

## *The Future of Class? The Role of Temporality in Class Identity in Greece*

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**Abstract:** *Recent approaches to the importance of class in social inquiry have noted the importance of temporality – attitudes toward the past and future – as a locus of class identity conceived both processually and structurally. In Greece this issue of the future and its unpredictability is deeply embedded in much of the agonistic practices of everyday life, from politics and business to localized illegal activities such as gambling. This paper explores how attitudes toward the uncertain future are articulated through notions of class identity in a Cretan town. In particular, gamblers and non-gamblers alike in the town identify one's class with how effectively one faces the contingencies of everyday experience, and such temporal stances also come into conflict or resonance with authorized stances toward the future supplied by the state and other institutions. This ascription of attitudes toward time according to class background also occurs alongside the play of other domains of identity, such as gender, ethnicity, locality, and family. Through an examination of a particular event of class-articulated conflict between prominent gamblers within the city this paper will illuminate the role of senses of time in the construction of class.*

A key element of many, if not all, of the papers in this session is the issue of social change. Whether as a result of processes of global, national, local, or other scale, many of these papers point to the salience of class for developing an understanding of social transformation. With this in mind, and also reflecting on the theme of these meetings (i.e., Time at the Millennium), I would like to focus our attention in this paper on a feature of class identity as I found it in Greece, that of temporality, or attitudes toward the future or past, one which may provide us a useful means of identifying at least one way in which social change and class intersect. In particular, given the degree to which anthropology has addressed the uses of the past through history, I am interested here in stances toward the future and I place emphasis on the future's characteristic uncertainty, a feature of it that never vanishes completely and, indeed, with the turning of the millenium, seems to come to the surface most visibly in such millenial fears as that of the Y2K bug.

Uncertainty has particular importance for developing an understanding of class in Greece because of the reliance in economic life on such notoriously capricious industries as agriculture and tourism. Yet the term uncertainty itself has remained largely the province of the field of economics, where it is a core issue in Rational Choice Theory. It is not from such an approach that I speak to you today. Rather, while doing research in Chania, a city on the island of Crete, I was struck by the frequency with which class distinctions were brought in discursive conjunction with claims about the *ability* to confront and engage uncertainty. In Chania, from year to year recently, regional crises and environmental hazards have rendered economic life in this otherwise generally wealthy city more and more precarious for its roughly 70,000 inhabitants. As class recurs frequently in Chaniot discourse with reference to this unpredictability – despite its potential threat to a parallel rhetoric of egalitarianism – I find the salience of class for understanding social life in Crete to be self-evident. That is, the prominence of the issue in local action testifies to its indispensability for any analysis. It may be that this is the case in more locales than we may realize; instead it may be, and I speculate here, anthropologists who, in the heady excitement of discovering and learning to make sense of other, equally salient, axes on which identity is formed, have turned a deaf ear to the continuing presence of class-articulated tension throughout the world.

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. I furthermore argue that our language is ill-suited for exploring this aspect of experience, and that, specifically, our use of the most frequently employed term, "risk," most often contains two implicit and problematic aspects: (1) a moral assumption that uncertainty or risk is negatively valued and must be minimized, and (2) a technical aspect which signals or implies the valorization of the calculation of statistical probability. These two elements (not always coexistent, but often so) have come to dominate academic and policy discourses. We should approach our understanding of the place of contingency in social life – in this case how it is articulated with reference

to class – with as neutral an analytic language as we can muster, this allows the local, often moral, implications of the usage to come more clearly into focus. In this sense, we may be surprised to find that unpredictability is as often of positive valence as of negative in everyday life. That is, the unpredictable is unquestionably also a site for “positive” outcomes such as rhetorical and technological innovation and the creation of new types of social relations, among other “windfalls.”

