

Intimate Uncertainties

Ethnographic Explorations of Moral Economies across Europe

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ABSTRACT

For this special issue we are bringing together six ethnographic cases of intimate uncertainties that are situated within different regimes of reproduction, healthcare and borders in and beyond Europe. These ethnographic inquiries exemplify unprecedented settings of moral ir/responsibility shaping the intimate on different scales and in various sites of power (agencies, clinics, borderlands). These uncertainties in times of major transitions from old to new moral orders, from industrial to postindustrial, from welfare to austerity spark off a renewed debate on moral economy. The authors of these contributions all focus the theoretical lens of moral economy squarely onto the intimate.

KEYWORDS

Europe, intimate uncertainties, moral economies, regimes of reproduction, healthcare regime, border regime

The articles in this special issue explore dimensions of intimate uncertainties in different European contexts. They all draw on material from long-term ethnographic research in England, Germany, Mexico, Montenegro, Morocco, Russia, Spain and Ukraine. Current regimes of reproduction, healthcare and borders in Europe and beyond exemplify unprecedented settings of ir/responsibility shaping the intimate on different scales (e.g. body, family, state) and in various sites of power (reproduction agencies, abortion clinics, transplant hospitals and border areas).

The basis for this issue was developed in the SNSF project 'Intimate Uncertainties: Precarious Life and Moral Economy across European Borders' and further elaborated with the authors in a workshop that took place in January 2017. The ethnographic projects presented here analyse how people in intimate and existential crises – such as infertility or unwanted pregnancy, fatal illness and in/adequate care, unsettled livelihoods and the ongoing 'border spectacle' (De Genova 2013) – respond to the uncertainties these crises entail. Building on



this, this volume deals with issues of im/mobility and the question of how, for some, the struggle for a better life demands crossing European borders in one direction or the other. Furthermore, a feminist perspective on intimacy shaped by existential uncertainties in the economic and political realm finally reveals the gendered working of moral economy in intimate contexts.

The uncertainties we focus on are intimate and gendered as well as existential, and we analyse them through the lens of moral economies. The authors relate to this theoretical frame in order to explore intimate questions of life and death: Veronika Siegl follows intended parents who visit agencies in Russia and Ukraine to employ surrogate mothers for fulfilling their inmost desire of having a baby. She convincingly shows how parents and agencies morally legitimise these highly contested reproductive practices and the commodification of parenthood by adopting ‘happiness’ as the ultimate aim of surrogacy. Michele Rivkin-Fish engages with the Russian feminist movement’s struggle for the right to make their intimate decision to avoid or to terminate an unwanted pregnancy in the changing moral economy of abortion in Russia. Feminist activists identify the failure of the state to support families as the major problem for parenthood, and Rivkin-Fish depicts their strategies – inspired by the Russian legacy as much as by global feminist movements – as an effort to criticise the increasingly moral framing and restriction of abortion as the main practice of birth control. She analyses how activists blame economic problems and the lack of public care for women’s decisions against pregnancy.

Sick people who are in desperate need of a liver transplant in Germany are the focus of Julia Rehsman’s article. She explores how the failure of livers is morally seen as self-inflicted when associated with alcohol abuse. She navigates through the patients’ medical biographies and identifies intimate and gendered transplant uncertainties they encounter in clinics that are assumed to be morally neutral. Rehsman analyses the practices of distributing livers, which is expected to follow objective algorithms yet is actually shaped by moral scrutiny of patients’ behaviour in the German healthcare system. Likewise, studying the intimate relations of healthcare and neoliberal practices in Mexico and the UK, Ciara Kierans describes the patients’ fight against a life-threatening disease and their hope for a kidney transplant. On the basis of her comparative analysis she elucidates how appalling weaknesses in Mexico’s healthcare regime surprisingly shed light on the neoliberal transformations of the allegedly safe National Health Service (NHS) in the UK.

Gerhild Perl explores the uncertainties and intimacies in the ongoing relations between the Spanish inhabitants of Rota and the Moroccan villagers of Hansala, enforced by a shipwreck with casualties in 2003. While the people of Hansala were mourning the loss of their relatives in almost every household, two activists and teachers from Rota took up the responsibility of the failed politics of the Spanish migration regime and started a solidarity project to improve livelihood in Hansala and prevent life-threatening migration and death at the Spanish coast. The study of intimate uncertainties in Jelena Tošić's ethnography reveals 'relational ethics' among local Albanians and immigrants in the Montenegrin harbour town of Ulqin/Ulcinj. She explores the historical embeddedness and the present practices of expecting 'never too much' in local women's marriage strategies, in men's attitudes towards possession and in Russian immigrants' expectations of belonging and citizenship. She persuasively demonstrates that this ethical attitude is not a cultural pattern but rather a relational practice repeated in various settings and on different scales of uncertainties.

