

# THE ECOSYSTEM IDEAL AND LOCAL NEOLIBERALISM OF THE YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR

## The Millennials' Entrepreneurial Environment in Slovenia

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This paper is about the young entrepreneur as an emerging social agent in contemporary Slovenia. Young entrepreneurs are affected by both an ideal sociality of entrepreneurial ecosystems and the small scale of their environment. This paper argues that while the former is promoted as a tool for strengthening local communities and a means of moving toward a prosperous future, the later prevents its actualization but provides security for young people. Family and other established social relationships are of considerable importance for maintaining young entrepreneurs' careers.

**Keywords:** entrepreneurship, neoliberalism, youth, generation, entrepreneurial ecosystem, smallness, family, economic anthropology, Slovenia

### Introduction

This paper is the result of the research project "Seizing the Future: A Comparative Anthropological Study of Expectations of the Future in Southeast Europe" (Petrović-Šteger 2016), whose aim is to break with the prevailing social scientific approach to the region that focuses either on the legacies of socialism or the fallout from the recent conflicts. Instead of fixating on the past, this project looks at discourses and material practices of a range of social entrepreneurs based in Serbia, Slovenia, and Albania to examine by comparison how they understand, imagine, plan, invoke, and seek to exercise control over their and others' futures in precarious times. The project defines social entrepreneurs both as people who describe themselves as such and as those recognized by others as able to innovate in response to pressing social problems. I research in Slovenia, where young entrepreneurs are gaining a public reputation as people capable of responding appropriately to social problems and who are inherently capable of bettering society's prospects.

One example of how this reputation is advanced is the TV show *Slovenia Start!*, launched in October 2016. The TV show presents startup entrepreneurs as brave, hardworking individuals (or small teams) with ingenious ideas, who have invested

time, knowledge, and available resources into innovative products, which the TV show helps to sell in a major chain store. The host of this show introduces himself as a social entrepreneur, an entrepreneurial mentor, and the owner of *Ustvarjalnik* (loosely translated as Creative Space), an enterprise that encourages entrepreneurship among youth. According to him, the TV show is the result of an increasing number of people for whom “encouragement of entrepreneurship is necessary for our country” (Jandl 2016). He believes that true entrepreneurs live with “an inner desire to transform the world around them into a better place. It’s not about earning money; it’s about solving people’s problems with your product or service or making their lives easier. If you co-create the future through your innovation, it’s the easiest way to influence the future” (Sedej 2017). In sum, the new, young entrepreneur is imagined as kind-hearted visionary who puts society before profit and creates a better tomorrow for all of us.

This TV show and other recent, related occurrences awoke my interest in the young entrepreneur as an emergent social agent in Slovenia. The label young entrepreneur is a recent phenomenon in Slovenia. Before 2006, when an NGO called Young Entrepreneur Institute began promoting entrepreneurship among youth, the label had been rarely used. However, after the 2008 financial crisis, youth as a target audience for the encouragement of entrepreneurship became increasingly recognized as one way of dealing with its consequences, and in particular with tackling high rates of youth unemployment (Tubić 2016). Entrepreneurship among youth has thus become a national social policy. Yet this is not the whole genealogy of the phenomenon. In the last few years, the notion of the young entrepreneur has started to be not merely an employment opportunity but has also become associated with a specific youth culture, which is heavily promoted together with entrepreneurship as a universal value. Thus, for example, Spirit, a governmental agency for entrepreneurship founded in 2013, supports introducing entrepreneurship into the national education system at all levels. In primary schools, for example, one of the optional courses is entitled “Hopes – Creativity, Entrepreneurship, Innovation” (“*UPI – ustvarjalnost, podjetništvo, inovativnost*”). In addition, the media has had a crucial role in constructing the ideal young entrepreneur, as the case of *Slovenia Start!* clearly signals.

Encouraging entrepreneurship is among the core goals of the globally expanding neoliberal agenda. Neoliberalism is an ideology and policy that favors diminishing the role of state and regulatory mechanisms and instead expanding the agency of capital and markets. It promotes “the primacy of flexibility – at the macrolevel of labor, capital flows, and markets and also at the microlevel of individual movements, ingenuity, performance, and self-invention” (Freeman 2007: 252). This paper explores the latter, i.e. “entrepreneurial flexibility as a key dimension of neoliberalism” (ibid.). I focus on the youth, because they have come to be conceived as an important neoliberal agent (cf. Fioratta 2015; McGuigan 2014; Ho 2009; Honeyman 2016; Kanna 2010). As one interlocutor, whose business is focused on innovation in photography

(1996),<sup>1</sup> observes, enterprising youth currently have universal value: “I think that people who are young and want to achieve something are becoming increasingly respected and so I think this is becoming a value in our world.” Yet, anthropologists have encouraged research beyond a general persona of an entrepreneur because people strive for self-realization as entrepreneurs under the most diverse circumstances (cf. Gershon 2016; Fioratta 2015; Freeman 2007; Osella and Osella 2009; Yurchak 2003). Hence, this study aims to explore some of the specificities that young Slovenian entrepreneurs encounter and try to make sense of.

Relying on an anthropology of ethics (primarily Lambek 2013), whose principal question is how people choose and judge their own actions, I already described a moral dilemma chasing my main ethnographic collaborator, who, stretched between two publicly recognized roles – entrepreneur (a businessperson) and social activist (a rebel) – worked hard to keep a proper balance between them (Kozorog 2018). He perceived both roles as engendering a better future for his surroundings and for society in general, yet he also perceived them as mutually exclusive, and creating different gains. Thus, he was struggling with an ongoing dilemma about which path to build on. This is not my focus, although my interest in ethics looms in the background of the present discussion also. My focus here is on how some millennials understand and practice entrepreneurship on the basis of one particular societal imaginary, while specific aspects of Slovenia also have a considerable influence on them. In particular, I will focus on an ideal of entrepreneurial camaraderie in something called an ecosystem, as well as on young people’s pronounced talk about the “smallness” of their country and the current surroundings in which they live and work. However, their social surroundings also include family and relationships with friends and neighbors, which function as a buffer in an entrepreneurial career.

