


YOUNG ENTREPRENEURS
IN MODERN-DAY SLOVENIA:
INTRODUCTION TO
AN EMERGING SUBJECT
(*Introduction to Thematic Section*)

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In the fall of 2021, one of Slovenia's commercial TV stations ran the sixth season of the TV series titled *Štartaj Slovenija* ('Slovenia Start'), which presents stories about careers of young entrepreneurs to the general public and promotes their products sold at one of the retail chains. Around 40 entrepreneurial teams were featured on the programme, since it first aired in 2016. With the hosts advising the featured entrepreneurs on how to develop their products and the series telling the public that most anyone can try their hand at being an entrepreneur, the TV series presents much like an educational programme. Semantically the series title conveys two messages: a call for Slovenia to take a more entrepreneurial path, and a reference to the concept of start-up as a new and innovative company format. The title can also work as a "slogan" (Makovicky et al. 2019) that publically promotes certain values, career opportunities, and ways of self-recognition that correspond with the contemporary neoliberal state project. Furthermore, since, in Slovenian, the word *start* rings like slang, and since its reference to start-ups is not familiar to all age groups, the title resonates primarily with young people. As the director general of the retail chain behind this TV series stated in a 2017 interview, they conceived it as a socially-conscious project which would restore the public's trust in the feasibility of success in Slovenia by featuring young entrepreneurs (Križnik 2017). But why young people specifically? The director general viewed young people in two contrasting ways. On one hand he thought many "do not believe it is possible to be successful in Slovenia. They are emigrating in droves. The statistic that in 2015 three times more young people between the ages of 25 and 35 sought opportunities abroad

is both telling and frightening.” The TV series was intended to confer “a signal to young people that the situation is not completely hopeless, that there are those, who understand their ideas. Not only that, but that there are those willing to help them and stand by their side.” On the other hand, the project “was based on the assessment that a large part of the youth in Slovenia is aware that they can mostly only rely on themselves to make a living and secure their position in society.” During the economic crisis (and after it), the youth were deemed particularly vulnerable – leaving Slovenia due to lack of jobs – but also particularly susceptible to the ideology of self-reliance (the notion that they must rely primarily on themselves) – because there are no jobs available, their youthful spring of ever new ideas enables them to establish their own companies. Today, the *Slovenia Start* project proudly proclaims that entrepreneurs who got their start in the marketplace in recent years with the aid of their TV series, form “a community wherein knowledge is exchanged; all of them became role models to the younger generations. Each of them paved their own way as an entrepreneur, they seized their own place in the market, began employing and developing new products, and confirmed that we can achieve much on our own, but together, we can accomplish everything” (Štartaj Slovenija 2020). The youth as the central protagonists of this project and TV series thereby function as an example to the society at large attesting that entrepreneurship is a socially-conscious activity which not only creates new niche markets but also generates a better society (“together, we can accomplish everything”). This modern-day capitalist narrative’s framing of self-care as care for others is attractive to the youth, which generally takes a critical position towards the destructive forces of capitalism.

The thematic block before you discusses young entrepreneurs (in Slovenia) as subjects and agents of economy, self-realization, self-identification, and youth culture. Young entrepreneurs are simultaneously viewed as objects of policies (subjects) and self-reflected persons (agents). Our research, represented here in five research articles, was largely carried out in 2019 and 2020 within the scope of the research project ‘Young Entrepreneurs in Times of Uncertainty and Accelerated Optimism: An Ethnological Study of Entrepreneurship and Ethics of Young People in Modern-Day Slovenia’.¹ The young entrepreneur in Slovenia was analysed as a historical subject. Until recently, Slovenian ‘young entrepreneurs’ did not self-identify with this term, which has since become widely used in public and professional discourse. From a historical perspective, the recent economic crisis and its youth unemployment contributed to the formation of thoughts and measures that stimulated youth entrepreneurship. We understand young entrepreneurs as ethical individuals (Humphrey 2008; Lambek 2010; Laidlaw 2014; Kozorog 2018), therefore our study addressed the processes of individual self-formation with due

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consideration of the factors directing individuals towards entrepreneurial activity. These factors included education at various levels, mass- and social media, as well as newly established institutions and social spaces aimed at stimulating entrepreneurship.

