topos of uncertain conditions has changed under conditions of accelerated global trends in social media which has altered domains of communication (Archambault 2013). In short, a fickle heart has been a concern since the beginning of humanity, but the medium of expression has changed.

In anthropology as well as in the other humanities, in engineering and the applied sciences, there are many descriptions of insecure situations and ways of dealing with them. Terminologies are, however, far from being standardised and accepted across disciplinary boundaries: Hazard, danger, threat, risk, insecurity, contingency, (mis)fortune or chance are only a few of those terms to label such scenarios. All these terms demand a certain level of knowledge on the sources, accessibility of facts, quantifiability and calculability, while uncertainty is marked by the absence of knowledge.

Earlier debates in anthropology have discussed topics of uncertainty more broadly as danger or misfortune. Mary Douglas, for instance, contends that a situation is dangerous, polluted and dirty if an object is out of place – characteristics that are not attributed to the object in the context where it belongs. Human actions aim at creating a «semblance of order» (Douglas 1978) to prevent danger. Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1976) speaks of unfortunate events.

Uncertainty is closely related to insecurity, contingency and uneasy living conditions. Susan R. Whyte (2009: 214) defines uncertainty as «a lack of protection from danger, weakness in the social arrangements that provide some kind of safety net when adversity strikes». This lack of protection does not mean that misfortune happens, it merely addresses its potentiality and the shortcomings of protection. Further, it drives people to find answers to what had caused the uncertainty in the hope to fill gaps of knowledge hoping that the knowledge may transform uncertainty into something familiar, explainable and comprehensible. Hence, uncertainty is challenging and filled «with varying degrees of unease or anxiety» (Haram & Yamba 2009: 13) since a lack of knowledge to assess the situation exists.

Contrasting the common notion of uncertainty as a scourge, as it is mostly done in anthropological studies, uncertainty can also be understood as a chance. *Christine Fricke's*<sup>2</sup> research on the uncertainty of oil depletion in Gabon illustrates this in this special issue. Fricke argues for the «liberating force of uncertainty». For her, uncertainty might be understood as transformative potential that «(re-) opens the future to indeterminacy» and «allows for alternative futures to be imagined». She goes beyond the notion that chances are carved out in the present uncertain situation, and shows that uncertainty itself is seen as a chance for transformation as it opens-up the future. The unpredictability of the resource's lifespan may equally result in an El

Dorado vibe or the clairvoyant prevision of decay. Experiencing a temporal mode as in a limbo provides the potential for people to act in manifold ways.

The potentiality is reflected in the term contingency which some authors use lately synonymously or as alternative to the term uncertainty (Adahl 2007: 20, Bromber et al. 2015). Contingency, however, does not entail the lack of knowledge at its definitory core. Insecurity and risk also entail a lack of knowledge as Sandra Calkins (2016) asserts; however here there is more certainty about how to deal with this kind of circumstances and the causing effects. According to Janet Roitman who refers to financial practices, we can differentiate between calculable forms of indeterminacy (risk) versus non-calculable forms of indeterminacy (uncertainty). She further highlights how the narrative of «risk» is crucial for knowledge production as it is made «an object of standards, measure, audit» (Roitman 2014: 75). Social actors may have the possibility to decide whether to take a risk or avoid it. If the potentiality is calculable a situation may become a risk.

Indeed, the currently omnipresent «risk narrative» must be explored critically. The concept of risk originated from European, «Western» thought, and was often associated with the rise of modernity, and its constant transformation and development of society.

Niklas Luhmann and Ulrich Beck note that risk is part of (western-style) modernity. This somewhat implies a linear, teleological time model. In contrast, «non-Western» societies were portrayed as stuck in stasis and cyclical time frames, meaning that crises periodically occurred, for example, due to harsh environmental conditions (cf. Beck & Knecht 2016).

Zygmunt Bauman (2008: 15) refers to insecurity as inherent to the human experience of life while stressing in particular the phenomenon's affective aspect: «Western» societies live safer lives compared to the lives of earlier generations, and yet, they feel more insecure. A prominent example is the fear of vulnerability which is closely linked to the media representation of threats that keep the globalised world in a stranglehold. They include negative effects of global trade and capitalism, climate change, surveillance and information flow in a world-wide web, the trafficking of people and weapons as well as terrorism across borders. The effects cannot be contained by behavioural norms or national borders and are therefore experienced as inescapable. All of these aspects disrespect social, cultural and moral spheres and are beyond territorial sovereignty, lead-

<sup>2</sup> When referring to the contributions in this special issue, we highlight the authors' names with italics.

ing to fear and awe (Bauman 2008: 15). The elaborations on modernity and insecurity by Luhmann, Bauman and Beck neglect the conditions of earlier epochs and those societies that are considered to be less penetrated by globalisation.

