

I guess I must admit it right at the beginning: Few topics seem as exhausted, worn out and even irritating to me as “collectives and communities”. When confronted with texts and projects about this topic, I feel an urge to drop them and redirect my attention before it’s too late, the tension is almost equal to when in church the tone of the preacher’s voice during the first words gives away the gist of the sermon after just a few seconds.

So, this is maybe why I accepted *Artalk*’s offer to prepare a selection of texts on collectives and communities. Despite being nothing new, the community turn can’t be overlooked. For several years, it has been circulating intensely in art and cultural production as a universal remedy to the individualism-centered capitalistic pressure putting cooperation against the market’s competitiveness and emphasizing sharing and unconditional togetherness instead of productivity, the ability of self-regeneration instead of endless growth, an organic bottom-up instead of a grid-centralist top-down approach. It experiments with forms of non-hierarchical structures. It should all click, but, for some reason, it doesn’t. The text selection for *Artalk Revue 6* is an attempt to put into words, even for myself, what annoys me on the community turn in art so much and why, even though I share, to a large extent, its starting points.

Today, the community and collective turn is probably most often referred to in attempts to introduce the shared commons into practice and also in an effort to think and design more-than-human alliances. In a time of extreme concentration of wealth and of social inequalities („There

are billions of users and one billionaire,” writes Jodi Dean in her essay *Society doesn't exist*) on the one side and a looming environmental collapse on the other side, this seems to be the most logical reaction. My critical suspicion is that community projects get all too often locked in an endless loop so establishing relationships becomes their goal. Under what conditions can community and collective building become a political and not just a therapeutic tool?

It is probably given by my anthropological background, but projects, which in some way put collectiveness “on display” (from developers’ PR projects to esoteric eco-communities), remind me persistently in some respects of 19th century’s human zoos. The early capitalist society, exhausted by advancing industrialization and its mechanical repetitiveness, created an image of lost authenticity projecting it into the people of colonized countries which paid the price for “progress” by being exploited and plundered. Those “noble savages” were then displayed as an attraction at fairs, shows, and world exhibitions. As a relic of something irretrievably disappearing and fascinating but irrelevant. Aren’t we, in “displaying” collectiveness and community or the ability to establish a relationship, currently doing something similar? Especially when this is happening in projects limited by one-year grant schemes whose implementation depends on hours of unpaid work, personal and professional excessive pressure, and periodical burnouts. When striving to create more than art and design different, better worlds, we often exhaust ourselves and our personal relationships with our loved ones and end up realizing we need to make our living from something.

And there is also another aspect. The people of colonized countries in those stylized scenes in human zoos were not supposed to represent a radical alternative – in fact, they were just representing living proof of Western hegemony. And above all, those staged lost paradises were sending out a message that they had been irreversibly lost and tamed, they were not representing a threatening different world which could prevail at any time. I am afraid that community projects that invest all their effort and means into portraying the fact that other worlds are still possible, without focusing on the structural reasons of why we can’t, don’t want to and don’t know how to establish relationships and alliances naturally, are rather a museified, harmless staging of alterity than a potential alternative. Under what conditions the former turns into the latter so that new imaginations lead to utopias instead of escapism? Community art practice alone does not offer an answer to this question.

Especially when communities are romanticized and venerated in the grant language as a sacred, untouchable concept. Thus, they become not only an analogy of missionary work and moralizing about “good examples”, but, above all, of boredom. Communities and collectives unavoidably include conflicts, tension, frustrations, ego trips and organizational incompetence masked behind horizontality and openness. But this is often their most interesting aspect. By suppressing it we reproduce a false flawless, unachievable image we can cling on to while considering the contact with real community representatives, such as our apartment house neighbors or close family, unbearable.

In her essay *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Wendy Brown, an American political scientist, considers separation walls the ultimate manifestation of the decline of state sovereignty. Only those states that are feeling insecure, weak, and threatened need to ostentatiously declare their power by means of security walls. Walls are the materialization and performance of the states’ melancholy for their lost sovereignty. The current fascination with communities and collectives may be, first and foremost, the performance and re-update of our melancholy for lost cohesion.

The texts collected in *Artalk Revue 6* question whether such an ideal state has ever existed while coming up with a reoriented focus: They look into the forms and mechanisms

of cohesion between groups that go beyond the stereotype of „good examples“ and artistic practice. Their perspective extends to social sciences: Kristína Országhová writes about sports communities acting as both a refuge and a battlefield and as a tool of reproduction of class and gender differences but also of their possible subversion. Ondřej Slačálek focuses on the mutual dynamics between the Czech neo-Nazi and antifascist scenes in the 90s and describes the ideological, communication and aesthetic constellations they were creating within one shared battlefield. The visual essay RUVK (Realist Utopia Velký Krtíš) is a report on the inhabitants of a socially excluded house who have not chosen this identity but are forced to deal with its stigma on a daily basis. In this house, the romantic idea of more-than-human alliances is directly confronted with the necessity to share one's private living space with cockroaches and true bugs.

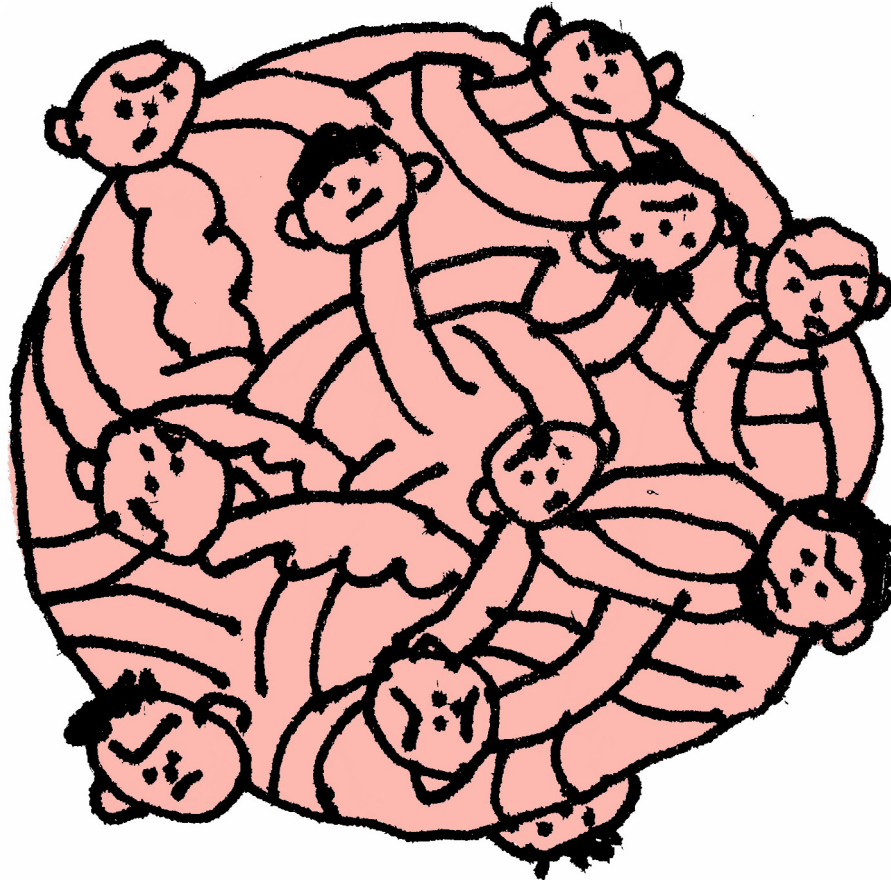
Elisabeth Schimpfössl's translated text is linked to the opposite pole of the social spectrum and analyzes philanthrocapitalism as a tool of class reproduction of the Russian super-rich. It points out that they use philanthropic activities both to legitimize their status and disproportionate wealth and also as a trick allowing them to create a continuity between seemingly unconnectable opposites: totalitarian socialism, in which they grew up, and capitalism, in which they became rich. In the second translated text, Jodi Dean analyzes three claims for the non-existence of society applying them on the world of social media. She sees them as an example of collective production which collides with the absence of collective ownership frameworks and thus leads to extreme accumulation of individual profits. She suggests we reorient our focus from the questions of content decentralization and circulation to ownership relations in the world of social media.

The selection of five texts for *Artalk Revue* cannot be exhaustive. But maybe it will manage to suggest that communities, collectives, and societies can, instead of being a spectacular-melancholic showcase of “what connects us”, form precisely from the other side: From realizing that we all must live off something and somewhere. Collective practice can then be about finding ways to transform this limitation into a starting point.

English translation: Anna Žilková

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Illustrations: Dorota Brázdovičová



When confronted with fascism,¹ a liberal is first and foremost faced with a mystery: How can this work? How can such a repulsive ideology which had committed such an atrocious set of crimes strike a chord with humanity? To what extent are these people strangers to us – are they even people?

I will never forget the debate caused some fifteen years ago by the film *Der Untergang – Downfall* in English. Some critics complained that the film's portrayal of Hitler was too human, that it pictured his fall, and one would even be tempted to feel compassion with him. Honestly, it is quite difficult to find anything remotely human in the trembling wreck screaming "Das war ein befehl!" – in reality, the film actually depicts Hitler as a very advanced monstrosity. But first and foremost – how else could Hitler be depicted than a human? Was he a UFO? A different form of life?

The monstrification of Hitler plays a double role. First of all, it displaces him to a safe distance preventing us from fully realizing the weight and consequences of the fact that Nazi crimes were committed by people, basically by people like us and therefore we are not immune to them. So, it can happen to us as well that *others* will see us, under certain circumstances, as monsters.

The second role is seemingly contradictory: portraying Hitler as a monster dehumanizes him but at the same time makes him a household name. He appears

¹ Let's start with one thing: though some otherwise minds flinch when fascism and Nazism are treated as one and put forward their many differences (and, in terms of historical detail, they might even be right), we will refer to the authority of Robert Paxton in *The Anatomy of Fascism* (Penguin Books, 2004) who states, like many other authors, that Nazism and fascism share similar key structural characteristics and should be analyzed under one common name.

in jokes and becomes an omnipresent artifact, an important, however denied, part of our world, of our culture, and of Internet memes. In hundred years, will he be someone like Napoleon is today? Hard to say. Evil is sexy and monstrous evil can be monstrously sexy.

Before it was fascism

Nevertheless, the source of fascism's persuasiveness could not have been just one personality, however demonic it might have been (and it is not even clear whether Hitler was not actually rather a below-average genius). The source of attractiveness must have been somewhere else.

And where this might have been, is suggested by Hitler's excited look on an old photo when he learns about the World War I. It is suggested by many Nazis' World War I front line experience which stretched the boundaries of the imaginable. It is also suggested by a story which is crazy enough to be repeated frequently, often with a different ideological meaning. After the World War I, a group of Italian war veterans frustrated by Italy's unmet territorial claims occupied the Croatian town of Rijeka and established the "Free State of Fiume" governed by the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio famous for his belligerent dramas and his war pilot stint. D'Annunzio approached Fiume as a theatrical experiment and a great show giving frequent long speeches during his 15-month long reign. The eccentric artist and his followers were expelled from the city by the Italian army after it accepted the Allies' conditions which did not include Rijeka. Before that, D'Annunzio had time to sign one of the first fascist manifestos and influence Mussolini.²

But before the war, Mussolini was already influenced by another thinker and author of original insights and also of some of the most bizarre ideological turns in the history of modern political ideas. Georges Sorel was an engineer who took an early retirement at the age of forty-five and, despite his conservative values, soon joined the extreme left – first the Marxist socialists and then the revolutionary trade unionists of the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail – General Confederation of Labour). In his most famous text *Reflections on Violence* (1908) he divides ideologies into utopias and myths. A utopia is a detailed plan of the future resulting in the central role of intellectuals, endless debates and, in the end, compromises. A myth, on the contrary, is a vague, fight-inspiring image which leads to heroism and self-surpassing.³ And a myth is what creates a new community, a community of solidarity in combat.

It seemed for a while that Sorel had found this heroism in belligerent CGT syndicalists, anarchists, and the radical left. Following the example of the first Christians, who were inspired by the myth of the apocalypse, he saw the modern myth in the general strike – a thrilling epic about the working class's fight against the bourgeoisie and about the ability of workers to force society to a complete halt.

But shortly after the release of *Reflections on Violence* (and in a time of police repressions against CGT syndicalists), Sorel suddenly understood that radical trade unionists had nothing to offer and that their vision of liberation was rather distant from his quite conservative moral beliefs. He got close with monarchists and nationalists – the extreme right of the time. His friends founded a rather bizarre group called Cercle Proudhon named after a prominent anarchist theorist who had, contrary to other anarchists, strongly conservative and also sexist opinions. Their logo featured a sickle,

² See for ex. Hakim Bey, *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, New York: Autonomedia, 1991; Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017.

³ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on violence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

a hammer and a monarchist sword. At the time, Sorel was attacked by an eminent Italian socialist leader who said that by joining the reactionists, this “retired bookworm” had betrayed the workers’ movement for good. It was not until a few years later that this socialist was hugely impressed by *Reflections on Violence* after reading it in prison. His name was Benito Mussolini.

According to Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell, the fascist ideology was basically ready to be applied during the last pre-war years in France.⁴ Others object that the chaos of opinions surrounding Sorel and his peers contained many different ideas: those that were close to fascism alongside many emancipation ideas which were hardly compatible with or even contradictory to fascism. And they also add that it does not make much sense to speak about an ideology without a real movement, especially in case of fascism. Historian Robert Paxton wrote that “fascism was an affair of the gut more than of other body organs”.⁵ It is probably necessary to avoid both extremes: in case of fascism, ideas are not enough, it must be experienced physically. But this also applies to other ideologies – they all need both ideas and physicality.

Sorel himself underwent yet another change of opinion: while most future fascists welcomed the outbreak of the World War I with excitement and Mussolini went straight to making every effort to drag his originally neutral country into it, Sorel was horrified. He was shocked by the enhanced powers of the state, the war propaganda and lies, the underlying moral decline. This really was not what he had imagined when, a few years ago, he dreamed and philosophized about a spur of liberating violence. He had time to do another leap in opinions – express support to the Russian revolution and Lenin – and then he died in 1922. Rumor has it that in the 1930s, Mussolini’s Italy and Stalin’s Soviet Union were sending competing offers to decorate his modest tomb with a sumptuous monument, but Sorel’s family refused them all. His old-time friends and fellow combatants joined both the extreme left and the extreme right. The latter also had various fates: while Hubert Lagardelle became Minister of Labour in the Vichy collaborationist government which earned him a prison sentence after the war, Georges Valois, one of the founders of Cercle Proudhon, joined the anti-Nazi resistance and died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.⁶

The following history of fascism and Nazism is well-known. Sorel was a somewhat marginal figure – if he was someone then a rather questionable precursor. But maybe his ideas about combat and myth shed a direct light on those sources of fascism that we don’t want to see because they reveal its attractiveness.

Why did the Czech skins start using the Nazi salute?

We can ask whether these sources of attractiveness translate to present day. Which is also related to other questions: To what extent is today’s neo-fascist movement related to the examples of the past it refers to? Is history repeating itself or are today’s neo-Nazis and neo-fascists some sort of historical swordsmen mimicking, in a completely different historical context, gestures which have already lost their meaning? Should extreme-right violence and ideology be seen as a continuation, as an imitation or as an unwanted parody?