Recently, in various parts of the world, anthropology examined a series of socio-culturally specific modes of systemic production and grounded realization of entrepreneurial self as an instrument of neoliberal governmentality – as the mutual association of techniques of systemic ruling and personal self-governance were defined by Michel Foucault (1988, 2008; see also Rose 1996; Miller and Rose 2008). The emergence of culturally specific neoliberal subjects resulted in the creation of ethnographies focused on different populations: transnational (Ong 1999), geo-historical (Yurchak 2003; Makovicky 2014; Biti and Senjković 2021), vocational (Vodopivec 2012; Gershon 2016), relating to public ethics and life philosophy (Muehlebach 2012), etc. These surveys focus on the subjects' (self)recognition as adaptable to circumstance (flexibility), capable of taking care of themselves through developing their own virtues and skills (self-sufficiency), and capable of taking care of those close to them as well as the general public (responsibility) in the circumstances generated by the neoliberal state's withdrawal from important areas of life. All this considered, it is surprising that this situation generated so few anthropological surveys of young people (few, though not none, one example of these is Ahmed Kanna's contribution (2010) on addressing the young people and their self-recognition as ethically and economically "valuable" citizens in Dubai). Surprising, because the young can be particularly attractive to neoliberal governmentality because they are considered teachable and susceptible to moral messages.

However, even though the stimulation of the entrepreneurial self in Slovenia is extremely important as the context for understanding youth entrepreneurship, our research doesn't primarily deal with the stimulation of a particular selfhood within society. Rather, it examines entrepreneurship much more directly, as an economic activity. We were interested in examples where young people actually founded their own companies or were preparing to do so. In other words, we wanted to tie the anthropology of neoliberal policies and the anthropology of entrepreneurship (Stewart 1991; Rosa and Caulkins 2013), not unlike what Carla Freeman (2014) did in Barbados. We perceive entrepreneurs in a more conventional way than that defined by the doyen of anthropological research of entrepreneurship Fredrik Barth, i.e. as individuals who loosen socio-cultural conventions in pursuit of their own profit (Barth 1963:6). We see them either as (co)owning a business enterprise, in the course of founding one, or – as is the case with many young people – at least as having their own brand, business plan, or vision of a future business enterprise. We focused on newly established companies (and excluded examples where young people took companies over from their parents or relatives).

This thematic block also views youth in a conventional way, i.e. as an age bracket

following childhood, though it is rather unclear when this age bracket closes. This is why we define it loosely, i.e. not rigidly following any official national or EU age frameworks. The permissible age range for applicants in the 'Young Entrepreneur of the Year' award (held by the Slovenian Young Entrepreneur Institute since 2011) is defined as between 16 and 35 years of age (Mladi podjetnik 2021). On the other hand, an analogous award in Australia is awarded up to the age of 40 (Solstice Media 2021). We opted for this latter, somewhat wider age-range, as youth is not merely a matter of age, it is also tied to specific forms of socialization (youth culture), whose influence goes beyond administratively defined age ranges (Bucholtz 2002).

Lately, the field of youth culture has been strongly impacted precisely by entrepreneurship as an economic activity. Rich people from the world of IT, new technology, gig economy, crypto finance, and online media became influencers, who made an impression on numerous young people. Some were, of course, more impressed by the socially and environmentally responsible entrepreneurship. Whatever the case, entrepreneurship became an important identity platform and basis of certain new youth cultures (digital nomads, co-workers, start-uppers, online investors, agents of sharing economy, etc.).

At the same time, certain supposed virtues of the young are an integral part of certain forms of entrepreneurship, e.g. the start-up approach, which touts youthful enthusiasm, daring, energy, and dedication to one's own idea. This is another reason why the small incidence of anthropological research on youth entrepreneurship is so surprising, particularly since critical assessment of the functioning of modern capitalism is an important anthropological topic (Gibson-Graham 1996; Narotzky 1997; Hart 2005; Ho 2009). Let us mention two exceptions: Catherine A. Honeyman's (2016) study on educating young entrepreneurs in Rwanda, and Siobhan Magee's (2019) contribution concerning the aspirations of the young in Krakow (Poland) to become entrepreneurs with the specific goal of working for themselves in the way they see fit – in short of being their own bosses. The above-expressed surprise over the sparsity of anthropological research on this topic arises from the fact that young people are a particularly desirable commodity in modern capitalism: they are considered agile in the way they think and act, and simultaneously as adaptable to fast-changing economic circumstances; they are believed to be quick learners, capable of out-of-the-box thinking, and disposed to contributing interesting marketable ideas; they have an abundance of energy to overcome obstacles on their career paths; they are skilled in new technologies, new online media and the self-branding they necessitate, etc. According to these criteria, they are a fairly ideal subject for contemporary capitalism, which spreads the doctrine that the key to success is agility, that it is greatly aided by the capacity to self-stage in the social media, and that one must go through potential failures, get back on the proverbial

horse, and start over. In short, young people represent those qualities of the human capital that enable the capitalist engine to ensure the occurrence of innovations for the production of new niche markets (Wilf 2015).