For this special issue we identified 'intimate uncertainties' as the main object of inquiry and looked at the selected ethnographic studies through the lens of moral economy, which has become highly relevant again in recent anthropological debates on economic, financial and refugee crises in Europe (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). The ethnographic examples ask from different angles how the intimate and existential experience of life and death is entangled with moral economies in particular contexts.

Ethnographic Explorations of Moral Economies

Moral economy has been a relevant concept in social science to analyse the common good in terms of rights, expectations and aspirations ever since the labour historian E. P. Thompson (1971) used the term in his famous article entitled 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century'. In it he argued that grain riots of the late eighteenth century had a moral dimension: these riots were not an 'irrational response to hunger' (1971: 136) when grain prices soar but rather a form of collective action grounded upon 'a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community [as well as] moral assumptions' (1971: 79). At the core of this moral economy of

the poor are the relationships between bakers and millers serving the community ‘for a fair allowance’ (1971: 83), the authorities supposed to regulate prices, and the emerging working class. In the transition to industrial capitalism, important tensions between fair prices and free market affected the moral economy of the poor, whereby the agency, subjectivity and experience of ordinary people enter the analytical frame (Millar 2015). James Scott (1976, 1985) has been the first social anthropologist to engage with this concept. In his monograph *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976) he explored peasant rebellions that took place in Burma and Vietnam in the 1930s. He argues that peasant risk aversion and subsistence security formed the basis for complex relations of loyalty, reciprocity, and responsibility that were severely tested under colonialism and capitalism. In Thompson’s and Scott’s understanding, moral economy underpins economic practices that are intertwined with moral obligations and social norms.

Over the last decade the concept of moral economy has gained new prominence in social anthropological research on morality as well as the study of protracted financial, humanitarian, refugee, property and housing crises under the current neoliberal order (Alexander et al. 2018; Besky 2014; Fassin and Eideliman 2012; Fischer 2014; Palomera and Vetta 2016). In 2009 Didier Fassin revisited the concept in important ways. By defining moral economies as the ‘production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in social space’ (2009: n.p.), he expanded the critical potential of the concept to study given social groups or societies beyond preindustrial contexts. Against this theoretical backdrop we consider moral economy as an anthropological way of studying hope and uncertainties at a particular time and space (Narotzky and Besnier 2014; Palomera and Vetta 2016) and as a tool to challenge simplistic economic perspectives (Carrier 2018; Hann 2010). It allows us to trace different moral practices as well as intimate crises embedded in them.

The six articles in this issue use the concept of moral economy to underline mutual obligations of different actors related to the intimate sphere (Carrier 2018) and clarify what counts as moral and appropriate in specific ethnographic settings connected with reproduction, national healthcare systems and migration regimes. In her study of the transnational moral economy of commercial surrogacy, Veronika Siegl reveals which narratives, actions and subjectivities are legitimate to promise happiness. She shows how the success of commercial agencies depends on their ability to instrumentalise economic considerations and broader cultural values related to happiness. Her

particular focus is on the ‘affective labour of happiness’ made from intermediaries and advocates and how it is critical to the moral economy of the surrogacy market. Michele Rivkin-Fish provides a study of the moral economy of feminist abortion advocacy in Russia. While feminist claims towards bodily autonomy appeared recently in Russia, they rely on a collective understanding of reproduction as a domain involving a range of obligations, responsibilities and ethical demands between the state and its male and female citizens. She demonstrates how ideas about childbearing and abortion are closely related to socialist and postsocialist expectations of reciprocity.

Julia Rehsmann is concerned with the moral economy of the German liver transplant system. She argues that liver transplant medicine is a prime field for exploring how moral economies of healthcare regimes affect the lives of those looking for medical care. While triage and the trope of scarcity play a role, she shows that arbitrariness heavily rules liver transplantation. Ciara Kierans provides an original account of the moral economies underpinning the Mexican and British healthcare systems: the regime of care and form of biopolitics they generate in relation to kidney treatment differ greatly. While the British NHS enjoys a great moral prestige based on principles of universal and free access, through her insights from the Mexican case Kierans shows that the British system is highly disembedded from society. In a context of austerity marked by profit-making activities, it generates important inequalities in terms of access.