Filip Vávra is a peculiar figure of the Czech extreme right. He has been connected to it since his early youth, at the end of the 90s he was considered a neo-Nazi leader which he never denied. He led several marches and brawls but also faced

4 Zeev Sternhell – Mario Sznajder – Maia Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology. From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

5 Paxton (note 1).

6 Jack J. Roth, *The Cult of Violence: Sorel and the Sorelians*, Berkeley – Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980.

serious accusations of working with the police and intense police pressure. The man who brought Ku Klux Klan's grand wizard David Duke to the Czech Republic has nevertheless decided to revisit some of his opinions. He has learnt from his Western role models that it is good to change one's language, and probably even one's approach, a bit: instead of speaking about racism in terms of racial superiority, he now refers to "racial separatism". He has a degree in Anglo-American Studies and almost thirty years after the rise of racist skinheads he decided to revisit their story in his 2017 self-published book *Těžký boty to vyřešej hned* (*Combat boots are an immediate solution*). The period is described through the fascinated eyes of a teenager (he was thirteen in 1991) and through the memories of his contemporary young street warriors.

While writing this book, Filip Vávra was driven by a double passion: in his reminiscing for premature living witnesses he loudly voices his intention to strive for the truth without avoiding controversial matters, but he has also decided to make it a nice time. He achieved both, to a certain extent: the brawls and racist attacks gain on a romantic undertone with the passage of time. But there are also some hiccups. Filip Vávra, who wants to be portrayed as a "decent patriot" today and even praises the Prague uprising of May 1945 in his song *Barikády Prahy* (*Prague's barricades*), must explain how come the Nazi salute was so widely used within the "nationalist" movement. He gives several explanations: an influence from the West, which shaped the Czech skins' subculture, an attempt to provoke and to be tough... and then there was also another reason. Named Ben.

According to the neo-Nazi veterans whom Vávra interviewed:

"Ben had a talent to enthuse people. He was always easy-going, smiling, in good spirits and fun to be around. And whenever we were set to commit another rascality, everybody waited for what Ben comes up with... Ben has this one quality: everybody likes him. Everybody brags about knowing him. He welds people together and we can say that the more Ben uses the Nazi salute, the more it is used by others..."

The only person who resisted the Nazi salute in the skinhead subculture was, according to Vávra's account, Dan Landa.⁷ Despite being a singer in a popular band, he did not enjoy much authority among skinheads, also due to his not-so-brave TV appearances. He simply couldn't measure up to Ben. When he argued against Nazism with an example from Ben's own family, it fell on deaf ears. "Holy shit, Ben, how can you? Your granddad, a general, died in a concentration camp!" "Honey," was Ben's serious immediate reply, "but he was an enemy of the Reich."

It was obviously not just about one person: "Ben" was definitely important, but in those reminiscences, he became mainly a synecdoche for what members expected of the skinhead subculture and what it was giving to them. The immediate closeness, the brawler's sense of belonging in combat and the need for a shared myth which distinguishes them from the rest of the world while making this rest of the world react strongly – all these needs prevailed over recent historical experience and even over family memory. The air was filled with "a desire to fight and the guys' desire to solve all their burning issues, here and now. They had their own take on the newly acquired freedom and wanted to show themselves to the world. With a shaved head and their right arm in the air."⁸ Hundreds of wounded and dozens of dead, mostly from the Roma community, fell victim to this take on freedom.

7 Note of the editor: Daniel Landa is a Czech rock singer, popular for his patriotic themes in his songs. In 1988 he founded the band Orlík, which is very popular among skinheads. The lyrics of some of his songs (e.g. "White League", "White Rider") often appear at anti-immigrant and far-right demonstrations.

8 Filip Vávra, *Těžký boty to vyřešej hned. Skinheads v Praze na konci 80. a začátku 90. let* (*Combat boots are an immediate solution. Skinheads in Prague at the of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s*), Prague: Fiva, 2017, p. 67–68.

Sharing in combat?

In his essay *Války dvacátého století a dvacáté století jako válka (Wars of the 20th Century and the 20th Century as War)* philosopher Jan Patočka describes the World War I front-line experience as the key experience for the entire following century. We could agree with his words that these front-line experiences of various seriously traumatized army comrade unions became the foundation of various fascist groups. Nevertheless, Patočka was addressing a deeper issue. He noticed a paradoxical phenomenon in some of the former soldiers' accounts: a connection, some kind of strange unity between both sides of the conflict is formed in war. Soldiers from rival sides shoot at each other, kill and hate each other but, on a certain level, they experience and create the war together – and they are also shaken by it together. In some very paradoxical sense, they co-create a joint piece of work. Using Patočka's language, we can say that they have experienced the traumatizing *night* which pulled them out of all the demands of the *day* – out of the ordinariness, consumption and errand running.⁹

Hard to say. But a certain mysterious connection between enemies probably exists. I took part in anti-fascist activities as a teenager, at the turn of the millennium, in a time when Vávra's leadership star was up high. I can't claim credit for any combat activities, I was mostly involved in writing articles, organizing protests, and posting up posters. But the ethos of combat got me as well and I felt it. I remember vividly the fascination with the enemy, nourished definitely by the difficult access to information. The Internet was in its beginnings hosting only extremely rudimentary and mostly content-poor websites and simple discussion forums. The main sources of information were videotapes of protests and hard-to-get zines. First of all, we obviously hated the neo-Nazis, fought against them, despised them and tried to stand in their way finding their ideology disgusting, frightening and sometimes also ridiculous. There was no way of talking about mutual respect or gentlemanly rivalry – in the fight against the supporters of the Third Reich, who were spending a disproportionate amount of time sculpting their muscles, no rules applied. They were being outnumbered and ambushed with their addresses and private information made public. The lack of acknowledgment was total, and I still think rightfully so. But the fight also brought interest in the enemy. We were confronted not only in the streets but many from "our camp" were also confronted with "them" in various discussion forums. The arguments, the shouting across the battle line and the efforts to provoke the other side to say more than it wanted to say resulted over time into a somewhat fragmentary communication – peppered with mockery and constant vigilance and driven by the ethos of mutual spying, but still existing.

We were irritated by the "skins and anarchists" compound used by many journalists and politicians, as if our anti-fascism equaled their fascism, as if we belonged together, as if, in the small-town eyes of the Peroutkas of the 90s,¹⁰ our aversion to Czech fascists' violence was making us their twins. It still irritates me, even today. I insist that their fascism and our anarchism, their racism, order, and hierarchy and our anti-racism, equality, liberalism, and subversion of various traditional values were the absolute opposite. But on a certain level (I want to flatter us and say "a deeper level") we could not deny that the mutual conflict and rivalry gave rise to a certain bond between the enemies, as if we were co-creating one terrain, one shared space in our skirmishing. As if we were, to put it using a Patočka-style overstatement, even in that irreconcilable fight (or for its sake, as a matter of fact) producing a shared piece of work. As if we were co-creating some kind of bizarre community, a community

9 Jan Patočka, *Kacířské eseje o filosofii dějin (Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History)*, in: *Péče o duši III*, Prague: Oikoymenh, 2002, p. 117-131.

10 Note of the editor: Ferdinand Peroutka (1895–1978) was a Czech writer, playwright and publicist. He is considered one of the most important representatives of Czech prewar democratic journalism.



of combat. And as if Sorel, whom we knew at the time only as a curious footnote, was an ironic foreshadower of such a situation.

After almost two decades, the former neo-Nazi leader Filip Vávra turned into a smart-ass youtuber. As in the 90s, when he felt that neo-Nazi anti-Roma violence expressed the opinions and desires of “the silent majority”, today he sees an opportunity in riding the wave of the normalization of anti-migrant or purely racist views. Recently, he was quick to contribute with his bit to the debate on the American Antifa by making a video about the Czech one. In the video with a pompous title *Antifa. 24 let teroru a násilí bez zájmu státu a médií (Antifa. 24 years of terror and violence with no interest from the state or the media)* the narrator is getting too big for his I-experienced-the-fight-firsthand boots and so the title could be rephrased as: “We kept beating the anarchists and punks for so long and then we were stupefied when they started beating us back.” More interesting than the hurried chronology is the story of when he met a militant anti-fascist in a Prague-Brno bus in the mid-00s. “We obviously hated each other, we had been going after each other for years but... we actually knew each other.” The bus was no place for a conflict, so the enemy passengers called a temporary truce and, in the end, spent the journey poking fun at each other, sizing each other up with fascination and debating some controversial situations. They had so many shared topics! Even after fifteen years the story is imbued with fascination and the power of this paradoxical moment – this pause in the struggle.

Better than reality?

That situation was obviously absolutely exceptional and changed nothing in their strong animosity which was now more and more often taking place outside of the physical world in the virtual reality all of a sudden fuller with information. The

Internet's reinforced role first led to a reinforced information superiority of the anti-fascists. With many neo-Nazis being negligent about Internet security, the anti-fascists were able to publish many frustrating details from their life and significantly corrode their movement. They celebrated a short-term victory.

11 Angela Nagle, *Kill all normies_ the online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right*, Washington: John Hunt Publishing, 2017.

In the long term, however, the wide use of the Internet created unprecedented opportunities for extreme-right politics. The alienated, dispersed communication seemed to be the opposite of the centralized, leadership-based, hierarchical fascist ideology. Yes, this is how naive some of us were! In reality, this form of communication created many new opportunities to spread stereotypes, hatred and conspiracy theories. The key question, to which I don't have an answer, is what kind of community can be created on the Internet. The Internet allows to form crowds, to share excitement from virtual and actual lynching, it's where the extreme-right experiences "the online politics of transgression" as described by Angela Nagle.¹¹ If fascism is, as Paxton says, a physical ideology, an "affair of the gut", we can say that virtual reality can induce significant gut-moving passions and experiences, even in a seemingly alienated environment in front of computer screens. The Internet provides an opportunity to connect in new forms of combat. However, the key question is: Will there also be new forms of combat solidarity and combatant networking? We don't know, but the successful attack on the US Capitol led by veterans, shamans and "camp Auschwitz" fans shows that fight myths have an open, and maybe even frightening, future ahead.

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Illustrations: Dorota Brázdovičová



I remember the feeling. I experienced it both as an athlete and as a spectator. The moment when a ball lands *right* on the player's boot after a pass and the player scores a goal. Not just some goal – *the* goal. A boxer whose movements in the ring seem like dancing. Euphoria. The feeling of absolute coordination in which you do not fully realise what you are doing. But your body knows, and everyone watching can feel it. You have just experienced a moment of genius, you see. A moment, however fleeting it might have been, when everything was in harmony. These moments do not come along often. During my twelve years as an active sportswoman, I can count only a few, but I will never forget them. My body remembers them.

Once, when I was having a beer with an old friend and her partner, he noted that we have a very “sporty” dynamic. He felt that people who spend a long time playing sports together gradually develop a particular relationship. I don't know how this relationship differs (if at all) from other long-term collective relationships. People who engage in sports together on a daily basis literally sweat together. They share physical and psychological suffering and overcome it together. Their relationship is therefore founded on sweat and pain. They experience each other in charged situations and sense each other not only through words but also through smell, in its most intense form. They might not understand each other, but they know their bodies almost perfectly. They know each other's weaknesses, physiognomy, movements, and rhythms, and the sounds they make when they move. They often find themselves

in situations in which they must totally trust others. They open up in all their physical vulnerability. They are brought together more by physical activity than by a shared world-view or values.

I have spent most of my life in sport collectives and communities. I loved them and they often got on my nerves. There were days when I desired nothing but to be part of them, and other days when I wished they would leave me alone. Days when I would look forward to conversations with people from these communities, and days when I would put off phone calls or messages for as long as possible. Even when I withdrew from sport, I would always return. They pulled me in. I am now active in amateur boxing. Before that, it was ten years of synchronised swimming. Every sport comes with a specific group of people – those who practise the sport and those who watch it. By their very essence, some sports attract people from socially secure strata of society, while others do not. The boxing community consists of various groups of people who would otherwise never meet: from Serbian and Ukrainian immigrants working in the Volkswagen factories through shop assistants, accountants, waiters and waitresses, and doctors, all the way to top managers and police officers. At matches, you will often hear more Hungarian and Romani spoken than Slovak. The spaces of sport can, at certain moments, protect us from the outside world, and from ourselves. Through sport, I have experienced some of the strongest moments of my life but also faced the most damaging behaviour.

Sport has a strange position in our society. I sometimes feel as if it is a refuge, one of the last places that we can rest, at least temporarily, in the safety of intimately familiar roles and rules. We have a tendency to perceive differences in sport as “natural”, an island in a sea of interpretation, because we can hardly separate them from our notion of an achievement that is physical, dependent on our bodily competence, and therefore objective. In sport, beliefs in biological differences, whether these are racial, gender, or other, meet and overlap in one of the few fields in which – it seems – we are faced with indisputable reality. Until recently, we were convinced that as far as sport was concerned, we did not need researchers’ theories. After all, everyone knows what sport is about.

The academic world long considered sport a subject not worthy of intellectual exertion. People who attempted to study this area of social life from an academic perspective encountered countless obstacles. Sport is part of the world of entertainment and therefore stands in opposition to the world of labour, which is serious and worthy of intellectual investigation. For a long time, the world of entertainment was seen from this perspective. But we see this trend changing as the boundaries between work and fun, and between work and free time, become blurred and entertainment becomes a leading sector in today’s economy of services and experiences.

When a university departmental committee challenged the American sociologist Harry Edwards to defend his academic interest in sport (the subject of his thesis) and its relevance to the social sciences, his answer was simple. He asked them whether the fact that sport was followed by billions of people around the world, while their academic articles were read by a negligible number of readers even within the academy, was not sufficient proof of the fact that sport was worthy of sociological examination. Today, there are a number of disciplines that explore and critically analyse sport, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, gender studies, and many others. The aim of this critical approach is not to measure and explain existing differences in

sport on the basis of biology, but to ask *why*. Why do some differences matter while others do not? Which cultural and social factors influence this? Who can do sport? Who builds sports centres and who is allowed in?

Moral support for military communities

Though we have a tendency to perceive sport as harmless fun and games, its capacity to mobilise the emotions of spectators is used by the mass entertainment and military industries. There has always been a strong symbolic and ideological relationship between sport and war. Sporting metaphors are often used by governments as tools with which to rationalise and legitimise military operations. Theorist Samantha King also points out that the entrepreneurial aspect of sport has become an indelible component of the sport-military ideology. She demonstrates how, during the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, organisations such as the National Football League (NFL) incorporated the politics of President George Bush's so-called war on terror into their strategies. Through its association with the NFL brand, the Bush administration created a remarkable audience for its military campaign, drawing in more fans every week than a political campaign can attract voters in years.

In 2004, American media carried the news of the death in Afghanistan of 27-year-old Pat Tillman, a former professional football player for the Arizona Cardinals. In 2002, Tillman had turned down an NFL contract worth \$3.6 million in order to enlist in the military, becoming an elite Army Ranger. Tillman became an ideal image of the American man, citizen, and soldier. His name suddenly made specific the previously abstract figures of the men and women of the American armed forces. Tillman's former team, the Cardinals, decided to name a square after him near their new stadium, the state of Arizona established a scholarship bearing his name, and his death was a central theme of the NFL in 2004. All these dedications, which focused on Tillman's death and not the question of *why* he died, represented his sacrifice as an aim, without asking if the sacrifice itself was meaningful. Thus, they turned the sacrifices made by Tillman and many others into a tool for justifying war, with no regard to its aims or the brutality of its everyday practices.

King claims that a significant transformation in the relationship between sport and war took place during the war on terror. This transformation attests to the militarisation of everyday life and also to a certain "sportification" of political life in the United States. Theorist Paul Gilroy went even further, claiming that the boundaries between war and sport have not just become blurred; instead, war and sport have merged. War has become sport.