### A Lack of Knowledge

«There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. He wants to see what is reaching towards him, and to be able to classify it [...]. In the dark, the fear of the unexpected touch can amount to panic» (Canetti 1984: 15).

The outstanding characteristic of uncertainty is its lack of knowledge. Hence, it is the most ambiguous and, at the same time, most open term and its existence might be taken for granted even if it is difficult to be described.

The German translation of uncertainty, «Ungewissheit», includes the term «Wissen» (knowledge) and «Nicht-Wissen» (ignorance or non-knowledge) which highlights this terminological difference adequately. The lack of knowledge is also part and parcel of the English usage of the term and is even reinforced in the definition by Whyte (2009: 213) who points out that «uncertainty refers to a lack of *absolute* knowledge: inability to predict the outcome of events or to establish facts about phenomena and connections with assurance» (emphasis added).

However, even while definite knowledge is absent, in situations of economic decline or war, knowledge systems may be produced, revised, assigned meaning to and shared, as Carolyn Nordstrom (1997: 28) states in relation to the Mozambique war scenario. One way of approaching an uncertain situation is to generate knowledge and to compute risks and chances. In this way, uncertainty can be transformed into a new category with a different set of knowledge.

As a truism, the stock of knowledge is not equally distributed to all members of a society. This imbalance in the access to knowledge may have various causes, some of which may be linked to taboos, therefore restricting knowledge to social groups based on age, gender, profession or other status. Lack of knowledge may also be due to the complexity of a specialist process including its consequences not being comprehensive so that it is restricted to so-called experts. This means that for a lay person it is often just not possible to assess a situation fully and to base options on well weighed decisions but to rely on other parties. Those parties may decide to withhold, instrumentalise or manufacture (fake) information. It is assumed here that the knowledge alone may have negative effects, such as an outbreak of panic or flight, or endanger the acceptance

of an authority in the community. An example is the meltdown of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986 when the authorities failed to inform the public. Moreover, information may not be available due to a lack of experience, especially if a matter cannot be articulated and is only available as embodied knowledge that is not expressed verbally; or there is a lack of access to media (i.e. literature, internet) imparting the knowledge; or due to illiteracy or language barriers. Besides, the matter may be taken for granted and is therefore not explicitly addressed and passed on, for instance apparently shared norms and values, or what is considered as «normal» mental abilities and physical functions, hence, everything considered to be common sense – just like the notion of time.

In this special issue, *Dominik Feith* and *Bernd Marquardt's* study challenges the above outlined notion of uncertainty as a mere lack of knowledge causing «dis-ease». In their example on antenatal care, it is not the lack of knowledge which causes uncertainty, but on the contrary, the additional medical information on a foetus' potentially abnormal development. The situation is uncertain, because there are hardly any options but to wait – a time of hopes and fears. The few possible interventions are medically and ethically highly complex, i.e. abortion or waiting for the infant's potential death, and narrow timeframes for decision-making apply. Medically, risks can be computed by experts. However, the accompanying social factors fall within the category of uncertainty caused by sophisticated diagnostic technology. The more information that comes to light and the limited options available results in making the decision-making process more difficult. And yet, the existence of (medical) technology does make living conditions per se less uncertain.

Uncertainty challenges whatever is taken for granted and the acquired stock of knowledge to confront problems might prove to be inadequate. This also means that knowledge is not to be reduced to information, but entails routines and bodily sedimented knowledge and experiences to which the flow of events can be related and reflected upon. However, in the medical cases in this issue (*Feith & Marquardt, Rehmann*) additional information does not entail any more options. The only option with or without such information is to «wait until the hoped for event is real - or, better, until the potential is realised» (Briggs 1992: 99).

### Experiencing Uncertain Futures

The taken for granted life-world, according to Alfred Schütz, is a «doxic experience» that centres on the repeatability of actions as implied in two famous stances: «and so on and so forth» and

«I can do it again». The doxic experience embraces sedimented typifications that make the world «taken for granted» and through its familiarity opens-up a glimpse toward the future and enables actors to anticipate (Schütz 1982 [1971]: 97, 178f.).