The thematic block before you ascertains that Slovenian public agencies, educational organisations on various levels, regional and municipal developmental agencies, private think tanks, institutes, media organisations, opinion leaders, and other influential actors recognized young people as entrepreneurial subjects, as the age group in possession of specific skillsets empowering them to more greatly benefit their own careers and the society at large. Public acknowledgment of the young as entrepreneurial is, for example, demonstrated in the extensive network of business incubators across the country, in the existence of the POPRI nationwide school competition in business ideas (POPRI international 2020), in the branched-out network of mentors funded by the SPIRIT Public Agency for Entrepreneurship to guide start-up entrepreneurs (Spirit Slovenija 2020), to name but a few. The role of entrepreneurs was also filled by young people. According to our research, Slovenia reflects wider international processes. However, that which is locally specific holds anthropological interest. This is why we begin our thematic block from a wider perspective of examining the European Union, in a contribution penned by Tatiana Bajuk Senčar on the formation of young entrepreneurs as subjects of EU policy and the roles that they have been accorded in policy discourse. Next, we move on to the context of education. Saša Poljak Istenič presents a case of a chosen secondary school to examine the neoliberalization of contemporary education in Slovenia, where students are seen as human capital, and examines how schools strive to avoid neoliberal labelling by using specific working methods in regular programs and extracurricular activities. Next, Peter Simonič discusses how academic economics at the University of Maribor and its promotion of start-ups influence local processes of entrepreneurializing young people and the parallel emergence (and decline) of the alternative cooperative economy in this, Slovenia's second largest city. This case reveals a divide between the think tank-style university-led promotion of entrepreneurship and activist activity in the post-industrial, economically and socially marginalized town of Maribor. In the ensuing contribution Miha Kozorog discusses a spatial analysis of the entrepreneurialization of youth. He explores the emergence of coworking spaces in Slovenia in the 2010s as a process, which reflects wider dimensions of the transformation of youth space in Slovenia, which resulted primarily in the decline of the youth's autonomy and a rise in the political and economic instrumentalisation of youth. The thematic block concludes with Maja Petrović-Šteger's account of entrepreneurial ambitions, values, and virtues of a 'critical fashion' producer Nati, presenting the emergence and building of her ethical and creative claims, and the way they are lived in Slovenia's capital city of Ljubljana.

Slovenia therefore possesses a vibrant youth entrepreneurship. This makes it

a good candidate for a critical consideration of the emerging phenomenon of youth entrepreneurship and its corresponding subject, while the country's small size contributes to the overall clarity of discussion. Let us, therefore, conclude the introduction by citing a critical observation by my interlocutor, a young entrepreneur, who previously collaborated as an advisor and role-model in institutions aiming to stimulate youth entrepreneurship but decided to stop because he determined that he could not identify (any longer) with the concept of entrepreneurship in the form in which it is systemically promoted in Slovenia. He described his disappointment by citing an occurrence at a youth competition at a so-called start-up weekend retreat, one of the more popular forms of promoting entrepreneurship among the youth. Our collocutor initially participated in these types of competitions, but later withdrew, not wanting to spoil the fun, he didn't want to "bring people down, because there was this whole hype of a good mood there". He would have spoiled the mood because he started getting severely disturbed by the whole thing. He noticed the banal mechanism behind the concept of persuasion; everyone can certainly come up with some kind of a problem that needs solving, address said problem, and invent an instant solution, this serves as an effective way of persuading the young to identify as entrepreneurial persons. But it gets worse. Even greater disappointment followed from his realization that, in actuality, this concept generates new environmental and social issues, since these so-called solutions often boiled down to not much more than greater waste and new consumers of natural resources.

"[The convenors of programmes for encouraging youth entrepreneurship] create conditions in which new problems are invented – and then – wow, their solutions. I don't perceive this as innovation. To me, it's a new polluter of our planet and parasite in the rain forest. Because, we have so many problems that are real and here, but difficult to solve. It would take a lot of time. But actually, various hackathons, and different kinds of weekend workshops for young entrepreneurs, basically create new polluters. [...] But rather than working on, and taking the time for discussions, debating what we, as a community or group of individuals, or group of businessmen, whatever you want to call it, working on changing real issues... No! We hold a weekend, where people come up with new problems, and of course, immediately offer payable solutions. [...] And at these start-up weekends, when participants go home, [they are all] "Yes we will!", "we will achieve". And then, in six months' time it all boils down to very little. And another thing – the catch is that this start-up concept even has the inbuilt safety mechanism, where failing is not a big deal, it's part of the process. [...] There are some strange mantras at play here."

This thematic block is intended as an attempt to reflect on the systemic and (trans) national environment in which these “mantras” are circulating. But, as some of the cases below will reveal, certain individuals most assuredly actively respond to the “mantras”, contemplate on them, and critically and selectively adopt them. These are in no way easy times for the youth, when the job market demands that they be entrepreneurial, when being an entrepreneur has even become an attractive option, while their ethics of inhabiting a planet whose future is already largely devoured by capitalism doesn't leave them indifferent.

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