Few sporting activities are compared to war as often as boxing is. The invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan prompted the American TV network NBC to put boxing matches back on national television. Through the Armed Forces Network, they also brought boxing matches to American military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, where they were watched by more than 800 000 military personnel, as theorist Benita Heiskanen writes in her *Urban Geography of Boxing*. But female boxers had not yet earned respect and the position of "capable" sportswomen within the boxing community, and so the media did not ascribe to the female body the capacity to encourage and support the morale of military communities. Therefore, only men's matches were broadcast.

Since a large number of the soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan – as well as most boxers on TV – came from working-class backgrounds or were members of ethnic minorities, these matches had the power to arouse feelings of solidarity, patriotism, and fellowship. For these class minorities, exposing one's own body to risk in combat or in the ring (and on television) represented a way of participating in an imagined notion of "American-ness". But, as King points out, depicting minority sportsmen is, in this case, an ideological intention. It serves as proof of the egalitarian character of American society and thus conceals the consequences of limited upward social mobility in a capitalist society strongly divided by race.

But it wasn't just boxing matches that were broadcast for American troops. Famous boxers also did tours of military bases – boxing matches included – to boost the morale of American military personnel overseas. Following this cue, the soldiers themselves also began to organise boxing matches, which they would then post online. Boxing is therefore connected to war not just symbolically; it has become an important tool for building, supporting, and strengthening military communities and collectives.

You just have to try harder

On the individual level, we see sport as a tool of social mobility, a possibility for the sufficiently talented and determined, regardless of gender, race, or socio-economic position, to move upward on the social ladder. This conviction has its roots in the concept of liberal meritocracy, for which social advancement is based on the capability and merit of the individual, not the influence of family situation, background, wealth, or position in society. Sport can doubtless become a means for improving one's financial situation and social standing, or even for acquiring great wealth.

In reality, however, the relationship between sport and social mobility is more ambivalent. Our notion of sport as a tool for improving our position and financial situation often leads to the reproduction and aggravation of pre-existing disadvantages. Many people see basketball or American football as the only way out of the impoverished environment of, for instance, African American communities. And not just outsiders: this notion is internalised by the members of these communities. It is, of course, a path for some, but for every elite sportsperson, there are thousands of others who do not succeed. Many factors play a role, and they don't just have to do with one's measure of talent or hard work. Sport costs money and requires a home situation that allows one to train regularly. If you face persistent poverty, insecurity, and related problems at home, you can hardly attend the regular training sessions necessary to break through in your sport of choice. The chances of your becoming the new Magic Johnson are virtually negligible. And then there is the stereotypical view that every Black man knows how to play basketball. Furthermore, an indivisible component of these narratives of upward social mobility are also the stories of the subsequent fall back down. A sporting career, particularly in contact sports played in teams, is relatively short – around ten years. Many sportspeople then find jobs as coaches or managers. Although recent studies among athletes in the United States demonstrate that the possibility of social mobility for white and African American athletes is comparable, the same cannot be said of post-career opportunities. White sportsmen and sportswomen have a disproportionate advantage when it comes to employment as coaches or club managers. Social mobility is thus less available to women and athletes from ethnic minorities and lower social classes, who also face stereotypes and a greater pressure on their sporting identities.

So that they can have it as good as we do

A number of programmes, run by various organisations, build on the notion of sport as a means of social mobility. These diverse programmes are often grouped under the umbrella term Sport for Development and Peace (SDP), within which sport is understood as a “universal language” (like art) that promotes mutual understanding across cultures. While the language supporting these efforts might seem egalitarian, when we look at the provenance of these initiatives, we discover it is mostly organisations in the global North. This suggests that the division of power around the world remains untouched. What is more important, however, is that while these initiatives frame their activities as attempts at “global citizenship”, what they really imagine is not social justice and equality of various forms of citizenship but rather the fulfilment of the ideals of the citizen of the global North along with their values and positions. As if this notion of citizenship were infectious and everyone who comes into contact with it becomes infected. SDP initiatives, mostly based in the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, and France, attract a large number of volunteers from these countries. The local people, on the other hand, who are familiar with the context and culture of the environment in which the programme takes place, are rarely part of the project. Often, they cannot even afford the cost of the introductory workshop necessary to carry out the work. Agencies present this form of volunteering as charity, in the sense of “Let us go and save the less privileged youths so that they can have it as good as we do”. These organisations enter into disadvantaged settings with a certain financial, cultural, and symbolic capital that makes the situation more difficult and often hampers the creation and operation of local bottom-up initiatives.

Being a *real* woman

Sport reproduces – and also confronts – various mechanisms of inequality. It is also one of the few areas of society that remain segregated by gender. While we can still perhaps explain why men and women do not compete together in various sports on the basis of muscle mass and physical fitness, the pay gap between male and female athletes, or the significantly less prominent media coverage of women’s sports, is harder to explain using “logical” arguments – unless, of course, we resort to claims that female sport is simply “less attractive”. We refer to various sports as gender-neutral, female, or male. In the case of gender-neutral sports, we think of tennis or track and field. Female sports include gymnastics and synchronised swimming, while male sports bring to mind football, ice hockey, or martial arts. As a boxer, the best-case scenario is admiration for having the courage, as a woman, to dedicate myself to something so physically demanding and tough. In the worst-case scenario, I am confronted with statements such as “I wouldn’t want you as a girlfriend” or “You’ll find it hard to find a partner this way” or “Such a pretty girl, it doesn’t suit you at all”. For some people, the fact of my being a boxer raises suspicions about my sexual preference, suspicions that are happily cast away once these people see that I have long hair and “female” facial features. In a world obsessed with measuring, tables, values, dichotomies, numbers, objectivisation, and objectification, the people who do not fit into these tables become highly uncomfortable.

In 2009, when the South African runner Caster Semenya won the 800 metres at the World Athletics Championships in Berlin by a margin of 2.45 seconds, she became the centre of sports media attention around the world. But not for her incredible sporting achievement. Semenya found herself in the midst of a passionate discussion

about whether she was *really* a woman. The ensuing whirlwind of hateful comments, cynical remarks, and insulting chants was started by her competitors. They described her as a “virago” and a masculine lesbian, and said things like “Just look at her” and “People like that shouldn’t be competing in our category ... for me, she is not a woman, she is a man.” Shortly after such comments appeared in the media, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) ordered Semenya to undergo what is known as “sex testing” – a medical examination to verify or determine one’s sex – before the World Championships in Berlin. After Semenya broke the national junior record at the African Junior Championships in Mauritius, the IAAF ordered the South African authorities to perform this (often humiliating) test. No one told Semenya the purpose of the examination, and throughout the testing process, she believed it was all part of doping tests.

At a time when Caster Semenya was supposed to be celebrating and finding joy in her success, she had to endure a cruel and humiliating media campaign. Sports commentators called her a “hermaphrodite” and demanded that she return both her medal and her cash winnings. Articles included such claims as “She looks like a man. She married a woman. She’s a man.” Semenya reportedly had to undergo a two-hour medical examination, which included being told to lie down and put her legs into stirrups while medical personnel photographed her genitalia. The tests apparently showed that Semenya is intersex: she has neither a uterus nor ovaries and her testosterone levels are three times higher than the female average, a medical condition known as hyperandrogenism. After intimate information about her body became the subject of public debate, Semenya retreated from the spotlight to regain her privacy.



The IAAF banned her from competing before the verdict was clear. After an 11-month investigation, the IAAF once again allowed Semenya to compete and confirmed the validity of her victory in Berlin.

Sex verification and hyperandrogenism

Sex verification was introduced into the Olympic Games in 2012, in London, almost a decade after the IAAF and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had banned the practice. I remember reading about this in an academic journal on bioethics and feeling a mixture of confusion and anger – what year or century was I in?! Under pressure after their handling of the Semenya case, the IAAF and the IOC decided to create a new (or rather updated) policy on sex verification. This is a combination of rules and restrictions based on the presumption that androgen hormones (testosterone and dihydrotestosterone) are the primary components of biological advantage in sport. The IAAF can order a sportswoman participating in international competitions to undergo sex verification on the basis of two factors. First, if the athlete has already been diagnosed with hyperandrogenism, it is mandatory for her to make this fact known to the IAAF and undergo the examination. Second, if IAAF medical personnel have reasonable grounds for suspecting a case of hyperandrogenism, they can confidentially examine any athlete. Reasonable grounds can be any “respectable source”, including information gained from medical personnel at the competition. When the athlete is invited to undergo sex verification, she must undergo some combination of these three examinations: a clinical examination, an endocrinological examination (testing urine and blood for hormone levels), and an overall examination (which can include genetic tests and a psychological examination). After completing these exams, the athlete can only compete if she has fulfilled the criteria of this new regulation. If she does not conform to the criteria, she receives a “therapeutic proposal” in writing. If she abides by the prescribed treatment, she can register for a follow-up exam. The treatment will probably consist of pharmaceuticals or a gonadectomy, the two principal methods for lowering testosterone levels.

Many people will doubtless consider this new policy reasonable. After all, gender categories in sport aim to create a *fair* environment. They are based on the assumption that men have an advantage in sport – they are stronger, faster, and have greater endurance – and competing against women would be unfair. But the division on the basis of gender in billiards and chess can hardly be grasped even by those who understand masculinity and femininity as clearly divided categories. We commonly think of sex as something clear, distinguishing between two indisputable categories – male and female. But contemporary science knows at least six indicators of sex – including chromosomes, gonads, hormones, secondary sex characteristics, external genitalia, and internal genitalia – and not one of them is binary. Each of these variables has numerous degrees and variations.

Current scientific findings suggest that any advantage we might ascribe to hyperandrogenism is so complex that testosterone levels, as an individual indicator, are virtually valueless, and certainly cannot serve to determine who is fit to compete in the male or female category. And even if any form of testing could really connect, indisputably, hyperandrogenism and athletic fitness, we should consider it just the same as any other biological advantage conferred by countless unique biological variations. Such variations are often found in elite athletes: for instance,

many runners and cyclists have a rare mitochondrial variation that gives them an incredible aerobic capacity and resistance to fatigue; in the case of basketball players, it is acromegaly, which leads to an increased size in hands and feet that is hormonally conditioned. Top-level athletes thus manifest countless biological advantages, and hyperandrogenism is merely one of them. Why, then, is it so important?

Athletic excellence and the myth of biological predisposition

Sport was created primarily as a forum for the performance of “male” skills. If physical fitness, strength, aggression, and endurance are expressions of what it means to be a man, then the very concept of a top-level sportswoman is in contradiction to this. And sportswomen with intersexual characteristics are not simply the scapegoats of sporting communities. The fact that we understand hyperandrogenism as a decisive factor for determining whether a sportswoman is sufficiently female or not, and the very introduction of sex verification for athletes, is not simply a rational decision underpinned by indisputable scientific facts. Even scientific knowledge is conjecture, not irrefutable fact. Rather, these policies reflect our cultural convictions of what it means to be a woman and which bodies we consider sufficiently female.

Athletic exceptionalism, however, is not simply the product of a biological predisposition. Biology doubtless plays a part, but excellence in sport is a combination of numerous factors, including access to material resources and social environment. If you have to live from month to month, your home environment is full of violence, and everything around you is uncertain and chronically unstable, how can you apply yourself fully to any sport, attend regular training sessions, maintain a dietary regime (or be able to afford one), and have the correct mindset, so important in training and competition? Some individuals can doubtless overcome all this and find the power inside themselves, but they are exceptions, not the rule. There is certainly nothing *fair* about these conditions.

Passion and public suffering

It would be an oversimplification to reduce sport to politics that reproduce social inequalities, or to tables of winners and losers. There is something else that attracts us to sport. It is that strange and powerful relationship to passion, that complex conjunction of desire and a kind of public suffering, pain and love, the world of masculinity, bodily experience, class, racial, and gender inequality – limitations but also the overcoming of limitations and the possibilities this brings. I still remember when I heard about the Twin Towers on the car radio. I was nine years old, and my mum was taking me to buy fins for swimming training. I remember exactly how she told me to be quiet and turned up the volume. The image froze me. I remember the colours and even the smell of the interior of the car. Just like momentous political events, sport has the potential to “arrest us” in time. We will never forget *that* goal, *that* finish, *that* figure-skating leap, *that* karate strike. At that moment, we know; we feel that we have experienced something exceptional. Sport is a mountain climber whose fingers tingle just looking at a cliff face. Sport is a boxer who looks at the ring and feels the punches as strongly as if she had just received them. Sport is a trainer who stands by and does nothing as his trainees are sexually abused. Sport is a labourer who travels from

abroad to build a World Cup stadium and receives no payment for months on end. Sport can be a refuge, but it can be a battlefield too.

English translation: Ian Mikyska

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Illustrations: Dorota Brázdovičová

I WANT TO SEE, HOW YOU LIVE!

D. was notified of the need for a field diary sometime in June 2020. It will be a year. We did not force him, but we were probably a little patronising. Write it down immediately, otherwise it'll pile up and you'll forget about it. But we immediately questioned this: do it your way, however you feel it. Be yourself, don't stress, think of yourself, and other advice of a similar nature.

Recently, H. said during a call that when he hears the word "terrain" ("field diary" is "terrain diary" in Slovak - translator's note), he imagines relief, something geographical. Apparently, the word doesn't evoke people at all. I imagine myself up to my knees in a muddy ploughed field, I think to myself. R. remarks that he has never encountered the term in design theory. It's "field" in English, which sounds a little better to H., apparently. Fieldwork is real work, J. quips. But ethnography is when you spend a long time in the field, isn't it? And what would Bronisław Malinowski say to the fact that we sent D. there instead of us? And did D. spend long enough in the field? D.'s task was, primarily, to collect evidence and support people, the people H. does not see when he hears the word "terrain".

*The following text is a collage of diary entries from the field, fragments of team meetings, and extracts from *Totálne zakázané* (Totally Forbidden), a collection of short stories by Nina Sadur.*

We present to the reader the image of a situation that took place shortly after tenants in an urban apartment block in an unnamed city received notice that their leases would not be renewed. All this in a so-called excluded location, in which we have been active as a research team since 2018. The events sketched in the text were preceded by our ethical and human dilemmas in confronting the impossibility of spending enough time with the tenants in moments of crisis in order to support them and devise, together, strategies for resisting the city. The city hall manifests a long-standing incompetence in public affairs, ignoring the needs of its inhabitants. It was clear that we cannot maintain the trust of the shaken tenants from a distance. Not even the regularity of our visits could replace the weight of daily personal contact. That is when D. joined our team, becoming a design tool, quasi-social worker, quasi-ethnographer, mediator, friend. As he moves into the workers' accommodation adjacent to the threatened block of flats, he experiences his own narrative, encountering prejudice and precarisation in his temporary job.

This accelerated, hybrid, design-informed strategy also underwent development. D. was originally supposed to move directly into the block in question and our collaboration was to remain secret from the residents. The plan was to confront representatives of the city through D., who would pose as a tenant. He could risk negotiating with the city as he wasn't existentially dependent on living in the house, unlike those who really do live there. The "mystery tenant" plan ultimately fell through, however, due to the inflexibility of the system by which city apartments are distributed. At least D. did not have to hide anything, remaining in the city for five months. He sent us daily updates and we spent some of that time in the city with him.

Our team works on research and the possibilities of intervention in the field of housing politics, inclusive urbanism, and application design for NGOs. We are based at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Brno University of Technology. We did not edit the team conversations or D.'s field notes; they are presented here in their raw form.

