**About the Book**

**Description**

This ethnography of middle-class Thessalonikians in the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession demonstrates that crisis is a process that constitutes, and is constituted by, loss, continuity, and rebirth of human life-ways—of people, materials, traditions, rituals, beliefs, and ideals. A pilot study in the city weeks before the Eurozone crash in November 2009 led to my return for year-long fieldwork (2011-12) during an acute phase of austerity. Ethnographic updates (2013-2019) contribute to the overarching thesis of this work on *crisis as a process of sociocultural transformation between defined, albeit fluid boundaries and uncertain future outcomes*. Central to this analysis are citizens who feel, think, and behave according to their authority, power, and self-interest to cope, adapt, and influence crisis-generated social reforms. The following research questions guide this study: How did these urbanites respond to an economic watershed that ruptured routine life as they knew it? How did professionals, accustomed to gainful employment, wealth, and respectability, reconcile an unanticipated loss of work, money, and dignity? How did these now downwardly mobile citizens manage diminishing material resources, and invest the newly acquired leisure and time that unemployment imposed?

A processual analysis of crisis reveals my participants’ responses to the consequences of global neoliberal market shifts. Theory of *crisis as liminality* depicts a time of variable, simultaneous, and cyclical *feelings* of despair, fear, and hope; *deliberations* about the causes and potential outcomes of the financial meltdown; and *acts* of resilience, solidarity, and recovery. Grounded theoretical analysis reveals that within this study community, crisis represents a time and space between ‘a break-down’ and ‘normalcy.’ I argue that crisis does not constitute absolute decline, but experiences that encompass an array of transitional states and fluctuating circumstances that may both traumatize and empower those whose life is in limbo. Any shock to a social system, including an economic bust, ushers in a period of societal liminality. Transitions from predictability to uncertainty produce fear and anxiety among those whose way of life the shock disrupts. *Crisis time* also initiates a process of emotional and cognitive healing, and acts of solidarity and recovery, that in turn accelerate social reconstructions.

I propose that the possibility of renewal following any disaster rests on the power and intersection of three human proclivities: self-preservation, resilience, and agency. Arising simultaneously among individuals who are surviving a common drama, these propensities meld into a collective intelligence that allows people to harness their agency and existing resources to drive sociocultural transformation. Such is the state of affairs in Thessaloniki today. The “tragic circumstances” that the fiscal crash caused, and which dominated locals’ experience for years, are re-conceptualized as valuable lessons that in 2019 form the impetus for their more enlightened and participatory citizenship. This ethnography contributes to the scholarship of shock, crisis, and transformations in a globalizing Europe and in Greece.

**Conceptual Organization of the Book and Overview of Chapters**

I have written this book with a broad readership of anthropologists and others in mind, that includes scholars and students of global disruptions, the crises that particularly unanticipated shocks generate, and local responses—people’s immediate coping and adaptive strategies that may foster enduring structural and cultural reforms. Thessalonikians’ narratives of debt and its implications during a period of harsh austerity in 2011-2012 constitute the centerpiece of the work. I present my interlocutors’ lived experience of abrupt and destabilizing changes to their daily life in their words in four consecutive chapters (3-6) that consist principally of thematically organized interview and observational data.  I devote a separate chapter (7) to a theoretical analysis of the debt crisis as *social liminality*—simultaneous, fluctuating, and cyclical states of a society in limbo during a period of precarious economic, political, and social conditions.

In the **Prologue** I trace the steps that guided me from literary adventures into Thessaloniki’s historical and mythical past, to academic quests in search of feasible research in, and of, the city, through a pilot study in 2009, to systematic ethnographic work among its people in crisis (2011-12). Included in the Prologue are my reflections on “the Greek crisis” (which the media and prospective research participants depicted as a “tragedy”) that preceded my onsite fieldwork. I left the field in August 2012, and as my hosts headed for their homes on the coast or to their natal villages to recover from a year of brutal financial disparities that left them exhausted and demoralized. While my fieldwork ended in 2012, the crisis did not end; it changed, and the people along with it. Individuals and families continue to struggle in 2019, even as ongoing strategies and markers of social recovery proliferate today.