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In any case, before I return to the issue of uncertainty and class in Chania, let me give you a wider yet still brief picture of the city and its environs. Chania lies on the north coast of Crete, and is a popular tourist destination with its well-preserved Venetian harbor and the looming, picturesque White Mountains to the south. But Chania is also a city of commerce, surrounded by broad and fertile plains well-suited to citrus production, and terraced hillsides covered with olive trees. Many Chaniots account for the prevalence of gambling in Chania by allusion to the combination of tourist and agricultural industries, and most Chaniots I came to know had links to these multiple sources of income. Chaniots generally talk about three different classes in the city; I will provide only a brief sketch of them here, and elaborate somewhat on two of them in the course of this paper. There is the working class, loosely defined as those Chaniots who do not work in a family-owned business or for the state, instead working for others as laborers in supermarkets, restaurants, and stores, or as taxi drivers and delivery persons. The next class category to which Chaniots refer is the middle class, consisting of small business owners, bank administrators, many bureaucrats, and others with desk jobs in higher paying industries, such as insurance and computer technology. Finally, there is the professional class, which includes doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, and the upper-level local bureaucrats. Often excluded from discourse is another class, that of foreign and migrant day laborers, a significant part of the agricultural work outside of the city itself.

The issue of uncertainty plays a role in this local conception of a class system in a key way, one that connects quite directly to the issue of social change. The professional class (doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, etc.) is made up of individuals who, members of the middle class suggest (as in the example below), do not have to confront directly the often dramatic shifts in fortune that are such a feature of tourist and agricultural businesses. Restaurant, café, and hotel owners, among others, highlighted to me how adept they were at dealing with the sometimes dramatic shifts in the tourist business, in particular. This élan referred not only to their ability to respond to regional tensions and crises, but also to respond to the Greek government, whose “constant” changing of the tax laws was cited to me by one hotel owner as the single biggest uncertainty facing those in his position. The doctors, lawyers, and others of the professional class, by contrast, were derided by these same owners for working in areas that, in good times and bad, continued to “feed off” the other classes. Another man, a newsstand owner, called them *pontikia*, rats, pointing out that they feed continuously, and in small ways that one at times might overlook.

But the question of social change is present in this tension as well, as a distinction between the new town above and the old town (harbor) within the Venetian walls in Chania has become a locus for the portrayal of the changing city landscape. Strict regulations control the appearance of the buildings in the old harbor, such that any new construction or renovation must conform to the color palette and design details that characterize the old town. Nonetheless, it is the old town that is currently seen as the site of innovation and business daring (a positive engagement of risk or chance), while the upper town, which houses the doctors’ and lawyers’ offices in thirty year-old buildings, is seen as tired and passive.

The old town features old churches, an old well inside a renovated house in the Muslim quarter (the site of a restaurant, “The Well of the Turk”), two extant minarets from the era of Ottoman occupation, a charming museum in a Byzantine-era monastery, several other monasteries now the sites of private businesses, a vacant synagogue, and a few large mansions with multiple terraces and gardens, although these last are so crowded amongst the smaller buildings that their existence is not obvious. Indeed, it is not often clear in this narrow hodgepodge of stone and plaster where one building ends and another begins. The stone paving and narrow alleyways in much of the old town further contribute to this sense of distinctiveness and disorientation, winding narrowly while rising and falling to follow the hills on either side of the harbor.

The same kind of partial concealment is true for the Venetian walls which surround the old town. In some places they are remarkably intact. Built of many close-set stones of nearly uniform size and color, they loom high.

indomitable, and not to be ignored, a deep trench that was intended to be a moat (it was never filled) running at their base. In other places, however, the walls are hidden behind rows of buildings or destroyed, leaving little evidence to the casual observer. Across this fickle boundary rests a central means by which locals demarcate the town, distinguishing between the old town and the surrounding urban area by two terms: *limani* (harbor), to refer to the old town, and *poli*, to refer to the surrounding city, a term most often combined with *pano*, "above," (as in *pano stin poli*, "above in the town") as the harbor lies mostly downhill from the city.