"I want to have a look how you live."

"I didn't call you."

Call with D.: discuss ethical issues; go over the contract; after that, he can decide whether he wants to do it. Please gradually add literature/sources that D. should read before/during his stay in the field.

I went to Žlták and I was figuring out electricity for X. until now. They've been cut off two years. X. is totally at his wits' end; he's got a long-term problem with the electricity and they don't know how to fill in and sort out the papers necessary to be reconnected, and they also don't know if it's worth coughing up 70 euros for it and then find out that they have to move out anyway. Winter's coming and they need the electricity so they can at least turn on the heater. I drank a lot of tea. And, at Y's, brutal punch cakes. I'm satisfied. That's it, in short. Gotta run.

In every household, we need to acquire (photograph) the original tenancy agreement with the city. D., please, also try and find out where the inhabitants have water and electricity meters.

The temperature dropped again today and Žlták is properly cold now. People are most afraid of being cut off from water as well. The news is going around and I don't know how to respond. I tell them there is no such information anywhere in the letter, but apparently something similar happened in other buildings. The children are starting to get sick. :(

I asked about the atmosphere in Žlták, but they responded as usual: it's quiet, people are thinking about what to do with their life, and so on. Everyone's scared but they have nowhere to go.

We should start realistically figuring out what will happen to those who remain in the house and occupy it with our help. K. should start looking around for a private investor for social housing. And it could be in another city, too.

I had a great conversation with O. in the flat about racism, Nazis, and more. He came in today with an Against Fascism badge on his jacket, so we started talking about Kotleba right away.

I try to talk to people about the situation, but I feel it's just momentary fixes to long-term problems - a hope they need to hear daily, because everyone else around them is rightfully pessimistic and mistrustful.

I also went round to a few new households today, where they opened the door for the first time. The woman across from Y. was quite surprised; apparently, this was the first time she'd heard the stuff I was telling her, and I felt, up to this point, like everything had gone over head, as if her apartment was in a parallel universe where they only just started repairing the roof of Žlták, and the owner of the building is a Roma guy who lives next door with a Casio watch from the pawnshop.

Meeting to discuss further plans in the field: think strategically, propose, and plan. Identifying and distributing to-do's, responsibility for communicating with the protagonists, plans for travel and extended stays in the field. Feel free to add material.

I tried asking everyone for their tenancy agreements, but almost no one has them. I don't know if they don't want to give them to me or if they really don't have them. Most people chuck them right in the bin, if I understood correctly today.

The nets I cast failed me :(sorry. People from the non-profit sector didn't help much with the radiators. They can't offer any money, they just sighed at the situation.

There are currently three radiators. D. will choose the right type of radiator online and they'll deliver it to the building.

I can't get the tenancy agreements at all. I don't know why, whether they're scared of showing me sensitive information with their name on it or whether they really threw them out like they say. Almost no one would show me. I asked them whether it contained a breakdown of how much they pay for heating, water, and electricity, and most people say it didn't. I asked them about debt to the city.

They have no debt on rent, or very little, around 30–50 euros max. The worst is the water, which they're mostly paying back. Or sometimes they haven't paid for rubbish. They tell me all of this in conversation; they didn't really want to show me any papers. It's like they all want to look their best in front of me – that's what it feels like.

They don't trust us. And they're also annoyed with my constantly comforting them. As if they would rather hear the worst-case scenario. Because they think that's what'll happen to them.

When I sit at W.'s and everyone is there, it seems like they can't quite relax in front of me. They put on the mask of the best person they can be, so they don't say much, etc.

The need to consistently inform tenants about our activities, collecting information on the tenants' plans and the debt situation in the individual apartments. Find out what debts it is favourable for them to pay back asap and which ones they can forget about.

At one point, the man who lives next to X. ran out into the corridor behind me. Last week, when I tried to contact him, he just shouted through the door that he already has accommodation and that he doesn't know why I'm defending the rabble from the estate, that it makes no sense, and I should fuck it all to hell. And today, this gentlemen, whose name I didn't have time to find out, became part of the rabble he was so vocal about last week. They put him on the housing list at Slobodáreň and told him what they tell everyone: they'll let him know. But yesterday they told him they don't want him there, because he is from Žlták and they don't want people bringing cockroaches to Slobodáreň. As he was shouting at me in the corridor today, others came out of their apartments and a cowboy movie started. People were shouting over one another saying they believe nothing until it's in black and white, and so on. Everyone is just scared that the police will come to clear out the estate.

What are we going to propose? It's more realistic to go for Housing First First (than Human Resources). What's left is finding an entity to administrate administer the whole process.

There will only be a bit of peace and the opportunity to discuss things without tension towards the end of the week, if the catastrophic visions they're sharing and strengthening don't come true. The electrician did not stay long. I asked him whether he could check the circuit

breakers because we're going to turn on about 10 radiators. He said that the communal distribution boards have nothing to do with that. That he'd have to check each apartment individually, he wanted to see some circuit breakers, so we went to O.'s, and as soon as he saw them he said they'd have to be redone. I asked him whether it could happen that when we turn on the radiators, they'll burn the communal circuit breakers, but he said they wouldn't. They have nothing to do with that; at the most, they'll blow the fuses in the individual households. The worst situation is probably X. Their apartment is cold and there are cables of various kinds connected with scotch tape that's exposed to the rain. It regularly blows their fuses; most recently, X.'s mum spilled something on an extension lead, so it burnt out again. And there's a problem at E.'s as well: when it's

cold and raining, it's enough for her to turn on a lamp in the morning and it blows her fuses, because the circuit breaker in the flat above her is wet or something.

So far, I've managed to photograph 15 letters. I'll continue tomorrow. Lots of people are complaining because they gave them a number they had no idea about and are not aware of this debt – some of them have a personal recipient (or whatever it's called). I recommended that they demand a precise breakdown of the debt, because it's so vague in the letter – services connected to renting. So that we know at least in some cases whether it's an unpaid balance for water, just so the people can find out what they're supposed to be paying for.

O. is very tempted to approach an institution. If we were to try it, we would have to prepare the materials, especially a business plan supported by a case study, perhaps.

As for the overall atmosphere, nothing's changed on the estate. People want to leave, they feel imprisoned, they're constantly searching for various little paths out there. I recommended to E. that she temporarily change her permanent address to somewhere else – so that there's no shining Ž1 on her ID – put on some nice clothes, and go look at apartments. But either way, without financial support for the deposit, no one can go anywhere. That's the biggest anchor.

Oh yeah, and I bought the radiators today, turbo ones, brutal ... they had a closing sale at OK Electro: one for 37eur. You'll find the receipt on the drive.

Doing something nice – that everyone will see, we'll do something nice, but we won't talk about it.

We're trying another manoeuvre, that some of them would stay with their families, change their permanent address to the city and then try to go and see apartments. Some of them have great pensions, 340 and 390, which would be enough for a one-bedroom, but there's a catch – they're from Žlták.

There's quite a depressing atmosphere at Žlták, because people know that people are gradually abandoning it, with only those who really can't move staying.

Yesterday, I wanted to go buy an Ethernet cable, so I went to an electronics shop in the evening and described the cable to the shop assistant. He stared at me for about five seconds. He obviously had the cable, but he told me to go across the road to see the boys – they definitely have it. I left the shop with a weird paranoid feeling, because I know the boys definitely don't have it – they don't sell things like that – and he definitely has it. But general advanced paranoia comes as no surprise.

The "available housing with elements of Housing First" grant was approved. What are our next steps?

This is how it all got muddled up.

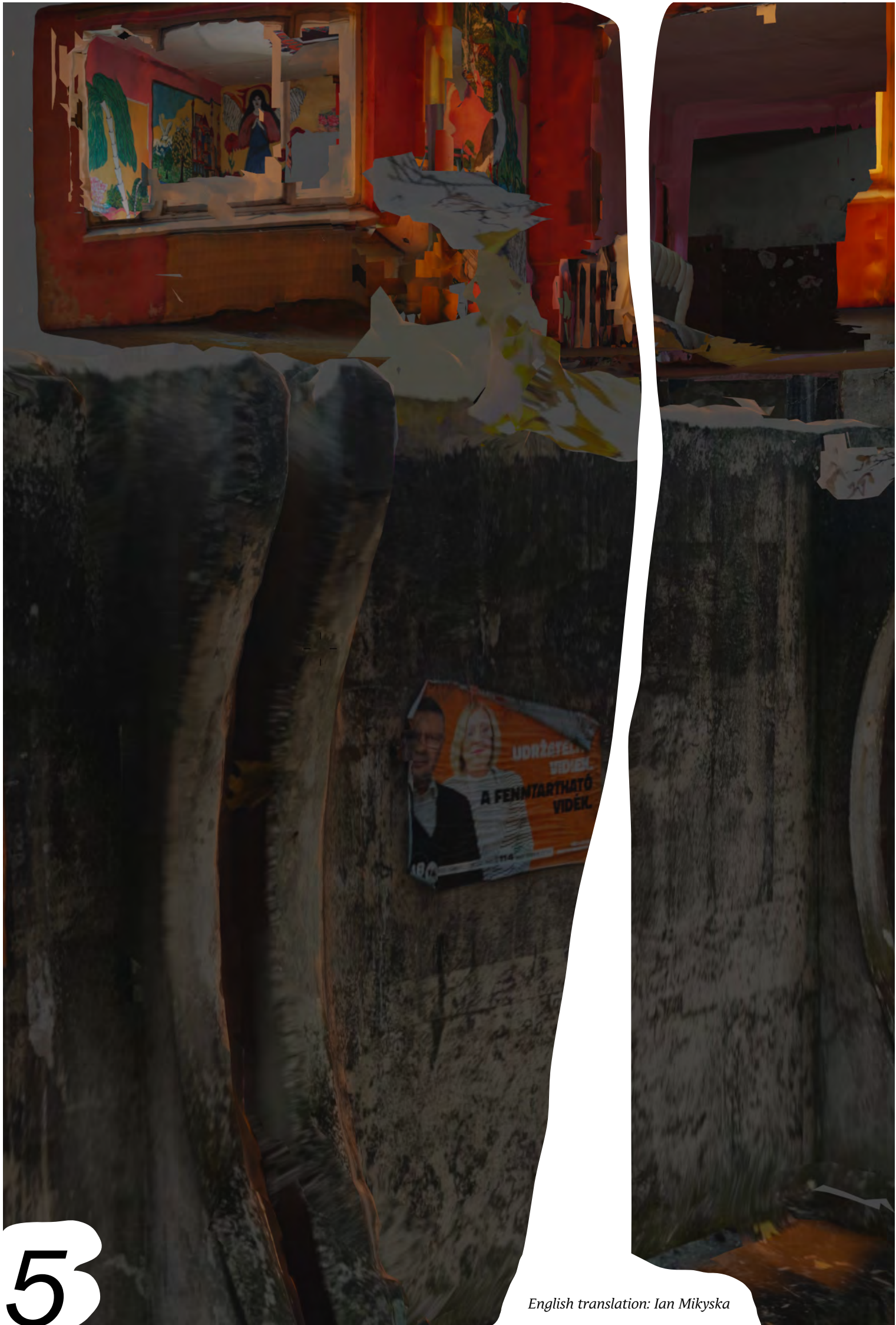
We were flooded with such gloom as cannot even be described.

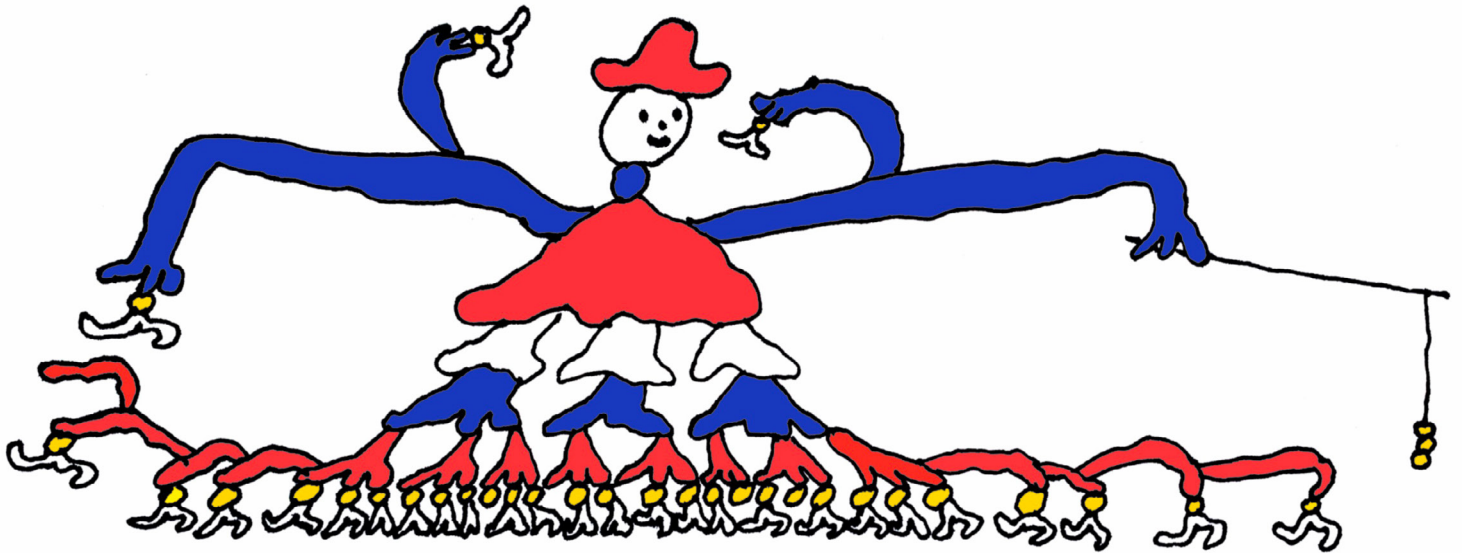
"Oh how awful and heavy we feel to be alive," the walls told us. "How awful we feel, what is wrong with us?" we wanted to say, but we no longer could. "Let us switch places. You will walk, curse, and die, and we will silently decay," the walls told us. "Yes, let us switch as soon as possible," we wanted to say, but we no longer could. Living, trembling, newly born, they reproached us thus and their grievances engulfed us, defenceless, speechless, soulless to the brim.

But we have already switched off and collected ourselves. Got rid of the terrifying visions, walked out of the darkness, and suddenly – we do finally hear a voice, we lie in our beds, listening, holding our breath.

They will punish us for this.

The electricity bills arrived yesterday.





Delving into the world of Russia's hyper-rich, this article investigates the historical and cultural features of their philanthropic practices and asks to what extent they are compatible with the idea of philanthrocapitalism. Such a research agenda raises several issues: First, these mega-rich individuals are striving to justify their fortunes in a society where, not so long ago, wealth was considered a crime and where today the gap between rich and poor has grown to become one of the widest in the world. Second, philanthrocapitalism is, by design, the antithesis to Russia's history of philanthropy, which has always existed within the control of a highly centralized state. Third, the new wealthy elite in Russia lacks the birth right of a capitalist class that was brought up with bourgeois values and had a sense of duty and entitlement instilled into them.

1 Weber, Max. 1991. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Translated and edited by Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills. London: Routledge, p. 271.

This is highly problematic: as Max Weber reiterated, the holders of power and wealth want to believe that they deserve their good fortunes because of who they are and what they constitute.¹ With the first generation of Russia's hyper-rich having cemented their wealth, it has become more important to them to feel that they deserve the positions they occupy and the benefits they have accrued. As a consequence of this change in priorities, social responsibility has become obligatory, resulting in a rapid rise in charitable giving in the new millennium. Philanthropy is particularly important for the older upper-class members, who have begun to think about the legacy they will leave after their death.