**Chapter 1** includes a brief account of the global, political-economic context of the debt crisis, my theoretical framework, and the research design of the book. Fieldwork principles and methods inform an ethnographic account that was resolutely participatory and collaborative. Analysis is based chiefly on participants’ narratives of crisis. Attention to the Greek state as a member of the European Union, the Eurozone, and subject to global market forces frames my analysis. A theory of *crisis as societal liminality* illuminates a process of sociocultural transformation that external forces propelled and local practices facilitated. The role of Greek politicians as a mediating force between international elites and the country’s ordinary citizens—who have been conscious and unconscious accomplices of their representatives—sheds light on the nature of the Greek crisis.

In **Chapter 2** I introduce readers to the city and its people. Three decades of prosperity preceded the Eurozone debt crisis and the downturn of the Greek economy. Conspicuous consumption of material comforts and sensory pleasures was the norm. An expanding and rising middle-class reveled in professional accomplishments and indulged themselves in leisurely pursuits, even as they reproached the immigrant workers who supported their lifestyle. The city that welcomed me in the aftermath of the fiscal collapse was bruised, with vacant buildings, closed shops, and sidewalks overflowing with trash. However, the city center was as lively and fertile of life as ever. Signs of a downwardly mobile people distressed to the point of desperation, e.g., unable to afford a warm home during an unusually frigid winter, or settling for work without pay, alerted me to the ephemeral joys and inherent risks of borrowed wealth. In Chapter 2, I also introduce the reader to a community of urbanites anguished by fiscal insecurity and moral indignity, yet endowed with generosity of spirit and affect, hospitality, humor, good will and hope.

**Chapter 3** highlights the raw feelings and primary coping strategies that people displayed following a sudden and disorienting financial and moral assault that dislocated them from perceived normalcy to resolute uncertainty. My hosts’ affective responses to the costs of crisis—material losses, social disintegration, psychological disturbances, and physical ailments—permeated conversations regardless of the topic in question. Whether we spoke of educational pursuits, professional advancements, wedding plans, the birth of a second child, or retirement, “crisis’ was everyone’s code word for disruption in or a barrier to such milestones in the life course.

**Chapter 4** captures informants’ painstaking disclosures of accountability for an economic crisis that found them unprepared and unprotected. Discourses of blame often led respondents to ponder explanations for a sinking economy and interpretations of a people drowning in personal regret and public shame. Collective calculations of cause and effect included judgment calls among participants as well as the origins of the debt crisis. They also pointed to the principal figures and agencies of financial and political exploitation, including European and Greek elites. Most painful, yet heartening, were informants’ self-critiques for fiscally naïve or irresponsible practices of the past, and their new valorizations of frugality and moderation in consumption. Chapter 4 shows that concomitant with unsettling psychological states among a people jolted by disaster are intellectual awakenings—renunciations of pre-crisis habits and adoption of more adaptive practices and values.

Crises expose people’s emotional vulnerabilities and revive their rational strengths; they also ignite their natural proclivities and ethereal aspirations. In **Chapter 5** I present my hosts’ testaments to resilience, intentionality, and determination to, not only survive the losses in crisis, but to gain from the resources that it offers, principally time and leisure in the face of mass unemployment. Without exception, study participants countered their own admissions of insecurity and helplessness with affirmations of potentially productive personal and social outcomes. The recession could, declared my hosts, inspire citizens, particularly the young, to revolt against pre-crisis, politically-driven and socially irresponsible economic strategies. The crisis may encourage Greeks to invest instead in the country’s natural and cultural resources, including its maritime, agricultural, and tourism sectors and in its civilization—its many world heritage sites of past and present livelihoods, defeats, and victories on which Thessaloniki’s and Greece’s future may depend.

In **Chapter 6** I spotlight Thessaloniki’s young adults—a generation that the financial debt crisis targeted most severely, and on whom any hope for economic recovery and national rehabilitation rests. All study participants pointed to the nation’s youth as at once the principal victims of a nation-state in decline and as the only promise for Greece’s recovery. As members of the so-called, ‘lost generation’ of Europe’s crisis-ridden Mediterranean societies, Greek youth warrant special attention in this analysis. Their status as the most credentialed, educated, urban, and upwardly mobile middle-class generation in the history of modern Greece subjected them to the perils of an underdeveloped, shadow state economy. Armed with advanced literacy, technological savvy and worldly sensibilities, young Greeks are poised to imagine and to construct alternative, more sustainable futures for themselves and the generations that follow. Chapter 6 captures their reflections and ideals as Thessaloniki’s self-conscious, and increasingly resourceful agents of social reforms.