Situations that seem socially, politically, economically or personally out of control, generate manifold experiences of and emotions towards the unknown as the ability to anticipate and to predict is minimised. A fragmented stock of knowledge and sedimented past experiences might turn into an uncanny condition that challenges familiar ways of being and living. Sigmund Freud's (2003 [1919]: 124) notion of the uncanny is defined as «that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar. [...] Under what conditions [can] the familiar become uncanny and frightening». Affect and (inter)subjective experiences are thus at the forefront when discussing issues of future and uncertainty as «uncertainty creates strong emotions of various kinds» (Horst & Grabska 2015: 9) such as inertia, fear, anger and nostalgia.

Different grades of knowledge and familiarity with a situation might be related to differing scales and intensities of uncertainty. Experiences of unfolding transformations in everyday life or radical change, for example, the transition to another age grade or being displaced by violent conflict are linked up with a fragmentation or loss of routines, knowledge and relations, in short: of certainties. This loss of certainties, knowledge or routines does not necessarily result in apathy or passivity; rather, actors strive to produce and gain knowledge, and thereby make a situation more predictable and meaningful. For example, the urge to decipher the dark and the rise of conspiracy and rumour is a strong component of uncertainty (West & Sanders 2003), turning an opaque future into a foundational aspect of the social fabric (Vigh 2011: 94). Even if an imagined coherent progression of time is lost, social actors will always act in anticipation of a particular version of the future.

Uncertain situations, such as the ones discussed in this special issue – resource extraction, severe illness, imprisonment, post-war lives and foetal malformation – as well as many more, such as forced displacement and migration often suspend life, challenge agentive capacities, and change temporal perceptions. People are kept in between life and death (in a ritual or literal sense), between stillness and movement, between apathy and engagement, or between hope and despair while waiting for possibilities, luck, chances, or events; in short: while waiting for futures.

We consider waiting and its interlinked notions of hope and patience as prominent characteristics of uncertainty, which especially provide insights into the temporalities of uncer-

tainty. While «waiting» and «hope» can be understood as a way of «coping» with uncertainty (Horst & Grabska 2015: 5), it can also be seen as an anticipatory practice, that links possible futures to the present (cf. Crapanzano 2003, Hage 2009). Migrants and refugees hope, sometimes for years, to return home, or to have a bright future elsewhere while waiting in camps, settlements and cities (Kastner 2014, Brun 2015, Turner 2015, Kleist & Thorsen 2017). Kept in a position of waiting and immobility, that on the one hand foster experiences of «existential stuckedness» (Hage 2009: 99), and on the other hand might lead to boredom in everyday life, people's future-orientations and hopes change over time in situations of prolonged uncertainty (Kleist & Jansen 2016).

Observing uncertainties of waiting and, in general, time, reveals waiting as an equally dynamic practice that ironically immobilises the patient as s/he is subjected to technologies and discourse. *Julia Rehsman* beautifully introduces the mythical figure of Hydra illustrating the idea of a perpetuation and continuation of uncertainties. While cutting off one of Hydra's heads, new heads or better said new uncertainties arise. Her examination of information and un/certainty exemplifies the practice of «taming uncertainty». Patients in a «temporal limbo», for example waiting for a liver transplant, may use techniques of avoidance to increase a degree of uncertainty in order to remain with some hope for the future and convert an «extraordinary» situation into what Rehsman calls the «new ordinary».

Waiting and hoping for things to come are closely connected to enduring uncertainty. In her research among forcibly displaced peasants in the Sudan, Valerie Hänsch (2016) shows that patience, as culturally embedded practice, became an all-embracing way of living the situation. With the construction of the Merowe Dam and the impoundment of the reservoir, the inhabitants of the Nile Valley were flooded out of their homes and fields. The «ontological security» (Giddens 1990) was shaken and taken for granted knowledge lost its validity. Amidst existential uncertainty, crisis and worlds falling apart, people experimented and tentatively explored possible ways of future lives along the emerging lake.

While the pace of transformation of people's lives was fast, daily life in their improvised camps slowed down. Before the flood, men and women followed a closely timed rhythm of work in the fields. Now they were forced into inaction. Time was marked by the dissolution of the temporal order and appeared to be endless and non-repetitive. Practicing patience was facilitated to endure the temporal void and to wait, e.g. to wait for the long day to pass or to wait for opportunities to reconstruct agriculture. Patience in this context was under-

stood as a virtue, which enables a person to live through adversity and to pursue their aims despite difficulties. In the situation of displacement, it represented an investment to endure uncertainty and to stay in the homeland. At the same time, practicing patience was an investment in the hereafter, in the sense that God will compensate people for enduring the present hardship on the Day of Judgement. Patience, then, can be understood as an attitude towards life while simultaneously shaping the perception of present uncertainties and pointing to different futures (Hänsch 2016).