All this was not an issue in the early post-Soviet period. The 1990s were dominated by the extreme prestige of money, no matter how it was acquired. Now that they have emancipated themselves from the urge to make more money, they have the freedom to ponder their cultural and spiritual identities—one of the luxuries that Pierre Bourdieu described as the privilege of being rich.² Accordingly, upper-class Russians have sought to engage in more intellectual activities and display more cultured traits. However, they lack the cultural templates of a bourgeois predecessor and rely instead on the Russian intelligentsia, whose values were filtered through the Soviet experience.³ As I argue in this article, this legacy is to a large extent compatible with philanthrocapitalist ideas.

Empirical Data

The material analyzed in this article is drawn from a set of eighty interviews with entrepreneurs and their spouses or children, which I conducted between 2008 and 2017, mostly in Moscow. Their characteristics are typical of the post-Soviet elite, the most salient of which is that they are highly educated.⁴ For this article I selected twelve interviewees, eight men and four women. They all are philanthropists and run their own foundation or charity (many of them parallel to their corporate foundations) or were cofounders of a foundation and have since been heavily involved. The eight men are the breadwinners in their families. Three of the four women are the wives of wealthy Russian men; the fourth is a sibling. Except for one couple, whom I interviewed in 2009, these selected interviews took place between 2015 and 2017.

The two earlier interviews, which took place in 2009, were with Maria Eliseeva and Iliia Segalovich, the cofounder of Yandex, the world's fourth largest search engine and Russia's equivalent to Google. Segalovich died from cancer in 2013, not having reached the age of fifty. His wife, Eliseeva, set up her charity *Deti Marii* (Maria's Children) in the early 1990s, and both were active in running its activities.

Veronika Zonabend is married to Ruben Vardanian, born in 1968 and former CEO and controlling shareholder of Troika Dialog, an investment bank. His assets were worth \$950 million in 2017.⁵ Through their foundation, Initiatives for Development of Armenia, they run an international boarding school, United World College Dilijan in Armenia, which Veronika looks after. Her husband is heavily involved in the development of Skolkovo Moscow School of Management, which he cofounded and where a research center was created in 2013 for the study of philanthropy, social entrepreneurship, and ways to pass down assets from the first generation of wealthy people in Russia to the next.

Irina Sedykh is the wife of the metallurgy tycoon Anatolii Sedykh, the main shareholder of United Metallurgical Company (OMK), Russia's second-largest pipe producer and biggest manufacturer of train wheels. He is also the president of the OMK-Uchastie (OMK-Participation) Charity Fund, which focuses on education, health, and children with special needs. Irina Sedykh chairs the fund's supervisory board and is heavily involved in its activities.

The fourth woman is Irina Prokhorova, born in 1956 and the sister of Mikhail Prokhorov, who was born in 1965 and topped Russia's rich list in 2009 with assets of \$22.6 billion (down to \$8.9 billion in 2017). Prokhorova is the founder of *New Literary*

2 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. London: Routledge and Paul Kegan.

3 Schimpfössl, Elisabeth. 2018. *Rich Russians: From Oligarchs to Bourgeoisie*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 83 and p. 97.

4 Kryshnanovskaia, Ol'ga. 2004. *Anatomiiia Rossiiskoi elity (Anatomy of the Russian Elite)*. Moscow: A. V., pp. 341–342.

5 All wealth indicators are taken from *Forbes Russia*.

Observer, the main intellectual journal and publishing house in Russia. She leads a philanthropic foundation named after her brother.

Piotr Aven, born in 1955, is chairman of Russia's biggest private bank, Alfa-Bank. In 2016 his assets were worth \$4.6 billion. He is cofounder of Liniia Zhizni (Life Line), a charity that organizes surgeries for children, and of Genesis Philanthropy Group, which supports Russian-speaking Jews worldwide. Aven regularly lends pieces of his art collections to museums. He is a trustee of several museums and universities.

Vadim Moshkovich, born in 1967, is the head of the agro-industrial holding company Rusagro, Russia's largest sugar and pork producer. In 2016 his assets amounted to \$2.3 billion. His main philanthropic activity is the development of a flagship school for highly gifted children. Fifty million dollars of his private money has gone into the project, and \$150 million into an endowment fund that will help keep things running.

Alexander Svetakov, born in 1963, also specializes in schools; however, in contrast to Moshkovich's school, these schools are for disabled children. Svetakov is the owner of Absolut Group, which has interests in real estate, trading, and insurance. His assets amount to \$3.3 billion in 2017.

Roman Avdeev, born in 1967, owns Moscow Credit Bank, one of Russia's most significant in terms of assets. His wealth in 2014 was assessed at \$1.4 billion. He runs a foundation working with orphans and foster parents.

Ziyavudin Magomedov, also born in 1967, is the main owner of Summa Group, which invests in port logistics, engineering, construction, telecommunications, and oil and gas. His wealth amounted to \$1.4 billion in 2014. His PERI Charitable Foundation largely works in Dagestan, his country of birth; however, their financing might dry up soon. Magomedov was about to fly to the United States with his family in late March 2018 when he and his brother were arrested and charged with setting up an organized crime group and embezzling state funds. On May 30 the court extended the arrest until August 5. In the very worst-case scenario, Magomedov could be handed down a prison sentence of thirty years.⁶

The remaining two interviewees are not billionaires. How rich they are is difficult to tell. Igor Tsukanov, born in 1962, is a former financier and the only one who permanently lives in London. He has never publicly given a price tag to his wealth. His collection of post-war Russian art is one of the largest in the world. He organizes his various philanthropic projects through the Tsukanov Family Foundation. Oleg Sysuev, born in 1953, is an Alfa-Bank board member. In the 1990s, he was deputy head of the presidential administration, the government's vice prime minister, and minister of labor. Sysuev is a founding member of Liniia Zhizni, together with Piotr Aven and others.

Philanthrocapitalist Ideas among Russia's Hyper-Rich

The current generation of hyper-rich grew up on Soviet propaganda, which taught them that the capitalist system inevitably spawns gains for a few to the detriment of the masses. Reality in the 1990s very much confirmed this Soviet propaganda take on capitalism: while the new wealthy elites speedily enriched themselves, the country's gross domestic product shrank by half, the population's living standards crumbled, and poverty exploded.⁷

6 Starinskaia, Galina. 2018. "Vladel'tsy gruppy 'Summa' Ziiavudinu Magomedovu grozit do 30 let lisheniia svobody" ("The Owner of Summa Group, Ziiavudin Magomedov, Faces up to 30 Years in Prison"). *Vedomosti*, April 1. www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2018/04/02/755524-ziyavudin-magomedov.

7 Scheidel, Walter. 2017. *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 222.

During the long oil boom of the 2000s, the memory of Soviet propaganda and the 1990s cut-throat capitalism faded. This allowed philanthrocapitalist ideas to be articulated. The oligarch Aven believes that the private sector will be supplanting the state and that private money will increasingly finance social infrastructure, covering everything from medicine to culture. He sees this as inherent in the logic of the market, stating, “Where capitalism develops, private philanthropy will emerge and grow.” Aven considers a strengthening of philanthropy to be of particular importance to Russia, as this will help rehabilitate private property.

Linia Zhizni, set up by the shareholders of Aven’s bank, was the brainchild of the oligarch Mikhail Fridman. Sysuev, one of the shareholders, told me, “Misha [Mikhail] used his success in business and applied it to charity: business technology, good management, motivated with clear tasks, audit, and control.” Sysuev pondered the weaknesses of this approach: “What we don’t have enough of are those emotional drivers, enticed by the soul,” he admitted. “But maybe that’s also good. We don’t give money if we can’t control it to the end.”

According to the former financier Igor Tsukanov, successful business people know best how to achieve a particular result, how to do a project, and how to organize a big event. They can easily switch from one project to another, and they can apply their skills to any field, not just business. After Tsukanov stopped doing business, he wanted to do something new: “But the new thing had to have parameters: clear objectives, a time frame, and a budget. These are the skills I acquired in business and applied to art.” He regards his own philanthropy as highly structured and is very happy with what he is doing; he is now one of the world’s leading collectors of post-war Russian art: “Exhibitions require efforts, logistics, and intellectual input. They are large projects.”

Other interviewees did not articulate philanthrocapitalist ideas that explicitly, but there were elements of it. Zonabend, who calls herself and her husband, Vardanian, social entrepreneurs, relates to philanthropy in the same way she relates to the market. They were among the first who started “helping systematically. . . . You need a system, otherwise there is no impact, and this system needs to be sustainable in the long run.” Magomedov’s foundation runs an innovation business incubator to develop entrepreneurial IT technology skills among young people in Dagestan. In his project, Moshkovich wants “to have the goals clearly defined and to understand how to get there, how to measure success, etc.” He is concerned about producing graduates whose skill set can compete with the West.

Philanthrocapitalism promotes the idea that competitive principles epitomize freedom of choice and individualism. The desire to express individualism and to experience this freedom of choice has a paradoxical consequence in Russia: people barely differ in their approaches. The vast majority of charity donors support children, and giving aid to children is the major form of charity in Russia.⁸ This is, first, because only children are considered trustworthy in a society that is largely based on distrust.⁹ Second, support for children is an investment in the future of Russia, an issue the new upper class has become increasingly concerned about. Third, support for children follows the Russian tradition of charity that emphasizes benevolence toward passive alms takers.¹⁰

Michael Edwards cautions that competitive principles should be applied to the third sector.¹¹ They are likely to push non-profits to economize in key areas of their work, eschew the most complicated and expensive issues, and avoid those most

8 Khodorova, Julia. 2014. *Russia Giving: Research on Individual Giving in Russia*. Moscow: Charity Aid Foundation Russia; and Skolkovo Center for Management. 2015. *Issledovanie vladel'tsev kapitalov Rossii (Russia's Wealth Possessors Study)*. Moscow: Center for Management, Wealth, and Philanthropy, p. 78, 81.

9 Hosking, Geoffrey. 2014. *Trust: A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

10 Dinello, Natalia. 1998. “Philanthropy in Russia and the United States: Elites and Philanthropy in Russia.” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 12, no. 1: 109–33.

11 Edwards, Michael. 2008. “Philanthrocapitalism: After the Goldrush.” *openDemocracy*, March 20. www.opendemocracy.net/node/36008/print.

difficult to reach. In a pure form, competitive principles inevitably exclude care for groups with little “use” for society. This is, however, not the main reason Russian philanthropists are little concerned about groups other than children, such as migrants, homeless people, drug addicts, ex-prisoners, or the long-term unemployed. Here near-social Darwinist attitudes, which were prevalent in the dog-eat-dog world of the 1990s, prevail: those who can work should do so and earn their own living, and those who are considered to have caused their own misery are not deserving of mercy.¹²

The State and Philanthropy in Russian History

Nascent philanthrocapitalist ideas are confronted by an intrusive Russian state. In this respect, historically in Russia, there is very little ground for philanthrocapitalists to build on. Philanthropy was initially confined to the aristocracy and the monarchy. The tsars kept tight control over who was allowed to give and to whom. At the same time they were showing largesse themselves, as well as permitting the ladies of the court to keep themselves occupied with philanthropic giving. The results were a great number of educational and healthcare institutions as well as institutions of art and culture.¹³ An example of this is the State Hermitage, based on the collection of Catherine the Great, which opened to the public in 1852.

By the mid- to late nineteenth century, when Russia’s industrialization took on pace, industrialists, financiers, and merchants accumulated sufficient wealth to divert some of it to charitable causes. This philanthropy covered a wide range of areas, from cultural institutions and the arts to social trusteeships or social welfare.¹⁴ This period is most strongly imprinted in today’s philanthropists’ minds. Zonabend told me that prior to the First World War 50 percent of all educational institutions were funded by benefactors, and Christian schools were all privately funded by money from the community, the church, and private individuals: “The rich felt a duty to support the development of their country.” She evaluated their giving very positively, relating it back to the nature of the state: “It has always been like this here. We have always had a heavy bureaucracy with people at the top who have never particularly cared about the well-being of their people. So the responsibility to care about the country and its people fell to the rich.” Moving on to the 1917 Revolution, Zonabend deplored that this feeling of duty was lost as a result. Even worse, “many philanthropists of that time supported the revolutionaries.”

Under Soviet rule, the authorities fully institutionalized social welfare and forbade all philanthropic activities. They perceived them as a capitalist practice that undermined the role of the Communist Party.¹⁵ Philanthropy lived on, however, operating under different terms. High-ranking party members patronized the arts even in the toughest of all times, the 1930s.¹⁶ In the post-war Soviet Union, charity was routinely provided through the various Communist Party organizations.¹⁷ Some of my interviewees, such as Segalovich, remembered those disguised charity activities very clearly, as well as their own commitment to them when visiting orphanages and the like.

In the early 1990s, a small number of Russia’s new businessmen pursued philanthropic activities, but they were usually sporadic, unfocused, and uncoordinated. The population dismissed them as PR stunts as well as attempts of the new rich to soothe a guilty conscience and schmooze with the authorities.¹⁸ After the economy had recovered from the 1998 financial crisis, charity rose rapidly.¹⁹ An increasing number of businesses began institutionalizing

12 Schimpfössl (Note 3), p. 110.

13 Khodorova (Note 8).

14 Dinello (Note 10), pp. 117–119.

15 Kurilla, Ivan. 2002. “Civil Activism without NGOs: The Communist Party as a Civil Society Substitute.” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 10, no. 3: 392–400.