## Methodology

In this paper, I do not rely primarily on my own ethnography, but on that of my students at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. As an assistant professor, part of my job is to prepare and deliver practical courses that are usually based on ethnographic fieldwork. I sometimes create topics from scratch, but occasionally I provisionally link them with current research projects, as I did in this case. Although the latter practice is ethically questionable because I urge students to investigate something of my own interest, in my experience this practice is more fruitful because the students tend to be more motivated and the results are better than when I use other topics. In my opinion, the students are more motivated because they feel there is more purpose when they collaborate on a wider project, which is not the case when they conduct research just to pass one practical course. When they contribute to an ongoing project, they

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<sup>1</sup> For each quoted interlocutor, the year of birth is between brackets.

can define a tangible aim for their work, while in the other case, their results merely become part of the department's archive without further interpretation.<sup>2</sup> However, usually I do not use students' results in my publications; this time is an exception, which I decided to make after discovering how profound these results were, and that it would be pity to merely archive them.

In the academic years 2016/2017 and 2017/2018, I designed a research project entitled "Young Entrepreneurs in Slovenia: Between Necessity and Vision, between the Search and Creation of the Future". I proposed the topic and also selected the literature, but the research is very much a result of collaborative work. Each student needed to contact and conduct an ethnographic interview (and preferably establish a lasting ethnographic collaboration) with one young entrepreneur. Together we designed a questionnaire containing more than 150 questions (some of which were optional) that covered these topics in the following order: a narrative opening question about their product and entrepreneurial career; details about their career and education; family; surroundings; being young in Slovenia; how they understand the concepts of entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation; and how they deal with the future. Students usually found their interlocutors near where they lived. In the first year, the students used semi-structured interviews as their main research tool and reported on 41 enterprises, of which I selected 34 for this analysis.<sup>3</sup> These included 20 male and 16 female,<sup>4</sup> highly-educated (or student)<sup>5</sup> entrepreneurs from both large and small cities, towns and villages across the country (five were from the capital, Ljubljana), and from various branches of business. Interviews in most cases lasted between 50 and 60 minutes, although some were shorter (30 to 40 minutes) and some longer (more than 90 minutes). Word-for-word transcripts 30 minutes in length and abstracts of parts not literally transcribed were prepared by the students. I then listened through all the recorded audio materials and made additional word-for-word transcripts of parts that I found important. At the time of this writing, reports from the second academic year were still arriving, so I've used them selectively for a few reflections on the issues presented here. The description of entrepreneurship provided in this paper was not anticipated at the beginning of our<sup>6</sup> research and is entirely the result of my own analysis of students' interviews.

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<sup>2</sup> I encourage students to further work on the materials we produce (I usually propose that one or more of them write a diploma thesis), but so far and without exception this has not happened.

<sup>3</sup> One interview was conducted with two females and one with two males, so 34 enterprises provided 36 interlocutors.

<sup>4</sup> A reviewer proposed an analysis of gender issues. Although I find her/his proposition relevant, and especially her/his observation that entrepreneurs' fields of engagement might reflect conservatism in their understanding of gender roles is, I think, a fruitful lead for further analysis, I do not have space and time to provide a more in-depth analysis of these issues. Hence, this paper unfortunately remains gender blind. However, I think gender deserves a separate article and since this is my first attempt to analyse young, Slovenian entrepreneurs, I am sure there will be an opportunity to do so properly.

<sup>5</sup> They have studied or study at various institutions. Since their parents financially support(ed) their educations, they can be classified as part of the Slovenian middle-class.

<sup>6</sup> The possessive pronoun "our", which I use throughout the text, refers to my students and me.

## Enterprising youth: defining parameters

Our initial dilemma was how to define the research subjects. Who are young entrepreneurs, or more specifically, who is an entrepreneur and what qualifies one as young? In Slovenian ethnology/anthropology, entrepreneurs have not yet been studied, except as directors of large, socialist enterprises in Yugoslavia (Fikfak and Prinčič 2008). In the ubiquitous liberal parlance, however, entrepreneurship refers to small, private businesses. Technical dictionaries define an entrepreneur as an “individual who, rather than working as an employee, founds and runs a small business, assuming all the risks and rewards of the venture. The entrepreneur is commonly seen as an innovator, a source of new ideas, goods, services and business/or procedures” (Investopedia 2018). Entrepreneurship is correspondingly defined as “the capacity and willingness to develop, organize and manage a business venture along with any of its risks in order to make a profit” (Business Dictionary 2018).

In the history of anthropology, entrepreneurs have been regarded as agents who, in contrast to the then disputed structural-functional equilibrium, organize social change and dynamics. Fredrik Barth, a pioneer in anthropological transactionalism, treated entrepreneurs in Norway thusly (Barth 1963). According to Barth, entrepreneurship does not necessarily apply to a businessperson, but to the agency of someone who risks breaking with traditional patterns by applying more experimental and less institutionalized behavior and is willing to manipulate other people and resources in order to maximize certain advantages (Stewart 1991: 74; Landström 2005: 47). Hence, in a review of the anthropology of entrepreneurship, Alex Stewart demonstrates that, in anthropology, an entrepreneur is understood either as someone engaged in “wilful goal-seeking and strategic behaviour” to create “change in normative orders” (Stewart 1991: 73) or as someone who runs a small business. In past few decades, however, anthropological interest in small business has increased. Therefore, Peter Rosa and Douglas D. Caulkins (2013) set anthropological interests in entrepreneurship firmly in the subfield of economic anthropology.

In this research project, we defined entrepreneurship as including small-scale enterprises and as being part of the economic systems of production, work, and livelihood. Besides how it is practiced, we also looked at the ideological implications of the notion of an entrepreneur in current Slovenian society. Our focus, however, was not on young people who were forced to register as “private entrepreneurs” out of economic necessity. For example, it is cheaper for a company to outsource work to such an entrepreneur to avoid paying taxes and additional expenses for an employee, and this can also be a strategy for lowering unemployment (cf. Rubić 2017: 173–179). There are plenty of such cases in Slovenia. As an athletic trainer (1989), who is one of those who fall into this category, sees it, young people either leave the country or “most of them are now private entrepreneurs. If they don’t have a job, they register as private entrepreneurs.”<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, our focus was on those who

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<sup>7</sup> The youth unemployment rate in Slovenia is lower than the Euro area average (according to the last measurement in August 2018, the rate was at 16.60 percent). In October 2018, in Slovenia the rate was at 8.90 percent. The youth

identify as entrepreneurial persons and who are eager to demonstrate that they can make a living by profiting from their ideas and special skills. We thus mainly worked with those who define themselves as “startuppers”, “visionaries”, “innovators”, “social entrepreneurs”, “creative people” and even “artists”. What we discovered are specific ethics of change-making and innovation (cf. Wilf 2015), around which an entire youth subculture is now evolving.