Practicing patience is not necessarily suffering passively. As Saba Mahmood (2001) has argued, patience is an active engagement. Suspended from life and its rhythms, waiting and enduring can be experienced as stillness and slow passing time, that might lead to resignation and frustration as the capacity to act is limited. However, waiting might also be translated into hope and activity, which help people to endure and keep life going.

### Confronting Uncertainties

Indeed, uncertainty is an existential part of the human condition. Hence, experiences of and interactions with the world make people attempt to contain uncertainty and to secure their future. Various case studies demonstrate how people confront uncertainty in manifold ways, for example by «navigating» (Vigh 2006), «juggling» (Sargent 1989), «manoeuvring» (Berner 2000) and «managing» (Goffman 1963) social forces. However, confronting uncertainty on a daily basis would not be bearable, so people try to routinize and thereby integrate uncertainty into their everyday lives (Oldenburg 2016). All these ways of dealing with an uncertain situation attribute more or less agency to the human and its environment. In particular, medical anthropology, legal anthropology, studies on youth, and conflict and migration studies describe actors as actively seeking and testing as many options as available assuming that it would be risky to miss out on chances. For example, patients visit alternative practitioners complementarily to biomedical facilities hoping that one of the various treatment options proves successful. Patients do not only seek relief but also balance risks and chances of healing. However, medical practitioners caution against side effects if alternative treatment options are used simultaneously as they create new risks (Kroeker 2015: 38).

Generally, people attempt to bring an uncertain situation under control by establishing routines and rules or creating institutions and interpretations to get a grip on life. Routines help to order the seemingly disordered and convert them into something familiar, known and trusted. As Peter Berger

and Thomas Luckmann (1980 [1966]: 45) state: «Meine Welt hält zusammen auf Grund von Routinen [...]». Here, routines are perceived as a glue that holds the world together. These routines might be seen as a reflexive ability to stabilise everyday life in contexts of chronic or existential uncertainty. In the context of protracted violent conflict in Eastern Congo, Silke Oldenburg (2010) observed the practice of routinisation as a means to acquire some kind of orientation in an uncertain world. By assigning meaning to extraordinary events their uncertain character might be tamed in order to create anticipatory practices and aim at a better future amidst seemingly limiting circumstances. Therefore, the dialectics of knowledge and uncertainty may generate new forms of knowledge, or a «fresh contact» (Mannheim 1964 [1928]), through which an overall setting of war and insecurity, but also less spectacular uncertainties such as love or livelihood preoccupations, might be integrated into everyday life and spur imaginative practices of a desirable future. However, the production of knowledge and thereby meaning can also create a different everyday world.

Another way of dealing with uncertain situations is the prevention of the undesired based on earlier experiences. Douglas (1978) shows that humans are able to prevent dangerous events by ritual performances. Prevention of dangers therefore means keeping things where, when and in the context in which they are supposed to be. These occurrences can be prevented by means of social control, religious and behavioural prescriptions like taboos, although there is no guarantee for their effectiveness. Douglas makes a point by stating that it is not of importance whether preventive measures are performed for religious or scientific reasons, but that they are performed at all and thereby danger is prevented. This idea of prevention, which imbues a future-orientedness, applies to «Western» and «non-Western» societies alike.

A classic ethnographic example of dealing with the unknown is divination. As Victor Turner (1975: 209) demonstrates in his influential book about the Ndembu in Zambia: «The diviner's insight is retrospective, [...] he discloses what has happened, and does not foretell future events». This means that divination among the Ndembu provides interpretations for problems that arose in the past and that have implications on the clients' lives in the present. The general approach is therefore to generate additional, explanatory knowledge, a common approach we find in dealings with uncertainty elsewhere. More generally, divination is a method to judge a situation through a consideration of incomplete evidence.

Furthermore, ways of dealing with uncertainty involve the community to a greater or lesser extent. As part of social life, support networks help to approach uncertain situations.

*Andrea Kaufmann* considers social relations as a motor of change. Liberia's civil society, comprising associations and social movements, has shaped much of the post war political history and has played an active part in shaping the country's future. Therefore, Kaufmann defines associational life as «islands of certainty in an uncertain setting» and thereby contrasts common notions that actors tend to turn only to individualistic practices such as «trying» and «hustling» under uncertain conditions. Researching young people, Kaufmann stresses that social relations and individual tactics are two sides of the same coin. Being connected to «big persons» and being engaged in patron-client relationships might open-up pathways to success and increase the probability of social upward mobility.