16 Fitzpatrick, Sheila. 2015. *On Stalin’s Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

17 Dinello (Note 10), p. 115.

18 Gambrell, Jamey. 2004. “Philanthropy in Russia: New Money under Pressure.” *Carnegie Reporter* 3, no. 1, 2004, available online: www.carnegie.org/reporter/09/philanthropy/index.html

19 Khodorova (Note 8).



their corporate philanthropy programs through corporate foundations. Major shareholders sometimes played a key role in this. Russian companies also began to embrace the notion of corporate social responsibility.²⁰ This was influenced in part by intensified encounters with their Western counterparts and in part by Vladimir Putin. Frequently using the term *social responsibility*, Putin made it clear early in his presidency that he expected those who accrued a certain level of wealth to help fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of the state. His encouragements had their intended effect. In 2006 almost 90 percent of donations in Russia went to state-run bodies financing health care, nursing homes, orphanages, and cultural institutions, thereby stepping in where the state had failed.²¹

Cynics regard such philanthropic efforts as pay-offs to remain in Putin's good books. Roman Abramovich was famously obliged to pump large sums into Chukotka, a remote region in the Far East he had no previous link to but that he represented for years in the Federation Council, the Russian upper house. Some equally doubt that Magomedov's interest in Dagestan, where he grew up, was primarily driven by care and compassion, rather than being a "necessary evil for winning favor with the Kremlin," which is keen to see Islamic extremism in the region contained.²²

In 1999 Vladimir Potanin, the wealthiest Russian in 2015, created the first private foundation, named after him. Since then, the number of private foundations has grown steadily. As of 2013, there were around seventy of them in Russia, many of which are endowed by their founders.²³ These private organizations have been established parallel to corporate ones, and some philanthropists channel their personal philanthropy through their business. Most of them want to have full control over their activities, which is one reason why many foundations implement projects directly, as opposed to allocating grants to intermediary organizations, usually nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Another reason is that the NGO sector in Russia is seen as corrupt, fraudulent, and incompetent.²⁴ In the aftermath of the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Putin accused foreign NGOs (among them Amnesty International) of being instruments of foreign influence, secretly undermining Russia's interests. The introduction of two laws specifically targeting NGOs—the “foreign agent” law of July 2012 and the “undesirable organizations” law of May 2015—weakens the sector further. While attacking the NGO sector, the government introduced a more favorable environment for private philanthropists.²⁵ In 2007 an endowment law was passed that made the income earned from endowments tax free. In 2012 tax incentives were introduced for individual donors. Kremlin-loyal NGOs have gained in strength and prestige.²⁶

In many Western countries, philanthropists tend to give globally as well as in the area they are economically active, or in the neighbourhood where they grew up.²⁷ Patriotism is an important feature of their giving, and Russian philanthropists focus almost exclusively on Russia. Within the country, there too are geographic peculiarities. As Russia's hyper-rich are keen to control their giving and most of them live in Moscow, donations and philanthropic activities are concentrated in the capital and its surroundings.²⁸ Parallel to this, natural resources are sourced from often very remote areas, and a lot of Russia's heavy industry is either energy based or otherwise regionally concentrated. Most of these industrial centers were developed in late imperial Russia and Soviet times. In both periods, the state played the most crucial role in industrializing the country.²⁹

When after the 1990s privatizations the oligarchs-to-be took over large industries left by the Soviet state, many of them ended up as the main employers in the region or town where their production, mines, or oil rigs were located. A crumbling social infrastructure, exacerbated by low wages and mass layoffs, caused severe social grievances. While not officially falling under the new owners' responsibilities, the highly desolate conditions in many regions nevertheless threatened to tarnish their image. In response, many corporations set up their foundations in the areas where their factories are located—and, thereby, filled some of the gaps in the underfunded public infrastructure. Opened in 2004, the Mikhail Prokhorov Foundation, run by Irina Prokhorova, focuses its work around the Siberian city Krasnoyarsk, where the oligarch's business is located. Theatre productions and cultural activities feature prominently in the foundation's program. Anatolii Sedykh has his main production in Vyksa, a town in the Nizhny Novgorod region. His foundation, led by his wife Irina, aims at “unifying the company's work on a social level.” She also organizes an annual cultural festival in the town. Prokhorova's and Sedykh's commitment to cultural development is somewhat reminiscent of the mission that Russian intellectuals—many of them from aristocratic backgrounds—pursued in the second half of the nineteenth century when they tried to teach the peasantry how to achieve a better life, some with a degree of paternalism, others with an enlightenment mission.³⁰ “We want to unite people and encourage them to take part in other people's life,” Sedykh said. She sees this as “a way of helping develop civil society.” Practically, this works via “volunteer participation” in the provision of care for disabled children. It has taken off, she said; every year there are more volunteers than the charity can reasonably integrate into its work.

In theory, strong state dominance, which heavily interferes in individual and corporate philanthropy, is incompatible with the concept of philanthrocapitalism. In Russia, however, philanthrocapitalism and a strong state can coexist harmoniously, as long as philanthropists accept the “rules of the game” dictated by the authorities.

24 Livshin and Weitz (Note 21); Khodorova (Note 8) p. 19; Skolkovo (note 8), pp. 78, 81, 83.

25 Coutts (Note 20).

26 Robertson, Graeme B. 2009. “Managing Society: Protest, Civil Society, and Regime in Putin's Russia.” *Slavic Review* 68, no. 3: 528–47.

27 Freeland, Chrystia. 2013. *Plutocrats: The Rise of the New Global Super-Rich*. London: Penguin, pp. 73–74; Lloyd, Theresa. 2004. *Why Rich People Give*. London: Association of Charitable Foundations, p. 55.

28 Coutts (Note 20).

29 Blackwell, W. L. 1974. *Russian Economic Development from Peter the Great to Stalin*. New York: Watts.

30 Schimpfössl (Note 3), p. 106.

“Sure, many things are not quite clear here. That’s something one needs to simply accept,” Zonabend said. “But the state is not interfering,” she insisted. “In sum, there are great chances here. We have much fewer restrictions than you have in Europe.”

Social Reproduction

In one respect philanthrocapitalism cannot possibly claim to make any difference when compared to previous philanthropic endeavors: its effect on legitimizing and re-creating social class. Nevertheless, advocates of philanthrocapitalism evaluate this positively; great riches generate extra money, and this extra money can be invested into social projects. Furthermore, social status obliges and nurtures a feeling of duty. This is something that scholars scrutinizing elite culture have widely written about, among them famously Georg Simmel in his elaboration of noblesse oblige.³¹

However personally motivated their giving may seem, in fact, it is often highly regulated through formal and informal rules. The elite is sensitive to questions such as who gives to whom, who is allowed to give, and who is allowed to receive. In the West, elite philanthropy is strongly related to being accepted by and identified with long-established, highly prestigious nonprofit organizations. Becoming a trustee of one of these indicates that one has socially “arrived”.³² In Russia, similar principles apply; however, they are realized through informal practices based on personal relations of trust. Whether formal or informal, such practices play the role of a social catalyst guarding the boundaries of social class and deciding who belongs to which elitist circles. Within these circles, very much in line with Marcel Mauss’s observations, interdependence and social obligations are created and re-created.³³

Apart from the bonding among upper class peers, philanthropy is also one of the most important tools to create a lasting legacy of cross-generational wealth. The first generation of wealth in Russia is growing older and their members are coming closer to death. The assets they will pass on to their offspring are on an epic scale; we will soon see one of the biggest transfers of wealth the world has ever seen, particularly if one considers the small number of people involved.³⁴ Against this backdrop, a certain training in philanthropy has become an integral part of what is considered a proper upbringing. Many children of the hyper-rich are on track to acquire legitimacy.

Avdeev would be delighted if his children continued his legacy by running his foundation, but, like many others, he stressed that this should be of their own volition. “It’s much more important to me that they live their own lives,” he said. “The older they get, the less I try to give them advice. An older child has a right to make his or her own decisions and make their own mistakes.” Avdeev’s children will have plenty of chance to do so. He does not intend to bequeath his wealth to any of them. What they receive is high-quality education, accommodation, and a car.

Zonabend and her husband also say they will not pass on their wealth to their children. Moshkovich and Svetakov intend to strictly regulate the amount their children will receive, while large parts of their fortunes will go to charity. Being deprived of a windfall inheritance is likely to enable the children to find a place in society that will make them appear deserving in their own right, regardless of the fact that they were born into privilege.

31 Simmel, Georg. (1908) 1992. “Exkurs über den Adel” (“Excursus on the Nobility”). In *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms), 816–31. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, p. 820.

32 Ostrower, Francie. 1995. *Why the Wealthy Give: The Culture of Elite Philanthropy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

33 Mauss, Marcel. (1898) 2002. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*.

34 Schimpfössl (Note 3), p. 150.

Social Inequality

Philanthrocapitalism has become fashionable at a time of increasing social inequality, with the wealth of a tiny group of hyper-rich multiplying exponentially. Never before in history has social inequality widened as rapidly as it has in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union.³⁵ In 2013 Credit Suisse declared Russia as one of the countries with the highest level of wealth inequality in the world.³⁶ The plunge in oil prices in 2014 undermined many of the gains made in the living standards of ordinary Russians during the early 2000s.³⁷ However, rich Russians have barely felt the consequences of either the 2008 or the 2014 crises; the number of dollar billionaires recovered quickly.³⁸

Svetakov sometimes has difficulties understanding his less fortunate fellow Russians: “Our people are particular. They’ve had everything taken away, but they still endure it.” That should not cause him sleepless nights, others say. “The population has become a lot richer in the last twenty, thirty years,” Aven insisted. He admitted that there is a problem of income inequality (which, shockingly to him, is already as high as in the United States, he added), but “the group of very rich people is very small and they live separately from the rest.” As for tackling the problem of inequality, he sees the responsibility lying with the state: “It’s a question of social policy. Social mobility must work. There mustn’t be any nepotism.” He assured me that there is certainly not any risk “whatsoever” of social protests erupting in Russia.

Industrialists closely involved in day-to-day business are the most likely to face moral dilemmas. Anatolii Sedykh reduced his staff after the 2014 crisis hit. His wife told me that even up to the eleventh hour they tried to save their business projects, whether profitable or not. Their foundation tried to mitigate the consequences of these layoffs, she assured me. Moshkovich too seemed at loggerheads with the basic demands of capitalism and his own role in it: “I’m not a politician, I’m a small person. I don’t deal with inequality. I don’t care about inequality,” he said. The issue, however, does bother him “in an empirical sense, in cases where I encounter it.” His company employs fifteen thousand people. He noted: “When we increase productivity, this means mass redundancies. . . . We need to sack people all the time.” Even though he is not personally involved in any such executive processes, they clearly make him feel uneasy; after all, they clash with his idea of being responsible toward his workers, and his desire to secure them a decent life. (“We build houses for our employees, raise their wages, educate their children, and so on.”)

Critics of philanthropy, such as Edwards,³⁹ argue that governments achieved far more over the last century through implementing social programs, especially when pressurized by social movements and civil society. Avdeev might partly agree with that. He thinks that “rich people can only contribute with their ideas”; however, “the main discussion needs to run in civil society.” In general, Avdeev allots an important role to the people, a view that originates from his Soviet values. “The April theses? Bread to all?” he asked me. “How could one possibly not agree with that?” He then told me that he appreciates Vladimir Lenin, not least for his qualities as a gifted propagandist and journalist. Avdeev embraces Marxist ideas in general; “although there is a lot of utopia in Marx. Then again, utopian ideas are not only bad after all.” Eventually, Avdeev lamented that one crucial demand put forward by Karl Marx has not been implemented: the abolition of inheritance.

35 Scheidel (Note 7), p. 222; Therborn, Goran. 2013. *The Killing Fields of Inequality*. Cambridge: Polity, p. 8.

36 Keating, Giles, Michael O’Sullivan, Anthony Shorrocks, James B. Davies, Rodrigo Lluberas, and Antonios Koutsoukis. 2013. *Global Wealth Report 2013*. Zurich: Credit Suisse, p. 53.

37 Pirani, Simon. 2010. *Change in Putin’s Russia: Power, Money, and People*. London: Pluto, p. 10.; Tikhonova, Natalya E., and Svetlana V. Mareeva. 2016. “Poverty in Contemporary Russian Society: Formation of a New Periphery.” *Russian Politics* 1, no. 2: 159–83, p. 162.

38 *Forbes Russia*. 2017. “200 Bogateishchikh biznesmenov Rossii 2017” (“200 Richest Businessmen in Russia in 2017”). April 20. www.forbes.ru/rating/342579-200-bogateyshih-biznesmenov-rossii-2017.

39 Edwards (Note 11).

Conclusion

Attempts undertaken by the hyper-rich to legitimize themselves through philanthropy help strengthen ties between them and facilitate cohesion among the various elite groups. Zonabend and Vardanian are in many respects spearheading Russia's new upper class. Their class consciousness is highly developed, witnessed not only by ensuring their children acquire high status, but by setting up an institution to coach Russia's rich how to pass down wealth to their offspring in a sustainable way. As for their intrafamily reproduction, Zonabend and Vardanyan have gone one step further by pledging to disinherit their children and give their money to charity instead. This is, in fact, the biggest favor parents can grant their children to give them legitimacy. It is the most powerful and impressive way the super-wealthy have to remove the stigma their children carry of being born with a silver spoon in their mouth.

The same is true for Aven and Sysuev. McGoey grants philanthrocapitalism a genuine novelty: the level to which benefactors are open about the fact that their charity enhances their business prospects.⁴⁰ Albeit as part of a long-term perspective, Aven's and Sysuev's investment in charity has as its aim the rehabilitation of the status of private property in Russia; and this obviously entwines with their own interest. Yet again, as with Vardanian, they pursue not only their personal self-interest but also the interest of their class as a whole.

A factor that has greatly facilitated their (self-)legitimization is their intelligentsia identity, and this echoes in their philanthropic practices. Although to varying extents, Zonabend, Vardanian, Aven, and Sysuev presented themselves as educators who see their duty in teaching their common fellow citizens civil society values. The credibility of moral leadership benefits from historically founded status—birth right and entitlement—and this is what they claim for themselves, among other things, by emphasizing their intelligentsia background.

There is, of course, a factor that dampens such efforts to assume moral leadership: the radical economic transformation in the 1990s, which was the precondition of my interviewees' riches. It could only acquire such a radical form because there was no significant force in society willing or able to contest the changes under way. This course of events was warmly welcomed by not only the liberal reformers in Russia but also their Western advisors, many of whom deplore the lack of a civil society in Russia today.⁴¹ None of my interviewees delved into this, which is interesting in itself. It indicates that Russia's new upper class has not yet found an entirely convincing narrative about the origin of their money, which they today so generously give to charity.

All this does not necessarily make Russia's hyper-rich unsuitable for philanthrocapitalism if it is understood not as an ideological idea but as a practical tool to justify wealth inequality. Arguing that private and corporate surplus money is the necessary precondition that sets free resources for philanthropy, however, has its own drawback: On the one hand, Svetakov and Eliseeva would not be able to run their projects for mentally disabled or otherwise disadvantaged children were it not for their riches. On the other hand, their projects would not exist if they reasoned purely in philanthrocapitalist terms. Their involvement with severely disadvantaged children does not fit into categories such as impact-oriented, measurable, result based, market savvy, high performing, cost effective, or financially profitable.

40 McGoey, Linsey. 2012. "Philanthrocapitalism and Its Critics." *Poetics* 40, no. 2: 185–99, p. 194.

41 Domrin, Alexander N. 2003. "Ten Years Later: Society, 'Civil Society,' and the Russian State." *Russian Review* 62, no. 2: 193–211, p. 31n.; Uhlin, Anders. 2006. *Post-Soviet Civil Society: Democratization in Russia and the Baltic States*. London: Routledge, p. 163.