The other tricky parameter is youth. Some interlocutors talked about the term young entrepreneur applying to the type of enterprise – e.g., startups running on innovative ideas – rather than to the age of entrepreneurs. According to this perspective, youth – regardless of age – are those who engage in new forms of work (e.g., coworking). Nevertheless, we defined the approximate age for research partners as being between 20 and 35. This intuitive delineation can also be treated in generational terms, in the sense that at an early age, they all went through a common formative experience, or in other words, common historical events shaped their worldview (Mannheim 1952).<sup>8</sup> Our entrepreneurs came of age after the breakup of Yugoslavia (of course, those born earlier witnessed it) and feel detached from Yugoslavian history. They experienced the formation of the new state of Slovenia, when entrepreneurship gained not necessarily the best reputation because it was associated with misconduct during the process of privatization (cf. Lorenčič 2012). They grew up with internet, European integration, and global connectivity. Moreover, in 2008, before the age of 30, they witnessed the financial crisis and the “dark times” that followed (cf. Pina-Cabral 2018).

Anthropologists of the region have often relied on the explanatory framework of post-socialism. I think that for this generation, this framework is not applicable because these millennials have not preserved memories of socialism. However, these memories remain present in young people’s lives via their parents. Our ethnography shows that their parents’ generation preserves ethics that could be traced into Yugoslavia – ethics that both support and inhibit modern-day Slovenian youth. Later on I analyze how different understandings of work and entrepreneurship create a generational conflict, which, however, is not fatal, but instead stimulates parental support for young people’s entrepreneurial careers.

Still, Yugoslavia is beyond young people’s horizons. One anecdote may demonstrate this: When preparing students for this research, I proposed self-responsibility as one of the keywords, and I urged them to read Nina Vodopivec (2012), an anthropologist of post-socialism. Vodopivec critically examines self-responsibility as an ideology whose aim in the 1990s was to interpellate factory workers as those who were to be held accountable. Students found investigating self-responsibility among young entrepreneurs important, but their reading of Vodopivec was flawed.<sup>9</sup> Firstly,

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unemployment rate in Slovenia “averaged 15.92 percent from 1996 until 2018, reaching an all time high of 25.60 percent in April of 2013 and a record low of 8.90 percent in April of 2018” (SYUR 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in this paper the notion of millennials does not refer to an age cohort, but to a common, formative experience (cf. Pina-Cabral 2018).

<sup>9</sup> I provide a general impression that I got from the students’ work, which does not necessarily apply to each and every individual.

while Vodopivec critically examines renouncing the former ethics of collective care and the imposition of a new ethics that leads to a fragmented society, students paid very little attention to the critique and took the accountability of individuals for granted and as an inherently positive social factor. One student commented:

Entrepreneurship does not mean only a change in organizational forms or business models for enterprises. It also generally establishes an ideal for individual agency at various levels: in the school, at the university, in the family, and in the country. Individuals have thus transformed themselves into entrepreneurial individuals, who strive for perfection, excellence, and improvement. Such new values connect with new forms of ethics: the welfare of the individual is nowadays measured by her/his success and by the competence of successful self-management (the individual should become a valid manager of her/his life). This, however, is relevant not only for personal profit, but also for public peace and social progress.

Of course, this first-year student spontaneously relied on a common affection for an entrepreneurial self.

Secondly, students also ignored socialism and post-socialism, which was integral to Vodopivec's argument, as relevant contexts for the current era. For them, these contexts belong firmly to the past. Here is a telling reflection from one student:

For youth, i.e. the millennials, the problems from the era of socialist Yugoslavia are somehow outdated. We simply grew up in another era, under different conditions, and with different problems. [...] I think young people are very much aware of self-responsibility in finding work and work as such. [...] I also think that the financial crisis in 2008 largely influenced the model of our approach to work and the search for work. There we saw that a job is not self-evident or something that "falls from the sky". [...] And although [Vodopivec], with the case of industrial workers, somewhat negatively outlines the contemporary state of the labor market (with different forms of precarious employment, self-employment, part-time jobs, working from home, etc.), and the uncertainty that such work brings, it still doesn't mean that we should mark the reorganization of labor negatively. It also has advantages – e.g., flexible workday, dynamic and non-routine work, a changing work environment, higher motivation for networking and making contacts ... A job (in our case, it is an entrepreneurial job) is thus not something that belongs to you and simply *is*, but has a greater impact on the person and their surroundings. And we, the youth, are aware of it.

Therefore, it turned out that the adjective youth in our research title refers not merely to age, but to a generation with a stronger inclination toward being self-dependent, a limited memory of Yugoslavia, and vivid impressions of the precarious times brought about by the 2008 financial crisis. The people we worked with, like my students, do not believe in solutions from the past. Instead, they are future-oriented, primarily regarding their own careers. They are, however, backed by an ideology in which, in

a prosperous environment, an individual's own progress and progress in their surroundings are mutually supportive. Thus they value self-dependency, but they also strive for a specific kind of togetherness, which I will discuss in the next section.

In next sections, I first present a form of socializing among entrepreneurs and an imaginary of society that stimulates entrepreneurial camaraderie. I then question what is specific about Slovenia regarding this internationally popular model of entrepreneurial sociality. In the perception of our interlocutors, an important specificity is the small size of the country and its cities and towns. I then demonstrate that the notion of "smallness" has many meanings, but one of its conditions is that it functions in contradictory ways, e.g., as an impetus toward an international career and as a provider of a domestic haven. In the latter case, family, friendship, and local communities function as social buffer in young entrepreneurs' careers.