The articles by Gerhild Perl and Jelena Tošić scrutinise the moral economy of the EU border regime. Gerhild Perl describes how the moral responsibility for the death of migrants trying to enter the European Union by sea is collectively erased. Her contribution follows the production, distribution and circulation of emotions, norms and values that normalise and rationalise Europe’s lethal border regime. She further analyses this with a view on an alternative development project between Spain and Morocco initiated after a shipwreck in Spain. In her article, Tošić adopts a different perspective on moral economy by exploring relationality. She conceptualises modes of ethics in Ulqin/Uljinc as relational and thus shows different gendered constellations in histories as moral economy – in relation with land, marriage partners and locality. She explores how an ethics of ‘never too much’ represents expectations at the different scales of marriage, possession and belonging as well as citizenship.

Altogether, people’s expectations, desires and entitlements are the cornerstone of the moral economies these articles analyse on the basis

of their ethnographic research. Beyond fair-trade initiatives, grassroots exchange and alternative economic projects, morality and economics have been seen as opposites for a long time. Fischer (2014: 8) argues that ‘moral values serve as a fundamental linchpin linking global processes and local worlds’. We believe that morals are intertwined with market forces, and we show that people’s economic behaviour and intimate subjectivities are closely entangled.

Intimate Uncertainties in and across Europe

Following Zygmunt Bauman (2003), we suggest that one of the tensions affecting intimacy occurs between security and freedom. Bauman (2007) insists on the ‘liquid’ state of the current phase of modernity, characterised by uncertain human bonds and the disappearance of traditional sources of solace. Feelings of anxiety and fear prevail, preventing lasting attachments and commitments. In this context of uncertainty the actors we are interested in all oscillate back and forth between freedom and ir/responsibility or between historically shaped uncertainty and moral responses, all the while negotiating intimacy in new ways.

The concept of uncertainty can be traced back to the economist Frank Knight’s distinction between risk and uncertainty (1921). According to Douglas North’s (2010: 13) reading of Knight, ‘risk was a condition in which it was possible to derive a probability distribution of outcomes so that one could insure against such a condition. Uncertainty according to Knight was a condition in which no such probability distribution existed’. We understand intimate uncertainty as a condition in which the actors involved cannot anticipate the outcome of situations. We further use intimate uncertainties in the plural to denote that they are differently intertwined with political choices and unequal power distribution. Although there is a debate in social science at large to decipher whether uncertainty or stability and economic growth have been the dominant norm in different social and historical contexts, what we suggest is that the way ordinary people intimately experience radical uncertainty – of economic and political nature – has changed in the last years. Indeed, these changing and challenging uncertainties intimately affect their visions of fairness, expectations for the future and right and wrong courses of actions.

In the late twentieth century, ubiquitous changes caused by transnational connectedness and technological innovations in our social environments, couple relationships and relationships between friends, kin,

parents and children triggered a new interest for intimacy in the social sciences (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Giddens 1992; Hochschild 2012; Luhmann 1986; Plummer 2003; Sennett 1996). Intimacy has been mainly expanded theoretically by black and postcolonial feminism (Rose 2003; Stoler 2006) and by queer studies (Foucault 1978; Povinelli 2006; Rubin 2011), who connected the realm of privacy and closeness with not only new forms of kinship and sexuality but also the sphere of politics, violence and power. Ann Stoler (2006), in her study of the colonial past, for example, suggested to explore intimacies within and beyond the domestic sphere and as sites of inequality. Drawing on this body of work, we argue that intimacies once mainly depicted as zones of familiarity and comfort with unavoidable insertions of troubles and violence (Berlant 2000) are major sites of power in today's settings of uncertainties.

Anthropologist Niko Besnier sees the strength of intimacy in its elusiveness. Intimacy, he suggests,

means nothing independent of a context, but once this context has been established, it serves to help people classify, characterize and understand human activity. It is this semiotic complexity that bestows its slippery quality, but it is precisely this indeterminacy that makes intimacy fascinating as an ethnographic object of enquiry. (2015: 109)

Intimacy has always been part of ethnographic explorations. In anthropology – as in social sciences in general – intimacy for a long time has been associated with the private, protected and peaceful part of ordinary lives. Translocal connectedness and the transformations of communication, including the exposure of the self in social media platforms, have made public scrutiny of the private realm part of our daily and intimate lives. We want to take up an ethnographically driven approach by investigating sites of intimacy in times of uncertainties through the lens of an economy of moralities, values and hopes (Fassin 2012; Palomera and Vetta 2016).