I devote **Chapter 7** to theoretical analysis of Thessalonikians’ multidimensional responses to harsh austerities and societal shifts. Interviews with hundreds of formal study participants, focus groups, and impromptu conversations with random locals form the basis of my interpretations. External and internal conditions precipitated the state debt crisis. Greeks continue to suffer in a recession, even as they exhibit organized forms of resilience and creative solutions to persistent disorder. At the center of this analysis are citizens who occupy a liminal status and their daily transactions—decisions, choices, values, and actions—with one another and with their institutional representatives. Personal coping mechanisms and collective adaptive strategies to economic precarity and political uncertainty reveal the generative, revelatory, and transformative elements of societal liminality. I argue that people’s conscious and unconscious responses to crisis, as individuals and members of households, and ultimately as citizens of a nation and the world, fuel gradual and incremental transitions that in time lead to structural and sociocultural reforms.

The **Epilogue** is based on my continued contact with Thessaloniki and its residents through social media, brief visits to Greece in November 2013 and February 2015, follow-up ethnographic data by a graduate research assistant during summers 2013-2018, and published literature on the Greek crisis and related questions. Thousands still endure the consequences of the 2008 financial crash. While many families in Thessaloniki continue to struggle financially, and individuals emigrate or migrate to secure their survival, the city has turned decidedly more optimistic. The fiscal collapse brought Thessaloniki’s efforts toward sustainable development to a halt. Yet, apparent in 2019 is its residents’ ongoing creative adaptations, intentional reforms, and animated spirits. Such sentiments signal a shift away from despair toward resilience. Middle-aged parents and retirees offer unwavering support of young adults’ efforts to not only overcome, but to benefit from the crisis through collective engagements in cultural developments. Thessalonikians’ articulations of their city’s value, national pride, and transnational solidarity, now dominate discourses of resilience and recovery. The July 7, 2019 Greek legislative election returned to power with nearly 40 percent of the popular vote New Democracy, the party led by Kyriakos Mitsotakis, signaling new hopes and aspirations for Greek resilience. Indeed, now “Greece is the good news story in Europe,” heralds the New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/08/opinion/greece-elections.html>

**Key Concepts**

Globalization

Neoliberalism

Austerity

Cosmopolitanism

European Union

Eurozone

Greece

Thessaloniki

Debt Crisis

Ethnography

Crisis Theory

Societal Liminality

Transnational Solidarity

Resilience

Cultural Change

Social Reconstruction

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**Reviews**

“Kozaitis explores the effects of enforced economic austerity on ordinary lives in a Greek city.  Her book is an eloquent testament to the residents’ extraordinary resilience, self-awareness, and capacity for deep solidarity in the face of a cruel and unexpectedly rapid erosion in the quality of their lives.” – Michael Herzfeld, Harvard University, author of *Cultural Intimacy*

“This book is ethnography at its finest. It takes us deep into the lives of people in Thessaloniki (Salonica) as they grapple with the shock of a broken economy and the fall from a comfortable, middle-class life, to previously unimaginable austerity.” – H. Russell Bernard, University of Florida, author of *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*

“In a masterful blend of ethnographic detail sophisticated theorization, Kozaitis charts the lasting impact of financial austerity on middle-class residents of the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki. Reaching beyond the stereotypes of the so-called “Greek Crisis,” Kozaitis takes the reader on a colourful and at times emotional tour of the local consequences of a global disaster. The research is detailed, current, and engages with issues beyond the borders of Greece. The author explains her methodologies and personal investment in the topic of research and provides poignant insights into one of the landmark socio-political events of the 21st century to date. Kozaitis reminds us that although Greece might now be out of the international media spotlight, the consequences of a decade of structural readjustment continue unabated in every aspect of everyday life. The thematic breadth is impressive – liminality, resilience, leisure, resistance, and solidarity. This book lends localized nuance to global phenomena, is a valuable contribution to ethnographies of austerity and crisis, and represents a key contribution to 21st century European ethnography.” – Daniel M. Knight, *The University of St. Andrews*