## Entrepreneurial ecosystem

During different periods of the twentieth century, entrepreneurship in Slovenia was structured according to diverse economic, political, geopolitical, conceptual, infrastructural, and other factors, which promoted very different ideas about entrepreneurs (Fischer et al. 1998; Fikfak and Prinčič 2008; Lorenčič 2012; Močnik and Rus 2016). Until very recently, however, youth was not regarded a separate agent of entrepreneurship. In the last few years, this has fundamentally changed. In 2014, a Slovenian academic think tank published a study called *The Overlooked Entrepreneurial Potential of Youth* (as part of the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor – GEM), which warned that the number of young people (age 25–35) among established entrepreneurs had been alarmingly low and recommended the government to reorient towards "this age population, for which it is certainly possible, through different programs and activities, to contribute the most for the recognition of an entrepreneurial career as a desirable choice for a path towards an occupation" (Rebernik et al. 2014: 14). As a part of everyday life, things have changed too. For example, the TV show *Slovenia Start!* openly targets young people, and its host also runs entrepreneurial workshops in secondary schools. These and other similar projects aim to stimulate youth to identify as and think like entrepreneurs, e.g., by converting their hobbies, skills, and ideas into businesses. One interlocutor from the capital (1987), who followed this trend, confirms this: "Generally, options for young creatives and small enterprises to present themselves, and to gain initial entry into the market, are bigger and bigger, and I'm very happy about it, because three, four years ago this was not the case." Today, this trend is widespread and is supported by an apparatus that includes the national education system, mass and social media, workshops, competitions and other social events, infrastructure including coworking hubs and incubator institutions, coaches and mentorship, etc. Of course, these are not a Slovenian invention; they are a local manifestation of a wider neoliberal world, which has recognized

youth entrepreneurship as an important source of capital extraction and one that promotes alluring forms of productive sociality for young people (cf. Bajič 2015; Gandini 2015; Shittu 2017).

One idea, which this reorientation towards youth promotes, deals with networking among young entrepreneurs in order to transcend the existing productive capacities of local communities. Instead of expelling competition between individuals, collaboration, mutuality and togetherness for entrepreneurs are advanced as values because it is thought that these together can pull local communities ahead, providing them with better futures. Young people thus gain recognition as “improvers” of the immediate surroundings and the larger society. Successful entrepreneurs are defined as role models and providers of practical help for less successful ones, so that together they create forces that pull others (society and the immediate surroundings) ahead. The word ecosystem is regularly used in relation to this, and provides an imaginary of naturalness for cohabitation among entrepreneurs. The Slovenian partner of GEM quoted above published another study on Slovenian startups and the startup ecosystem, which defines the latter as a necessity for the successful development of the former, because “challenges demand various forms of support and collaboration with other principles of a startup ecosystem”, while such an ecosystem “consequently contributes to an increase in the welfare of society” (Močnik and Rus 2016: 73–74). Togetherness of young entrepreneurs – networking, collaboration, mutual help and inspiration, and even friendship – is thus promoted as a desired sociality, because it is meant to improve the whole of society.

Here, I approach the idea of such an ecosystem ethnographically.<sup>10</sup> On June 15, 2018, the research team behind “Seizing the Future” hosted a workshop with social entrepreneurs from the wider region. Our Albanian guest, Gerti Boshnjaku, attracted my attention because of his description of a youth-targeted project. I found his language and the values he promoted very similar to what I have observed in Slovenia. Gerti is a marketing specialist but in his presentation, he focused on the project Startup Grind Tirana. This is a local branch of an organization supported by Google for Entrepreneurs, which describes itself as “the largest independent startup community, actively educating, inspiring, and connecting more than 1,000,000 entrepreneurs in over 365 cities” (Startup Grind 2018). It aims to build a “global startup community designed to educate, inspire, and connect entrepreneurs”. This community is formed through monthly local events where “successful local founders, innovators, educators and investors share lessons learned on the road to building great companies”. Events in Tirana also host such people, who have been named “local champions” to serve as role models for members of the public who are interested in this. As part of the global Startup Grind project, which nurtures “startup ecosystems in 120 countries”, Gerti believes the Tirana branch has had a positive effect. The events he organizes work on “principles of giving, sharing, helping others, making

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<sup>10</sup> Most of the literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems focuses on their components and development (cf. Cohen 2005; Mason and Brown 2014; Uddin et al. 2015). My interpretation of the phenomenon does not follow this literature.

friends, and community”. Events serve as “inspiration for the startup journey ahead”, on which entrepreneurs are “devoted to having an impact by creating companies with the potential to change the world” (Boshnjaku 2018). This is for him the most viable way toward a better future.

There is no branch of Startup Grind in Slovenia. Nevertheless, there are similar initiatives based on and which spread similar values and ideas of entrepreneurial togetherness. For example, I invited people from the Young Entrepreneur Institute I mentioned previously to the same workshop. Unfortunately, they could not participate because they had already organized an event entitled “Young Entrepreneur? Why not!” for the same day. The institute’s mission is to “spread the word about entrepreneurship among youth or all those for whom entrepreneurship might be an interesting career path. [...] We believe that entrepreneurship could become a milestone for many, and one which enables people to realize their talents and thereby improve their quality of life” (Mladi podjetnik 2018a). The institute’s event, which I obviously could not attend, had some obvious similarities with those organized by Gerti. It was advertised as “an opportunity for the extraction of new ideas, knowledge, and acquaintanceship” (Mladi podjetnik 2018b). Lectures by “guests from young, successful Slovenian enterprises” were meant to share solutions for the challenges that “young enterprise sooner or later encounters”. Besides, it was “an opportunity for socializing” during the competition for the Young Entrepreneur of the Year 2018 award (ibid.). In short, the idea behind this initiative was to inspire young people to consider entrepreneurship and to engender camaraderie.

In sum, both the Albanian and the Slovenian events target youth and have a goal of connecting them into one so-called local ecosystem. Neither of these visions, however, was invented locally; they were introduced from elsewhere. In the Albanian case, the source is clear: Startup Grind was born in the USA in Silicon Valley and was spread around the globe by Google. And what about the Slovenian case? In May 2016, I did an online investigation of connections between the Young Entrepreneur Institute, its partners, and its partners’ partners.<sup>11</sup> One of the institute’s supporters was the Ljubljana University Incubator, established in 2004 by the University of Ljubljana, with a vision of promoting “entrepreneurial values among young people”, increasing “entrepreneurial awareness in the university environment and encouraging young people to realize their business ideas”, and improving “conditions that will enable enterprising young people to pursue their visions” (LUI 2018).