My interviewees were all born in the Soviet Union, most of them in the Brezhnev era. Their Soviet upbringing and education forms a major part of their identity. If they refuted their past, this would mean denying, to some extent, their own worthiness. This creates some conflicting ideas in terms of how they comprehend their role in the system and the new social hierarchy. This conflict is particularly apparent in Moshkovich, who perceives himself as a product of Soviet society, and Avdeev, who identifies with the ideological concepts that founded the Soviet project. As little related to philanthrocapitalism as such an analysis might sound, in a lighter and dampened version it has global parallels: the world's richest are increasingly borrowing some terminology traditionally ascribed to the socially caring, occasionally even the radical Left, when talking about their efforts to change the world and connect with the common people.⁴²

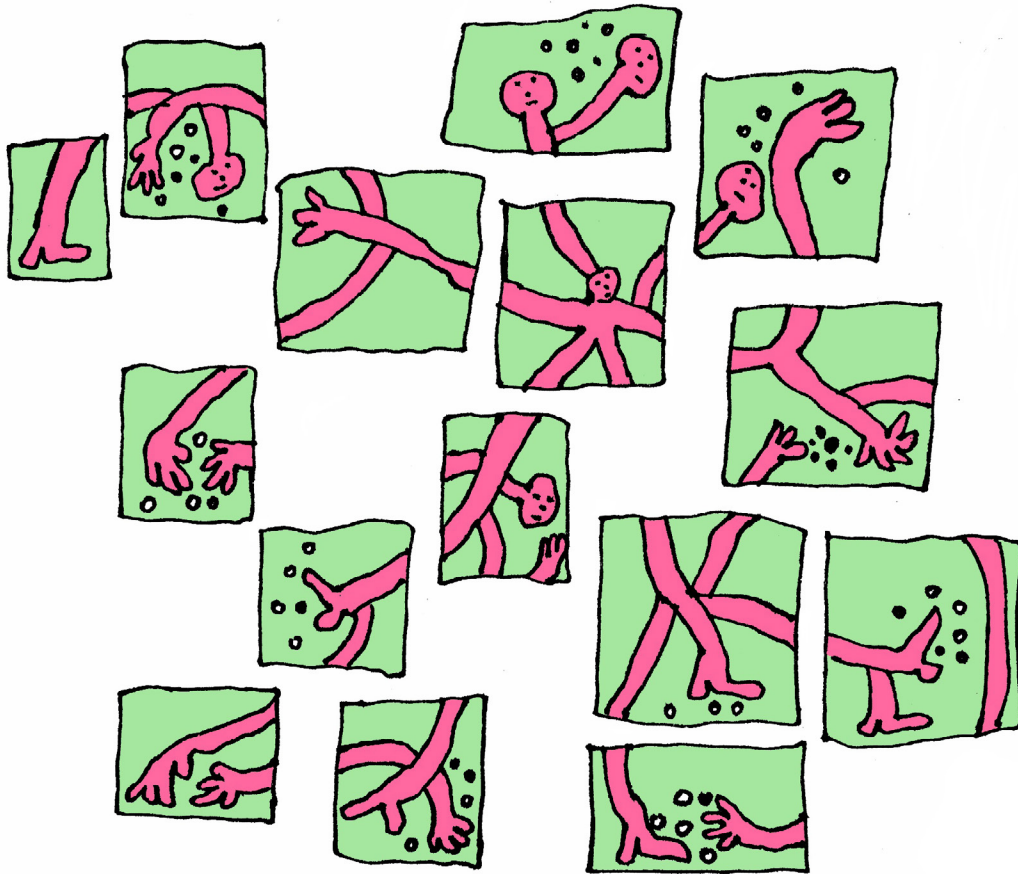
42 *Forbes*. 2012. "The Forbes 400 Summit: Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and the Greatest Roundtable of All Time." October 8. www.forbes.com/sites/randalllane/2012/09/18/the-forbes-400-summit-bill-gates-warren-buffett-and-the-greatest-roundtable-of-all-time/.

Such efforts naturally stop short of challenging the status quo with regard to wealth distribution. Increased philanthropic activities and, in particular, the current fashion of philanthrocapitalism reflect the power of individual money and its extreme concentration. These circumstances reinforce its influence, not least in relation to the state. This is also the explanation for why there is very little tension, if not full-on cooperation, between philanthrocapitalists and the state. This is true even for Russia. Sure, some of the rich resent having projects allocated to them by the authorities. However, once they submit to the game and play it right, Russia is full of opportunities for those well established within the power system. Merging philanthrocapitalist and Soviet ideologies is in many ways doing the trick and, to a large extent, characterizes Russia's new upper class and the philanthropists among it.

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Illustrations: Dorota Brázdovičová



Introduction

Over roughly five years, *eons* in Internet time, the term “social media” has become ubiquitous. Taking the place of the contestation and uncertainty over “new media,” “digital media,” “networked media,” “personal media,” “participatory media,” and even “tactical media,” “social media” has effectively hegemonized the field, not only producing a generation unaware of pre-Facebook and pre-Twitter connectivities, but also reformatting prior digital experiments as so many failures or advances on the way to mediated sociality. Perhaps most indicative of the theoretical dilemma social media poses: there is general, assumed agreement on what social media is even as there is significant doubt as to whether society exists.

1 Transcript archived at the Margaret Thatcher Foundation, at <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>.

Three claims for the non-existence of society

For the last 30 or 40 years, society has been said not to exist. The claim appears in at least three versions. The neoliberal version of the claim that society doesn't exist was voiced most famously by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In a 1987 interview with Douglas Key published in *Women's Own* following her third term win, Thatcher emphasized personal responsibility and hard work.¹ Wanting and working to get more money, she said, was “the great driving engine, the driving

force of life.” Against basic principles of social welfare, she argued that it was not the government’s role to look after the misfortunate; it wasn’t society’s fault that they were homeless, sick, or unemployed. “There is no such thing as society.” Rather, “there are individual men and women and there are families.” The neoliberal version of the claim that society doesn’t exist, then, emphasizes individuals and families. Even when churches are acknowledged, they are treated more as sites for the individual practice of faith than they are as social forces. The claim that there is no such thing as society, moreover, is raised critically. It is part of the ideological justification for the attack on the welfare state as a social solution to the social problems inevitably accompanying capitalist markets. Neoliberalism says that the idea that society can deal collectively with common concerns is an illusion. The reality is that it’s every man for himself. People are first and foremost individuals.

A second version of the idea that society doesn’t exist is the *network* version. The network version appears in a variety of guises in contemporary social and media theory, the most prominent of which is Bruno Latour’s actor–network theory. He writes, “It is no longer clear whether there exists relations that are specific enough to be called ‘social’ and that could be grouped together in making up a special domain that could function as ‘a society’.”² Starting from the position that there is no such thing as society, Latour advocates a sociology that can trace the actions through which things are assembled into associations.³ Groups form and un–form; they are groupings of previously disparate elements rather than fixed or constant collectivities. The methodology Latour proposes for critical sociology also manifests itself as a solution: the non–existence of society can be fixed with the proper technologies. If we attend to the ways collectivities are assembled, or if we ensure that they have the right techniques and technologies, procedures and processes through which to connect, then we can put together social moments and political issues.⁴ To be sure, these moments and issues are always disruptable, but that is both liberating and unavoidable.

A third version of the claim that society doesn’t exist can be called the *radical democratic or post–Marxist version*. In *Hegemony and socialist strategy* (1985), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe write:

“... we must begin by renouncing the conception of ‘society’ as founding totality of its partial processes. We must, therefore, consider the openness of the social as the constitutive ground or ‘negative essence’ of the existing, and the diverse ‘social orders’ as precarious and ultimately failed attempts to domesticate the field of differences.

Accordingly, the multiformity of the social cannot be apprehended through a system of mediations, or the social order be understood as an underlying principle. There is no sutured space peculiar to ‘society’, since the social itself has no essence.”⁵

Society doesn’t exist. Conflicts, forces, power, struggles, competition, and oppression, however, do. “Social orders” attempt to suppress, evade, and “domesticate,” these processes, making them appear as ruptures of a whole rather than as contingent relations among diverse and antagonistic elements.

The primary difference between the network and the radical democratic version of the claim for the non–existence of society is that the network version thinks that objects (things) exist and considers their creative, combinatory action, their agency, as a primary associative force. The radical democratic version pays less attention to things, emphasizing instead a variety of uniting and dividing forces.

2 Bruno Latour, 2005. *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor– network– theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 2.

3 Bruno Latour, 2003. “What if we talked politics a little?” *Contemporary Political Theory*, volume 2, p. 143.

4 Noortje Marres, 2005. “No issue, no public: Democratic deficits after the displacement of politics,” dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam, at <http://dare.uva.nl/document/17061>.

5 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 1985. *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. Translated by Winston Moore and Paul Cammack. London: Verso, pp. 95–96.

What do these three versions of the idea that society doesn't exist have in common? First, they are from the same basic historical period, the period of the end of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberalism. Second, they all reject the idea of an organic social whole or grounded totality; since society doesn't exist there is no need for a conceptual account of its ground or basis. Third, and relatedly, they reject notions of natural hierarchies, which would only make sense in a relatively fixed setting. It follows, fourth, that they also reject the idea that there is or could be some central myth, theme, story, or authority that gives structure to society. Rather, there are mutually productive entities (individual persons and objects) and forces.

6 Michel Foucault, 2008. *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

7 Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, 2005. *The new spirit of capitalism*. Translated by Gregory Elliot. London: Verso.

If society doesn't exist, what would social media look like?

If there is something right or true about any of these accounts of society and the sense in which it doesn't exist, what would we expect social media to look like?

The neoliberal version replaces the idea of society with the claim that there are individual men and women and there are families. These men and women are responsible for themselves. They are motivated by money in a competitive, capitalist environment. We can imagine, then, that they are concerned with jobs, maybe with finance, with security, and likely with finding mates and making families that can take care of them with they are old or infirm. We could also expect that these individuals might try to find ways to measure themselves and others so that they can determine who is the most successful, the most powerful. Such knowledge could conceivably help them in the job market as well as let them know who to pursue as a mate.⁶ We might also expect that people would deal with the pressures of competition by forming alliances and building networks.⁷ Individual competitors might see it as in their self-interest to combine, so they would probably look for ways to do this easily and efficiently.

They would want to know what others are doing in order to keep up with or even get ahead of their competition. They might also want relief from the loneliness of temporary work on short-term contracts, desiring connection to others insofar as they work from home or shift from office to office. Their social lives might be increasingly screen-based since their preoccupation with making money and getting ahead might estrange them from more community-based activities. In short, if the neoliberal claim that society doesn't exist is true, we would expect a social media tailored to individualism, competition, alliance, entertainment, and pro-creation. We would expect it to be concerned with individual interests — privacy, security, property — much in the way that companies and entrepreneurs are always trying to protect their advantages.

If the actor network version of the non-existence of society is true then we would expect social media to be focused on making, on invention. Insofar as the problem of politics is building issues and enabling association, we would expect ongoing innovation in technologies that facilitate collaboration. We might imagine more apps that let people share — the content would be less important than the fact of sharing. Overall, we would expect enthusiasm with respect to the activity of associating and relatively less concern with the content, substance, or purpose of association.

The social media we would expect if the radical democratic version is true would be basically the same as what we get from the actor network version — a tumultuous media environment. The primary difference would be that whereas the former delights

in making, the latter delights in contestation. So we would imagine people designing and using media in order to build identities, coalitions, and alliances. We would imagine media as a terrain of struggle over these identities. And we would expect unceasing turbulence with respect to contents, uses, applications, platforms, and protocols, especially insofar as any sedimentation or cohesion establishes the hegemony of one group or outlook, diminishing the potential of the others.⁸

Generally, then, the three accounts of the non-existence of society would lead us to expect a media environment pretty much like what we have. To be sure, we might be surprised that a common protocol TCP/IP was possible at all. But for the most part the Internets we have, our different devices, uses, and apps, are basically what we would expect. If society doesn't exist, we would expect social media to correspond in some way to this non-existence — to be individualistic, competitive, fluid, contested, and turbulent. We would expect emergent hierarchies, in groups and out groups, multiple opportunities for individuation and individual self-aggrandizement. To be clear, I am not arguing that the media we have *reflects* the fact that society doesn't exist. I am not making a simple "reflection" argument. Rather, the argument I am making (so far) is about mutual constitution: this is the media that "we" as disparate, unequal, competitive individuals would build and use.

Tactics and critique

There is a convergence, then, between the claims that society doesn't exist and the social media we have. Yet there is a disjunction between the media we have and arguments that flow through critical media theory and tactical media activism. In these circles, we hear that the problem is centralization and that what we need is individual control, individual autonomy, more privacy, better security, more choices, and more options.⁹ We hear these points made in the language of critique, even radical critique, as if they were not repeating the dominant ideology of individualism. The presumption seems to be that egalitarian emancipation depends on independence from centralized structures of communication and power. It seems to be, in other words, that centralization is a (if not *the*) crucial barrier to more just and responsive political arrangements.

More bluntly put, the same mantras of concern that animated John Perry Barlow and the cyber-libertarians on the information frontier and then the California techno-utopians turned *Wired* champions of the so-called new economy are echoed today. The alternatives and their positive/negative valences are the same: decentralized, distributed, bottom up, contingent, and individual are better than centralized, unified, top down, collective, and planned.¹⁰ As Fred Turner powerfully demonstrates in his book on Stewart Brand and cyberculture, this is an ideological matrix that became powerful during the Cold War and was then "grooved up" in the nineteen sixties.¹¹

Why do critical media theorists and activists repeat the critique of centralization in a decentralized media environment? Why do they continue to applaud and urge individual choice and self-organization even as neoliberalism insists on privatization and capitalism insists on individual competition rather than collective cooperation?

Psychoanalysis provides several possibilities.¹² The insistence on repeating the same critique might be a psychotic response to missing authority, to the foreclosure of the paternal function. Or maybe it's a paranoid response that enables the subject

8 Tim Jordan, 2007. "Online direct action: Hacktivism and radical democracy," In: Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera (editors). *Radical democracy and the Internet: Interrogating theory and practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 73–88.

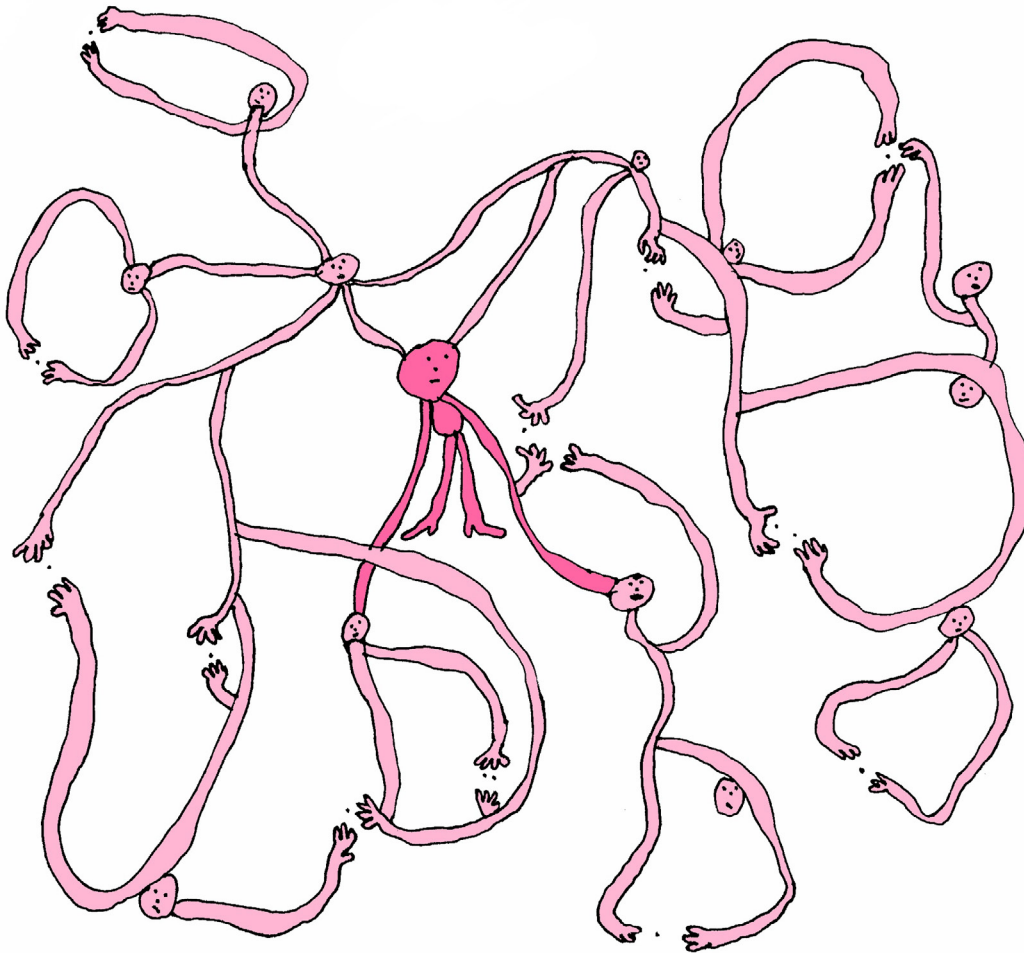
9 See, for example, the program for *Unlike Us #3*, specifically the project section showing alternatives in social media; see <http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/unlikeus/past-events/2-amsterdam/program/>.