To make, as I mentioned above, a simple association of the old town with the past and the new areas with the present would be dangerously misleading, however. The new town is made up of buildings built for the most part since World War II, many of them in the 1960s and 1970s. These office and apartment buildings, often four or five stories of concrete with simple large-paned windows and balconies, reflect to Chaniots a past era as distinctly as do the Venetian buildings around the *limani*. While a few new businesses open regularly in the new town, such as bookstores and clothing stores, nonetheless the *limani* is the site for a large amount of current capital investment in new and renovated cafés and stores, tailored both to the historical commission's requirements for their exteriors and to current trends in restaurant and store design. These businesses utilize custom-built furniture and comprehensive decors, reflecting the large amount of capital the owners have invested in them. When I asked an acquaintance who had recently opened a popular café in the old town despite owning a continually successful (amongst Chaniots) live music club "up in the city," he responded, "There isn't very much new happening in the city; everyone comes to the harbor now to relax." His café, like many others in the harbor, has a distinctive decor and theme, in this case the café is a playful throwback to thirties-era Greece, with posters and music from that time and furniture reflecting an older era; the place is also known in Chania for using an older method for making Greek coffee by heating it slowly on a bed of hot sand.

The result of this is that residents see the "old harbor" ("old town") as the site for "new" categories of business, as a site of innovation, while many shops in the city above recede into a more recent past, derided as "old" and "ugly." This point was brought home to me by a close friend of mine who, while we walked near the city hall in the new town, pointed to the coffeehouse on the corner, with its large-paned windows and simple furnishings, in a building that could not have been more than 40 years old, and said, "Here is a true, authentic, traditional *kafenio* in Chania." This association of one area, and its predominant businesses owned by the middle class, and another part of Chania where the professional class is found, mirrors the tension I presented above between the middle and professional class. I would now like to illustrate this by reference to one specific example among many, one which brought two clubs (*leskhes*, sing. *leskhi*) where card-playing and gambling take place, and their memberships, into opposition.

The term *leskhi* most often refers to clubs where card-playing and gambling takes place, clubs with at least technically open memberships but a regular clientele of gamblers, often married couples. The term is also used to denote private clubs, with closed memberships, where gambling also takes place – there are two of these in Chania – and the dual use of the term is a source of tension in the city. The private clubs have as members local professionals: pharmacists, doctors, and lawyers, while those who play at the *leskhes* are, while sometimes wealthy, nonetheless of middle class backgrounds, either in the tourist industry or another business. The class tension this distinction reveals was made evident to me when, after numerous attempts, I was able to gain entry into one of the city's two private clubs. I relate the evening here at length because of the numerous ways in which it highlights the ambiguous place of gambling amidst local struggles over class, European-ness, and other axes of identity.

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On that evening I arrived at the club about 8:15 p.m., and waited just a minute or two before Markos arrived. On two previous occasions he had stood me up, so I was pleased to see him finally arrive. His manner as he walked up to me was noticeably reserved and a little agitated, although polite enough. He took my arm and led me over to a small leather couch which rested against the wall just inside the door to the club and before a second set of doors: we were quite noticeably within, but yet not within, the confines of the club itself. We sat, and he turned to me and said, though kindly, "What do you want here?" I immediately sensed that there might be a problem, and that the reasons for his two previous cancellations may have been more than the pharmaceutical emergencies that I had been told. At

my pause, he elaborated that he asked because he did not think that there was anything of interest for me there. He went on to describe the club as different from the "other *leskhes*" I may have seen. The people here, he said, are educated (*morfomeni*, lit., well-shaped), and very different from those who play in "the clubs that you can see from the street," a revealing comment, as it underscores the role of visibility in claims to legitimacy. I replied that I was interested not just in gambling for a lot of money, but in games in general, to understand the social role that games can play in culture. This seemed to ease his concerns somewhat, and he soon invited me to follow him to the back to sit, "drink something," and talk.

The *leskhi* occupied the first and basement floors of an apartment building near the courthouse. The building's mid-1960s style was evident in the polished blonde oak beams across the ceiling, the smooth-lined bar and shelves behind of similar wood, the front coat-check desk of the same wood, the smoked-glass lamp fixtures, the 1960s-style large speakers mounted on the walls, and the high-ceilinged, free-of-accent, white-painted structure of the rooms as a whole. By contrast, the curtains (always closed) were velvet and a reddish color, complete with tie backs of gold braid, so imposing that they were the first thing I noticed when I entered the room. The floor was covered with a number of intricately-colored carpets, the chairs were heavy and either plush or leather-covered, and the small tables were marble-topped. Running to the back was a hall along which were rooms, probably two or three, with three or four doors opening into them, where the members played cards. As we walked, Markos whispered to me, again a little nervously, that I should not say why I was there to anyone we met.