The Ljubljana University Incubator’s partner was CEED (Centre for Entrepreneurship and Executive Development). CEED is an organization founded and supported by SEAF (Small Enterprise Assistance Funds), an investment fund established as an NGO in 1989 when the “international developmental community had begun to recognize the growing importance of the private sector in achieving economic growth, both in developing countries and in the transition countries following the fall of the Berlin Wall” (SEAF 2018a). SEAF is focused on small and me-

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<sup>11</sup> Here presented configuration has changed since.

dium-sized enterprises “in emerging and transition markets” and has the following mission and vision: “Improving lives and communities through Entrepreneur-led Development. We envision a world where entrepreneurs anywhere have the capital, tools and support they need to improve the economy, their communities, and the environment” (SEAF 2018b). In order to stimulate local businesses, in 2004, SEAF established CEED, whose aim was to find successful “local leaders” in transition markets to “mentor those looking to grow their businesses” and via a peer to peer model create “communities of entrepreneurs while developing the ecosystems in which these entrepreneurs operate”. CEED’s goals include inspiring “entrepreneurs to become leaders, [and to] give back to the entrepreneurial ecosystem and broader community” (CEED 2018). The first local CEED center was established in Bulgaria in 2004, followed by centers in Romania and Macedonia, and in 2006 a fourth was established in Slovenia.

The point I want to make with this sketch of connections is not to give a precise anatomy of one particular project’s international financing, inspiration, and support, but rather to show that the ideology promoting entrepreneurial ecosystems, which is increasingly targeting young people, has specific historical, geographical, and political sources (which should be investigated in more detail), centers, and peripheries (e.g., the USA and the transition markets), and is today actively promoted in many other countries. Nonetheless, while I am convinced that it is important to consider the power dynamics behind such highly ideological projects, in this paper I will instead look more closely at specific conditions as interpreted by young entrepreneurs, in which the vision of entrepreneurial ecosystems is implemented in Slovenia.

Our interlocutors claim that, apart from rigid legal procedures, the entrepreneurial environment in Slovenia generally functions well. This is especially true, they say, regarding the mechanisms previously mentioned that provide support for young entrepreneurs (e.g., workshops, incubators, events, etc.). One interlocutor who describes herself as “cognitive trainer” (1980) even said that today there are “increasingly more such initiatives and such collaborations, so you even have to be a bit careful now not to jump into each and every thing”. Many of them also reported that they observe a burgeoning entrepreneurial youth culture, which encourages young people to participate. According to an innovator of tattoo machines (1992), the “startup community”<sup>12</sup> in Slovenia functions well because members are willing to help each other. He estimated that Slovenia is “a phenomenon” because of many “startup communities”. He mentions that an older generation of entrepreneurs runs larger companies and has a reputation of its own, while younger ones

have a reputation among themselves. Because we know who’s who. But when you see one typical, successful startupper, s/he will have untied shoes and ripped jeans [he points to himself], and messy hair. Right? It’s more about

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<sup>12</sup> Our interlocutors did not use the technical term “entrepreneurial ecosystem”. However, by using other words they were clearly referring to a specific sociality of entrepreneurial togetherness. In order to simplify things, I use this technical term throughout the text.

startup life. You decide to be your own boss and because you're not interested in some regular social rules, it's more like rock'n'roll. If you ask me, this is the exact opposite of capitalism and more like the punk movement a few decades ago. It's just that nobody will tell me what I can do and why not and how I should do something. I'll do it on my own.

Apparently, there is an emergent youth identity in Slovenia, which is at least partly stimulated by an ideal of sociality in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. This ideal imposes an important social role onto entrepreneurial youth. Specifically, young people are given the role of the avant-garde, and are relevant for society's future.<sup>13</sup> To perform their historical role, however, young entrepreneurs are encouraged to connect to ecosystems of togetherness, thus already making an important step toward improving society. In what follows, I demonstrate that this ideal runs up against the limits of smallness that are part of Slovenia's specific conditions. Later on, however, I will focus on other social relationships that have a fundamental influence on youth entrepreneurship and are, likewise, a possible effect of this smallness.

## Smallness: limits to an ideal

The well-known American journalist Thomas Friedman proclaimed the twenty-first century world as "flat", meaning that technological innovations, digitalization, fast communication on a global level, and free markets will reduce economic inequalities between continents, regions, countries, populations, and people, because "more people than ever before in the history of the world are going to have access to [new technological] tools" (Friedman 2005: 45). He suggests that humans, regardless of where they live, will use these tools "as innovators, as collaborators" (*ibid.*) to improve local conditions and make them more equal to those in other, i.e. more developed, places in the world. According to Friedman, the future looks brighter, because "everywhere you turn, hierarchies are being challenged from below or transforming themselves from top-down structures into more horizontal and collaborative ones" (*ibid.*). This is exactly the vision behind the geography of entrepreneurial ecosystems presented here. This flat geography is composed of networks of entrepreneurs with presumably good intentions for the larger society, who work together, share knowledge, provide solutions for acute social problems, set examples for followers, and strengthen local communities. However, as observed by geographer David Harvey, in Friedman's vision of the world, "the erasure of geographical and anthropological differences is striking" (Harvey 2009: 52), and this is also the case with the entrepreneurial ecosystems examined here.

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<sup>13</sup> Mirjana Ule (2010), one of the leading researchers of Slovenian youth, observes that in the post-socialist transition, youth as a social agent was marginalized. However, recent recognition of youth entrepreneurship, which I focus on, has brought youth back into the center of public policies. On the other hand, in contrast to socialist youth to which Ule ascribes historical agency, present-day youth do not lead progressive politics, but faithfully follow the capitalist ideal of productivity.