In the ethnographies in this issue, intimacy refers to physical as well as emotional and social relationships that integrate medical care for individuals and kin, reproductive dimensions of families and the collective responsibility of border politics. Intimacies in the context of fear, risk and hope in this collective approach are linked with the processes of commodification (Constable 2009: 50), morality and ir/responsibility (Perl and Strasser 2018). We further suggest that intimacy and intimate relations are always in the making (Sim and Vickery 2014), as they are negotiated within families, articulated between lovers and friends, experienced deeply within the self and expressed even by dead bodies.

Viviana Zelizer's seminal book on the entanglement of intimate and economic spheres (2005) inspired our work on integrating economy, morals and intimacies instead of seeing them as hostile worlds apart. Furthermore, Didier Fassin's reconsideration of moral economy in the context of humanitarian interventions and, thus, in the realm of disasters, catastrophes and uncertainties stimulated our debates on the governance of health, reproduction and migration through moral anthropology. Even if criticised because of its lack of economic analysis (Kloos 2012; Palomera and Vetta 2016), Fassin's discussion (2009) of moral economy as the distribution of morals, values and affects provoked a refreshing anthropological debate on moral economy. This renewed debate on moral economy sparked off in times of major transitions, between old and new moral orders, from industrial to postindustrial, and from welfare to austerity.

The research we brought together in this special issue all explore experiences of existential uncertainty within the realm of the utmost intimate that is invaded by crisis and capitalism. We took up and expanded the debate on the intertwinement of the political, the economic and the moral (Hochschild 2012; Oswin and Olund 2010) by including the intimate in ethnographically grounded studies of the gendered regimes of reproduction, health and migration.

Veronika Siegl's article articulates this frame as the 'inner workings of capitalism that creeps into the sphere of intimacy' (Siegl in this issue) when couples decide to have a baby born from a surrogate mother. She shows how reproductive agencies move children as 'happy objects' (Ahmed 2010) into the realm of commerce. Michele Rivkin-Fish's study identifies the right to abortion as a contested site of decisions on the individual body, where the competition between the public and the intimate takes place. She concludes that 'state leaders seek to resolve uncertainties regarding the Russian nation and women strive to maintain control over their personal lives' (Rivkin-Fish in this issue). The intimate experience of a life-threatening disease in the context of different healthcare regimes are the focus of Julia Rehsman and Ciara Kierans. Both ask how intimacies are entangled with the moral economy of transplant systems. While Rehsman looks into the intimate uncertainties of people with an alcoholic liver disease seeking medical care and reveals a gendered dimension of the moral triaging of lives, Kierans's article traces how sick bodies are intimately connected with neoliberally transformed care systems and their moral economies. Gerhild Perl explores intimacies that arise in the encounter with dead bodies washed ashore

close to Spanish people's homes in 2003 and in the unexpected connectedness and affection between strangers combatting economic inequality and moral irresponsibility of the EU border regime. Jelena Tošić explores intimacies as long-term, emotional and both essential as well as fragile forms of close relations situated on the different scales of personal (marriage), object-oriented (land property) and place-related (belonging after immigration) attachments embedded in social and historical transformations.

All articles in this special issue argue that intimacy encompasses the spheres of life, life cycles and death. According to Maurice Bloch, in Europe as well as in other Western societies people perceive life and death as two very distinct spheres, with life having a clear beginning and a clear end. He argues that this differentiation has been reflected in the constitution of the person as an individual – understood as an entity. 'One is either an individual with all the parts joined, or one is divided, which in our system means being nothing at all, or in other words dead' (Bloch 1988: 16). The different case studies of this special issue call the clear-cut boundaries and unity of human life and human agency into question not only because they involve body parts (such as gametes and organs) but more essentially because the social and biological nature of life and death irremediably come apart. Corpses and personal belongings of anonymous migrants landing on Andalusian beaches raise the question of recognition, rights and the mourning of the dead in violent contexts (Perl in this issue). Life and death merge in the case of patients receiving an organ from braindead patients: one person's life is rescued only because the life of another person comes to an end (Rehsmann and Kierans in this issue). While prospective European parents hope to create life in the Ukraine with the help of surrogate mothers (Siegl in this issue), women's organisations in Russia fight for the right to prevent pregnancies by contraceptives rather than with abortion (Rivkin-Fish in this issue).

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