10 Jodi Dean, 2010. *Blog theory: Feedback and capture in the circuits of drive*. Cambridge: Polity.

11 Fred Turner, 2006. *From counterculture to cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the rise of digital utopianism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

12 Jodi Dean, 2009. *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies: Communicative capitalism and left politics*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

to avoid acknowledging what is missing and confronting his own freedom. Or maybe the answer is simple mistrust, an element of the larger cultural crisis of legitimation facing political and economic institutions (a crisis which neoliberalism relies on and exacerbates).



What's dissatisfying in these psychoanalytic possibilities (even for those who find psychoanalytic explanations compelling) is that the mistrust expressed among critical media theorists and activists is a mistrust of networks, of the very decentralized and individualist processes and patterns an early generation lauded as the remedy to centralized power. The networks we have are not secure enough, not private enough, not flexible enough. Our information and identities are insecure, at risk. We are too vulnerable. The mistrust of networks, then, seems to assume the possibility of a completely free and completely friendly network, where one could say whatever one wanted to whomever one wanted with absolutely no repercussions. In other words, it assumes a fantastic, impossible network that is both secure and politically radical at the same time.

From concentration to dispersion and back

Before addressing the mistrust of networks, I want to recap the argument thus far. My first claim is that there has been a significant critique of the idea of "the social." This critique has pointed out the ways that something that can be called "society" doesn't exist, that instead there are persons and things, gaps and flows, and contingencies and processes. My second claim is that the social media we have look like what we would

expect from this description of the absent social. They are changing and incomplete, multi-layered, populated by subjects and objects that compete and combine in various ways. And my third claim is if the first two are true, then there is a problem with approaches to social media rooted in a critique of centralization and a concern with privacy, autonomy, individual choice, and security because neither centralization nor the lack of individual choice is the problem confronting radical activism today — not even loss of privacy is the problem.

Rather, the opposite is the case: dispersion is the problem; de-centralization is the problem. Consider contemporary distributed work arrangements. In early 2012, for example, news broke of IBM's intention to layoff thousands of its German workers, a program called "Liquid".¹³ The company's plan entails organizing a distributed "talent cloud" on an Internet platform something like Facebook. The company would store information regarding workers' skills "in the cloud" and rehire them when necessary. Workers would compete for higher rankings and companies would hire them on a task-by-task basis, avoiding inconvenient labor laws, the expense of health benefits, and the need to maintain a physical plant. Personal international employment contracts would subvert national labor regulations. As Andrew Ross points out, the Internet mobilizes the dispersed work of multiple individuals. It does so, moreover, not simply by allowing for "telecommuting" or by enabling ever longer global supply chains. Rather, it connects people who work for free (that is, who don't construe their online activities as work for which they should be paid) and free-lancers (or "e-lancers") who cobble together income through myriad micro-tasks in multiple settings. Ross writes, "As in the offshore outsourcing model, the dispersion of this labor is highly organized but it is not dependent on physical relocation to cheap labor markets."¹⁴ Tasks are distributed, workers are dispersed. And this makes organizing an opposition, finding ways to come together in common struggle, building the solidarities necessary to sustain a fight extraordinarily difficult.

Attacks on "centralization" and "hierarchy" thus put the problem ideologically; they invert it. Because they don't recognize this inversion — or the interconnection between dispersion and concentration — the "solutions" they offer only make it worse. They increase dispersion and amplify noise, making it harder for people to find what they want, to know what they want, and to know what to trust. Albert-Laszlo Barabási's work on complex networks demonstrates this point.¹⁵

Complex networks are characterized by free choice, growth, and preferential attachment. Examples include academic citation networks, blockbuster movies, and the popularity of blogs and Web sites.¹⁶ Barabási explains that complex networks follow a power law distribution of links. The item in first place has twice as many links as the item in second place, which has more than the one in third and so on such that there is very little difference among those at the bottom but massive differences between top and bottom. So lots of novels are written. Few are published. Fewer are sold. A very few become best-sellers. The idea appears in popular media as the 80/20 rule, the winner-take-all or winner-take-most character of the new economy, and the "long tail".¹⁷

In these examples, the "one" (the item exponentially more popular than the many) emerges as the field or network expands (hubs are an immanent property of complex networks). In the context of a broadly distributed labor market, expansion diminishes opportunities for income and paid labor (as we've seen in the collapse of print journalism and university presses). We should recognize here a primary

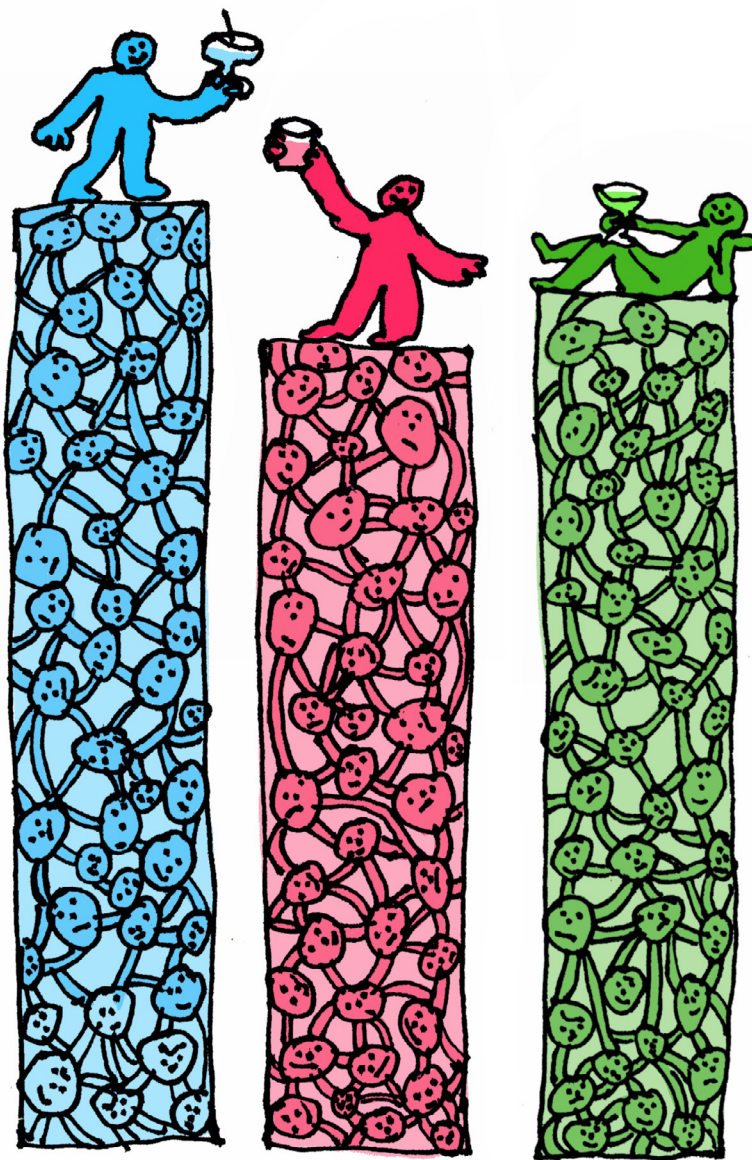
13 Markus Von Dettmer und Frank Dohmen, 2012. "Frei schwebend in der Wolke," *Der Spiegel* (6 February), at <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-83865244.html>.

14 Andrew Ross, 2013. "In search of the lost paycheck," In: Trebor Scholz (editor). *Digital labor: The Internet as playground and factory*. New York: Routledge, p. 20.

15 Albert-László Barabási, 2003. *Linked: How everything is connected to everything else and what it means for business, science, and everyday life*. New York: Plume.

16 Clay Shirky, 2006. "Powerlaws, Weblogs, and inequality," In: Jodi Dean, Geert Lovink, and Jon Anderson (editors). *Reformatting politics: information technology and global civil society*. New York: Routledge, pp. 35–42.

17 Chris Anderson, 2004. "The long tail," *Wired*, volume 12, number 10, at <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html>.



condition of labor under neoliberal capitalism. Rather than having a right to the proceeds of one's labor by virtue of a contract, ever more of us now win or lose such that remuneration is treated like a prize. In academia, art, writing, architecture, entertainment, design, and increasing numbers of additional fields, people not only feel fortunate to get work, to get hired, to get paid, but ever more tasks and projects are conducted as competitions, which means that those doing the work are not paid unless they win. They work but only for a chance at pay. The implication of the shift from wages to prizes is the mobilization of the many to produce the one. Without the work of the many, there would not be one (who is necessarily contingent): the bigger the network, the bigger the hub — and the bigger the reward for the one at the top.

The administration of U.S. President Barak Obama has made inducement prizes a key part of its "Strategy for American Innovation." Outlining its vision for a more competitive America, the White House announced that government "should take advantage of the expertise and insight of people both inside and outside" Washington by using "high-risk, high-reward policy tools such as prizes and challenges to solve tough problems."¹⁸ In effect, it decentralized expertise and redistributed risk. Contests privilege those who have the resources to take risks as they transfer costs associated with doing work to contestants (furthering neoliberalism's basic mechanism of socializing risk and privatizing reward). People pay to do work for which they will not be remunerated.

Multiplication and dispersion are inextricable from powerful centers. Hubs like Facebook are effects of dispersion. The very hierarchies that decentralization and dispersion are supposed to eliminate also result from them. No long tail without the one.

Since hubs emerge out of dispersion, we would do well to think more about some of the advantages of centralization. Conglomeration has its own pleasures; people like being part of something bigger themselves. A key pleasure of social media is the pleasure of connectivity. It is a reaction to the disconnections of precarious labor, the breakdown wrought by neoliberalism. All three versions of the claim that society doesn't exist accept this. The neoliberal version recognizes that people might want to connect for both careerist and escapist reasons; the actor network version looks for ways to build association; and, the radical democratic version addresses collective struggles. The affective dimension of hubs, then, points to a way in which centralization is desirable: people want to be where their friends are, where the action is.

Social media makes the fact that production is always production for others manifest. Whether it is affect or information (understanding "information" as designating a relation, whether of signal to noise, sender to receiver, or contribution to content), production in social media is reflexive, always a production of relations. The cooperation of different individuals appears as what it is, the productive force that arises out of our combined and multiplied efforts. Rather than congealed within a commodity form that renders relations between people as relations between things, the social substance manifest itself in a clear, visceral way on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, in fact, in massively popular social media.

The social substance

I have argued that the basic problem of social media, a problem that we access by thinking about the ostensible non-existence of society, is not centralization. Centralization is rather the flipside of the drive to proliferate, as well as a kind of solution to the dispersion proliferation yields. Why do critical media people not get this? I have suggested that it is because of ideological illusion, the repetition of the mantras of new economy neoliberalism as if these were critical insights. To leave the argument here would be one-sided. There is more to it than this because the critical impulse against centralization is right. It just expresses itself in ideological terms, treating centralization *per se* as the problem rather than ownership and property as the problem. More bluntly put, that Facebook has over a billion active users is not the problem. The problem is that the company that we make in common does not belong to us.

The production of the social substance that we see in Facebook and Twitter is not completely for itself — someone else owns it. There are millions of users and one billionaire. It is not like Facebook and Twitter are user owned: more than a billion users, one billionaire (a clear power law). Facebook is explicit about this. The Web site declares: "Our product development philosophy centers on continuous innovation in creating products that are social by design, which means they place people and their social interactions at the core of the product experience."¹⁹

Because of the property relations that allow a common product to be owned by a single person (or a corporation which, in U.S. law, is a person), producing social relations does not enable producers to procure means of life, means of subsistence.

You can't eat your friends. There is an ongoing lawsuit, though, regarding whether you can eat your followers — a company is suing a former employee for taking his followers with him when he left the job, claiming loss of ad revenue and valuing followers at \$US2.50 per follower.²⁰ My point is that the production of social relations is for someone else, the capitalist. So we are alienated from our means of socializing even as we are completely immersed in them. In fact, the more immersed, the more alienated insofar as there are more hits and clicks and pageviews to be tracked, auctioned, sold, and put back to capitalist use (thus, I use alienation not to describe a subjective experience but an objective process).

In massive social media there is a disconnecting of social relations from relations through which one provides and is provided food and shelter — and this is a real contradiction. Active production of social relations is not active production of food and shelter; and, for more and more people, active production of food and shelter is not the active production of social relations. That is to say, most people are not paid for their productive engagement in social media. It is not the way they earn money. At the same time, most of the active production of social relations does not occur through the production of food and shelter. This means that what paid labor there is in social media produces something else or serves and administers something else. Corrupt arguments like those of Chris Anderson that announce that everything is “free” in the networked economy obfuscate the reality of the loss of income people need to survive.²¹ If everything is free then no one earns the money to pay for food and shelter. Social media relies on a strong, even constitutive division between communicative labor and the labor that produces food and shelter. Emphasizing this division reveals how waged labor and property are fetters on communicative production and thus instruments of alienation.

The problem of social media is the problem of capitalism — private property and ownership. Communication under communicative capitalism is a primary means of production, but it does not belong to us. Our basic communicative acts, our affects and feelings, hopes and ideas, to the extent that we express them electronically, belong to another not ourselves. Hence, even when we critique this other and its system, we contribute to it, reinforce it.²² Only those who neglect this fundamental feature of communicative capitalism can champion some kind of “new politics” or speak about Twitter and Facebook revolutions. They mistakenly treat as having arrived what is not yet there. The politics that matters is not in the content coursing through the networks. It is in the form of mass individual use of personal media to create new, huge, conglomerations and combinations of people. The form can be used in a new politics — but not as long as it owned by someone else, not as long as it is confined within capitalism.

Marx wrote in *The German ideology*, “In imagination, individuals seem freer under the rule of the bourgeoisie than before because their conditions of life seem accidental to them. In reality, they are less free, because they are more subjected to the domination of things.”²³ Critics and activists who conceive the problem of social media in terms of centralization and massness or who think what we need is more dispersion, diversity, and privacy in networks seem to want to make more things accidental, less necessary. The reality is that this is less emancipation, not more, because of the stepping away from the power that comes with collectivity, a power to which social media gives expression. Mass social media like Facebook and Twitter make the fact of collective production, of social power, present and undeniable such that it seems completely bizarre and contradictory that anyone could justifiably own them, or any

20 Bob Sullivan, 2012. “When you and employer split, who gets your friends and followers?” at <http://redtape.nbcnews.com/news/2012/10/12/14373762-when-you-and-employer-split-who-gets-your-friends-and-followers?lite>.

21 Chris Anderson, 2008. “Free! Why \$0.00 is the future of business,” *Wired*, volume 16, number 3, at http://www.wired.com/techbiz/it/magazine/16-03/ff_free?currentPage=all.

22 Jodi Dean (2010) and Jodi Dean (2009).

23 Karl Marx, 1994. *Selected writings*. Edited, with an introduction, by Lawrence H. Simon. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, p. 145.

substantial means of production at all. They are common property but not common property, public but not public, private but not private. To focus on individual privacy rights and security issues is to displace this fact, to push it away and proceed as if capitalism were not contradictory.

I close by returning to the social. The three versions of the claim that there is no such thing as society miss the way that society does exist, namely, antagonistically, through class conflict. Society is not a whole or a unity. Rather, it exists in the enactment of collectivity and common production.

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