As Harvey (2009) maintains, neoliberal projects and their imaginaries of the world regularly overlook that the agents they count on operate in the most diverse geographical and anthropological conditions. This is also the case for young Slovenian entrepreneurs, many of whom believe in the ecosystem ideal. For example, a maker of musical instruments in a small town (1989), says that his ideal goal would be to create “something that links sociality and work... I don’t know, an organization, an institution... I don’t know... to unite different ideas and to make something larger together.” However, this ideal has limits when confronted with Slovenia’s specific spatial and social conditions. One of the specificities about this country that interlocutors regularly mentioned is its “smallness”. This description refers to both the country and the very places where they live and work. Yet this description has many meanings.

Anthropologists have recently discussed the notion of a “small country”. Andre Gingrich and Ulf Hannerz made a distinction between absolute and relative smallness. The first refers to the size of the population and the size of the country’s territory, while the second is smallness “from a native’s point of view” and points at “how people in one way or another refer to their country as somehow smaller than elsewhere” (Gingrich and Hannerz 2017: 6). Slovenia is small in both aspects: It has a total area of 20,000 square kilometers and has a population of about two million. The largest city, the capital, has approximately 270,000 inhabitants, the second largest has 100,000, two others have around 35,000, and three more have around 25,000. The rest are smaller than 20,000, but most often they are small towns and villages with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. A small population means a small national market. Our young entrepreneurs regularly mentioned that the market is too small, so this is also part of their perception of relative smallness. For example, an innovator of children’s bikes (1985) said that Slovenia’s buying power is definitely too small. Therefore, for startupper to survive and succeed, it is urgent to reach foreign markets: “Slovenia is my springboard, but my target market is a foreign country.” This was an oft-repeated claim.

Still, our interlocutors ascribe other meanings to smallness as well. Some are part of Slovenians’ common repertoire when describing their country; others are specific for young entrepreneurs. Part of the commons is a variation on “small is beautiful” (Gingrich and Hannerz 2017: 40), according to which a small economy with little industry helps preserve the natural environment. Thus, for example, a natural cosmetics producer from a village, who is older but started her business recently, repeats a common trope among Slovenians that Slovenia’s potential is “boutique products”, which are often regarded as a reflection of the country’s smallness: “I think our greatest potential are these small enterprises, such boutique things. Because Slovenia is so small, and we can’t be good in an enormous industry. So I think that’s it. And ecology too, if we look, we are one of Europe’s hotspots.” The owner of a burger chain (1985), whose burgers are made from local and organic produce, also reveals the positive aspects of smallness. His desire is to expand abroad. Nonetheless, he thinks Slovenia as well as its capital, where he lives and works, are convenient because they

are cozy, and because he feels supported by the local people. Smallness works well for his business because it engenders trust in local and eco-friendly produce. A promoter in a small town of what is known as “forest selfness” (1983), a tourism product based on walks in the forest to “connect with nature and one’s self”, also maintains that Slovenia has enormous potential, especially because well-preserved nature has much to offer for the growing trends of healthy lifestyles and self-care. However, not only entrepreneurs with niches in tourism, health, food and farming, but others as well perceive Slovenia as cozy and ecologically healthy. Some even said that they persist in their hometowns – which otherwise they find too small for creating an ideal entrepreneurial environment – precisely because there they feel “closer to nature”.

Another common judgement among Slovenians is that because of the country’s smallness, they should behave small-mindedly. In other words, social control stimulates “a tendency to disapprove of originality and too much success” (Gingrich and Hannerz 2017: 19). Nonetheless, this tendency allows space in Slovenians’ imaginary for the David and Goliath motif (ibid.: 17). Specifically, if one succeeds internationally, media fanfares usually announce it with awaking national pride. This is especially true in sports. In the last few years, however, the figure of a genuine entrepreneur has also gained such public recognition. A few entrepreneurs have thus become regular guests of the media, which report on their life stories about overcoming barriers with personal will and original ideas. Our interlocutors mentioned these people, who represent overcoming Slovenian smallness.

One example is Ivo Boscarol, who works in a small town developing and producing light aircraft for global markets. He seems to be an exceptionally important role model for young people, whom he also compliments by saying, for example, that millennials are the kind of young people who don’t “run but jump, and have brains that work 300 [km] an hour” (Husejnović 2017). For the youth, he functions as a role model of a true entrepreneur, who succeeded with his own ideas and hard work, and who gives back to the local community. “He works for people, for those surrounding him. And he makes very innovative things”, says the bike innovator (1985) mentioned previously. A mechatronic engineer (1991) from the same town as Boscarol, with whom he collaborates, admires him for his working methods based on collaboration: “He knows how to create a healthy working environment.” According to one whose niche is food from insects (1994), among young entrepreneurs, Boscarol and a few others are highly-respected because “they created strong, successful companies from scratch”. Yet, role models are, according to this young entrepreneur, also young people who have created midsize, profitable enterprises on their own. “There are quite a few such in Slovenia and I’m friends with many of them or we know each other well.” According to this interlocutor, his peers, who think “out of the box” rather than small, and who are ready to see the world without the limitations imposed on them by being Slovenian, deserve respect. Yet, he thinks of himself and his fellow entrepreneurs as exceptions because they possess “a different worldview, a different one from the population of my generation. We who think like

this, we're one percent." Others are, in his view, too Slovenian to allow themselves immodest agency.

Besides these notions of smallness, there is another one directly related to the idea of an entrepreneurial ecosystem, which is of primary interest for this paper. To recap, the idea of an ecosystem fosters togetherness among local entrepreneurs, whose joint forces will push local communities forward. Yet, to make such an ecosystem effective, a certain number of entrepreneurs are needed, otherwise their strength would get lost in the local business as usual. According to this perspective, our young entrepreneurs regularly claimed that their hometowns, where many of them are based, are too small to form a proper entrepreneurial sociality, and that perhaps the only place in Slovenia where this is possible is the capital, Ljubljana. Thus, for example, the innovator of children's bikes (1985) says that he would certainly do better if he lived in a bigger town, whereas his hometown (the fourth largest in Slovenia) is too small for hosting a true entrepreneurial ecosystem. "I can tell you what it's like in Ljubljana. There it's pretty nice. Large meeting rooms, bright colors, chairs on the floor, sofas, a relaxed environment where you can think. So ideas emerge. [...] I'm integrated into one incubator in Ljubljana. [...] They run a pilot system. They invited ten startupper and have very good program." In his hometown, such an atmosphere is barely imaginable to him. A gardening innovator from a village (1986) also said that for an ideal entrepreneurial environment, "there should be incubators, which in Ljubljana function relatively well, because someone comes there with an idea, and then the incubator or whoever provides a supportive environment for its realization". The entrepreneur who deals with innovation in photography mentioned earlier (1996), who lives in a small town but operates in Ljubljana, says, "I think Ljubljana is close to an ideal entrepreneurial environment because it's the right mix of young and old, of those ready to accept novelties and those who aren't." His hometown, on the other hand, is "a nice, small town with few people who know each other well", but this environment is "not innovative" or, as he adds, "just partly". Similarly, a maker of fashion accessories (1992), who turned her hobby into a business and moved from a small town to the capital, says that in small towns young entrepreneurs cannot succeed because only Ljubljana offers them a supportive environment.