Civil society organisations in Uganda are another example of a collective way of dealing with uncertainty. *Annika Witte* describes how civil society organisations take up the «resource curse risk narrative» of future oil production in Uganda. Civil society actors present an ambiguous image of the future with oil as dark, which can only be avoided if oil production and its risks are managed well. While the identification and knowledge of risks is a way of reducing, and controlling uncertainties, Witte shows how the communication of risks «as modes of anticipating the future» increases rather than reduces uncertainty in the population among the communities who will be affected by the oil production. In conclusion, the potential oil boom in Uganda produces hopes of prosperity as well as fears of resource mismanagement as common social narratives.

In some cases, options to confront uncertain situations are more limited than others. Few options apply to prison inmates who serve an indefinite incarceration, and therefore little appears to be uncertain, quite the contrary. The uncertain subjectivity is caused by the limited room to manoeuvre and the sheer experience of a very lengthy time. Being immobile might as well be caused by indefinite incarceration as *Irene Marti* explores in her ethnographic case-study of a prison in Switzerland. Having no long-term perspective outside the known structures of the prison does not enable the inmates to make plans but to «do with time». Little interruptions of the routine – a visit with the hair dresser or a daydream – are all welcome events while everyday time in prison is perceived as boring and monotonous. Marti argues that prisoners, sentenced to indefinite measures, are not only actively «doing time», e.g. passing and killing time, but also «doing with time» and «being with time», which means giving meaning to and accepting the situation until a remarkable conversion of the self happens («let go their former selves»).

Having introduced uncertainty as an open, subjective, social but also analytical concept and state of being, the following sections explore its state of becoming. Four theses guide our idea on how the future is conceptualised in times of uncertainty:

### Uncertain Futures: Present & Past Relations<sup>3</sup>

Responses to uncertainty are a particularly eligible field for studying the dimensions of time. In addition to exploring the cultural, social and existential meanings of uncertainty, it is useful to approach uncertainty as a heuristic device which allows us to analyse temporal perceptions and the ordering of time. Dimensions of time unfold in relation to imaginations. Immediate visions of the future may, thereby, differ from subjective long term aspirations and from those visions which will affect future generations or after (earthly) life. Therefore, this multiplicity of imaginations points at a multiplicity of notions of time (Fabian 1983). Hence, we speak of competing visions of the future and, thus, of futures in the plural (cf. Koselleck 2004). Expectations, actions and preparations which are meant to realise desirable developments and to prevent undesirable ones can tell a lot about conceptualisations of the future.

In general, temporal arrangements follow two grand schemes, namely revolution and repetition. The future can, on the one hand, be understood as a break with the past, a revolutionary new start, contrasting the contemporary. On the other hand, the future can be understood as the continuation of a process which has its starting point in the past. Continuity and change are merged and a result of slow or fast developments without the expectations of a rupture and break in the future. According to this notion, the future relies on experiences of earlier comparable phases and, not least, the hope or fear that new situations lead to similar consequences.

One such example is *Fricke's* description of Gabon's oil elite that promotes the repetition of a past oil boom to ensure confidence into the future. Describing different scenarios of oil depletion related to the near, mid-range and far future, Fricke points out that: «These multiple futures are grounded in multiple pasts that inform anticipation, provide affective orientation towards the future and shape the present experiences of uncertainty».

For macroeconomists, the future is easily carved out, and yet uncertain: Growth is the ultimate value that leads to prosperity. Investments are made in expectation of constant growth

<sup>3</sup> These theses were inspired by research on «Future Africa» conducted by the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies (2013-2016) funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).



in the future. Jane Guyer (2007) criticises the way in which neoliberal ideas are meant to lead to freedom and prosperity in the long run. In her opinion this is comparable to evangelical prophecy. The vision of a prosperous future stands in stark contrast to the contemporary world, which is in the one case dominated by «date regimes» of debts, interest rates and monetarization, and in the other by everyday life and the waiting for the second appearance of the messiah as Guyer points out.

In a millennialist mission, a break with the past and the establishment of a kingdom of God is anticipated. In evangelistic eschatology, «Born again» Christians resolve relations of the past and undergo a spiritual rebirth, one that comes with strict norms and values. In this scenario, the past as well as the future is perceived as a revolutionary break ascending to a utopia that is often inherent to revolutions. However, the future after a revolutionary break is not detached from its history but results from a historical prologue, one that has given birth to change.