We sat in one of the rooms in back, a room with two entrances. There were roughly six men sitting in the front room, all of them older, around sixty years old. In this back room, there were three occupied tables: one of them had a group of only women, five of them, playing; another table, near us, had three women and one man, and they were playing *berimba*; the final table had two couples, and they also were playing *berimba*. The people in this back room seemed to be younger than the men I had seen sitting in the front room.

We spoke about the *leskhi* itself for a little while. He told me that it was a very old *leskhi*, over 100 years old, he said, and that they used to have an old building next door, a beautiful building, but they had been obliged to move from it because maintaining it was too expensive. Now, they all rented the current location. In 1995 there were 130 members, all male (though their wives can attend the *leskhi*, even without their husbands; as I discuss later), and a new member must have the approval (by secret ballot) of 75% of the membership. There is no rule about level of education, but every member, he said, must be *morfomenos*.

We spoke briefly about casinos, and he seemed disdainful of them: "Only the casino wins," he said. We spoke further, and I asked him about the state games and he gave the same opinion, that only the state wins in that kind of gambling. Shortly it came out, however, that the previous year a large number (80) of the members took a trip together, that the *leskhi* organized, to Kerkira (Corfu), to gamble at the casino there. We returned to the subject of the *leskhi* itself and he again stressed that gambling itself is not central there. It is, he said, "only for company" (*parea*). He called the *leskhi* "a family place," and thereby not like "lower places." The *leskhes* that are just for gambling are, he reiterated, "totally different."

Noting the couples at two of the other tables, I asked if husbands and wives played together often. He said that disagreements often arose when a husband and wife played together as a team, reflecting, I thought, at least one similarity with the "lower" *leskhes*, where accusations of cheating frequently were made to couples playing as partners. When, following his insistence that the gambling there was not the point, I compared their playing for "small stakes" to the playing for drinks in the villages, he immediately seized on the analogy. "Yes, exactly," he said, "it's like in the villages." He then spoke a bit about the level of stakes at the *leskhi*. "We don't play for much money," he said, "A person cannot lose more than, say, one thousand drachmas in one night playing here." I was immediately skeptical of this claim; the nearby couples were playing *berimba* for ten drachmas a point, which meant that a two thousand point difference in score (common at the end of the game) would result in the losing side's owing 20,000 drx. (about 90 US\$). Over the course of an evening, in which one could play six or seven such games, the stakes would certainly be substantial. (Also, when I related this story to others in Chania, most of them expressed disdaimful disbelief, saying with conspiratorial confidence that they played for a lot of money at this *leskhi*.)

The distancing of the two kinds of *leskhes* from each other is mutual, as an owner of another *leskhi*, Christoforos, made clear to me. It turns out that the president of the other private club, which shared many members with the first one, was Christoforos' godfather. Christoforos then characterized the gambling at the private club which I had visited. "They are all dirty," (*vromiki*) he said, "Ten percent of them are clever, and they steal money from the other ninety percent. They won't let me in because they don't want another clever person in the club." It is

clear that his personal experience shaped his view of the club, which he now saw as filled mostly with passive victims of a few clever members, a rather scathing portrayal, particularly in Greece where to be a passive victim is particularly reviled. Others in Chania saw the exchange differently, and suggested that Christoforos' expectation that his godfather's membership would assure him one as well was completely unreasonable. "He's not their type. What is he thinking?" a gambler who played regularly at Christoforos' leskhi remarked. The lines of contest over gambling and the signs of class membership are bitterly drawn.

We can see, then, that the ability to handle uncertainty, whether to avoid being cheated at the card table, or to face the shifting whims of the tourist industry through innovation in the old town, plays a key role in the mutual class ascription that takes place in Chania. While I have the room here only to provide brief examples, I suggest that the issues of temporality and chance bring to the foreground a heretofore-overlooked aspect of the daily struggles over meaning and resources, one that I call *the politics of the contingent*. Attention to how class, among other axes of identity, is implicated in such ascriptions may help us better understand the links between stances toward the future and social change.