Similar narratives about hometowns that are too small and the capital being an appropriate size for hosting a prosperous entrepreneurial ecosystem were very common. Perhaps the most vivid description of unfulfilled longing for an entrepreneurial ecosystem in a hometown was provided by my interlocutor (Kozorog 2018), an outdoor sports and festival organizer (1981). He compared his hometown of less than 5,000 inhabitants to the eye of a tornado. According to him, the eye is both a place of calm and a sign of unease. For him, his town is not vibrant enough, but at the same time it is full of inherent potential that could be used to transform it into a more dynamic place. This could happen especially if entrepreneurs collaborated as an ecosystem. However, according to him, there are too few people feeling dissatisfied with local circumstances. He thinks that most of his fellow townspeople are resigned to the haven of the tornado's eye. He feels surrounded with too few

like-minded peers to connect with to jointly harness the place's potential, stimulate change, and bring about a better future to the local community. Thus the condition of smallness acts as a discouraging factor for an aspired-to entrepreneurial sociality.

## Belonging, parents, neighbors, and friends

The ideal of an entrepreneurial ecosystem promotes togetherness among entrepreneurs while regarding “the rest” of society as part of the environment that only gains prosperity through the success of entrepreneurs. However, “the rest” contains agents that have a significant effect on youth entrepreneurship. This time they affect it not through an ideal, but through established social relationships. Moreover, while smallness functions as an inhibitor for the ecosystem ideal, these relationships could be regarded as an effect of smallness. Regarding this smallness, one of the entrepreneurs quoted above said that most young Slovenians stick to established social relationships and do not research “out of the box”. Among these established relationships are belonging to the place where one grew up and to one's family of origin. These relationships affect youth entrepreneurship in contradictory ways because they create both restraint and security for young people's careers.

The young entrepreneurs interviewed as part of this study varied considerably in terms of the spatial and social relationships in which they operate. Some immediately started an international career, others joined the capital's supposedly prosperous entrepreneurial ecosystem, and quite a few stayed in their hometowns. Nonetheless, among young entrepreneurs, as among Slovenians in general, local belonging is still a factor.

Belonging can be an effective driving force behind entrepreneurs' engagement with a local future. I observed this while conducting ethnographic research with the outdoor sports and festival organizer I mentioned previously (Kozorog 2018), whose actions had three objectives: self-improvement, making a profit, and “improving” his hometown. Yet he felt that he was struggling within the eye of a tornado, where he found like-minded peers only with difficulty. In the summer of 2017, however, he enthusiastically informed me that in his hometown, four young entrepreneurs had opened a coworking hub, and that he had rented a space there, mostly so he could support them. This might not have been economically justified, but it had been an act of belonging based on a supposition that the new hub would strengthen local entrepreneurial togetherness and consequently improve the local community.

I reached out to the founders of the coworking space to find out what their goals were. Again, I discovered that belonging was part of their motivation; another part was to connect young entrepreneurs as a way to combat an allegedly rooted local idea that “trying to change things doesn't make sense”. They saw their coworking hub as a public good that would have a positive influence, particularly on young people: “Our primary and basic goal is to empower young, innovative locals, who still

have to be dragged out of the dark by force!" In order to connect with "successful individuals" who already had made changes in the locality, they organized public events to present these individuals as role models. Through this, they attempted to demonstrate they could form a joint force and together "improve" the local community. However, they too encountered the condition of smallness: "We have many events, many things going on, but no people. We have to figure out why this is. And then three people show up and you say, OK, at least we have three. But even if it's only three, if the three are the right ones, they can change the world." Still, there were few people in town like my interlocutor who rented a space there, and although optimism was an important driving force behind this project, smallness was also a threatening factor.

Some young entrepreneurs thus also decide where they will operate based on belonging, even though other places might have more to offer. At the same time, however, a place might provide security when family, neighbors and friends support entrepreneurial endeavors. Probably the most important agent within these established social relationships are parents. However, they played an ambivalent role in many of our interlocutors' careers. Young people and their parents have different perspectives on work and entrepreneurship, which have been shaped by growing up in Yugoslavia and Slovenia respectively. This engenders generational conflict; yet it is not a fatal one. The usual parental advice to our interlocutors was to "find a job", instead of trying to become an entrepreneur. Most of them reported that their friends are not entrepreneurs and have been or are searching for a "regular job" instead, and that the likely reason for such agency was parental influence. A recent survey among Slovenian high school students also demonstrates that they follow family advice to ensure security, so rather than becoming entrepreneurs they hope to find "safe employment" (Pinterič 2016: 56). Our young entrepreneurs, on the other hand, did not follow parental advice because for various reasons, including being unable to find a "regular job" or identifying as entrepreneurs, they found this advice obsolete. Parental propositions were based on a generational worldview that was formed through the current generation's parents (and grandparents) growing up in a socio-economic system in which finding a job was not an obstacle. Parental advice to stick to already-established jobs instead of creating a job through entrepreneurship was thus an inhibiting factor for young people's aspirations. At the same time, however, their parents were also very much aware of the difficulties their children face after the 2008 financial crisis, when jobs have become frighteningly scarce (cf. Pina-Cabral 2018). Their awareness of the unfair distribution of opportunities, in which children have considerably fewer of these than their parents did when they were young, was the reason why parents sometimes also gave considerable support to their children's entrepreneurial ambitions. Therefore, our interlocutors regularly reported considerable help from their parents, which came in forms of work, investment, and purchasing products.