In Sandra Wallman's (1992) book on futures, the question appears regarding whether under conditions of uncertainty individuals or societies are rather present-centred and preoccupied with the immediate in contrast to the imagined distant future. Let us point this out with two different examples: On the one hand, nomadic societies living at the edge and being used to shortages know how to store material and immaterial resources which secure livelihood. Besides food provision, stories of earlier events, poems and mutual assistance provide the mental strength to sustain deprivations (Spittler 1989). In Gerd Spittler's case-study among the Tuareg, communication and intergenerational transmission of knowledge become central resources to deal with famine. Without these resources, there can hardly be any investment into a distant there and then. On the other hand, there are examples which illustrate present-centredness in an uncertain and hostile environment. Here, investments into the future may be in vain given that chances for life are minimal but not zero (cf. Briggs 1992). However little the chance, it provides leeway for social action.

These two latter examples show that people embrace uncertainties and take them for granted. Futures are conceptualised as more open, uncertain and fluid instead of following preconceived long-term, linear plans and visions as in Guyer's example.

### Orders of Time & Rhythms of Uncertain Futures

It has been held by evolutionary thinkers that «modern» societies, which are supposedly urban, western and rational, have a different approach to time than «pre-modern/so-called tradi-

tional» societies, a term implying attributes such as rural, backward, pre-industrial and underdeveloped. Mircea Eliade (1960) divided the world into «religious or «archaic / primitive' man» as opposed to «non-religious» or «historical / modern man». For the former, time would be cosmic, cyclical and mythical, repetitive and divine. For the latter, time would be linear, shaped by events, rationality and agency. These two models are said to differ in their perception of time, where «modern» societies are future-oriented while «traditionalists» are focused predominantly on the present. Physical time, what Johannes Fabian (1983) also calls «objective» or «neutral» time, is measured chronologically and with reference to demographic or ecological change. Developments and events take place one after the other as part of an ongoing process and in a linear sense directed towards the normative «telos» of progress. This time model «conveyed an aura of scientific rigor and trustworthiness» (Fabian 1983: 22) and constituted the basis of evolutionary narratives. This practice generates, according to Fabian, «temporal displacement», a term that he framed as «allochronism» (Fabian 1983: 32).

This «temporal displacement» reveals much about constructed hierarchies in time (and space). To start with, we can observe that there are different time regimes that exist simultaneously in a specific place or a distinctive social group. These time models might be conflicting as time orders are often imposed on others. Sabrina Maurus (2016), for example, observed different time models in Southern Ethiopian youth. Western education, as a classic example of modern progress and unilinear development, is associated with «clock time». This assumption implies linear planning subject to measurable and comparable «modern» standards. Maurus found that pupils enrolled in schools internalise an idealised curriculum vitae of growth and success while their age mates who do not enrol in formal education remain part of the pastoral community. The latter's future vision resembled their elder family member's roles.

Contrasting the linear time model as ultimately western, a circular model describes best the rhythms of fortnightly punctuations of a patient's liver in *Rehsmann's* chapter. The patient's «bodily clock» creates a reliable routine. The rhythm of prison life implies monotonous but predictable time arrangements as well. In this case (*Marti*), time can be understood as dispossessed by the inmates that have little leeway to project into the future. However, daydreaming or virtual games make them «do time».

The governing of time and the imposition of time regimes can produce uncertainty and eventually leads to changing rhythms of life. This is particularly relevant in the field of resource extraction or the implementation of infrastructure which follow linear time models and technical planning processes towards a certain goal in distant futures. Con-

fronted with the implementation of a dam in their vicinity, peasants at the Nile were forced to think and decide about their far futures, about when to leave and where to resettle. The changing river regime resulting from the impoundment of the Nile ultimately transformed rhythms of life along the emerging lake. Former agricultural practices had been closely related to the cycle of seasons and the annual rise and fall of the river. The dam-enforced new river regime disrupted the manifold socio-environmental relations. Further, this produced – with economic and social practices – the calibration of new temporal orders (Hänsch 2016).

There are no hints that temporal orientations are mutually exclusive. Quite the contrary, Maurice Bloch (1977: 289) holds that linear and cyclical time can coexist. Fabian (1983) argues that an alternative model of time besides the mathematical model is that of mundane time which can be cyclical or linear, but more importantly, periods of time may continue in the future and result in a new epoch or era. Mundane time devises ages and stages by labelling periods as millenniums, Golden Ages and other constructed periods.

### Changing Presents & Alternative Futures

«Images of the future may affect what actually happens in the future, and, more importantly, [...] images of the future can constrain the present at least as much as do images of the past», notes Wallman (1992: i) in the preface to her volume on «Contemporary Futures». The dialectics of future and uncertainty stress temporal relationalities and modes of time.

The argument here is that future visions impact on the actions in the present. Luhmann (1982) outlined that the current utopia of the future is a *present future*. At the present moment of time images of the future are vague. Present future(s) stand in contrast to the *future present*, a time that will soon materialise, is less utopian and more technological. Along this vein, the past is full of utopias, dreams and visions, in short: the past futures turned into past presents. Moments which came into being often contrasted expectations and did not turn out as imagined and hoped for. At the same time, the present conditions alter the visions of the future. Important information may come to light and conditions change, which, in return, impact on the present image of the future.

Another example relies on the precondition that people need to be dynamic. In our special issue, *Kaufmann* shows that without «trying» or «hustling» in Monrovia's streets, accession into patrimonial networks and thus the opportunity to grab a chance are out of reach.

*Witte* and *Fricke* provide examples of present futures and the adjustments of these in their articles on two crude oil producing countries, Uganda (*Witte*) and Gabon (*Fricke*). In Gabon, oil has been exploited for the past fifty years and has brought Gabon massive revenues, wealth, and prosperity. Time and again, however, new extractions have failed, resulting in parts of the population fearing that the boom will come to an end, revenues will cease, wealth will shrink and that this may eventually result in civil war. These prospects affect actions in the present. Contrasting this, the minister of oil and oil producing companies publish enthusiastic visions of alternative futures that is a future with oil. How do these expectations shape the imagination of the future and, hence, life in the present? Believing in new findings of oil, one of the interviewees leads her life in the way that there is no change to be expected, in contrast to the interviewee's mother who expects change due to the soonish end of oil. Here, visions compete and can thus be labelled as present futures. As a matter of fact, these certainly differ from the reality as it materialises as future present.

In *Witte's* paper, Uganda announced the imminent exploitation of crude oil and that the country will prosper because of this. This vision is shattered, altered, and delayed due to a lack of technological means to access the desired treasure. The vision of the future impacts on how the present is organised. The future gives rise to new expectations, scenarios, visions, plans, calculations, utopias and dystopias, and gives proof of the liberating as well as the challenging face of uncertainty, which again impacts on how people lead their life and envision their future.

Visions of the future animate new readings of the present which in turn animate imaginations of alternative futures in a process of checks, re-readings, balances and new formulations. New processes are pushed to bear fruits in the envisaged future, knowing that there may be little chance to see them ripen.

### Agency in Times of Uncertainty

What is the role of agency in uncertain conditions? When the foundation is shaking, actors (re-)act in a quest for order. Apparently, the era of enlightenment has slowly changed the dominant discourse from events being attributed to fate, god(s) or natural deities to a responsibility of humans who take their future into their own hands as prominently argued by the historian Lucian Hölscher (1999) or the sociologists Ulrich Beck (1992) and Barbara Adam (2009). Beck (1992: 98) notes:

Pre-industrial hazards, no matter how large and devastating, were «strokes of fate» raining down on mankind from «outside» and attributable to an «other» – gods, demons or

nature. Here too there were countless accusations, but they were directed against the gods or God, «religiously motivated», to put it simply, and not – like industrial risks – politically charged.

This leads to the misleading assumption that non-European societies are stuck in a situation of fate while «you white people run on rails», as an Inuit pupil put the difference between the locals and the Christian missionaries' usage of time (Briggs 1992: 89, cf. Maurus 2016). This difference, as eurocentric as it is, still remains in development paradigms to date. As a consequence, questions about the subjective experience of uncertainty and the transformative power of faith and hope are left unanswered.

The notion of uncertainty and with it the notion of time is part of interpreting a situation as a new and single event, as a temporary or permanent condition one has to get used to, as a periodical and perhaps biographical phase everybody has to go through, or even in a millennial sense as a point of no return. While some societies may interpret the appearance of uncertain situations as new and as a scourge of an accelerated exchange of humans, goods and values, others make reference to historic epidemic plagues which came and went.

In both Christian and Muslim beliefs, practices are directed towards a good and prosperous life after death. The (Catholic) Christian notion of the Last Judgment coming as an unexpected verdict, the fear of sanctions may emphasise certain behaviours in the present with regard to the future. As Luhmann notes (2008: 98), «In committing sins you risk the salvation of your soul, which thereby becomes a matter not of church practice but of individual lifestyle and effort». In sum, the respective future vision justifies the present action, given that not all options at hand are also morally acceptable. This may result in pressure to evaluate potential outcomes and decide for «the best» option, according to culturally defined parameters.