For example, an IT startupper (1978) said that he even did not tell parents he was an entrepreneur, “because they are always afraid... of course, all parents prefer if their children have some kind of steady job, because this seems the most secure to them”. This clash of generations was also mentioned by an event organizer (1997), whose parents support him “100%”, yet said that his motivation was to do things differently from them: “We still have to have a bit of anarchy. We shouldn’t allow them to lead us through life. I mean, it’s all right, because they’ve had more experience, they know more, but if we don’t try our things in our lifetime, we won’t write our own history.” A fashion designer (1987) said that her parents were ambivalent about her decision to become entrepreneur, but when they discovered that she was serious, they also helped with the work. Similarly, a clothing maker (1994) said, “everyone supports me, especially now, when they see that this has become my job, my eight-hour workday, now they know that it’s for real, that I really make money, and even if they didn’t want to, they have to support me”. A children’s clothing maker (1992) also mentioned that her enterprise relies on her mother’s sewing skills, so this mother supports her daughter with practical knowledge and carrying out some of the work. The fashion accessory maker (1992) mentioned previously, who had moved to Ljubljana from a small town, said that her parents had financially supported her enterprise, while help also came from friends.

Parents thus provide a safe environment that enables some of these young people to carry on with their entrepreneurial aspirations. I call this phenomenon local neoliberalism because entrepreneurial youth are dependent on family and other close social ties. Thus, friends and neighbors are also a social buffer for youth entrepreneurship and hence part of this local neoliberalism. Of course, their support has different motivations than those of their parents. For example, it might be motivated by admiration of what they consider a brave decision, but it might also include the transgenerational solidarity referred to previously. Here are some examples: The above quoted mechatronic engineer (1991) said that his parents “wished I would find a job, but when they saw how much joy I get from this, that I’ve somehow found myself in it... then the tension dissipated. My surroundings and my friends, however, supported my decision quite a lot. Some even helped me and did some work for me.” A producer of gardening supplies (1991) said that his products “were best-accepted in my home village. I was surprised too. [...] I have to say as a village community we are very close [...], and this support was pretty strong. And when I say support, I don’t mean only saying nice things but also buying my products.” A boutique owner (1981), who sells Slovenian handicrafts in her hometown, said that doing business in a small town is more difficult than in a larger place, but that she felt supported by the townspeople and friends. A wooden jewelry maker (1993) said that he preferred to live in his home village, and because “we all know each other, people have really accepted my products, they told others about them and that’s how it started. I presume that in Ljubljana or some other city, it’d be a much harder start.” Another wooden jewelry maker (1992) from another small town said that her friends and neighbors support her by buying her products. A gift maker (1990) mentioned that

in her hometown, co-residents support entrepreneurs, sometimes they even help with workforce: “They join forces, support, perhaps they support also this courage, that someone went out on their own, and that someone really makes something also for the place, I guess.”

Thus, the established personal ties among people – family, friends, and local community relationships – provide support for young entrepreneurs as individuals, i.e. daughters, sons, grandchildren, neighbors, etc. Youth entrepreneurship in Slovenia is, in many cases, dependent on such close ties.

## Conclusion

Economic systems of production, work, and livelihood are always based on some ethical principles. Such principles are socially consolidated by appropriate ideologies (Narotzky 1997: 32). In this paper, I approach youth entrepreneurship in modern-day Slovenia as a recently established opportunity to earn a livelihood, which the media, state apparatus, schools, universities, and private think tanks popularize as being ethical, responsible and respectable. I define this targeting of youth as being neoliberal, because it aims to foster self-dependency and flexibility for young people and youthful creativity in order to stimulate new means of capital extraction. In order to stimulate this economically productive creativity, new ways of working are promoted (e.g., coworking) and so are new models for imagining social relationships. I have focused on the latter, and specifically on the “entrepreneurial ecosystem”. This ideal of society promotes togetherness among young entrepreneurs, i.e. their collaboration, mutual growth and friendship, to form a social base whose aim is to invigorate the whole of society.

Thus, many young entrepreneurs believe that by forming such togetherness they can become a sort of avant-garde that will improve (or bring about a better future for) local communities and the broader society. However, I have observed that in Slovenia, which is notoriously small (and some of the towns and villages are especially small), it is difficult to reach this ideal sociality among youth because, in many places, young entrepreneurs lack peers among whom they can form such entrepreneurial camaraderie. On the other hand, I have observed that non-entrepreneurial agents, who, according to the model, represent the rest of society, function for many as elements of a crucial supportive environment for an entrepreneurial career. The appeal to youth to engage in entrepreneurship thus depends on the support of established social relationships, which include family, local communities, and friends. Parents perform an essential, yet ambivalent role. On the one hand, they promote “regular employment”, which was common for their generation, but on the other hand, because they are aware of the uneven conditions in which their children have grown up, they also feel the need to help them when they decide to start down an entrepreneurial path.

I classify this appeal to youth as neoliberal because it places the future of society in the hands of entrepreneurship. However, this paper points to inconsistency of the neoliberal ideal, because in fact youth entrepreneurship is quite dependent on the support of established, non-entrepreneurial social ties due to conditions specific to Slovenia. While the ideal promotes a vision that entrepreneurial ecosystems push local communities forward, sometimes the situation is reversed. Without the help of parents, friends, and neighbors, youth entrepreneurship among Slovenians would have less of an impetus.

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## Ideal ekosustava i lokalni neoliberalizam mladog poduzetnika. Poduzetničko okruženje milenijalaca u Sloveniji

Članak se bavi mladim poduzetnikom kao novim društvenim akterom u suvremenoj Sloveniji. Na mlade poduzetnike utječu i idealna društvenost poduzetničkih ekosustava i malenost njihova okruženja. Autor pokazuje da dok se ovo prvo promiče kao sredstvo za jačanje lokalnih zajednica i put prema prosperitetnoj budućnosti, drugo sprečava njegovo ostvarenje, ali mladima pruža sigurnost. Obitelj i drugi uspostavljeni društveni odnosi značajno utječu na održavanje karijera mladih poduzetnika.

**Ključne riječi:** poduzetništvo, neoliberalizam, mladi, generacija, poduzetnički ekosustav, malenost, obitelj, ekonomska antropologija, Slovenija