Under pressure to meet conflicting behavioural expectations, pregnant women in Lesotho struggle to fulfil status aspirations, religious aspects, familial approaches and the like simultaneously. Those who tested HIV-positive in antenatal care had to include medical advice to prevent transmission of the virus to the baby and manage stigma at the same time (Kroeker 2015). Despite this uncertain situation, Kroeker suggests that pregnant and delivering women with HIV have agency and responded to conflicting demands in a pragmatic way. One such way was to avoid conflicts, to evade places, to tell a lie or to manipulate authoritative decision-makers, and lastly, to keep «face», in Goffman's sense, as another way. The field closes possible pathways, but, at the same time, opens others. This leaves room for acting and hoping, high expectations

and strong disappointments. There are chances and potentialities, but also the fear of falling. In this realm, even waiting can prove as an active and deliberate strategy, more precisely, waiting for opportunities to appear (cf. Briggs 1992: 99).

Are there people who do not plan a future? Johnson-Hanks (2005) describes that «the future» is let to decide. In light of the arguments set out in this introductory chapter, we doubt that. What looks like relying on divine forces and a limitation of agency to the present could also be interpreted as a deliberate way of not burdening oneself with what is to come anyhow. Confidence, agency and responsibility for the future are opponents of uncertainty and maybe the future is not uncertain in this context. Moreover, rhetoric of presentness in regards of what divine powers hold for the future must not be confused with an absence of ideas about what the future may hold.

Implicit to this analytical framework is a «dialogue between agency and social forces» and an interaction of people «with each other *and* the field» (Vigh 2009: 426-427).

### **Conclusion: The Tension between the Immediate and the Imagined**

Uncertainty is an essential part of the social fabric. It is a temporary state of disorder, breeding the desire to order and bearing the creativity to re-order. In general, situations of uncertainty are characterised by unpredictability, which points to more open alternatives of what life in the future could be like. Anticipatory practices rely on these temporal dimensions, which are dynamic, intrinsically open and less defined as well as containing less controllable outcomes. As time is constantly produced, bringing up new futures while depending on new pasts (Koselleck 2004: 236, Roitman 2014: 18), experiences of uncertainty shape subjective and social life-worlds while being shaped by them at the same time. Hence, the future and the present, which is soon to be the past, stand in a constant dialogue, one which under ordinary conditions is hardly ever expressed but becomes pronounced in uncertain times. Time models are taken for granted, they are not noticeable and part of the cognitive, cultural heritage, but in times of need the temporal basis is addressed as part of a creative process. This opens-up the opportunity to study the relation of uncertainty and the future. Our aim is to stress and highlight the particular role that the future holds in dealing with uncertain times and spaces.

Human agency is an integral part of ensuring livelihood, to secure and reproduce resources and, finally, to provide

the living conditions for the next generation or the after-life. Such actions are often enshrined in ethical notions, which not only help to separate right and wrong but organise sustainable social life in a temporal way.

Uncertain situations and volatile worlds confront people to make their living within contradictory realities. The articles in this issue provide insights into how futures are perceived and enacted in contexts of imperfect knowledge of what is about to happen. Experiences of uncertainty, be it personal or social, ordinary or existential, shape and affect people's aspirations towards futures.

The implicit temporal perception of action and everyday life as a continuous flow and realisation of the future in the present is challenged. Uncertainty problematizes the future, makes it a point of inquiry and brings it into the present, since aspirations, visions, knowledge systems, projects, plans and life itself are being interrupted, fragmented and transformed. Uncertain future(s) can lead to a concentration on the present and the experience of «present-ness» (Bryant 2016: 20). Confronted with uncertainty that suspends lives, the dominant perception of presentness is often related to stillness, waiting and enduring. The present and everyday time might then appear as characterised by sameness and non-repetitive orders of time. Futures and pasts are out of reach and even might collapse, while the present seems to be stuck in same-same without difference. However, this cannot be linked to any culturally manifested time model or a dearth of agency. The general idea of influencing current processes to make a future more secure exists in many societies worldwide. Neither do apparently present-oriented societies forget future and past, nor do future-oriented societies under the conditions of acceleration and globalisation constantly delay gratification in the present.

In all societies, we argue, both (or more) concepts of time exist at the same time, are intertwined and, at times, compete. Attempts to shape and anticipate the future includes routinisation, knowledge production, testing and exploring possibilities, enduring, hoping, waiting for early signs, and combinations of collective and individual dealings with the problem. Uncertainty is not only perceived as pressure but also as a chance to break with the past and to engage in utopian futures.

We conclude with a question: Are dreams, visions, and aspirations meant to come true? Maybe, maybe not. Often enough they serve as guidelines, as images of a future that works at its best in the present: As a guideline, model and motivation, and as a «principle of hope» (Bloch 1985 [1959]).

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